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### **Shakespeare, Julius Caesar and Political Violence on January 6, 2021**

The theme explored here is the theme of political violence. Political violence comes in many forms: war, assassination, conspiracy, lone wolves, and more. Within the theme of political violence, this paper will look at the two main factors within groups of violent political actors in the context of politically violent conspiracies. One group can be called the “True Believers”, and the second group the “Exploiters”. The True Believers are characters that see the act of violence they are performing as abhorrent inherently, but necessary for what they perceive to be the greater good. The Exploiters are the characters among the faction that have more cynical motives. These motives may include their own hunger for power, greed, jealousy, or other motives that are not above board and which they conceal from their allies. They are eager for the violence and use the True Believers as cover to conceal their own less than honorable motives. This broad theme of political violence and the internal dynamics of conspiracies are powerful because they run through both historical and modern times.

This theme will be examined in the context of Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*. Political violence through the murder of Julius Caesar and the war that follows is a central theme of the play. We will also examine how the political violence of the Elizabethan Era influenced Shakespeare’s work, and how the themes of political violence can inform our understanding of our own time, particularly in view of the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States’ Capitol. Indeed, political violence is such a common theme in American political life that we have a wide

variety of examples to choose from. Domestic terrorism—defined by using violence to affect political change—is the most common form of violence in America today, according to the FBI (Terrorism). Since 2001, because of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and the wars in the Middle East that followed, Americans have been trained to be concerned about international terrorism threats, particularly from groups like al Qaeda and ISIS, but these have been eclipsed, according to the FBI, by threats from within, from our own citizens (Terrorism).

*Julius Caesar* is set in Rome, near the end of Caesar's life as he returns home from conquest. A commoner says, "...we make holiday, to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph." (Shakespeare 1.1.34) There is a certain type of populism in the support of Julius Caesar that those in power look down on, but seek to exploit if they can. There has been a political struggle in the government of the Roman Republic, and Caesar has been named dictator of Rome. The Senate is considering making Caesar a king and ending the long era of the Republic entirely. There are rumors among the characters that Caesar has already been offered the position but had turned it down, but that has not mollified his critics. The public seems to want him to accept it. Casca says, "...they say the Senators tomorrow/ Mean to establish Caesar as a king." (Shakespeare 1.3.88-89). The very presence of Cicero in this scene is meant to underscore a certain adoration of the Roman Republic, despite the political realities of running a increasingly large empire.

Brutus, a friend of Caesar, is worried that he might accept it and end the Republic he loves. Brutus frets. He is one of the True Believers. He is honorable and known to be a friend of Caesar, so the others plotting violent overthrow want to recruit him to provide cover for themselves. Cassius speaks to him and stokes his concerns, even while admitting they are not necessarily his own. Cassius seeks to further persuade Brutus to join them and act against

Caesar. Cassius admits as much aloud to an empty stage at the end of Act I, Scene II, “Caesar doth bear me hard; but he loves Brutus.” (Shakespeare 1.2.325) His underhanded tactics succeed, and they conspire together with other conspirators to murder Caesar (Shakespeare 2.1).

The second half of the play deals with the consequences of their actions. War breaks out between armies that remain loyal to Caesar’s supporters and his adopted son Octavius, and with the supporters of Cassius and Brutus, which further spreads the political violence to all the countryside, not just the capital city. The public’s response to Caesar’s murder is given in Act III, Scene II, when they shout, “Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay! /Let not a traitor live!” (Shakespeare 3.2.216-217) The conspirators are losing the war, and as the enemy closes in on Brutus, he chooses to take his life rather than be captured and paraded through the streets of Rome as a trophy. He sees death by his own hand as more honorable than capture (Shakespeare 5.5).

In the end, the act of political violence does not change the fate of Rome; indeed the assassination of Caesar may have accelerated the rise of the Roman Empire. The political violence does not remain contained, and ends with Caesar’s heir named as emperor, and Caesar himself deified (Woolf 261).

An interesting secondary theme to be considered here is the contrast between the perceived “strength” of violence and the perceived “weakness” of Caesar, particularly in the idea of his having the “falling sickness.” The perception of epilepsy in the Roman world (Todman 435) was very different than in the Elizabethan world (Diamantis, Sidiropoulou and Magiorkinis 691). In the Roman world, epileptics were thought to speak to the gods and could be considered holy (Todman 440). In the Christian era, it was more likely to be seen as a sign of demonic possession (Diamantis, et al. 695). So we see the imposition of Elizabethan era norms on the

conspirators' motives. The contrast between conceptions of strength versus weakness also plays out in the dynamic between the two factions supporting political violence. The Exploiters perceive themselves as the "strong" ones who cannot be manipulated so easily, while they perceive the True Believers like Brutus as more easily manipulated because they believe in something, and therefore are weaker and open to manipulation on those grounds, and susceptible to the lies and sophistry of the Exploiters. The alliance the Exploiters have with the True Believers is temporary and contingent, for they see these allies as mere conveniences who are inherently just as weak as those they attack. The perception of their allies is not shared by the True Believers. It is worth considering, even if they had won the war after Caesar's death, whether the mostly likely outcome was more violence as the Exploiters turned on their former allies. Indeed, it is Caesar himself who observes of Cassius, "Such men as he be never at heart's ease /Whiles they behold a greater than themselves, /And therefore are they very dangerous." (Shakespeare 1.2.218-220). Had he lived, Cassius would have remained dangerous to both friend and foe alike.

The themes of political violence (and their dependence on these notions of strength and weakness) are consistent themes throughout history. In the Elizabethan Era, we see the consequences of the wars of religion, of the Protestant Reformation, not only in England, but throughout Europe (Musée virtuel du protestantisme). The official faith of England changed repeatedly in the years from Henry VIII until Elizabeth I, as the religious loyalties of the king or queen changed. Violence against those of the out-of-favor faith was commonplace (Alchin). It was, therefore, logical to enact political violence against those in power to prevent or stop violence committed by the state on themselves and others of like mind. While the modern

dynamics are not entirely parallel with the events of *Julius Caesar*, nonetheless, we see the parallel themes playing out across time.

Political violence played a prominent role in the lives of those in Elizabethan England. Deep in the heart of the Protestant Reformation, religious-based violence was commonplace and conspicuous in political activity. This is in part because of the association of the state with the church. The state acted for the religious motives of its leader, and the religion acted for or against the state, depending on whether it aligned with the religion or not. State actors within and without engaged in violence in promotion of their beliefs in their own religious superiority (Political violence and persecution). *Julius Caesar*'s conspirators do not directly act out of religious motives except for the observation by Cassius that Caesar is a man and not a god (Shakespeare 1.2), but we might consider this somewhat parallel to the English monarch's claim to be head of the Church and ordained by god.

The need for political actors to lean on religion for their legitimacy spurred political violence if that legitimacy was ever questioned, for such questions became a matter of belief in their god. The other side became enemies of their god, and thus they claimed that to protect the public good, the other side must be eliminated. A monarch who believed in the wrong god could lead all their people to hell (Smuts 416).

During Shakespeare's time, states could go to war against each other to overthrow heathen monarchs, or political powers could rise among the people in the form of coup attempts and assassinations to free the people of a heathen figurehead, in their eyes. Violence inflicted upon the people by the government to coerce their religious beliefs further inspired political violence in defense of themselves and their co-religionists. Colonial ambitions of the era further

promoted both violence and so-called “godly” rule by imposing their religion on colonized people and lands (Smuts 418).

However, the political violence of *Julius Caesar* is more specific: it is the violence of assassination that is center stage. Brutus and Cassius end up in a war as retaliation for their attempt to seize power, but the initial act is the murder of the head of state. Assassination, too, was a key feature of violence in the Elizabethan Era. Individual citizens came to believe they were authorized, by their god or other forces, to assassinate their leaders. These attempts could be carried out through extensive conspiracies because of the difficulty of getting close to the queen (Kesselring).

The central plot of *Julius Caesar* is driven by political violence of various types. The main plot point is the assassination of Caesar, but the consequences of that act are more violence: the violence of a civil war. Moreover, the assassination of Caesar is especially and personally violent, with his friends and colleagues literally stabbing him in the back, repeatedly, in a public place. One could argue that political violence is the central theme of the play, so much so that we can see levels of dynamics within the co-conspirators that are more difficult to tease out in illustrations of political violence in others of Shakespeare’s plays (Shakespeare).

When *Julius Caesar* was released in 1599, it exhibited several striking parallels to the milieu of the moment. Caesar, like Queen Elizabeth I, was an aging ruler who had no natural heirs (Caesar did adopt a nephew). Of course, Shakespeare could not imply that assassinating the leader was a good thing, so the play instead focuses on the consequences for Caesar’s assassins, Brutus and Cassius. As discussed above, assassins were highly motivated in this era, and relatively commonplace. There were even assassination attempts of Queen Elizabeth I herself (e.g. in 1586), thus the play could act as a warning to others who might consider using political violence,

that it will be revisited upon them—violence begets more violence—and should not be viewed as a viable means of achieving power (Tichenor).

Political violence plays a prominent role in many of Shakespeare's plays, in particular the tragedies. *Henry V* describes the most common kind of political violence: going to war to achieve a political end (Shakespeare). In *Henry V*, Henry is goaded into war, in part by the Church that wishes to distract Henry from paying attention to their misdeeds at home, and in part by the arrogance of the French Dauphin, who taunts Henry, thinking he will not act (Shakespeare). One could argue that war is the ultimate kind of political violence, since war harms far more than just individual political actors. The treatment of this kind of political violence is glorified in *Henry V*, however. It is treated as an opportunity for honor and glory and not as an act to be avoided. By contrast with *Henry V*, one can see in *Hamlet* that assassination plays a role, repeatedly, but in particular in the assassination of the king. It appears like the new king will get away with the murder of his brother, marrying his brother's wife, and taking the throne, though Hamlet himself was the legal heir. Hamlet himself learns the truth and plots to murder his uncle in turn. Like the message in *Julius Caesar*, the political violence in *Hamlet* has consequences: in that both the king, his wife, several bit players and Hamlet himself all end up dead; thus, violence breeds more violence (Shakespeare).

Conspiracies and assassinations are common events in the modern world. The 1960s was replete with assassinations such as that of President Kennedy, the assassination of several prominent civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, a presidential candidate at the time. We appear to be entering another period of political violence in the 2020s. Domestic political violence has been on the rise throughout the late 2010s but was punctuated by the attack on the United States Capitol Building on January 6,

2021. The consequences of these violent acts have not yet had all their costs played out, but we can see the people who were on the Hill that day also reflect the dichotomy described above in terms of True Believers and the Exploiters: we see those white nationalist and Christian supremacist groups on trial for seditious conspiracy (with some already convicted), in contrast from some of the random low-level Trump supporters who have been convicted in some cases of merely trespassing in the Capitol against police orders. We have seen some of these defendants come around and confess to being duped by misinformation and being led to the Capitol by Trump's claims. Stephen Ayers, a Capitol rioter who was convicted for his actions that day told the January 6 Committee that he was doing what Trump told him to do at the rally and got caught up in the emotion. (Select January 6th Committee 202) Then there are those that remain unapologetic and continue to promote violence and violent overthrow of the government (Select January 6th Committee 536). In addition, we saw the kidnapping attempt of Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan. Both events were driven by militias (ad hoc pseudo-military organizations who claim to exist to defend the public *against* the government). Both events involved conspiracies, and both events could have ended in assassinations: in the Michigan case, against Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Associated Press). In the case of January 6, 2021, several officials were seemingly targeted including Vice President Mike Pence, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Select January 6th Committee). The scale of these events is quite different, but many of the motivations behind the two events are sufficiently similar to mark them as a part of a larger pattern of political violence identified by the FBI (Terrorism).

The Wolverine Watchmen is a right-wing militia group in Michigan that plotted to kidnap and possibly kill Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The group advocated for accelerationism, the desire to accelerate the coming of a civil war/race war in the United States. The plot was



intended to be carried out in 2020 and proved to be something of a precursor for the Capitol attack. It was, in part, motivated by COVID-19 restrictions imposed by Governor Whitmer while there was still no vaccine or treatment for the disease. Militia members scouted out her vacation home and held drills in preparation for the kidnapping attempt, where they intended to put her on “trial”, which could have resulted in her assassination. This plot followed months of protests outside, and inside, the Michigan Capitol Building, where protestors wielded guns to intimidate the legislature. The plot was thwarted because the FBI had an informant inside the group (Associated Press).

The recency and relatively smaller scale of this kidnapping attempt and the fact that it was stopped before it could be carried out make it relatively more difficult to assess the internal dynamics of the plot because none of the participants have come forward to confess. However, one dynamic of political violence is clear: the perception that the attackers are the “strong” ones, and the victims are “weak”. In this case, supposed “weakness” is marked by two factors: being opposed to carrying firearms (thus, being pre-emptively disarmed), and by the fact that the Governor was a woman. Indeed, materials presented at trial and in the indictments frequently described Whitmer as a “bitch” (Associated Press). This weakness made Whitmer susceptible to their conspiracy. One can compare this to Caesar’s “falling sickness” in Shakespeare’s play, making him also weak and susceptible to assassination (Shakespeare 1.2). Likewise, Caesar’s early inclination to heed the warnings about the Ides of March are portrayed as womanly, and therefore, show weakness (Shakespeare 3.2).

The January 6, 2021 attack on the United States’ Capitol Building has been much more carefully studied, particularly in light of the public hearings and the report put out by the January 6 Select Committee. The conspiracy was also larger and involved people in power, as did the

plot in *Julius Caesar*, and so the parallels are easier to identify. The attack on the Capitol was a complex plot driven in large part by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, who had lost the 2020 election but did not want to give up power. He and his cohorts tried several different schemes to overturn the results of the election he lost, but legal court challenges were all rejected. His scheme to produce fake Electors was meant to pressure his Vice President, Mike Pence, who would be overseeing the count of the Electors in Congress on January 6, 2021, to throw out legitimate Electors or serve an excuse for objections on the floor to throw a monkey wrench into what is supposed to be a merely ceremonial process. The multiple avenues of attack here made clear that these were excuses meant to provide cover for the illegality of overriding certified Electors. Trump plotted for violence on that day months in advance and did so in public on his Twitter account. Militias and other organizations that supported him did the same, in public in many cases, out in the open on social media (Select January 6th Committee 514). We see appeals to the need for political violence in the modern era that parallel some of the claims in Shakespeare (losing the Republic) as well as to the Elizabethan era citing dire consequences to the nation. Donald Trump famously claimed at his speech on the Ellipse on January 6<sup>th</sup> that Americans would lose their democracy if they did not fight back (Select January 6th Committee 538).

Elements of the January 6 attack at the Capitol included both True Believers and Exploiters. Based on evidence gathered by the January 6 Select Committee, Trump himself was an Exploiter, though he tried to present himself to the public as a True Believer. He pushed aside advisors who were urging him to accept the results and surrounded himself with outside advisors, like John Eastman, who told him what he wanted to hear. Trump, in combination with these advisors, devised several coordinated strategies to overturn the election. Some of these

strategies were non-violent in the sense that they tried to have the color of law, but the final strategy for protests at the Capitol were decidedly and intentionally violent (Select January 6th Committee 427).

The Proud Boys and the Oathkeepers, two militia groups that participated on January 6, were called out to “stand by” during the election and heeded Trump’s call to come to the Capitol on that day. They planned, by having weapons and armor, to breach the Capitol to prevent the certification of the election. Members of the Oathkeepers have been convicted of seditious conspiracy, while the Proud Boys are currently on trial for the same offense (Lynch). These groups also have their own motives related to racism and patriarchy and should also be classed among the Exploiters. Their objections to the election were not rooted in the idea that it was stolen in any real sense, but rather in the idea that women and minorities don’t deserve to vote. Their disdain for women and minorities suggests that they view both groups as “weak” unless they vote according to their white patriarch’s desires. The only people allowed to have an opinion are the ones with opinions that agree with white conservatives. They will take whatever position is necessary to retain or regain power. In *Julius Caesar*, we see this dynamic play out in several different ways. Cassius describes several instances of weakness in Caesar, particularly related to his epilepsy. Casca also mentions it, and Cicero says something mocking in Greek, all in the first Act (Shakespeare 1.2). Brutus later uses that implication of weakness to convince Caesar to go to the Senate despite the warnings of danger he has received (Shakespeare 2.3). His real weakness, as it turns out, is fearing that other people will perceive him as weak. Donald Trump expressed a similar sentiment in not wanting anyone to know he had lost (Select January 6th Committee 220).

In the context of January 6, the True Believers are not among the elite, unlike Brutus, but rather they are the masses of Trump supporters called to Washington to protest. They were caught up in events and believed Trump's lies—lies that the January 6 Select Committee report shows that he did not believe himself—that the election was stolen. People like Steven Ayers believed that Trump had really won and were persuaded that if they did not defend their democracy, that they would lose it. Their true belief was useful for Trump. He could himself pretend to also be a True Believer to cover up his own acts behind the scenes, to try to protect himself from the potential prosecutions he knew would come if he failed. The fact that Trump was also able to exploit his True Believers for nearly a quarter billion dollars for his fake legal defense fund (Select January 6th Committee 770) also suggests that Trump saw them as “weak” and able to be manipulated, and so in contrast, that made him “strong”. In *Julius Caesar*, it is Brutus that uses his friendship with Caesar, and Caesar's fear of being seen as weak, to persuade him to go to the Senate, despite repeated warnings of danger on that day (Shakespeare 2.3).

It's difficult to know what specific acts were committed on that day by the Exploiters and the True Believers since despite their different motives, they acted in concert. What we can say is that people showed up armed at the Capitol. They attacked police, resulting in injuries to more than 140 officers. While attempting to breach the Capitol and the House chamber, at least one protestor was shot by police, some died in the crowd, and several police either died or committed suicide because of the events of the day. Nearly 1000 people present at the Capitol that day have been arrested and charged with a variety of offenses, up to and including seditious conspiracy. There is ample videotaped evidence, some of it recorded by protesters themselves, looking for Nancy Pelosi. A gallows was erected outside, apparently for Mike Pence. Trump himself tweeted during the violence to egg on the crowd and waited for hours before finally telling people to go

home (Select January 6th Committee 603). It can be fairly argued that Trump saw the piety of Mike Pence as a fatal weakness he could exploit, as well as the fact that the Speaker was a woman.

The parallels to *Julius Caesar* are many, but there is one main difference: January 6 was a self-coup: Trump was trying to remain in power and used a conspiracy of violence to maintain that power. Caesar was also in power, but it was outsiders trying to forcibly remove him from power. In that sense, the plot to kidnap and possibly murder Governor Whitmer has more in common with the overall plot of the play, since in this case, the conspirators sought to overthrow the legitimate leadership and not maintain the power of the current government.

Contemporary performances of *Julius Caesar* exploit the parallels to the modern era, even before they became quite-so concrete. A 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* for Shakespeare in the Park inspired controversy because Caesar was portrayed as Trump-like (Wilkinson). However, in my analysis, Trump is not akin to Caesar so much as Cassius, the lead Exploiter. The deviation from Trump as Caesar comes in the fact that Trump was the lead conspirator, as Cassius was. Trump is not seeking to murder himself. Authoritarian he may be, but he was exploiting violence to remain in power, not to seize it. Cassius is in a much more similar position to Trump. He is consumed by his own arrogance and seeks to maintain his power (as a Senator), and it is Cassius who seeks to use non-legal means, violence, to obtain his ends. And it is Cassius who reveals his own views of the Roman people in trying to speak for Caesar when he says, “But that he sees the Romans are but sheep.” (Shakespeare 2.3.109). It certainly seems like Trump held similar opinions of his supporters.

It can be easy to miss the similarities between the modern scope of political violence as illustrated here and what was experienced during the Elizabethan Era, and certainly the True

Believers would see things quite differently as defending their god versus defending democracy. However, for the instigators of political violence, for the Exploiters, both eras of political violence are centrally about one thing: the acquisition and maintenance of power. That the patriarchy could also exploit claims about feminine “weakness” in both eras only drives home the similar motives of the main actors, and the continued relevance to the present day.

This paper has examined a number of aspects of political violence in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, and see how they have played out in the real world in sometimes strikingly similar ways in both the Elizabethan era when Shakespeare was writing, as well as in the present century, as exemplified by the kidnapping plot on Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, and the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States’ Capitol Building. In these contexts, one can consider the internal dynamics of conspiracies between the Exploiters who run and drive political violence and the True Believers who aid and give cover to the violence, and the dynamics of strength and weakness that plays out both within conspiracies (Exploiters see themselves as stronger than the weak True Believers whom they manipulate), and between the conspiracy plotters and their victims. While all cases of political violence don’t contain all these elements, Shakespeare can still speak to and inform our understanding of present events through the universality of the dynamics he illustrates in his plays. Shakespeare’s relevance continues because he speaks to the universal motives of people—here, the seeking of power—and he will remain relevant as long as we remain people.

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