Introduction: a Roman thought

When Cleopatra says of Antony, 'a Roman thought hath struck him' (*AC*, 1.2.87) or when Horatio says to Hamlet, 'I am more an antique Roman than a Dane' (*Ham*, 5.2.325), Shakespeare suggests that there are certain values that are characteristically Roman, but not geographically or temporally limited to a particular place. As G. K. Hunter has said, Cleopatra's 'Roman', by a shorthand readily recognizable by Shakespeare's audience, means 'soldierly, severe, self-controlled, disciplined', virtues toward which Cleopatra, as hedonist, feels distinctly ambivalent.[1] Horatio's 'antique Roman', by a similar shorthand, implies an advocacy of suicide as preferable to dishonour or a life of 'bestial oblivion' (*Ham*, 4.4.39), a view sharply at variance with Christian doctrine. Cleopatra alludes to similar notions when she expresses a desire to die by suicide 'after the high Roman fashion', acting in accordance with 'what's brave, what's noble' (*AC*, 4.15.90–1), transforming herself into a Roman by her death. Antony, one of many Roman heroes in Shakespeare to die by his own hand, proclaims his constancy to such values in his dying words:

> … and do not basely die,
> Nor cowardly put off my helmet to
> My countryman: a Roman by a Roman
> Valiantly vanquished.
> (4.15.57–60)

In many of these passages, there is an assumption that most people fail to live up to this ideal of conduct, that relatively few Romans are worthy of the name. Coriolanus scornfully says of the hostile plebeians, '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 of the Capitol' (*Cor*, 3.1.236–8). *Titus Andronicus* is full of the contrast between Roman and barbarian ('Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous', 1.1.383), in a play in which Romans and Goths compete in behaving barbarously, with a nightmarish descent into murder, rape, mutilation, and cannibalism. In *Julius Caesar*,

Cassius employs two comparisons in disdainfully dismissing those who fail to live up to a 'Roman' ideal of conduct: 'Romans now' are women, not men, in a paltry modernity, a pale reflection of ancient glories. 'Our fathers' minds are dead, /And we are governed with our mothers' spirits' (*JC*, 1.3.80–4). Cleopatra, as she prepares for suicide, sees Roman 'resolution' and perseverance as characteristically male: women are changeable, men are better able to achieve an ideal of constancy in governing their behaviour, to 'do a noble deed':

> My resolution is placed, and I have nothing
> Of woman in me. Now from head to foot
> I am marble-constant. Now the fleeting moon
> No planet is of mine.
>
> (*AC*, 5.2.236–40)

The Roman ideal of conduct, as these passages show, is basically masculine, suitable for a military society, where *virtus* needs to be tested on the battlefield. The history of Rome, as Shakespeare, Livy, and Plutarch present it, is a history of war and conquest. Myles McDonnell has argued that the term *virtus* in Roman usage initially means manly courage and only gradually comes to have the broader meaning of virtue or moral worth.[2] As we shall see, Livy and Plutarch are central sources for the Elizabethans in defining Roman values. Their accounts of Roman history presuppose a commonwealth of male citizens ready to serve their homeland on the battlefield. *Fides*, keeping one's word, is closely related to *pietas*, fear of the gods and respect for one's household gods, in a family unit where the father expects unquestioning obedience. Clemency and discipline, masculine virtues, are exercised at the discretion of those with power over life and death, who, accountable to no one, can show the importance of self-control. Discipline at its most fearsome and uncompromising is illustrated in Livy's Titus Manlius, who executes his son for disobeying an order, and both discipline and clemency are shown in the dictator Lucius Papirius, who demands the death of his Master of Horse for defying his authority in leading Roman troops to a victory without asking his permission, and then relents under pressure.[3] Prudence, wisdom, *gravitas* are all seen as male virtues. The only one of the dominant Roman values more appropriate to women than men is *pudicitia*, chastity. Yet in Livy and Shakespeare, Lucretia, committing suicide to save her honour, explicitly does so to provide an example to the men in her family, spurring them on to revenge. Shakespeare's Volumnia, tutor to her son in 'precepts that would make invincible /The heart that conn'd them' (*Cor*, 4.1.10–11), more prudent and wise than

the son she has made a soldier, acts as conveyer and repository of masculine Roman values.

In all three of Shakespeare's plays based on Plutarch, Roman values are held up to scrutiny. When Caesar says 'I am constant as the northern star', or when Brutus says 'not that I loved Caesar less, but that I love Rome more', their proclamation of their own virtues entails considerable self-delusion, and the irony is apparent in both cases (*JC*, 3.1.60; 3.2.21–2). Throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra keeps up a running commentary on conventional Roman notions of heroism and masculinity, and the virtues of the cold, efficient Octavius Caesar are less attractive and dramatically interesting than the vices of his rival Antony. The scene on Pompey's barge, with Lepidus, the 'third part of the world', carried off dead drunk, is no less critical of Sextus Pompeius's professions of virtue than of Menas's cynicism in offering to cut the throats of the triumvirs and make Pompey 'lord of the whole world'. Pompey's claim that his 'honour' would allow him to reward the act, finding it 'afterwards well done', but only if Menas had not told him in advance, is hardly an instance of idealized virtue, and Menas's comment deflates his pretensions of high-mindedness.

> For this,
> I'll never follow thy palled fortunes more.
> Who seeks and will not take, when once 'tis offered,
> Shall never find it more.
>
> (*AC*, 2.7.74–85)

In a scene often omitted from productions, Ventidius's cautious refusal to seek acclaim for a Roman victory, on the grounds that 'Who does i'th'wars more than his captain can, /Becomes his captain's captain', is another sceptical commentary on 'ambition, the soldier's virtue' in a society of competing males (*AC*, 2.7.74–85). The manly virtues of the warrior Titus Andronicus, who begins by killing his son for disobedience and later chops off his own hand, slays his raped and mutilated daughter to allow her 'shame' to perish, and serves up his enemies in a cannibal feast, are a *reductio ad absurdum* of Roman values, an implicit critique of 'the standard motifs of austere republican virtue'.[4] In a more subtle critique of Roman *virtus*, Coriolanus's exemplary heroism – 'If any think brave death outweighs bad life, /And that his country's dearer than himself …/ Follow Martius' – leads him to invade Rome at the head of a foreign army and then to lose his own life in what is virtually a parody of his earlier triumph over the Volscians: 'Cut me to pieces, Volsces, men and lads, / Stain all your edges on me' (*Cor*, 1.7.72–6; 5.6.112–13).

To Shakespeare, Jonson, and their contemporaries, Rome could never be wholly Other, but was seen as parent or precursor: 'the Roman past was to them not simply *a* past but *the* past … since it led to the present', providing a model for emulation.[5] In a foundation myth similar to that of Rome, Brute, a descendant of Aeneas, is imagined as establishing a colony on the island of Britain, bestowing his name on it. *Cymbeline*, one of several plays set at the time of the Roman invasion of Britain, ends with a harmonious reconciliation between ancient Britain and Rome, 'a Roman, and a British ensign' side by side, waving 'friendly together' (*Cym*, 5.4.481–2). In the court of James I, the Roman analogy is standard currency for praise of the monarch as '*England's Caesar*'. In James's elaborately staged entrance into London in 1604, the streets were lined with arches and statues in 'a triumph in the high Roman style', recreating ancient Rome in the eyes of the beholders. Jonson's masques, with their designs by Inigo Jones, full of Roman motifs, present James I as a new Augustus, and in coins and medals the King is frequently represented in Roman dress, crowned with laurel.[6] Similar flattering comparisons, with a particular emphasis on peace and 'moral conquests', continue in the reign of Charles I, in masques with titles like *Britannia Triumphans* and *The Triumph of Peace*, presenting the King as 'a Roman emperor reincarnate'.[7]

The plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, and their contemporaries often present a much darker image of Rome as exemplifying barbarism rather than civility. *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Sejanus* in different ways show the twin evils of tyranny and anarchy, the unbridled rule of appetite breaking down ordinary ties of kinship and loyalty in an angry mob or unscrupulous seeker after power. In *Julius Caesar*, the horrendous spectacle of a plebeian mob tearing Cinna the poet to pieces is immediately followed by a scene of cynical politicians bargaining with death sentences:

> ANTONY. These many, then, shall die; their names are pricked.
> OCTAVIUS. Your brother too must die; consent you, Lepidus?
> LEPIDUS. I do consent.
> OCTAVIUS. Prick him down, Antony.
> LEPIDUS. Upon condition Publius shall not live,
> Who is your sister's son, Mark Antony.
> ANTONY. He shall not live. Look, with a spot I damn him.
> (*JC*, 4.1.1–6)

In Jonson's *Sejanus*, as the virtuous, ineffectual republicans, unhappy with Tiberius's abuses of power, are picked off one by one by Sejanus and Tiberius, one of them complains, 'There's nothing Roman in us; nothing good, /Gallant, or great'.[8] When in the opening scene of *Titus Andronicus*,

full of empty ceremony, Titus crowns Saturninus as 'king and commander of our commonweal, /The wide world's emperor', Saturninus's words in response are patently hypocritical.

> SATURNINUS. Thanks, noble Titus, father of my life.
> How proud I am of thee and of thy gifts,
> Rome shall record, and when I do forget
> The least of these unspeakable deserts,
> Romans forget your fealty to me.
> (*Tit*, 1.1.250–61)

A moment later, ensconced in power, Saturninus indeed forgets any sense of reciprocal obligation or constraints on his power, as he hurls defiance at the Andronici, calling them 'traitorous' and imagining a conspiracy to 'dishonour' him:

> No, Titus, no, the emperor needs her not,
> Nor her, nor thee, nor any of thy stock.
> (*Tit*, 1.1.304–8)

The feebleness of beleaguered virtue before triumphant, shameless vice is illustrated in the figure of the raped, mutilated Lavinia, with her hands and tongue cut off. Rome in *Titus Andronicus* is mutilated, the ideals of patriotism and honour, 'hands to do Rome service', shown to be 'in vain', and any prayers are 'bootless'. Rome, Titus concludes, 'is but a wilderness of tigers' (*Tit*, 3.1.54, 74–81).

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, there are many plays on Roman themes. According to one recent list, forty-nine such plays are extant, and the titles of forty-five additional 'Roman' plays survive.[9] The extant plays range from Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (first performed in 1588) to Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626), and include three plays on Cleopatra other than Shakespeare's, two entitled *Caesar and Pompey*, three on Nero, and at least three which, like *Cymbeline*, juxtapose ancient Britons and Romans. Studies of Shakespeare's Roman plays are rarely comparative in approach: indeed, the standard pattern for critics is to limit themselves to *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* (or any two of these three), considered in isolation, ignoring Shakespeare's early *Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*, his late *Cymbeline*, and the plays on Roman themes by his contemporaries.[10] In this study, I shall examine Shakespeare's dramatic use of the myth of Rome, the received tradition of Roman history and Roman values. When we compare Shakespeare's Roman plays and his poem *Lucrece* with works by other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists writing on similar topics, we find striking differences

as well as similarities. Plays by Shakespeare, Jonson, Chapman, Massinger, and others draw in detail on the writings of Roman historians, interpreting them in various ways, and here again the approach in this study will be comparative, quoting from the Elizabethan translations to which Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have had access.

CHAPTER 1

Roman historians and the myth of Rome

SMALL LATIN AND LESS GREEK

Ben Jonson, in rather sour remarks about his rival playwright, described Shakespeare as having 'small Latin and less Greek'. A tradition, especially prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, characterizes Shakespeare as a disciple of nature rather than art, untutored, breathing the pure air of inspiration – in Milton's words, 'Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child, /Warbl[ing] his native wood-notes wild'.[1] In the 1605 Quarto of *Sejanus*, Jonson provides detailed marginal annotations, mostly in Latin, indicating the passages in Tacitus, Suetonius, and other sources he consulted and adapted in writing the play. Shakespeare differed from Jonson and from such writers as Milton, Marvell, Herbert, Crashaw, and Herrick in not being able to read and compose Latin texts as easily as English.

But though Shakespeare left school at the age of fifteen, his education at Stratford grammar school gave him a knowledge of Latin at least equal to that of an A-level student or first-year undergraduate reading Classics today. In the standard curriculum of Shakespeare's day, students were drilled in Latin from the age of seven. Starting with Lily's Latin grammar, memorized by rote in the lower forms, a sixteenth-century grammar-school student would have been exposed to texts of increasing difficulty: Cato's *Distiches*, Aesop's Fables in a Latin translation, the plays of Terence, and 'Tullies epistles … Tullies Offices, de Amiticia, Senectute … Ovid's *Tristia* and *Metamorphoses*, Virgil'. According to one contemporary schoolmaster:

> And therefore I would have the cheifest labor to make these purest Authors our owne, as Tully [i.e. Cicero] for prose, so Ovid and Virgil for verse, as to speake and write in Latin for the phrase, as they did.[2]

The method normally used in Tudor grammar schools was 'double translation': the schoolmaster would choose 'some notable common place out of his Orations, or some other part of *Tullie*', translated into plain

English, and ask each pupil to translate back into Latin, and then to compare his own version with the original in Cicero. Among Latin prose authors, Cicero was generally considered the model of eloquence and correctness, and, among historians, for 'proprietie in wordes, simplicitie in sentences, plainnesse and light … *Caesar* and *Livie* … are perfect examples of Imitation'. Sallust, read in the upper forms, was another standard text, though as a difficult writer, he was considered 'not verie fitt for yong men, to learne out of him'.[3]

The principal source for Shakespeare's Roman plays was an English translation from the Greek: Sir Thomas North's Plutarch (1579). But for the poem *Lucrece* (1594), he drew his materials from Livy and from Ovid's *Fasti*, neither of which had at that time been translated into English. Ovid was Shakespeare's favourite poet, a constant presence not only in his two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, but in many of his early plays, including *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. According to Francis Meres in 1598, 'the sweet, witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared sonnets'.[4] The Latin authors most important to Shakespeare were those he first encountered in school: Ovid, Virgil (not Horace, a pervasive influence on Jonson), and, among prose writers, Cicero and Seneca, both valued as providing well-phrased *sententiae*, material suitable for memorization or inclusion in a commonplace book. With Ovid, Shakespeare was able to consult Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567), but the many Ovidian echoes in his plays and poems show that he read *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, *Amores*, and *Fasti* in the original Latin. As Martindale says, Shakespeare's 'small Latin' gave him the ability 'to read Latin books, if they were not too difficult, without a translation', though for Greek texts, he was forced to rely on English translations.[5]

When Shakespeare began writing at around 1590, there was no general history of the Roman republic and empire available in English.[6] His first Roman play, *Titus Andronicus* (1590–3), does not have an identifiable source among Roman historians. Its principal character, the Roman general Titus Andronicus, is an invented figure, as are the rival claimants for emperor, Saturninus and Bassianus, and the play does not depict a particular moment in Roman history. As Terence Spencer comments:

> It is not so much that any particular set of political institutions is assumed in *Titus*, but that it includes *all* the political institutions that Rome ever had. The author seems anxious, not to get it all right, but to get it all in.[7]

Julius Caesar, written approximately a decade later, has a definite source in Sir Thomas North's translation of *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans … by Plutarch* (1579), from which Shakespeare carefully combines and adapts material from the lives of Brutus, Caesar, and Antony. North's Plutarch also serves as Shakespeare's principal source for *Antony and Cleopatra* and for *Coriolanus*, though the story of Coriolanus is also found in Livy.

In the 1590s, a dramatist with 'small Latin and less Greek' writing a play based on Roman history would have been able to consult North's Plutarch and also another translation from the Greek, Appian's *An Ancient History and Exquisite Chronicle of the Romanes Warres*, tr. W. Barker (1578). Appian, the principal source of Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (first performed, 1588) and a partial source of Mark Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*, provides a detailed historical account of the late republic, from the civil wars of Marius and Sulla to the accession of Augustus. A translation of Polybius by Christopher Watson was published in 1568, but it only includes Book I, about the wars of Rome and Carthage (along with an extended comparison of Henry V and the Roman general Scipio as models of heroism, added by the translator). It does not include Polybius's account of the Roman constitution in Book VI, immensely influential in the history of republicanism later on. Philemon Holland's enormous folio translation of Livy (over 1,400 pages long) was published in 1600, and could have been used, along with North, in *Coriolanus*. Sallust's *Two Most Worthie and Notable Histories … The Conspiracie of Cateline … and the Warre … of Jugurth* was translated by the dramatist Thomas Heywood in 1608. Two important translations of Tacitus were published in the 1590s, Sir Henry Savile's *Fower Bookes of the Histories of Cornelius Tacitus* (1591) and Richard Grenewey's *Annales of Cornelius Tacitus* (1598). Aside from one passage in *3 Henry VI*, possibly indebted to Savile's translation, there are virtually no references to Tacitus in Shakespeare, either in translation or in the original Latin.[8]

REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

In the version of Roman history familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, there are two key, defining events. The first is the banishment of the kings and establishment of the Roman republic, as narrated in Books 1 and 2 of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (the subject of Shakespeare's poem *Lucrece*). The second is the end of the Roman republic and its replacement

by a form of government concentrating power in the hands of a single man. For dramatists, the principal figure identified with this moment is not Augustus, founder of the empire, but Julius Caesar, assassinated because it was feared he aimed at tyranny:

> Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
> Like a colossus, and we petty men
> Walk under his huge legs and peep about
> To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
> (*JC*, 1.2.134–7)

The form of government established after the overthrow of Tarquin replaced the all-powerful monarch with two consuls, elected for a term of one year and not eligible for re-election. The consuls were as much military as political leaders and, during the early republic, one or both were likely to be away from Rome, leading an army in the field. As Livy points out, the main constraint on the powers of the consuls was the strict limitation on their period of office. This often created problems in military operations, when a general had to be replaced in the midst of a war, or had to return to Rome to supervise an election for his successor, but it also meant that consuls could be called to account when they left office. Livy in Book 2 praises the republic as 'a free state now from this time forward', governed by 'yearly Magistrates' and subject not to the caprices of individual men, but to 'the authoritie and rule of laws'.[9] In theory at least, the consuls were responsible to the Senate, which in the early republic was a body of patricians who held office for life.

At the time of the expulsion of Tarquin, Rome was a tiny walled city, with control over a territory of 800 square kilometres and the ability to raise an army of 8,000 citizen-soldiers. After three centuries of endless wars against other Italian tribes (Volscians, Samites, Etruscans) and wars of conquest beyond Italy, by the year 218 BC, when the Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded Italy, Rome had a population of 400,000 adult male citizens, with another 600,000 in Roman colonies and among Italian allies.[10] At Augustus's accession two centuries later, the population of Rome exceeded four million. The Romans devised a wonderfully effective strategy in extending their control over all Italy and beyond: first, they planted colonies of Roman citizens, often former soldiers, in remote outposts, and secondly, they granted Roman citizenship (first with partial and then with complete citizens' rights) to those they conquered in battle. During the lifetime of Julius Caesar, no more than 15 per cent of Roman citizens lived in Rome. Caesar spent ten years commanding a victorious