

*Shakespeare's
Rome*



Robert Miola's Thesis:

Shakespeare made Rome the subject of six of his works.

Each time Shakespeare returns to Rome, his concepts of Rome and the Romans change.

His works are, in fact, an ongoing dialogue with Rome.

Early Works:



*In *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare's Romans are clichés and have little depth, cardboard cut-outs.*

Miola believes Shakespeare was still mystified by the legacy of the mythologized Romans.

He does not yet have the bravery (or the skill) to make them his own (realistic).

**“Romans here...are stereotypes,
still figures of cardboard and
past, constructed from materials
lying in the Elizabethan treasure
chest of classical learning”
(Miola 236).**



Julius Caesar

Signifies the point where Shakespeare breathes life into the historical Romans

At this point, Shakespeare also becomes more critical of the Romans.

He criticizes their blind devotion to Rome and their own legacies , as well as their disregard for personal and family connections.



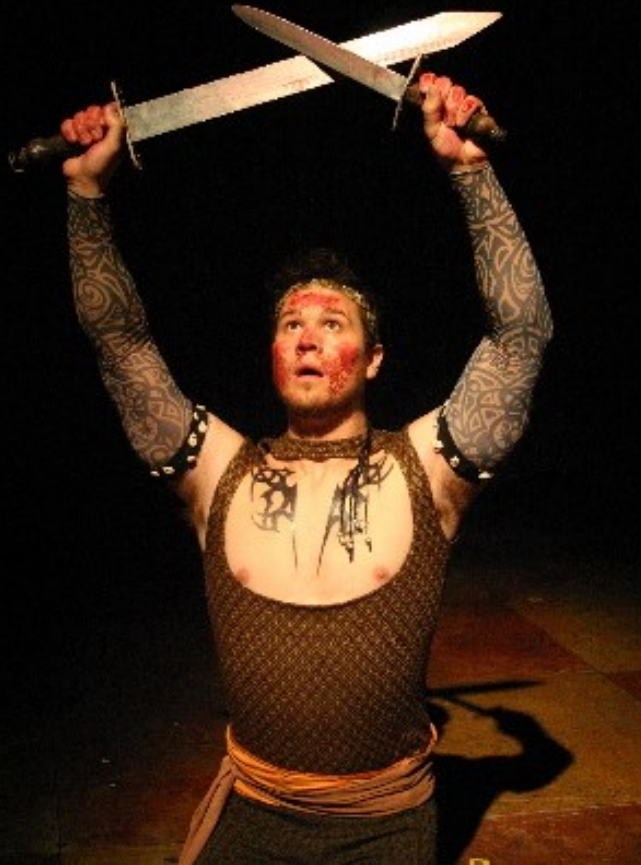
Antony and Cleopatra

Shakespeare's "sequel" to *Julius Caesar*

Shakespeare's concept of Rome changes. At this point it's no longer a city, but an empire, a world power.

He contrasts Antony's Roman stoicism with Cleopatra's sensual lifestyle.

Later Works:



Coriolanus and *Cymbeline* are Shakespeare's last two dialogues with Rome.

Shakespeare becomes increasingly critical of the Romans and their skewed concept of "honor."

With *Cymbeline* (set in Britain) the Romans give way to their cultural successors: the British.

**“Like the historical city,
Shakespeare’s Rome rises and
falls” (Miola 236)**



Julius Caesar (in-depth)

Miola asserts that Rome is the central protagonist of *Julius Caesar*.

Rome is directing the characters' fates.

He cites a sense one gets while reading the play that every character's fate is pre-determined, their history already written.



Shakespeare's Romans are obsessed with their past (ancestors) and their futures (legacy).

Criticism: They allow *past* and *future* to direct the *present*.

They continually choose their country over personal relationships (*Rome over home*).



History & the Romans

Caesar himself was a very important historical figure to Elizabethans

Many playwrights made him the subject of their plays, yet *Julius Caesar* is commendable because it puts no slant on its characters. Was Caesar truly a tyrant? The play is intentionally ambivalent.

Miola asserts that Shakespeare's Romans try to write *their own* histories, but these efforts are continually thwarted.

“Imitating the past, [the characters] try to mold the present for the approval of the future.... Their struggle to impose permanent order on reality is actually an attempt to write their own history — one, the play makes clear, that is difficult and perilous” (Miola 77)



Ironic, huh?

Caesar wants to lead Rome to greatness — but is cut short by the daggers of his own senators.

Brutus slays Caesar in order to safeguard the republic — but actually paves the way for an even more ambitious ruler, Octavian/Augustus.

Antony hates Brutus and Cassius for their treachery — but uses similar techniques to turn the Roman mob against them.



Ironies in *JC*

Antony and Octavian join forces to fight Caesar's betrayers—yet they will soon betray each other.

Brutus and Cassius kill Caesar for idealistic reasons—yet once in exile, fighting for their lives, they struggle to maintain their idealistic views of their actions.

The “civilized” Roman people quickly devolve into a mob of bloodthirsty killers—much like the “barbarians” they have conquered.

“No matter how much these Romans try, no matter how much they suffer, the force of history frustrates their intentions” (Miola 78)

Virgil and Ovid

Miola notes Shakespeare's frequent nods to the writing styles of the great Roman poets Virgil and Ovid

In *JC* there are many references to Virgil's *Aeneid*: Cassius' references to the story of Anchises; the storm imagery of Act I, Scene III seems to be influenced by Virgil's own descriptions of storms.

The trend continues to *Antony & Cleopatra* (Aeneas and Dido)

