

Shakespeare's Rome: A Space of Interrogation

Maria Del Sapio Garbero, ed., *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 231 + xi pp.

Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Nancy Isenberg and Maddalena Pennacchia, eds., *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2010), 388 pp.

1. A Space of Interrogation

The representation of Rome in Shakespeare's plays is always associated with a profound interrogation of Renaissance spatial and temporal boundaries: it appears as a space in which past and present coalesce to cast new light on early modern English culture and politics, divided between the search of its own cultural identity and the influence of the classic heritage. The diachronic and synchronic study of the ways Rome and England intersect in Shakespeare's production is the object of two collections of essays recently published as *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* (2009) and *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* (2010). The two volumes present a variety of essays showing, from different viewpoints and critical perspectives, the way Shakespeare looked at Latin culture and was inspired by ancient Roman historical characters and settings to pose questions about crucial issues of his own time.

The four key-concepts developed by the papers are suggested in the titles: "Identity", "Otherness", "Empire" and "Body". *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* is divided into two sections, respectively "What is it to be a Roman?" and "The Theatre of the Empire", focusing on the construction of both single and cultural Roman/English identity. *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* proposes the division into "Human Bodies" and "Earthly and Heavenly Bodies", exploring the way the body is (re)located in the early modern map of knowledge, with reference to the human but also to animal and vegetal life.

Maria Del Sapio Garbero's introductions to the collections – "Performing 'Rome' from the Periphery" and "Shakespeare's Rome and Renaissance 'Antropographic'" – constitute the indispensable threshold to enter the Roman textual world: she suggests that Rome in Shakespeare's plays mirrors the Renaissance complex historical milieu, in which the cultural episteme was being shaken by the intersection between the humanist heritage and the birth of a new scientific thought and where the world geographical pattern had been changed by new discoveries. In this review-essay, I would like to examine some of the questions discussed transversally in the volumes, while also offering a parallel (necessarily partial) analysis of the plays.

2. “What is it to be a Roman?”

The starting point to analyse Shakespeare’s Roman plays may be the definition of Roman identity, which is the object or instance of Manfred Pfister’s discussion of *Coriolanus*. The play better epitomises *and* questions Romanness and its masculine values, based on “austerity and heroic self-discipline, civic pride, and public service”,¹ characteristics which, though projecting a cohesive and strong identity, can hide contradictions and weakness.

Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is no longer Plutarch or Livy’s legendary general, but a man split between the adherence to those values and the impossibility to fully interpret them. His mother Volumnia is, in this respect, a pivotal character: though a maternal figure, she lacks any feminine traits, in order to better drive her son to incorporate the Roman masculine qualities. This generates a complex mother/son relationship, which may be further understood through Janet Adelman’s reading of *Coriolanus* in the light of the myth of Romulus and Remus. According to Adelman’s analysis in “Shakespeare’s Romulus and Remus: Who Does the Wolf Love?” (*IOE*, 19-34), as the foundational myth of the twins nursed by a she-wolf implies, Roman masculine identity emerges from a scenario where the feminine/maternal element is purged and replaced by the ferociousness of a she-wolf. In *Coriolanus*, Adelman identifies Volumnia with the she-wolf, who induces the protagonist to fully adhere to a hyper-masculine Roman model, whose destructive potential (in the myth represented by the fratricide) is dramatised “first against the outsider-twin Aufidius and then against his ‘sworn brother the people’ in Rome (2.3.88)” (*IOE*, 29).²

If *Coriolanus* presents some contradictions of the male Roman identity, Volumnia, the feminine archetype when associated to the she-wolf, also provides a model of womanhood present in the Roman patriarchal system. She is probably the only woman entrusted with the task of saving the country and her political success is evident in a cue pronounced by a senator: “Behold our patroness, the life of Rome” (5.5.1). The full meaning of the epithet “patroness” is investigated by Antonella Piazza, who in “Volumnia, the Roman Patroness” (*QB*, 121-134) suggests how Volumnia’s unexpected power is basically due to her age and consequently to desexualisation. Volumnia, though a woman, appears as a masculine figure, because, as the saviour and re-founder of the city, she has to embody the masculine qualities that also associate her with the legendary she-wolf. Politically, the figure of the patroness, then, may also be seen as a synthesis between Elizabeth and James I, or as Piazza, highlights, as a “suggestion to the contemporary James to look back to ‘prudent’ Elizabeth I for advice” (*QB*, 134). Beside, by questioning the Republic, Shakespeare seemed to respond to the political anxieties of his time, such as the insurgence of republican ideas, that Shakespeare projected ahead, prophetically forerunning the events that would lead to the civil war and to Charles I’s execution.

The political dimension of the play is further discussed by Maurizio Calbi, who, in “States of Exception: Auto-immunity and the Body Politic in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*”, conceives Rome as a body and reads the main hero’s banishment from

¹ Manfred Pfister, “Acting the Roman: *Coriolanus*”, in *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome*, 36.

Hereafter this volume will be indicated as *IOE*. Pfister is also the author of “Rome and Her Rats: *Coriolanus* and the Early Modern Crisis of Distinction between Man, Beast and Monster”, in *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare’s Rome*, 239-258. Hereafter the latter volume will be indicated as *QB*.

² On the other hand, as Drew Daniel argues, Romanness implies suicide in order to assert the nobility of the masculine construction that, in *Hamlet*, is nevertheless contested by the protagonist. (“‘I am more antique Roman than a Dane’: Suicide, Masculinity and National Identity in *Hamlet*”, *IOE*, 75-90).

a Derridean perspective, as an act of auto-immunisation on the part of Rome's organism, which expels what was meant to protect it (*QB*, 77-94). Coriolanus's banishment cannot be sacrificial and is doomed to forerun the tragic return of the hero, potentially destructive for the community. In Calbi's view, the Republic portrayed in the play is very similar to a state of exception as theorised by Agamben, in which paradoxically life is regulated by a suspension of the law, a condition that cannot guarantee safety even after the removal of the dangerous element.

While Calbi reads Rome as an organism, a body expelling illness in *Coriolanus*, Michele Marrapodi and Claudia Corti analyse the question of the body in relation to the play differently. In "Mens sana in corpore sano: The Rhetoric of the Body in Shakespeare's Roman and Late Plays", Marrapodi focuses on the metaphor the physical body of Coriolanus represents within and for the State (*QB*, 197-218); in "The Iconic Body: *Coriolanus* and Renaissance Corporeality" (*QB*, 57-76), Corti discusses what she defines the "physicalization of the playtext", offering a complex view of the overall way in which the body is presented on stage, as an icon, as a token and as a simulacrum, also referring to early modern politics and the way the body metaphor was functional to political discourses.

3. Hosting History

Coriolanus, as we have seen, proves a complex play posing questions about identity and politics. According to Adelman some of the problems haunting *Coriolanus* are solved in *Cymbeline*, revealingly composed in the same period. *Cymbeline* is chronologically the last Roman play, a complex romance that combines different settings and temporalities, providing a very intricate historical background mixed with a Baroque atmosphere. In "Other from the Body: Sartorial Metatheatre in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*" (*IOE*, 61-74), Paola Colaiacomo analyses the complexity of *Cymbeline* in relation to the seeming/being dichotomy as symbolised by garment. In the play disguise, confusion about characters and other devices do not offer the usual Shakespearean insights, as its main aim is to smooth some tragic events evoked in the previous Roman plays. Thus, as Adelman points out, the haunting of the she-wolf as well as the fratricide is reworked in the story of Cymbeline's sons, lost in the wilderness but fed by a man, so to retain their heroic masculinity but free from the infection of the savage feminine (*IOE*, 33). The expurgation of the maternal element is also enacted in relation to Posthumus's birth, 'ript' from his mother's womb, an event that was interpreted as a sign of fortune in classical and early modernity. This aspect is analysed by Iolanda Plescia, who in "From me was Posthumus ript: *Cymbeline* and the Extraordinary Birth" (*QB*, 135-148) investigates the Caesarian section and its cultural implication in Renaissance culture from a scientific viewpoint.

Thus, as Adelman suggests, *Cymbeline* proposes a mitigated version of the foundational myths of Rome, which had proved problematic in the other plays, in order to produce the logic of a *translatio imperii*, "a sanitized and appropriately Britishized version of Rome's founding twins, an altogether suitable basis for the

relocation of Rome to England” (*IOE*, 34). Even the rape of Lucrece is reworked through the subplot of Imogen and Iachimo, which does not end with the woman’s sacrificial death. What is striking here is that Shakespeare alternates the strategy of expelling the Other (see *Coriolanus*) with the opposite mechanism of appropriation. Politically, Marrapodi explains, Shakespeare’s aim is to exorcise “domestic anxieties of political disgregation and [present] a patriotic ideal of national sovereignty”, enacting an “ideological appropriation” of Italian history (*QB*, 198; 205), a manipulation which Del Sapio reads in the light of Derrida’s concept of hospitality and from a more textual perspective (*IOE*, 101).

The ambivalence of the Derridean host, who is simultaneously questioned and legitimated by the arrival of a stranger asking for hospitality, reverberates in Shakespeare’s discursive strategy that retains the Other, objectifying it, hosting it like a guest or hostage; in “Fostering the Question ‘Who Plays the Host?’” (*IOE*, 91-106), Del Sapio argues that the Other is ‘textualised’ “according to the double movement of *identification* and *distancing* entailed in his re-reading of Rome” (*IOE*, 98. My emphasis). This is particularly evident with female characters such as Cleopatra and Tamora, whose Otherness is doubled by their being women and strangers, but Del Sapio also highlights the presence of another guest/ghost that is probably more haunting than haunted, i.e. the legacy of the past heritage represented by the figure of Caesar. This aspect is discussed also by Maddalena Pennacchia in “Antony’s Ring: Remediating Ancient Rhetoric on the Elizabethan Stage” (*IOE*, 49-60), who shows how *Julius Caesar* stages a remediation of the classical tradition, through the controversial characters of Caesar himself and through Antony’s ‘modernised’ rhetoric. But the figure of Caesar in the play for most of the action is represented by his corpse, a fact that shows the body differently from how it appeared in the plays analysed so far, triggering further questions on the position of the body in the Renaissance and its role in Shakespeare’s discursive strategies.

4. The *Body Politic*

Caesar’s corpse assumes a paradigmatic dimension in the very complex net of cultural intersections giving shape to the Renaissance body question.³ Many essays, in both collections, deal with *Julius Caesar*, mainly discussing the Brutus/Antony’s contest; notably, these two characters have different rhetorical approaches in explaining to the people the reasons for Caesar’s murder. In “Body and History in the Political Rhetoric of *Julius Caesar*” (*QB*, 219-236), Alessandro Serpieri argues that both rhetoric and the way the corpse is shown to the audience are the most relevant factors in determining Antony’s victory: “scenic space and persuasive rhetoric are the very element on which Shakespeare bases his most political and public play” (*QB*, 221). Indeed, according to Serpieri, making Caesar a spectacle allows Antony to win over Brutus’s classical rhetoric: while Brutus calls on his honour and respectability to persuade people of the rightness of his actions, Antony enacts a different strategy based on a ‘proof’ (the body) that in his words

³ The essays presented in *QB* focus on the way the body is internally examined and externally repositioned in the world through Shakespeare’s Roman *corpus*. The essays in the section entitled “Earthly and Heavenly Bodies”, which I cannot discuss here, treat the chain of being as an unstable structure under the influence of Renaissance medicine, cosmography, and science in general. See the essays by Andrea Bellelli, Giovanni Antonini and Gloria Grazia Rosa, Maddalena Pennacchia, Nancy Isenberg, John Gillies, Gilberto Sacerdoti (who is also the author of “*Antony and Cleopatra* and the Overflowing of the Roman Measure”, *IOE*, 107-118).

does not need any other rhetorical device – a fact that is obviously denied by his very sophisticated rhetoric, by his physical use of the space at his disposal and by his involving people, “actors in *his* scene” (*QB*, 231).

In this respect, in “Performing Anatomy in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*” (*QB*, 95-108), Ute Berns states that “the two speeches actually invoke different epistemological models.... The success or failure of [the] speech depends on this link between authority and truth” (*QB*, 98-9). Whereas Serpieri analyses rhetorical devices in detail, Berns reads the play in a more materialistic view, considering the contest as an expression of the cultural/scientific changes occurring at the time. The ‘authority’ represented by Brutus and the ‘truth’ represented by Antony, in fact, evoke “a specific historical development in the practice of anatomy”, with reference to the different methods in dissecting the bodies used by Mundinus and Andreas Vesalius, respectively recalling Brutus and Antony’s strategies. Mundinus used to lecture *ex cathedra* a dissection that was practically made by surgeons and ostensors, and, as Berns states, “the presence of the corpse, during his performance, was not of crucial importance” (*QB*, 101). How not to think of Brutus, speaking from the rostrum, distant from the audience and from the body? Vesalius, on the contrary, personally dissected the corpse, involving the audience, not lecturing but *showing*, so recalling Antony ascending the rostrum, speaking next to the body, inviting people to form a ring around them and finally unveiling the ‘fact’. Thus, the contest condenses more than one meaning and reflects the complex stratified culture of Renaissance England.

In “Antony’s Ring” Maddalena Pennacchia gives a political interpretation of the contest, by reading the difference between Antony’s and Brutus’s strategies in terms of levels of awareness in the use of verbal and body languages. She reads the passage from the Republic to the Empire, after Caesar’s death, in terms of a shift in the practice of communication, necessary to address a larger audience: “In the play, admiration and reverence for the classical modes of public communication appear problematically mixed with the need to celebrate new communicative models elaborated by Elizabethan culture” (*IOE*, 50-51).

In presenting “new models” through Antony’s performance, Shakespeare assumes a controversial position. Indeed, in my opinion, the effect of the contest goes beyond the celebration of these models, almost appearing as a warning against the power of words. What seems to me very striking in relation to *Julius Caesar* is that indirectly Shakespeare dramatises how science too is a ‘discursive’ practice in continuity with humanities, as Del Sapio states in “Anatomy, Knowledge, and Conspiracy: in Shakespeare’s Arena with the Words of Cassius” (*QB*, 33-56): “the anatomist is both a physician and a philosopher” (*QB*, 37). Claiming that there can be a ‘fact’ opposing any discursive interpretation is a danger Shakespeare’s play warns against. Through Antony’s Baroque rhetoric, Shakespeare demonstrates that the vision of truth/reality is in any case constructed, entangled in a complex intersection of textual strategies. Vesalius/Antony’s rhetoric is based on a sensorial perception that the Bard reveals to be deeply affected by verbal and body languages. Words can contaminate perception like poison in one’s ear.

5. The Female Body

The centrality of the body on Shakespeare's stage *in presentia* or *absentia* so far analysed has yet left out the fundamental question of how women's body is represented and the precise function it has in the Shakespearean cultural system. Two typologies emerge: the virginal, innocent woman (Lucrece, Lavinia, Imogen) as opposed to the savage, sexually uncontrollable woman (Cleopatra, Tamora, the wicked queen of *Cymbeline*).

In *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*, the question of the female body is examined in particular by Barbara Antonucci in "Blood in Language: the Galenic Paradigm of Humours in *The Rape of Lucrece*" (*QB*, 149-160) and Gilberta Golinelli in "Floating Borders: (Dis)-locating Otherness in the Female Body, and the Question of Miscegenation in *Titus Andronicus*" (*QB*, 275-286), who discuss both typologies in relation to *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and *Titus Andronicus* (1594).⁴ What emerges is that the body of women in the Roman plays is often associated with contamination, intended as infection or miscegenation, as happens with the protagonist of the poem; for Antonucci: "After the rape, Lucrece instantly feels infected and poisoned" (*QB*, 153), a condition that cannot be healed but through suicide. The idea of contamination returns in relation to Lavinia, Titus's daughter, who has also been raped and mutilated and *has* to die because 'contaminated' by the violence she has been inflicted: her death is conceived as a relief, an act that restores her dignity.

In the case of Lavinia, a Roman young woman, however, contamination assumes a strong ethnical and cultural connotation since the rapists are two Goths, Chiron and Demetrius. This point is developed in detail by Golinelli, who focuses on how *Titus* expresses the fear of being invaded by an Other that is sexually and racially connoted. In fact, the play is set in late imperial Rome, confining North with the Goths and South with the Moors. The mixing of these populations, on the one hand, appears inevitable and, on the other, triggers a series of bloody events, which inscribes the play into a Senecian genealogy. Particularly significant for Golinelli is the birth of a black-moor child (*QB*, 282), who renders the confines of the Empire unstable, producing (and revealing) the anxiety for the female body dominance. The source of instability is indeed Tamora's body: "in the play borders and otherness are at the same time visible and contested by the permeability of race and borders themselves, by the fact that both body and language could reveal and conceal the truth" (*QB*, 282-3). Otherness, in this case, resists classification, refuses to be a guest/hostage in the house of the host.

6. "The Theatre of the Empire"

The second section of *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome*, "The Theatre of the Empire", immediately identifies theatre as an instrument to represent, more or less critically, the phenomenon of imperialism that was beginning in Shakespeare's time. Indeed, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the birth of the

⁴ In the same volume, the following essays focus on the female body from a gender perspective: Paola Faini, "Cleopatra's Corporeal Language", 161-170; Simona Corso, "What Calpurnia Knew: *Julius Caesar* and the Language of Dreams", 171-190; Viola Papetti, "Under the Sign of Ovid: Motion and Instance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", 191-196; Mariangela Tempera, "*Titus Andronicus*: Staging the Mutilated Roma Body", 109-120.

Western cultural identity that, oversimplifying, was based on three historical ‘facts’: the formation of the European modern nations; the transnational circulation of humanist classic culture, whose values were functional to the nationalist rhetoric; and the prospect of colonial expansion as a consequence of the discovery of the New World. In respect to these overlapping events, England, a newborn nation, had to negotiate its cultural position in relation to the authority represented by the classics in order to claim its autonomy; on the other hand, it had to look back to Roman imperial history to find answers about its own new emerging empire. The anxieties about imperial expansion are represented in *Titus* and *Cymbeline*, as the one manifests the dangers of expanding territories and confines, while the other aims at finding a continuity between Rome and Britain, through the identification with Augustus’s Imperial Rome.

From a postcolonial perspective, Antonucci in “Romans versus Barbarians: Speaking the Language of the Empire in *Titus Andronicus*” (*IOE*, 119-130) and Golinelli in “In Dialogue with the New: Theorizations on the New World in *Titus Andronicus*” (*IOE*, 131-144) explore the way *Titus* epitomises the conceptualisation of the racial other, a question that obviously was of great importance as a consequence of the new geographical discoveries and in the view of the nascent empire. In the play, the initial Roman/Barbarian opposition is significantly blurred, opening uncanny questions about who the barbarian actually is. The episode of the child substitution signals indeed that Shakespeare, and probably his audience, questioned themselves about miscegenation and its consequences. If *Titus* projects the English anxiety about the confines of single and collective identity on Roman Empire, *Cymbeline* directly presents a confrontation between Rome/Italy and Britain, coming to a final synthesis between the two cultures, through the process of the *translatio imperii*. This point is discussed in “Shakespeare’s Writing of Rome in *Cymbeline*” (*IOE*, 157-174) by Laura Di Michele, who reads *translatio* not only in terms of space (starting from Lefebvre’s theories), but also from a gender perspective: “What we are called to witness here is the metamorphosis of the new emerging nation: *Roman Britain* (and James I’s Great Britain, as well) is neither a ‘feminine’ society subjected to the danger of invasions as Elizabethan England usually conceptualized herself, nor a ‘masculine’ society as imperial Rome was in the collective imagination of the British. The new Britain (like Imogen) is both feminine and masculine (*IOE*, 171).⁵ The figure of Imogen emerges as a pivotal figure, able to synthesise masculine (through the recourse to disguise) and feminine, and possessing the same archetypal power of Volumnia or Lucrece, without proving desexualised or being a sacrificial victim. As previously discussed, then, *Cymbeline* represents the fusion and overcoming of themes presented in the other Roman works; whereas the Elizabethan works expressed anxiety for the dynastic succession, the future of the monarchy et cetera (see, for example, *Julius Caesar*), the Jacobean plays (such as *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline*) reflected tensions related to the passage from Elizabeth’s reign to James I’s absolutism and the fear of the insurgence of new republican ideas. The attitude towards the idea of the empire also changed: whereas *Titus* shows the

⁵ A spatial analysis of Rome/London opposition is also offered by Carlo Pagetti in “Shakespeare’s Tales of Two Cities: London and Rome”, *IOE*, 145-156. Giorgio Melchiori discusses the re-signification and so the transference of classical culture in Shakespeare’s play through the mediation of the morality tradition in “‘They that have power’: The Ethics of the Roman Plays”, *IOE*, 191-205.

encounter between different cultures, in terms of a weak centre vs a threatening periphery, *Cymbeline* re-proposes the confrontation with another culture, inverting the centre/periphery dichotomy and finally transferring imperial authority from the old centre (Rome) to the new centre (Britain). The image of the empire is not only politically relevant, but it has also to do with the idea of writing: “[T]he colonizer is like the playwright, in that they both ... trace lines and mark boundaries on the land and on the territories portrayed in maps, on stage and page” (*IOE*,158). Here, Di Michele echoes Del Sapio’s previous suggestion to consider Shakespeare as a host. The coloniser/playwright/host creates boundaries; Shakespeare’s works trace the confines of the Western Self, confines that, however, he also questions through the representation of an Other, who resists a univocal interpretation and returns its gaze onto the audience, onto ‘us’.

In conclusion, the essays presented in *Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome* and *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare’s Rome* analyse the entire Shakespearean Roman canon, revealing the cultural implications that stem from a confrontation between different times and places. Rome appears as a ‘space’ where Shakespeare’s past and present converge, also amazingly projecting these issues in the future, considering how questions related to a country’s cultural hegemony or the post-Imperial legacy are still relevant today.⁶

⁶ Indeed, the Globe was inaugurated with a Roman play, *Julius Caesar*, almost prophetically foreseeing that, about four centuries later, a new Globe would be built precisely in Rome, as Nancy Isenberg demonstrates in “Shakespeare’s Rome in Rome’s Wooden ‘O’”, *IOE*, 175-190.