

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation:           ARENDT AND SHAKESPEARE: RETHINKING  
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL CONCEPTS

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Scholars have long noted the role Greek tragedy plays in the articulation of Arendt's claims about what she calls the "anti-political" tradition in Western thought, but no one has explored the ways Shakespeare bears on her political philosophy. This is especially noticeable, given that Arendt recurs to Shakespeare in numerous books and essays, and in her personal correspondence. Nevertheless, political scientists have overlooked Shakespeare in Arendt studies and equally absent from Shakespeare criticism have been Arendtian theories of the political that have much to tell us about Shakespeare's work. This dissertation makes visible the palimpsest-like quality of those Shakespearean texts whose anachronisms are conceptual rather than material. Their "rich and strange" pearls invite us to consider the history and transformation of some of the most fundamental concepts in Western political thought. By layering Christian and classical notions of freedom in *The Rape of Lucrece*, a poem whose subject concerns the foundation of Roman political freedom, or by constellating in

*Coriolanus* classical and early modern notions of what it means to be a citizen, Shakespeare allows us to see, as if for the first time, the fate of the modern political world and the anti-political impulses that often drive its metamorphoses. My twin goals are to discover why Shakespeare and performance play such an important role in Arendt's political philosophy, and to explore the saving power that the Shakespearean corpus might still have for our capacity to think politically today.

ARENDR AND SHAKESPEARE: RETHINKING FOUR FUNDAMENTAL  
POLITICAL CONCEPTS

by

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## **Dedication**

To Sandra and to my parents, who never doubted.

## **Acknowledgements**

The time I spent witnessing an unfolding dialogue between Arendt and Shakespeare has been enlivened by the presence of others who offered their insights, their support, and their gentle but much needed critiques.

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## Introduction

Paul Kottman observes in the introduction to his anthology *Philosophers on Shakespeare* that while the influence of Greek drama on philosophy (in particular, nineteenth century German idealism) has been thoroughly investigated, the significant influence of Shakespeare is just beginning to be charted. Given, for example, Hegel's careful consideration of *Macbeth* in his early theological writings, might not Shakespeare have explained Sophocles to Hegel, rather than the other way round (5)? A similar situation exists in Arendt studies. Scholars have long noted the role Greek tragedy plays in the articulation of Arendt's claims about necessity and contingency, thought and action, and unity and plurality—about what she calls the “anti-political” tradition in Western thought—but no one has explored the ways Shakespeare bears on her political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This is especially noticeable, given that Arendt recurs to Shakespeare in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Life of the Mind*, *Between Past and Future*, in numerous essays, and in her correspondence with W. H. Auden. Nevertheless, political theorists have overlooked Shakespeare in Arendt studies and, until quite recently, equally absent from Shakespeare criticism have been Arendtian theories of the political that have much to tell us about Shakespeare's work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive account of the role Greek tragedy plays in Arendt's thought, see Robert Pirro, who makes the case that the theatrical metaphors that appear in Arendt “reflect the presence of a tragic framework” (37) and that the Greek polis represented for Arendt, “perhaps, the most compelling historical example of the public realm in its kinship with the theatrical stage” (38). For a more detailed summary of the critical commentary regarding the image of the ancient Greek polis in Arendt, see footnote 7.

<sup>2</sup> To date, there has been no scholarly attempt to fully account for Arendt's interest in Shakespeare. Richard Halpern engages with Arendt in two recent articles; although Halpern has spent much of his career writing about Shakespeare, his contribution to the conversation follows the trend of contemporary studies of Arendt's thought regarding the influence of drama, focusing as it does on the influence of Greek tragedy rather than on Shakespeare. In “Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt

When Auden reviewed Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* in 1959, he initiated an extended dialogue about politics and literature with Arendt, as well as a friendship, into which Shakespeare figured again and again.<sup>3</sup> In his review, Auden proposes that we read Arendt's book as if it were an etymological dictionary of political concepts. If Arendt is a political philosopher, Auden writes, she offers no "saving solutions." Rather, "she merely asks us to think what we are doing [sic] which we can never manage unless we can first agree about the meaning of the words we think with, which, in its turn, requires that we all become aware of what these

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to Rancière," Halpern provides a critical assessment of Arendt, asking of both Arendt and Rancière, "What are the theoretical consequences if Arendt's and Rancière's shared primal scene of democracy—and of theater—works otherwise than they claim?" (548). Halpern begins with a provocatively-entitled section, "Hannah Arendt's Antitheatrical Prejudice," to explore the tension between Arendt's dual claims for Greek drama, as both a medium for representing spontaneous action and for recording and preserving the ephemeral quality of action. Halpern claims that Arendt's distinctions between action (*praxis*) and work (*poesis*) attempt to produce absolute boundaries between the space of the political and the modern encroachments of the economic and the social, but he neglects to note the moments where Arendt acknowledges traffic between these domains, as I will explore in some detail in Chapter 2. More pertinent to my opening discussion here is that Halpern nowhere notes Arendt's own engagement with Shakespeare. He has read Shakespeare alongside Arendt, however, in "Eclipse of Action: *Hamlet* and the Political Economy of Playing"; here he concludes, as in his article on Arendt and Rancière, that the "The 'mixed' or contaminated status of political economy is something that Arendt feels compelled to fend off as a way of protecting the purity of political action from economic motives. *Hamlet*, by contrast, cannot imagine the state outside its dialectical relation with economy" (451). In *Thinking With Shakespeare*, Julia Reinhardt Lupton's interrogates the viability of Arendt's distinction between action and labor (what she terms "politics and life"). In choosing to "set the Shakespearean table with Arendt" (13), however, she adopts a stance that is, in relation to Halpern's, "more creative-receptive than critical-cautionary" (12). By reading Arendt alongside Shakespeare, Lupton ultimately argues for the universality of Shakespeare's works, "not as a thesaurus of eternal messages but in their capacity to establish real connections with the successive worlds shared and sustained by actors and audiences over time" (18). Her argument for the persistent relevance of Shakespeare is one with which Arendt might well have agreed; Arendt herself offers Shakespeare's representations of buried political concepts like freedom as exemplars for modern readers to consider, and she expresses her own notion of the durability of concepts in an image derived from Shakespeare. Yet Arendt also explores the limits and dangers of relying on previous thinkers (Shakespeare, in particular) for an understanding of the present, an aspect of her thought which Lupton does not treat. The actions of individuals who had participated in the Holocaust, according to Arendt, shattered an entire tradition of thought and "clearly exploded our categories of political thought" (*Essays in Understanding* 310). Arendt especially applied this claim to our inherited notions of evil. And as I explore in detail in Chapter 4, Arendt considered Shakespeare to be one of the primary representatives of a longstanding tradition of thinking about evil. If from one perspective Shakespeare showcases the kind of political thinking that Arendt wanted to encourage, from another, he is a representative of a tradition whose authority has been shattered by the events of the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> For a closer examination of their engagements over political theory by way of Shakespeare, see Chapter 4.

words have meant in the past” (*A Company of Readers* 52-53). It is perhaps unsurprising that Auden, who himself wrote and lectured extensively on Shakespeare, should seize on the Arendtian strategy for reading the history of political thought that Arendt herself found in Shakespeare. For it was to Shakespeare’s works that she kept returning in order to shed light on the genealogies of political philosophy’s anti-political “thought trains” (Arendt, *Life of the Mind* 154).

Fundamental to Arendt’s theory of political life are her concepts of plurality and natality. According to Arendt, every human birth represents natality, a radical novelty insofar as each signals the entrance onto our political stage of another actor who possesses the freedom to initiate new enterprises. As we will see, Arendt holds an equivocal view regarding Christianity’s impact on our ability to think politically, but she nevertheless finds in the story of the incarnation our most well-known conceptualization of natality. The singularity of an event erupting into a present (“A child has been born unto us”) disrupts the classical understanding of political history as a mere repetition of natural cycles (*The Human Condition* 247). And yet, first because she was sensitive to the potentially terrible consequences of any form of newness that relegates the Jewish tradition to an obsolete past, and second, because the power of action is a capacity that cannot entirely be denied to anyone who takes upon themselves its call to responsibility, Arendt expands the notion of natality, the singularity of a birth that heralds the singularity of a life’s actions, to every individual. In “Introduction *into* Politics,” an essay in which Arendt deploys Shakespeare to introduce this universalized natality, she writes, “In the last analysis, the human world is always the product of man’s *amor mundi*, a human artifice whose

potential immortality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality of those who come to live in it. What Hamlet said is always true: “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!”” (*The Promise of Politics* 203).

If individually, as political agents who can act upon the political world, we manifest the phenomenon of natality, it is collectively, as agents who also think, judge, and form opinions from irreducibly particular perspectives regarding a world we share in common, that we reveal the epiphenomenon that Arendt calls plurality. Our experience of plurality—this living among a multitude of unique political agents, each with his or her own capacity for judgment—encourages us to think of politics spatially, as an opening that at once separates us from one another while relating each to all. When Greek philosophy deigned to think upon the political at all, it dispensed with plurality altogether, pre-fabricating an ideal polis that was to be constructed by a sovereign philosopher-king rather than founded, preserved, and re-figured by the actions of multitudes. Properly recognized, the very fact of plurality invalidates many of the claims that political philosophy has made regarding the ends of politics, revealing the political space as a space of opinion rather than one of truth.

In her *Denktagebuch*, a private thought journal she kept for more than two decades following the publication of the *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, Arendt begins one of the early notebooks with the heading: *Experimental Notebook of a Political Scientist*. Its purpose, she writes, is to “reconsider all philosophical statements on Man under the assumption that men, and not Man, inhabit the earth. The establishment of political science demands a philosophy for which men exist

only in the plural... In this realm of plurality which is the political realm, one has to ask all the old questions, what is friendship, what is solitude, what is acting, thinking, but not the one question of philosophy: Who is man..." (295). " From these two basic observations, natality and plurality, Arendt develops a corresponding ontology of praxis which stands in stark contrast to a Western philosophical tradition that has consistently elevated contemplation over action, being over becoming.<sup>4</sup> Philosophy's congenital inability to recognize the novelty inherent in our capacity to act and to reshape our political institutions has kept us from understanding the nature of politics and thus from developing the capacity adequately to judge new situations as they emerge in our world. Moreover, its discomfort with the unpredictability and contingency that characterize action engendered a thoroughgoing contempt for the life of the polis. Such anti-political habits are pervasive for Arendt, and they are shared by otherwise antagonistic thinkers like Plato, Hobbes, and Heidegger; the weight of their combined thought significantly contributes to background assumptions which continue to foster the contempt that modernity heaps upon political life.

In the interest of eradicating, or at least of reducing, the uncertainties associated with political life, philosophy subordinated the *vita activa* to the solitary contemplation of eternal Ideas that would serve as the ordering principles for all action. One significant feature in the history of political theory is the interest philosophy has taken in displacing long-standing, deeply-rooted analogies between

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<sup>4</sup> As Dana Villa has suggested, Arendt's work gains power from its critical stance toward the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical tradition. In one sense, "Arendt's theory of action proceeds by lifting *praxis*, in 'crystallized' form, out of its philosophical context and resetting it in an existential one" (*Arendt and Heidegger* 11). The result is a framework that can better accommodate the plurality that continually reinvents through action the meaning of our political lives among others.

drama and political experience.<sup>5</sup> For Arendt, recuperating these dramatic metaphors serves as an antidote for this tradition, providing an alternate, non-philosophical register through which to understand political life. For Arendt, theater remains, “the political art par excellence”: “only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art...it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others” (*Human Condition* 188).<sup>6</sup> Drama and politics resemble one another insofar as both need an audience: “both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend upon others for the performance itself” (*Between Past and Future* 154). Non-dramatic art forms, on the contrary, are characterized by a certain “[i]ndependent existence” that does not so readily illuminate how political life sustains itself through the actions of others; unlike these “products of making,” political institutions always “depend for continued existence upon acting men...utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action” (*Between Past and Future* 153).

If the dramatic form can best represent both the plurality of perspectives that constitutes political life as well as the primacy of action over contemplation in political life, what could Shakespeare in particular offer Arendt that traditional political thought could not? When Arendt suggests that something of Hamlet’s condition is “always true,” she seems to suggest that certain works of art, like Shakespeare’s, are “timeless.” By this she is not claiming, however, that they serve,

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<sup>5</sup> In his book on Arendt and drama, Paul Kottman discusses at length philosophy’s strategy of expropriating the spectacle of “theater” on behalf of a “theory” that is designed to stabilize the uncertainties of political life; a contemplative inner gaze fixated upon the eternal Idea supplants the audience who witnesses the contingency of the “scene”; correspondingly, philosophy’s reliance on solitary thought subsumes the contingent, conditioned quality of both dramatic and of political action beneath the principles of an ordering rule (35).

<sup>6</sup> As Paul Kottman argues, “...without plurality there is no drama: the simple fact that there must be more than one person is in fact what most essentially distinguishes the theater from the other arts” (33).

like the Platonic *Idea*, as an enduring roadmap for political and ethical life. Accompanying our experience of natality, wherein agents interrupt automatic or habitual practices, is the possibility that radical novelty can be introduced into the world. With opportunity for such novelty comes the need to recognize when our existing categories and patterns of thought are inadequate to the task of understanding our shared experiences. And this recognition, in turn, requires each generation to accept the responsibility to think for themselves, or as Arendt puts it, to “discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought” in their own time (*Thinking* 210). If Shakespeare’s works are “timeless,” then, it is because they offer us an exemplar of what Arendt refers to as the “timeless time” of thought (211). With his manifest ability to collect together disparate and sometimes contradictory visions of political concepts, persistent amalgamations of the no more and the not yet, Shakespeare often crystallizes past and future into a single theatrical or poetic moment to discover their meaning in the present.

In her introduction to Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, Arendt writes: “Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all. The Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence—that is, at the bottom of the sea—for as long as we use the word ‘politics’” (49). Passages like this one have led Arendt scholars to make compelling arguments about the influence that ancient Greek political institutions and their representation in Greek tragedy have on her political theory.<sup>7</sup> But they have missed

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<sup>7</sup> So pervasive is this line of thought that only a sampling of relevant examples is possible here. J. Peter Euben remarks that although Arendt does not discuss any Greek play at length, “her discussion

the fact that Arendt’s metaphor for understanding the afterlife of political concepts—“the bottom of the sea”—is at bottom Shakespearean. Arendt makes this evident when she goes on to describe what she calls “*thinking poetically*”:

And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will

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of politics and action are [sic] suffused by the language and imagery of theater” (152). Acknowledging that Arendt seems unconcerned with what was irremediably antidemocratic about ancient Athens (“substantial social and economic inequalities, slavery and patriarchy, imperialist adventures, exclusive citizenship laws, the absence of rights...”) [149], Euben argues that Arendt is not attempting to recover the Greek *polis* wholesale, but to use it as a provocation: “to make the everyday seem anomalous, thereby opening up the present for real thinking if not for real political struggles” (163). In her seminal treatment of Arendt’s political thought, Margaret Canovan argues in a similar vein that while the politics of ancient Athens did not in fact make what Arendt articulates about political freedom into a worldly reality, it nevertheless offers modern readers something distinctive in its discovery that basic political experiences emerge only between actors in a shared public space (*Reinterpretation* 115-116). Dana Villa agrees with this mixed assessment, further pointing out that for Arendt “not even the Greeks (not even the Athenians!) possessed a robust sense of the public world” (*Politics, Philosophy, Terror* 208); the appeal of the Greek *polis* lay in its vision of political action that preceded the Greek philosophical and Christian traditions, which both turned the aim of the political into a means toward a predefined end. And for Hannah Pitkin, what Arendt identifies in the Greek *polis* is an understanding that, contrary to the modern understanding of human rights as inherent or God-given, “people are not by nature equal but must be made so by human arrangements if they are to become fellow citizens in a free polis” (73).



come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as  
'thought fragments,' as something 'rich and strange,' and perhaps even as  
everlasting as *Urphänomene*.' (50-51)

This description of Benjamin's historiography refers to all the fragments from the past that suddenly ("at a moment of danger," 255) become legible in new and unexpected images produced by a dialogue between past and present. But, of course, Arendt is also alluding to Ariel's "full-fathom five" song from *The Tempest*, the full version of which Arendt quotes in the conclusion to the first volume of her *The Life of the Mind*. There, she tells us that this Shakespearean song best captures the theoretical assumptions that undergird her own book (212). Ariel's song speaks to the strange persistence of dead political sovereigns ("Nothing...that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change" [1.2.400-1]), a persistence which for Arendt, extends as well to deeply imbedded notions of political sovereignty and alternative political worlds that were themselves once material realities on the earth. Such phenomena, lying "full fathom five", may not be present-at-hand but neither are they beyond the reach of thought, that strong swimmer who can with great effort wrench such transformed treasures back into the world of the living.

My dissertation demonstrates the value of reading Shakespeare's corpus as a primer in this mode of political thought. For while the genealogies of political concepts that Arendt developed in her work are undeniably indebted to Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, her methodology is also distinctively Shakespearean.<sup>8</sup> For example, Phyllis Rackin suggests that the use of anachronisms

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<sup>8</sup> Dana Villa identifies the influence of both thinkers in Arendt's critical approach to understanding present experience by bringing the full impact of some fragment of a collective past to bear upon it:

in Shakespeare's history plays—the insertion of unsettling early modern phenomena like military cannons and “commercial capitalism” into the English feudal past—indicates a nostalgia for, and a sense of complicity in, the passing of a particular lifeworld that Shakespeare's audience must have felt (128). Focusing initially not on Shakespeare's medieval homeland but his Rome, this dissertation makes visible the palimpsest-like quality of those Shakespearean texts whose anachronisms are conceptual rather than material. Their “rich and strange” pearls are case studies in “thinking poetically” as Arendt describes it, inviting us as they do to consider the history and transformation of some of the most fundamental concepts in Western political thought. By layering Christian and classical notions of freedom in *The Rape of Lucrece*, a poem whose subject concerns the foundation of Roman political freedom, or by constellating in *Coriolanus* classical and early modern notions of what it means to be a citizen, Shakespeare allows us to see, as if for the first time, the fate of the modern political world and the anti-political impulses that often drive its metamorphoses.<sup>9</sup>

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“The task of destruction, as practiced by Arendt, Benjamin, and Heidegger, is never simply negative: it does not express the childish wish to ‘have done’ with the past. It is undertaken precisely in order to gain access to primordial experiences whose very strangeness serves to shatter the complacency of the present.” (*Arendt and Heidegger* 9)

<sup>9</sup> By exploring what Shakespeare's plays can tell us about what Arendt would have called the “anti-political” tendencies of Western culture, this dissertation reconsiders what we mean when we use the phrase “political Shakespeare.” It will inevitably raise a familiar theoretical objection: in a post-Foucauldian critical world, have we not agreed that the private is political? Indeed, it is perhaps due in large part to the dominance of Foucault in New Historicist early modern literary studies that Arendt was eclipsed as a significant interlocutor. The de-differentiation of texts and their cultural contexts ran parallel to the theoretical refusal to view the public and the private as distinct political spaces. This is what leads Alexander Leggatt, in *Shakespeare's Political Drama*, to acknowledge that there may be “a political dimension in the relations of the sexes in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like It*, or of parents and children in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*” but to conclude that “if everything is political then nothing is, for the word has lost its edge” (ix). Arendt made a similar but much more sustained diagnosis of New Historicism, *avant la lettre*. Moreover, she would have added that any wholesale abandonment of classical conceptual distinctions between public and private ultimately must lead to the erosion of the public sphere that was, for Arendt, one of the hallmarks of

With this dissertation, I take seriously Arendt's challenge to ask anew fundamental questions from the perspective of plurality, and to do so in my own right while considering how Arendt's understanding of anti-political tendencies in the Western philosophical tradition (and our own, contemporary political moment), are informed by her encounters with Shakespeare's provocative examinations of our most basic political perplexities. Posing a fundamental political question in each of the chapters that follows—*What is political freedom? What is political action? What is political friendship? What is political evil?*—I also explore how Arendt's reconceptualization of politics alters our own understanding of the Shakespearean corpus. While I am concerned with the early modern reception of Shakespeare and am sympathetic to Lisa Jardine's injunction that we read "*Shakespeare Historically*," my main objective is instead to examine the fragmentary histories of the political that Shakespeare wrests from his source material, and those that Arendt, in turn, wrests from Shakespeare. In focusing on how both Arendt and Shakespeare attend to the major sea-changes in the history of political thought, I here submit, then, a kind of experimental notebook of my own that treats Shakespeare's literary works as if they were essays composed with Arendt's questions in mind.

Chapter 1, "Between Political Freedom and the Freedom of the Will in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Julius Caesar*," begins by reading Shakespeare alongside Arendt to re-ask my first question: *what is political freedom?* In "What is freedom?", Arendt mines the Western philosophic tradition for its conceptual articulation of

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modernity. In order, then, to grapple with what Arendt and, I will argue, Shakespeare intend by the "anti-political," it is necessary provisionally to bracket the political as a distinct space wherein freedom can become a political reality only to the extent that there are institutions which guarantee political actors the ability to appear and speak in public.

freedom. From its virtual absence in the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle that favored the contemplative life over the active life of the *polis*, freedom made its first major entrée into Western philosophical thought with St. Augustine, whose valorization of the will transposed freedom from the political domain of citizens to the moral domain of the individual. For Arendt, this unfortunate analogy between the freedom of the individual will and the political freedom that subsists between citizens diminishes our collective ability to care for the common world of laws and institutions that afford the necessary public space for any sustained freedom to act and speak among citizens: for “without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance” (“What is Freedom?” 149). The ideal of an individual who is free to the extent that she can subject her desires to a higher will was fodder for the modern bourgeois conception of the sovereign individual that built a firewall between freedom and politics. Arendt traces this modern conception of freedom to seventeenth-century thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, for whom freedom is measured by the extent to which citizens have freedom of individual movement to transact their own private business, that is to the extent that they have achieved a “freedom *from* politics” and have ceded political decisions to the will of the sovereign state.

Drawing on these observations in Arendt’s essay on freedom as well on her discussions of will and conscience in *The Life of the Mind*, my initial chapter mines the Shakespearean corpus for its reflections on these two notions of human freedom whose distinctions have become obscured. Whereas Arendt locates the imminent eclipse of political action in the work of other seventeenth-century thinkers,

Shakespeare is for her a poetic thinker who examines a constellation of *freedom*s, thereby emphasizing the occlusion of the political freedom to found, enact, and augment the shared spaces of a public world by the individual and ethical freedom of the *liberum arbitrium*. Following Arendt's lead, I will chart the very different conceptions of freedom articulated in *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*. The chief aim of the chapter, however, will be a political reading of *The Rape of Lucrece*.

With *Lucrece*, the only non-dramatic text under consideration in this dissertation and one that Arendt does not appear to have read, I offer a first example from Shakespeare of the *poetic thinking* that she finds so valuable for any examination of present political life, a present which is always a concretion of persistent historical concepts and thought-trains, and practices. *Lucrece* explores the consequences of a move away from envisioning freedom as the shared responsibility of citizens who act and deliberate in public to an Augustinian model of freedom as freedom of the individual will. Unsurprisingly, Augustine stands behind readings of Lucrece's rape and suicide that dwell on questions of the will rather than on resistance to tyranny. Indeed, succeeding interpretations constitute an exemplary case study in Arendt's genealogy of the concept of freedom (Donaldson 55). Overlaying such accounts of Lucretia back onto Republican models of freedom, Shakespeare's palimpsestic poem collects historical fragments from our shared experience of freedom and thereby reveals the impoverished nature of the political world we inhabit.

Chapter 2, "*Homo Faber*, Action Hero Manqué: Crafting the State in *Coriolanus*," follows up the first chapter on political freedom to ask anew the question: *what is political action?* By way of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, I here explore the

fundamental contradiction that Arendt identifies in classical political philosophy: namely, that Plato and Aristotle, who “thought craftsmen not even worthy of full-fledged citizenship, were the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication” (*Human Condition* 230). They argued that participation in the *banausic* life, which involved the making of objects for sale in the market, should exclude one from citizenship. Only virtuous political actions pursued for their own sake rather than as a means of exchange were worthy of a citizen. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius gives voice to this perspective and the paradox that Arendt identifies when he attacks the plebeians, saying: “You have made fair hands, / You and your crafts! you have crafted fair!” (4.6.116-17). His is the patrician’s contempt for craftsmen who would participate in the sphere of political action. When he reduces their action to quotidian crafting, Menenius dismisses the plebeians’ attempt to leave the more solitary work of their shops so that they might act in concert in the political realm: “What work’s, my countrymen, in hand? Where go you / With bats and clubs?” (1.1.55).

Menenius’s metaphorical language echoes the pervasive conceptual “substitution of making for acting” that Hannah Arendt identifies in Hellenistic political theory. Under Arendt’s tripartite ontology of labor, work, and action, labor is trapped in the endless life cycle of production and consumption that sustains bare life; work, the process of fabrication that starts with a preexisting *eidōs* in the mind of the craftsman and ends with a wholly independent object, is the only human activity that can be said to have a definitive beginning and end; and action possesses a beginning but, in its infinite and so largely unpredictable repercussions, no identifiable end. The danger

that Arendt identifies is the tendency to view the political sphere from the perspective of the craftsman, or what she calls *homo faber*. When this happens, the fabrication process offers an illusory model of control and mastery over the political, and the inherent uncertainty of *praxis* becomes obscured by metaphors of *poesis*. The Martius who boasts that “Alone I fought in your Corioles walls, / And made what work I pleas’d” (1.8.8-9) is the craftsman par excellence, not the action hero he envisions himself. Putatively legitimate political actors become part of a violent process of shaping the polis into a preconceived form while actual craftsmen are relegated to the making of objects for sale in the market. The overall effect is to reify and thus to reduce our understanding of political action, the spontaneous human activity through which new forms of political space unpredictably emerge and are sustained.

Chapter 3, “Sovereign Fathers and Sovereign Friends in *Hamlet*,” attends to the question: *what is political friendship?* In her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize that she was awarded in 1959, Arendt posits friendship as a political category with a history that parallels the general fate of politics in modernity. Unlike the ancients, argues Arendt, we moderns “are wont to see friendship solely as a phenomenon of intimacy, in which the friends open their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands.” This posture “conforms so well to the basic attitude of the modern individual, who in his alienation from the world can truly reveal himself only in privacy” (*Men in Dark Times* 24), and therefore risks losing track of the political relevance of friendship: namely, that one’s relatedness to others is determined by the political world shared in common with all.

Recent early modern scholarship supports Arendt's hypothesis while offering a more specific historical moment for the emergence of this now predominant mode of modern friendship. When the discourses of ideal friendship in the Renaissance began to articulate forms of sovereignty distinct from monarchic rule and patriarchal authority, friendship could serve as a bulwark between public and private identities. Ideal friendship in the period followed classical precedent in one important regard: the friend was understood as "another self." Early modern writers supplemented this vision of friendship with the epithet "sovereign," sometimes implying that such friendships could even develop their own limited *polis* and provide an escape from the political world of sovereignty.

To Hannah Arendt, all forms of sovereignty rely upon a denial of the irreducible plurality of public life: all human action is fundamentally *non-sovereign* because its meaning emerges in the context of boundless language and is inevitably dependent on the unpredictable reactions of others. In this chapter, I read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* together with Michel de Montaigne's essay "On Friendship," exploring the pair of texts as essays that enable us to explore with Arendt how modern friendship is both symptom and support for notion of the sovereign individual. As a discourse that distinguishes between public, political sovereignty and the private sovereignty of friendship, the notion of the sovereign, *singular* friend also shares with theories of political sovereignty an inability to recognize the world of plurality.

Chapter 4, "Beyond Shakespeare? Modernity and Thoughtlessness," considers the question: *what is political evil?* If Arendt viewed Shakespeare as an exemplary historical thinker whose work enables us to reflect upon the conceptual



transformations that have mediated the various regime forms of Western political life, she ultimately finds it necessary to look beyond Shakespeare to comprehend the bureaucratized, wholesale murder introduced to our world by totalitarianism. For comprehension, Arendt argues, “does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt” (*Origins* viii). While my first three chapters argue that Shakespeare was sensitive to Arendt’s concept of natality, totalitarianism, itself an unprecedented form of government, requires new ways of thinking about the problem of evil.

Chapter four, then, relies on Arendt’s personal library, archived at Bard College. Her readings in books on Shakespeare and on philosophers who read Shakespeare, as well as her epistolary discussions about Shakespeare, forgiveness, and punishment with W. H. Auden, enabled Arendt to articulate what she felt were the unprecedented characteristics of modern political evil. Robert C. Pirro, for example, has identified Arendt’s critical engagement with Hegel’s theory of Greek tragedy; but Arendt also adopts Hegel as a key Shakespearean interlocutor. Following the Holocaust, Arendt felt it was necessary to reevaluate our inherited concepts regarding transgression and punishment. For Hegel, *Macbeth* is paradigmatic of a “causality of fate” through which the transgressor is punished in the very act of deforming an ethical world, which itself constitutes the relation of the self to the self as well as of the self toward others. Shakespeare, not Greek tragedy, underwrites Hegel’s notion of modern ethical life predicated on an internalization of guilt. But the problem of conscience in the twentieth century that troubled Arendt caused her to question the wisdom of

reading the contemporary problem of evil through Shakespearean texts. In a section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* aptly titled, “A Novel Form of Government,” Arendt urgently pleads with her readers to acknowledge the unprecedented nature of totalitarianism. She fears that if we rely on the “extraordinarily long-lived” categories of regime forms discovered by classical political philosophy, we will mistake totalitarianism as merely some “modern form of tyranny,” and so underestimate the unique challenges it poses for the possibility of genuine politics in the future (461).

Arendt became convinced that totalitarianism’s dual elimination of the public life that makes possible a shared world and the private spaces that enable solitary thought introduces an urgent need to face the possibility that Shakespeare’s representations of evil merely confirm the split between earlier experiences with evil and the unprecedented qualities of twentieth-century crimes (crimes that Arendt judged beyond the possibility of either punishment or forgiveness). Totalitarianism’s transformation of the prohibition against murder present in all previous lifeworlds into an injunction poses a novel challenge. “Thou shalt not kill” effectively became “thou shalt kill” (*Eichmann* 150). Like Hegel, Arendt is not concerned with moral principles; the danger does not lie in the “bad persons” of philosophical discourse, those who could care less about whether or not they have consciences. A far greater problem for modernity lies in what Arendt saw as the dependence of conventional morality (*moralität*) on institutionalized norms (*sittlichkeit*), which for her turn out to be little more than unreflective obedience to legal rules. For if we lose the capacity to think—to quietly reflect on what we are doing so that the conscience is able to do its work—then there is little to prevent the law itself from normalizing evil. And even

though she relentlessly emphasized the importance of widespread public deliberation by free and equal citizens for the possibility of a sustainable political existence, Arendt also saw that in a world in which terror and blind obedience to the law become the rule, the contemplative life emerges as a paradoxically radical form of political action. For the real challenge in a time when Shakespeare's vision of evil has little explanatory force and we can no longer rely upon the support of traditional forms of authority is to find a narrative that, first and foremost fully acknowledges the novelty of the anti-political forces that confront us.

## Chapter 1

### Shakespeare Between Past and Future:

#### Political Freedom and the Freedom of the Will

In her essay, “What is Freedom?” Arendt finds in Shakespeare a fellow pearl-diver, a poet apt to discover, collect, and differentiate among the “thought-trains” of various historical moments, and then to weigh their political consequences in his own time. Arendt is primarily concerned in this essay with what she views as Western philosophy’s profound misunderstanding of political freedom. Utterly neglected by Plato and Aristotle despite the central role it played in the political world of the Greek *polis*, freedom did not even appear as a serious topic of philosophical inquiry until Augustine. But under his sponsorship, political freedom was radically transformed into a Christian understanding of freedom as freedom of the will (*Between Past and Future* 151).

Thus buried at the bottom of our conceptual sea, political freedom was obscured from view, becoming irrecoverable as it once existed. Nevertheless, the freedom of the *polis* subsists in our language, and we therefore can dredge up a story, a memory of how freedom understood as individual freedom of the will was derived from the experience of freedom that existed in Greek political life:

...in spite of the great influence the concept of an inner, nonpolitical freedom has exerted upon the tradition of thought, it seems safe to say that man would know nothing of inner freedom if he had not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality. We first become aware

of freedom or its opposite in the intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves. Before it became an attribute of thought or a quality of the will, freedom was understood to be the free man's status, which enabled him to move, to get away from home, to go out into the world and meet other people in word and deed. (*Past and Future* 148)

In the Greek *polis*, freedom was coeval with the opening up of a space in which a plurality of actors could encounter one another: "The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together, - the agora, the market-place, or the *polis*, the political space, proper" (*On Revolution* 31). But in the world we have inherited, Arendt suggests, this interdependence of politics and freedom has become much less obvious. In reaction against totalitarianism and its near eradication of both a public realm of freely acting citizens and forms of privacy that the public realm is capable of supporting, the unlikely agreement between the absolutist political philosophy of Hobbes and the modern liberal democratic belief that politics is "compatible with freedom only because and insofar as it guarantees a possible freedom *from* politics" (*Past and Future* 149) has calcified into a general consensus.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," Isaiah Berlin summarizes this seeming unanimity regarding what freedom is: "This is liberty as it has been conceived by liberals in the modern world from the days of Erasmus (some would say of Occam) to our own. Every plea for civil liberties and individual rights, every protest against exploitation and humiliation, against the encroachment of public authority, or the mass hypnosis of custom or organized propaganda, springs from this individualistic, and much disputed, conception of man" (200). In *On Revolution*, Arendt attempts to disentangle a conflation of liberation and freedom. Freedom of movement, freedom from restraint, coercion, and fear are negative forms of freedom; they may be "the results of liberation" but are not "the actual content of freedom" (32). Active participation in public affairs that constitutes and renews the public sphere often goes unnoticed during revolutions, but any sustained freedom is only possible through the distinct act of forming anew the constitution of a government. For Arendt, the American revolution supplies the key example of this two-fold enterprise: "The men of the eighteenth-century revolutions had a perfect right to this lack of clarity; it was in the very nature of their enterprise that they discovered their own capacity and desire for the 'charms of liberty,' as John Jay once called them, only in the very act of

The atomistic, individual freedom that characterizes freedom of the will contributed mightily to the production of the sovereign individual.<sup>2</sup> It provided a template for the predominant, modern conception of freedom that understands individuals to be *free* only to the extent that they can freely decide about the pursuit of their private interests. Such a perspective preserves absolute individual freedom as an ideal, merely tolerating social contracts as necessary evils, security against the violence of all against all. Even worse, it disengages us from the unavoidably plural quality of public action that sets into motion, modifies, and sustains the institutions and laws which themselves delimit the spaces where both public as well as private freedom are possible. It effectively conceals from us the reality that political life depends upon a form of freedom whose defining feature is the ability to begin something new in the presence of others:

The idea that freedom is identical with beginning, or again, to use the Kantian term, with spontaneity, seems strange to us because, according to our tradition of conceptual thought and its categories, freedom is equated with freedom of the will, and we understand freedom of the will to be a choice between givens or, to put it crudely, between good and evil. We do not see freedom as simply

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liberation. For the acts and deeds which liberation demanded from them threw them into public business, where, intentionally or more often unexpectedly, they began to constitute that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality. Since they were not in the least prepared for these charms, they could hardly be expected to be fully aware of the new phenomenon. It was nothing less than the weight of the entire Christian tradition which prevented them from owning up to the rather obvious fact that they were enjoying what they were doing far beyond the call of duty” (33).

<sup>2</sup> In her dissertation (*Love and Saint Augustine*), Arendt discusses the tendency of the Christian tradition since Augustine to put forward the sovereign individual as an ideal: “To the extent that Augustine, when speaking of the quest for and the love of the self, thinks in terms of the ideal of autarchy and self-sufficiency, he cannot but arrive at an ideal of absolute isolation and independence of the individual from everything ‘outside’ this self over which the self has no power. And this ‘outside’ includes not only my ‘neighbors’ but also my own body. This is an alienation from the world, which is much more radical than anything requested or even possible in orthodox Christianity” (41).

wanting this or that to be changed in some way or other. (*Promise of Politics* 113)

Every newcomer who steps onto the political stage possesses the ability to initiate an unforeseeable series of events. In the Greek word *archein*, to lead as well as to begin, Arendt finds the best evidence for her conviction that in the Greek political world, freedom of action was synonymous with beginning. And among the Romans, too, freedom was linked with beginning through their memory of the city's founding, *ab urbe condita* (126) ["from the founding of the city"]. For Arendt, Hamlet's words, "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" speak to the capacity for free action on the part of newcomers who are always interrupting the existing political scene as they step into it with their novel perspectives, taking up the identity of citizens when they act alongside and in concert with others (192).<sup>3</sup>

Supplied with historical and dramatic exemplars though we are, this experience of political freedom is, nevertheless, the rarest of phenomena. In places where it once existed and subsequently evaporated, as in the collapse of republicanism in ancient Rome, the notion of an inner freedom may have served as a nostalgic substitute for it:

This freedom which we take for granted in all political theory and which even those who praise tyranny must still take into account is the very opposite of "inner freedom," the inward space in which men may escape external coercion and *feel* free. The inner feeling remains without outer manifestations and

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<sup>3</sup> In "The Crisis in Education," Arendt finds a nihilistic quality in the overriding, conservative tradition of political thought that has tried to inoculate itself against the unpredictable quality of action. This perspective, "which accepts the world as it is, striving only to preserve the status quo[,] can only lead to destruction, because the world, in gross and in detail, is irrevocably delivered up to the ruin of time unless human beings are determined to intervene, to alter, to create what is new" (192). In response, she once again offers Hamlet's words, which she claims "are more or less true for every new generation, although since the beginning of our century they have perhaps acquired a more persuasive validity than before" (192).

hence by definition is politically irrelevant. Whatever its legitimacy may be, and however eloquently it may have been described in late antiquity, it is historically a late phenomenon, and it was originally the result of an estrangement from the world in which worldly experiences were transformed into experiences within one's own self. (146)

Arendt thus associates the supersession of political freedom by freedom of the will with a sense of loss, with the *privation* of the public world that depends upon action for its renewal. Arendt's meditations on the concept of the will in *Love and St. Augustine*, in the essay "What is Freedom?" and in *The Life of the Mind*, all identify Augustine as the first thinker to make freedom a primary focus of philosophy. Because the Greek philosophy of Plato and Parmenides resolutely opposed the contemplative life to the freedom of the *bios politikos*, freedom could only enter this history of philosophy once Christianity, and Paul in particular, had discovered a form of freedom divorced from politics. Arendt links the Stoic thought of Epictetus with the pre-Augustinian emergence of this conceptual translation of the freedom among citizens actively participating in politics into an inner freedom from politics. The individual self, content to redefine freedom as freedom from desire, appeared to offer an effective bulwark against the "obvious decline of freedom in the late Roman Empire" (147). By the time Augustine addressed the problem of the freedom of the will, then, a significant effort to dissociate freedom from politics was already underway.

Positing freedom from desire as the highest form of freedom, Augustine couples each sinful individual with a sovereign, self-sufficient God who operates as the model



for an agent free from corporeal desire. Here political freedom is understood as but another instance of *cupiditas*, the desire to "hold fast to things that can be called ours only for a time" (27). And it must be subordinated to the freedom of the will, "quae quidem nulla vera est nisi beatorum et legi aeternae adherentium" (1.15.32.109) ["which is genuine only if it belongs to happy people who adhere to the eternal law" (27)].<sup>4</sup> In this context, being deprived of freedom is understood not as banishment from the public political realm of action but, rather, as enslavement to individual desire: "For this very thing did I sigh, bound as I was, not by another's irons but by my own iron will" (*Confessions* 188). Seen through this lens, freedom comes under the purview of the individual moral agent, not the citizen, and the mark of freedom becomes self-sufficiency and sovereignty over one's moral actions.

If Augustine's inner freedom of the will adopts elements from Stoic thought, his more novel contemplation of the experience "I will" but "I cannot" reveals a disjunction that was largely unexplored in the classical Greek and Roman tradition prior to Christianity: a disjunction between the knowledge of the good and the will to perform it. In his *Confessions*, Augustine explores this "will which is broken in itself" (Between Past and Future 159) that follows the logic of command-and-obey:

imperat animus, ut velit animus, nec alter est nec facit tamen. unde hoc monstrum? et quare istuc? imperat, inquam, ut velit, qui non imperaret, nisi vellet, et non facit quod imperat. sed non ex toto vult: non ergo ex toto imperat. nam in tantum imperat, in quantum vult, et in tantum non fit quod imperat, in quantum non vult, quoniam voluntas imperat, ut sit voluntas, nec

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine's Latin text of *De libero arbitrio* is taken from *Corpus christianorum series latina* 29. The English translation is Peter King's.

alia, sed ipsa. non itaque plena imperat; ideo non est, quod imperat. nam si plena esset, nec imperaret, ut esset, quia iam esset. (*Confessions* 448)

Mind commands mind to will: there is no difference here, but it does not do so. Whence comes this monstrous state? Why should it be? I say that it *commands* itself to will a thing: it would not give this *command* unless it willed it, and yet it does not do what it wills.

It does not will it in its entirety: for this reason it does not give this *command* in its entirety. For it *commands* a thing only insofar as it wills it, and in so far as what it *commands* is not done, to that extent it does not will it. For the will *commands* that there be a will, and that this be itself, and not something else. But the complete will does not give the *command*, and therefore what it *commands* is not in being. For if it were a complete will, it would not *command* it to be, since the thing would already be in being. (*Confessions* 197, emphasis mine).<sup>5</sup>

While Arendt admits that Augustine's phenomenological exploration of the will illuminated many of the paradoxes of human volition, she also emphasizes the consequences of identifying human freedom with the capacity or incapacity to will one existing choice among others. Philosophy's debilitating transposition of freedom from an arena of politics to "an inward domain of the will, where it would be open to self-inspection," obscures rather than illuminates the experience of freedom as a phenomenon that exists only among a plurality of political actors (145). About this,

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine's Latin text is taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition. The English translation is John K. Ryan's.

Arendt is unequivocal: freedom “as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will.” (*Between Past and Future* (151).

In Part 2 of “What Is Freedom?”, where Arendt sets out to recover what she argues has been repressed from classical notions of freedom, she turns not to classical sources but to Shakespeare, identifying two different conceptions of freedom in *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*. Before examining this direct appropriation of Shakespeare’s plays, however, it will be helpful to explore Arendt’s consideration of the historical relationship between freedom of the will and political freedom alongside Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, a poem which anticipates Arendt’s diagnosis that our political fate in the modern world arises in part from the conceptual occlusion of political freedom by freedom of the will. Shakespeare’s most comprehensive and subtle reflection on these two interrelated but ultimately opposed notions of human freedom, *Lucrece* constellates historical fragments from our shared experience of freedom to reveal the impoverished nature of the modern political world we inhabit.

### **Re-finding Political Freedom in *The Rape of Lucrece***

Although a longstanding tradition of criticism discourages political readings of *Lucrece*, Annabel Patterson has disabused us of the notion that the poem deliberately avoids the subject of political revolution that is patently adumbrated by the myth of Lucrece.<sup>6</sup> Even as she depreciates a critical tradition invested in “denying the

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, a number of studies dispute Shakespeare’s role in the composition of the poem’s Argument; in particular, see James M. Tolbert, “The Argument to Shakespeare’s ‘Lucrece’: Its Sources and Authorship,” *University of Texas Studies in English* 29 (1950): 77-90, and Heather Dubrow, “The Rape of Lucrece and the Republic for Which It Stands,” *Centennial Review* 19 (1975): 57-79.

presence, let alone the dominance, of a republican thematics” in the poem, Patterson admits that *Lucrece* pushes Brutus to the periphery and focuses instead on Tarquin’s infected will. She contends, however, that this meditation on freedom of the will is merely a “smoake of words,” a way to escape censorship. But this feint hardly evacuates the poem of its anti-monarchic sentiments, which are rooted in Livy’s account of the Republican government that formed following Lucrece’s suicide (*Reading Between the Lines* 297). After all, the “Argument” that frames the poem establishes tyrannical rule as its political context: Lucius Tarquinius was not king by election or by birth, but “contrary to the Roman laws and customs, not requiring or staying for the people’s suffrages, [he] had possessed himself of the kingdom” after murdering his father-in-law (1-5). Patterson thus successfully extracts a political reading from the poem, but curiously, she dismisses the poem’s first 855 lines as “primarily psychological and rhetorical filler” (297).<sup>7</sup>

Ian Donaldson’s account of the poem, vulnerable though it may be to Patterson’s attack on apolitical readings, pays attention to the conceptually palimpsestic qualities of the poem that she ignores. For instance, Donaldson observes how *Lucrece* shifts between Roman and Christian perspectives on the question of Lucrece’s suicide without definitively prescribing one or the other: “It is as though Shakespeare had begun to Christianize the old story, begun to question in an Augustinian fashion the logic and wisdom of its central actions” (56). Both of these readings, then, draw attention to the imposition of the largely Christian concept of freedom of the will onto

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<sup>7</sup> See “What delays the reader for 855 lines is primarily psychological and rhetorical filler—along with twenty-nine stanzas devoted to an ephrastic account of a painting of the siege of Troy and Lucrece’s meditation on the poem while she awaits her husband’s return” (297). Patterson writes of the “shimmering superficiality” of the poem’s inquiry into Tarquin’s will. I judge this material to be fundamental to the poem’s layered genealogy of freedom.

the ancient Roman story of Lucrece's rape and the founding of the Roman republic. But Patterson, in particular, underestimates the ways the poem's peripheral Republicanism raises questions about our ability to experience and understand political freedom due to the emphasis philosophers have placed on individual freedom, an emphasis exemplified by the poem's extended consideration of the freedom of the will.

When Shakespeare palimpsestically overlays Christian notions of moral freedom onto the myth of the founding of the Roman Republic, he calls attention to philosophy's conceptual occlusion of political freedom by freedom of the will. At the same time, the narrative trajectory of the poem—which begins with the private, individual considerations of conscience and revenge but ends with Lucrece's individual will toward revenge being transmuted, *malgré elle*, into the new political community of the Roman Republic—hints at a possible recuperation of political action in spite of its historical eclipse.<sup>8</sup> *Lucrece* thus makes a notable contribution to political philosophy by exploring the consequences of the historical shift from a classical Roman view of freedom (in which freedom was the collective responsibility of a body of politically active citizens) to a post-Augustinian focus on freedom as the freedom (or bondage) of the individual will. The interpretative history of the myth of

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<sup>8</sup> According to Arendt, the American Revolution contained a renewal of political freedom in precisely this sense. While it was subsequently hampered by a longstanding anti-political tradition that favored the made constitution over the uncertainty of political action, the principle that inspired it relied on a “hitherto almost unknown emphasis on *public* freedom, an indication that they understood something very different from the free will or free thought the philosophers had known and discussed since Augustine. Their public freedom was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space or market-place which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all” (*On Revolution* 124).

Lucrece was particularly suited to this exploration, as a story about political revolution turned into a story about the freedom of the will.

Shakespeare's poem emphasizes this shift by extending the scope of Augustine's exploration of the problem of the will. The consideration of Lucrece and the question of her suicide in *The City of God* is supplemented in Shakespeare, who dwells as well upon Tarquin and his will to commit the crime of rape. Livy, Shakespeare's chief source, gives us a Tarquin whose intention to rape Lucrece is untroubled by any inner resistance to the crime: "Ubi exceptus benign ab ignaris consilii cust post cenam in hospitale cubiculum deductus esset, amore ardens, postquam satis tuta circa sopitque omnes videbantur, strict gladio ad dormientem Lucretiam" (200) ["He was graciously received by a household unaware of his purpose. After supper he was led to the guest bedroom. Burning with passion, once he saw that it was safe all around and everyone was asleep, he drew his sword and went to the sleeping Lucretia" (80)].<sup>9</sup> Here, the few, uneventful moments of solitude that precede the rape of Lucretia are merely implied. In Shakespeare's poem, they become the subject of an exhaustive investigation into the problem of the will. In lines 127-735, Shakespeare's Tarquin, caught "Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will" (246-47), better recalls the "hot contention" of the soul that Augustine describes in his *Confessions* than the Tarquin in Livy who is more straight-forwardly "amore ardens" ["[b]urning with passion"].

According to Augustine it is in the condition of solitude that the problem of the will is most manifest. Describing Augustine's position, Arendt writes that "willing in

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<sup>9</sup> The text I have used for Livy's Latin is the Loeb Classical Library edition; English translations are Valerie Warrior's.

solitude is always *velle* and *nolle*, to will and not to will at the same time” (158).

*Lucrece's* Tarquin exemplifies this division in the will when he contemplates rape; his “troubled mind” (126) and sleeplessness are symptomatic of the paralysis of the will experienced in solitude:

As one of which doth Tarquin lie revolving

The sundry dangers of his will's obtaining;

Yet ever to obtain his will resolving,

Though weak-built hopes persuade him to abstaining. (127-30)

Generating its own counter-will, the will is split and, from the Pauline perspective, in need of being made whole. But Shakespeare, like Augustine, allows no resolution for this will divided against itself. “Madly tossed between desire and dread” (171), Tarquin both wills and does not will the rape he intends.

The poem represents the temporal logic of extended internal argument and counter-argument (“Had Collatinus killed my son or sire...But as he is my kinsman my dear friend, / The shame and fault finds no end” [232-38]) collapsing into the near simultaneity of phenomenal willing and nilling: “Hateful it is: there is no hate in loving. / I'll beg her love: but she is not her own” (240-41). Even as Tarquin advances toward *Lucrece's* chamber, he commands himself, and struggles with, but does not completely overcome the internal resistance to what he sets out to accomplish:

Honest fear, bewitch'd with lust's fowl charm,

Doth too too oft betake him to retire,

Beaten away by brain-sick rude desire. (173-75)

Despite these vacillations, Tarquin associates the possession of a sovereign, unified will with a virile masculinity ("My will is strong, past reason's weak removing" [243]) that eliminates debate from the theater of the mind: "Then childish fear avaunt, debating die! / Respect and reason wait on wrinkled age!...My part is youth, and beats these from the stage" (274-78). This assertive pep talk, a blustering attempt to banish second-guessing from the period of full manhood to the periphery of childhood and dotage, merely reaffirms the uncanniness of a will that is stubbornly multiple. Even while he speaks to Lucrece just prior to the rape, Tarquin admits that he has deliberated about whether or not to commit the crime ("debated even in my soul" [498]) and claims that he has reached an unequivocal decision to perform it ("nothing can affection's course control" [500]). Still, all that he can finally assert is that he will "strive to embrace" his act and its consequences ("mine infamy" [504]). He cannot claim to be in possession of the unified will he desires.

Such attempts to silence the will that is at odds with itself may appear to be an individual struggle. The aspiration toward self-sovereignty, however, also serves as an exemplar for the politics of sovereignty that pervades the poem. Whenever mastery of one over the many seems the only possible framework for action, the coexistence of a plurality of individual performers has little conceptual space in which to develop. Unable to eradicate the nilling that accompanies his willing, Tarquin habitually projects the internal conflict of his will onto external objects. Standing between Tarquin and the rape he wills, for example, stands "each unwilling portal" (309). Just as these obstacles give way to him, so too, he imagines, will Lucrece, the master signifier of his own internal resistance: "As from this cold flint I



enforced this desire / So Lucrece must I force to my desire" (181-82). But even as he moves past them, they unsympathetically recall the force of his divided will:

The locks between her chamber and his will  
Each one by him enforced, retires his ward;  
But as they open they all rate his ill,  
Which drives the creeping thief to some regard. (302-05)

Tarquin, then, externalizes the conflict of the will by imaginatively substituting the external world and Lucrece for the resistant other within. The fantasy of her rape metamorphoses into a fantasy of self-mastery, a vain hope that rape can temporarily unify his will: "thou with patience must my will abide— / My will that marks thee for my earth's delight" (486–87).

Lucrece, quite the contrary, laments the rape as a loss of sovereign will in a fallen world. As early as *Love and Saint Augustine*, Arendt argues that the only model in Christianity of an agent in whom will and power are never at odds is the creator (87). By way of comparison with the creator, the individual encounters an ontological lack in itself through the experience of its broken will. God's law works through the operation of the individual conscience. But as Arendt and *Lucrece* both testify, insofar as the will needs to command itself if it is to follow the dictates of conscience, it is ineluctably split between the will that wills and the will that is nilled. God's law thus represents both an external commandment and the will's congenital incapacity to obey its infinite obligation (89).

Lucrece's ideological attachment to monarchic rule depends upon the possibility that kings can resemble God, overcoming the chasm between willing and doing.

Responding to Tarquin's aggression, Lucrece holds onto this hope that the sovereign can couple will with power and be absolutely self-governed: "Thou seem'st not what thou art, a god, a king; / For kings like gods should govern everything" (601-02). She consequently suffers from the inevitable disappointment of any vision of politics in which the sovereign must be both creature and creator.

Thus, while Tarquin's desires emerge from a concept of the sovereign self that freely imposes its arbitrary will upon others, Lucrece's vision of freedom depends on a different but related theory of the sovereign self. Tarquin, who wants to rule over others, attempts to unify his broken will by representing its internal split as a split between the self and others; for her part, Lucrece wants Tarquin to resolve his will into a unity by means of self-control and virtuous action. He must rule over himself absolutely as a prerequisite to ruling over others: "Hast thou command? By him that gave it thee, / From a pure heart command thy rebel will" (624-25). Disturbed by the constitutively broken will, Lucrece, like Tarquin, relies on sovereign control over inner dissension for the possibility of freedom: "So shall these slaves [evils] be king, and thou their slave, / Thou, nobly base; they, basely dignified" (659-60). "It must appear strange indeed," writes Arendt, "that the faculty of the will whose essential activity consists in dictate and command should be the harbinger of freedom" (145). Whether understood from Tarquin's perspective as performing what one wishes without the intervention or consent of others, or from Lucrece's, as having the capacity to act free from an enslavement to individual desire, critical examination of the political forms of government that are undergirded by notions of sovereignty becomes difficult, perhaps impossible.

Such, at least, is Arendt's diagnosis of the problem:

Politically, this identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will. For it leads either to a denial of human freedom—namely, if it is realized that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign—or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of freedom, i.e., the sovereignty of all others. Within the conceptual framework of traditional philosophy, it is indeed very difficult to understand how freedom and non-sovereignty can exist together or, to put it another way, how freedom could have been given to men under the condition of non-sovereignty. Actually it is as unrealistic to deny freedom because of the fact of human non-sovereignty as it is dangerous to believe that one can be free—as an individual or as a group—only if he is sovereign.

*(Past and Future 164)*

Arendt's genealogy of the concept of freedom articulates the historical problem that Shakespeare's *Lucrece* probes. When the problem of the freedom of the will is translated into the domain of political theory as a model for freedom there are "fatal consequences" for our ability to think about political life: "it was one of the causes why even today we almost automatically equate power with oppression or, at least, with rule over others" (162). When philosophical thought shifted from "action to will-power, from freedom as a state of being manifest in action to the *liberum arbitrium*, the ideal of freedom ceased to be virtuosity in the sense we mentioned before and became sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others, and

eventually prevailing against them” (*Between Past and Future* 163). So it is that following her rape, Lucrece, like “the poor frightened deer that stands to gaze, / Wildly determining which way to fly,” seems to be limited to the *liberum arbitrium* of her attacker, a freedom that is a freedom of choice between two alternatives: “To live or die which of the twain were better, / When life is sham’d and death reproach’s debtor” (1154-55).

Augustine's significant reconceptualization of human freedom coincides with his equally decisive intervention in the interpretative history of the rape of Lucrece. Lucrece's claim that her violated chastity required her suicide had gone largely unchallenged in the early Christian tradition prior to Augustine. As a woman who valued her chastity above her life, she was most often considered a heroic martyr (Donaldson 25-27). Augustine's meditations on the freedom of the will led him to question this perspective.

Suicide, according to Augustine, is generally imagined by those who attempt it as a pathway to a freedom from the conflicted will that characterizes earthly existence: “Inquietudo enim uariat affectiones ut altera alteram perimat, quies autem habet constantium in qua maxime intelligitur quod dicitur Est” (3.8.23.83) [‘Being unsettled makes our emotions vacillate so that one destroys another. Peace, however, has the constancy in which we best understand what is called “being”’ (90)]. Respite from the conflict of the will is available only through the same grace that represents the highest possibility for any creature of God. Suicide inevitably misfires because, despite its announced goal to achieve nothingness, its true aim is the attainment of being in the highest sense—a will free from conflict:

Omnes itaque ille appetitus in voluntate mortis non ut qui moritur non sit sed ut requiescat intenditur. Ita cum errore credit non se futurum, natura tamen quietus esse, hoc est, magis esse desiderat. Quapropter sicut nullo pacto fieri potest ut non esse aliquem libeat, ita, nullo pacto fieri oportet ut ex eo quod est quisque bonitati creatoris ingrates sit. (3.8.23.83)

Thus, the whole of his pursuit in the wish for death is not meant so that the person who dies is not, but rather so that he is at rest. Thus, although he believes in error that he is not going to be, he still desires by nature to be at peace, that is, to be to a greater extent. Consequently, just as it cannot happen that anyone take delight in not being, so too it ought not happen that anyone be ungrateful to the good-ness of the Creator for the fact that he is. (90)

Resembling Freud's notion of the death drive, the desire for suicide according to Augustine emerges out of a desire *to be* most fully, leaving the earthly condition of the conflicted will behind.

In the case of Lucrece, Augustine questions the justifications for her self-inflicted death. If her own will did not consent to the rape, if instead another's will was imposed upon her, her virtue remained intact: "Quocirca proposito animi permanente, per quod etiam corpus sanctificari meruit, nec ipsi corpori aufert sanctitatem violentia libidinis alienae, quam servat perseverantia continentiae suae" (80) ["while the mind's resolve endures, which gives the body its claim to chastity, the violence of another cannot take away the chastity which is preserved by unwavering self-control"]

(28)].<sup>10</sup> In short, Lucrece should not be admired for being unwilling to bear the public scrutiny of those who might not believe her innocence; the inner freedom from the pangs of conscience that the possibility of grace affords should have been sufficient to bolster a virtuous woman against self-murder (30). Freedom, when understood as the freedom of the will, cannot be violated by the actions of external agents.

But Shakespeare's palimpsestic *Lucrece* gives us a Lucrece who seems already to have read the Bishop of Hippo's interpretation of her rape. Upon first informing Collatine, she communicates her sense of the enduring subjection she faces following what happened in her bed: "From that (alas) thy Lucrece is not free" (1624). This Lucrece next pleads that the men take Augustine's position in order to persuade her that she is "free" from blame:

'O, teach me how to make mine own excuse!  
Or at the least this refuge let me find;  
Though my gross blood be stain'd with this abuse,  
Immaculate and spotless is my mind;  
That was not forc'd; that never was inclin'd  
To accessory yieldings, but still pure  
Doth in her poison'd closet yet endure.' (1653-59)  
....  
'May my pure mind with the foul act dispense,

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<sup>10</sup> The Latin text is taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition; the English translation is from Henry Bettenson's Penguin Edition. Augustine seems to be elaborating here upon Lucrece's own suggestion in Livy that hints at the possibility of including intention as part of the context for evaluating events: "ceterum corpus est tantum violatum, animus insons; mors testis erit" (202) ["But only my body has been violated: my mind is not guilty. Death will be my witness" (81)].

My low-declined honour to advance?

May any terms acquit me from this chance?

The poison'd fountain clears itself again;

And why not I from this compelled stain?' (1704-08)

Ultimately, however, the Roman men's affirmation of her sovereign, inner freedom ("With this, they all at once began to say, / Her body's stain her mind untainted clears" [1709-10]) is not enough to convince Lucrece who, committed to ending her life, "with a joyless smile... turns away" (1711). But unlike Livy's Lucrece, who commits suicide without any such protracted consideration regarding the inner domain of the will, Shakespeare's fully considers and then rejects Augustine's claim that inner freedom is sufficient. She herself understands her rape to have bound her and Tarquin together irrevocably. And she believes that his will still holds sway: "He, he, fair lords, 'tis he / That guides this hand to give this wound to me" (1721-22). Rejecting the sovereignty of an inner will, she does not thereby manage to escape the suffocating framework of freedom understood as freedom of the will.

As a textual construction, Lucrece is herself a constellation of freedoms, a "rich and strange" pearl that Shakespeare brings to the surface so that his readers may explore the transformations to which history and political philosophy have subjected freedom. As a representative woman in pre-Republican Rome, she embodies a female subjectivity deprived of freedom in a public, political space. But this perception of her is unsettled by the history of Christian male subjectivity that suffuses the poem, and that she seems to harbor within herself when she responds to Tarquin. This alternate narrative identity has passed through at least three major

historic phases: first, the expulsion of Tarquin and the opening up of a public space of freedom in the Roman Republic; second, the contraction of this public sphere and a shift of emphasis away from public freedom to inner, Stoical freedom in the late Roman Republic; and finally, the emergence of the Augustinian belief in the primacy of the freedom of the will. As we have seen, the narrative *telos* of the poem, which centers on the political founding of the Republic, is sharply at odds with the rhetorical arguments posed within it. Yet the layering of Lucrece's pre-Republican female subjectivity with the early modern male subjectivity that she ventriloquizes (the one that sets aside public freedom for freedom of the will) also suggests certain affinities between them.

Understandably unable to imagine a form of political freedom that might exist through the creation of a space where she could act and speak in public among fellow citizens, and, following her rape, no longer able to find freedom in an internal, individual freedom of the will, she externalizes her will through suicide and revenge in what we should recognize as the poem's final gesture toward the notion of a sovereign will. In *Lucrece*'s representation of Lucrece's state of mind as she begins to write, Shakespeare again taps into Augustine's keen observations on the phenomenological experience of the broken will:

Her maid is gone, and she prepares to write,  
First hovering o'er the paper with her quill.  
Conceit and grief an eager combat fight;  
What wit sets down is blotted straight with will;  
This is too curious-good, this blunt and ill:



Much like a press of people at a door,

Throng her inventions, which shall go before. (1296-1302)

As we have seen, Tarquin imagines his struggle to perform the rape as a mortal combat between sovereign will and reason, and the narrative voice's variation on this theme reads it the same way ("Tween frozen conscience and hot-burning will" [246-47]). But the above stanza reminds us that in Augustine's account of the will, its constitutive split does not depend upon the distinction between a good will and a bad one, between mind and will, or flesh and mind. The conflict of the will manifests itself in *any* volitional move toward any action, even when all the alternatives before one's mind appear good: "quid? si ergo pariter delectent omnia simulque uno tempore, nonne diversae voluntates distendunt cor hominis, dum deliberatur, quid potissimum arripiamus? et omnes bonae sunt et certant secum, donec el eligatur unum, quo feriatu tota voluntas una, quae in plures dividebatur" (*Confessions* 454) ["If, therefore, all these offer delight at one and the same time, do not diverse wills perplex a man's heart while it deliberates which thing we would seize upon before all others? All of them are good, but all strive with one another, until one is chosen, and there is fixed upon it a single complete will, whereas it had been divided into many wills" (199)]. Likewise, the simile in *Lucrece*, "a press of people at the door," emphasizes the moment of suspense that is characteristic of the deliberative capacity of the mind simultaneously to entertain contradictory perspectives. Drawing on a passage from Duns Scotus, Arendt describes the experience that precedes the writing process: "I am still entirely free, and I pay for this freedom by the curious fact that the

Will always wills and nills at the same time: [but] the mental activity in this case does not exclude its opposite” (*Life of the Mind* 102).

Understood in this way, writing as selection among an infinite variety of necessarily competing possibilities might seem to be the exemplary model for the form of freedom that Arendt wants to resurface, for what she describes as “the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before” (98 *Between Past and Future*). But because Lucrece's only model of freedom, Tarquin's sovereign will, operates within the constraints of the individual freedom of the will, her vision of the relation between author and world continues to mirror Tarquin's view of sovereign action.<sup>11</sup> As Amy Greenstadt has suggested, Lucrece participates in a cultural fantasy emerging at the time that the author could determine the meaning of the works they sent into the world (46).<sup>12</sup> Once she moves to externalize her individual will, her rhetorical maneuvers are designed to control the reactions of others and direct them toward predetermined ends: first to have them “clear her / From that suspicion which the world might bear her” (1320-21) and then, to revenge her rape with the death of Tarquin.

When we act, Arendt suggests, we always act among a plurality: “Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus

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<sup>11</sup> Donaldson notes that other versions of the myth, particularly those from the visual arts, depict Lucretia's response to her rape as an “act which in some ways resembles, mocks, and counters the act that Tarquin himself has performed” (12). Shakespeare makes this connection explicit.

<sup>12</sup> Greenstadt writes: “By drawing on the ideal of female chastity, Lucrece constructs a fantasy of authorship developing in this period—namely, the idea that the author's intentions or ‘will’ could condition the ultimate meaning and reception of his work. While critics generally view ‘the Author’ that emerged in early modern England as inherently masculine, Lucrece instead suggests the ways that this figure—and, by extension, ideas of the modern individual—developed through an identification with a model of female subjectivity” (46).

action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners" (*Human Condition* 190). Lucrece, like Tarquin, seems unable to acknowledge this; while she may solicit the aid of others, she intends that they merely act as the executors of a sovereign will that she alone will leave behind: "This brief abridgement of my will I make" (1198). According to Arendt, action that is free is not bounded by means-end rationality; unlike violence that transforms human beings into *material* that can be used for pre-scripted ends, action inspires the subsequent actions of other actors but never determines them.

Prescribing the reaction that she desires ("Myself thy friend will kill myself thy foe, / And for my sake serve thou false Tarquin so" [1196-97]), Lucrece strives to confine her action to an economy of exchange between her attacker and herself, to a violent revenge inflicted upon him for her rape.

What Arendt ultimately tries to recover in "What is Freedom" and *The Life of the Mind* is a form of freedom that is not contained by the question of the freedom of the will, and Shakespeare's plays, as we will see, have a role to play in this recovery. Even though *Lucrece* deals primarily with the occlusion of alternate forms of freedom by freedom of the will and sovereign notions of action, it too explores the curious non-sovereign qualities of action that frustrate the aspiration toward a sovereign will. Lucrece's assumption that she can become the sole author of a sovereign, meaning-making will is undermined by the poem's intimation about the structure of action. Shakespeare, like Arendt, understands that insofar as our actions emerge into a world of other actors who may interpret and react to what we do, they are programmatically "weak." And Lucrece herself at least partially recognizes this. While she intends the

letter she composes to transmit her will, she also expresses fears that it will be inadequate to this task, and therefore plans upon Collatine's arrival to supplement her words with theatrical performance: "...the life and feeling of her passion / She hoards, to spend when he is by to hear her" (1317-18).

Subject to unanticipated consequences and the reactions of others as we are, what then can we know about the meaning of our actions and our role in the world? For Arendt, "the perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion" (*The Human Condition* 185). *Lucrece* does not allow the reader to do even this with much confidence. While *Lucrece* may intend to impose a sovereign authorial will, revenge itself is always reactive and necessarily a response to the perception of at least one other actor's prior offense. In Arendt's estimation, while an "agent frequently remains the subject, the 'hero' of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of the eventual outcome" (*The Human Condition* 185). When the Roman men set out to "publish Tarquin's foul offense" (1852), we are left with the irresolvable question whether what they "publish" is their authorial work, or Tarquin's, or *Lucrece*'s. If what they make public is *Lucrece*'s legacy alone, an imprint of her sovereign will, why do the Roman men suddenly elect to banish Tarquin rather than to murder him? Since the poem provides no explanatory commentary, the reader is left to grapple with the disjunction between *Lucrece*'s will to revenge and the legacy her intervention into the public Roman political space leaves behind.

And yet, this disconnection between intention and result points up another observation of Arendt's—that if actions are “weak” in one sense, they are curiously powerful in another. Insofar as they have the ability to inspire future actions and to set into motion a series of events, they can tear asunder established boundaries and conventions. Even an action that may initially seem utterly insignificant “bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (*Human Condition* 190). From this perspective, Lucrece does both more and less than she intends.

We see this when we consider the additional interpretive complications raised by the poem's subtle treatment of the political consequences of Lucrece's rape. Following Lucrece's suicide, Lucretius and Collatinus enter into a kind of rivalry in grief, each claiming to suffer more than the other from the loss of Lucrece: “The one doth call her his, the other his, / Yet neither may possess the claim they lay” (1793-94). When Brutus interrupts this display of aristocratic “emulation” (1808) by plucking “the knife from Lucrece's side” (1807), his very involvement broadens the number and type of perspectives that are brought to bear on the matter of Lucrece's rape, extracting it from the private concerns of familial honor to claim it as an event exemplary of “abominations” that presently affect all Romans (1832). According to Brutus, “Rome herself in them doth stand disgraced” (1833). Urging that such crimes must, as a general principle, be “from forth her fair streets chased” (1834), he recalls the otherwise disconnected commentary in the poem's Argument about the violation of popular consent that Tarquinius Superbus' rise to power entailed. Brutus seems not to have heard Lucrece's final invocation that they should kill Tarquin, since he

argues for the same form of revenge but claims it as his own: “Thy wretched wife mistook the matter so / To slay herself that should have slain her foe” (1826-27). Advocating that they act to preserve “all our country rights in Rome” (1838), Brutus gains the support of the other noblemen present, who vow along with him to support this course of action.

And yet, in this ever-expanding circle of actors, Brutus’ call to action, like Lucrece’s will before it, gives way in the final stanza to others heretofore unseen or heard:

When they had sworn to this advised doom,  
They did conclude to bear dead Lucrece thence,  
To show her bleeding body thorough Rome,  
And so to publish Tarquin’s foul offence;  
Which being done, with speedy diligence,  
The Romans plausibly did give consent,  
To Tarquins’s everlasting banishment. (1849-55)

Reading that this indeterminate but presumably larger group of “Romans,” having learned of the rape through the “show” of Lucrece’s “bleeding body,” has “give[n] consent, / To Tarquins’ everlasting banishment,” we must be struck by what they have not given consent to: his death. Here again, the poem suggests that freedom of action in a public space, while often initiated by an individual, can never, except under conditions of tyranny, be a matter of individual will. The very question of the freedom of the will, which had hitherto monopolized the poem’s consideration of freedom, seems momentarily to have retreated in the face of a re-emergent form of

freedom that gains strength when the individual acts of agents are mediated and redirected by those of others. And so if what Lucrece performed in calling for revenge cannot be called properly political because it relied on the freedom of the will as its paradigm, nevertheless it may have paved the way for the political action to come. The poem's final words—"everlasting banishment"—recall the Argument's framing of the poem as one in which a new political paradigm will be set into motion: the result of the people's actions is that "the state government changed from kings to consuls" (41-42). In its final lines, then, the poem moves decisively away from its focus on revenge and sovereign will to action oriented by a principle of mutual consent, and to publically inspired action that can be the foundation of something new.

As I have tried to argue, critics of Shakespeare's *Lucrece* have identified, on the one hand, the juxtaposition in the poem of classical with Christian contexts and concepts, and on the other, the political, Republican resonances of its framing devices. Reading the poem through Arendt enables us to see the relation between these two elements, to see how the poem enacts the conceptual constellation of freedom we have inherited, and how it shares Arendt's concern for the influence that Western philosophical discourse has had on our ability to think about political matters. Ending as it does with a movement toward Republican freedom, the poem also suggests that we moderns have lost sight of something, something the figures in the poem do not quite realize that they hope to gain. Because the historically prior world of the poem subsequently has been saturated with our own perspectives on freedom as freedom of the will, Arendt and Shakespeare remind us powerfully of this

legacy of freedom at the very moment when we read that the Republic is being founded.

### **Beyond the *Liberum Arbitrium* in *Julius Caesar***

Having explored in the first part of “What is Freedom?” the history of philosophical thought that had unraveled any meaningful connection between freedom and politics, Arendt turns to Shakespearean drama as a “non-philosophical” register that allows her to articulate the experience of freedom, not as “an attribute of the will but an accessory of doing and acting” (165). As I will explore in more detail in the next chapter, Arendt diagnoses the work of seventeenth-century philosophers like Thomas Hobbes as symptomatic of the eclipse of political action in modern thought. In Shakespeare, however, Arendt finds a historical thinker who preserves the cultural memory of political action as well as the conceptual distinctions she wants to make visible:

We deal here not with the *liberum arbitrium*, a freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides between two given things, one good and one evil, and whose choice is predetermined by motive which has only to be argued to start its operation—“And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain, / And hate the idle pleasures of these days.” Rather it is, to remain with Shakespeare, the freedom of Brutus: “That this shall be or we will fall for it,” that is, the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which



therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known. Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are not its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them. (151)

Unlike the individual will, which is impelled by motives or goals, the freedom to begin something new among others that Arendt identifies in *Julius Caesar* instead "springs from" principles.<sup>13</sup> Without an understanding of what Arendt means by principle, however, it certainly appears difficult to accept the argument that Brutus can so readily be contrasted with Richard III on the grounds that he is free from both motive and goal. When Brutus concludes that "it must be by his death" (2.1.10) and then moves toward Caesar's assassination, does he not begin the pursuit of something like a goal?

Arendt's theory of political principles can only be grasped through wider exploration of her corpus, but already in "What is Freedom?" she elaborates on the concept, using Shakespeare as a guide. Unlike the freedom of Richard III, who affirms "in his intercourse with himself" (160) the choices he wills, actions inspired by principle, as I will explore shortly, do not emerge from "'within the self as motives do—'mine own deformity' or my 'fair proportion'—but inspire, as it were from without" (152). The opening lines of *Richard III* highlight as well a related problem that Arendt raises in "What is Freedom?" It is the same problem that modern

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<sup>13</sup> The relationship between Arendt's notion of principle, a concept she mentions in "What is Freedom?" but only fully develops in other texts, and her understanding of both action and political freedom, has not been widely examined. This relationship is evident in the passage she cites from *Julius Caesar*, and I will argue that it is fundamental to her understanding of human freedom.

psychology confronts when it evaluates freedom from the perspective of individual motive, again from the framework of the individual will. From the perspective of the agent, an individual may experience what she performs as freely chosen, but when she takes on the perspective of an external observer, that same individual may come to see her actions as forced moves, inevitable; even though individual motives may be less open to inspection than other phenomena because of the enormity of possible factors at play, they too appear to be just as determined as free (144-45). *Richard III* underscores this irresolvable aporia regarding individual freedom almost as soon as its protagonist, who is the only Shakespearean character to begin a play with a soliloquy, enters “*solus*”—alone. When Richard explains that his natural conditions at birth—the physical deformities that he claims make him ill-suited for peace-time recreations—have left him “determined to prove a villain,” he insinuates that his Machiavellian role-playing is freely chosen. But as a host of critics have suggested, it is equally possible to read these lines ironically, and to locate other underlying causes—whether physiological, psychological, or divinely inspired will—that have motivated, and thus “determined,” Richard’s actions behind his back, as it were.<sup>14</sup>

However it is that he is “determined,” Richard does not demonstrate the capacity to experience the freedom of beginning anew, a freedom that necessarily requires inspiration “from without”: a concern for a public world that will outlast the

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Charnes writes that when we examine the play retroactively, Richard does appear to have been determined, “[b]ut not because Richard wills it.” The play’s “ultimate structural irony is that Richard’s declaration of ‘determination’ leads him into actions that confirm his predetermination, his imprisonment in a body that is the spatial representation of already inscribed political and moral ‘perversion’” (62). See also Janet Adelman’s *Suffocating Mothers* (1-10). On the possible meanings of the word “determined” in this passage, see David S. Berkely’s note in *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

individual.<sup>15</sup> Thus whatever his will-to-power leads him to perform cannot be understood in terms of political principles.<sup>16</sup> As Arendt writes elsewhere, political principles like "(f)ear, honor, and virtue are not merely psychological motives, but are the deep convictions of a community of individuals that establish relations between them and serve as the criteria according to which all public life is led and judged" (*Essays in Understanding* 331-32). One fundamental distinction between individual motive and principle is that while motives require no audience, principles inspire inter-subjectively oriented actions that rely on others to judge them, remember them, and reclaim them through future action. Much like objects judged beautiful in Kant's aesthetic theory, principles can only ever make their appearance through particular examples, by revealing themselves through exemplary individual actions. Unlike motive, principles thus must appear to others in order to have any reality at all. And because they appear in and through action, there can be no exhaustive list of principles; with the capacity to begin something new, agents conjure novel principles alongside the political communities they enact. As appearances, principles make claims to a universality that can never be exhausted by the satisfaction of desires (as with motives), or even by the actions through which they manifest themselves; acts inspired by them disclose a world stage that can be erected anew by subsequent actors, even when dislocated by historical moment or individual condition. It is this

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<sup>15</sup> Bonnie Honig describes what is at stake in a freedom of beginning as that which has the capacity to "liberate us from the trivial occupations of the private realm by overcoming the most important and tenacious impediment to action: the biological, psychological, and mental self that dwells in the relative comfort and safety of the private realm" (79).

<sup>16</sup> Richard III, as Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin have noted, is unique among male protagonists in Shakespeare's histories for his attempt to undermine rather than champion the play's only vision of an institution that will last beyond the life of the individual: the Tudor dynasty (106-07).

self-revealing characteristic of political principles that makes them one of the most recognizable phenomena of shared political experiences.

Of concern to Arendt is that modern analyses of political action have been unduly concerned with what remains individual and ultimately invisible about an actor's motive at the expense of what action discloses (a principle) when it enters into the public world. In *On Revolution*, she writes:

To be sure, every deed has its motives as it has its goal and its principle; but the act itself, though it proclaims its goal and makes manifest its principle, does not reveal the innermost motivation of the agent. His motives remain dark, they do not shine but are hidden not only from others but, most of the time, from himself, from his self-inspection, as well. Hence, the search for motives, the demand that everybody display in public his innermost motivation, since it actually demands the impossible, transforms all actors into hypocrites; the moment the display of motives begins, hypocrisy begins to poison all human relations... In politics, more than anywhere else, we have no possibility of distinguishing between being and appearance. In the realm of human affairs, being and appearance are indeed one and the same. (*On Revolution* 98)

The distinctions that Arendt makes here between the indeterminate in motive and the apparent in principle will help to elucidate what is at stake when she claims in "What is Freedom" that Brutus' actions are inspired by principle. When Arendt asserts that actions inspired by principle must be free from both motive and goal, she is not suggesting that motives and goals cannot coexist alongside principles. Yet in the case

of a political action, its meaning will necessarily exceed any particular goal or motive; the generality of principles and the actions they inspire establish or renew relations between individuals, a fact that frustrates interpretations of such actions which are solely based either on the individual motive that impels it or on the successful achievement of any goal that orients it in a particular instance. Arendt's concern is that it is precisely the ubiquity of individual motives, and the role they play in nearly all human actions (both those inspired by principle and those that are not) that so promotes aggressive investigation of them. This tendency, however, both in Shakespearean criticism and in everyday life, attempts to make visible what is most inscrutable about an action, and does so at the cost of ignoring, or at best placing under a preemptive hermeneutics of suspicion, the most apparent feature of actions inspired by care for the common world: principle. While Arendt may have overstated her claim about the examination of motives "transforming all actors into hypocrites," she rightly suggests that under such scrutiny, all agents fall under at least the suspicion of hypocrisy.

In Arendt's personal copy of *Shakespearean Tragedy*, we find evidence (in the form of underlining and marginal notes), that her attention was drawn to A. C. Bradley's discussion of the pervasive "motive-hunting" that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had identified in *Iago* (182-84); Arendt's familiarity with these suggestive remarks indicates that her phrase the "search for motives" in *On Revolution* may thus be tied more closely to Shakespearean criticism than might at first appear.<sup>17</sup> And indeed, *Iago* does present an interesting portrait of an agent whose motives for action are

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt's personal library is maintained as part of the Arendt Collection at Bard College. An electronic copy of Arendt's copy of *Shakespearean Tragedy* is available at: <http://www.bard.edu/library/arendt/pdfs/Bradley-Tragedy.pdf>.

overdetermined and therefore to a large degree opaque, even (or especially) to himself, just as Arendt describes. We might briefly recall the catalog of self-diagnosed motivations that Iago articulates over the course of the play: resentment at having been passed over for promotion, despite his superior military experience (1.1.7-32); xenophobia, against Othello (his “Moorship” [1.1.32]) and Cassio the “Florentine” (1.1.19); revulsion at Othello’s military and romantic successes (1.1.32, 88-91, 110-16); and a belief that Othello has made him a cuckold (“I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He’s done my office” [1.3.375-9]; “For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat” [2.1.286-87]).<sup>18</sup> This darkness of motive proves irresolvable; neither Iago, nor literary critics can provide any definitive interpretation. As for principles, with Iago, as with Richard III, it never occurs to us to inquire whether he is oriented by principles that seek to establish, protect, or augment a common world: such principles simply do not appear.

With Shakespeare’s Brutus, however, the situation is manifestly different, declaring as he does his intent and principles to the conspirators, who are the only representatives of plurality that the contracted public world of *Julius Caesar* makes available to him. The features of this orientation toward a public world that distinguish it from motive and which Arendt finds in Brutus remain largely unexamined, and her reading cuts against the grain of much criticism of the play. In his essay, "*Julius Caesar* and the Mystery of Motive," David Lucking supplies a case study of the very "search for motives" that Arendt cautions against, writing: "As is only to be expected in a work that is so deeply interested in the ambiguities of

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<sup>18</sup> Coleridge famously points to the soliloquy at the end of 1.3 to supply an example of the “motive-hunting” through which Iago attempts to explain to himself the reason he desires revenge against Othello (172).

political action, discrepancies between real and professed motives, between covert intention and overt justification, are evidenced in a number of personages who conceal personal or caste interests beneath a veneer of public commitment" (120). Like Arendt, Lucking tells us that the opacity of Brutus' motivations guarantees that the "determinants of human action can ever truly be grasped at all." But Lucking does not distinguish between principle and motive; that Brutus might be inspired by Republican principle is for Lucking merely one possible motive among others (122). When we conflate political principle with individual motives in this way, Arendt argues, we deprive the phenomenon of action that is inspired by principle (and consequent sustainable forms of political freedom) of the attention that it merits.

Because they concentrate on Brutus' self-examination of his motives, critics often discount his identification of political principles entirely. His claim that "I know no personal cause to spurn at him / But for the general. He would be crowned..." (2.1.11-12) is taken as cover for some other, unacknowledged and deeply personal motivation for murdering Caesar. And because Caesar has not yet done the things Brutus fears he might ("So Caesar may. / Then, lest he may, prevent" [2.1.27-28]), it follows that Brutus is merely fulfilling Cicero's observation that "men may construe things after their fashion / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34-35). But if Brutus does not articulate the specific effects that Caesar's actions and the actions of those who support him have *already* had on the Roman political world, others in the play do. Regarding his ever increasing influence, Cassius asserts that Caesar "doth bestride the narrow world / Like a colossus" and that, as a consequence, the political freedom of others has become significantly constrained: "petty men /

Walk under his huge legs and peep about / To find ourselves dishonorable graves” (1.2.134-37). Cassius’ concerns correspond with those of the historical Cicero, who asked, “Quae causa justior est belli gerendi, quam servitutis depulsio? In qua etiamsi non sit molestus dominus, tamen est miserrimum posse si velit. Immo aliae causae justae, haec necessaria est” (*Philippic VIII.iv.12*) [“What juster reason is there for the waging of war than to repel slavery? A condition in which, though your master may not be oppressive, yet it is a wretched thing he should have the power to be so if he will. Nay, other causes are just, but this is necessary”].<sup>19</sup> The fact that Caesar has the formal or informal *ability* to encroach on the freedom of others is already a sufficient condition for concluding that the public freedom of all citizens has contracted.

Arendt would be the first to admit that Brutus and Cassius may well have personal histories that play a role in their affective responses to Caesar’s rise to power. This, however, does not prevent them from articulating the consequences his ascendancy has had for the shared world they inhabit or from acting on the basis of political principles that transcend individual motive.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, a mere espousal of principles

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<sup>19</sup> See as well modern Republican theorist Philip Petit, who concludes that, “Domination is subjection to an arbitrary power of interference on the part of another—a *dominus* or master—even another who chooses not actually to exercise that power” (340).

<sup>20</sup> Critics such as Girard, Kahn and Rebhorn who reduce republicanism in the play to mere intra-aristocratic emulation or agon all identify similarities rather than differences between what drives the actions of Julius Caesar and the conspirators. For Rebhorn, all are “animated by the same fundamental drive, the drive to excel all others, to ‘out imitate’ their fellows (79)...The central value that directs the behavior of all the aristocrats in Julius Caesar is emulation in the several, contradictory senses of that word. To focus on one of its aspects: the emulation they all feel appears in the form of their omnipresent rivalry with one another, in their competition for preeminence, in their factionalism that leads to assassination and civil strife” (83). Girard, bringing his mimetic theory of tragedy to bear on the play, draws much the same conclusion: “Instead of competing within the limits of the law, the rival leaders turn violent and treat each other as enemies. They all accuse each other of destroying Republican institutions and this false excuse quickly becomes the truth of the situation. All of them together are destroying the Republic” (110). Similarly, Coppélia Kahn highlights Cassius’ recounting of the swimming contest between himself and Caesar as symptomatic of the “routine intensity” of agonistic competition that effectively undermines any explicitly expressed notion of equality; in the end, “Caesar’s obsession with coming out on top is part and parcel of the agonistic ethos that has overtaken ‘the general good’ as keystone of the republic” (88).



offers no guarantee against hypocrisy, against the possibility that the agent may incorrectly judge the correlation of a principle with a particular goal, or that the principle will not ultimately be hijacked by incompatible motives. But attendant individual desires do not *necessarily* strip principle of all meaning or significance. To better understand this, as well as how Arendt explores principle through Shakespeare's plays, requires a more thorough understanding of what she means by political principle.

In "On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding," Arendt connects her notion of political principle with that of Montesquieu, who makes a distinction in his *L'Esprit de Lois* between the laws that constitute various forms of government (the constitutional framework of a republic that grants sovereign power to the people, the lawlessness of tyranny that reduces politics to the whims of a single person's will) and the principles that inspire the actions of citizens and so set into motion and sustain those same forms of government (*Essays in Understanding* 330).<sup>21</sup> While Arendt clearly does not agree with Montesquieu that a fixed number of political principles exist, since she believes that action can introduce entirely new principles into the world, she does take from him the notion that certain forms of action are undertaken for the sake of a principle that then guides the selection of aims and goals. Arendt writes that in the case of republics, for example, the "fundamental experience upon which republican laws are founded and from which the action of its citizens springs is the experience of living together with and belonging to a group of equally powerful men...the common ground of republican law is thus the insight that

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<sup>21</sup> In defining principles here, Arendt is preparing to articulate the (anti-)principle of terror that inspires actions under totalitarianism, the unprecedented form of government that is the subject of chapter 4.

human power is not primarily limited by some superior power, God or nature, but by the powers of one's equals" (336). In Shakespeare's play, Caesar's conception of his own individual sovereignty flatly contradicts this principle. He acknowledges that just as there are many stars in the heavens, so the world "'tis furnished well with men" (3.1.66); but he is loath to permit this cosmic analogy to foster a vision of Republican plurality. Caesar admits of only "one / That unassailable holds on his rank / Unshaked of motion" (3.1.68-70). As he puts it, "I am constant as the northern star, / Of whose true-fixed and resting quality / There is *no fellow* in the firmament" (3.1.62, emphasis mine).

When Flavius, however, urges Murellus near the beginning of the play that he "Let no images / Be hung with Caesar's trophies," he is enlisting the aid of a fellow citizen to preserve the principle of equality, a principle that cuts across patrician and plebeian lines to define the Roman republic (1.1.68-69). This rather desperate symbolic gesture is overshadowed by a deeper anxiety about the material support of the Roman people, the "vulgar" who lift up Caesar. Flavius wants to pluck the "growing feathers... from Caesar's wing" to "make him fly an ordinary pitch, / Who else would soar above the view of men / And keep us all in servile fearfulness" (1.1.73-76); but he does not appear to expect popular support for this. He implies that if the governing principle of republican law (its "spirit," in Montesquieu's parlance) that set the republic into motion and sustains the public space of equality ceases to be the predominant inspiration for the actions of the citizenry, another form of government will arise in which actions are inspired by entirely different principles. In any form of government, Arendt suggests, whenever its "principles are no longer heeded and the

specific criteria of behavior are no longer held valid, the political institutions themselves are jeopardized” (*Essays in Understanding* 332). And when subsequently and without warning we learn from Casca that “Marullus and Flavius, for pulling scarfs off Caesar's images, are put to silence” (1.2.285), we are confronted with the dangers of operating according to marginal principles, that is, according to principles belonging to a form of government whose institutions have all but evaporated.<sup>22</sup>

As the political experience of the patricians in *Julius Caesar* tilts away from republic and toward tyranny, fear, an emotion that Montesquieu thought characteristic of the governing principle that inspires action under tyranny, accompanies anticipation of the loss of the Roman republic. Yet “[f]ear as a principle of action is in some sense a contradiction in terms,” Arendt concludes, “because fear is precisely despair over the impossibility of action” (*Essays in Understanding* 337). And the thirty-nine appearances of the word fear in *Julius Caesar* signal not only the subjects’ fear of a tyrant but also that tyrant’s fear of his subjects. Not just Flavius’ premonition of the “servile fearfulness” to which they will all be subjected or Brutus’ “fear” that “the people / Choose Caesar for their king” (1.2-78-79) but also Caesar’s own misgivings contribute to the play’s atmosphere of apprehension. At the same time that he denies that he is subject to the impulses of fear—“I rather tell thee what is to be feared / Than what I fear: for always I am Caesar” (1.2.210-11), he assures Marc Antony—Caesar revealingly identifies what the object of his fear would be, if he were to be afraid: “I fear him not: / Yet if my name were liable to fear / I do not know the man I should avoid / So soon as that spare Cassius” (1.2.197-98).

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<sup>22</sup> Hadfield (171-72) points to such additional examples as the absence of trials.

Pervasive fear compels citizens to retreat from a public space into individual, depoliticized private life, generating, according to Arendt, “that anxiety which we experience in situations of complete loneliness” (*Essay in Understanding* 336). As Andrew Hadfield points out, there is “no shared public culture” in the play; the characters in *Julius Caesar* are separated out into “small groups whispering secrets to each other” (171). The political world presented in *Julius Caesar* is thus one in which the space where a plurality of actors had the ability to encounter one another has been eclipsed by the specter of tyranny.

Brutus begins the play among a crowd of Romans, yet he remains alone. When Cassius criticizes him for his recent neglect of their friendship, Brutus hints at his private struggle with matters of public import: “I turn the trouble of my countenance / Merely upon myself” (1.2.39-40). In an attempt to draw him out of this inwardly directed disposition, Cassius asks, “Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?” (1.2.51). When Brutus responds that “the eye cannot see itself” (1.2.52), he elicits confirmation of finitude from Cassius (“’Tis just”), who then offers up the judgment of others as the only pathway to something like self-knowledge. Isolated as he is, Brutus does not realize the value others place on his political friendship and leadership. Unseen others—“such mirrors / As will turn your hidden worthiness into your eye / That you might see your shadow” (1.2.56-57)—lament that Brutus forgoes their judgment. Unlike Richard III, whose “delight” it is “to see my shadow in the sun and decant on mine own deformity” (1.1.26-27), and whose identity is formed exclusively through theatrical self-presentation, Brutus’ value is ratified by men

“groaning underneath’s this age’s yoke” (1.2.61), men who are the “mirrors” (1.2.56) and “glass” (1.2.68) that would enable him to see his own “shadow” (1.2.58).

The contrast between the individual freedom of the will articulated by Richard III and the capacity for the sort of freedom Arendt identifies in Brutus depends on the absence of others in the first case and their presence in the second. The private deliberations of the Roman conspiracy, unlike the solitary dialogue with the self in *Richard III*, are symptomatic of the recent foreclosure of the space for public deliberation. Principled action is planned in the private space of Brutus’ house that the conspiracy claims for itself as a substitute for the nearly defunct “Senate-house.” Yet while the two passages Arendt cites from *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar* represent fundamentally different conceptions of action, their contextual similarity—both are spoken in private spaces—brings into closer proximity the two-in-one of the individual will and the condition of the conspirators who have been deprived of a public venue for their grievances.

Indeed, moments before the other conspirators arrive at his home, Brutus himself suffers from the vicissitudes of the isolated mind contemplating a course of action but caught in the “interim” when:

The genius and the moral instruments  
Are then in council, and the state of man,  
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then  
The nature of an insurrection. (2.1.66-69)

The moment he is joined by others, all this is forgotten. The social technology of promising constitutes a second *coup d’état*, this one capable of converting the willing

and nilling of inward life into the normative force of speech that implicitly keeps the presence of others in mind. In contrast to the opacity of motives that frustrates interpretation of the self by the self and by others, promising is transparently identity-forming and -declaring: to promise to do and then to perform are constitutive social acts that produce a public self and acknowledge the need for others.

While the conspirators briefly consider bringing Cicero into their enterprise because his reputation would lend legitimacy to their enterprise (“It shall be said his judgment ruled our hands” [2.1.145]), Brutus rejects the suggestion, emphasizing Cicero’s inability to “follow any thing/ That other men begin” (2.1.150-51). As Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, the capacity to act alongside others provides the only possibility for non-sovereign freedom, the only escape from the logic of freedom understood as the freedom of the sovereign will to control the self or to dominate others:

Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all. The function of the faculty of promising is to master this two-fold darkness of human affairs and is, as such, the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one's self and rule over others; it corresponds exactly to the existence of a freedom which was given under the condition of non-sovereignty. (244)

If the passage from *Julius Caesar* to which Arendt refers (“That this shall be or we will fall for it”) exemplifies the freedom to act in concert and to set in motion a renewed political life, the condition of possibility for that freedom is understood not only by Arendt, but by Brutus as well, to be the ability to promise. And whenever Arendt speaks of promising, she means committing to a political principle. Such commitments do not require the successful achievement of a particular goal to retain their validity, although committing to a principle does require actions that are oriented by the pursuit of goals.

Hence, when Brutus insists that the conspirators forgo swearing a religious oath that would commit them to the assassination they intend, he points to a more general “promise” (2.1.139) that must have a binding force if what they will do is to have any lasting meaning. To make an oath would carry with it the assumption that they are atomized individuals who need to be compelled through fear of external retribution to lay aside private desires and motivations:<sup>23</sup>

...What other bond  
Than secret Romans, that have spoke the word,  
And will not palter? and what other oath  
Than honesty to honesty engaged,  
That this shall be, or we will fall for it? (2.1.123-27)

This last line, seized upon by Arendt to represent political freedom, arises in a context that assumes citizens are constituted by underlying political promises and actions that are a fulfillment of them. Such promises subtend individual identity and

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<sup>23</sup> For a more sustained discussion of the stakes of oath-making in the play, see Jan Blits (43-46).

motivations.<sup>24</sup> When Brutus asks, “What need we any other spur but our own cause / To prick us to redress?” (2.1.122-23), he (like Arendt) implies that political promises “spring from” a shared principle. If their mutual political experiences, what they witness in others (“the face of men” [2.1.113]) and among themselves (“the sufferance of our souls” [2.1.114]), are not sufficient testimony that the principle of republican virtue is fundamentally threatened (“the time’s abuse” [2.1.114]), and if they do not commit themselves to action with those experiences in mind, then even if they succeed, the form of political life they claim to support can have no lasting future. If they have not internalized Republican virtue such that oath-making has become superfluous, they might as well “break off betimes, / And every man hence to his idle bed; / So let high-sighted tyranny range on, / Till each man drop by lottery” (2.1.115-18). This conclusion is drawn by the character in play that has been most evidently affected by the destabilization of Roman political life and the inward retreat into individual psychic life that it has promoted in him. The failure of republican virtue and the rise of tyranny are two symptoms of an underlying antipolitical tendency driving the subject toward the soporific isolation of private life.

Unlike the individual will, adept at setting and pursuing goals, principles “are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in light of its principle once the act has been started” (*Between Past and Future* 152). Yet this very generality is the source of principled action’s

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<sup>24</sup> In his essay “Promising and Civil Disobedience: Arendt’s Political Modernism,” J.M. Bernstein links Nietzsche’s exploration of the human animal’s singular ability to promise in *The Genealogy of Morals* with Arendt’s assertion in *The Human Condition* that individual identity emerges through the promises we implicitly and explicitly make with others (119): “Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities—a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity of the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel” (237).



characteristic power. Recall for a moment the “weak” quality of action so evident in *Lucrece*: all action enters an already existing world of improvising actors, a fact that frustrates the attempts of a solitary will to achieve anything enduring in the political world on its own, much less through a single act. But Brutus also hints at the curiously “strong” quality of action that has been inspired by principle; it is never exhausted by a particular act and can be recalled as a promise, a “spur” (2.1.122) for future action:

Shall Rome stand under one man's awe? What, Rome?

My ancestors did from the streets of Rome

The Tarquin drive, when he was call'd a king.

'Speak, strike, redress!' Am I entreated

To speak and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise:

If the redress will follow, thou receivest

Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus! (2.1.152-58)

Calling to mind the foundation of the Roman republic that frames

Shakespeare's narrative poem, Brutus promises to act according to a principle whose beginning, its *principium*, he traces to actions that first founded the political space of the republic. For the freedom to begin something new is also the freedom to begin *anew*: it can never be about “absolute beginnings” but is an attempt to “restart time in an inexorable time continuum (*Life of the Mind*, II 213-14). As a way of highlighting the structural conundrum posed by political beginnings, Arendt attends to the Roman myth of foundation, Aeneas' journey from a conquered Troy to found the city of Rome: “The legendary hiatus between a no-more and a not-yet clearly indicated that

freedom would not be the automatic result of liberation, that the end of the old is not necessarily the beginning the new” (*Life of the Mind, II* 204). Founding for Arendt is always in some way to re-found, to repeat in Kierkegaard’s distinctive sense as repetition-with-a-difference (149).<sup>25</sup> As John Caputo writes: “To repeat is to produce and to alter, to make and to make anew. Repetition is a principle of irrepressible creativity and novelty; it would be impossible to repeat without making and without altering what is already made. Even to repeat ‘exactly the same thing’ is to repeat it in a new context which gives it a new sense” (142). Characteristically reusable, then, political action not only creates but cultivates a collective space for further action when those who inhabit it continue to act in accordance with the principles that established it. And as others enter the political scene, Arendt suggests, principles allow for and require continued reinterpretation regarding how one should act to fulfill them.

But given the ultimate failure of the conspirators to restore any kind of meaningful public freedom, we might be mystified by Arendt’s citation from *Julius Caesar* and even begin to wonder whether principles really do supply a sufficient intersubjective substrate for action from which a political world could emerge. In her own discussion of Arendt’s reading of *Julius Caesar*, Suzanne Smith objects that because Arendt’s vision of action attempts to purge it of means-ends rationality entirely, it leaves little room for the necessarily practical aims of political life: “One could argue that nothing less than an abject failure to achieve instrumental goals would suffice by way of indicating the lofty disdain for success that Arendt sees as characteristic of

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<sup>25</sup> As Kierkegaard notes: “The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (149).

free political action” (273). Ironically, the failure of the conspirators, contra Smith, has more to do with their resurrecting a sovereign, instrumentalist view of action (this time in a collective incarnation) than with relinquishing such a view. As we have seen, because the background conditions for free action were no longer in place, the conspirators concluded that they had few alternatives to violent rebellion.

The danger with acts of violence is that they often become ends in themselves when actors attempt to achieve with finality the principle that inspires them. Our first hint in *Julius Caesar* that violent overthrow might be viewed not as the beginning but as the end of publically spirited action occurs when Brutus promises to oppose Caesar upon condition of a successful outcome: “O Rome! I make thee promise, / If the redress will follow, thou receives / Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus!” (2.1.56-58). His misunderstanding is detectable in the analogy he makes between one’s internal state during a moment of decision (“Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion” (2.1.63-64)—a “little kingdom” of contending forces—and a political “insurrection.” Although Shakespeare uses this moment to show the distinction between willing alone and the promising among others that follows hard after, we might also infer from these lines that Brutus never escapes entirely from the logic of the sovereign will. A Stoic philosophy of individual self-mastery that prefigures the Christian freedom of the will governs his view that the public freedom of the Republic somehow hinges on his action alone, on his inner freedom to unify the multiplicity of inner wills into a sovereign act of violence.

In the play, Brutus argues that Antony should be spared because what the conspirators oppose is “Caesar’s spirit” (2.1.166). Here, even as Brutus hits upon

how political promises commit them to act in opposition to the principle, or “spirit,” of Caesarism, he confuses the principle with the person, with a single will that can be eliminated through violence. According to this view, Antony is a mere appendage of Caesar’s will rather than an agent who is himself capable of acting and of reacting; he “can do no more than Caesar’s arm / When Caesar’s head is off” (2.1.181-82).<sup>26</sup> In the corresponding passage in North’s Plutarch, Brutus recognizes how an action can serve as an exemplar of principle in precisely the way Arendt imagines. This Brutus hopes that Antony, in the absence of Caesar, will take up their cause and “willingly help his country to recover her liberty, having them an example unto him to follow their courage and virtue” (125). And here Brutus seems to recognize that their actions offer merely the possibility of Republican freedom, its *conditio sine qua non*, rather than its *conditio per quam*, its foundation (*Life of the Mind*, II 208).

What Shakespeare stages in *Julius Caesar* is a movement toward freedom that does not account for the chasm between the freedom to begin something new and the constitution of a sustained public freedom. The fundamental problem with the conspirators’ perspective in *Julius Caesar* is that they conflate two terms: liberation and freedom. Immediately following Caesar’s death their cries are celebratory (“Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!” [3.1.78]; “Some to the common pulpits and cry out / Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement” [3.1.80-81]), suggesting that they have achieved directly—through a single, liberating act of violence—political freedom. Yet notwithstanding the transactional metaphor Brutus deploys to suggest the final eradication of tyranny (“Ambition’s debt is paid” [3.1.83]), political freedom

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Leggat makes a similar observation regarding Brutus’ attitude toward Antony, which he argues “implies a theory of Caesarism—that, since everything depends on one man, when he goes his followers are powerless—that gives Antony no credit for will or initiative of his own” (147).

can be lasting only if it is continually reconstituted through action and institutionalization that is consistent with its originating principle.

Rather than urge the Romans to reinitiate the constitution of a common world by restoring the institutional life that supported the Republic, the post-assassination conspirators deploy rhetoric of self-exculpation. And while the Senate is mentioned several times in the first half of the play, ironically it is Caesar who last invokes it—and then only as a kind of personal possession (“Are we all ready? What is now amiss / That Caesar and his senate must redress?” [3.1.31-32]). With Caesar’s murder, the Senate-house empties; the next time the Senate is even peripherally invoked, it is when we learn “That by proscription and bills of outlawry / Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus / Have put to death an hundred senators (4.2.225-27). Rather than restoring the Republic, the conspirators merely reinforce the loss of institutional life that has already transpired.

What Shakespeare suggests to us is that the “spirit” of Caesar that Brutus dismisses as the will of a single individual is instead its own inspiring pseudo-principle, which in the absence of any durable Republican institutions will continue, post-Caesar, to inspire the actions of others. When Antony subsequently recurs to the word “spirit,” he suggests not only his own independence as an individual agent who can act according to the principle of Caesarism, but also the non-coincidence of liberation and freedom: “And Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge... Shall in these

confines with a monarch's voice / Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war" (3.1.70-73).<sup>27</sup>

Here again theatrical performance serves as an apt metaphor for the freedom that emerges through public, political action. The performance of freedom, like the performance of a play, requires actors and a performance space, and it lasts only as long as the action itself. Absent reincarnation in the bodies of succeeding actors, it will disappear from the world stage. Recalling how the experience of writing in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* articulates the fantasy of a sovereign, authorial will, we are now in a better position to understand the potential risk of analogizing the *polis* with a non-dramatic work of art:

In the sense of the creative arts, which bring forth something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own, politics is the exact opposite of an art—which incidentally does not mean that it is a science. Political institutions, no matter how well or how badly designed, depend for their continued existence upon acting men; their conservation is achieved by the same means that brought them into being. Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action. (*Past and Future* 153)

That political freedom depends upon future performers is precisely what the conspirators fail to recognize. Rather than conceive of how they might inspire others to act in the name of freedom according to Republican principle, they instead predict

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<sup>27</sup> "The basic misunderstanding lies in the failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom; there is nothing more futile than rebellion and liberation unless they are followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom" (*On Revolution* 133).

how their deeds will be commemorated on the playhouse stage (“How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown? [3.1.111-13]) in remembrance of what they judge will be a lasting achievement of freedom (“So often shall the knot of us be called / The men who gave their country liberty” [3.1.118-19]). Inspired by principle the conspirators may be, but they nevertheless succumb to the temptation to understand revolution from the perspective of means-ends rationality. Compared to spectacular acts of rebellion, the work of constituting and fostering the principle that inspired them—through laws, institutions, and quotidian civic practices—can seem tedious, non-urgent, and even reactionary or conservative.

If, like the conspirators, we fail to distinguish liberty from freedom, then we risk blurring the distinction between tyranny and Republicanism. René Girard, who reads *Julius Caesar* in light of his mimetic theory of tragedy, contends that rather than differentiating itself from Caesarism, Republicanism merely emerges in the play as its reactionary double. Exemplified by the mimetic envy Cassius evinces toward Caesar, aristocratic emulation encourages rather than prevents the unraveling of the Republic (110). Wayne Rebhorn has similarly argued that Shakespeare’s play levies greater responsibility for the reduction of shared political space and the ascendancy of absolutist regime forms on a widespread aristocratic will-to-power than on the individual figures of Caesar, Antony, and Octavius (107). There is much merit in these arguments, yet if we consider the principled pact that Brutus and the conspirators make (to begin anew the promise that an earlier Brutus set into motion) as utterly without remainder—as motivated merely by an Imperial will cloaked in

hypocritical, Republican garb—we may miss how Shakespeare’s play is also a study in the phenomenon of promises and principles that are the precondition for an institutional life capable of fostering future action consistent with the experience of public freedom.

Any single action might for a while open up a space for freedom but never secure it. Principles, unlike motives, align with the weak character of action in that they never seek out ends in any final sense of the term. Jacques Derrida, who draws an inspiration similar to Arendt from Hamlet’s sense that the time is “out of joint,” supports this view when he writes in *Specters of Marx* of the infinite promise of democracy, of what he refuses to call a future democracy but only a “*démocratie à venir*” (143) [“democracy to come” (81)]. Actions that advance a principle are subject to programmatic failure, not only because of their non-sovereignty in a world of plural actors but also because no particular action can ever fulfill the “infinite promise” that political principles harbor. Nevertheless, even when actors fail to recognize the danger of attempting to “set things right” once and for all, their principled action becomes an inheritance that obligates all of us with a call to respond:

Même si elle n'a pas été tenue, du moins sous la forme de son énonciation, même si elle s'est précipitée vers le présent d'un contenu ontologique, une promesse messianique d'un type nouveau aura imprimé une marque inaugurale et unique dans l'histoire. Et que nous le voulions ou non, quelque conscience que nous en ayons, nous ne pouvons pas ne pas en être les héritiers. Pas d'héritage sans appel à la responsabilité. (150)



A messianic promise, even if it was not fulfilled, at least in the form in which it was uttered, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history. And whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot be its heirs. There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. (115)

In *Julius Caesar*, Arendt finds in Brutus' words the quality of political freedom that has the power to establish and maintain a world when he recalls the foundation of the republic and commits himself to the "promise" of restoring it. It is his unfortunate equation of violence with political action, his pursuit of the "ontological content" of the Republic by violence alone, that resurrects a sovereign, albeit collective, will, pitting the Roman conspirators against the individual will of Caesar.

At the same time, and notwithstanding this durability of political principles, it would also appear that promises and the individual acts they inspire are not sufficient to support a lasting space for freedom. Certainly, reading Arendt's early essay "What is Freedom?" alongside Shakespeare's *Lucrece* and *Julius Caesar* enables reflection on a conceptual history of freedom that led to the equation of freedom with the freedom of the will, the consequences of which this chapter has only briefly surveyed. As a non-philosophical discourse, the Shakespearean corpus serves us as it did Arendt, as a model for rediscovering the potentialities that exist when we have the imagination and courage to create something new in our political life by (counter-intuitively, perhaps) diving into our collective past to recover those rich and strange conceptual pearls that have suffered a sea-change. When we read him through

Arendt, Shakespeare suggests to us not only the durability of political principles once they first have made their appearance on the political stage, but also how transient they can be as material incarnations if not properly cared for, and ultimately, how difficult it is for us first to understand what freedom is and then to act in such a way as to nourish it.

Yet neither Arendt's essay nor the Shakespearean works in question are equipped to help us think quite so carefully about how public freedom, as locus for the freedom to begin anew, nevertheless requires stable legal and institutional frameworks that will "house" in a worldly space the principles which inspired it. Through a reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in the next chapter, I will analyze the two-fold perplexity of political action that we have now begun to uncover. Although freedom is located in the capacity to begin something new, public freedom must be sustained through institutions that in some measure structure and restrict the scope of all future actions. Yet contrary to the assumptions of the Platonically inspired tradition of political theory that Arendt consistently critiques, the political world should not be analogized to a finished object, as if it were preconceived as an idea in the mind of a craftsman philosopher-king and then forged through his will. As a space of action, the state is necessarily saturated with a quality of thoroughgoing and ineradicable indeterminacy, and affords re-interpretation of the principles that founded it, in new contexts and based on the perspectives of newcomers.

In the conclusion to *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt suggests that because wars and revolutions became the most fundamental political experience of the twentieth century, we were predisposed to equate violence with political action (198).

We thus may be tempted to agree with the conspirators of *Julius Caesar* about their terms for defining freedom and to account their action a failure because it does not ultimately succeed. But as we will explore in more detail in the next chapter, while violence may take the form of a sovereign individual fashioning the world according to her will, action neither pursues ends nor depends upon success to introduce new principles into the world we share. If Shakespeare's Martius exemplifies the persistent conceptual substitution of making for acting in Western political thought, Brutus' move toward principled action succumbs to some of the same presuppositions; his reliance on violence alone to restore the Republic misconstrues what may be accomplished through one act as if it would leave behind a state that possesses the durability of a made thing.

## Chapter Two

### *Homo Faber, Action Hero Manqué: Crafting the State in Coriolanus*

You have made good work,  
You and your apron-men; you that stood so much  
Upon the voice of occupation and  
The breath of garlic-eaters! (4.6.96-99)

Thus Menenius illustrates a contradiction that Hannah Arendt locates at the heart of classical Western political philosophy. On one level we hear the patricians' contempt for craftsmen's participation in the sphere of political action: "You have made fair hands, / You and your crafts! You have crafted fair!" (4.6.118-19). Right from the start of *Coriolanus*, Menenius denounces the citizens' political aspiration with a sarcastic display of paternalistic disdain for their desire to trade solitary work in their shops for concerted action in the political realm: "What work's, my countrymen, in hand? Where go you / With bats and clubs?" (1.1.55). The First Citizen's response—"Our business is not unknown to th' Senate; they have had inkling this fortnight what we intend to do, which now we'll show 'em in deeds" (1.1.56-58)—both acknowledges and deflects the insult. If "business" refers ambiguously to labor as well as to action, "deeds" signifies more definitively the citizens' self-conscious engagement in the business of politics, not the business of the market, and thereby refutes the claim that what they are engaged in is "work" rather than action. On another level, however, Menenius's sentiments correlate with the pervasive conceptual "substitution of making for acting" that Arendt identifies in Western political theory. Favoring the durability and predictability of the made thing over the

distinctive uncertainty of action, this persistent category mistake stifles our ability to recognize new political formations and possibilities as they arise. Menenius' suggestion that the citizens have ineptly "made" the political world they inhabit implies an analogy between the work of craftsmen and actions of citizens. The paradox that Menenius thereby expresses is one that Arendt attributes to the thought of both Plato and Aristotle, who even while being among "the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication" simultaneously "thought craftsmen not even worthy of full-fledged citizenship" (*The Human Condition* 230).<sup>1</sup> But this contradiction, observed by both Arendt and Shakespeare, is merely the most ironic by-product of the fabrication trope's entrance into the space of the political. When we imagine the state as something that emerges through a craftsman-like process of reification, as in the Roman myth of foundation where the sovereign founder draws the sacred boundaries of the city, we are likely to conceive of it as an object that *is* or *ought* to be impervious to human plurality, to the very multiplicity of perspectives and individual actions that in actuality constitute, preserve, and augment any common political world.

In Chapter 1, we explored Arendt's meditations on the conceptual history of freedom through an elaboration on her own reading of Shakespeare. When *The Rape*

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<sup>1</sup>This accounts for the inconsistent attitude toward work that Tom Rutter identifies in the play: "The fact that the language of work—indeed, the word 'work' itself, obsessively—is so ostentatiously used and with such negative connotations in the latter half of the play is strikingly at odds with its more positive use in a very different context in the first half" (149). For Rutter, the difference is explained by contemporary shifts in attitudes toward work and by an ideological backlash against a changing political economy. While Reformation ideologies often held up work as a model for virtuous action, the social mobility of the mercantile classes who either engaged in labor or (more often) employed laborers threatened a social hierarchy long presided over by the nobility. If the play's representation of the entry of the craftsman into the ranks of the citizenry reflects a changing perception during Shakespeare's time of the role of the worker in the body politic, it is less the case that the play's attitude toward work is inconsistent than that it sharply distinguishes the "work" engaged in by craftsmen from the "work" engaged in by the political classes.

of *Lucrece* and *Julius Caesar* are considered as essays on the various deformations that political freedom as a concept has endured under philosophy's preference for a freedom of the will, Shakespeare appears to be performing the kind of "poetic thinking" that Arendt describes as reconsidering from the perspective of present experience such "rich and strange" "thought fragments" as have "suffer[ed] a sea-change" (*Illuminations* 50-51); particularly when read alongside one another, both works suggest how the fundamental experience of plurality has been overshadowed by the notion of the sovereign individual that the freedom of the will produces as its impossible ideal. Shakespeare thereby resurfaces a cultural memory of forms of political action that only exist in the modern world under a kind of erasure.

Yet just as Arendt's fidelity to the experience of plurality precludes freedom of an individual, sovereign will from standing in for political freedom, so too it prevents the sovereign will of any ruling class from imposing a predetermined structure upon the domain of the political, a domain which is characterized by the entrance of newcomers who may reevaluate, again and again, the meaning of political freedom. In *Coriolanus*, at the same time that the patricians attempt to deny or ignore the obvious fact that the craftsmen citizens' political action radically interrupts and disturbs the political world they share with them (resulting as it does in the establishment of a new political institution, the tribunes of the plebeians), these same patricians view the city as if it were a made object which they themselves crafted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Barton has argued that among the patricians, Martius is the only one who ultimately refuses "to accept that a new stage has been reached in the evolution of Rome" (73). I see a more widespread recalcitrance on the part of the patricians when it comes to acknowledging both the possibility of political change, as well as what I take to be more significant, deeply embedded cultural metaphors and ideologies that serve to bolster Martius' notion of himself and the other patricians as "makers" of Rome.

By examining in this chapter the three categories of human engagement with the world that Arendt develops in *The Human Condition*—labor, work, and action—and, in particular, the political consequences of our tendency to overlook the fundamental difference between making and acting, I will demonstrate how this conceptual conflation is carefully considered in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. Because the play highlights the unprecedented and unpredictable events that the public actions of the citizens set into motion, *Coriolanus* allows us to experience what Arendt calls the “pathos of novelty” (*On Revolution* 27), that is, a brief encounter with our ability to set into motion new political realities. The tragedy is that this is no more than a vista glimpsed: the plebeians and patricians alike are unable to learn from this experience or to nurture this ability. They, like we, fail to recognize and remember such moments as fundamental to who we are as political actors.

While setting out in Chapter 1 to analyze the conditions for the possibility of a sustained political freedom, I also demonstrated that *Julius Caesar* articulates the limits of political promising and political action when they do not found or re-found institutions that afford a lasting public space where speech and action among citizens readily can take place. This very durability of institutional life complicates the claim that the political world of action is not something that is made, because its foundation attempts to establish pre-determined limits to action, and thus to novelty. In staging our recurrent blindness regarding political action, I will argue that *Coriolanus* also articulates, in ways that *Julius Caesar* and *The Rape of Lucrece* do not, the irresolvable ruptures between the novelty of free action and existing structures of political life that Arendt herself unsuccessfully attempts to reduce or resolve. With

*Coriolanus*, Shakespeare enables us to speculate more comprehensively than does Arendt about the relationship between the radicalism of the doer who begins something new and the comparative stability of those not-quite-“made” political and legal institutions that enable action to be interpreted and remembered by a political community.

### **A Constellation of Citizenships**

The citizens of *Coriolanus*, identified variously as plebeians and craftsmen, are, like so many of Shakespeare’s characters, overdetermined by the social categories to which they can be said to belong. If their complaints of hunger remind Annabel Patterson of the 1607 Midlands Uprising, and align them with an English rural poor seeking national political representation (*Popular Voice* 129), for Theodore Levinwand, the play’s urban context “acknowledges Rome’s dyadic social structure but regularly (re)imagines Roman plebeians occupying an intermediate position in a tripartite social structure” (“Shakespeare and the Middling Sort,” 296). And indeed, when Martius goes to the market to ask the consulship of the plebeians, to “cog their hearts” with the intention of returning “beloved of all the trades in Rome” (3.2.227), the play’s citizens seem to comport with London’s middling sort. It also turns out that the reimagining that Levinwand observes extends to Shakespeare’s decision to strip his plebeians of their significant military role in Roman history in order to recast them as urban craftsmen. In Plutarch’s “Life of Coriolanus,” the eponymous general is not the only one who publically displays the wounds his body has suffered in combat. When the plebeians return from fighting the Sabines, they face unrelenting



creditors; in desperate pleas for recognition, they reveal their own injuries, not hoping to gain political office (as may Martius) but merely to preserve their status as free men: “And such as had nothing left, their bodies were layed holde of, and they were made their bonde men, notwithstanding all the woundes and cuts they shewed, which they had receyved in many battells, fighting for the defence of their countrie and commonwealth” (5). Plutarch’s plebs are also soldiers, but speech prefixes in the first Folio (“plebeians,” “the people,” and “citizens”) distinguish citizens from soldiers. And when Martius disdainfully refers to the plebeians’ military “valor,” what he has in mind are what he considers to be their disgraceful domestic uprisings, their “mutinies and revolts” (3.1.125).

When considering what these distinctions mean in the play, we would do well to remember that most of the extant classical political philosophy available to Shakespeare assumed that craftsmen and retailers were dubious candidates for full citizenship. When the First Citizen of Shakespeare’s play complains, “We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good” (1.1.14), he acknowledges the classical perception of craftsmen as pseudo-citizens and the prevailing belief that full citizenship requires political action and military service. Xenophon’s *Treatise of Household*, for example, remarks on the illiberal nature of the craftsman’s work and how ill-suited the men who engage in it on a daily basis are for the responsibilities of citizenship:

For suche craftes, as be called handye craftes, they be very abiecte and vile and littell regarded and esteemed in cities and common welthes: For they do destroye the bodies of those, that do occupie them whan they make them to

sytte euermore at home, and to be fedde vppe alwaye in the shade, and some make them to stande all the day staryng on the fire. And whan the body is ones tender and feble the stomacke and spirite muste nedes to waxe a greatte deale the weaker. And agayne, they haue but smalle leysure to sette theyr mynde and diligence to do theyr frendes any good, nor also the common welthe. Wherefore suche men seme to be but a smalle comforte to theyr frendes at a nede, nor no good men to succour theyr countree in tyme of ieopardie. And for a suertie in some cities and common welthes, and specially suche as be daylye in warre hit is not lawfull to neuer [sic] a cytesyn to occupie no handye crafte (11).

In *Coriolanus* where, as Cominius claims, “valour is the chiefest virtue and / Most dignifies the hauer” (2.2.84-85), the depiction of the plebeians as craftsmen, not soldiers, makes their irruption into the political space of Rome even more scandalous.<sup>3</sup>

Echoing Xenophon, Plato’s writings also reveal the full weight of the contradiction that Arendt identifies in Western political thought. In his *Laws*, the city-state is arranged in a series of concentric circles, with the public and religious sites, agora and temple, at the center, the properties of the citizens next, then twelve villages occupied by non-citizen craftsmen and citizen soldiers, and finally a border zone in which each citizen would also have a country house. Here, artisans are

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<sup>3</sup> Rita Banerjee discusses at more length the relation between republican conceptions of citizenship and military service in *Coriolanus* (39-45). She finds in Martius a representation of Machiavelli’s warning that republican values can foster martial competitiveness at the expense of civic participation, and quotes J.G.A Pocock’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s concerns: “A man who should devote the whole of his energies to the arte della lana and none to participation in public affairs would appear in classical theory as less than a citizen and a source of weakness to his fellows; but a man who should devote the whole of his energies to the arte della guerra ... is an infinitely greater danger” (*Machiavellian Moment* 41).

deprived of citizenship and excluded from political participation, but in Plato's other writings, craftsmanship is a model for political action (Vidal-Naquet 231). The demiurge in *Timaeus* is an artisanal god who shapes the world-soul as a metallurgist, the human body as a potter (235); elsewhere, the political ruler's science is compared to that of the weaver (227). A similar contradiction surfaces in *Coriolanus*.

Menenius bitterly attacks the plebeians for the "good work" they have "made" of Rome, implying that the plebeians cannot make a satisfactory political world because of their work as craftsmen; but Cominius has recourse to the metaphor of a master-craftsman when he stipulates Martius' singular, innate virtues: "He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That *shapes* man better" (4.6.90, emphasis mine).

In early modern London, the craftsman's status as a citizen was no less equivocal. In Philomen Holland's translation of *Britannia* (1607), William Camden sharply distinguishes the categories of citizen and craftsman. Whereas "Citizens or Burgesses" occupy a position just below that of gentlemen, "Craftsmen, Artisans, or Workemen," those that "labour for hire" and "sit at worke" ("*Mechanicke Artificers, Smiths, Carpenters, &c.*") are ranked "Lastly" as persons "termed of the Romans, *Capite censi*, as one would say, *Taxed or reckoned by the poll, and Proletarii*" (177). In *Angliae Notitia* (1669), Edward Chamberlayne subscribes to Camden's hierarchy, but he allows that retailers and craftsmen are "capable of bearing some Sway or Office in Cities and Towns Corporate" (492).

Comparable ambivalence about the political status of artisans prevails in *Coriolanus*. Even though Menenius tells the newly elected Tribunes that he accepts

them as members of the commonwealth (“wealsmen”), he also tells them: “I cannot call you Lycurguses” (2.1.54). Lycurgus’ reputation as the classical law-maker *par excellence* makes the most obvious thrust of this insult its suggestion that the tribunes are inept legislators. But they are also unlike the Spartan Lycurgus because, as Plutarch records, he separated craftsmen (whose tasks he relegated to slaves and foreigners) from citizen-soldiers:

...casting all craftes and base occupations upon bondemen and straungers, and putting into the hands of citizens the shield and launce, suffering them to exercise no other arte or science, but the arte and discipline of warres, as the true ministers of Mars....For to have any occupation, to buye and sell, or to traficke, free men were expressly forbidden: bicause they should wholly and absolutely be free. (54)

Articulating a view of citizenship more Greek than Roman, Martius holds the plebeians to be non-citizens. He grudgingly acknowledges those institutional reforms that have reshaped the Roman political world even as he questions the legitimacy of these changes: “I would they were barbarians—as they are, / Though in Rome litter’d; not Romans—as they are not, / Though calv’d i’th’porch o’th’Capitol” (3.1.236-38). And confronting his mother at the end of the play, Martius opposes the soldiers that follow him to the plebeian craftsmen he intends to crush: “Do not bid me / Dismiss my soldiers, or capitulate / Again with Rome’s mechanics” (5.3.81-83).

By occluding its artisans’ role as plebeian soldiers, *Coriolanus* brings ancient standards of aristocratic citizenship to bear on the early modern citizen of the craft guilds. This constellation of citizenship anticipates the fragmentary historiography

of Walter Benjamin that, according to Arendt, uncovers the neglected meanings preserved in words by juxtaposing present understandings with “those spiritual essences from a past that have suffered the Shakespearean ‘sea-change’” (Benjamin *Illuminations* 48-49). As Benjamin himself describes the concept of the “constellation” in his *Arcades Project*, “[i]t is not so much that what has gone by [das Vergangene] casts its light upon the present, or that the present casts its light upon what is gone; rather, the image is the constellation that ensues when what has been [das Gewesene] converges with the Now in a flash” (*The Arcades Project* N3,1). Although *Coriolanus* is set in ancient Rome, the political dialogue that it stages between past and present conceptions of citizenship and the political status of the craftsman constellates in a single image the opposition between ancient and seventeenth century notions of citizenship. With the patricians disparaging and the plebeians failing to nurture their intervention in the public political world, the play signals the maddening closure of political space at the very moment of its emergence.

The plebs first violate the ancient divide between full citizens and craftsmen, performing publically as *civic* actors who demand political representation. Then, having opened up a space within which to speak as a plurality, they seem to relinquish their responsibility to preserve it when they return to work as private individuals in the *civil* space of the market. Arendt finds similarities between the political capacities of those categorically excluded from politics in the ancient world and the modern citizen who by and large abstains from political participation. For the possibility of political freedom is always tenuous; it “does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them—like the slave, the

foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world—do not live in it” (*Human Condition* 199). Indeed, the citizens described by Sicinius—“singing happy in their shops and going about their functions friendly” (4.5.9)—end the play resembling nothing so much as the modern bourgeois citizen whom Arendt identifies in the work of Thomas Hobbes (*Origins* 139-43).<sup>4</sup> The emancipation of the historical craftsman occurs when Hobbes’ modern, negative concept of freedom, what he describes as “the liberty to buy, and sell, and otherwise contract with one another; to choose their own abode, their own diet, and trade of life,” powerfully takes hold of the political imagination, and civic duties give way to individual interests (131). For Hobbes, freedom is not found in the concerted public actions of citizens but rather in what liberal political theory claims as their freedom *from* politics, the freedom of atomized individuals to pursue their private economic desires. Persons thus shrink from their fear of their natural, isolated condition *into* the state, and once in it, prudentially seek out “commodious living” (*Leviathan* 79). The parallel reversion of the once publically-oriented citizens in *Coriolanus* back into isolated craftsmen has been a locus of debate among critics concerned with the play’s attitudes toward modern representative politics, a politics in which people trade their public “voices” for the

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<sup>4</sup> As Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “It is significant that modern believers in power are in complete accord with the philosophy of the only great thinker who ever attempted to derive public good from private interest and who, for the sake of private good, conceived and outlined a Commonwealth whose basis and ultimate end is, the accumulation of power. Hobbes, indeed, is the only great philosopher to whom the bourgeoisie can rightly and exclusively lay claim, even if his principles were not recognized by the bourgeois class for a long time. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* exposed the only political theory according to which the state is not based on some kind of constituting law—whether divine law, the law of nature, or the law of social contract—which determines the rights and wrongs of the individual’s interest with respect to public affairs, but on the individual interests themselves, so that ‘the private interest is the same with the publique’” (139).

voices of those who, like the tribunes of *Coriolanus*, hold elected positions of political authority.<sup>5</sup>

### **Labor, Work, and Action**

Of course, from the start, Menenius' suggestive remarks about the political action of the citizens—their “good work”—points up not merely the political capacity of the craftsmen but the commonplace analogy according to which political action is compared with craftsmanship.<sup>6</sup> For Arendt, this durable analogy is a clear indicator that political philosophy since Plato has preferred to rely on the certainty of work rather than confront the uncertainty of political action:

This seeming contradiction clearly indicates the depth of the authentic perplexities inherent in the human capacity for action and the strength of the temptation to eliminate its risks and dangers by introducing into the web of human relationships the much more reliable and solid categories inherent in activities with which we confront nature and build the world of the human artifice (*The Human Condition* 230).

In *Coriolanus*, we witness both the radical newness initiated by the political action of the craftsmen citizens as well as the deeply imbedded political metaphors of

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<sup>5</sup> For an example of such debates, see Oliver Arnold's contention that Annabel Patterson and other “Whig Shakespeareans” put too much stock in the play's recurrent theme of the citizens' “voices.” Such critics, Arnold argues, see the citizens' participation in politics as unequivocally progressive rather than seeing that the concepts of consent and representation are ideological terms that mask many of the coercive aspects of representational politics. In failing to make sharper distinctions between the plebs and the tribunes, Arnold argues, they also fail to discuss the distinction between “speaking for oneself and being spoken for by representatives” (195).

<sup>6</sup> This suggests that an Arendtian reading of the political in *Coriolanus* would exceed the limitations that Stanley Cavell implies political interpretations of the play are almost necessarily subject to: “A political reading is apt to become fairly predictable once you know whose side the reader is taking, that of the patricians or that of the plebeians...” (*Disowning Knowledge* 145).

craftsmanship that help to deny that anything fundamentally new could ever arise in political life.

In order better to understand the troubled conceptual relationship between work and action, we should first begin with a review of Arendt's tripartite ontology that also includes labor, in addition to work and action.<sup>7</sup> Chained to necessity and the life process, labor is trapped in an endless cycle of production and consumption that sustains bare life. Channeling *Macbeth*, Arendt writes that "the end of its toil and trouble" arrives only at death (*Portable Hannah Arendt*, 171). Producing the least durable and most natural of human things, labor's products do not erect a human world or make of it an inhabitable place; they merely stave off the eternally recurring appetite of the human animal. By and large, the ancient view held that those who engaged in labor were slaves of necessity. The only way to achieve the freedom of action available in public was to enslave others who would keep the demands of labor at bay. Relegated to the private household, the *oikos*, labor and the concerns of biological life (*zoē*) were sharply distinguished from political life (*bios*) and the public stage of virtuous action. Arendt argues that with the advent of modernity, this dramatic space for acting and witnessing action was eclipsed by the state's increasing concern with what had previously been under the purview of the private household, the maintenance of mere, or "bare" life. "In a world without action," drama itself became meaningless as a generic model for political life (*Origins* 141).

Precisely this takeover of *bios* by *zoē* has pre-occupied the attention of recent political theorists, notably Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. In *Coriolanus*,

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction Arendt makes between work and labor, two words we have come to think of as synonyms, is one she herself admits is "unusual" but nevertheless of crucial importance for our ability to think cogently about the conditions of possibility for political life (*The Human Condition* 79).



labor still bears the classical connotations, marking the bodies of those who engage in it as apolitical animals. When the tribunes consider how to turn the people against Martius, Brutus suggests the commonplace belief that, should it be in his power, Martius would strip the citizens of their ability to act politically and transform them into a resource for labor that would be sustained solely on account of its use value. Martius would:

Have made them mules, silence'd their pleaders, and  
Dispropertied their freedoms; holding them  
In human action and capacity,  
Of no more soul nor fitness for the world  
Than camels in their war, who have their provand  
Only for bearing burthens.... (1.2.245-50)

In this nightmare vision of Roman politics, the plebeians have lost their legal status as citizens to become what Arendt calls *animal laborans*, laboring without end between birth and death. A form of life whose killing would not be a crime, they resemble what Giorgio Agamben refers to as *homo sacer*, a figure that makes its most dramatic entrance into history with the death camps of Nazi Germany.<sup>8</sup> The rise of biopower

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<sup>8</sup> *Homo sacer* literally means both “sacred” and “cursed man,” but most nearly signifies a person who stands outside the law. In the introduction to his *Homo Sacer*, Agamben identifies Arendt, not Foucault, as the thinker who had “analyzed the process that brings *homo laborans*—and with it, biological life as such—gradually to occupy the very center of the political scene of modernity. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt attributes the transformation and decadence of the political realm in modern societies to this very primacy of natural life over political action” (3-4). Certainly, Arendt’s concept of the “rise of the social” into public life accords with Agamben’s concern that the introduction of the Greek notion of bare life (*zoe*) into the public space (*bios*) blurs the distinction between public and private. Agamben’s reduction of the gap between totalitarianism and modern representative democracy to an asymptotic curve, however, is not shared by Arendt. Arendt does assert that the very fact of totalitarianism’s emergence embeds it in our shared political history and makes its resurgence as a regime form a dangerous possibility. While her genealogy of the rise of totalitarianism identifies the “thought-trains” of modern political theory that contributed to the emergence of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, she never implies an “inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” or

in the twentieth century gave states the capability to manage life, as in the welfare state. But it also enabled it to kill with unprecedented efficiency, as in totalitarianism. Biopower effaced the public identity of the citizen and made the “bare life” achieved through labor the central focus of modern governments. Amidst such an administered life, it becomes the prerogative of the state to decide who constitutes the “healthy” portion of the body politic and who represents the threats to it that should be eliminated. Like the totalitarian camp, according to Agamben, every modern government produces a “zone of indistinction” (*Homo Sacer*, repeated throughout) that makes it impossible to tell the difference between inside and outside, legal and illegal, transforming what had been deemed a state of emergency or an exception in the ancient state into something much closer to the rule.

James Kuzner, who reads *Coriolanus* according to Agamben’s belief that labor and concern with biological life processes have thoroughly undermined the capacity of institutions to reliably support political life without disastrous consequences, concludes that the play offers the only viable alternative to affairs of the state: a rejection of all forms of political community. When Coriolanus promises to become “a kind of nothing, titleless” (5.1.13), he is “promising nothing except to break every other promise” (196) and, ultimately, in his uncertain attachment to both Antium and Rome, is “a traitor to every promise and to every border of identity” (197) made possible by the state. Arendt, too, shares the concern that the public

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reduces the modern state to the camp, as does Agamben (10). And while there is evidence to support Slavoj Žižek’s claim (see *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*) that the term totalitarian has been used as an ideological bogeyman to shield the status quo against viable political alternatives, his accusation that Arendt’s focus on totalitarianism makes her the most visible representative of this form of conservatism is simply false: one need only notice her relentless exploration of human action and the freedom that permits the foundation of new political worlds based on entirely unforeseen and unprecedented political principles (2-3).

space of political action has been intruded upon as the traditionally private concerns of labor and the maintenance of life have fallen under the aegis of the modern state. Although labor occupies one mode of the human condition that Arendt identifies, the reduction of the human to mere laborer or of the state to the administrator of biological life, needless to say, leaves no room for political action. Yet Arendt, whose exploration of the deep structural connection between political promising and action I explored in Chapter 1, certainly does not share Agamben's (or Kuzner's) reductive equation of the human with the laborer or of the modern liberal state with the totalitarian camp.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Arendt's concern with the intrusion of labor into modern political life demonstrates the importance she places on drawing and maintaining important conceptual distinctions, a mode of thinking we have seen she finds operant in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Keen to reclaim the full potential of political action, Arendt distinguishes it not just from labor but also from work, the process of fabrication that starts with a preexisting *eidōs*, or form, in the mind of the craftsman and ends with a self-subsistent object. As Sir Philip Sidney remarks in his *Defence of Poesy* "the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work"

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<sup>9</sup> Contrary to recent pro-republican interpreters of *Coriolanus*, Kuzner argues that the play "represents the birth of Roman Republicanism as the birth of a state that, in the name of securing personal borders, uses law to place individuals outside the law, thus making life within the city what Agamben calls "bare life"—life that can be killed without recourse to more recognizable legal channels" (174). Although the notion of a bounded self-hood protected by the state makes human rights possible, it also (writes Kuzner following Agamben) gives the state the right to remove those rights-bearing boundaries whenever it wishes. Citing instances when the citizens resort to extra-legal measures to excise Martius from the body politic as the very means by which they will preserve their own rights, Kuzner suggests that Martius responds by refusing a bounded self-hood and the state that supports it, exposing himself to be "undone" by others, both on the battlefield as well as in the market. But this is to ignore those moments when Martius himself intervenes in the civic space, deciding who should be included in it and who should not, as we see above at 3.1.236-38. Failing to see the ways that institutional life mediates conflict in political organizations, Kuzner concludes that Shakespeare's play anticipates what he takes to be the modern state's reduction of the possibilities of action to labor and "bare life" such that states and all forms of political promises remain irredeemably dangerous.

(24).<sup>10</sup> Whereas life-sustaining labor has no beginning or end, work is the only human activity that can be said to have both a definitive beginning and an end. As for action, it possesses a beginning, but complete with infinite and largely unpredictable repercussions, it cannot be said to have an identifiable end. Like metaphor, action establishes links between things hitherto considered unrelated or incompatible and so opens up unprecedented political spaces. "Action," writes Arendt, "always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries" (*Human Condition* 190). This "boundlessness" of action has the potential to destabilize existing human institutions (*The Human Condition* 190-91). When the tribunes rally the plebs to pursue Martius to his home with violent intent, Menenius fears that they are on the cusp of fundamentally threatening existing legal processes; they should instead, he argues, "bring him / Where he shall answer by a lawful form" (3.2.321-22). The First Senator backs this alternative, recognizing the programmatic uncertainty of action: "The other course / Will prove too bloody, and the end of it / Unknown to the beginning" (3.2.324-26).

As we saw in Chapter 1, when Lucrece acts against Tarquin, she attempts to control the outcome through the rhetorical manipulation of others; we might now say that when she does so, she imposes her will on the world as a craftsman might upon the material with which she works. She does this of necessity, because her status as a

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike action, work begins with a preexisting model, or concept. Arendt developed a more complete articulation of this in her lectures on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where she discusses Kant's notion of the concept: what "Plato called the *eidos*—the general form—of a house, which is never given to the natural senses but only to the eyes of the mind... Whenever one draws or builds a house, one draws or builds a particular house, not the house as such. Still, one could not do it without having this schema or *eidos* before the eyes of one's mind" (82).

woman does not permit her entry into the public realm as a political actor, does not enable her to enact a new political beginning based on principle. Hence, she returns violence upon violence, attempting to counteract the sovereign will of Tarquin who raped her with a sovereign will of her own that will live on after her death. We also saw that the moment she enlists the aid of others, she sets into motion a collective act which *is* based on principle (although admittedly not one that could change political conditions for Lucrece or for women generally), something she did not intend and could not have predicted when she began to act.<sup>11</sup>

Work, then, having a predictable beginning and end, is fundamentally different from both labor and action. Unlike labor, it has the capacity to produce things that exceed the cycle of production and consumption. Through work, the human world of tools, edifices, and art emerges as does “the familiarity of the world, its customs and habits of intercourse between men and things as well as between men and men” (*The Human Condition* 94). Because they ease the burden of the continual labor required to sustain life and create artifacts that preserve and remember the actions performed, the *res gestae* (“things done”) which would otherwise not survive,

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<sup>11</sup> A further connection between the craftsman citizens of *Coriolanus* and Lucrece—the fact that their social roles dictate an isolation from public political life—presents an opportunity to discuss the vexing question of the relation between Arendt’s political theory and her gender politics. Arendt has long been criticized for the stark distinctions between public and private that make her critique of modern political life possible, as they seem to reinforce the longstanding dichotomy of the *polis* that banishes women to the private household and deprives them of the possibility for significant action through its valorization of the public life of the citizen. Despite the unpalatable social hierarchy that the public/private distinction historically upheld, as Bonnie Honig suggests, in Arendt “there is no determinate class of persons that is excluded from political action.” (155). In fact, when Arendt’s concern with preserving the public sphere as a space of appearance where political action rather than the attitudes of labor or work are the primary preoccupation is coupled with her notions of plurality (heterogeneity) and natality (the constant birth of new actors onto the public stage) as conditions for the possibility of political life, the public stage appears subject to the “boundlessness” of action (discussed above) in such a way that any roles that gender or all other forms of identity might have in relation to it appear both contingent and fungible.

the products of work, while not eternal, may continue to erect a human world well beyond the lifespan of their individual creators.<sup>12</sup>

In fabrication, the end product always predetermines the appropriate materials and methods for its production. Work, therefore, will always depend on means-end rationality, will always necessitate that a measure of violence be imposed on the matter upon which it works. As Arendt put it, the craftsman, who is the “creator of human artifice[,] has always been a destroyer of nature” (*Portable Hannah Arendt*, 174). Arendt accepts fabrication as a necessary form of violence, endorsing a conceptual opposition between nature—that which has not been shaped by human hands—and the human world of fabricated objects whose emergence is dependent upon human will’s forcible reshaping of nature. If in the mode of labor we are servants to nature, through work we appear as its master. What worries Arendt is the tendency to use any analogy based on craftsmanship or the craftsman (whom she calls *homo faber*) to conceptualize action in the political sphere. When this happens, the fabrication process supplies the fantasy that an absolute mastery over the political realm is possible (or even desirable). The inherent uncertainty of action (*praxis*) that for Arendt characterizes political affairs is obscured by metaphors of making (*poesis*).

Still, the perspective of *homo faber* dominates Western political philosophy. While it was only with modernity that man came to be defined “primarily as *homo faber*, a toolmaker and producer of things” (*Human Condition* 229) and only then that

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<sup>12</sup> For another critical perspective on the relation between work and labor, see *The Body in Pain* in which Elaine Scarry reads the creation of artifacts as a response to the constant stresses of biological life: “The chair, for example, mimes the spine, takes over its work, freeing the person of the constant distress of moving through many small body postures, empties his mind of absorption with the pain in his back, enabling him instead to attend to the clay bowl he is making or to listen to the conversation of a friend” (144).

philosophy overcame its disdain for fabrication, classical political philosophy had already conceived of “acting in terms of making” (196). Arendt connects this subsumption of *praxis* by *poesis* with Western philosophy’s desire for a greater degree of reliability in the realm of action than is available: “It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs” (195). The tyrant’s resort to direct forms of violence might well be a vain attempt to eliminate the necessary weakness and uncertainty of action that are a consequence of human plurality, but Plato’s invention of the philosopher-king is yet another attempt to deny action its role in the political sphere, not only for the multitude but for the tyrant as well. The reliability of the contemplative life of *Ideas* furnishes standards which, lying outside the realm of action, re-enter the polis as authoritative measures: “Plato is helped by an analogy from practical life, where it appears that all arts and crafts are also guided by ‘ideas,’ that is, by the ‘shapes’ of objects, visualized by the inner eye of the craftsman, who then reproduces them in reality through imitation” (110). But these ideas, when they become the “unwavering, ‘absolute’ standards for political and moral behavior and judgment in the same sense that the ‘idea’ of a bed is the standard for making and judging the fitness of all particular manufactured beds” (*Between Past and Future* 110), provide even greater incentives for tyranny to reemerge, the regime form most suited to shaping a polis by way of brutal means-end rationality. Arendt, again: “If the republic is to be made by someone who is the political equivalent of a craftsman or

artist...the tyrant is indeed in the best position to achieve the purpose” (*Between Past and Future* 112).

Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* helpfully introduces a theoretical distinction between the type of reason employed in making and the type employed in acting. Making “has an end distinct from itself,” not so acting since its only ends are the individual acts themselves (107). According to this formulation, action (*praxis*) appears to be unequivocally superior to making (*poiēsis*). The *banausic* life, then, the making of objects for sale in the market, is not worthy of the citizen. For Aristotle, political actions are and must be pursued for their own sake. But even here, Aristotle’s conceptual distinction between *praxis* and *poesis* fails to acknowledge the radical quality of political action—what Arendt will insist upon as the setting into motion of the completely new— by interpreting action teleologically and as a means toward another, higher end: the establishment and maintenance of the good state (Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger* 49).<sup>13</sup>

Although the seventeenth-century philosophy that was emerging about the time that Shakespeare was writing for the stage largely rejected such teleological readings of nature and politics, it (and Hobbes in particular) did not so much overturn the classical tradition of political thought as emancipate it from the social context in which the work of the craftsman was less important than the contemplative life of the philosopher. For Arendt, Hobbes exemplifies *homo faber*’s takeover of the political because he made visible a pervasive undercurrent of Western philosophical thought in

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<sup>13</sup> For the best account of Arendt’s vexed relationship with Aristotle’s theory of action, see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, who delineates her major objections to his concept of action as an instrumentalization of action that simultaneously destroys any distinction between nature and the arena of human action (50).



his mechanistic conception of both nature and politics. We see this clearly in his introduction to *Leviathan*:

Nature is the art through which God made the world and still governs it. The art of man imitates it in many ways, one of which is its ability to make an artificial animal. Life is just a motion of limbs caused by some principal part inside the body; so why can't we say that all automata (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as a watch does) have an artificial life? For what is the heart but a spring? What are the nerves but so many strings? What are the joints but so many wheels enabling the whole body to move in the way its designer intended? Art goes still further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of nature, man! For by art is created that great Leviathan called a 'commonwealth' or 'state', which is just an artificial man - though bigger and stronger than the natural man, for whose protection and defence it was intended. (9)

Hobbes' famous formulation collapses nearly all of the traditional distinctions between nature and art on the one hand, and between making and acting on the other. And as God the creator is now understood as a craftsman God ("God is the Artificer and nature is his fabrication") so man is a lesser craftsman who creates from the material of men a singular artificial man, society ("History of Political Theory," 023991). And yet, as Arendt points out, although Hobbes analogizes divine creation and the formation of political bodies, he also establishes a crucial difference between them. Unlike the relationship between nature and God, in which the creator retains mastery over the created world, the created object in the political realm becomes

“stronger than all its producers who need to be protected by their own production” (“History of Political Theory,” 203992). With the disappearance from modern political life of what Arendt calls political principles (a concept explored in Chapter 1) from which free actions spring and according to which each particular action is judged, ends are judged solely by the product they fashion. The will of the anonymous craftsman has become superior not only to the means that are used to produce the political “product” but, ultimately, to politics itself; according to the logic of *homo faber*, all political action would itself come to an “end” with the final product (*Promise of Politics* 193). According to this interpretation of politics, the product of human fabrication takes precedence over its individual fabricators.

Shakespeare’s Rome anticipates this Hobbesian analysis. The patricians also view politics as a violent process of molding the polis into a preconceived form, that is, as work and not action.<sup>14</sup> It follows that they relegate craftsmen, putatively unsuited to active participation in politics, to making objects for sale in the market. For his part, Martius conceives of the political world as a mechanism that guards against something like a Hobbesian state of nature in which atomized individuals pursue unchecked their cannibalistic appetites: “You cry against the noble Senate, who / (Under the gods) keep you in awe, which else / Would feed on one another?” (1.1.185-87). This justification of the state as that which mitigates rapacious

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara L. Parker has argued for the influence of Plato’s *Republic* on the play’s political preconceptions: the rigid functions *Republic* assigns to various members of the polis are tacitly supported by the play’s tragic conclusion (23-24, 54-73). Like Plato, the play envisions an inevitable decline when monarchy (grounded in reason) is perverted by material interests. What follows is a cycle of regime changes whereby republic gives way to oligarchy, oligarchy to democracy, and democracy to mob rule. While the play’s patricians’ view of the state does resemble Platonic political thought, the play as a whole is skeptical about the inevitability of regime change. As does Arendt, Shakespeare emphasizes the surprise and spontaneity of political action, not its necessity.

individualism anticipates Hobbes theory of state formation as Arendt describes it: “Their equality as potential murderers places all men in the same insecurity, from which arises the need for a state” (*Origins* 140). As Menenius represents it to the plebeians, the sovereign power of the state, once established, is itself not only irresistible but mechanistic. Its motion is predetermined and inexorable: “...you may as well strike at the heaven with your staves, as lift them against the Roman state, whose course will on the way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs of more strong link asunder than can ever stand in your impediment” (1.1.66-71). Again, Arendt finds a similar sentiment in Hobbes: “Security is provided by the law, which is a direct emanation from the power monopoly of the state...as this law flows directly from absolute power it represents absolute necessity in the eyes of the individual who lives under it” (*Origins* 141). With Arendt, we are left wondering whether there is in the formulations of Menenius, Coriolanus, or Hobbes any possibility of spontaneous action.

The longstanding, implicit assumption of Western political philosophy which Hobbes and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* make explicit—that the political world is *made*—fundamentally limits our understanding of political action, the human activity by means of which new forms of political space unpredictably emerge and are sustained. As Arendt argues, *homo faber* cannot adequately account for political life because it works with prefabricated concepts, whether the *Ideas* in Plato’s cave or the objects with properties in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The idea that only what I am going to make will be real—perfectly true and legitimate in the realm of fabrication—is forever defeated by the actual course

of events, where nothing happens more frequently than the totally unexpected. To act in the form of making, to reason in the form of "reckoning with consequences," means to leave out the unexpected, the event itself, since it would be unreasonable or irrational to expect what is no more than an "infinite improbability." Since, however, the event constitutes the very texture of reality within the realm of human affairs, where the "wholly improbable happens regularly," it is highly unrealistic not to reckon with it, that is, not to reckon with something with which nobody can safely reckon. The political philosophy of the modern age, whose greatest representative is still Hobbes, founders on the perplexity that modern rationalism is unreal and modern realism is irrational—which is only another way of saying that reality and human reason have parted company. (*The Human Condition* 300)

Events emerge through action, ushering in unforeseen and unprecedented configurations; they can only be subsumed by preexisting categories when interpreted as if they were a finished work. But how can we reckon with something for which we have no preexisting standard of measurement? Both Shakespeare and Arendt caution against applying old categories of understanding to something that may be fundamentally new.<sup>15</sup>

The versions of Menenius's fable of the belly—the old explanatory frameworks—available to Shakespeare effectively conceal the possibility for genuine political action. In Plutarch, for instance, a causal connection is insinuated between Menenius's oration and the restoration of civil order: his "good persuasions and

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Arendt's theory of the event, see her essay, "Understanding and Politics," *Essays in Understanding*, (319-20).

gentle requestes...pacified the people, conditionally, that the Senate would graunte there should be yerely chosen five magistrates, which they now call *Tribuni Plebis*, whose office should be to defend the poore people from violence and oppression” (6). The plebeians’ agency in acquiring tribunal representation takes a back seat to the persuasive, shaping power of Menenius’s words. Even more striking in this respect is Philip Sidney’s recourse to Menenius in his account of the poet as maker in his *Apologie for Poesy*. Early in the treatise, Sidney urges his readers to “give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker [the poet], who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings” (24-25). Having analogized the creation of nature with the production of poetry, Sidney finds in Menenius Agrippa an exemplar of the poet as maker. Menenius’s tale “wrought such effect in the people, as I never read that only words brought forth but then so sudden and good an alteration; for upon reasonable conditions a perfect reconcilment ensued” (42). Here again we see the Aristotelian politician whose chief end is to shape the character of citizens so that they are predisposed to noble action (*Nicomachean Ethics* 23). To be “politically active” is to “practice [politics] in the way that handcraftsmen practise their craft” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 159). Both Plutarch’s and Sidney’s accounts of Menenius’s oration, then, implicitly favor the aristocratic poet over the people, the maker over the multitude.

But as we have seen, to rely on the metaphor of making is to grasp at fantasies of control rather than to contend with the unpredictable nature of action. The

Shakespearean Menenius' vision of the Roman state proceeding on a predetermined, inexorable "course" participates in a recurrent ideology that claims the status-quo as necessity. Whether our context is the Roman senate's monopoly on political power in *Coriolanus* or the depoliticized citizenry of the neo-liberal state that accepts global capitalism as the only possible life-world, when the pretense of necessity is countenanced, the illusion of the necessary turns into a nearly fixed reality, a made thing. According to Arendt's account of Nazi Germany, a similar form of propaganda was "one, possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with a non-totalitarian world" (*Origins* 344). But it is the non-totalitarian nature of the political world, its un-made-ness, its susceptibility to action, which gives the lie to fictions of necessity, just as the plebeians who revolt in *Coriolanus* do to the claims of Menenius's oration and as the recent public displays of solidarity from the streets of Cairo to Wall Street undercut nationalist and free market ideologies.

In Shakespeare's, if not Sidney's telling, rebellions occur in "several places of the city" (1.1.184). By decoupling the oration of Menenius from the founding of a new political order, Shakespeare preserves the constitutive unpredictability of political action, as well as the wonder and fear its uncertainties provoke in those who wish to be the masters of the world.<sup>16</sup> When the patricians hear of the concessions granted to the plebeians, they cannot think of what has happened in terms of a finished work or product, but are forced to confront contingent political action as if

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Cavell also sees Shakespeare's deployment of the belly fable in competition with Sidney's account, perhaps even an outright "rebuke of it" (82). According to Cavell, Shakespeare "puts into question both the nature of the 'alteration' and the 'perfection' of the reconciliation by placing the story at the beginning of the play" (83). I contend that *Coriolanus* does both more and less, that it leaves intact the shaping power of Menenius' oration but refuses to diminish the unpredictable political action that the plebs, independent from the oration, engage in.

for the first time. They are faced with the possibility that the political is not something that is made according to a preconceived idea (*eidōs*) but instead is produced, altered, and maintained by an improvising plurality of actors. Because action does not emerge out of the natural bodily compulsions that necessitate labor, or out of means-ends rationality and the desire for utility that motivates the creation of objects in work, it follows no preordained script. As we learned in Chapter 1, all that prevents the act of beginning something new from becoming arbitrary is the political principle that inspires it, for beginning and principle, “*principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval” (*On Revolution* 212). And because, unlike a made thing, an action is never fully bounded or finished, there always exists the possibility that the unprecedented will occur. We may conjure into existence not only something that has no previous existence, but even more radically, something not even given “as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not exist” (*Between Past and Future* 155).

Only when Martius reports that “the other troop” (1.1.203) has been granted a “strange” (1.1.209) petition does Menenius learn that the plebs have been granted five tribunes “of their own choice” (1.1.215). Menenius, too, finds this “strange” (1.1.220). Their shared “strange” speaks to the wonder and surprise that political revolution can provoke, to what Arendt identifies as the “pathos of novelty” (*On Revolution* 27).<sup>17</sup> In such moments, the “shock of experience” temporarily disrupts our familiar categories and confronts us with the need to reevaluate them:

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<sup>17</sup> The word “strange” also evokes another related blindness that plagues the perspective of *homo faber*: that the forms of political action that serve to open up a political space where there was none before, always makes their appearance from the outside and as the “work” of strangers.

Whenever we are confronted with something frighteningly new, our first impulse is to recognize it in a blind and uncontrolled reaction strong enough to coin a new word; our second impulse seems to be to regain control by denying that we saw anything new at all, by pretending that something similar is already known to us; only a third impulse can lead us back to what we saw and knew in the beginning. It is here that true [political] understanding begins.

(Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*)

While at first the play recognizes the novelty of citizens leaving their solitary work and acting together to open up a new public space, ultimately the plebeians and the patricians alike are unable either to seize hold of or to abide by the “strange.” The play anticipates the fate of modern politics when the citizens disperse and return to being isolated craftsmen. The death of Martius heralds not the emergence of something new but, in what is perhaps Shakespeare’s unique political tragedy, the near collapse of political life. At best, the market has taken revenge against an aristocratic monopoly on political action.

At least part of the plebeians' ultimate failure fully to grasp their political capacity may be attributed to their internalization of the play's valorization of individual action and its utter disregard for collective organization. When actions are publicly praised, as when, for instance, the Herald announces Martius' triumph over the Volscies, they are attributed to a single actor:

Know, Rome, that all *alone* Martius did fight

Within Corioles gates: where he hath won,

With fame, a name to follow Martius Caius. These



In honor follows Coriolanus. (2.1.161-64, emphasis mine)

Arendt diagnoses the tendency to laud as action *par excellence* those instances when someone appears to do something "all alone" to be yet another consequence of the tremendous sway that the perspective of *homo faber*, ever obscuring the distinctions between work and action, has on our understanding of the possibilities of action:

Fabrication is surrounded by and in constant contact with the world: action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of acts and words of other men. The popular belief in a "strong man" who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is...based on the delusion that we can "make" something in the realm of human affairs—"make" institutions or laws, for instance as we make tables and chairs, or make man "better" or "worse" (188).

Surely no one in *Coriolanus* sees the political sphere more intently through the *homo faber* lens than does Martius. While their own desire for increased political influence with the plebs may inspire the tribunes' accusation that Martius would, "depopulate the city and / Be every man himself," (3.1.263-64), his refusal of sustained interaction with others is never in question. At the end of the play, Martius even renounces his limited partnership with Aufidius in favor of his earlier solitary attack on the Volsces; whereas his "Alone I did it" attempts to reclaim an image of masculine self-sufficient adulthood, his "Boy!" (5.6.116) returns Aufidius' "boy of tears!" (5.6.100) jibe back upon him for relying on Martius' help to attack Rome.<sup>18</sup> And if Cominius' claim that

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<sup>18</sup> For a sustained discussion of the Roman culture of honor and its attendant elevation of individual action that Shakespeare's play constructs, explores, and challenges, see Alexander Welsh (191-209), who plausibly argues that the Martius' claims of autonomy are overshadowed by the counterfactuals presented over the course of the play.

Martius "rewards his deeds with doing them" (2.2.26-62) marks Martius as the play's exemplar of action as the highest good and as an end in itself, in actuality he, too, subjects action to categories that are appropriate only to work.

Before exploring this at length, it is worth remarking on the curious fact that a play so concerned with the relation between work and action has inspired critics to focus on the third human capacity that Arendt identifies: labor. For Arendt, politics can only happen once individuals are freed from the constraints of labor and the demands of the body. A political world that cannot move beyond the issue of hunger is not a properly political world at all. Its citizens, compelled to speak on behalf of the needs of their private bodies, can neither act nor emerge as individuals who speak freely in the public realm. In "Anger's my meat," Janet Adelman brilliantly explores the metaphors of feeding in the play, arguing that "the taking in of food is the primary acknowledgement of one's dependence on the world, and as such, it is the primary token of one's vulnerability" (131). This reading persuades us that Martius' identity is founded on a denial of the bodily dependence we all have on the biological life of others for our creaturely existence. And certainly, by altering the historical account in Plutarch from one of debt among returning plebeian soldiers to the price of grain, the play makes possible Martius's categorical opposition of the ravenous appetites of the citizens to his fantasy of his own biological self-sufficiency. But the claim that feeding is the "primary acknowledgement of one's dependence" obscures another crucial form of dependency. We are not only reliant on the physical bodies of others for our *bare life*, we are also subject to a community of others who reflect back our identity when they judge us as political actors. In this sense, too, we are never

authors of ourselves. Conflating the finitude of biological dependency with the finitude that structures intersubjective action, Adelman's psychoanalytic reading sutures the life of the individual to the processes of labor and feeding. This conflation reaches its apotheosis in a melding of the maternal body with the polis: "Rome and his mother are finally one" (140). In Arendt's terms, while "Anger's My Meat" aptly demonstrates how the perspective of *homo faber*, the self-sufficient maker, refuses to acknowledge a dependency on labor and the mother's body (represented in *Coriolanus* by the figure of Volumnia), it neglects the extent to which *homo faber* also refuses to acknowledge a dependency upon the political world and the constitutive unpredictability of action that establishes and sustains it.

Martius believes himself the sole author of his political *persona*, utterly independent from the public stage on which he acts and the audience who witnesses; the honorific cognomen he receives after his defeat of the Corioli only bolsters his fantasy that he is "author of himself." Indeed, Martius seems to fancy himself a self-sufficient master-craftsman when he recalls how the battlefield was just so much material for him to mold as he willed: "Alone I fought in your Corioles walls, / And *made* what work I pleas'd" (1.8.8-9). From this perspective, the honorary title appears as a mere by-product of action, an object that he has fashioned for himself in combat with the Volces.

Hannah Arendt gives us a different view of public recognition. When she was awarded the Lessing Prize in 1959 and Denmark's Sonning Prize for her contributions to European civilization in 1975, she used both acceptance speeches as opportunities to speak about the "world" that such public awards and honors establish

and preserve when they reify action in the memory of a political community.

Contrary to Martius' craftsman ideology that misrecognizes action as making, Arendt (as we saw in Chapter 1) asserts that the meaning of an action exceeds its author's intentions and is subject to interpretation by a community of others. Such honors, then, supply us with "an impressive lesson in humility, for [they imply] that it is not for us to judge ourselves, that we are not fit to judge our own accomplishments as we judge those of others....I have always believed that no one can know himself, for no one *appears* to himself as he appears to others" (*Responsibility and Judgment* 7).

Furthermore, the very possibility of receiving an honor requires the prior existence of a public space within which action can be recognized: "In awards, the world speaks out, and if we accept the award and express our gratitude for it, we can do so only by ignoring ourselves and acting entirely within the framework of our attitude toward the world, toward a world and a public to which we owe the space into which we speak and in which we are heard" (*Men in Dark Times* 3). Martius earns his moniker through his actions, but he is impatient with the fact that recognition of those actions depends both on those who will perform the recognition as well as on the public space that makes the performance possible. Menenius, initiating the Roman ritual by which action becomes work in cultural memory, calls upon the "present consul" to "report / A little of that worthy work perform'd / By Caius Martius Coriolanus" so that patricians and plebs alike are able "both to thank and remember" it and to bestow upon it a lasting significance that action alone could never hope to achieve (2.2.45-47).

Ultimately, Martius is determined to craft a name for himself that does not rely on the recognition or consent of the Roman people at all but, rather, on their annihilation. As Cominius tells us, he “forbade all names / He was a kind of nothing, titleless, / Till he had forged himself a name o’ th’ fire / Of burning Rome” (5.1.12-14). Refusing to allow his actions to be registered in the communal memory through public recognition (he will not hear his “nothings monster’d” [2.2.77]), he rejects the transformation by others of his action into work.

Arendt is careful not to ask that we cease being *homo faber*, only that we not allow the perspective of *homo faber* to exclude all others. Indeed, political action depends upon reification if it is to obtain any lasting significance. The:

doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed. If the *animal laborans* needs the help of *homo faber* to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced. We need not choose here between Plato and

Protagoras, or decide whether man or a god should be the measure of all things; what is certain is that the measure can be neither the driving necessity of biological life and labor nor the utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage. (173-74)

To focus on Martius' constitutive dependence on his mother and the body politic for his bare life and not to recognize his dependence on the political community for the *meaning* of his life as a political agent, is to replicate Martius' blindness. To favor the independent moment of action over the dependent one is to imagine oneself a maker and is to adopt the perspective of *homo faber*.

Arendt's contextualization of the Lessing Prize is motivated less by modesty than her fear for the extinction of public spaces and the possibilities for meaningful political action in the modern world (*Men in Dark Times* 4). Martius, who is averse to the market, the locus of exchange and commensurability, fears the world of political action even more. Ironically, his misrecognition is not due to an aversion to the craftsmen ethos, but to the fact that he unselfconsciously esteems himself a *master* craftsman. While he claims to be devoted to actions which serve no larger purpose larger than their enactment, actions whose greatness is exhausted in their performance, he is in fact doing his best to repudiate action's inexorable resistance to sovereign mastery or biological necessity and its reliance on the interpretation and judgment of a political community for its survival.

## Political Theater, Political Institutions

Bolstering Martius' vision of political making, the dominant patrician ideology of *Coriolanus* wholly discredits in advance the concerted actions of the many. According to Cominius, it is to the Martius's credit that "alone he enter'd / The mortal gate of the city," and "aidless came off" (2.2.112; my emphasis).<sup>19</sup> When the tribunes assert that the people join them in denouncing Coriolanus's unregenerate pride, that they "do it not alone," Menenius categorically dismisses collective action as unworthy of the name action: "I know you can do very little alone, for your helps are many, or else your actions would grow wondrous single: your abilities are too infant-like for doing much alone" (2.1.34-37). Menenius would have it that when the plebeians act together, they are less than full, adult citizens. Indeed, they truly act only if they act alone.

This difference between the patricians' vision of solitary action and the collective action that the plebeians engage in can be understood with the help of another pair of Arendtian categories: the patricians reduce action to *violence*, whereas the plebeians reveal the full potential of action as *power*. Violence characterizes the craftsman or politician who attempts to work in isolation, shaping the objects or men

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<sup>19</sup> There are many other such examples in the play, for instance when the First Solider observes that Coriolanus single-handedly faces down the Volscies ("he is himself alone, / To answer all the city," 1.4.50-51), or when the Herald praises him for his achievements:

Know, Rome, that all alone Coriolanus did fight  
Within Corioli gates: where he hath won,  
With fame, a name to Caius Coriolanus; these  
In honour follows Coriolanus.  
Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus! (2.1.161-66)

Martius' conception of himself as self-sufficient seems in accord rather than in conflict with this communal assessment of his actions, but it is, ironically, most ideologically useful to him when he shuns all forms of community: "though I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen / Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen... (4.1.29-31).

upon which he works toward the ends he desires. Even on the battlefield, where acting together would seem to be virtually unavoidable, the individual soldiers of *Coriolanus* strive for the exclusive right reductively to offer up each of their bodies as raw material that will be transformed into an instrument of Martius' will: "O me alone! Make you a sword of me!" (1.6.76). Both master and made object, the two models of absolute independence for the slave of Hegel's well-known master-slave dialectic, stand apart from any public world of plurality.<sup>20</sup> The soldiers' craftsman mentality imposes a sense of isolation on the world of appearance and strips it of its possibility for spontaneous action—everyone becomes mere material for the will of another or, perhaps worse still, material for the anonymous processes of history. It is in this sense that violence characterizes the work of the craftsman.

Power, on the contrary, should be linked conceptually to action, for it can only exist in the legal and institutional spaces between individuals that they work together to create and preserve (*The Human Condition* 200): "Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the

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<sup>20</sup> In Hegelian terms, from the perspective of the soldiers in *Coriolanus*, the pure negativity that Martius imposes on them and on the battlefield makes it into a pure object of his desire, and gives the impression that Martius is an absolutely independent being. This correlates with the perspective of the slave in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for whom the concept of independence is figured first through the master: "To begin with, servitude has the lord for its essential reality; hence the *truth* for it is the independent consciousness that is *for itself*" (117). Through work, the slave gains another vision of independence. Work, according to Hegel, "is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has its independence. This *negative* middle term or the formative *activity* is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, *qua* worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence" (118). But it is only the slave who has come to grips with the fear that accompanies the threat of death at the hands of the master who can attain a self-consciousness that includes acknowledgment of the presence of others (what Hegel calls *geist*, or spirit). When, as with *Coriolanus*, the "consciousness fashions the thing without that initial absolute fear, it is only an empty self-centered attitude; for its form or negativity is not negativity *per se*, and therefore its formative activity cannot give it a consciousness of itself as essential being (119).



capacity to act” (188). Hence it is encouraging to come across those moments in *Coriolanus* when the citizens distinguish themselves from the soldiers through their generation of power rather than violence. Power, the plebeians’ answer to the Senate’s threats of strength and violence, represents a version of action that cannot succumb to the temptations of an impossible individual sovereignty because it depends at its root on collective striving. And yet unlike the soldiers on the battlefield who serve as ready-to-hand resources for the will of Martius, the collective actions of the plebeians never coalesce into a single will. While the manipulative tribunes nearly achieve consensus that assent should be withheld from Martius, some disagreement among the plebeians persists; “almost all repent in their election” but not all do (2.3.253).

The political theater of the marketplace in the world of *Coriolanus* had customarily been a place where manipulative political rhetoric enabled the staging of pleasant fictions, a form of role-playing that Coriolanus, in his drive for independence, finds distasteful: "it is a role that I will blush in acting" (2.2.144-45). This interpretation of acting in public assumes that the identity of the private individual is compromised whenever one takes on a public role and submits oneself to the judgment of others. So understood, it is impossible to avoid the implication that such activity is the part of the hypocrite. But as Arendt discusses in *On Revolution*, the “profound meaningfulness inherent in the many political metaphors derived from the theatre” also supplies us with an understanding of the public stage as potentially revelatory of identity rather than necessarily duplicitous (106). For Arendt, the history of the Latin word *persona* rather than the Greek *hypokrites* is

relevant. The mask, or *persona*, worn by actors in the ancient theater was a metaphor for the process by which private individuals emerged from their solitary abodes onto the public stage, where they took on the role of citizens. Rather than concealing or effacing the individual beneath it, this mask, expressive of the legal status of the *persona*, produced an identity that could speak and act politically among others. Accorded both rights and duties, this entity was distinguished from the apolitical existence of *homo*, the natural person who stood outside the body politic, the slave (and, often enough, *homo faber*) who was “certainly a politically irrelevant being” (107).

Even if Coriolanus’ interpretation of political acting dominates the play—Volumnia agrees, and so too does Menenius, who seems to relish the work of political manipulation rather than to eschew it—in 2.3, the marketplace briefly becomes a theater in which another available set of meanings for the term acting stands shoulder to shoulder with theatrical posturing, with pretending to be something that one is not. For a moment, a plurality of citizens perform as political actors on a public stage, and their acting enables the disclosure of their public *persona* rather than hypocrisy or the concealment of ulterior motives. Shakespeare affords us a glimpse of power emerging in that most ironic form of civil disobedience, when citizens violate cultural habit by holding an institution to its word, the principle to which it purports to adhere, for the first time. And they do this precisely when that institution—the public theater of the state—seems on the verge of extinction. First Martius asks that he be allowed to neglect the ritual in the marketplace (“Let me o’erleap that custom” [2.2.135]); shortly thereafter, he quips that that custom “might well be taken from the people”

(2.2.145) completely. Even as a *symbolic* locus for the principle of popular election, the marketplace is under threat.

While the citizens await Martius in the marketplace, they debate the merits of performing an act that the patricians had not considered even a possibility: the rejection of a suit made to the people by a prospective consul. That the First Citizen opens the scene arguing that they "ought not to deny him" (2.2.1-2) suggests that this option has already been discussed offstage. The Second Citizen's "We may, sir, if we will," (2.2.3) confirms that the controversy has not been settled. The Third Citizen also acknowledges the citizens' collective capacity, but he appears to be resigned to the present state of affairs, to submitting the power of assembly and public deliberation to the authority of precedent: "We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do" (2.3.4-5). While the power of collective action that opens the play results in a new political institution, here performing the unprecedented, briefly acknowledged and entertained as a possibility, would have taken the form of a surprisingly modest (but nevertheless utterly radical) demand: that the already existing institutional space of the marketplace can fulfill its promise as an arena for the people's deliberations. Thus when the Third Citizen's stance wins the day and Martius is selected as consul ("Are you all resolv'd to give your voices? But that's no matter, the greater part carries it" [2.3.37-38]), the space for public critical thought, debate, and action evaporates even as it emerges. We feel a residue of uneasiness when the plebs express doubts that their voices have been freely given. Sicinius asks, "How now, my masters, have you chose this man?" (2.3.153) and the

First Citizen responds by specifying effects — "He has our voices" (2.3.154)—not causality or agency.

Recollections of the events in the marketplace provide us with further evidence of their skepticism: Coriolanus "mock'd us," (2.3.157) they claim, "flouted us," (2.3.158) "u'sd us scornfully" (2.3.161). These accusations of intimidation are voiced diffidently (the Second Citizen worries that his social status even renders him "unworthy" as a witness) and it is only through the cajoling of the Tribunes that the suit is ultimately rejected (2.3.156). Nevertheless, there is a revolutionary quality to the fact that the deadening consistency of what Slavoj Žižek calls "habit" is temporarily disturbed by the citizen's open public debate:

Every legal order has to rely on a complex "reflexive" network of informal rules which tells us how we are to relate to the explicit norms, how we are to apply them: to what extent we are to take them literally, how and when we are allowed, solicited even, to disregard them, and so on--and this is the domain of habit. *To know the habits of a society is to know the metarules of how to apply its explicit norms: when to use them or not to use them; when to violate them; when not to choose what is offered; when we are effectively obliged to do something, but to have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice...[as in] many political situations in which a choice is given on condition that we might make the right choice: we are solemnly reminded that we can say no-- but we are expected to reject this offer and enthusiastically say yes. (Defense of Lost Causes 171)*

In such circumstances, when unspoken rules effectively negate an explicit offer of free choice, taking that offer in earnest constitutes a novel, revolutionary event. When the market as a place of ritual exchange (wherein the bearing of wounds is swapped for the unanimous and anonymous support of the people and "their voices") reveals its potential as a political space of deliberation and decision, the unspoken rules undergirding the world that the patricians have tried to fashion for themselves suddenly seem inconstant and unreliable, airy nothing given a local habitation and a name.

The craftsmen-citizens' re-founding of an endangered institutional principle is another instance of their concerted action opening up something new in the political space of *Coriolanus*; it also sets into motion the play's most explicit confrontation with a contested definition of Rome's political foundation. For Arendt, it is the Roman concept of foundation that finally offers a kind of bridge between action and work, between, on the one hand, the promises that action implicitly or explicitly offers, and on the other, the more durable institutional life it sets into motion, preserves, or interrupts. In relation to action, the story of Rome's foundation acknowledges an "unrepeatable beginning," an action that can usher in unprecedented, utterly new forms of life: "The foundation of a new body politic...became to the Romans the central, decisive, unrepeatable beginning of their whole history, a unique event" (*Between Past and Future* 121). Yet as we explored in *Julius Caesar*, if action is to create a more durable space for freedom than the limited "islands of security" (*Human Condition* 237) that promises offer, a political foundation must create the state as a shared public thing (a "res publica"). When a

collective action cannot achieve its own authority through institutionalization of its principles, the power it generates dissipates as soon as the action is completed. While violence relies on the substantial resources of strength, power always only exists potentially: “What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call “organization”) and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power” (*Human Condition* 201). Only the citizens' care for the world and its democratic spaces preserves their power. As a constituting event but also a “work,” then, the foundation is the locus of a political authority that supports the principles that inspired the act of founding, framing through laws and institutions the actions of citizens which themselves simultaneously undergird and constitute the foundation’s very durability.

In this way, foundation serves to conceptualize the political as something that is created but never quite made, and which, while set into motion by an arbitrary free act, must subsequently attempt to set provisional boundaries for the disruptive power of action, or to some extent, as Arendt puts it, “renege on the very experience of freedom and novelty” (*Life of the Mind II*, 210). Nevertheless, political foundations are quite different from the Platonic, workman-like conception of laws as external forms that serve as the immutable standards of political life; the concept of foundation captures the power of action without banishing all significant action to a past historical moment, and blurs the commonplace distinction between conservative and revolutionary by incorporating the roles that both work and action play in politics. Arendt links authority (*auctoritas*) to its root, *augere* (to augment), claiming that the living were bound to preserve the memory of those precedents set by their

ancestors and to augment the *polis*, to act anew by building upon (even if revising or reinterpreting the meaning of) the foundation that opened up the space of freedom.

In Livy's account, *Ab urbe condita* (*From the Founding of the City*), Rome's foundation is traced to a single act by its eponymous founder, Romulus. But he does not elevate the founder to the status of maker or prescribe preservation as the only legitimate work of the present. Reflecting on the establishment of the Republic that follows the rape of Lucretia, Livy praises the wisdom of those involved because in acting they preserved the work performed by the Roman kings who had followed Romulus, those whom he describes as "deinceps conditores" (218) ["successive founders"] (219). The most prominent of these is Numa, whom Livy credits with supplying the legal foundations of the city: "Qui regno ita potitus urbem novam, conditam vi et armis, iure eam legisbusque ac moribus de integro condere parat" (66) ["Having received the kingship in this way, Numa prepared to give the new city that had been founded by force of arms a new foundation in justice, law, and proper observances"] (29). Livy thus provides support to Arendt's argument that the Roman notion of foundation accommodated the freedom to act: to revise, alter, and re-"work" the existing public space of freedom.

But Shakespeare's play demonstrates that this notion of augmentation fails to resolve the rupture between action and work to which Arendt draws our attention, to the radical quality of action that "cuts across all boundaries" and the work of foundation that attempts to limit the space of action (*Human Condition* 190). The question of whether a particular action is consistent with the promise implicit in any political foundation, whether a revision of laws or institutions is an augmentation

rather than a violation of it, is always a site of potential conflict. In *Coriolanus*, the voting ritual of the Roman marketplace appears, from one perspective, to be the fulfillment of a promise already made but from another, the patricians', the breaking of that same promise. Learning that his suit for consul has been rejected, Martius again wonders aloud if the people should have the right to do so: "Must these have voices, that can yield them now / And straight disclaim their tongues?" (3.1.33-34). This comment leads to a larger conflict centered on the legitimacy of the newly created institution, the tribunes of the plebs. First, suggesting that the tribunes are cloaked in a false authority ["For they do prank them in authority, / Against all noble sufferance] (3.1.23-24), Martius argues that although it may have been necessary for the patricians to grant that privilege during the plebeian rebellion, it now undermines the longstanding authority of the patricians, arguing for once that the violence of others to make the state is illegitimate because it does not originate in authority:

In a rebellion,  
When what's not meet, but what must be, was law,  
Then were they chosen, in a better hour,  
Let what is meet be said it must be meet,  
And throw their power in the dust. (3.1.165-69)

Against the charge that the creation of their office was illegitimate, the tribunes point to the political compact reached through the agreement of both patricians and plebeians alike ("By the consent of all were we establish'd / The people's magistrates" [3.1.198-99]). Martius' categorical dismissal of this institutionalized authority is sufficient to deem him a "foe to the public weal" (3.1.173) and his threats treasonous.



But when the plebeians voice their support for the tribunes as official magistrates ("You so remain" [3.1.200]), and Menenius attempts to reassure them ("And so are like to do" [3.1.201]), Cominius supports Martius by claiming that the very creation of the institution threatens to dismantle Rome's political foundation:

That is the way to lay the city flat,  
To bring the roof to the foundation,  
And bury all which yet distinctly ranges  
In heaps and piles of ruin. (3.1.202-4)

Although Cominius' admonition against the leveling of traditional hierarchies might refer to the general escalation of violence between patricians and plebeians, and the eventual failure of politics that we are witness to, Cominius is implying as well that any political actions the plebs take to alter the constitution of Roman political life are violations of the foundational principles upon which Rome was built. In this sense, he echoes Martius concern for the "integrity" of the "fundamental part of state," (3.1.150), and reinforces an architectural metaphor of the political realm as something that is "made" by the few, if not by a single historical founder. In both their estimations, the people are certainly not the city, and have no right to perform as "successive founders"; their participation can only unmake or "unbuild the city" (3.1.196) rather than augment it. *Coriolanus* thereby reveals the basic rupture inherent in a political foundation, a rupture between work and action that Arendt's notion of *augmentation* cannot quite suture; to claim to act through the inspiration of a political principle is, first, always the creation of something new, but, second, always a reinterpretation of a promise inscribed within a political foundation. Such

reinterpretations are subject to the judgment of a political audience who will debate whether or not the action is an augmentation of that foundation. Failing a political resolution of this debate, violence erupts.

From one perspective, then, *Coriolanus* stages the tragedy of a *genuine* action hero manqué who shares in political philosophy's failure to recognize the distinction between work and action. But it is also equally the tragedy of a citizenry unable to achieve or sustain the forms of power it seems to be on the verge of developing. *Coriolanus* performs our recurrent inability to recognize, harness, and remember that we can act according to new principles and set into motion new political realities. And it evokes the pathos of novelty that we experience when we grasp, even for a moment, our startling theatrical powers. Finally, it offers as well a challenge to Arendt's theory of foundation, and to any attempt finally to resolve the conflict between work and action.

### Chapter 3

#### Sovereign Fathers and Sovereign Friends in *Hamlet*

When Arendt proposes in her *Denktagebuch* that the task of critical thought is to reconsider “all the old questions” of political philosophy from the perspective of plurality, it is unsurprising to find not only Arendt, but also Shakespeare, in whom she had an abiding interest as a political thinker, interrogating presuppositions about freedom and action. What *is* surprising, perhaps because its role has not figured prominently in scholarly work on Arendt’s thought, is that her list of “old questions” includes “what is friendship?” (*Denktagebuch* 295).<sup>1</sup> Alongside her conviction that the public world of freedom has been supplanted by the freedom of the will (as I explored in Chapter 1 through a reading of *The Rape of Lucrece*), and that the redemptive possibilities of political action have been occluded by political metaphors of a sovereign, solitary craftsman forging the universal history of the *polis* (as we saw in the last chapter’s exploration of *Coriolanus*), is her observation that inter-subjective relations between citizens—the locus of the political friend—have been overshadowed by the concept and practice of private forms of friendship.

According to Arendt, we have developed the habit of viewing “friendship solely as a phenomenon of intimacy, in which the friends open their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands” (*Men in Dark Times* 24). This insular perspective on friendship, which deprives us of alternate understandings of the relationship, is symptomatic of a broader misunderstanding of the relation between

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions include Shin Chiba’s “Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship, and Citizenship,” Margaret Canovan’s “Friendship, Truth, Politics: Hannah Arendt and Toleration,” and Lisa Ditsch’s “On Friendship in ‘Dark Times.’”

the self and the world that grounds our capacity to act among, and interact with, others. According to Arendt, this limited view of friendship:

conforms so well to the basic attitude of the modern individual, who in his alienation from the world can truly reveal himself only in privacy and in the intimacy of face-to-face encounters. Thus it is hard for us to understand the political relevance of friendship. When, for example, we read in Aristotle that *philia*, friendship among citizens, is one of the fundamental requirements for the well-being of the City, we tend to think that he was speaking of no more than the absence of factions and civil war within it. But for the Greeks the essence of friendship consisted in discourse. They held that only the constant interchange of talk united citizens in a *polis*. (*Men in Dark Times* 24)

The fundamental problem of relegating friendship to the domain of private life is that there is no guarantee it will maintain any relevance to the world that is its condition of possibility. The close, personal attachments associated with this version of friendship may offer a temporary refuge from a public world threatened during what Arendt refers to as “dark times,” but they do not typically foster action that restores or sustains that world. Political friendship, on the contrary “is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (*Men in Dark Times* 25). Because it occurs in the public world, the “in-between” of political agents, this *philia* of the *polis* is charged with the affect of respect, not love:

what love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs. Respect, not unlike the Aristotelian *philia politike*, is a kind of “friendship” without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard

for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem. (*The Human Condition* 243)

More recent political theorists have articulated at greater length the underlying rhetorical connection between the dominant understanding of friendship as a private affair and the emergence of classical liberalism's vision of the citizen.<sup>2</sup> When the public world becomes limited to governmental administration and action itself to individual activity within the capitalist market, the citizen is circumscribed as an atomized, self-interested agent and relieved of the burdens of civic responsibility. Here the *philia* of public discourse and debate is displaced by depoliticized forms of friendship that are the purview of the sovereign individual's private, intimate election; the belief that self-identity is most authentically located in one's relation with private friends serves as another powerful ideological support for the definition of freedom as "freedom from politics" that I explored in the first two chapters.

The modern form of friendship that Arendt describes can be traced back to Shakespeare's work, despite the quite different historical and political constellation from which his plays arose. Drawing attention to the discourses of ideal friendship in the Renaissance and their articulation of an alternative form of sovereignty to monarchic rule and patriarchal authority, recent scholarship implicates a notion of friendship that emerged toward the end of the sixteenth century in a broader cultural

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<sup>2</sup> According to Michael Kaplan, private friendship plays a prominent role in the "liberal imaginary that is obliged to produce the sentimental attachments of private life as the site of extrapolitical sociality, inasmuch as, paradoxically, their imagined antipathy toward authority effectively renders them paradigmatic of liberal citizenship" (7). With a less critical eye than Kaplan, Allan Silver explores how the historical emergence of capitalism and liberal thought produced friendship as the locus of "intimacy," demarcating the private role of friend from the public role of citizen; Silver identifies how Adam Smith and many of his contemporaries identified friendship as a shelter from the "impersonal administration" of the "commercial society" characteristic of modern public life (51).

movement that attempted to establish stable boundaries between public and private identities.<sup>3</sup> Early modern writers utilized the term “sovereign” when describing the domain of friendship, not only to refer to what at least since Plato had been considered the superlative quality of homosocial relationships but also to highlight the possibility that friendship could establish a non-hierarchical *polis* insulated and independent from the rest of the political economy.<sup>4</sup> As an alternative to the compulsory bonds of kinship and kingdom, friendship represented an arena of free choice.<sup>5</sup>

Following classical formulations, the humanist vision of ideal friendship imagined the friend as “another self” (Shannon, “Monarchs, Minions,” 92). Thomas Elyot, for example, described friendship as “a blessed and stable connexyon of sondry wylles, makyng of two persons one, in hauynge and suffrynge” (135). This image of one soul in two bodies corresponded to a desire for an absolute identification between partners that could serve as a potential shield against the sullyng interactions of commercial and political action.<sup>6</sup> In an early modern world of class hierarchies, it is

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<sup>3</sup>See Tom Macfaul (1-29) and especially Laurie Shannon (*Sovereign Amicitie* 1-53). While I am indebted to the previous work of many scholars, the title of this chapter conveys a particular indebtedness to Shannon’s book.

<sup>4</sup>This does not in any way suggest that the discourses of early modern friendship were not often deeply bound up with notions of public political life. But if we accept C. Stephen Jaeger’s assertion that “[m]edieval poets and historians were largely indifferent to what we call private life,” then the early modern affective possibility of bracketing public and private life with regard to friendship reveals a quite different political and emotional topography; indeed, Jaeger himself finds Shakespeare’s *King Lear* symptomatic of a western culture that had “increasingly privatized” the experience of love and friendship (4).

<sup>5</sup>As Macfaul argues, by the time Shakespeare was writing toward the end of the sixteenth century, “the Protestant Church of England was clearly beginning to impose ideas of the nuclear family as the foundational unit of society. With the destruction of other modes of allegiance, the family became an increasingly monolithic commitment for the individual—and friendship, the one remaining alternative mode of allegiance, therefore came to be presented in stark opposition to family” (5).

<sup>6</sup>Macfaul suggests that Shakespeare’s plays were performed at a crucial moment in the western history of friendship, “as older feudal modes of allegiance gave way to modern friendship of affection.” Without completely disappearing, the medieval conception of friends as those who were materially attached to one as neighbors and as family members began to compete with an emerging form of

not difficult to imagine how such an idealization—one that attempted “to make men the same” (Macfaul 83)—would have encouraged the resurrection of a form of individual sovereignty, however paradoxically dependent it was upon mutual support; the constant friend impervious to fortune could bolster the Stoic’s fantasy of an “inner citadel” of thought.<sup>7</sup> And even when the rhetoric of sovereign friendship, wherein identity is “an antidote to the politics of hierarchical difference,” was self-consciously recognized as a fantasy, it could still endure as an ideal for early moderners to pursue (Shannon, “Monarchs, Minions,” 92). Thus, Laurie Shannon correctly diagnoses

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“noninstrumental friendship, based in affinity, that d[id] not (and should not) obtrude on a wider world of public affairs” (5).

<sup>7</sup>The seventeenth century Neostoic reflections of the English clergyman Joseph Hall reproduce in a Protestant context the early Roman Stoic conception of the mind as another polis: “Everie man hath a kingdome within himselfe: Reason as the Princesse dwels in the highest and inwardest room. . . . violent passions are as rebels to disturb the common peace” (97-98). It should be noted, however, that Christian Neostoicism in the sixteenth century often transformed the early Roman Stoical belief in reflection as a retreat from the uncertainty of worldly affairs into programs for practical political action, tempering where necessary the “pagan” belief in self-sufficiency as a doctrine antithetical to dependence on a Christian God. See Adriana McCrea (3-39). Perhaps best exemplified by the life of Justus Lipsius, friendship in this context more closely resembles the later Roman Stoicism of Cicero, which was “adapted to the practical requirements of the Roman senatorial class,” and often extended friendship “beyond the inner circle of two or a few friends to widening circles of humanity. . . .” (Morford 15, 25). See also Jacqueline Lagrée (148-76). For the purposes of this chapter, though, the term “Stoicism” will not be explicitly linked with any particular offshoot of early modern Neostoic philosophy. Rather, it will be deployed as a way of harnessing Arendt’s conception of the term and its history in the west in order to suggest similarities with the privatized friendships articulated by Montaigne’s *Essais* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. One final note: Montaigne is often offered as an example of early modern Neostoic thought only after a considerable degree of qualifications are presented that refer to his idiosyncrasies as an individual thinker. If analysis is limited to Montaigne’s discussion of friendship, though, the term “Stoic” as Arendt defines it will prove an appropriate label. As I explored in Chapter 1, in Arendt’s consideration of the western tradition’s tendency to embrace Stoic forms of thought and its pernicious effects on the viability of a public political sphere, she locates a link between two western concepts of sovereignty in the emergence of Stoic philosophy during the late Roman Empire. Against a notion of political life in which men could participate as citizens only through the mastery of others, as we have seen, Stoicism raised thought itself to the position of the sovereign. Thus, for Arendt, freedom as a political concept is logically prior to the metaphoric translation of freedom to an inner, non-political realm and its understanding in Christian thought as the question of the freedom of the will. For further evidence, see Arendt’s posthumously published *The Life of the Mind*, in which she provides examples of the recurrent influence of Stoical thought (151-66). Also see Serena Parekh (111-15). Because this chapter draws heavily upon both Arendt and Hegel, it is also important to point out that Arendt’s interpretation of Stoicism is read here as a rearticulation of Hegel’s well-known account of the master-slave dialectic and of the unhappy consciousness, which also treat Stoicism as a form of revolt against the material conditions of slavery. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (119-23). Finally, for a discussion of the similarities between Hegel’s and Arendt’s diagnoses of Stoicism as “an inner withdrawal from political conflict,” see Andrew Shanks, *Hegel’s Political Theology* (155-60).

sovereign friendship in the early modern period as a manifestation of “the private subject’s sovereign aspirations” (“Monarchs, Minions,” 92).

All forms of sovereignty, according to Arendt, are founded on escapist fantasies that attempt to deny the fundamental plurality of public life, the *non-sovereignty* of all human action:

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth—and not, as the tradition since Plato holds, because of man’s limited strength, which makes him depend upon the help of others. All the recommendations the tradition has to offer to overcome the condition of non-sovereignty and win an untouchable integrity of the human person amount to a compensation for the intrinsic “weakness” of plurality. Yet, if these recommendations were followed and this attempt to overcome the consequences of plurality were successful, the result would be not so much sovereign domination of one’s self as arbitrary domination of all others, or, as in Stoicism, the exchange of the real world for an imaginary one where these others would simply not exist.

*(Human Condition 234)*

It may at first seem counterintuitive to apply Arendt’s concept of non-sovereignty to a critique of early modern sovereign friendship—a relationship of interdependence between two persons might appear to necessitate abandoning the notion of individual sovereignty. We might well imagine that the fantasy of sovereignty indulged in by



Coriolanus, for example, as *homo faber*, the elite maker of the political world, might be tempered by reliance on the intimacy of private friendship. Further, as an arena of free choice and spontaneity, friendship might seem the ideal site of new beginning, a natality that transcends the mere fact of biological birth. Arendt herself articulated this aspect of friendship in the *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, suggesting that the unpredictability of freely given friendship continually disrupted the ideologies of totalitarian regimes, which claimed they had substituted spontaneous human action, in both its public and private forms, with a coordinated and dutiful pursuit of a predetermined vision of historical progress (456).<sup>8</sup>

And yet, if the figure of the monarch symbolizes what Arendt outlines as the first mode of sovereignty—“the arbitrary domination of all others”—sovereign friendship occupies the mode of “Stoicism” with a minimal difference: it is indeed “the exchange of the real world for an imaginary one where these others”—with the sole exception of the ideal friend—“would simply not exist” (234). What I want to suggest is that there is something of a shared assumption between the otherwise distinct modes of thought that I will be calling “sovereign fathers” (to represent the given relation to patriarchal or sovereign authority) and “sovereign friends”; such a concord can be located in their mutual refusal to acknowledge plurality, vulnerability, and inevitable dependence, and in their collaboration as a Scylla and Charybdis of sovereignty between which the early modern (masculine) subject oscillates. By reading Michel de Montaigne’s essay “Of Friendship” alongside Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, this exploratory chapter will examine two different early modern

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<sup>8</sup> “any spontaneously given friendship is from the standpoint of totalitarian domination just as dangerous as open hostility, precisely because spontaneity as such, with its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination over man” (456).

articulations of the movement away from sovereign fathers and toward sovereign friends. The question I will pose is whether or not the tragically interpellated Hamlet, having thoroughly considered both notions of sovereignty, is finally able to adopt a posture of non-sovereignty by risking a further shift to what we could call non-sovereign, or political, friendship.

### Montaigne and La Boétie

Well before Hamlet believes he has sufficiently demonstrated the legitimacy of the ghost that resembles his father, the prince already appears guilty to himself for having delayed revenge. Having failed to restore a public image of the absolute authority of his father—an image tarnished by Old Hamlet’s own mortality but also by Gertrude’s infidelity and its threat to young Hamlet’s inheritance—Hamlet suffers the demands of the paternal sovereign in the form of an emasculating insult: “Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face.” (2.2.567-68).<sup>9</sup> That now the injunction to “Remember me” (1.5.91) issues from a “who” suggests that for Hamlet, moral law is itself a sort of dead father perpetually reminding him of his promise to “wipe away all trivial fond records” from the “table” of his memory (1.5.98-99). Because the world outside Hamlet seems to be a place where memory has almost universally failed, it has become an “unweeded garden” (1.2.135).<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>9</sup>All references to the play are from *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (Walton-on-Thames: Methuen and Co., 1997), which is based primarily on Q2 but substitutes and supplements some lines and stage directions from F; see Jenkins’ edition for a detailed description of his editorial decisions (74-82).

<sup>10</sup> Immediately after remarking that the world is “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (1.2.135-37)—“possess” here bemoans not only a general condition of fallenness but also the possession of the political world of Denmark by Claudius—Hamlet turns to the failure of Gertrude to adequately mourn his father (“That it should come to this: / But two months dead”), insinuating a connection between the failure of memory and the “unweeded” garden of the world (1.2.135-36).

the agent of his father's will, Hamlet is left to commemorate sovereignty itself. Both "scourge and minister," he has concluded that it is the son's role to pursue justice and reformation (4.3.177). And insofar as Hamlet upholds the demands of patriarchal authority, he preserves a fantasy of lost sovereignty's return.<sup>11</sup> In his quest for the restoration of an ideal world of fathers, Hamlet as avenger represents what Nietzsche would later identify as the potential for political violence in what he calls monumental history, wherein, "[h]ass gegen die Mächtigen und Grossen ihrer Zeit für Bewunderung der Mächtigen und Grossen vergangener Zeiten ausgiebt. . . . ob sie es deutlich wissen oder nicht, sie handeln jedenfalls so, als ob ihr Wahlspruch wäre: lasst die Todten die Lebendigen begraben (302) ["hatred of present power and

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<sup>11</sup>The above summary draws upon the work of a host of critics, but most notably on John Kerrigan, who identifies the role of memory in *Hamlet* and its problematic relation to revenge, observing that "An Orestes-figure," like Hamlet, "so devoted to the past will find it hard to avenge" (182); "Even when comfort is found in the past, that only makes the present more desolate, 'an unweeded garden'" (183). On Hamlet's internalization of his father's desire for revenge see, for example, Joanna Montgomery Byles, who suggests: "The superego, then, is a revengeful force which seeks to punish. Hamlet tries to become his father's superego, but because he cannot act on it, his own superego takes revenge on him—tortures him, kills him eventually" (129). Though this chapter will attempt to establish a fundamental connection between the sovereignty of patriarchal hierarchies and the sovereignty of private, ideal friendships, the role of Hamlet's mother should not be neglected. For instance, Janet Adelman makes use of psychoanalytic perspectives to restore Gertrude to the center of the drama: "[T]he fathers in *Hamlet* keep threatening to collapse into one another, annihilating in their collapse the son's easy assumption of his father's identity. . . . The initiating cause of this collapse is Hamlet's mother: her failure to serve her son as the repository of his father's ideal image by mourning him appropriately is the symptom of her deeper failure to distinguish between his father and his father's brother. . . . as she forgets, he inherits the burden of differentiating, of idealizing and making static the past; hence the ghost's insistence on remembering . . . and the degree to which Hamlet registers his failure to avenge his father as a failure of memory" (13). See also Jacques Lacan (11-52). As I move on to discuss ideal friendship in the play, I want to preserve the link that Adelman establishes between the act of avenging the father and the attempt to reform the mother, but I will not take a side with regard to their priority in psychoanalytic terms. The important matter here will be that if the mother-father dynamic is sutured together in the play by Hamlet's desire for revenge, ideal friendship emerges as a possibility opposed to that vexed familial dynamic in its totality.

greatness masquerades as an extreme admiration of the past. . . . whether they wish it or no, they are acting as though their motto were: ‘Let the dead bury the living.’”<sup>12</sup>

Before exploring any possible alternatives to revenge that friendship might offer Hamlet, I want to examine the case of Michel de Montaigne as an example of a late sixteenth century strategy for shifting emphasis away from the sovereign commands of the father to the sovereignty of private friendship. In “Of vanity,” Montaigne relates the regret he experiences when observing the diminished quality of the plot of ground that his own dead father had cultivated and that he has inherited, the French estate which bears the family name. Published in the final volume of the *Essais* in 1588, twenty years after the death of his father, the essay records a sort of confession: “Et accuse ma faineance de n'avoir passé outre à parfaire les beaux commencements qu'il a laissez en sa maison; d'autant plus que je suis en grans termes d'en estre le dernier possesseur de ma race et d'y porter la derniere main” (3.9.419) [“And I blame my indolence that I have not gone further toward completing the things he began so handsomely in his house; all the more because I have a good chance of being the last of my race to possess it, and the last to put a hand to it” (3.9.726)].<sup>13</sup> Even while Montaigne writes, “Je me glorifie que sa volonté s'exerce encores et agisse par moy” [“I glory in the fact that his will still operates and acts through me”], he also suggests, to borrow Hamlet’s words, “what a falling off was

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<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, vol 1., *Nietzsche's Werke* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1905); the English translation is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957).

<sup>13</sup>All Montaigne citations are taken from the author's 1588 Bourdeaux Copy, made available as digital images by *The Montaigne Project*, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne/>. The English translations are from Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University, 1967). Citations are listed in my text by book, essay, and page number.

there” from Montaigne *père* to Montaigne *fils*. Deficient in two filial responsibilities, he has both neglected the upkeep of the estate and failed to produce a male heir who will inherit his father’s land.

But where Hamlet’s ethical relationship to the dead is dominated by the commands of his father, Montaigne is able to move beyond the commands of his dead father toward a cultivation of an individual identity. In the preface to his “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” Montaigne relates that his earlier vernacular translation of Sebond’s *Theologia Naturalis* was carried out at the request of his dying father: “C'estoit une occupation bien estrange et nouvelle pour moy; mais, estant de fortune pour lors de loisir, et ne pouvant rien refuser au commandement du meilleur pere qui fut onques, j'en vins à bout comme je peus . . .” (2.12.177) [“It was a very strange and a new occupation for me; but being by chance at leisure at the time, and being unable to disobey any command of the best father that ever was, I got through it as best I could . . .” (2.12.320)]. As for Hamlet, the memory of his own dead father is fashioned into an ideal image whose commands cannot be resisted. The passage of time lacerates the guilty conscience of the Prince of Denmark (“I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do” [4.4.43-44]), but Montaigne performs the will of his father, although not without interposing his own. The “Apology,” as readers of Montaigne have long noted, does not live up to its name; defending Sebond from the critical attacks of other writers does not prevent Montaigne from criticizing the presumptions of natural theology as an intellectual overreaching that cannot be

sustained.<sup>14</sup> In more ways than one, then, Montaigne undermines the will of his father by perpetuating the memory of Sebond on his own terms.

In “Of Friendship,” Montaigne shifts attention away from a sovereign patriarchy that is subservient to the model of the estate and toward the “*souveraine et maistresse amitié*” (1.28.72) [“sovereign and masterful friendship” (1.28.140)], that, in its utter particularity, is subservient to no model. “[P]arfaicte amitié” (1.28.72) [“perfect friendship” (1.28.141)], as he also terms it, is in no way to be confused with more common types of friendship; whether “*naturelle, sociale, hospitaliere, venerienne*” [“natural, social, hospitable, erotic”], forged by “*la volupté ou le profit*” [“pleasure or profit”], or for “*le besoin publique ou privé*” [“public or private needs”], none of these can equal it (1.28.70; 1.28.136). Friendships “*si entiere et si parfaite*” (1.28.70) [“so entire and so perfect” (1.28.136)] emerge from a free choice and bestowal of affection, and are best conceived of in opposition to the affections due to blood relations: “*Le pere et le fils peuvent estre de complexion entierement eslongnée, et les freres aussi. . . . à mesure que ce sont amitez que la loy et l’obligation naturelle nous commande, il y a d’autant moins de nostre chois et liberté volontaire*” (1.28.70) [“Father and son may be of entirely different dispositions, and brothers also. . . . the more they are friendships which law and natural obligation impose on us, the less of our choice and free will there is in them” (1.28.137)]. And since sovereign friendship must be governed by two equal partners, the “*trop grande disparité*” (1.28.70) [“too great inequality” (1.28.136)] between fathers and sons inhibits its cultivation.

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<sup>14</sup>See Hugo Friedrich (91-103) and Jean Starobinski (88-90).

Despite Montaigne's political conservatism and his desire to contain the revolutionary potential of friendship, his essay reveals the impossibility of an ideal harmony between patriarchal sovereignty and mutual sovereignty and, indeed, the potential for outright antagonism between the two. As Montaigne notes: "L'unique et principale amitié descoust toutes autres obligations" (1.28.73) ["A single dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations" (1.128.142)]. Departing significantly from his source material in Cicero's *De Amicitia*, Montaigne offers the Roman pair Tiberius Gracchus and Caius Blossius as the prime example of a sovereign friendship. In Cicero, for whom friendship is virtuous only insofar as it is compatible with the duties of Roman citizenship, the two men are an example of a friendship that extended well beyond its proper bounds. In the dialogue, Laelius informs his interlocutors about the time when Caius Blossius came to him to receive pardon for actions disloyal to the state. Attempting to justify what he had done, Blossius claimed he had been bound by loyalty to his friend Tiberius Gracchus. Hearing this, Laelius proceeded to investigate just how far these bonds of friendship might have extended:

‘Etiamne si te in Capitolium faces ferre vellet?’ ‘Numquam,’ inquit, ‘voluisset id quidem; sed si voluisset, paruissem.’ Videtis quam nefaria vox! Et hercule ita fecit, vel plus etiam quam dixit; non enim paruit ille Tiberii Gracchi temeritati, sed praefuit, nec se comitem illius furoris sed ducem praebuit. . . . Nulla est igitur excusatio peccati si amici causa peccaveris; nam cum conciliatrix amicitiae virtutis opinio fuerit, difficile est amicitiam manere si a virtute defeceris.

[“Even,” I said, “if he wanted you to set the Capitol on fire?” “He would never have wanted that,” he answered “but if he had, I would have complied.” You can see what a pernicious thing to say that was; and, in fact, he put it into practice, or even did more than what he said: he did not simply follow the rash designs of Tiberius Gracchus, but was the author of them. . . . it is no excuse for wrongdoing if one does wrong for the sake of a friend, for, since the belief in each other’s good character was the agent that brought the friends together in the first place, it is difficult for friendship to remain if one leaves the path of goodness.]<sup>15</sup>

That Blossius remained loyal to Gracchus and supported him during the revolutionary activity he undertook for popular land reforms is unequivocally referred to as a form of wickedness. While Montaigne mentions that Blossius admitted he would have burned Roman temples if Gracchus had requested it, he softens the statement by claiming that Blossius had “la volonté de Gracchus en sa manche” (1.28.71) [“Gracchus’ will up his sleeve” (1.28.140)] and completely omits their revolutionary solidarity. In Cicero, no friendship is so perfect that it cannot be broken: “they ought not to consider themselves under any obligation to stand by friends who are disloyal to the republic.” In Montaigne, though, sovereign friendship seeks to exempt itself from the requirements of citizenship: “Ils estoient plus amis que citoyens, plus amis qu'amis et qu'ennemis de leur païs (1.28.71) [“They were friends more than citizens,

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<sup>15</sup> The original Latin and English translation are from Cicero, *Laelius: On Friendship*, trans. J. G. F. Powell (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1990), 45-47.



friends more than friends or enemies of their country” (1.28.140)].<sup>16</sup> All that keeps Montaigne’s notion of sovereign friendship politically conservative is his assertion of its perfection, rarity, and ultimately, unworldliness.<sup>17</sup> In this guise, friendship approaches what Arendt calls love, a form of intimacy in which the relation to the beloved eliminates the space that might otherwise exist between political subjects: “Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others” (*The Human Condition* 242).

Sovereign friendship in Montaigne thus severs the obligations of public life, a fact that is resonant with conclusions Arendt finds him drawing in “Of Solitude”: “Il se faut reserver une arriereboutique toute nostre, toute franche, en laquelle nous establissons nostre vraye liberte et principale retraicte et solitude. En cette-cy faut-il prendre nostre ordinaire entretien de nous à nous mesmes, et si privé que nulle acointance ou communication estrangiere y trouve place” (1.39.242) [“We must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude. Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves, and so private that no outside association or communication can find a place...” (1.39.177). While Montaigne’s retreat from the political realm is not tied to a bourgeois pursuit of private economic interests (“un office servile que la mesnagerie”[1.39.244]) [“the care of an estate is a job for slaves”

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<sup>16</sup>Powell notes in his commentary that “Montaigne, *Essai* 1.28, takes issue with Cicero over his judgment on Blossius” (98). But Montaigne’s changes are better categorized as muted, even surreptitious, alterations that are representative of an early modern tension between monarchical and amity-based forms of sovereignty. At once declaring the priority of friendship over every other obligation and concealing the potential for political rupture by denying the radical possibilities made explicit in Cicero, Montaigne presents the private sphere of friendship as an innocuous retreat from public life.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of the wider Renaissance cultural belief in true friendship as an anomaly, see Ulrich Langer; for relevant discussion of Montaigne in this context, see pp. 14-20.

(1.39.180)], and must be mitigated by his longstanding civic service, it does nevertheless suggest that the primary end of life is a care for the solitary self rather than for the world: “Il est temps de nous desnouer de la société, puis que nous n'y pouvons rien apporter. (1.39.242) [“It is time to untie ourselves from society, since we can contribute nothing to it” (1.39.178)]. According to Arendt, Montaigne presents solitude as the “Situation, in der wir nichts mehr beitragen können zu der gemeinsamen Welt, dem human artifice” (*Denktagebuch* 349) [the “situation in which we can contribute nothing to the common world, the human artifice.”] For Arendt, on the contrary, solitude is never a “silent dialogue between me and myself, but an anticipated dialogue with others...” (*Men in Dark Times* 10). Thinking in solitude prepares one to return to a political form of friendship where the logic of the “other self” is always already interrupted by plurality, a radical otherness whose only common ground is the shared political world.

But unlike political bonds of obligation that draw their power from a concern for the world, loosely binding individuals together while preserving their separate identities, the ideal friendship that Montaigne and La Boétie experienced effaced the distinction between self and other altogether:

En l'amitié dequoy je parle, elles se meslent et confondent l'une en l'autre, d'un melange si universel, qu'elles effacent et ne retrouvent plus la couture qui les a jointes. Si on me presse de dire pourquoy je l'aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, qu'en respondant: Par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy. (1.28.71)

[In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.]  
(1.28.139)

So rare is sovereign friendship, in fact, that Montaigne can cite no contemporary example that even approaches it: “entre nos hommes, il ne s'en voit aucune trace en usage” (1.28.69) [“among men of today you see no trace of it in practice” (1.28.136)]. The impossibility of an incarnation of fraternal mutuality that escapes private interests absolutely—in which “il n'y a affaire ny commerce, que d'elle mesme” (1.28.71) [“there are no dealings or business except with itself” (1.28.138)]—is occluded by the nostalgic fantasy of the relationship Montaigne claims to have shared with the late Etienne de La Boétie. Perhaps, as Tom Macfaul argues: “Death . . . provides a form of reconciliation, by sublimating . . . past feeling into an ideal which can no longer be altered” (65).

If the praise of friendship is a praise that includes the former self, it turns the present self into an uncanny thing—neither here nor there, neither now nor then. The persistence of the self in the absence of the other gives the lie to any absolute intersubjective union and lowers the self even as it idealizes the other: “Car, de mesme qu'il me surpassoit d'une distance infinie en toute autre suffisance et vertu, aussi faisoit-il au devoir de l'amitié” (1.28.73) [“For just as he surpassed me infinitely in every other ability and virtue, so he did in the duty of friendship” (1.28.143)]. The inadequacy of language textually to represent this friendship nonpareil emerges as

another form of guilt for spectral images inadequately memorialized; shifting sovereignty from dead fathers to dead friends does not purge the subject of the superego. Montaigne remarks in a letter to Paul de Foix that he possesses “bien aussi peu de moien et de suffisance pour . . . render” (1368) [“little means and ability to render” (1063)] faithfully the memory of La Boétie.<sup>18</sup> Shortcomings appear here as an individual’s limited capacity for expression, rather than, as in Hamlet, as public but “maimed rites” of remembrance.<sup>19</sup>

Although Montaigne is committed elsewhere in the *Essais* to a depiction of the ephemeral and ever-shifting qualities of a mutually constituting world and self, in “Of Friendship” he produces a unique memory of wholeness. And yet, even though his tone can be categorized as nostalgic, in grasping for a type of stabilizing force in a singular friendship rather than in family coats of arms that “n'ont de seurté non plus que les surnoms” (1.46.116) [“have no more security than surnames” (1.46.203)], Montaigne idealizes the past in a way that exceeds the parameters of Nietzsche’s notion of monumental history. Monumental history, like revenge, seeks the restoration of an ideal past: “Er entnimmt daraus, dass das Grosse, das einmal da war, jedenfalls einmal möglich war und deshalb auch wohl wieder einmal möglich sein wird (297) [“It is the knowledge that the great thing existed and was therefore possible,

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<sup>18</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Oeuvres Complètes de Montaigne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962). The English translation is Donald Frame’s; see Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*.

<sup>19</sup> “[M]aimed rites” refers to Hamlet’s reaction to witnessing a body—a body that he soon after discovers is Ophelia’s—being brought to the graveyard without the benefit of proper Christian burial (“Who is this they follow? / And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken / The corse they follow did with desp’rate hand / For do its own life. ‘Twas of some estate,” 5.1.211-14). As David Bevington has argued, *Hamlet* presents a series of uncompleted or improperly performed ceremonies that deserve the same title: “The ‘o’erhasty marriage’ of Gertrude and Claudius before the play begins is a maimed rite; so is the awkward public scene at court in which the marriage is announced in the presence of Gertrude’s inconsolable son, the dramatic entertainment presented by the players to Claudius but broken off by his sudden rising, Claudius’ abortive attempt at prayer, the ‘obscure funeral’ of old Polonius, the substituting of a forged death warrant sent by Claudius to the King of England, and the burial of Ophelia without the singing of the ‘service of the dead’” (127).

and so may be possible again”(14)].<sup>20</sup> As a cultural anomaly, something that happens only “une fois en trois siecles” (1.28.70) [“once in three centuries” (1.28.136)]—and even then only through mere fortune or coincidence—sovereign friendship is an absence to be mourned, not a political project that can actively be pursued. Here we may call to mind Arendt’s argument that discussions of the rarity of ideal love have a tendency to obfuscate the political problems that the concept of ideal love itself introduces: “Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces” (*The Human Condition* 242). For the Montaigne of “On Friendship” (if not for the more Pyrrhonian Montaignes of other essays), or Hamlet himself, the “unweeded garden” of the world can never again be cultivated.

Such a relation to the past, though, produces a malaise in the present. All the pleasures of life, Montaigne writes, “au lieu de me consoler, me redoublent le regret de sa perte” (1.28.73) [“instead of consoling me, redouble my grief for his loss” (1.28.143)]. With the death of La Boétie, the “amitié qui possede l'ame et la regente en toute souveraineté” (1.28.73) [“friendship that possesses the soul and rules it with absolute sovereignty” (1.28.143)] persists only to cast a pall over the present: “ce n'est que fumée, ce n'est qu'une nuit obscure et ennuyeuse” (1.28.73) [“it is nothing but smoke, nothing but dark and dreary night” (1.28.143)]. Because the Platonic union of Montaigne and La Boétie meant that they went “à moitié de tout” [“halves in everything”], it thus now seems to Montaigne as if he is “luy desrobe sa part” (1.28.73) [“robbing him of his share” (1.28.143)]. Preserving for the reader the idea

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<sup>20</sup>Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*.

of a sovereignty and wholeness achieved through friendships of the past, the essay passes on as its own legacy a feeling of dispossession.

### **Hamlet and Horatio**

By contrast, Hamlet is oriented by a desire to restore a world that has been lost. Briefly recall the way Arendt reads Hamlet's sense of obligation at the close of the play's first act: "In the last analysis, the human world is always the product of man's *amor mundi*, a human artifice whose potential immortality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality of those who come to live in it. What Hamlet said is always true: 'The time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!'" (*The Promise of Politics* 204). Here Hamlet speaks on behalf of natality, Arendt's coinage for newborn agents continually emerging onto the world stage, inserting themselves into the political world they have entered and altering it through their actions, however incalculable or indeterminate. Insofar as action relies upon the power of multiple actors, it is of interest to wonder whether Hamlet speaks these lines as an aside, replicating the isolation that characterizes the play's extended soliloquies, or whether Hamlet confides this obligation—however elliptically—to Horatio and Marcellus, the "good friends" (1.5.146) who promise to keep secret their encounter with Old Hamlet's ghost.<sup>21</sup> Hamlet has just dispensed with the protocols of class difference in favor of solidarity, urging the pair a moment before, "Let us go in together" (1.5.194). He repeats this immediately after, when (presumably) seeing Horatio and Marcellus hesitate, he enjoins them: "Nay, come,

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Hapgood's edition of *Hamlet* from the Cambridge *Shakespeare in Production* series provides examples of both: Edwin Booth, for one, noted in his study book that Hamlet speaks these lines: "to himself. 'Tis the groan of his over-burthened soul" (144).

let's go together" (1.5.198). Taken together with the interactions of Bernardo, Francisco, Marcellus, and Horatio, "friends to this ground" (1.1.16) who open the play expressing their concern for Denmark in opinions that diagnose and attempt to understand the appearance of the ghost (Horatio: "But in the gross and scope of mine opinion, / This bodes some strange eruption to our state" [1.5.71-72]) and the reason for their enforced vigil (Marcellus: "What might be toward, that this sweaty haste / Doth make the night joint-laborer with the day: / Who is't that can inform me" [1.1.80-82]), we might identify in Hamlet's disclosure (if it is a disclosure) the nascent signs of political friendship.

For one necessary condition of the discourse of political friendship is that the *doxa* of citizens—how the world appears to each in their own particularity—not become obscured by any purportedly objective or universal truths. Speaking about the world which "friends have in common" is, by and large, what constitutes this form of friendship: "By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them. It gains not only in its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its own which is shared in friendship" (*The Promise of Politics* 16). Marcellus's plea for others to help him understand cultivates a space for *doxa* ("Who is't can inform me?"[1.1.82]), and Horatio responds in kind, but only by further widening the scope of the debate to include what others, not present, have themselves concluded: "That can I. / At least so the whisper goes" (1.1.82-83). This "at least" lends his explanation a provisional quality which is echoed throughout the scene: "And this, I take it (1.1.107)... "I have heard" (1.1.154); "And then, they say" (1.1.166); "So have

I heard, and do in part believe it” (1.1.170). The speculative atmosphere adds weight to another allusion Arendt makes to Hamlet’s articulation of responsibility, where she uses it to illustrate the deliberative possibility for friends in "dark times" together to test “the limits of their ability to understand even inhumanity and the intellectual and political monstrosities of a time out of joint” (*Men in Dark Times* 17).

Yet the lonely quality of Hamlet’s protestation against his fate suggests that the form of aristocratic revenge in which he feels an obligation to participate supplies yet another incarnation of the sovereign theory of action we explored in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*. If Martius recalls Rome’s defeat of Corioles as an event that he alone achieved (“Alone I did it” [5.6.116]), Hamlet thinks that he alone “was born to set it right.” And tellingly, when Hamlet contemplates revenge (either by himself or with Horatio), the manifestations of civic *doxa* evident in the play’s first scene give way to an underlying devotion to truth that is only superficially concealed by Hamlet’s articulations of doubt. As Georg Lukacs points out, notwithstanding the “‘sceptical’ and ‘philosophical’” qualities that Hamlet evinces, he “never for a moment doubts that he is impelled as though by categorical imperative to seek blood revenge” (142). Dutifulness to a law of truth, in this case to the truth of sovereignty in kingship, establishes an ultimate authority for action that obviates the need for consultation with others, others with manifestly different experiences of the world. Under such conditions, non-sovereign friendship cannot appear: “The political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion. More than his friend as a person, one friend understands how and in what specific articulateness the common world



appears to the other, who as a person is forever unequal and different" (*The Promise of Politics* 18). The notion of an absolute truth (whether philosophic, religious, or scientific) that is independent of contextualized, sensuous experience imposes a law of logicity and an obligation to "objectivity" that does not require the opinions of others. Regarding this sense of duty, Arendt observes that a guilty conscience is produced not when one sacrifices politics to truth but, instead, truth to politics. And in its cruelest manifestations, the idea of truth can be deployed to naturalize difference, as when scientific discourses were used to construct the Jews as a pariah-people who could be deprived of rights, or even, under totalitarianism, could be killed *en masse*.

Political friendship, an endangered form of solidarity that takes human plurality as the ground for the possibility of a shared world, poses the only relevant question that Arendt believes can stand in opposition to the dictates of truth: "Would any such doctrine, however convincingly proved, be worth the sacrifice of so much as a single friendship between the two men?" (*Men in Dark Times* 29). Parting company with Aristotle, Arendt credits Socrates with locating within the experience of thinking by oneself the logically prior experience of dialogue with particular others; when the experience of plurality is remembered as the ground of experience, rather than construing the friend as another self, valorizing identity and logicity, it becomes clear that "The self, too, is a kind friend" and, moreover, that "the guiding experience in these matters is, of course, friendship and not selfhood" (*The Life of the Mind I*, 189). Thinking, as I will explore with Arendt and Shakespeare in much greater detail in my final chapter, can thus itself become political when the dialogue with the self,

that multiplicity of opinions and wills, is oriented by the prior experience of plurality so that thinking becomes the locus of ethical judgment and the staging ground for political action. But Hamlet, while caught between his sovereign father and his sovereign friend, Horatio, largely remains preoccupied with being and truth rather than plurality and friendship.

When Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her chambers, the image of Claudius held up next to that of Old Hamlet's serves as a self-evident reflection of the truth of the dead king's virtues, while reminding us at the same time of his non-sovereignty, as evidenced by his very substitutability: "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed / And batten on this moor? (3.4.66-67). Defending the truth of his father's sovereignty does serve as a kind of categorical imperative for Hamlet, something that, as Arendt puts it, "is postulated as absolute and in its absoluteness introduces in the interhuman realm—which by its nature consists of relationships—something that runs counter to its fundamental relativity" (*Men in Dark Times* 27). And as we discover from Hamlet's soliloquies, all relations—sexual no less than political—are potential threats to this truth, and indeed already appear to have transformed the world into an "unweeded garden."<sup>22</sup>

In his capacity as private friend, Horatio serves as a mere reflection of the truths that Hamlet takes to be indisputable; he does not manifest for Hamlet the plurality of the public world but, quite the contrary, represents for him the sameness of fraternity. Hamlet claims that they will consult the opinions of one another

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<sup>22</sup> It is this sort of introspection that Arendt claims "annihilates the actual existing situation by dissolving it in mood, and at the same time it lends everything subjective an aura of objectivity, publicity, extreme interest. In mood the boundaries between what is intimate and what is public become blurred..." (*Rahel Varnhagen* 99).

regarding Claudius' reaction to the play ("after we will both our judgments join / In censure of his seeming" [3.2.86-87]), but when the time comes, Horatio's noncommittal replies go characteristically unnoticed by the Prince of Denmark:

Hamlet: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a  
thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well, my lord.

Hamlet: Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Horatio: I did very well note him (3.2.280-84)

Horatio does not express agreement here that Claudius has ratified the ghost's accusations by his reaction to the staging of the *Mousetrap*. Experienced as a mirror of Hamlet's own convictions, Horatio thus in some measure reinforces the truth of the lone avenger-actor who rises to defend the sovereignty of his dead father. But because revenge—itsself unable to undo the King's death or prolong others' mourning his memory—is incapable of restoring this sovereignty, the idea of Horatio as friend salvages a different form of sovereignty. As I hope to demonstrate, Hamlet attempts to compensate in some measure for the failed sovereignty of kingship, exchanging the monumental history of Hamlet's father for a monumentalizing of the singular friend.<sup>23</sup>

As does Montaigne, still another of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Thomas Churchyard, ascribes priority to the free choice of friendship over the givenness of

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<sup>23</sup> Regarding the political limitations of imagining ideal friendship as one shared with another self, Arendt writes: "In other words, political freedom is possible only in the sphere of human plurality, and on the premise that this sphere is not simply an extension of the dual I-and-myself to the plural We. Action, in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world, stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought, which operates in a dialogue with me and myself. Under exceptionally propitious circumstances that dialogue, we have seen, can be extended to another insofar as a friend is, as Aristotle said, 'another self.' But it can never reach the We, the true plural of action." (*Life of the Mind II*, 200)

family relations in his *A Sparke of Frenship* (1588), describing it as choosing “by election and privy liking” (D2). Hamlet uses the same language to describe the free act of determining his own sovereign friendship when he confesses to Horatio: “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice, / And could of men distinguish her election / Sh’ath seal’d thee for herself . . .” (3.2.63-65). A comparable freedom appears unavailable in romantic love, where the duty to preserve familial nobility impinges on it. Witness Laertes’ counsel to Ophelia:

...he himself is subject to his birth:  
He may not, as unvalued persons do,  
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends  
The sanity and health of this whole state;  
And therefore must his choice be circumscrib’d  
Unto the voice and yielding of that body  
Whereof he is the head. (1.3.18-24)

If Hamlet’s bride selection must bear the imprint of his status as prince (“his greatness weigh’d, his will is not his own” [1.3.17]), his private election of a singular and sovereign friend operates in pronounced opposition to a polity governed by a sovereign monarch. Indeed, it is with friendship, not this obligation to his father, that Hamlet, for a moment, at least, identifies the soul as monarch. By “having seal’d...for herself,” the soul produces an obligation that competes (even if not wholly successfully) for priority with the King’s signet ring, the ring which itself will

“seal” the death of the false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the name of the father (5.2.48).<sup>24</sup>

And yet, for all that *Hamlet* has glimmers of Montaignian friendship, there is a pervasive sense that it has been blocked by Hamlet’s destiny as the namesake of a dead king. When Claudius informs the prince that he is heir to the throne, he also makes clear that the political world is not one from which Hamlet can retreat:

You are the most immediate to our throne,  
And with no less nobility of love  
Than that which dearest father bears his son  
Do I impart toward you. For your intent  
In going back to school in Wittenberg,  
It is most retrograde to our desire. (1.2.109-14)

Prior to the action of the play, then, Hamlet has expressed a desire to leave Denmark for Wittenberg; is it merely coincidence that this would mean escaping from the realm of his father and of public election to reach the place where the object of his private election happens to reside? Margreta de Grazia has argued persuasively that, “the language of the play itself upholds the attachment of persons to land,” rather than, as much criticism after Hegel supposes, produces an interiorized representative of modernity that is striving to be independent from the land in the wake of a disinheritance: “[f]ramed by territorial conflict, [*Hamlet*] stages one contest over land

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<sup>24</sup>Even though *Hamlet* is among the most thoroughly mined literary artifacts in the English language, the play’s concern with friendship has been much less of a critical focus than might be expected. As Robert C. Evans remarks, “friendship—a crucial concern of classical and Renaissance thinkers—has not received much explicit or systematic attention as an important and pervasive theme in Shakespeare’s great tragedy.” (88) See Evans for a detailed analysis of the play’s treatment of friendship, according to which Horatio appears as one of the play’s “best examples of friendship.” The best recent account is Michael Neill (319-38); see also Macfaul (141-68) and Keith Doubt (54-62). For the influence of classical notions of friendship in *Hamlet*, see James I. Wimsatt (1-6).

after another . . . . The language of the play itself upholds the attachment of persons to land, humans to humus” (2-3). But even if, as she argues, “it is not clear that personal identity can survive deracination or disentanglement,” this is precisely the crisis with which Hamlet is forced to cope (43). And while revenge, the dominant logic of the play, seems to offer the possibility of clinging to an identity that is based on land and inheritance, Hamlet’s image of Horatio serves as an example of a Stoic resolve that might stave off the loss of identity in a different register<sup>25</sup>:

for thou hast been  
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards  
Hast ta’en with equal thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee. (3.2.65-74)

We do not learn exactly what it is that Horatio has endured at the hands of fortune but, as with almost everything that Hamlet says, his encomium offers clues about his

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<sup>25</sup>Perhaps another reason that the friendship of Horatio and Hamlet is not explored in criticism as often as it might be is that Horatio is nearly always read as a character whose main function is to serve as an objective arbiter of the events in question during the play. Bert States calls him “Our man in Elsinore,” and compares his role in the play to that of a Greek chorus, a species of ideal spectator (147-56). John Halverson makes the somewhat dubious claim that “[i]t is Horatio’s unimpeachable witness that, virtually alone, confirms Hamlet’s essential integrity and nobility of soul; without this confirmation, Hamlet would be an almost intolerably ambiguous figure” (57). Christopher Warley has recently used these critical assumptions about Horatio to explore the general problem of all claims of impartiality (1023-50).

own inner conflicts. If filial identity is bound to land and inheritance, sovereign friendship attempts to fashion an identity out of itself by making the break from land and from subjection to fortune that is the Stoic's fantasy. Here I want to suggest that, *pace* de Grazia, a fully historicized Hegelian reading remains available as a way of diagnosing Hamlet's conflicted stance toward his own situation, not as a symptom of an emerging teleological movement toward modernity and absolute spirit, but rather of a specific early modern preoccupation with two modes of sovereignty. What this more modest reading would suggest is that sovereign friendship as a cultural phenomenon must be read as a development that arises in opposition to a preexisting form of political sovereignty. As de Grazia suggests, the first mode of sovereignty is concerned with the mastery of land and the mastery of others; the other mode, the fantasy of Stoic self-sufficiency, emerges in the guise of sovereign friendship as a reaction to this first mode.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, it is Hegel himself who still provides the best analysis of the Stoic mode of consciousness *as* a fantasy: what constitutes Stoicism is “. . . weder ein Anderes als es, noch die reine Abstraktion des Ich . . . sondern Ich, welches das Anderssein, aber als gedachten Unterschied an ihm hat, so daß es in seinem Anderssein unmittelbar in sich zurückgekehrt ist . . .” (134) [“. . . neither an other than itself, nor the pure abstraction of the ‘I,’ but an ‘I’ which has otherness within itself, though in the form of *thought*, so that in its otherness it has directly returned to

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<sup>26</sup>de Grazia's groundbreaking study has important implications for my reading of the play. She shows us how the long-standing generic categorization of *Hamlet* as a “pure tragedy” obscures its proximity to Shakespearean history plays: “The critical tradition that has identified *Hamlet* with the onset of the modern period has ignored the centrality of land. For this tradition, it makes little or no difference that Claudius, ‘a cutpurse of the empire’ (3.4.99), has dispossessed Hamlet of the realm to which his birth all but entitled him” (43).

itself" [121-22]).<sup>27</sup> Is this not precisely what Hamlet articulates when, seeing in Horatio his model of a Stoic self impervious to fortune ("thou has been as one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing"), he internalizes him ("I will wear him in my heart's core") as an ideal friend? The idea of sovereignty reemerges for Hamlet, then, as a contradictory partnership that asserts each member's absolute independence from the external world—from the "thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to" (3.1.62-63)—at the same time that it depends on the image of the other. The Stoic friend who is "not passion's slave" appears to be master of himself, a projection that provides an alternative to the revenger whose pre-scripted identity oversupplies "the motive and cue for passion" (2.2.555). As Hamlet's representation of absolute self-mastery, this version of Horatio exemplifies the prince's own desires for individual sovereignty.

Horatio therefore fulfills the function of the friend that Jacques Derrida finds in the Ciceronian tradition of friendship, where by means of an exemplar of the self, "on projette ou reconnait dans l'ami vrai son *exemplar*, son double idéal, son autre soi-même, le meme que soi en mieux (20) ["projected or recognized in the true friend, it is his ideal double, the same as self but improved" (*Politics of Friendship* 4)]. This projection is not merely a misrecognition of the self as other, but an anticipation of a sovereign self not yet actualized: "Parce qu'on le regarde nous regarder, se regarder ainsi, parce qu'on le voit garder notre image dans les yeux, en vérité dans les nôtres, la survie alors est espérée, d'avance illuminée, sinon assurée, pour ce Narcisse qui rêve d'immortalité. Au-delà de la mort, l'avenir absolu reçoit ainsi sa lumière

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<sup>27</sup>Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Leipzig: Dürr'chen Buchhandlung, 1907); for the English translation, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.



extatique, il *apparaît* seulement depuis ce narcissisme et selon cette logique du même” (20) [“Since we watch him looking at us, thus watching ourselves, because we see him keeping our image in his eyes—in truth in ours—survival is then hoped for, illuminated in advance, if not assured, for this Narcissus who dreams of immortality. Beyond death, the absolute future thus receives its ecstatic light, it appears only from within this narcissism and according to this logic of the same” (*Politics of Friendship* 4)]. Unlike the ghostly vision of the father that unsettles confidence in the sovereign self, haunting the notion because it has not been sufficiently remembered (“Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose” [3.4.109-110]), the projection of a future solidity found in the private friend—this image of Horatio—bolsters sovereignty by suggesting a possible future self, an “other self” who would shed the indecisiveness and uncertainty of the avenging actor (“...for it cannot be / But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall” [2.2.572-73]).

Nevertheless, Hamlet himself seems to rehearse the possibility of an alternate sovereignty from an ironic distance, as if painfully aware that—in contrast with the demands of Hamlet’s father—his vision of ideal friendship is itself a sort of tautology that, in its absolute separation from material reality, is an unsustainable fantasy. “Something too much of this,” Hamlet tells Horatio, abruptly shifting the conversation back to the topic of revenge (3.2.74). As Arendt puts it: “sovereignty is possible only in imagination, paid for by the price of reality” (*Human Condition* 235). Indeed, the prevailing model of friendship foregrounded in *Hamlet* more closely corresponds with those less exalted types that Montaigne writes “mix into friendship

another cause and object of reward than friendship itself” (1.128.136). When Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “. . . in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?” their response, “To visit you, my lord, no other occasion” (2.2.269-71), might, if true, appear to fulfill the condition of sovereign friendship that it “have no other dealings except with itself” (1.28.138). But the audience (and Hamlet, too, as it turns out) knows that it is “the sovereign power” of Claudius, not sovereign friendship, that has brought them to Denmark (2.2.26).

Since we do not know which “dozen or sixteen lines” (2.2.535) inserted into the *The Mousetrap* are Hamlet’s, he may himself be author of the Player King’s speech that articulates—and anticipates—a betrayal of love in terms of the fragility of friendships in the political world:

This world is not for aye, nor ’tis not strange  
That even our loves should with our fortunes change...  
The great man down, you mark his favorite flies;  
The poor advanc’d makes friends of enemies;  
And hitherto doth love on fortune tend:  
For who not needs shall never lack a friend,  
And who in want a hollow friend doth try  
Directly seasons him his enemy. (3.2.195-204)

Counterpoised against the lines spoken to Horatio earlier in the very same scene, the image of the Stoic friend begins to appear to us a naïve exception that has nevertheless been retained by Hamlet as an ideal to be achieved. And although Hamlet claims he can speak earnestly with Horatio precisely because he lacks an

income (Hamlet: “Nay, do not think I flatter, / For what advancement may I hope from thee / That no revenue hast but thy good spirits / To feed and clothe thee?” [3.2.57–60]), this familiarity is not reciprocal.<sup>28</sup> As Michael Neil observes: “for all its rhetoric of equality and the intense emotion Hamlet invests in it, royal friendship remains a painfully one-sided thing: Hamlet may garland Horatio with the pronouns of intimacy, ‘thee’ and ‘thou,’ but Horatio can never use the same intimate voice” (Neill 333).<sup>29</sup> Thus if the notion of sovereign friendship now seems unsustainable, it is not yet because a realization about the inevitable non-sovereignty of all human action has set in, but rather because the material reality dominated by the sovereignty of kingship and hierarchy appears to prevent its fulfillment. In Denmark, at least, friendship among equals does not appear possible.

Still, a vision of an equality that is just out of reach undergirds Hamlet’s escapist tendencies. Recall that earlier, in act 2, Hamlet discloses to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his conviction that “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.243; Folio only). Even though by this point in the play Hamlet’s desire to leave the country has been complicated by the appearance of the ghost and the command to remember his father, we should not entirely lose track of his earlier “intent” to return to Wittenberg (1.2.113). Hamlet’s connection with Horatio, after all, is that of a “fellow-student”

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<sup>28</sup> Lars Engle concludes from these lines that, “Politically powerless, [Horatio] can confer no advancement in return for insincere praise.” (257).

<sup>29</sup> In his book *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, David Schalkwyk concludes that friendship in the early modern period was capable of shifting the relationship of subordination between masters and servants toward a friendship relation: “The initial conception of the servant as instrument is transformed via the recognition of the imaginative incorporation of that instrumentality into the master’s own subjectivity, following one of the most traditional tropes for love” (52). Notably, Schalkwyk argues that the vision of the servant-friend as an “other self” could, “under certain circumstances render friendship *possible*, but those circumstances tend also to be its condition of impossibility. It promises but seldom delivers the ideal forms of autonomy and equality that sovereign amity requires, and to which *eros* in Shakespeare aspires” (52).

(1.2.177). As Elizabeth Hanson has recently demonstrated, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the nobility and gentry were entering universities in increasing numbers; because universities had traditionally been reserved for the education of the “poor,” the class status of their more well-born attendees may have been undermined or contested by such institutional rules as those regulating the modesty of student dress.<sup>30</sup> Thus Wittenberg may have offered Hamlet and Horatio a temporary reprieve from established hierarchies and been a more appropriate breeding ground for an *amicitia* among equals, something Denmark cannot offer them.<sup>31</sup> And consistent with Margaret Ferguson’s observation that the language of Hamlet has the “curious effect of *materializing* the word” such that the distinction between literal and figurative meaning becomes unclear, both “Denmark” and “prison” become unstable in precisely this way when we recall two sets of details: Denmark is both a place Hamlet has been prevented from leaving and a word that also functions as a synecdoche in the play, with the father-king standing in for the

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<sup>30</sup> In Hanson’s own words: “Insofar as clerical institutions create their communities through their own disciplines, rather than their members’ heredity, their membership is open ended and their practices can weaken other modes of social distinction. The ‘poor’ for whom the universities were supposed to have been founded and of whom Horatio is an exemplar may have been characterized not by actual economic poverty as much as by imperviousness to social class: a radical lack of status, either high or low” (212).

<sup>31</sup> Part of Hanson’s fine essay compares the significance of place, Wittenberg in relation to Denmark, and thus resembles my own: “‘Wittenberg’ signifies ‘the university’ in the way that ‘Elsinore’ means ‘the court.’ When ‘Wittenberg’ is paired with ‘Elsinore’ or ‘Denmark,’ it reminds us that these spaces cannot be occupied at the same time: for Hamlet, Horatio, and (in Q1) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to be *in* Elsinore is to be *from* Wittenberg. As Hamlet’s unsuccessful suit to Claudius in 1.2 makes clear, ‘Denmark’s a prison’ (2.2.243), and Hamlet wants to escape it for the university. In this way, *Hamlet* establishes at the outset a geography for its existentially fraught action, situating it in the corrupt and sycophantic court but shadowing the rotten state of Denmark with another space, the university, from whence the prince’s nobility of character seems to derive, less ambiguously perhaps for modern audiences than for those at the turn of the seventeenth century. However, if Wittenberg is an ‘elsewhere’ to Elsinore’s claustrophobic ‘here,’ it is also made present at Elsinore in the person of Horatio, whose displacement from university to court is signaled by his reply to Hamlet’s query, ‘But what in faith make you from Wittenberg?’—‘A truant disposition, good my lord’ (1.2.168–69) [220–21].” An earlier version of my chapter was published in the volume *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*; Hanson’s argument was published subsequently to my own.

nation (Ferguson 292). In the opening scene, for example, the ghost takes the form of “the majesty of buried Denmark” (1.1.51). Not long after, Gertrude urges Hamlet to conceal any enmity he harbors—both for the realm he wishes to depart and for the person of his uncle—by *appearing* to be a friend: “let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (1.2.69). Denmark is a place where one can “look like a friend” rather than actually become one. This corresponds with Laurie Shannon’s suggestion that: “For the royal subject, friendship proposes an idealized world apart, a world magnifying that subject’s ‘sovereign prerogative’ as an individual” (Shannon, *Sovereign Amitie* 125). And as *Hamlet* demonstrates, prohibitions often augment the idealization of desires: escaping back to Wittenberg represents an escape from Denmark and from fathers to friends, from an economy of the sovereign patriarch that demands for love an impossible revenge to a (more modern) economy of sovereign friendship whose requirement for love—mere arrival—is, perhaps, equally impossible.

### **The Pariah and the Parvenu**

When Hamlet claims, “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space” (2.2.254-55), we again witness the Stoic illusion of sovereignty that is propped up by a refusal to acknowledge a dependency on others, apparently even one’s friends. As Arendt points out, the desire to deny the fundamental condition of non-sovereignty may very well result in an “abstention from the whole realm of human affairs” (*Human Condition* 234). A loss of kingship in *Hamlet* generates Stoic thought and sovereign friendship as alternate forms of self-mastery; the eclipse of

public freedom precipitates desire for “an escape from the world into the self which, it is hoped, will be able to sustain itself in sovereign independence of the outside world” (9 *Men in Dark Times*). Although the play's preoccupations with kingship and patriarchy produce an opposition that is peculiarly early modern, it would not be amiss to consider them as at least analogous to, if not proleptic of, private friendship's function in modern liberalism to sustain the flight from political life. In *Hamlet*, we witness something of what Arendt describes as an “inner emigration,” a retreat into private thought and emotion that repudiates but cannot deny the individual's responsibilities as citizen (*Men in Dark Times* 19). And because Arendt ultimately concluded that this disposition toward individual isolation was among the greatest dangers facing the modern world, I will take the risk of trying to glean from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* those elements of friendship which, subsequent to Arendt's analysis, appear as subterranean trends that we have inherited.

In her articulation of the phenomenon of “inner emigration,” Arendt points to the situation of the cultural pariah. Deprived of rights and a space in which to experience political friendship through public-spirited action and discourse, pariahs cultivate intimate and fraternal friendship as a stop-gap against the sense of worldlessness that accompanies exclusion from a political community. Pariah peoples (by which we might imagine not only the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish populations in anti-Semitic Europe but also communities of undocumented migrant workers in the United States today) may thus rely on fraternity, friendships based in a politics of identity that forms a protective circle against the properly political world that has disenfranchised them.

We might well ask what the experience of a prince of Denmark has in common with that of the pariah. Certainly, if a world of public freedom is to be sustained, the closeness of private fraternity cannot serve as a universal substitute for it, only as a temporary and situational one. As Arendt argues:

Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped. When people choose this alternative, private life too can retain a by no means insignificant reality, even though it remains impotent. Only it is essential for them to realize that the realness of this reality consists not in its deeply personal note, any more than it springs from privacy as such, but inheres in the world from which they have escaped. They must remember that they are constantly on the run, and that the world's reality is actually expressed by their escape. (*Men in Dark Times* 22)

Nevertheless, Arendt also concedes that in such “dark times” (what Arendt, channeling *Hamlet*, also refers to as “a time out of joint” [17]), the pariah's response to a politics that does not accommodate difference—seeking refuge in invisibility and fraternity—holds a much wider appeal, as concern for the world gives way to shame for what the world has become: “And in invisibility, in that obscurity in which a man who is himself hidden need no longer see the visible world either, only the warmth and fraternity of closely packed human beings can compensate for the weird irreality that human relationships assume wherever they develop in absolute worldlessness, unrelated to a world common to all people” (16 *Men in Dark Times*). This tendency further explains what allure the friend—whose presence offers an escape into the

sovereignty of private thought—might have for the aristocratic revenger like Hamlet, a solitary agent who alone is obliged to restore the world to its former pristine state.

Another possibility for the pariah is the path of the parvenu, who instead of withdrawing, hysterically pursues acceptance into social and political worlds (from which she is either explicitly or implicitly excluded) without attempting to alter them. For some European Jews, this could require taking extreme measures toward assimilation, attempting to eliminate all recognizable ethnic markers and even internalizing a system of values that denigrated the pariah group from which they are trying to distinguish themselves.<sup>32</sup> The French word, *parvenu*, designates someone who has merely “arrived” on the scene. Prior to Arendt’s appropriation of the term, it was most frequently a class marker, referring to the *nouveau riche* who attempted to enter into French aristocratic circles with newly acquired wealth. Arendt’s Jewish parvenu, then, in some measure imitates the behavior of this bourgeois individual who sought to achieve acceptance through capital and through his own imitation of courtly norms of conduct.<sup>33</sup>

I have introduced Arendt’s pariah and parvenu because they can tell us something important about the introduction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the Danish court (“Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” [2.2.1]) as well as about the obstacles to political friendship which modernity increasingly presents us

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<sup>32</sup> In her biography of the Jewish writer Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt quotes from a letter in which Varnhagen attempts to understand how this phenomenon had operated in her own life, as she had organized one of the most well-known salons from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century: “the Jew must be extirpated from us; that is the sacred truth, and it must be done even if life were uprooted in the process” (*Rahel Varnhagen* 183).

<sup>33</sup> Providing context for the historical circumstances Rahel Varnhagen faced, Arendt writes: “Nineteenth-century Jews, if they wanted to play a part in society, had no choice but to become parvenus par excellence, and certainly in those decades of reaction they were the choicest examples of parvenus” (*Rahel Varnhagen* 238-39).



with. Given their view of the middling social position they currently occupy in the world ("Happy that we are not over-happy / On fortune's cap we are not the very button" [2.2.228-29]), the pair have been read as representatives of early modern class mobility: they are either aristocrats by birth who have fallen out of favor with fortune or men's eyes, or else they are members of the gentry aspiring to become newly minted members of the royal court, with all its attendant privileges (Blits, *Deadly Thought* 127). In either case, they seem devoid of the capacity to act, offering themselves as flexible instruments of the King and Queen's will: "But we both obey, / And here give up ourselves in the full bent / To lay our service freely at your feet / To be commanded" (2.2.29-32). Claudius and Getrude drop vague hints of the rewards they may receive for this willingness to subordinate all other principles of action to that of obedience to authority ("Your visitation shall receive such thanks / As fits a king's remembrance" [2.2.25-26]). Yet even as the royal pair seem to gentle the condition of these parvenu ("Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern/ Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz" [2.2.33-34]), in equal measure they de-differentiate them as distinct individuals.<sup>34</sup> Like the dactylic metrical foot that conjoins their names, both the play and its politics conspire to mold Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into uniform subjects.

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Muir characterizes Rosencrantz of Guildenstern as "indistinguishable as Tweedledum and Tweedledee" (68). The onstage possibilities of this moment, consistent with Muir's claims, are exploited by Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (earlier 1-act version called *Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are Dead*), where the alternating lines of Claudius and Gertrude demonstrate not only their own confusion about who is Guildenstern and who Rosencrantz (Gertrude "correcting" Claudius while herself being mistaken), but also the characters' own (Guildenstern bowing when Rosencrantz's name is spoken, 36-37). Responding to a modern theatrical tradition that similarly represents the pair, Marvin Rosenberg, however, outlines in some detail the individual differences in the speech patterns of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he finds suggestive of dispositional variances (373-75)

Like the parvenu, and apparently eager to conform to the rules and standards of the court or salon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern participate in the effacement of their individual characters through the cultivation of a postured unanimity. One frequently either finishes the other's sentence, or provides a perspective that is intended to speak for both. This pattern of collective response marks not only their dutifulness ("we both obey" [2.2.29]) and social status ("Happy that we are not overhappy" [2.2.228]), but also the purpose of their visit with Hamlet ("What should we say, my lord?" [2.2.277]) and, finally, the unanimous quality of their thoughts ("We think not so, my lord" [2.2.248]).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who do not seem to mind (or even to notice) that they are shirking responsibility for an endeavor in which they are willing participants, rely entirely on external authority to provide them with their code of conduct. Arendt deems this attitude to the world "behavior," a term she deploys to distinguish the astonishingly automatic quality that accompanies rote adherence to a truth or to authority from an individual's ability to think, to judge a situation, and then to act with the principle of plurality in mind.<sup>35</sup> In the context of the parvenu, behavior is paradoxically at once both self-centered and self-annihilating, concerned as it is with the preservation of the individual by means of a practiced attunement to, and a habitual readiness to obey, the expectations of the presiding authority in any given situation. Such unquestioning conformism loses sight of the world that stands between actors. If parvenu behavior were to shift from being the exception to becoming the norm, both principled action and *doxa* would lack a space in which to

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<sup>35</sup> Hannah Pitkin identifies this characterization of behavior in *Rahel Varnhagen*, where Rahel, in a moment of reflection, describes her non-engagement with the world as precisely "doing...nothing", "letting life rain upon me" (181).

appear, to become meaningful, and to support the tangible forms of solidarity which sustain political friendship.

In the case of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish *parvenus* that Arendt explores in *Rahel Varnhagen*— those exceptional because wealthy Jews who did escape from pariah existence into the salon—the price of assimilation was at least to some extent to internalize the oppressor’s system of values. It could even mean supporting the continued exclusion of other Jews, particularly poor immigrants and refugees, the class of pariahs from which they sought to dissociate themselves.<sup>36</sup> Political friendship, which requires acts of solidarity, withers under such pressure. For to ensure success, the parvenu must learn to ignore his capacity “to distinguish between friend and enemy,” thereby relinquishing political forms of friendship altogether. This unthinking conformity to the world as it is holds special affinities with the apolitical focus of the modern citizen writ large, who must increasingly adapt to a world of radical, deracinating change as a people who are both isolated from one another (insofar as they cannot openly exchange opinions about the world that has deracinated them) and thrown together as a uniform mass of living beings. Both the path of the pariah who seeks intimate, private friendship as a substitute for the political world and the parvenu who sacrifices friendship as well as action to conformism, avoid the open conflict and dispute that are the ground of political life.

(*Men in Dark Times* 30).

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<sup>36</sup> In *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt provides the example of a Prussian law that held all Jews as a community accountable for the debt of each individual Jew. The law thus preserved the idea that all Jews, both wealthy parvenus and poor pariahs, were members of a single class of people, a fact that only exacerbated the tendency of the parvenu to support the continued exclusion of the pariah from public life, so as to maintain a distinction between them. Relieved to have escaped from being a pariah, the parvenu “felt like a Grand Sultan in contrast to his poor, backward coreligionists. From their degradation, from the great gap that separated him from them, he drew his consciousness of being an exception, his pride in having come so gloriously far” (216).

That Hamlet deploys the prison trope just moments before he reveals his knowledge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's business with him as the court's parvenus ("But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore" [2.2.269-70]) further suggests a connection between the absence of a public space for friendship and Hamlet's alternation between remaking the world alone and abandoning it altogether. Notwithstanding what transpires on the battlements in the opening scenes of the play, nothing in the Denmark of *Hamlet* resembles what we observed in *Coriolanus*, the dialogue between citizens and the concerted action that constitutes what Arendt calls power. In *Hamlet*, action is limited to the dream of violence that would remake the state in the father's image at the sovereign hand of the filial avenger. But as we have seen, that dream—Hamlet's recognition that the "time is out of joint" and that he has a responsibility "to set it right"—is diverted because his father and his birth make of him a continual object of suspicion within the court that constitutes his world. This general condition of surveillance ("Well, we will sift him--Welcome, my good friends!" [2.2.58-59]), made all the more pervasive by the presence of the parvenu, ("What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?" [2.2.239-42]), darkens the name of friend. Hamlet is led to despise the world of appearances ("Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" [1.2.76]) and, by fits and starts, to turn away from it, seeking out the warmth of intimate friendship.

And in the moments when Hamlet seems oriented by sovereign friendship, finding in Horatio's Stoic resolve an ideal friend and "other self," his attitude to the world aligns him with the inclination of those in dark times to "despise the world and

the public realm, to ignore them as far as possible, or even to overleap them and, as it were, reach behind them—as if the world were only a façade behind which people could conceal themselves—in order to arrive at mutual understandings with their fellow men without regard for the world that lies between them” (*Men in Dark Times* 11-12 ). Within the liberal imaginary to which I have alluded, private friendship also appears as an exit from the disappointments, uncertainties and risks associated with rebuilding a public world that has become inhospitable. As Arendt puts it, “Nothing in our time is more dubious, it seems to me, than our attitude toward the world...” (*Men in Dark Times* 4). In both Hamlet’s context and our own, this proffered exit multiplies the dream of sovereignty, splitting it into two radically independent forms: the sovereign state that polices its citizens and wages war on other sovereign states and the individual who is free to act as sovereign within the private sphere of intimacy and of market transactions.

Here we can read the mutually reinforcing dialectic between the competing notions of sovereignty that Hamlet is, that we are all to some extent, caught between—between Alexander and Plato, between mastery of others and mastery of self. Hamlet cannot choose but be heir to the throne; he desires to elect (first Horatio as friend and later, with his dying breath, Fortinbras as king) but has been elected. As the son of Denmark, Hamlet is a psyche bound by a material world of political sovereignty and patriarchal love, yet he still claims he would be free, “were it not that I have bad dreams” (2.2.256). But exactly what it is that restricts the achievement of sovereign friendship has become uncertain for him. The language of the prison outlines an aporia: Hamlet’s oscillation between two forms of sovereignty. Although

he condemns Claudius's external prohibition against his physical freedom as well as his own inability to will a mastery over himself that would make him resemble—however misrecognized it may be—the image he has of Horatio, Hamlet remains unable to confront the non-sovereign quality of the human condition.

Arendt identifies this dangerous dialectic in an 1952 entry of her *Denktagebuch*, describing the pithy apothegm supplied by *The Murder of Gonzago's* Player King (words we might attribute to Hamlet)—“Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own” (3.2.208)—as “Die Kantsche Aporie auf die kürzeste Formel gebracht” [“The Kantian aporia brought to the shortest formula” (274)]:

“Ours” sind unsere Gedanken, weil wir nur allein denken können. Die amerikanische Erfahrung der *πραξις* verführt dazu, die Gedanken für teilbar, restlos mit-teilbar zu halten und das Denken für einen Teil des handelnden Prozesses. Dies führt zum Konformismus, also dem Abschaffen des Denkens, denn Denken und Selbst-denken sind dasselbe. Die kontinentale Erfahrung des Denkens verführt dazu, auch der Gedanken “ends” uns zu eigen zu machen — d. h. andere zu zwingen, unsere Gedanken zu denken und auszuführen--, also zur Alleinherrschaft. Auf der einen Seite die Tyrannisierung des Denkens durch die Gesellschaft, auf der andern die wirkliche, politische Tyrannis. Schliesslich treffen sie sich. (274)

[Our thoughts are 'ours' because we can think only in solitude. The American experience of *πραξις* (praxis) tempts us to regard thoughts as divisible, as completely communicable, and thinking as part of the acting process. This

leads to conformism, meaning the abolition of thought, for thinking and self-thinking [Selbst-denken] are the same thing. The continental experience of thought tempts us to appropriate also the 'ends' of thoughts--that is, to force others to think and execute our thoughts--in other words, [it seduces us] to autocracy. The tyrannizing of thought through society on the one hand; and, on the other, the real, political tyranny. They meet at last.]

In many respects, Arendt's perspective on the relation of intention to ends is actually less akin to the Player King's aphorism than it is to the disclosure that Hamlet makes to Horatio following his return to Denmark ("Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well, / When our deep plots do pall: and that should teach us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" [5.2.8-11]), though even here this "divinity," while external to the individual agent, nevertheless resembles a maker that does not admit of plurality or contingency. The Player King's private preoccupation with the problem of the will, and his individualist frame of reference that views the gap between thought and result with despairing resignation ("So think thou wilt no second husband wed / But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead" [3.2.209-10]), resembles the affect in Kant's response to the aporia that he identifies between the autonomy of universal ethical principles, and the stubborn heteronomy of the will.<sup>37</sup> While both the Player King and Kant identify a crucial feature of action, its non-sovereignty, their view of this characteristic remains limited; it is framed exclusively

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, *The Critique of Practical Reason*: "Autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of the duties conforming to them; any *heteronomy* of the power of choice, on the other hand, not only is no basis for any obligation at all but is, rather, opposed to the principle of obligation and to the morality of the will" (48).

as a shortcoming of the individual will rather than as the very condition of plurality that makes political friendship possible.

Arendt wants instead to preserve the Player King's/Kant's aporia as a symptom not of human frailty but of plurality, privileging friendship that considers the experiences of others communicated through opinion as the ground of political thought. In the next chapter, I will argue alongside Arendt that the very notion of Kant's categorical imperative in some measure facilitates the reduction of ethical action to obedience to universal laws. Her focus in this entry from her *Denktagebuch* on individual thought—"Our thoughts are 'ours' because we can think only in solitude"—anticipates her later work in *The Life of the Mind* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she outlines the requirement of solitude for the type of thought, thinking from the perspective of others, that acts as a stay against blind obedience to established laws of the land as well as to the more reflective but still law-like quality of Kantian categorical imperatives. When read from Arendt's perspective, "Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" bespeaks the condition of the lone actor among many others (not merely "an other self") who is responsible for thinking about what it is she is about to perform and its relation to the public world she inhabits, even though, or precisely because, its consequences cannot be fully predicted. A sense of duty to lawfulness that is independent of experience cannot accommodate this kind of thought or the posture toward political friends that requires acknowledgement of opinion before truth, experience before moral laws. It is, then, unsurprising that Hamlet's commitment to his father in the first act of the play is



accompanied, as we have seen, by a desire to eradicate all experience, all particularity, in service to the universal command to revenge:

...Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter (1.5.97-104)

Principled action emerges from the individual judgments of particular situations, which themselves emerge from a political thinking that, while solitary, is oriented toward solidarity with others, who are themselves, non-sovereign. If Hamlet's promise to his father had been one he had been able to keep entirely, he would have been disabled from accommodating political friendship altogether.

Arendt loosely links the Kantian she finds in *Hamlet* to refer to her individual experience with two forms of modern political organization that had, in different ways, lost sight of this aporia, effectively foreclosing political friendship. The first is modern liberalism, which because of the constraints it places on the scope of citizen action, has served thus far in this dissertation as the primary inheritance in modernity of an anti-political Western tradition. Arendt here distinguishes this form of government as the "American experience of *πραξις* [praxis]," which for Arendt exemplifies the transformation of the parvenu's behavior within the limited context of

the court or salon into a nearly universal phenomenon of modern society. In *Hamlet*, I have argued, the parvenu is exemplified by the lock-step thinking of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who operate as if their thoughts indeed are “completely communicable,” expressing in a single voice (either’s will do), without dialogue or consultation (“we both obey” [2.2.29]), what they intuit that they are expected to say. Modern liberalism markedly expands the topos of the parvenu by creating a vast arena of individuals who are coerced into conformity by widespread financial uncertainties that threaten to render all but the very wealthy superfluous at any moment. Freedom to act is defined by the individual agent who engages in market transactions; the accompanying bureaucratic organizational structures that characterize modernity further encroach upon the sphere of action and foster mass conformism, coordinating the activities of vast numbers of individuals in the production of predictable ends, offering the illusion that no one individual's acts are responsible for anything at all. Together, market and bureaucratic ideologies encourage citizens to believe that they are at once atomized and sovereign, agents operating against an anonymous background structure outside their concern or, in any case, beyond their power to alter. The individual parvenu is refigured into a social norm, and thought becomes coincident with utilitarian strategic planning that furthers the underlying principle of action coordination; the end result is that job security trumps political participation and solidarity with others. In this context, to be a parvenu is thus merely to have arrived as newcomer, without feeling empowered to take any responsibility for the political world one inhabits, by making judgments about it, exchanging judgments about the world in public with fellow citizens, and

acting on the basis of shared principles. If there is a pariah who thinks quietly about "setting it right" at all, such thoughts are almost certain to remain the purview of the individual or the private friend, unsupported by the public friendship of citizens amidst a shared world.

The alternate political form that Arendt identifies, totalitarianism, serves not so much as a foil for liberalism, as a re-contextualized and crueler manifestation of it. If the Jewish parvenu of the nineteenth century had tried to live as the exception to the rule of the Jew as pariah, statelessness and totalitarianism eliminated any distinction between the two: "Today the bottom has dropped out of the old ideology. The pariah Jew and the *parvenu* Jew are in the same boat, rowing desperately in the same angry sea" (*Jew as Pariah* 90). And furthermore, the novelty of totalitarianism is that it mobilizes the phenomenon of statelessness to make all individuals superfluous; when everyone becomes a potential pariah of the state, the violence of conformism escalates to such a degree that virtually everyone risks losing the capacity to act based on principle, that is, on behalf of a common world that would protect all as human beings.

With liberalism, the solitary quality of thought lends itself to the fantasy of private "nutshells," a sovereignty preserved outside politics in the putatively infinite space afforded by private thoughts and private friends. Under totalitarianism, as I will explore in much greater detail in the following chapter, this fantasy of sovereignty metastasizes into the possibility that all spontaneity, both the realm of public action and the realm of private thought, can be mastered absolutely. At an individual level, we might consider Hamlet as revenger and his commitment to "wipe

away” all “fond” considerations; in his quest to restore the world, to “set it right” without consulting the opinions of others, he even goes so far as attempt to reconstitute their thoughts. Hamlet’s private vision of his father in Gertrude’s chamber is followed by Hamlet’s threat to show Gertrude her “innermost part,” a threat that effaces the distinction between violence and persuasion. In Hamlet, this is but an ephemeral thought-train; it is not until such thought permeates the social level that totalitarianism is possible, deploying as it does both ideology and violence with the goal of completely eliminating the cornerstones of public friendship, plurality and spontaneity.

In his friendship with Horatio, Hamlet seems to pursue an escape from both this logic of the father that requires violent restitution of the world as well as the logic of the parvenu that leaves no room for friendship because the self-preservation of the individual rather than the common world is at stake. Hamlet gestures toward friendship as an alternate private space, but in his oscillation between respecting the commands of his father as sovereign and admiring Horatio as an embodiment of a Stoic resolve impervious to the shape of the political world, he merely preserves the sovereign imagination that is the tragic hero’s fate. For much of the play, it seems, there is no public place in which non-sovereign friendship can make an appearance.

### **The Abdication of Sovereignty**

If deflecting the sovereign will of fathers means, for Montaigne, maintaining fidelity to a sovereign friendship once possessed in an Edenic past, and for Hamlet, futilely gesturing toward an impossible, Stoic identification with Horatio, what might

an abdication of sovereignty look like? Is such an achievement even possible for self-conscious life? Is it desirable? Or are we forever destined, to some extent at least, to ignore our own vulnerability and dependence upon others? To these most difficult of questions, I can only offer two inconclusive suggestions, each of which is supplied by the fifth act of *Hamlet*. First, another dead end. Knowledge of the finitude inherent in mortality is *not* a sufficient condition to compel Hamlet to relinquish the aspiration toward self-mastery. Even after Hamlet's imagination discovers the possibility of tracing "the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole" (5.1.197-98), he is still compelled to demand public recognition for his own nobility and stakes this claim in a willingness to die:

Dost come here to whine,  
To outface me with leaping in her grave?  
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.

(5.1.272-74)

But this offer to sacrifice the self by risking death is merely the last, desperate stand of an individual consciousness—the Hegelian life-and-death struggle—that, try as it might, cannot completely isolate itself from public life. Identity cannot ultimately be founded on an inner world that precedes all forms of social engagement; at the most basic level, though, this is the trap set by every dream of absolute mastery. No, if Hamlet finally does realize the futility lodged within every claim to sovereignty, it cannot be because he accepts finitude as mortality. Rather, he must de-ontologize finitude and reconceive it as evidence of the non-sovereignty of intersubjectivity. As Arendt argues, such an acceptance would entail a person's acknowledgement of "the

impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do . . . [this] is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (*Human Condition* 234). In order for Hamlet to give up the illusions of self-mastery in which sovereign friendship participates, he must acknowledge that others are always involved in defining the meaning of an individual’s life.

It can be no coincidence that Hamlet’s fleeting encounter with the spontaneity of political friendship occurs when the fraternity of travelling actors arrives at court. Displaced as “tragedians of the city” (2.2.237) by a sudden fashion for casting plays with boy actors, they might represent for us the precariousness of a world where one’s place in it is in large measure determined by fluctuations of the market. As signs of plurality, their power resides in their ability to give voice to the conditions of the present, as Hamlet warns Polonius: “Do you hear, let them be well used; for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live” (2.2.519-22). Hamlet’s greeting, “Welcome, good friends” (2.2.418) anticipates a moment of quasi-political solidarity, a spontaneous friendship that emerges when Hamlet demands that their accommodations not be determined by their class position: “...Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?” (2.2.524-25).

This briefest recognition of another form of friendship never reemerges in the play, save perhaps in its closing moments. Having killed Claudius and said farewell to Laertes, Hamlet first turns to the public world—to the entire court on stage but

also, perhaps, to the theatrical audience—in one last desperate attempt at sovereign self-representation:

You that look pale and tremble at the chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,  
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—  
But let it be. (5.2.340-44)

The breath between, “O, I could tell you” and “But let it be” presents what I take to be a crucial interpretive crux. Does Hamlet mean to say he really *could* tell us, tell us *all*, only then to pass the responsibility on to Horatio because there is not enough life left in him, not enough time, in which to do so? If this is the case, then John Kerrigan is right to ask, with no small degree of skepticism: how “can Horatio report either Hamlet or his cause aright?” (Kerrigan 189). What of all the soliloquies to which Horatio has not been privy, the theatrically self-conscious Hamlet might wonder? But if “Let it be” signals a realization, not that there aren’t enough words left *in him*, but that there could never be enough words, then the instructions to Horatio take a very different form. After all, in his notoriously protracted death throes, Hamlet speaks for another twenty or so lines. Is there, then, a movement toward the abdication of sovereign friendship, a giving up of the desire to assert total mastery over the self and its identity; Hamlet may now accept what we are all always compelled to do anyway: we must place our story, not in the hands of “another self,” but in the hands of an other.

When Hamlet forcefully denies Horatio's movement toward suicide ("Give me the cup. Let go, by Heaven I'll ha't") [5.2.348]), he repudiates their friendship of identity, by distinguishing them as separate biological creatures ("I am dead, / Thou livest") [5.2.343-44], and by reinforcing Horatio's individuation in urging him to exercise a capacity that is onomastically his (*oratio*). Though Hamlet does mention concern regarding his "wounded name" (5.2.349), this does not lead him to attempt, like the ghost of Old Hamlet, to tell his own story ("List, list, oh list...") [1.5.22]. In licensing Horatio to speak about him, Hamlet either knowingly or unknowingly invokes the paradoxical freedom that emerges from the subjection of one's actions to the *mythos* of another who speaks, not as you would have him, but only as he will.

If we credit Hamlet with this sort of knowledge near the end of the play, then the "readiness [that] is all" (5.2.218) is not merely readiness for death but also readiness to play a part in a play written and acted in by others besides himself ("They had begun the play" [5.2.31]). Hamlet sees now that he is not sole author of himself, that he must play a part in a play that began even before he could attempt to write its "prologue" (5.2.30). This would also represent a significant shift away from the posture Hamlet has had toward Horatio. Heretofore, when Hamlet has spoken to Horatio, it has been as if, to quote Arendt, his words were "...not addressed to posterity, but to a real listener who is merely treated as if he were anonymous, as if he could not reply, as if he existed simply and solely to listen (*Rahel Varnhagen* 98). Hamlet is reaching toward a non-sovereign friendship if his request to "tell my story" (5.2.354) is not merely a replication of the ghost's sovereign injunction to "Remember me."



This potential acknowledgement on the part of Hamlet reminds us of his own fleeting acknowledgement of the opinions of others, when he tells Polonius that the players are the “abstract and brief chronicles of the time,” the power of whose “ill report” one should not treat lightly. Shakespeare further underscores how our judgments of events in large measure constitute a shared, plural world, by the emphasis he places on certain elements of the dramatic genre. The spectator's role as judge, as Arendt contends, is a latent feature of all dramatic action: “Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story’s plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the “heroes” who reveal themselves in it” (187). In Greek tragedy, this inter-subjective aspect of meaning-making appears by way of the chorus who supplies the *doxa* of citizens, commenting on the action as it transpires throughout the course of the play. In *Hamlet*, by contrast, the function of something like a chorus gains its meaning from the peripheral position it occupies in the play. Hamlet’s oscillation between a sovereign father and a sovereign friend, his devotion to the truth of sovereignty in one form or another throughout much of the play, gives rise to an atomized vision of the world that hardly considers how it might appear to others. As we have seen, a chorus of sorts does make a brief appearance at the start of the play in the form of the *doxa* of the citizen-soldiers noted earlier in this chapter. Perhaps its return is anticipated by Horatio’s metatheatrical request that the dead “High on a stage be placed to the view” (5.2.382-83) and Fortinbras’ agreement that additional audience members take part: “Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience” (5.2.391-92). If in *The Rape of Lucrece*, an expanding circle of actors’ actions and reactions are set into motion by Lucrece’s suicide (but not

determined by it or by her sovereign aspirations), in *Hamlet*, a widening circle of audience members will judge the events that the friend relates to them: “And let me speak to th’yet unknowing world” (5.2.384).

To re-think the concept of friendship by assuming conditions of plurality and the existence of a shared world requires us to abandon the sovereign friendship of the atomized individual who retreats from the world into private relations, seeking freedom in the choice of private companions whose sameness merely reinforces the vision of a bounded, autonomous subject. We might note the difference between what the ghost calls Hamlet to do, to act on his own to take revenge, and what its appearance prompts the watchmen to do: namely, judge, both individually and together as friends, what is happening in their shared political state. When faced with her own “time out of joint”—the political evil of the twentieth century—Arendt worried that attempts to understand it in terms of the available precedents of evil, even those represented in Shakespeare, would be to abdicate responsibility to think and judge anew, and so to fail to recognize that it was inexplicable in terms of available categories. Individual thought and judgment undertaken with the context of plurality in mind, developing one’s own perspective while acknowledging the perspectives of others, offer the only possibility of preserving political freedom, action, and the political friendship that activates them. But as I argue with Arendt in the next chapter, they are also the capacities that are now the most endangered.

## Chapter Four

### Beyond Shakespeare?

#### Modernity and the Thoughtlessness of Political Evil

I have been thinking about evil for many years, or to be specific thirty years, about the nature of evil. And the wish to expose myself—not to the deeds, which, after all, were well known, but to the evildoer himself—probably was the most powerful motive in my decision to go to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

■ Hannah Arendt, 1963

As the world confronted for the first time the reality of what had occurred in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, Hannah Arendt declared in 1945 that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual Europe” (*Essays in Understanding*, 134). What she would discover over the next two decades, however, was the disturbing unwillingness of professional thinkers to confront the particular challenges that totalitarianism presented to moral judgment. These challenges arose not only for Nazi criminals but also for those who were left behind to attempt to understand both who was responsible and what had motivated them. To Arendt, it seemed evident that these genocidal crimes represented a fundamental rupture with our past experiences with human evil. As she concluded, they had “clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment” (310, *Essays in Understanding*). Their very appearance had disinherited us of our traditional methods of coping with and of understanding evil. It was in this context, and over the course of almost thirty years, that Shakespeare’s

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was included as part of a response to written questions from Samuel Grafton of *Look* magazine in preparation for an interview and article that themselves never materialized; Grafton’s questions centered on the controversies surrounding Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in particular her description of the evils in which Eichmann had participated as “banal”; see *The Jewish Writings*, p. 475.

representations of evil and forgiveness served for her as a recurring exemplar of this traditional framework. Appearing in letters to friends, in Arendt's private notebooks, lectures, and published books, they served as a foil for the distinctive forms of evil she ultimately concluded Shakespeare could not have prepared us to comprehend.

Yet even as the world was faced with an urgent need to reconsider persistent assumptions about human agency, the use of the word "evil" remained nearly taboo for sociologists and critical theorists. Following the defeat of totalitarian governments, leftist post-war intellectuals turned in large part to examine more immediate social and political questions, predominant among them, civil rights, imperialism, and global capitalism as well as the material ideologies that supported its expansion. An understandable suspicion emerged that the use of the word "evil" signaled, more often than not, an ideological weapon at best apt to stifle debate (George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil"), at worst to demonize cultural others. Labeling potential agents of revolutionary action evil, for instance, works in support of the *status quo*, naturalizing the role of historically-contingent social and economic forces. When we focus primarily on what Slavoj Žižek calls the "subjective violence" of individual actors, the structural, everyday violence that creates its conditions of possibility are more readily ignored (*Violence* 9-10).<sup>2</sup>

In Shakespeare studies, fear of misusing the word "evil" has severely limited its viability as a category for critical thought. About *Macbeth*, for instance, critics have expressed concern that it is widely understood as a play "about evil" (Sinfield

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<sup>2</sup> Eagleton's *On Evil* is only one of a number of recent explorations of the concept of evil that considers the reluctance among intellectuals to use the word evil. See also Susan Neiman's discussion in the preface to her *Evil in Modern Thought*; on dramatic representations of evil, see the introduction to Paul Corey's *Messiahs and Machiavellians: Depicting Evil in Modern Theatre*.

95). Thus Alan Sinfield argues that recourse to “evil” effectively supports a distinction between so-called “legitimate” forms of violence that serve the interests of state power and those forms of violence that are “evil” precisely because they disturb it (95). When Macbeth efficiently dispatches the rebel Macdonwald with “bloody execution” (“he unseam’d him from the nave to th’chops” [1.2.22]), his acts are valorized for their nobility (“O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman” [1.2.24]); when he kills the king, he becomes a monstrous traitor. Undoubtedly, critics like Sinfield make compelling cases regarding how the word “evil” has been deployed in support of structures of power.<sup>3</sup> Arendt herself contributed significantly to our understanding of the role that twentieth century ideologies played in the exclusion of certain populations from the plural world of politics, effectively stripping them of their human rights. But it would be unwise to conclude that an exploration of Shakespeare’s representation of Macbeth as an exemplary figure of evil is as inherently “conservative” an enterprise as Sinfield suggests.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside this general discomfort with the word “evil” following Auschwitz, Arendt began to detect a “widespread fear of judgment” on the part of those who had not been present in the camps. The common refrain, “*Who am I to judge?*” echoed

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<sup>3</sup> Harry Berger’s “The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*” complicates dualistic interpretations of good and evil in the play, arguing that the normative injunctions of Scottish masculine warrior culture produce an image of the heroic Macbeth whose excess is exemplary. Thus while the play may indeed represent the thesis that “evil naturally destroys itself” (70), this self-destructiveness is located at a structural rather than an individual level: it “precedes, rather than follows from, the horrors perpetrated by Macbeth” (75). And Berger does approach a discussion of agency in relation to a structurally generated “evil” with what he terms an “existentialist emphasis on the responsibility of the characters, that is, on their freedom to reinforce or to oppose the structural tendencies” (72). For a recent, self-admittedly “orthodox” reading of the play (and one that explicitly disagrees with Berger’s on a number of points), see Richard Strier’s *The Unrepentant Renaissance* (132-49).

<sup>4</sup> By attending to how state power can influence what it means to kill different types of persons based on their relation to law, arguments of the sort described above noticeably tend, for example, to ignore the murder of children in the play. Their deaths do not fit neatly within the structural opposition Sinfield identifies between legitimate and illegitimate killing, suggesting that the moral questions raised by the play do not necessarily bolster dominant ideology.

the Biblical “judge not lest ye be judged”; but Arendt concluded that this was likely a symptom of the trauma caused by the administrative machinery of totalitarianism, trauma that led to the “the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone could be expected to answer for what he has done” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 19).<sup>5</sup> Even if it was not openly acknowledged, the viability of moral responsibility itself had thus been threatened. This suspicion has also carried over into the study of Shakespeare's work, where what is striking about the most prominent criticism produced over the past two and a half decades is that it also largely ignores questions of agency and of ethical action. From the vantage of the early Foucauldian theory of the “subject,” for example—an entity seemingly determined by the historical life-world into which it emerges through micro-filiations of power and ideological discourse—characters in Shakespeare's plays were stripped not only of their naïve sense of self-determination but also of any more carefully considered, historically-situated forms of human agency.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Arendt, too, pays careful attention to socio-ideological and juridical forces that shape the identities and the forms of action that are more or less available to a particular group of persons. Yet for all that she drew considerable attention to the determinative power

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<sup>5</sup> Arendt is identifying a widespread tendency here but she is also almost certainly directing her comments at Gershom Scholem, who had responded in a letter to Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: “I do not believe that our generation is in a position to pass any kind of historical judgment. We lack the necessary perspective, which alone makes some sort of objectivity possible—and we cannot but lack it” (*Jew as Pariah* 241). Arendt's essay, cited above, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” launches with commentary on the “furious controversy” that was set off in response to what she characterizes as (not her book but) a “book that was never written” (17). For more on the reactions to her book, see note 18.

<sup>6</sup> For a short discussion of the impact new historicist and cultural materialist readings have had in this context, see Hugh Grady's essay “Moral Agency and Its Problems in *Julius Caesar*: Political Power, Choice, and History” from the collection in *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*. In such influential interpretations as Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy*, Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*, and Alan Sinfield's *Faultlines*, dramatic characters “seemed to be products of deterministic processes rather than agents who defined themselves through their action...[and] were to be understood solely in their relation to ideology (16).

social norms have to shape the possibilities of human action, Arendt was unwilling to lose sight of the human capacity to resist and refigure social norms through. Critical perspectives that fail to attend to this possibility yield too much ground to the belief propagated precisely by totalitarian ideology, that terror and violence make all things possible, including the transformation of human agents into cogs in the machine of history.<sup>7</sup> Thus while Arendt understands the culturally mediated quality of “choosing” one’s actions, she nevertheless retained a particular interest in drama as a genre about (and a genre that enables reflection on) human agency.

As I indicated in the introduction to this dissertation and explored in the first three chapters, drama is for Arendt the “political art par excellence” because of its ability to make manifest the two-fold appearance of a hero’s actions in the political world, both through the *mimesis* of actors who perform deeds and through the chorus which witnesses what is performed and supplies it with meaning. As I have argued, this dynamic reveals how an action erupts among a plurality of other actors and, once performed, can no longer be said to be in the possession of the doer (*The Human Condition* 187). Looked at only slightly differently, however, drama also makes visible at least two perspectives by means of which action is related to our capacity

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<sup>7</sup> On the ideology that all things are possible, see *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “Even if we take totalitarian aspirations seriously and refuse to be misled by the common-sense assertion that they are utopian and unrealizable, it develops that the society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely. Those who aspire to total domination must liquidate all spontaneity, such as the mere existence of individuality will always engender, and track it down to its most private forms, regardless of how unpolitical and harmless these may seem. Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions, the bundle of reactions that can always be liquidated and replaced by other bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way, is the model of the ‘citizen’ of a totalitarian state; and such a citizen can be produced only imperfectly outside of the camps” (*Origins* 456). See also Arendt’s comments in her essay “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy”: “The behavior of the *individual* is at stake in moral matters and this came out in courtroom procedures where the question was no longer, Was he a big or small cog? But why did he consent to become a cog at all? What happened to his conscience? Why did it not function, or function the other way round?” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 277);

for ethical judgment: that of the agent who judges how to act in a particular situation and that of the audience who witnesses as well as judges what has been done. The first aspect of judging occupies Hamlet throughout Shakespeare's play—particularly when he considers what it would mean if he were to kill Claudius while the king is confessing his sins. The second, as I explored in the last chapter, emerges as the play is closing, with Horatio's meta-theatrical appeal that the dead "High on a stage be placed to the view" (5.2.382-83) and then with Fortinbras's summons for additional witnesses: "Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience" (5.2.391-92). This audience will be called on to come to terms with the events that have transpired in Denmark.

Arendt argued that just such a responsibility existed for those who lived on after the Holocaust (*Responsibility and Judgment* 19), and she suggests how plays (Shakespearean plays in particular) can prepare us to make moral judgments through the particular cases they furnish for our consideration. They enable us to "judge and tell right from wrong by having present in our mind some incident or person, absent in time or space, that have become examples" (145 *Responsibility and Judgment*). By judgment, Arendt means the kind of thinking that takes into account the perspectives of other agents and their own subjective experiences. For example, an actor playing *The Merchant of Venice's* Portia offers an audience what Kant called an "enlarged mentality" by embodying a particular gendered identity. When an actor delivers the lines, "One half of me is yours, the other half yours, / Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours, / And so all yours! Oh wicked times / Puts bars between the owners and their rights" (3.2.16-19), the audience is asked to acknowledge Portia's



ambiguous relationship not only with Bassanio but also with her dead father and the constraints patriarchy puts on her possibilities for agency (*Critique of Judgment Par. 40*). For Arendt, telling right from wrong is not of matter of following a rulebook or a “categorical imperative”; it depends upon our habitual exposure to exemplary and plural bearers of moral and political qualities who “will be an outstanding example for my further judging of such matters” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 140). Quoting Thomas Jefferson, Arendt agrees that the “fictitious murder of Macbeth” excites in us “as great a horror of villainy, as the real one of Henri IV” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 145). Dramatic characters and dramatic performances assemble examples that make moral life possible in ways that rules of conduct do not. As a particular agent’s perspective exceeds “all generalization and therefore all reification,” it cannot be subsumed by a concept but requires something much closer to an aesthetic judgment that “can be conveyed only through an imitation of their acting” (*The Human Condition* 187-88).

Arendt’s engagement with some of the moral and ethical considerations that Shakespeare elicits in us may run contrary to many of the predominant contemporary critical approaches for analyzing his plays, but here Arendt should be seen as reviving a well-established practice rather than breaking much new ground.<sup>8</sup> More recently,

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the first book of criticism of the plays, Elizabeth Montagu’s *Essays on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* of 1769, framed them as a noteworthy product of an ethical mode of thought: “We are apt to think of Shakespeare only as a poet; but he is certainly one of the greatest moral philosophers that ever lived” (59). A few critics since World War II have delivered a number of extended treatments regarding how evil is represented in Shakespeare. Charlotte Spivak argues that Shakespeare channels the Augustinian tradition that understands evil as non-being; according to Spivak, villains like Iago and Richard III may appear frightening at first, but upon closer inspection, they are found empty, even laughable (14). Neil Forsyth, who finds that Shakespearean evil is too appealing to be called “nothingness,” argues that this is why Arendt seized upon Shakespearean evil as a foil for the form criminality took in Eichmann; the “poetic intensity, the uncanny psychological accuracy” of the soliloquies makes distinctive “Shakespeare’s representation of villainy, such that

academic scholars have called for a return to characterological criticism of Shakespeare's plays, criticism that credits human agency without, however, abandoning wholesale what critical theory has uncovered regarding historically mediated experiences of selfhood.<sup>9</sup> Michael Bristol, for instance, provides a particularly Arendtian justification for reading the corpus from an ethical perspective when he suggests that Shakespeare's characters, inhabiting "a contingent world where they are faced with novel, unpredictable, and unprecedented situations that require evaluation and judgment" and that, "make us care about such decision-making in a way that engages our own concern" (*Shakespeare and Moral Agency* 5).

This return to ethics in Shakespeare criticism has begun to open new avenues of thought, and yet critics still do not appear comfortable with the word "evil" or with exploring Shakespeare's representations of the concept of evil.<sup>10</sup> It is thus not surprising that, despite Arendt's conclusion that the experience of totalitarianism has deprived us of our traditional "tools" for understanding evil, tools which Arendt felt we inherit in large part from Shakespeare, critics have not addressed the questions that Arendt's inquiries solicit us to ask: first, can Shakespeare help us to understand the particular forms of evil that emerged with totalitarianism? Second, how does reading Shakespeare encourage us to rethink for ourselves the conceptual frameworks that we have inherited? And finally, to what degree do Shakespeare's depictions of

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Arendt uses his characters as the point of reference to illustrate precisely that grandeur she did not find in Eichmann..." (5).

<sup>9</sup> Most notable is the recent collection of essays edited by Michael Bristol, *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*. See also Robert B. Pierce, "Being a Moral Agent in Shakespeare's Vienna." *Philosophy and Literature* 33.2 (2009): 267-79. See Richard Strier, for whom moral agency in Shakespeare has been a longstanding concern. In particular, see again Chapter 3 of his book, *The Unrepentant Renaissance: "Against Morality."*

<sup>10</sup> In the Bristol collection (see footnote 9), the word evil appears (usually as a reference to a Shakespearean character using it) several times, but none of the dozen or so essays included makes any attempt to treat it as a concept in its own right.

evil still provide us with insights into the difficult questions concerning moral agency and moral judgment in our present context?

Certainly, the dilemma of theodicy—how to reconcile the coexistence of God and evil (whether human or natural)—is not something we dwell on—but then neither did Shakespeare. Quite the contrary, his plays may be said to anticipate the collapse of inherited frameworks for understanding human suffering. When at the end of *King Lear* we do see an attempt to yoke together god (*theos*) and justice (*dike*), the play reveals how this mode of meaning-making fails to account for the agonizing experiences we have witnessed. More worrisomely, in representing the carelessness connected with the persistent deployment of habitual thought patterns, the play reveals our stunning inability to recognize such inadequacies.<sup>11</sup> When Edgar kills Edmund, he offers a providential account of transgression and punishment, a version of theodicy, that is utterly incommensurable with the recent events he has passed through. Is there any way that his “The gods are just” (5.3.160), even when it is coupled with Edmund’s inexplicable assent: “Th’s hast spoken right; ‘tis true. / The wheel is come full circle” (5.3.163-64), can assuage Gloucester’s earlier cry: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods; / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.36-37)? As Arendt suggests in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, such encounters with the incomprehensible must be acknowledged if subsequent critical reflection and judgment are to be made possible:

The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces. Comprehension

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<sup>11</sup> Marvin Rosenberg writes of the “dark, deadly, grimly comic world of *Lear*” as one that engenders such a complex array of response that “it must defeat any attempt to enclose its meaning in limited formulae such as redemption, retribution, endgame, morality, etc” (328).

does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden that our century has placed on us — neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality — whatever it may be. (*Origins* viii)

This twofold “facing up to” and “resisting” is what I argue Shakespearean drama takes to be its responsibility. From this perspective, the most shocking element in *King Lear* is not Lear’s anguished cries during the storm, the brutal mutilation of Gloucester’s eyes (“Out, vile jelly!” [3.7.82]), nor the humiliation of his failed suicide that results from this blindness, not even the unexpected death of Cordelia—although certainly these are terrible. Rather, it is the moment when Edgar introduces theodicy as a mode of comprehension, as a way to explain the horror of what we have witnessed through a commonplace, that we are faced with the choice of turning away from the particularity of the suffering that is being acted out before us and away from its resistance to neat categorization. Insofar as Shakespeare stages both the breakdown of explanatory frameworks as well as missed opportunities for understanding anew that Edgar exemplifies, he does seem to anticipate what Arendt discovered while attending the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the former SS *Obersturmbannführer* who was accused of organizing mass deportations to Nazi concentration camps. I have in mind the connection Arendt makes between evil and the defendant’s recourse to clichés, his ultimate unwillingness “to think, namely, to

think from the standpoint of somebody else” (*Eichmann* 49)<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare’s Edgar offers a case study of the failure to judge, to account for the particularity of our individual experiences and those of others when our inherited paradigms prove inadequate to the events of the world. And insofar as all of us rely upon existing concepts as well as upon commonplaces and clichés to make sense of the world we inhabit, we are all potential Edgars.

Of course, Edgar is not Eichmann. Ultimately, Arendt concludes that Shakespeare’s immediate social and political horizons, while they enabled him to anticipate momentous crises of understanding, simply could not allow him to glimpse and so provide us with an account of political evil answerable to the experience of the Holocaust. In the postscript to the second edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt made use of Shakespeare to explain what she had meant by the controversial subtitle of her book, “A Report on the Banality of Evil,” citing figures from the Shakespearean corpus as foils for the exemplary agent of twentieth century evil: “...when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’” (287). Here Shakespeare no longer appears as a pearl diver who unearths and reexamines sedimented political concepts

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<sup>12</sup> Concluding the final chapter of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt writes of the moment before Eichmann’s execution: “He began by stating emphatically that he was a *Gottgläubiger*, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded: ‘After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. *I shall not forget them*.’ In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was ‘elated’ and he forgot that this was his own funeral. It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lessons that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (*Eichmann* 252).

but, quite the contrary, as the primary representative of a traditional understanding of moral agency that could not have anticipated, let alone understood, the forms of evil characteristic of totalitarian governments. As Arendt would later write, the endurance of certain works of art like Shakespeare's is not due to their "timelessness" but to their demonstration of the possibility for a kind of thinking that sets up a "timeless time" (211), a thinking that gathers together the absent tenses of past and future, the no more and the not yet, to discover their meaning in, and material impact upon, the present. Shakespeare serves as an example to us of this particular kind of thinking, but he cannot do our thinking for us; it remains the responsibility of each new generation to "discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought" (*Life of the Mind* 210).

Yet even in the aftermath of the Holocaust, which left no doubt that continuity with previous traditions had been shattered by the form of life modernity had ushered in, the past, and Shakespeare with it, continues to operate upon us, though without affording the same authority or meaningfulness: "What you are then left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation" (212). It follows that critical thought must position this tradition such that we may distinguish current from past horizons of possibility, and in so doing, confront and jettison superannuated conceptual paradigms.

As I will argue in this chapter and explore through my own reading of fragments from the Shakespearean corpus, Arendt's readings in books on Shakespeare and on philosophers who read Shakespeare, as well as her epistolary

discussions about Shakespeare, forgiveness, and punishment with W. H. Auden and Karl Jaspers, can enable us to better articulate what Arendt felt were the unprecedented characteristics of modern political evil.<sup>13</sup> From her post-World War II perspective, she felt it necessary to reevaluate philosophical conceptions of transgression and punishment, conceptions that modern philosophers, and Hegel in particular, developed in part through encountering Shakespeare's plays. Robert C. Pirro has discussed Arendt's critical engagement with Hegel's theory of Greek tragedy (46-50), but I will show that she also adopts Hegel as a key Shakespearean interlocutor. And for Hegel, *Macbeth* provides a dramatic representation of his notion of the causality of fate in which the transgressor is punished by the ethical world he both transgresses and deforms through his own actions, "ruining the friendliness of life" (Bernstein 422). Shakespeare, not Greek tragedy, underwrites Hegel's notion of modern ethical life predicated on an internalization of guilt. But the problem of conscience that troubled Arendt exceeds what she sees in *Macbeth*. When conscience remains resolutely silent, or worse still, commands previously forbidden—unconscionable—actions, Arendt can no longer take her bearings from Shakespeare. Nor, as I will demonstrate, can she take comfort in the time-honored

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<sup>13</sup> Yosal Rogat's *The Eichmann Trial and the Rule of Law*, begins and ends with comparisons between Greek tragedy and the capture and trial of Adolph Eichmann ("just as the matricide that Orestes commits requires the establishment of a legal institution, namely the Areopagus, which quells the cycle of vengeance, so the genocide Eichmann helped carry out requires a new and now international trial that will fulfill a similar function on a global scale"--48). Susannah Gottlieb, however, writes about the "tense relation to the problem of [Greek] tragedy" in Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Gottlieb argues that Arendt's claim that Eichmann was unlike Shakespearean agents of evil implies that she is harnessing Walter Benjamin's distinction between the tragic hero of Greek tragedy and the tyrant of the German *trauerspiel*, of which Shakespeare's tragedies are specimens. For Gottlieb, ancient Greek tragedy remains the center of Arendt's attention, rather than Shakespeare. Eichmann is thus "doubly distanced from the tragic hero: not only is he utterly unlike tragic heroes in the proper sense of the term; he is similarly unlike the tyrants or intriguers who appeared as a consequence of the death of tragedy. Nevertheless - and this is crucial - the justification for the death sentence imposed on him retrieves the situation staged in the Oresteia, where 'the earth' or 'the moral order' exacts punishment in cases of outrageous crimes" (51).

equation between morality and obedience that she saw extending through Shakespeare to Kant's categorical imperative. Ultimately, Arendt became convinced that totalitarianism's eradication of both the public spaces that make possible a shared world and the private spaces that permit reflection upon which conscience can operate requires us to confront the possibility that the forms of evil represented in Shakespeare only confirm the profound rupture between all previous experiences with evil and unprecedented twentieth-century crimes (crimes that Arendt judged beyond the possibility of either punishment or forgiveness).<sup>14</sup>

### **Before Radical Evil: Shakespearean Inflections in the Private History of Arendt's Thought**

Shakespeare appears for the first time in 1946 as one of Arendt's interlocutors on the question of evil in the course of her correspondence with Karl Jaspers, under whom she had written her dissertation on St. Augustine. Reflecting on Jasper's descriptions of Nazi criminality in his book *Die Schuldfrage*, Arendt contends that he has failed to consider how the Holocaust transcends all previous notions of criminality:

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<sup>14</sup> Neil Forsyth makes precisely the mistake Arendt cautions against—ignoring the unprecedented characteristics of totalitarianism—when in his discussion of Shakespearean evil he reads Arendt's interpretation of the evil of Eichmann as merely “a modern form of an ancient idea, that evil is simply the absence of something, the failure to act or to understand, in this case a failure of imagination” (1). J. Gregory Keller more carefully evaluates Arendt's juxtaposition of Eichmann with Shakespearean villains when he sets out to undermine her claims: “Macbeth may be more like than unlike Eichmann, at least in the ease with which he is persuaded that the evil deed is obviously the right one” (41). But Keller ignores key points raised by Arendt: unlike Eichmann, “Macbeth struggles with his ‘conscience’ but finally does the deed” (42). Insofar as Macbeth reflects on what he intends, he retains a disposition toward ethical action that hardly resembles what Arendt observes in Eichmann (43). Macbeth's akrasia is not commensurate with Eichmann's banality. Furthermore, Keller picks up on precisely how Macbeth's consideration of the deed follows the categorical imperative (44)—he does not face the particular challenges to thinking that the legalization of murder has for Eichmann's ability to judge.



Your definition of Nazi policy as a crime (“criminal guilt”) strikes me as questionable. The Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough....That is, this guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems....We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime... (54)<sup>15</sup>

To Jaspers, Arendt's claim that all existing legal concepts fail to account for the nature of the crimes in question attributes a sublime quality to the criminals, something that might be appropriate for the grandeur of villains from the Shakespearean corpus, but not to those who participated in the Holocaust:

You say that the Nazis cannot be comprehended as “crime”—I’m not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of “greatness” – of satanic greatness...It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality...The way you express it, you’ve almost taken the path of poetry. And a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material – his instinctive aesthetic sense would lead to falsification of it – and that’s why he couldn’t attempt it” (62).<sup>16</sup>

Jaspers’ association of Nazi evil with “banality” obviously influenced Arendt’s subsequent thought, as did his juxtaposition of the term with Shakespeare’s aesthetic

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<sup>15</sup> See Arendt’s letter dated August 17, 1946. Jaspers defines guilt according to four categories, among them, “criminal guilt” or crimes that “are acts capable of objective proof and violate unequivocal laws. Jurisdiction rests with the court, which in formal proceedings can be relied upon to find the facts and apply the law” (*Question of German Guilt* 25).

<sup>16</sup> See Jaspers’ letter dated October 19, 1946.

representations of evil. Arendt does not respond specifically to Jasper's use of Shakespeare here, but she does imply general agreement through her admission that perhaps she has characterized evil in terms that approach the "satanic greatness" that Jaspers describes, a characterization she also rejects wholesale. At least ten years later, Arendt privately expresses this concern about Shakespeare in marginal notes that agree with what A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* claims about how we are moved by the evil of Iago: "...although in reading, of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror" (Bradley 190).<sup>17</sup> In Arendt's letter to Jaspers, however, she remains unsatisfied with the available notions of criminality:

But still, there is a difference between a man who sets to murder his old aunt and people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all...built factories to produce corpses. One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, and to the extent that I can't avoid such formulations, I haven't understood what actually went on. Perhaps what is behind it all is only that individual human beings did not kill individual other human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being. (69)

At the same time that Arendt was corresponding with Jaspers, she was working to complete *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the work in which she began a call that

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt seems to have had more than a passing interest in Bradley. In her copy of *Shakespearean Tragedy*, she responds to both Bradley and Shakespeare and it is clear that her inquiry centered on the topic of evil. Her marginalia include brief notes on the representation of evil motives, comparisons between Iago and Stalinism, and the reactive (rather than active) quality of resentment. Additionally, one of the few clippings glued into Arendt's *Denktagebuch* includes a brief book review article that attempts to exonerate Bradley from some of the influential criticisms leveled at his work by L. C. Knights and F. R. Leavis (632-33).

would reverberate throughout her later work, a call to recognize that our existing political categories no longer sufficed to understand contemporary political experience, and to acknowledge that fundamentally new possibilities had emerged into the world. Throughout her intellectual career, Arendt elaborated on the defense mechanisms Western political philosophy had developed against the unpredictability of political life, particularly in *The Human Condition*, where, as we saw in chapter two, she explored the effect that the conceptual perspective of the maker, *homo faber*, has had on our ability to recognize political action and its possibilities for new political formations. But in *Origins*, Arendt gives voice to a particularly urgent need to combat these tendencies, given the novel forms of evil that we now have the responsibility to grapple with and attempt to understand:

It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a “radical evil,” and this is both true for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a “perverted ill will” that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous (459).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The reader has now encountered two seemingly incongruous adjectives, radical and banal, both of which Arendt applied to the concept evil at various periods during her lifetime. Arendt’s description

Shakespeare does not appear in *Origins*, but when Arendt began her personal *Denktagebuch* in 1950, shortly after she finished the first edition of the book, she began to restate the relationship between modern political evil and Shakespeare's representations of evil that had surfaced in her correspondence with Jaspers. Unlike Jaspers, Arendt was concerned not to distinguish literary representations from actual experience but to confront the inadequacy of traditional conceptions of evil as they are represented in the Shakespearean corpus. In an entry entitled "Das radikal Böse" ("The radical evil" [18]), Arendt for the first time juxtaposes specific characters from the Shakespearean corpus with the description of evil she had outlined in *Origins*:

woher kommt es? Wo ist sein Ursprung? Was ist Grund und Boden? Es hat nichts zu tun mit Psychologischem-Macbeth-und nichts mit Charakterologischem-Richard III, der beschloss, ein Bösewicht zu werden.

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of evil as banal was at the center of the controversy over the publication of her book; there were, it should be remembered, many objections levied against *Eichmann*: claims of factual inaccuracy, outrage at her tone, including the book's frequent use of irony, and regarding her brief discussions of the role of the Jewish administrative bodies, the *Judenräte*, in the Holocaust. On this last charge, for instance, in an essay published in *The Partisan Review* Lionel Abel called it a "terrible charge against the Jewish leaders" and concluded: "One might as well accuse the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima for having made their own deaths possible, since they lived in cities, and cities make the best targets" (228) [For a comprehensive review of the controversy, see Randolph Braham's *The Eichmann Case: A Sourcebook*]. Nevertheless, it was the phrase the "banality of evil" that became the most recognizable rallying cry against her; Gershom Scholem called it a "catch-phrase," lamenting that nothing of the "radical evil" she had articulated in *Origins* remained "but this slogan" (*Jew as Pariah* 245). In response, Arendt explained that she had indeed changed her mind: "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its 'banality.' Only the good has depth and can be radical." (*The Jew as Pariah*, 250-51). In *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, Richard Bernstein traces the transition that appears to take place between *Origins in Totalitarianism*, where evil is radical, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where it is banal. Bernstein supplies considerable evidence to suggest that Arendt, her comment to Scholem notwithstanding, meant essentially the same thing by both, but that she became concerned that the word "radical" suggested a metaphor of depth inappropriate to the kind of evil she had been trying to understand. Arendt's conviction that thought is radical, that it involves a pearl-diving—which is also to say a "going to the root"—for sedimented political concepts, resonates with much of what we have seen throughout this dissertation.

Wesentlich ist 1. der Über-Sinn und seine absolute Logik und Konsequenz. 2. das überflüssig machen des Menschen bei Erhaltung des

Menschengeschlechts, von dem man Teile jederzeit eliminieren kann.

[Where does it come from? What is its origin? What is its foundation? It has nothing to do with the psychological—Macbeth—nothing to do with the

characterological—Richard III—who decided to become a villain. Essentially

it is 1. The over-arching meaning and its absolute logic and consequence. 2.

The making of men superfluous through the preservation of the human race,

from which one can eliminate parts at any time.] (18)<sup>19</sup>

To better understand this summary definition of political evil—both its unflinching

logicality and its penchant for making individuals superfluous—as well as why

Arendt attempts to explain the break with traditional notions of evil by way of

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<sup>19</sup> My translation of “Über-sinn” is indebted to Ralph Bauer and Theodore Leinand, and assumes the distinction Frege announces in *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (most commonly rendered as “On Sense and Reference” in English); this reading of “sinn” signifies a meaning without any necessary connection to experience; radical evil occurs when the political world of plurality is directed toward an end outside experience that an ideology has imbued with the appearance of necessity. To my knowledge, this entry has escaped scholarly attention until now. It makes us aware for the first time that following her correspondence with Jaspers, Arendt had reworked the relationship between Shakespearean representations of evil and the evil she was attempting to understand. Richard Bernstein, who has commented on Arendt’s engagement with evil via Shakespeare, notes that “Arendt herself frequently refers to Shakespeare when speaking about evil, especially when she attempts to distinguish the banality of evil from traditional conceptions of evil” (*The Jewish Question* 150). Bernstein’s argument, noted above, suggests that Arendt maintained a fairly consistent understanding of the nature of the evil that manifested itself most explicitly in Nazi death camps. But Bernstein encounters difficulties because, as he observes regarding Arendt’s juxtaposition of banal evil with Shakespearean representations of evil, “[because] her rhetorical constructions sometimes suggest that the alternative to the banality of evil is evil which is theologically or aesthetically categorized as “satanic greatness,” one can easily be misled into thinking that she identifies radical evil with satanic greatness” (152). The note in Arendt’s notebooks, unnoticed by Bernstein, conclusively supports his argument; while here her topic is radical evil, the overall judgments on modern political evil that Arendt makes by way of comparison with Macbeth and Richard III appear again in very similar form in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, when she re-articulates her concept of the banality of evil. Bernstein’s omission is understandable, for while the index to the published transcription of Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* lists a couple of references to Shakespeare, a number of Arendt’s notes on Shakespeare, including this one, are not included.

comparison with Shakespearean villains, we first need to consider in more detail the definition of radical evil that Arendt had already developed in *Origins*, where she connects its novelty with the essential characteristics of totalitarianism. In the section of *Origins* that follows the passage on radical evil cited above, aptly entitled, “A Novel Form of Government,” Arendt first urges her readers to acknowledge the unprecedented nature of totalitarianism. For while the introduction of the word “totalitarian” into our language itself might suggest a degree of collective awareness concerning the novelty of totalitarianism, the temptation to deploy familiar categories as synonyms for totalitarianism overrides the power of its coinage (*Understanding* 312). Succumbing to this temptation in the case of totalitarianism prevents us from recognizing that its appearance in our world disrupts the traditional opposition of lawful and lawless governments and thus introduces the need for a radical reevaluation of many of our fundamental political and juridical concepts.

Keeping in mind the six regime forms that Aristotle identified in his *Politics* (monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, republic, democracy), forms which still provided a comprehensive register at the time when Shakespeare was writing, we may briefly consider the representations of monarchy and tyranny in *Measure for Measure* as examples of lawful and lawless paradigms respectively. Law, whether understood as deriving from the *lumen naturale* of natural law or the revelation of divine commandments, has generally been sharply distinguished from the individual actors who can never become ideal embodiments of either (*Essays in Understanding* 340). Vincentio communicates this tradition when he suggests that the Venetian “strict statutes and most biting laws” are “The needful bits and curbs to headstrong

weeds,” citizens whose actions, it is presumed, will never entirely align with the prescriptions of law (1.3.20-21).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, although positive laws are not eternal and unchangeable, they do have a consistency which enables us to determine which individuals operate in accord with them, which in violation of them. In *Measure for Measure*, the sudden enforcement of the statute forbidding fornication, which as Vincentio admits, “fourteen years we have let slip” (1.3.22), disrupts legal consistency (or in this instance, legal inconsistency), thereby intensifying a quality of arbitrariness that unsettles the citizens’ confidence about the deputy who has been left in charge:

Whether the tyranny be in his place,  
Or in his eminence that fills it up,  
I stagger in:--but this new governor  
Awakes me all the enrolled penalties  
Which have, like unscour'd armour, hung by the wall  
So long that nineteen zodiacs have gone round  
And none of them been worn. (1.2.144-50)

Tyranny emerges when the relative predictability which laws establish is eroded by the arbitrary will of a single individual. Left alone following Angelo’s threat that he will “prove a tyrant” and go forward with her brother Claudio’s execution if she does not submit her body to his sexual urges, Isabella reflects on this development as a

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Shuger associates this element in *Measure for Measure* with a tradition extending to Plato’s *Laws*, where laws are imagined to produce “an ideal of individual and social excellence” (13). Following Karl Popper, Shuger emphasizes the anti-individualist elements of this vision, but she also recognizes how laws under Plato’s interpretation are posited as unrealizable ideals that represent the “transcendent Idea in the institutions of the *polis*...” (13).

subordination of law to individual will: “Bidding the law make curtsy to their will / Hooking both right and wrong to the appetite / To follow as it draws” (2.4.176-68).

Importantly, the predominant conceptual framework here re-articulated by *Measure for Measure* holds lawful and lawless governments to be mutually exclusive forms of regime. Totalitarianism, however, unravels the distinction between the two. Insofar as it eliminates positive law and the stable, predictable space for action that law makes possible, totalitarianism may be understood as lawless. Indeed, one of the reasons that totalitarianism has been confused with the operation of tyranny is that initially it functions in a similar way, dismantling the existing structure of law and the public life it enables (465). As we saw in an earlier discussion of *Julius Caesar*, the principle of fear that governs in tyranny forces the public citizen into the isolation of private life, leaving the tyrant alone to occupy the public space. As Cassius complains:

When could they say till now, that talked of Rome,  
That her wide walls encompassed but one man?  
Now is it Rome indeed and room enough,  
When there is in it but one only man. (1.2.154-57)

So to isolate citizens, however, is merely pre-totalitarian: “Political contacts between men are severed in tyrannical government and the human capacity for action and power are frustrated. But not all contacts between men are broken and not all human capacities are broken” (474). Even in instances where political action does *not* reemerge from the private, as it does when the conspirators plan their revolt inside the gates of Brutus’ orchard, the “whole sphere of private life with capacities for



experience, fabrication, and thought are left intact” (474). If tyranny limits the capacity for human action by isolating citizens so as to eliminate the public realm of life where political action and resistance are possible, it does not, as does totalitarianism, produce a loneliness that deprives human beings entirely of a world in which they might belong, and thereby destroy the private life of thought and everyday experience, in addition to the life of action (475).

Totalitarianism performs this second operation insofar as it is also *lawful*, that is, insofar as it pursues “the sense of absolute logic and consistency” that Arendt mentioned as the first element of radical evil in her *Denktagebuch*. Subordinating both the political life of plurality and the everyday life of private individuals to what it takes to be the laws of Nature or History, it obeys a logic of predefined ends that does not resemble the arbitrariness associated with the will of a tyrant (*Essays In Understanding* 339-340)<sup>21</sup>:

Totalitarian lawfulness...executes the law of History or of Nature without translating them into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior. It applies the law directly to mankind without bothering with the behavior of men. The law of Nature or the law of History, if properly executed, are expected to produce mankind as its end product...Totalitarian policy claims to transform the human species into an active unfailing carrier of the law to which human beings would only reluctantly be subjected. (462)

Totalitarianism no longer pursues the logic of utility common to modern democratic states. The ill-conceived neoliberal view that government should serve as an

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<sup>21</sup> Arendt explicitly argues this point: “The totalitarian dictator, in sharp distinction from the tyrant, does not believe that he is a free agent with the power to execute his arbitrary will, but, instead, the executioner of laws higher than himself” (*Origins* 346).

administrative regulator of the life processes of individuals and as a coordinator of market activities may not emphasize individual or collective political action (and may even present significant conceptual and material obstacles to it), but neither does it entirely prevent action's appearance on the public stage.<sup>22</sup> Totalitarianism mobilizes its masses by subordinating all movement to a process of history that is independent of utilitarian calculation. And as an ideology, it is fundamentally opposed to the capacity for action in each individual, a potentiality that both haunts and disrupts its drive toward absolute consistency and reliability: "The superhuman force of Nature or History possesses its own beginning and its own end, so it can only be hindered by the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is" (*Origins* 465). Rather than the law, as in *Measure for Measure*, it is the individual, then, that totalitarianism seeks to make "static" through a process Arendt labels "total terror." Treating the infinite variety of humanity with its capacity for spontaneous action as if it were a single individual, totalitarianism aligns all activity with a law that is external to ethical life. Before this tribunal of terror, the meaningfulness of human agency is nearly lost because everyone is considered equally innocent: "the murdered because they did nothing against the system, and the murderers because they do not really murder but execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal... Terror is lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some suprahuman force, Nature or History" (465). And unlike under tyranny, not merely the capacity for action but the capacity for independent thought that might oppose the cruelty of this logic is severely constrained: "By destroying all space between men

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<sup>22</sup> See Sheldon Wolin's discussion of Rawlsian liberalism in chapter 15 of his updated *Politics and Vision* (524-56).

and pressing men against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated; by teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated” (478).

Supporting this first element of administrative evil that Arendt identifies in her *Denktagebuch*—the superlative logicity of totalitarianism—is the second, rendering individuals superfluous. An understanding of this concept can be gleaned by reading *Origins* alongside another of Arendt’s letters in which Shakespeare appears as a significant interlocutor. In 1960, a year before she attended Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem and four years before she published the second edition of the book that contained her response to criticisms of her description of the evils of Nazism as “banal,” Arendt suggested to W. H. Auden her wariness with reading Shakespeare as a guide to understanding the present, particularly when it came to the questions about the nature of evil that had concerned her following the Holocaust. Commenting on his essay “The Fallen City” (“I just read the Falstaff piece”), which considers passages from *Henry IV part 1*, *Measure for Measure*, and *King Lear*, Arendt writes that her response will be an extended one, requiring more than a single missive; she has several points that at some point she would “like to raise, especially about Greek tragedy,” but “[I] am writing now because of ‘forgiving’” (1). Both Arendt’s letter and the essay by Auden that prompted it can be read as part of an ongoing conversation on forgiveness that was set off by Arendt’s exploration of the concept in *The Human Condition*. While Auden claimed in a book review of June, 1959 that

Arendt's book was "one of those rare books which gives me the impression of having been especially written for me" ("Thinking What We Are Doing" 72), his essay offers examples from Shakespeare that challenge some of Arendt's claims regarding forgiveness.<sup>23</sup>

In a portion of "The Fallen City," Auden explores the difficulty that Shakespeare must have faced (and that Greek tragedians, for instance, did not) when he attempted to dramatize individual subjective states, forgiveness among the most prominent examples. Auden's argument is built on the claim that forgiveness is an interior state of regard toward a transgressor that is ultimately independent of that other's way of relating to the one who is forgiving: "The command to forgive is unconditional: whether my enemy harden his heart or repent and beg forgiveness is irrelevant" (28). Such a freedom from inter-subjective exchange implies that there is no necessary connection between forgiveness and action. Such forgiveness is an altogether private affair that can be enacted only under certain conditions. *Measure for Measure*, when Isabella forgives Angelo at the end of the play, provides such an example:

Again, on the stage, forgiveness requires manifestation in action, that is to say, the one who forgives must be in a position to do something for the other which, if he were not forgiving, he would not do. This means that my enemy must be at my mercy; but, to the spirit of charity, it is irrelevant whether I am at my enemy's mercy or he at mine. So long as he is at my mercy, forgiveness is indistinguishable from judicial pardon...One may say that Isabella forgives

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<sup>23</sup> In his dissertation on Arendt and forgiveness, Steven Prescott Ferguson also identifies the exchange that Arendt has with Auden on the topic of forgiveness (136-41).

Angelo and the Duke pardons him. But, on the stage, this distinction is invisible because, there, power, justice, and love are all on the same side. (28)

The simultaneity of Isabella's forgiveness of Angelo and the Dukes' pardon of him leads us to ignore certain of the distinctions between forgiveness and legal pardon of which Auden reminds us: "The law cannot forgive, for the law has not been wronged, only broken; only persons can be wronged" (28-29). Clearly, Auden is responding to Arendt here, implying that she mistakes legal pardon for forgiveness in *The Human Condition* when she writes, "The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly" (241). But as Arendt takes note, when Auden distinguishes forgiveness from the act of pardon in his discussion of *Measure for Measure*, he also relegates forgiveness to the purview of the *individual* moral agent.

Quite the contrary, Arendt finds that morality, having been derived from the possibility of forgiveness, depends upon experiences that can only occur in the presence of others. Prior to Arendt, forgiveness had been paid scant attention by political theory, perhaps because its most influential articulation by Jesus of Nazareth is predominantly moral and religious. Under Arendt's theory of the political, however, forgiveness becomes a fundamental aspect of the political experience of plurality. In *The Human Condition*, first published in 1958, forgiveness appears as the necessary counterpart to her description of promising explored in Chapter 1: "The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose "sins" hang like Damocles' sword over every new

generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men" (237) If promising is one of the preconditions for the possibility of a shared political world that exists by virtue of action, the intersubjective capacity to forgive accommodates action in a plural world where, as we have seen in earlier chapters, action is categorically unpredictable and routinely subject to misfiring.

In her letter of response to Auden, Arendt is willing to grant Auden that she had indeed effaced the distinction between forgiveness and judicial pardon—"You are entirely right (and I was entirely wrong)"—in *The Human Condition*. But because Auden maintains that forgiveness is an internal, individual state that holds no relation to action, either that of the doer or the sufferer, he overlooks its plural character, the "the mutuality of the whole business" that "is essential for the act of forgiving," an act which is, *pace* Auden, always also an act of judgment (2). Further, Arendt questions whether forgiveness belongs "in the same category" as charity, implying that Auden has conflated the two. While *caritas* might be able to "carry a group of worldless people through the world, a group of saints or a group of criminals" it cannot be the basis for a world of rights and thus, unlike forgiveness, is not a political concept (*The Human Condition* 53).<sup>24</sup>

This analysis of *caritas* can be traced to Arendt's larger critique of the basic formulations of Western human rights discourse that she contends facilitated the creation of superfluous human beings. Rather than deriving from the historical

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<sup>24</sup> Isabella and Falstaff are Auden's examples of the concept of charity as it appears in Shakespeare.

development of political institutions that would support them, rights were understood to derive from the innate sovereign will of the individual, a sovereign will that is then supposed by consent to be transmuted into the general will of the sovereign state (*Origins* 291-99). Public freedom is only guaranteed by the sovereignty of this unanimous, general will, which paradoxically requires that the atomized individuals who constitute it uniformly possess natural instincts for both individual freedom and universal pity toward others. Such a vision of the innate dignity of natural man resembles something of what Lear sees in Edgar, “the thing itself” or “unaccommodated man” (3.4.95-96).

Here Arendt finds a particularly virulent reincarnation of a thought-train we explored in Chapter 1, wherein freedom is understood primarily as freedom of the will. The problem of widespread statelessness that emerged following the First World War, together with the terrible force with which the phenomenon deprived individuals of human rights, revealed that rights were anything but inalienable for those whom the general will does not recognize as part of the sovereign state. This incarnation of superfluousness, the phenomenon of worldlessness that occurs through the loss of belonging to a political community, should be understood as a necessary though not a sufficient condition for the entrance of another form of superfluousness, a totalitarian version that attempts to solve the problem of statelessness by first stripping large portions of the population of their rights and then by eliminating these populations through administrative killing operations. As if responding to *King Lear*, Arendt records that for those who had lost the protections of a common world to which they could belong and who then found themselves in the concentration

camps, “the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger” (300).

The historical experiences of banishment and slavery supply a kind of precedent for understanding the first kind of superfluosity, statelessness, but not that of the second, life in the concentration camp (*Origins* 444).<sup>25</sup> Paul Kottman has suggested how banishment in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, where the possibility of a durable political world replete with inheritable forms of social life has been called into question, not only complicates the pastoral form but also anticipates questions Arendt would raise about statelessness in the twentieth century (23-46). But in the Forest of Arden we also find a form of alternate sociality for the banished Duke and his former Lords, now his “co-mates and brothers in exile” (2.1.1), which recalls Arendt’s characterization of exile as that which “banishes only from one part of the world to another...also inhabited by human beings” (*Origins* 444). As with banishment, the search for precedents in the institution of slavery fails adequately to account for the experience of life and death in the concentration camps. Slavery, which we saw can approach the logic of the camp (in *Coriolanus*, when Brutus points to Martius’ desire to reduce the plebeian full capacity for political action to the life of

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<sup>25</sup> There has been no shortage of sociologists and political theorists who attempt to understand what Arendt took to be the unprecedented characteristics in Nazi concentration camps by means of existing precedents like slavery. For examples, see Bruno Bettelheim (39), Stanley Elkins (81-139), and John Stanley (200-3). For a comprehensive review of this material, see Peter Baehr, who attempts to define from a sociological perspective the value of the unprecedented as a concept, and helpfully, recognizes the necessity of judgment as a capacity for determining when the concept should be applied: “If we translate Arendt’s own philosophical formulations into a more analytical idiom, we might say that an event has a precedent if it is possible to identify another event that has taken place at an earlier time that is sufficiently similar to the later event in relevant respects. The point about invoking a preceding event is that it is better understood than the more recent event that has attracted our attention. An event is ‘unprecedented’ if it is impossible to identify an earlier event that is sufficiently comparable to the more recent event in relevant respects. Highlighting the term ‘sufficiently’ indicates that there will always be a judgment involved; highlighting the term “relevant” indicates that that judgment itself is inevitably affected by our theoretical purpose” (822).



labor: "...holding them / In human capacity and action / Of no more soul nor fitness for the world / Than camels in their war, who have their provand / Only for bearing burthens" (2.1.246-50), still harbors a utilitarian logic that values the slave in economic terms. The inmate of the camp, however, "has no price, because he can always be replaced; nobody knows to whom he belongs, because he is never seen. From the point of view of normal society he is absolutely superfluous, although in times of acute labor shortage...he is used for work" (*Origins* 444).

According to Arendt, widespread statelessness does, however, set the stage for totalitarianism; the mass, tempest-tossed populations that are thereby created develop a desire for consistency in the unstable political reality they inhabit, which can be supplied by a denial of that reality through the unthinking logicity of propaganda. Statelessness itself is enabled by intellectual frameworks that explicitly proclaim human rights founded on an unconditional, bare humanness while legally subordinating the possession of rights to the sovereign will of the nation state. Totalitarianism is made possible by such widespread anti-political thought-trains (and the material realities they create) that conceive of politics from the perspective of a single individual who, *ipso facto*, and paradoxically, is both the inherent possessor of rights and a sovereign will that can either grant or deny them to others. Arendt's concerns about Auden's unconditional view of forgiveness, which she labels *caritas*, are prompted by the tendency to think of the individual in this way, ignoring until too late how the public, plural world of freedom depends upon actions that support the living institutions of justice and law. Whereas charity in early Christianity signaled the loss of a durable, public world, private charity in the twentieth century served as

an inadequate stop-gap for the insufficiency of human rights that had been allotted merely by virtue of biological birth. Preserving the lives of some who had lost their rights to statelessness, it could not restore their access to a public world nor prevent totalitarian regimes from murdering others wholesale (296).

Arendt repeats in her letter to Auden an assertion from *The Human Condition* that directly responds to Auden's claims about forgiveness—both its independence from particular circumstances as well as its universal applicability: “If we are to trust in what ‘the Gospels assure us’ of, then the ‘command to forgive is not unconditional.’ Jesus said: ‘If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him’” (1). Arendt experiences the modern, liberal “temptation” to forgive, what she understands to be charity, as the corollary of the reluctance to judge and to understand, but it is this temptation she would “rather resist.” As she would later write in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: “Justice, but not mercy, is a matter of judgment, and about nothing does public opinion everywhere seem to be in happier agreement than that no one has the right to judge somebody else” (296).

Supplementing the earlier entry in her *Denktagebuch* where she concluded that Shakespearean representations of evil seemed unable to assist us in comprehending the phenomenon of superfluousness, Arendt again wonders if Auden’s example of transgression from Shakespeare—Angelo's attempt to use the power of his office to coerce Isabella into submitting to his sexual desire—is relevant to the forms of criminality she is interested in understanding: “Furthermore: the offenses which Jesus predicts are clearly beyond the power to forgive: ‘woe unto him through whom they come. It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast

into the sea—it were better for him that he were never born’...I was thinking of the absurd position of the judges during the Nuremburg trials who were confronted with crimes of such a magnitude that they transcended all possible punishment. But this surely is another matter” (1-2).

**Thoughtless Evil: *Macbeth* and *Richard III***  
**in Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *The Life of the Mind***

Arendt turns specifically to this other matter in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she again suggests by way of Shakespeare the limits of applying existing conceptual frameworks to understand the unprecedented in totalitarianism. Both here and elsewhere, Arendt develops strong analogies between the judgments made when witnessing trials and judgments made when witnessing plays. Like trials, plays offer particular case studies upon which we can practice our moral judgments.<sup>26</sup> Among the things which made it difficult to recognize what was novel about Eichmann’s crimes was the form the trial took, a show trial that Arendt claimed stripped the proceedings of the dramatic aspects inherent to criminal trials. According to Arendt the accused’s ability to judge ethically and to act on the basis of such judgments is a longstanding assumption for the particular types of judgments that are made at criminal trials. The agent as a concept is the very subject of a trial, just as the hero-actor is the subject of a play: “A trial resembles a play in that both begin and end

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<sup>26</sup> In *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*, Lorna Hutson argues that evidence evaluation in trials required competence in probability that can tell us a lot about how characters judge one another. Legal epistemology, in her telling, helped to give rise to the Renaissance theater—itsself deeply forensic.

with the doer, not with the victim” (9). Situated within the plural perspectival world where multiple agents are always performing individual actions, trials and their outcomes also retain the element of “irreducible risk” that is characteristic of political life (266). But certain factions at Eichmann’s trial attempted to eliminate this element, turning it into a “spectacle with prearranged results” (266). When his crimes were identified with the movement of a history of Jewish suffering, Eichmann failed to remain at “the center of the play” (266) and almost took on the appearance of an “innocent executor of some foreordained destiny” (19). According to Arendt, “In the center of a trial can only be the one who did—in this respect he is like the hero in the play—and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer” (9). But because Eichmann’s trial did not judge his particular deeds, “the trial never became a play”(9). Consequently, the legal and juridical concepts normally applied at criminal trials were not deployed and thus remained unchallenged, and the peculiar nature of Eichmann’s crimes and the difficult questions that totalitarianism posed for the possibility of judging moral agents were left largely unexplored.

Arendt attempts to revive those dramatic aspects of Eichmann's story that were invisible at his trial, as well as to understand how the forms of evil he participated in had weakened the conceptual frameworks that normally would have been deployed to evaluate him as a moral agent. Even her title, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, carries an association with the dramatic genre (i.e. *Oedipus at Colonus*), as if to frame the defendant as dramatic agent for the reader. The challenge Arendt lays out for herself in *Eichmann* is to turn the trial, to turn its vision of totalitarian

history, from a terrifying vision in which men appeared to have become mere cogs in the machine of history, back into a drama of individual actors, a play whose agents could again be judged for how they did or did not act. The supreme difficulty was to do so without disregarding the fundamentally new challenges that the experiences of totalitarianism posed for understanding moral agency.

Examples taken just from some of the Shakespearean criticism published around the time Arendt wrote *Eichmann* suggest that her concerns about the intellectual practice of “deducing the unprecedented from precedents” were still warranted. If Arendt encountered Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, released in English in 1964, she likely had sympathy for a project that sought to read Shakespeare with an eye to present political life; she would not, however, have been able to agree with Kott that *Macbeth* represents anything like the “Auschwitz experience” (82), “the huge steam-roller of history” that “has been put in motion and crushes everybody in turn” (77). And certainly, Arendt would have found troubling what another critic wrote in *Shakespeare Survey* of the evil in *Macbeth*: “...can we condemn our ancestors for an over-zealous belief in spiritual evil when we have Eichmann’s in our midst?” (McGee 55).<sup>27</sup> As Arendt definitively concludes in the second edition of the book, which appeared in 1964: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’ . . . Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking

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<sup>27</sup> While Eichmann’s participation in mass murder was quite different from either Hitler’s or Stalin’s, more recent comparisons between Macbeth and these totalitarian leaders in articles like Roland Mushat Frye’s, “Hitler, Stalin, and Shakespeare’s Macbeth: Modern Totalitarianism and Ancient Tyranny,” provide evidence that similar elisions of the unprecedented, in terms both of individual participants and totalitarianism as a regime form, are still in play. What Frye finds to be “Shakespeare’s profound understanding of human nature” (84) licenses wholesale equations that Arendt felt it important to avoid.

out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing” (287).

This assessment of Shakespeare’s representations of evil runs parallel to Arendt’s criticisms of some of the basic presuppositions concerning evil that undergird Western legal frameworks. First, she challenges the requirement that intention, the determination “to prove a villain,” is necessary for the commission of a crime (*Eichmann* 277). Second, she complicates the role that conscience plays in traditional notions of evil, critiquing its trustworthiness as an instrument for guiding moral action, but also its reliability when it came to showing up on the scene at all. Finally, she calls into question the value of understanding moral acts in terms of obedience, and immoral ones in terms of disobedience, an analogy that Eichmann used in his own defense. As he saw it: “[h]is guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue. His virtue had been abused by the Nazi leaders” (247). This viewpoint reached a height of terrifying absurdity when Eichmann, who claimed to have read Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, revealed his conviction that while obeying Hitler’s orders he had only abided by a Kantian notion of duty and therefore could not have done anything wrong (136). Arendt initially dismisses Eichmann’s comparison as outrageous, reminding us that Kantian practical reason requires every individual to make judgments consistent with the categorical imperative through the use of his or her own reason, rather than surrender that capacity of reasoning to others through unquestioning obedience. For Kant,

individual reason was the source of the law, but “in Eichmann’s household use of him, it was the will of the Fuhrer” (*Eichmann* 137).

Several years later, however, in a series of lectures she gave in 1965-66 at The New School for Social Research and the University of Chicago, Arendt appeared more concerned with Kant’s use of the word “law” in defining the categorical imperative, and explored what it might mean for the viability of his theory of moral action. Undoubtedly, the equation of morality with obedience and adherence to established laws has a long tradition. Expressed by Paul in *Romans* (“For when the Gentiles which have not the Lawe, do by nature the things *contained* in the Law, they having not the Lawe, are a Lawe unto themselves. Which shewe the effect of the Lawe written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts accusing one another, or excusing” [Romans 2:14-15]), it could also have been found by Shakespeare in contemporary writings devoted entirely to the conscience. In the most prominent example, Williams Perkin’s *Discourse of Conscience*, we find that “[t]he mind is the storehouse and keeper of al manner of rules and principles...It may be compared to a booke of law, in which are set down the penall statutes of the land. The dutie of it is to prefer and present to the conscience rules of divine law whereby it is to give judgment...” (84).

Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative significantly reconceptualized ethical action in several respects, but primarily by opposing accounts of moral action as the pursuit of the good, whether of happiness or utility, to his formulation of *a priori* reason that, independent of experience, could immanently determine a universal moral law unbound by either individual desires or the calculation of

particular ends. Despite these theoretical innovations, in so categorizing ethical life as the subordination of individual desire to a moral "law," Arendt claims that Kant reintroduces "the concept of obedience, through a back door as it were" (*Responsibility and Judgment* 72). Under Kant's notion of the categorical imperative, the conscience obliges the individual to obey the law of any rule that she judges to be universalizable. If one makes a promise while secretly intending to break it, for instance, one is depending upon the continued existence of the normative practices of promise-making and -keeping in order to exploit them. Willing both that promising exists and that it does not exist, the individual universalizes two contradictory propositions: that we should keep the promises we make to others *and* that we should break those promises when they become inconvenient to keep. If promising as a social practice is to exist at all, keeping promises that one makes becomes a categorical imperative, a universal rule that one ought to follow.

In the figure of Macbeth, who unlike Eichmann does possess identifiable motives for committing murder and certainly intends the murder he commits, I would argue that we also find an understanding of morality as obedience to a universal law. Furthermore, Macbeth's interpretation of the moral conflict he experiences near the beginning of the play seems to anticipate and embody Kant's description of the categorical imperative. For as he contemplates the murder of Duncan, he articulates the standard, or universal, against which his individual desires are opposed:

He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,



Who should against his murderer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. (1.7.12-16)

Here Macbeth's judgment about the murder he intends relies on established standards and rules; one *ought not* to murder one's king or kinsman, one *ought not* to murder a guest. Moreover, the very idea of kingship depends upon subjects not murdering their king; when Macbeth pursues the crown through the murder of Duncan, he makes an exception in his own case regarding the institution upon which he plans to rely for his own future existence. And while his individual situation may supply him with motives for murdering Duncan, this does not entirely eliminate the obligation he feels to abide by a universal moral law that commands him not to murder.<sup>28</sup>

But what lies behind this form of morality that Macbeth experiences here and that Kant continues the tradition of describing as a "law" that compels obedience? Arendt suggests that the unreliability of the will as an executor of reason—the disjunction between knowledge of the good and the will to perform it—so disturbed Kant that he supplemented rational principles with an obligatory character. Under this interpretation, the imperative in Kant's moral law harbors what all forms of the "Thou shalt" imply: the threat of retribution, whether "by an avenging God or by the consent of the community, or by conscience, which is the threat of self-punishment which we commonly call repentance" (78).

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<sup>28</sup> This accords with what Kant claims about the ineliminable quality of the moral law in *Religion within the Limits of Human Reason Alone*: "Man (even the most wicked) does not, under any maxim whatsoever, repudiate the moral law in the manner of a rebel (renouncing obedience to it). The law, rather, *forces itself* (dringt sich) *upon him irresistibly by virtue of his moral predisposition*; and were no other incentive working in opposition, he would adopt the law into his supreme maxim as the sufficient determining ground of his will; that is, he would be morally good. But by virtue of an equally innocent natural predisposition he depends upon the incentives (*Triebfedern*) of his sensuous nature and adopts them also (in accordance with the subjective principle of self-love) into his maxim" (31).

And judging by the emphatic underlining of a passage in Arendt's copy of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, the juridical metaphors that Kant uses to describe the operation of the conscience were of particular interest to her as well: "the man who accuses and judges himself in conscience must think of himself as a twofold personage, a doubled self who, on the one hand, has to stand in fear and trembling at the bar of the tribunal which is yet entrusted to him, but who, on the other hand, must himself administer the duty of judge which he holds from inborn authority" (104, Arendt's copy).<sup>29</sup> Macbeth describes the drama of his life in similar terms, anticipating the psychic punishments his conscience will levy upon him when one half of him stands in judgment over the actions of the other:

...But in these cases,  
We still have judgment here; that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague th' inventor: this even-handed Justice  
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice  
To our own lips. (1.7.7-12)

The particular imperatives mentioned by Macbeth serve as a form of standing moral law that he feels bound to obey. When he disregards what he takes for universal laws in favor of individual motive and desire, he appears to suffer from the impact of this violation. Consequently, the play does not immediately alert us to any of the

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<sup>29</sup> See also Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*: "The judicial pronouncements of that wondrous power in us that we call conscience are also in perfect agreement with this. Let a human being use what art he wants in order to paint to himself a remembered unlawful behavior as an unintentional oversight—as a mere carelessness, which one can never avoid entirely, and thus as something which was carried away by the stream of natural necessity—and to declare himself innocent of it; he nonetheless finds that the lawyer who speaks in his favor can in no way silence the prosecutor in him, if only he is conscious that at the time when committed the wrong he was in his sense, i.e. had the use of his freedom" (124-25).

problems with the Kantian framework for understanding morality or with the traditional understanding of conscience that the case of Eichmann makes visible.<sup>30</sup> According to Arendt, the events of the Holocaust demonstrated that the notion of morality as grounded in rule-bound behavior but also in a duty to will the categorical imperative was ill-equipped to supply reliable guideposts for moral action in a political world where the law commanded evil rather than forbade it. Unlike the rules of hospitality and respect for kingship that govern Macbeth's conscience, in the totalitarian state, "there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed" (295). And any reliance that Eichmann might have had on rule-bound behavior, his unquestioning obedience to the will of the Fuhrer, seems only to have freed him from the pangs of conscience all the more when he was ordered to participate in mass murder.<sup>31</sup> In complying with

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<sup>30</sup> As A. E. Stoll describes it, "Macbeth and Lady Macbeth take the path of willfully ignoring conscience as they will their sworn king, and in the aftermath of that action they experience conscience redounding upon them" (132). This play's focus on the phenomenon of conscience suggested to certain critics contemporary with Arendt, Eugene Waith, for example, that Macbeth's "deliberate decision, against the dictates of his better judgment... is one of the most important manifestations of the evil which dominates the entire play" (267). In one of the few articles that attempts to account for Arendt's juxtaposition of Eichmann with Macbeth, J. Gregory Keller contends that while Macbeth initially exemplifies Arendt's notion of the thinker who, in dialogue with himself, makes moral judgments regarding his intentions and who thereby is persuaded to refrain from murdering Duncan, the play ultimately reveals Macbeth to be "more like than unlike Eichmann, at least in the ease with which he is persuaded that the evil deed is obviously the right one," when he leaves thinking alone to be swayed by the arguments of Lady Macbeth (41). While Keller's discussion of Macbeth is adequate as an illustration of Arendt's consideration of the relation between thinking and moral judgments, it neglects Arendt's articulation of what was fundamentally different about Eichmann's case, as this chapter will go on to explore: namely, that he never appears to have thought about what he did, that the laws of conscience in the Nazi regime actually commanded murder rather than forbade it, and that the terror imposed by totalitarianism intruded upon precisely the private spaces of thought where such judgments in *Macbeth* take place.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt's interpretation of Kant's ethical theory has not been without influence, even among scholars who do not wholly agree with her assessment. Addressing how Arendt's Eichmann problematizes the equation of dutiful action with morality, Samuel Kerstein draws an example from *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, in which Kant argues that a religious inquisitor simply could not execute a heretic while passing his two-fold test for moral permissibility; Kant is convinced that in so doing such a person could neither have acted from duty (rather than individual desire), nor earnestly reflected on the action and judged it to have moral worth. While Kerstein maintains, contra Arendt, that such a possibility is unlikely, he is unconvinced by Kant that it is impossible: "Nevertheless, I cannot prove it

the law, Eichmann was sustained by its deadening reliability as a compass of social normativity, and so did not have to “fall back upon his ‘conscience,’” as Arendt puts it (293).<sup>32</sup>

Arendt is not the first thinker to suggest by way of Shakespeare the limitations of Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative. In his own reading of *Macbeth*, what Hegel objects to in Kant’s moral theory is that its logic of command and obey affords primacy to abstract universal principles and turns other individuals into mere opportunities for actualizing moral dutifulness, shifting our focus away from what Hegel takes to be the experientially prior inter-subjective relations of communal life that are either upheld or disrupted by the particular actions of individuals. Moreover, it preserves the master-slave political relation through yet another iteration of freedom as freedom of the will, internalizing with it the understanding of all moral action as the conquest of biological desire through a controlling rationality. By virtue of this uncompromising ratiocination, the Kantian version of morality does not imply any need to consider the *perspectives* of others or to grapple with the inter-subjective dilemmas for moral action that human plurality presents. In this sense, Arendt agrees

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to be impossible that, in performing an odious action, someone might fulfill these two conditions, thereby giving the action moral worth. Acknowledging the possibility of odious actions having moral worth is painful. Yet I see no way of avoiding it while, at the same time, defending a plausible reconstruction of Kant’s views” (546-47).

<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, Arendt identifies the recurrent analogy of moral action as obedience so that she can dispense with it entirely: “Even in a strictly bureaucratic organization, with its fixed hierarchical order, it would make much more sense to look upon the functioning of the “cogs” and wheels in terms of overall support for a common enterprise than in our usual terms of obedience to superiors. If I obey the laws of the land, I actually support its constitution, as becomes glaringly obvious in the case of revolutionists and rebels who disobey because they have withdrawn this tacit consent. . .there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters. . .Thus the question that should have been addressed to those like Adolf Eichmann who participated in state-sanctioned genocide was not, ‘Why did you obey?’ but rather, ‘Why did you *support*?’” (*Responsibility and Judgment* 47- 48).

with Hegel: “in Kant the question What ought I to do? concerns the conduct of the self in its independence from others” (19 *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*).<sup>33</sup>

If with Kant moral life still revolves around the cultivation of a good will, in Hegel there is a transition to an ethical life where the conscience, as the Spirit of the rational state, pursues the freedom of the community (Bates 202). We might apply Hegel’s suggestion to Shakespeare’s play by observing that in addition to the categorical imperative which subsumes the particular case under a universal law, Macbeth also points to Duncan as an individual who is loved by a community, and whose bonds with other individuals would seem not merely to supplement a law that commands he not be harmed but also to preclude the need for law as a guide to ethical life:<sup>34</sup>

Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, this his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d, against

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<sup>33</sup> Here, at least, some Arendtian scholars have taken issue with Arendt’s perspective on Kant’s practical philosophy. Seyla Benhabib argues that where Arendt may be right to identify a solipsistic element in Kant’s theory of pure practical reason (in its reliance on individual judgment rather than the perspectives of others in making a determination regarding the moral worth of an action), Arendt’s own lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* promote reflective judgment’s capacity to enable an “enlarged mentality” that takes into consideration the subject positions of multiple persons. For Benhabib, this suggests the possibility that reflective judgments could resolve Arendt’s concerns regarding the isolated perspective of the categorical imperative. A connection between Kant’s second and third *Critiques* might be established, where the communicability of reflective aesthetic judgments would help free individuals from “subjective private conditions” that “lack all validity in the public realm,” acting as a deliberative supplement to the determinative judgment of the categorical imperative (132-40). I must agree with Dana Villa, however, that this strategy relies on public speech as a means toward a more universal rationality rather than as an end in itself, thereby dispensing with the irreducibly plural and often agonistic perspectives inherent to Arendt’s project in favor of a more Habermasian one in which consensus is the end of reflective judgments (*Arendt and Heidegger* 70-71).

<sup>34</sup> J. M. Bernstein suggests that what Hegel attempts vis-à-vis his rejection of Kantian morality “involves a general shift of orientation, a changing of the topic of morality from the question of law and obedience, vertical morality, to the quality and nature of our relationship with one another, horizontal morality” (421).

The deep damnation of his taking off;  
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe...  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye (1.7.16-24)

In Hegel's vision of ethical life, an individual's self-regard is dependent upon her relations with others; this dependence sets in motion a causality whereby actions that harm or disrupt those relations redound upon victim and actor alike. The actor suffers not because of a contradiction between the rules an individual judges to be universally valid and the actions she chooses to undertake but because the social fabric that binds the self to a community is the same fabric that generates the self's relation to itself. In the essay "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," Hegel finds Macbeth paradigmatic of the consciousness that, while attempting to eliminate an enemy by killing him, is nevertheless plagued by the memory of that other through the murderous model of relating to the self and to others that has thereby been produced:

The illusion of trespass, its belief that it destroys the other's life and thinks itself enlarged thereby, is dissipated by the fact that the disembodied spirit of the injured life comes on the scene against the trespass, just as Banquo who came as a friend to Macbeth was not blotted out when he was murdered but immediately thereafter took his seat, not as a guest at the feast, but as an evil spirit. The trespasser intended to have to do with another's life, but he has only destroyed his own, for life is not different from life, since life dwells in the single Godhead. In his arrogance he has destroyed indeed, but only the friendliness of life; he has perverted life into an enemy. (229)

In defining Macbeth's act as the willful imposition of his particular desires against the universal life of Spirit, Hegel seems in some measure to agree with Kant as to what constitutes the essence of evil. And yet, while the abstract, universal law of individual morality *may* threaten before the act, Hegel's vision of evil suggests that transgression only retroactively makes the self conscious of the universal embodied life of which it was a part and from which it has subsequently cut itself off. Despite both Macbeth's anticipatory wish about the crime—"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (1.7.1-2)—and Lady Macbeth's assertions once it has been committed—"Things without all remedy / Should be without regard: what's done is done" (3.2.11-12)—the murders Macbeth commits make the world permanently inhospitable for him. "Macbeth doth murder sleep" (2.2.35), staining himself with the guilt of an ineradicable transgression, a guilt that seems potent enough to darken the natural world with the murdered's blood: "Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red" (2.2.60-62). As if nostalgically recalling a time before law when the dead did not intimidate the living, Macbeth even seems to recognize a connection between the establishment of political institutions and the uncanny resurrection of the victims of violence through the social memory of conscience:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,  
Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal;  
Ay, and since too, murders have been perform'd  
Too terrible for the ear: the time has been,  
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,

And there an end; but now, they rise again,  
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools. (3.4.74-81)

According to Hegel, then, there is something potentially redemptive about crime; it is only through transgression that self-consciousness becomes aware of its dependence upon others for its own identity, the knowledge of which the guilty conscience is but a symptom. If knowledge of an ethical life emerges in the wake of its violation, crime is the progenitor of conscience and is thereby productive of an awareness of the primacy of political relations (J. M. Bernstein 427). But is this necessarily so? What might happen when ethical norms, when Hegel's Spirit, conditions individuals not to weep for the dead, but to eradicate their memory? What happens to conscience when there is no longer a prohibition against murder but an injunction to carry it out on a massive scale? For Arendt, totalitarianism presents a novel problem for modernity, for through it the normative prohibition against murder present in all previous life-worlds was transformed into an injunction. "Thou shalt not kill" effectively became "thou shalt kill" (*Eichmann* 150). Hegel's perspective on *Macbeth*, while it anticipates some of Arendt's observations regarding the problems of relying on the Kantian categorical imperative in situations where no precedent exists, is of limited use once totalitarianism emerges.

Just as comparisons with earlier regime forms signify a failure to recognize the novelty of totalitarianism, the search for precedents in one individual murdering another fails adequately to account for the experience of life and death in the concentration camps. The twentieth century perspective Arendt articulates offers a



direct challenge to the dialectical notion of conscience that Hegel identifies in *Macbeth*, where the limit case for evil remains the murder of one individual by another:

The murderer who kills a man—a man who has to die anyway—still moves within the realm of life and death familiar to us; both have indeed a necessary connection on which the dialectic is founded, even if it is not always conscious of it. The murderer leaves a corpse behind and does not pretend that his victim has never existed; if he wipes out any traces, they are those of his own identity, and not the memory and grief of the persons who loved his victim; he destroys a life, but he does not destroy the fact of existence itself. (*Origins* 442).

But as Arendt goes on to ask, “What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?” (441). Under the “total terror” of totalitarianism the eradication of the memory of victims no longer remains a mere desire, as it proves to be in *Macbeth*, but a “skillfully manufactured unreality” that treats the inmates of concentration camps as if they had never even been born (445). Here murder is transformed into a medical procedure that reduces the deliberate elimination of life into something resembling a “perfectly normal measure” (445).<sup>35</sup>

However many deaths *Macbeth* accumulates responsibility for over the course of the play, murder never achieves the status of anything approaching normality. One of the fundamental ideological preconditions for totalitarianism is a belief that,

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<sup>35</sup> Historical studies increasingly support this assessment; in one of the first prominent histories of “everyday life” during the Third Reich, Christopher R. Browning focuses on a single German police battalion, revealing the extent to which “the criminal policies of the regime inescapably permeated everyday existence...mass murder and routine had become one. Normality itself had become exceedingly abnormal” (xvii).

because all things are possible, the mass production of corpses can be taken for a natural process of history. What Macbeth seeks to achieve seems neither possible to others (as Caithness puts it: "He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause / Within the belt of rule" [5.2.15-16]) nor natural. Quite the contrary, the Doctor suggests it will turn nature itself against him: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.68-69). In *Macbeth*, the enduring memory of the murdered, as Hegel demonstrates, is never in question. But whereas the tortured conscience of Macbeth prevents him from forgetting what he has done, Eichmann is among what Arendt calls the "greatest evildoers," "those who don't remember because they have never given thought to the matter, and, without remembrance, nothing can hold them back" (95).

One the most jarring revelations for Arendt regarding how the conscience had gone horribly awry as a guidepost for ethical action was that a near identity had been achieved between morality—understood as either obedience to duty (Kant's categorical imperative) or as inter-subjective, communal practices (Hegel's Spirit)—and social normativity, which implied that moral life bears an uncomfortable resemblance to habit:

...it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of *mores*, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people. How strange and frightening it suddenly appeared that the very terms we use to designate these things—"morality," with its Latin origin, and "ethics," with its Greek origin—

should never have meant more than usages and habits... What had happened?  
Did we finally awake from a dream?" (50)<sup>36</sup>

Given this realization, Arendt draws the further conclusion that feelings of guilt cannot be relied upon as a barometer for moral conduct.<sup>37</sup> While guilt is undeniable as a social phenomena—"people *feel* guilty or feel innocent"—it is most often aroused as the result of contradictory social practices, "between old habits and new commands" (*Responsibility and Judgment* 107): 'once killing or whatever the "new morality" demands has become a habit and is accepted by everyone, the same man will feel guilty if he does not conform. In other words, these feelings indicate conformity and nonconformity, they don't indicate morality' (107). Shakespeare

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<sup>36</sup> Christopher Browning's description of the composition of Reserve Police Battalion 101—working-class men from Hamburg with an average age of thirty-nine, none of whom were members of the SS—offers a case-study of this phenomenon: "By virtue of their age...[t]hese were men who had known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis. Most came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least nazified cities in Germany, and the majority came from a social class that had been anti-Nazi in its political culture. These men would not seem to have been a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers on behalf of the Nazi vision of a racial utopia free of Jews" (48). When offered the opportunity to decline participation in the first mass shooting, several men did refuse to participate, but this became more rare as time went on; in testimony given several decades later, many of the men seemed to struggle with the notion of choice: "It was a different time and place, as if they had been on another political planet, and the political values and vocabularies of the 1960s were useless in explaining the situation they found themselves in 1942" (72). Supporting Arendt's claim about the thoughtlessness with which the mass killings were undertaken, one participant testified: "Truthfully I must say that at the time we didn't reflect about it at all. Only years later did any of us become truly conscious of what had happened then... Only later did it first occur to me that it had not been right" (72).

<sup>37</sup> As a corollary, Arendt suggests that temptation is no more reliable an indicator of the morality of an action: "Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted not to murder, not to rob, not to let their neighbors go off to their doom... and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefitting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation" (*Eichmann* 150). This can be read as yet another criticism of Kant's categorical imperative (or another example of how *Macbeth* does not provide us with a comprehensive view of the possibilities of evil), which assumes that given an opposition between a sense of duty or respect for the law and desire or inclination, morality will fall on the side of duty and against individual desire. Arendt points out that Himmler's Nazi propaganda specifically opposed a sense of dutifulness to desires that resisted killing: "...it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!" (105)

presents a marginal example of this type of conflict in *Macbeth*, when Lady Macbeth exploits the role that a readiness to kill plays in the masculine identity of the Scottish warrior culture by pitting it against the competing role of fidelity to kingship: “When you durst do it, then you were a man...Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both. / They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / Does unmake you” (1.7.49-54). Under the influence of these challenges, Macbeth gradually shifts from refusing the enterprise wholesale (“We will proceed no further in this business” [1.7.31]) to defending his position as a manifestation of a proper form of maleness (“Pr’ythee peace. / I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more, is none” [1.7.45-47]) to yielding to the competing claim on his masculinity that Lady Macbeth taunts him with (“Bring forth men-children only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males...I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” [1.7.73-81]). If this evolution makes it plausible that Macbeth has experienced a degree of guilt for temporarily hesitating to kill Duncan, can we refuse to entertain the possibility that Eichmann anticipated a guilty conscience would result if he did not comply with the entire ruling regime’s demand that he support state-sanctioned murder?: “[A]s for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to [do]? - to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care” (*Eichmann* 25).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Coppelia Kahn, in *Man’s Estate*, highlights this aspect of Macbeth, arguing that “Macbeth’s rhetoric shows how desperate he is to make himself into his wife’s kind of man, if only in words, and how he lacks any confidence in himself as a moral being” (182).

Arendt seems to have felt the weight of her exploration of these deformations and inversions regarding conceptions of conscience that we inherit from Shakespeare. She more fully considers the activity of thinking and its relation to moral action in *The Life of the Mind*. In the introduction, she repeats her assertion that Shakespearean villains represent a traditional picture of evil insofar as they communicate a self-awareness of the ills they pursue or imply the existence of individual motives—motives which may or may not be opaque to the audience or to the characters themselves: “Evil men, we are told, act out of envy; this may be resentment at not having turned out well through no fault of their own (Richard III)...Or they may be prompted by weakness (Macbeth). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred wickedness feels for sheer goodness (Iago’s ‘I hate the Moor; my cause is hatred’ ...)” (3-4).<sup>39</sup> In relation to the capacity for thought, Richard III is most prominently set against Eichmann’s much less reflective participation in evil acts:

It was this absence of thinking—which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we hardly have the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think—that awakened my interest. Is evil-doing (the sins of omission, as well as the sins of commission) possible in default of not just “base motives” (as the law calls them) but of any motives whatever, of any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being “determined to prove a villain,” *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? (4-5)

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<sup>39</sup> See also Arendt’s entry in her *Denktagebuch* from February, 1966 (653-54).

In *Macbeth*, we have a representation of wickedness, of the person who must overcome the dictates of conscience in order to accomplish what he has in his mind to do. But what of Eichmann, whom Arendt suspected of being thoughtless, of being unfamiliar with the “silent intercourse” of thought. Although I agree with Arendt that the possibility of an Eichmann is not something for which our existing concepts have prepared us to comprehend—and that Macbeth and Eichmann largely represent two different paradigms of evil—I suggested above how Shakespeare is nevertheless able to provide a liminal case of morality as conformity; Macbeth is faced with two sets of rules which, brought into conflict with one another, almost mechanically induce guilt merely because both cannot simultaneously be obeyed. And ultimately Arendt, too, found Shakespeare’s representations of evil to contain more than merely a distillation of traditional concepts. In the conclusion to the lectures that she dedicated to Auden, “Thinking and Moral Considerations”—a dedication which is perhaps signaled more intimately by the exploration of Shakespeare that became the conclusion to the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* (“Thinking”)—Arendt ultimately credits *Richard III* with acknowledging the muted quality of the conscience that can occur when we are in the presence of others.<sup>40</sup> First, she points to a moment in the play that seems to embody Kant’s vision of a self standing before its own internal tribunal. Waking from dreams that have been haunted by the ghosts of his many victims, ghosts who remind him in turn of the particular crimes he has committed against them, Richard is affected by the condition of plurality of which the ghosts give testimony, by a self that cannot seem to escape its self-identity as murderer, and by the principled conviction that all murderers must be revenged:

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<sup>40</sup> “Thinking and Moral Considerations” was prepared as a lecture but published as an article in 1971.

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by:  
Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.  
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:  
Then fly: what! From myself? Great reason, why:  
Lest I revenge. What! myself upon myself?  
Alack! I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
That I myself have done unto myself?  
O! no: alas! I rather hate myself  
For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.  
Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.  
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;  
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree;  
All several sins, all used in each degree,  
Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!'(5.3.182-99)

While in solitude, Richard must keep company with himself; but as Arendt observes, this very condition can produce a memory or reminder of plurality: “[n]othing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than...this *duality* in myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (185). In Arendt’s consideration of

political friendship that I explored in the previous chapter, we found that dialogue with others is logically prior to the dialogue with the self: “I first talk with others before I talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that I can conduct a dialogue with myself as well” (189). The dialogue that Richard has with himself reveals an inner difference, a psychic two-in-one that cannot live with itself because in violating the conditions of plurality it has opposed itself to the conditions of its own possibility, which are embodied by the dialogue of the self with the self. Instead of finding “love” for the self for what the will has been able to achieve on behalf of itself, he finds self-loathing for “hateful deeds.”

Yet however powerfully affected Richard seems by the experience of his self-reflection, the sentence he passes on himself is soon forgotten. He remains under the sway of his conscience only so long as he is alone. When he returns to the company of others, such self-laceration comes to an end and "conscience" becomes "but a word that cowards use, / Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe...." (5.3.309-10).

Shakespeare continues to make use of the word conscience, but as Arendt observes, he does not in this instance “use it here in the accustomed way,” as an ever-present influence on the moral self: “Conscience, as we understand it in legal or moral matters, is supposedly always present within us, just like consciousness. And this conscience is supposed to tell us what to do and what to repent; before it became the *lumen natural* or Kant’s practical reason, it was the voice of God” (190). In *Richard III*, Shakespeare, however, disrupts the association of conscience with the ubiquitous subjective phenomena known as consciousness. In making us aware of these phenomena as distinct, Shakespeare is performing the kind of thinking Arendt



defines in her *Denktagebuch*: “All thought starts and departs from everyday speech. The need to think arises whenever we find that words taken in their ordinary sense are obscuring rather than revealing. The process of clarification that occurs in the thinking process comes about through distinctions” (770). Turning to the language of the murderers in the first act of the play, Arendt is struck by the way they describe conscience, as something absent that is feared only in anticipation of its appearance: “What if it come to thee again?” the First Murderer asks (1.4.132). There is, however, nothing necessary about this proleptic fear, dependent as it is on a habit of keeping company with one’s self:

Shakespeare’s murderer says: “Every man that means to live well endeavors...to live without it,” and success in that comes easy because all he has to do is never start the soundless solitary dialogue we call “thinking,” never go home and examine things. This is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, as it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment. Bad people—Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding—are *not* “full of regrets.” (191).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Marjorie Garber makes a similar observation about the meaning of the word conscience in *Richard III*: “Conscience in *Richard III* is predominantly a moral term, having its modern meaning of ‘sense of duty’ or ‘remorse.’ When Richard associates conscience with cowardice, he is talking about feelings of guilt and responsibility, essentially societal values internalized into a moral system. But ‘conscience’ in Shakespeare’s time also carried the primary meaning of ‘consciousness.’” (89).

Arendt thus reads Shakespeare's *Richard III* from a dual perspective. In one sense, Eichmann is utterly unlike Richard. While in the service of a political regime that sought to eradicate entire populations, it is entirely possible that he never intended "to prove a villain." And he need not have been a hypocrite; what he pursued was legal and thus there was no necessary disjunction between public appearance and private intent. Insofar as he relied on the public law as a guide for moral action, he may never have considered the relation between his genocidal actions and the ineradicable fact of human plurality.

And yet we also find Shakespeare already disrupting the equation of conscience with consciousness. What appears as a marginal case of evil in *Richard III*—the villain who at moments seems to have left behind the reflective capacity of the self and its side effect, conscience—becomes something much closer to the norm with Eichmann. Arendt implies that Eichmann's ability to think about what he was doing was further inhibited because totalitarianism reduced to the maximum extent possible the private space required to make thinking possible. Rather than solitude, which enables the self to confront itself, totalitarianism instead produced loneliness, the experience of being utterly alone in the world. Even as it isolates the self from other individuals and limits exposure to their unique perspectives, the physical and ideological violence of totalitarianism unifies the self through a relentless identification of the individual with the law of the land. Ultimately, this externalized identity limits the self's natural propensity to divide into the critical plurality found in solitude, an experience that enables thinking from the perspective of others.

## Afterword

The perspectival potential of the dramatic genre made manifest by Shakespeare has already been explored at length and in many forms elsewhere. Theodore Levin, the director of my dissertation, wrote some years ago regarding the perplexities that emerge whenever one attempts to neatly subsume the figure of William Shakespeare beneath a single categorical, early modern subject position, based upon the works that he composed:

Surely it has not been easy to say just what sort of agent Shakespeare conceived of himself as or was constituted as in his time. For every argument enlisting him among the subversives or anti-providentialists of the period we find an argument for the patriarchal bard or for the keeper of the great chain. Yet it seems clear that he was in many ways an interhierarchical figure: capitalist and artist, bourgeois and artisan, shareholder and actor, urban and provincial. He is perhaps less this or that than a stage for contestation and intermixing. A heteroglot Bottom, Falstaff, or Cleopatra better captures the Shakespeare function than does any univocal voicing. (“Negotiation and New Historicism” 487)

As Levin here hints, heterogeneous voices ripple ever outward, from something inherent in the works themselves to the critical responses they elicit. Throughout the writing of this dissertation, my own encounters with the infinite variety of arguments that Shakespearean critics have crafted has both been an instructive lesson in my own

finitude and testament to the fact of plurality. Indeed, some critical responses to Shakespeare stand as monuments to the power of young scholars in particular, those newcomers who (often in the face of strong opposition from more firmly established academics) reconsider what it means to read these plays and poems, and who in so doing disrupt prevailing interpretive modes by introducing novel ones that will coexist alongside them.

Had *Arendt and Shakespeare* recurred to the Shakespearean corpus merely as evidence of our experience of plurality, however, it would perhaps have been too obvious and commonplace a topic to alone have merited yet another extended treatment. The other claim with which I began is that Shakespeare traffics not merely with the fact of plurality but also with some carefully crafted tools—the technologies of philosophical thought—that have developed, in concert with political violence, to suppress and deny plurality. The chapters of this dissertation have thus drawn attention to the pressure Shakespeare exerts on the conceptual elisions and contradictions that have invaded our political language. The very durability of terms like freedom, action, and friendship demonstrates their seemingly ineradicable significance while belying their susceptibility to deformations and conflations that our habitual thought-trains conceal but which critical thought, as Arendt suggests and Shakespeare demonstrates, can make visible.

*Lucrece*, for example, offered us a view of public freedom through a poetic palimpsest of political philosophy, a freedom overwritten but not completely obscured by freedom understood as freedom of the will. The poem's vision of authorship exemplifies the translation of political freedom, whose *condicio sine qua*

*non* is non-sovereignty among others, into a freedom identified with sovereignty, whose impossible ideal is absolute control over individual soul, audience, and end results. The political consequences of our substitution of making for acting are thus perhaps already detectable through the analogy we find between Lucrece's Christian vision of freedom and Tarquin's sovereign will. In *Coriolanus*, however, these consequences are made explicit, with the shift from the earlier poem's meditations on individual agency to a play centered on the fate of the polis. When Menenius deploys political philosophy and its craftsman-like vision of the state as a made object with pre-defined ends, he excludes from the space of freedom a plurality, ironically represented in the play by the plebeian craftsmen. Against the backdrop of the plebeian rebellion and its unsuccessful containment by such organic fables of the political, the play thinks through the fate of citizenship, as the momentary republican impulses of the plebeians give way to a more bourgeois-like, mercantile behavior that better represents the dominant practices of the modern citizen. *Hamlet* tentatively postulates friendship both as the individual's escape route from the interference of political sovereignty and as its ticket to a private sovereignty, thereby creating a kind of firewall that at once separates and reinforces the two forms of sovereignty that we found, respectively, in *Lucrece* and *Coriolanus*. As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, these thought-trains are part of a constellation of conceptual and material developments that serve to de-politicize and atomize citizenries. If individuals are "freed" from politics by modern, representative democracy—and so become sovereign individuals deciding for themselves (deciding primarily what

career to pursue)—the sovereign who decides on the political is all the more “freed” from the meddling interference of active, publically-oriented citizens.

It has not been my intention here to discuss all or even most of Shakespeare’s works as examples of the “poetic thinking” that Arendt claims has the power to reveal the sedimentary conceptions of politics we have inherited and their impact on present political thought and action. Nevertheless, if my arguments are found persuasive, the notion that the corpus still serves as exemplar and testing ground for political thought may merit further investigation, investigation which would consider carefully our own rapidly evolving political reality. My final chapter considered Arendt’s evaluation of a form of political evil that enabled the Holocaust, in relation to a cultural inheritance regarding moral agency that was significantly influenced by Shakespeare’s dramaturgy, and which, I have argued with Arendt, may not fully have prepared us to understand the unprecedented array of conceptual and material ideologies which insulate individuals from their responsibilities as citizens in a shared political world. Because I have maintained a focus on the history of political theory that confronted Arendt and Shakespeare as thinkers in their own times, I have not attended to our own political moment in significant detail. Here I will only offer brief remarks as to why the panoply of political concepts that crystallized with the material realities of totalitarianism have not lost their significance or danger for us.

It was Arendt herself who seems to have anticipated that liberalism would not turn out to be an antidote for the novel forms of political evil that emerged with totalitarianism: “It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism

has become a thing of the past” (*Origins* 460). Sheldon Wolin’s book *Democracy Incorporated* offers a corresponding vision of the contemporary American political situation, coining the term “inverted totalitarianism” to describe a regime that unlike totalitarianism proper—which is characterized by the perpetual mobilization of its citizens through continuous regime changes—relies upon a politically disengaged citizenry to undermine political institutions without revolution, largely through legislative lobbying and unlimited campaign contributions. Under cover of furthering a fiscal responsibility that benefits all, for example, the New Deal’s social agenda—which offered a vision for a more equitable economy but also set into motion an unprecedented apparatus of state power—is quietly being dismantled with cuts to programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), while the accrued power of the Federal government is left intact to expand the role of military contractors as well as the legally sanctioned leverage that multinational corporations hold over both “guest” workers and increasingly vulnerable citizens (x-xv).

These strategies recall my discussion of the moment in *Coriolanus* when the citizens question whether they have indeed been awarded “voices” in the marketplace ritual. If there is revolutionary power in holding public institutions to their promises when they do not transform those promises into political realities, as the citizens do when they claim their right to refuse Martius their voices for consul, so too there is counter-revolutionary violence in undermining political principles (by exerting undue influence over legislative and regulatory activities) without overturning entire legal structures or implementing an abrupt regime change. In contrast with totalitarianism, today the counter-revolutionary tactic *par excellence* is claiming fealty to a

constitution that promises to protect individual liberties and rights, while actively undermining the institutions that afford those same protections.

Widespread indifference to the political world almost certainly has been shaped by the dominant, individualistic theories of the political which I explored in detail throughout this dissertation, but apathy is also, increasingly, a despairing response to the commonplace awareness that voting, the signature political act of representative democracy, has become almost meaningless amid the overwhelming influence that corporate lobbyists and media conglomerates exert on the legislative process, metastasizing inequalities of power and widening the gap between elected representatives and ordinary citizens. The opening scene of Ralph Fiennes's 2011 film version of *Coriolanus* refigures elements of the play to illustrate the widespread alienation from political participation that coordinated networks of technology, corporate capital, and state powers actively enforce today. The symbiosis of the corporate media, the affluent and the state is signaled by the appearance of Senator Menenius, who no longer visits the plebeians in person and who instead delivers his arguments from a *Fidelis TV* studio. As several plebeians watch from a private meeting space they have managed to procure for their own internal deliberations, the opportunity for dissenting voices publically to be heard has disappeared from the play. The sound-bite quality of the news segment cannot admit the elaboration of a lengthy fable on political theory, and all that remains of Menenius' original rhetorical set-piece are the brief epithets "friends" and "good neighbors" (which one hears as something akin to "My fellow Americans"): the speech itself is boiled down to its essentials: "you may as well strike at the heavens with your staves" (1.1.66-67). This



threat is carried out in the scene that follows, when tanks and police in riot gear mechanically beat back the citizens who quite obviously cannot offer any “impediment” (1.1.71). It would be difficult to deny that public protests are increasingly treated by elected government officials today as a vestigial form of carnival, an almost superfluous release valve, rather than as a serious form of political participation. And given the array of forces that are now aligned to manipulate public response to dissent, it is understandably difficult to maintain any faith in the capacity to act with which we are all endowed. When Martius emerges from amid the phalanx-like formation of riot police to address the atomized crowd, we now cannot but agree with his description of the citizens as “fragments” (1.1.221).

Neither Shakespeare nor Arendt could anticipate the novel political challenges that confront us today, and neither therefore can offer us a blueprint for the future. As I have demonstrated, however, they can both offer significant aid in tracing the history of the shared conceptions we have regarding politics, thereby enabling us to subject those conceptions to increased scrutiny and in the process, re-introduce into our political imaginary a more expansive definition of fundamental concepts like freedom. The political questions I have re-examined here from the perspective of plurality must therefore remain merely a propaedeutic for thinking about politics today. It seems certain, however, that as long as special interests remain content to focus on specific social issues rather than on the primacy of a common, political world—rather than on discussing in public the marked absence of a public venue for political participation that safeguards the integrity of fundamental political principles and the institutions that support them—we will not cultivate sufficient power to

produce the necessary forms of active citizenship that have been occluded by political theory.

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