

Shakespeare and the Zeitgeist

by [Ralph Berry](#) (March 2023)



Posthumus and Imogen, John Faed, 1865)

'Nothing odd can last long,' said Dr Johnson. Rarely for the great doctor, he was wrong. The current mutilations of Shakespeare have been with us for decades, and I cite the latest. The Royal Shakespeare Company—what authority is evoked in that title, which as was said at its foundation in 1960 'has practically everything going for it except God' —has now announced details of its *Julius Caesar*, coming in March. Julius Caesar will be slain by the first female Brutus ever cast by the RSC, with Cassius also played by an actress. It is invigorating to know that Caesar (whom I always think of as Big July in *Guys and Dolls*) will not be played by a member of the patriarchy. The message for today is clear: a strong woman has overturned a male dictator, and serve him right. The two strong women are assailed by a male-dominated society, which eventually forces 'Brutus' and 'Cassius' to commit suicide. A further version of the tragedy comes into view, and Shakespeare's fable metamorphoses into *Thelma and Louise*.

Julius Caesar is singularly ill-suited to gender-swapping. It is written with a hard clarity, as though incised upon marble. There is hardly any of the ambiguity that is Shakespeare's general form. Schoolchildren can understand the plot, and indeed it is an excellent teaching play (the best, I think, in the canon, with the possible exception of *Twelfth Night*). There is a clear-cut political story and outcome, and it is presented without any kind of authorial nudging. The play allows the audience to make up its own mind, or used to.

This kind of modern re-writing of Shakespeare has a respectable past. Some thirty years and more ago, the search was on for a period envelope that would contain the issues raised in the text. The late Jonathan Miller, a great director, had a flair for detecting a past society that would fit the play. His best period analogue was for *Measure for Measure*, which is saturated with sex to a degree not equalled elsewhere in Shakespeare. His production (1975) exploited what is in effect a pun of history that Duke Vincentio's city,

Vienna, is also the city of Freud. The pun would be meaningless, but for the play's unquestionable obsession with sexual repression—and its outlet in Vienna's bordellos, accompanied by venereal disease. So Miller's *Measure for Measure* was costumed in the 1930s. At the same time, Robin Phillips, the Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival Theatre Ontario, set his production in the Vienna of the Austria-Hungarian empire. His dating was 1912, which caught the strange prophetic talent of Shakespeare to see that mad frivolous society nearing the brink of the crash. Phillips brought out a distinctively 1975 awareness of corruption in high places and the feminist issue of Isabella's integrity (and not, as such 'chastity'). In separate productions, 1930 and 1912 reflected the Zeitgeist of the era. You could add Tyrone Guthrie's earlier *Troilus and Cressida*.

No Shakespearean play has reflected its production time more than *Love's Labour's Lost*. Robin Phillips set it in belle époque France, a little before the outbreak of war in 1914. The men are clad in cavalry undress, and the action, a prolonged summer flirtation, takes place in a park near the Cavalry school Saumur. The comedy, les grands manoeuvres for the young officers, is cut short by the entrance of the man in black. Mercade announces the death of the King: 'the scene begins to cloud.' The end comes with 'The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo,' and, as the principals are leaving, a distant rumbling is heard. They pause, puzzled. Was it thunder? Or gunfire? The era ended with the guns of the Marne, as in the text Fame yields to Death.

Love's Labour's Lost came back in 2014. The RSC got this one right, with a guest director, Christopher Luscombe, setting it in the pre-war England of George V and Charlecote Park. The comedy of manners was over with the entrance of Mercade as a French officer of field rank, leaving only the final arrangements. At the very end the four young men returned on stage in subaltern's uniform. This coup de theatre stunned the

audience into rapt silence. What was there to say?

And now for our own time. The political scene in England is riven by Brexit, and the nation's referendum decision in 2016 to leave the European Union. The result has never been accepted by the Remainers, who are strong and determined to neuter or even reverse the victory of the Leavers. Many prominent Remainers are still in the Commons and the Lords. Some, not all have recanted. But surely Shakespeare has nothing to say on this matter? He has, in *Cymbeline*.

Dr Johnson again supplies an incontestable judgment. The plot of *Cymbeline* is 'unresisting imbecility.' I shall not trace the plot, which centres on the efforts of an Italian lounge lizard, Iachimo, to defame for a bet an English rose Imogen. A Roman army enters the final scene in 5.5, and its commander parleys with Cymbeline. The British King announces gracious terms:

Well,

*My peace we will begin. And, Caius Lucius,
Although the victor, we submit to Caesar
And to the Roman empire, promising
To pay our wonted tribute, from the which
We were dissuaded by our wicked queen,
Whom heavens in justice, both her and hers,
Have laid most heavy hand.*

What's this? Full payments ('tributes') to be resumed to the European Union, born of the Treaty of Rome? And who could 'our wicked queen' be other than Margaret Thatcher?

The Soothsayer then foretells 'the harmony of this peace'. Cymbeline speaks the play's final words:

*Laud we the gods,
And let our crooked smokes climb to their nostrils
From our blest altars. Publish we this peace
To all our subjects. Set we forward, let
A Roman and a British ensign wave
Friendly together. So through Lud's town march,
And in the temple of great Jupiter
Our peace we'll ratify, seal it with feasts.
Set on there! Never was a war did cease
Ere bloody hands were washed, with such a peace.*

'Lud's town' is London, the name of the mythical King Lud preserved in Ludgate Hill. Shakespeare, it turns out was a Remainer all the time. The nationalist author of *Henry V*, the hammer of the French, has now moved to a final Romance bearing an accommodation with the Treaty of Rome. There will be an Anglo-European army, the dearest wish of President Macron, whose joint flags will 'wave friendly together.' The Remainer camp should read *Cymbeline*, and discover that Shakespeare got there first. He would.

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Ralph Berry has spent his career in Canadian universities, ending with the University of Ottawa. After that, he took a Visiting Professorship in Kuwait University, followed by the University of Malaya. In recent years he has written for *Chronicles* magazine. His hinterland is Shakespeare, but not as a figure of Tudor history. Shakespeare's works are a mirror to today's issues and themes, through which we can better understand today's politics.