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James Kuzner

*Case Western Reserve University*

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## NONREPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS

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*The Third Citizen: Shakespeare's Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* by Oliver Arnold. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp. 325. \$55.00 cloth.

Is representative democracy worthwhile? Not really, Oliver Arnold suggests in *The Third Citizen*. In this painstaking, lively, and piercing book, the author makes his case not with reference to the present moment but by attending to the rhetoric of the House of Commons and to Shakespeare's attitudes toward it. Arnold believes his approach needful for several reasons, ones that begin as disciplinary concerns, then ramify outward. One reason is the continued influence of New Historicism and its focus on "the subjectivity, ideology, and culture peculiar to monarchy" (25). Another is the tendency of revisionist historians to accord the early modern Commons a passive role, that of a mere department of the crown. A third is the practice of "new Whig" critics who refute new historicists and revisionist historians alike by shifting focus from the crown to the people who opposed it in hopes of protoliberal empowerment.

For Arnold, all three approaches—emphasizing as they do the political hierarchy's top or bottom—neglect a crucially important discourse that was emerging within the Commons and that articulates what the author calls "the politics of representation." To be sure, Elizabethan and Jacobean knights and burgesses were elected to their seats in the Commons as were generations of previous members of Parliament (MPs), but the notion that MPs represented the people,

Arnold points out, was novel: “the claims [MPs] made to represent and speak for thousands of people were ‘modern’ and unprecedented” (15). In focusing on the words of monarchs and the commonwealth’s members but not of members of parliament, historians and literary critics alike have largely ignored a concept of artificial personhood—according to which an MP speaks not just for himself but for and even as the people—that was born in Shakespeare’s time and is integral to our thinking about representative democracy today.

Arnold sees Shakespeare adopting a radical position on representative politics. Arnold argues that “[t]he Whigs’ attempt to make Shakespeare our liberal contemporary” (11) is misguided—not because Shakespeare was an absolutist, or regarded the English people with contempt, or was a republican rather than a true democrat, but because he portrays political representation as itself tragic. This is so because being represented deforms and disempowers the enfranchised subject, who is asked to hold a number of counterintuitive, crippling beliefs: for example, “that he was representatively present at the political center (that he was at once home in Shropshire and present in St. Stephen’s Chapel in London),” “that he empowered himself by empowering others,” and “that he attained a political voice by allowing others to speak for him” (7).

Shakespeare rejects each of these beliefs: “In Shakespeare’s canon,” Arnold writes, “there is not a single exception to this rule: when they invest representatives with their voices, the people lose both power and their capacity to articulate cogently their aims and desires” (12). In speaking for and even as the people, political representatives make those people disappear (13). Arnold believes that his turn to the birth of representational rhetoric—and especially to Shakespeare’s critique of it—is particularly timely, for we now take that rhetoric for granted: “[E]arly modern observers,” Arnold writes, “. . . may have something disquieting to tell us, the subjects of a representationalism so entrenched as to seem virtually natural and inevitable.” Sharing in Shakespeare’s wisdom, we might see how sinister this entrenchment is, might “consider whether the most fundamental contradictions and ideological misrecognitions of political representation in its primitive form have been exorcised from, or simply work more effectively in, its perfected form” (19).

*The Third Citizen* opens with a lengthy introduction followed by a full chapter that focuses—largely through parliamentary proceedings—on the self-conception of the House of Commons, then moves into chapter-length readings of the First Tetralogy, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, and, lastly, *Coriolanus*. Each

chapter takes extended recourse to historical materials, and the contexts in which Arnold charts Shakespeare's tragedies of political representation are many, including the experience of parliamentary "elections"; disciplinary practices of the House of Commons (which claimed to be the mouth of lay-people but excluded them from meetings and kept proceedings completely secret); and theories of parliamentary representation, of the magic by which the absent people were made present. The book thus has a broad appeal; it should be of interest not just to Shakespeareans but also to the legions of historians and literary critics who study the Commons and its relationship to the rise of English republicanism.

By and large, readers will be not just interested but compelled. With admirable precision and subtlety, Arnold pairs the politics articulated by MPs with Shakespeare's demystifications of them, often also with recourse to the bard's rewriting of classical sources. For example, Arnold explains nicely how, in *Titus*, Shakespeare revises Livy, for whom republicanism is the remedy to Tarquinism and to rape; Arnold argues that "to be represented in Titus's Rome is not to gain a voice in state affairs but to lose one's tongue" and that "muteness is the shared condition of the victim of rape and the victims of political representation," which makes untenable distinctions between the

emperor Saturninus and more recognizably republican figures such as Marcus Andronicus (101). Equally compelling are similar arguments about Brutus's arrogation of the people in *Julius Caesar* and the founding of the tribunate in *Coriolanus*, which "marks a radical transformation—and not for the better—in the people's comportment, manner of speech, and self-conception" (96). The Roman citizens of that play, mistakenly giving up their voices, are changed from "smart and confident" individuals into a disempowered, "fickle and confused rabble" (96). Arnold even demonstrates how we, still buying into the rhetoric first deployed by the Commons, make some of the same mistakes as Shakespeare's characters; for instance, Whig recuperations of the play, "for all the importance they attach to plebeian speech, do not distinguish between speaking for oneself and being spoken for by representatives," and in doing so such recuperations "construct political representation *precisely as the ideology of early modern political representation constructs political representation*" (195). This seems exactly right, and to the extent that speaking for oneself and being spoken for are conflated not just in some contemporary criticism but in contemporary culture—conflation that, given the most recent presidential election, seems fairly blatant here in academia—Arnold's book supplies a crucially important,

clarifying reminder about representative democracy's limits.

The book is perhaps not as fully developed when it comes to describing what Shakespeare offers as an alternative to the politics of representation and that politics' emptying out of the represented. The alternative, it turns out, is a somewhat vague, undertheorized notion of "empowered" selfhood that is arguably as suspect as some of the notions for which he takes Whig critics to task. Arnold opposes representational politics to a "radically public theater" in which people hold onto their power; Arnold believes that we can see the benefits of this most clearly when Caesar refuses to take the crown offered him by Antony, the people celebrate, and Caesar must thus refuse the crown twice more (42). Here, the people retain their "power to judge and decide, to turn their thumbs up or down," just as theatrical audiences did (43). For this reason Shakespeare, and Arnold along with him, think of theater as "a model for genuinely democratic relations of power," for a politics of presence in which the people retain their "will and their right to judge their own enemies" (144). So for all that Arnold speaks of Shakespeare as a radical not simply for his time but for our own, one main difference between his Shakespeare and that of the Whigs is between one who favors some version of participatory democracy and one who favors its

representative counterpart. People should participate directly in government rather than be represented in it; they should be truly empowered and truly protected by their governments, their rational capacities respected and their voices given regard.

Another way to say this is that for Arnold as for Whigs—indeed, for most historians and literary critics invested in recuperating English republicanism for the present moment—a bounded, discrete, delineated, protoliberal form of individuality is an assumed political good. Arnold speaks of "a tragic loss of integrated identity"; Shakespeare believes that people must "retain their power rather than delegate their authority to others" (41, 160). Arnold admires the same thing that Whigs do about the citizens of *Coriolanus*—their "audacity and self-possession," their capacity, early in the play, to be "an articulate, deliberative, and purposeful group of distinct individuals" (215, 204). Consider the mournful tone with which Arnold regards self-loss as the citizens experience it, once in the introduction and again in the epilogue:

When they give up their assault on the Capitol in exchange for the creation of the tribunate, they transform a power proper to themselves into a power that can only be exercised by others . . . with the steps to the Capitol itself

right before them, with power just at their fingertips, the citizens turn fortune's wheel with their own hands and cast themselves down before masters of their own creation. What makes the Third Citizen's loss of power so moving . . . is the concomitant loss of the capacity to articulate loss and, perhaps, even the loss of a selfhood sufficiently integrated to register loss as loss. (10)

What name, then, should we give to the dramatic fate of the Third Citizen, who, when we meet him in act I, is in possession of himself and, perhaps, on the brink of wresting power from the patricians but who soon believes that he can win honor only by recognizing honor in others, that he can ennoble himself only by conferring nobility on others, that he can make his voice heard only by letting others speak for him, that he can be powerful only by making him powerless? (220)

Certainly, having his voice usurped by sinister tribunes is not a nice way for the Third Citizen to be deprived of power. Still, any number of theorists will wonder to what degree we can call Arnold's Shakespeare "radical." This Shakespeare is strongly attached to bounded selfhood and strongly opposed to vulnerability;

this Shakespeare urges individuals to seize the "power just at their fingertips." Imagine the exception that would be taken by Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, Jean Luc-Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and the host of others who do not regard "holding onto power" as inherently good and who see as many salutary forms of vulnerability, of letting go of power, as pernicious ones. These theorists also emphasize how holding onto power can itself be pernicious, and they might even look to Arnold's characterization of Caesar's body—how Romans might have judged him were he an enemy—as symptomatic of the dangers of empowered selfhood: "Caesar's fragile, mortal, vulnerable body . . . reminds the people of the power they once enjoyed in relation to Caesar," Arnold writes. "The body they see before them is the body that Caesar offered to them after the thwarted crowning. The 'piteous spectacle,' in other words, is, in part, the spectacle of the violence that was properly theirs usurped. Caesar was once theirs to kill" (175). If Caesar being theirs to kill is the alternative to their being dissolved by Brutus, it is difficult to see how "holding onto power" would be much more than a false—or rather a literalized—alternative to the violence of political representation, just as tribunes are elsewhere shown to be a false alternative to tyrants.

Even more: we can read the texts on which Arnold focuses not

only as rejecting the possibility of preserving bounded selves when representing them, but as abandoning bounded, protoliberal selfhood altogether. These texts ask that vulnerability be embraced. In *Coriolanus*, for example, we might see this in the eponymous hero's giving over of himself to Aufidius and to death. There are, as well, ways to see a republican politics founded in the salutary sharing of, rather than the defensive attempt to eradicate, that vulnerability, and it is at least arguable that Shakespeare's gestures in such directions are more radical than the gestures that Arnold deems the bard's most radical: those pitched toward the demystifications of representation-alism and toward the empowerment that such political clarity might effect. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's refusal of a politics to which many of us still subscribe is striking indeed, and Arnold is right to say so and to show us how; the brilliance of the book resides in precisely this.

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