

Introduction

I

WE TRIED to shield our four-year-old from American electoral politics. He overheard things, of course, people saying Donald Trump is not a good man. At four, you're taught to be nice and do the right thing. We didn't say anything the day after the election, but he heard about it at daycare. That night, he said to his mother as she was putting him to bed, "Mommy, Trump won the election." "Yes, sweetie, I know," she said. Then he broke down in tears. Rattled, she asked why he was crying. "I don't know."

Confusion was the most immediate response for many. Why had this happened? What was coming next? Why did it hit us so hard? I lost it a little myself the morning after, when I realized that my son and three-year-old daughter would first learn about the American president during the Trump years. I remember learning about the presidency with awe and inspiration. A child's naivety, sure, but I saw the president as an ideal, the best we can be. I don't want my children to hear the president talking about women the way Trump does. My son better never speak about women like that. No one better talk to my daughter that way.

What overwhelmed me was the symbolism. I thought then—still think now—that the lasting damage of Trump's election will not be the policies enacted, which can be checked and balanced or reversed over

Excerpt • Shakespeare and Trump

time, but the message sent to a generation of young girls and boys about how to achieve success. Whining, lying, cheating, and being an asshole are now demonstrable paths to success in America, a new generation socialized to behavior we had hoped to leave behind in the twentieth century.

I teach in a liberal bubble (Harvard University) within a liberal bubble (Cambridge) within a liberal bubble (New England). The day after the election, no one made eye contact on the subway. We stared at the floor in silence. No pleasantries with the teachers when I dropped my kids at daycare. *Was she a Trump voter?* They were asking the same about me. Could a preschool teacher support Trump? A college professor? Anything was possible. The rules had been rewritten. Nothing made sense.

“You know who wasn’t surprised when Trump won?” asked many marginalized Americans. The day after, back in my conservative hometown in Kansas, there weren’t any celebrations. If anything, they felt buyer’s remorse: the symbolic votes cast to send a message to Washington brought a result that few thought possible. Those who bought Trump and his policies would now have to own them—the Oppenheimers of Trump.

The major players in the election—Trump, Clinton, Obama—spoke to the nation that day about unity, reconciliation, and putting the past behind us. They wanted to stave off unrest and violence from disaffected Americans who feared a Trump presidency. Those appeals were absurd: when a bully takes over the schoolyard, we don’t tell our children that we owe him a chance to lead. And those desires for safety and security clashed with our equally valid desire for analysis and understanding. Why did things happen as they happened? How did we get here? What are we supposed to think now?

II

So first we felt it as human beings. Only later did we try to understand it as academics. *How do we explain this to our kids?* was the refrain at home. At work, *How do we talk about this in class?*

It became important for people in positions of authority (parents, teachers, ministers, governors, etc.) to affirm the value of honesty, kindness, respect for the dignity of all human beings, and the community’s commitment to protect and support anyone feeling afraid, sad, or un-

Excerpt • Introduction

certain. I've always been pretty progressive in my politics but viewed such gestures as a little too precious for my tastes. Those values make up the unspoken moral fabric of America, I thought. That was no longer tenable. In the days after the election, a friend back in Kansas with a biracial daughter was called—to her face, in front of the kid, on two separate occasions—a slur so horrible I won't repeat it here. Our commitment to basic human decency needed to be made explicit, even if it felt hokey. *Don't feel guilty about opposing racism, sexism, and hypocrisy*, I had to say to myself. *Intolerance is the only thing to be intolerant of*, I heard the father of free speech, John Milton, saying.

My school sends out an email blast each morning about research being done around campus. The day after the election, experts coming from positions of disciplinary knowledge were asked to comment on the results: a professor of public health on the future of Obamacare, a professor of political science on the rise of populism at home and abroad. It was a testament to the value of academic expertise, and it was stabilizing to know what would happen next. Knowledge is power. So, on my way to campus, I asked, *What's the disciplinary perspective of my course?* I was teaching a first-year writing course about Shakespeare.

The course introduces students to scholarly interpretation and argument. On our first day, I tell them that academic writing—all academic work, really—is about one thing and one thing only: the search for truth. This pronouncement comes from my grad school teacher Stanley Fish's notion of “professional correctness.”¹ Arguing against professors and institutions of higher education that view their mission as the cultivation of good character in students and a citizenry prepared to participate in democracy, Fish says to “aim low.” Don't try to make your students better people; don't promote virtue; don't advocate for policies and politicians. Instead, do what you have been trained to do. As a Shakespearean, I have been trained to explain *King Lear*, but I should not draw an analogy between Lear's unhinged premodern machismo and the same in Donald Trump. Remain in an analytical posture, seeking knowledge and understanding; don't lapse into an ethical or political mode, seeking the betterment of society. The belief that academia is a venue for the discovery and dissemination of truth clashes with the idea that academics need to exert moral leadership, especially in perilous times.

You can imagine Fish's response when the Historians Against Trump penned an “Open Letter to the American People.” “Today, we are faced

Excerpt • Shakespeare and Trump

with a moral test,” they wrote. “As historians, we recognize both the ominous precedents for Donald J. Trump’s candidacy and the exceptional challenge it poses to civil society. . . . We have a professional obligation as historians to share an understanding of the past upon which a better future may be built.”² No, you don’t, Fish wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed titled “Professors, Stop Opining about Trump”: “Academic expertise is not a qualification for delivering political wisdom.”³

But if academic work is, as Fish says, about the search for truth, wouldn’t it be evading my academic responsibilities in a writing course—wouldn’t it be professional malfeasance—not to address the problem of truth in the 2016 election? “Post-truth” ended up being the *Oxford Dictionary*’s word of the year.⁴ Could I, with a straight face, tell my students that I was going to teach them how to search for truth and not acknowledge the attack on truth that was underway? So when we gathered on the day after the election, we talked about it—not as a political issue (Democrats versus Republicans), nor as an ethical issue (right versus wrong), but as an issue of truth, honor, and integrity in thought. Should health care be run by the federal government? That’s not a matter of truth: reasonable people can disagree. Should abortion be illegal? Not a matter of truth. Should Trump have been elected president? Not a matter of truth.

But it was true that the United States had elected a man who flouts the truth. Trump disregarded facts, honesty, science, and knowledge derived from experts both academic and military. If you don’t accept that as true, you also have an aversion to the truth. Outside our classroom was a place for anger and fear expressed in peaceful demonstrations, and reflection and reconciliation for the sake of national healing. Inside our classroom was a place for truth, for analysis, for understanding and debate about what is true and why. What was the significance of the fact that we elected a truth-less man as president? What is the status of truth in the age of Trump? Avoid doing politics, I asked students. Don’t polemicize. At the same time, don’t be fearful to speak the truth just because it makes some people look bad and others uncomfortable.

Having honed our skills of interpretation and argument all semester, we came to an understanding that quelled the confusion many were feeling. It was the justification for the humanities in action. Training in the humanities equips you with tried-and-tested strategies of analysis so that, when life serves up problems that are difficult to understand, you have the right tools ready at hand in your interpretive tool belt. Our

Excerpt • Temple University Press

conversation that day concluded that a time of felt economic recession had produced a nostalgia for 1950s American prosperity. Economic nostalgia had spilled over into a cultural nostalgia resistant to the increasing multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, and power and prominence of women in the nation. That is an analytical statement, not a political one—a thesis, or at least the first draft of one. We also, as is common in academic writing, identified questions for further thought. Why did economic anxiety, fear, anger, and resentment manifest in the kind of cultural rhetoric that the United States has disavowed in public for the past sixty years? Why does economic hardship speak the language of bigotry? Why didn't Trump's bigotry keep him from the White House? Those are political questions that require analytical answers. Don't do politics, yes. But don't let *don't do politics* prevent analysis.

III

That is one way we addressed the election in class. The other way, coming from the perspective of Shakespeare studies, was to look at the essay “An American Tragedy” published a day later by *New Yorker* editor David Remnick. “The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency,” he wrote, “is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism.”⁵ This was highly offensive to me, not as an American citizen—Remnick's narrative of the causes and consequences of Trump's election was educational—but as a literary critic. The word “tragedy” is bandied about in public to mean, vaguely, “something very bad.” But tragedy is a highly formal literary device with a long history; its specialized meaning in literary studies points to a different understanding of the situation.

The first writer to theorize tragedy, Aristotle, describes it as a story about nobles—the wealthy, powerful, strong, brave, heroic, wise, and virtuous among us—who fall from prosperity to adversity, not because they are wicked, or victims of random misfortune, but because they make mistakes. The term in Greek is *hamartia*. The mistake causes the catastrophe, yet the gap between the smallness of the error and the severity of the catastrophe caused produces tragic pity and fear: pity for the person who did not deserve such a harsh outcome for such a small misstep, fear that a similar catastrophe could befall us for the routine mistakes we make daily.

Excerpt • Shakespeare and Trump

Was there a *hamartia* in the 2016 presidential election? Did a great, heroic, noble, virtuous, well-intentioned person make a tragic mistake that brought about a catastrophe—one that was disproportionately large compared with the minuteness of the mistake? It is probably obvious that I am referring to Hillary Clinton’s email scandal. While secretary of state, she used a private email account for official government business for the sake of convenience (to avoid having to carry multiple electronic devices). This was against State Department policy. Her decision to ignore that policy became scandalous when it was revealed that she had sent classified information on her nonsecure account and that her legal team had deleted 33,000 emails deemed non-work-related. When the scandal did not go away on its own, Clinton publicly apologized, though she obviously was not very remorseful and thought that the scandal was empty politics. Indeed it was, but the story dominated the final two weeks of the presidential campaign after Federal Bureau of Investigation director James Comey, who had declined to press charges against Clinton in July 2016, announced that the FBI was reviewing new emails discovered during an unrelated investigation into Anthony Weiner, the estranged husband of Clinton’s aide Huma Abedin. In the words of Trevor Noah, host of the *Daily Show* on Comedy Central:

The story is so Shakespearean. . . . Think about it: Hillary survives Bill’s sex scandal, but now gets a scandal from her top aide’s husband. And it was Bill who married them. Not to mention that Trump got his sex scandal from Billy Bush, whose uncle was defeated by Hillary’s husband before Trump later defeated his cousin Jeb. There are only like fifteen characters in the entire story!⁶

News outlets spent more time covering Clinton’s email scandal than all her policy proposals combined. A story of modest importance consumed the election. To Elizabeth Drew at the *New York Review of Books*, “The damn spot that the server was on Clinton’s presidential campaign turned out to be deadly.”⁷

Whether we view it as an ethical lapse or a political miscalculation, Clinton slipped; she herself, repeatedly, called the private server a “mistake.” Many factors contributed to the election of Donald Trump, but Clinton’s email played a disproportionately large part in bringing America crashing down into a Trump presidency. In terms of retributive

Excerpt • Temple University Press

justice—*Does the punishment fit the crime?*—Clinton’s mistake should not have cost her the election, but it did. If we are going to call the 2016 election a “tragedy,” it is because a silly mistake brought about the downfall of a valiant politician who had given her life to public service. It was easy enough then—even easier now—to identify Clinton’s shortcomings as a candidate. But the story of Hillary Clinton is tragic because she did almost everything right throughout her life, yet an utterly insignificant error not only kept her from becoming president but also—more importantly—initiated a massive catastrophe. As tragedy, Clinton’s story generates pity and fear in us: pity because she deserved to be president, and fear because even if we do everything right, we too could be denied the success we would receive were the world logical and just.

IV

On the science side of campus, people feared the drying up of funding under Trump. On our side, the crisis in the humanities now had a clear and demonstrable consequence. The election revealed that the crisis is not about dwindling enrollments and decreased funding. It is about the waning, in mainstream American culture, of the knowledge and skills imparted by the humanities. The crisis is not *in* the humanities; it is bigger. It is in an educational system that devalues the humanities. Humanists are not, I think, interested in saying *I told you so*, but the election confirmed what we had been saying for decades: there is a dire need to foster the ability, among all our citizens, to interpret information amid the relentless data overload of the digital age.

Here’s my take on the 2016 election: if you are a teacher, and you give the class an easy test, and half the class fails, there is something wrong with the way you are teaching the material. Humanists need to rethink how we have been teaching the material. More generally, there is something wrong with moral and civic education in America. Even if we fix the Trump problem, we will not have fixed the America problem. The United States needs to come to grips—we haven’t even come close—with the fact that our celebrated nation, with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition of love and kindness (especially for the most vulnerable among us) and the modern political tradition of liberal democracy (including the achievements of the women’s rights and civil rights movements), elected a transparently immoral man with streaks of fascism.

With the increasing multiculturalism in the United States, and the continued decline of Christianity as the institution responsible for the cultivation of virtue, scholars will find themselves playing a more prominent role in the moral education of the country. The educational system is the only institution with the structural footprint to assume this role. I do not know if this is good or bad; many of us do not want this responsibility. Stanley Fish will kick and scream, but, like it or not, teachers are going to become secular ministers. This is not a call to action but a prediction. When it comes true, it will be our job to preach the gospel of truth, to practice the politics of truth. Preachers and politicians can't make truth great again: that is not what they have been trained to do. Academics are responsible for truth. That is what we have always claimed. It's time to support our argument with evidence.

V

Shakespeare offers a unique opportunity for the education of the American mind. He is widely taught in schools, creating a common language of sorts, and is especially cherished by those who want to conserve the traditions of America's European heritage. Conservatives love Shakespeare. Yet Shakespeare also forces us to reflect on the origins, uses, abuses, and outcomes of power. That is why many Shakespeareans are politically progressive.

That progressivism is palpable in my colleague Stephen Greenblatt's book *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*, published in 2018. In the face of government censorship of politically incendiary material, he argues, "Shakespeare was the supreme master of displacement and strategic indirection."⁸ He wrote plays related to current events, but did not make the connections explicit, leaving audiences to recognize the resonances. Shakespeare's "oblique angle" (184), Greenblatt says, made it "easier to tell the truth at a strategic distance from the present moment" (5). Greenblatt then imitates his idol, throwing shade at Trump without mentioning him by name in readings of Shakespearean tyrants like Richard III, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and King Lear.

This was not a new strategy, as Greenblatt explained in a lecture at the Folger Shakespeare Library, invoking "the Janus face of new historicism," the movement in literary studies he founded in the 1980s.⁹ New historicism has "a certain proud affinity with antiquarianism," he said, but what was new was its "heightened alertness to the pressures of

Excerpt • Introduction

the present.” He pointed to his early book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), whose narrative of Renaissance colonialism evokes images of American troops setting fire to Vietnamese villages.¹⁰ “It’s not a question,” he said at the Folger, “of being shy or coy. It was an attempt to use the preoccupations and passions of the present as a way to illuminate and to enter into and encounter the past.” Turning to Trump, he concluded, “In certain circumstances, particularly in anxious or traumatic circumstances, it may be beneficial to look away from the present, and to distance oneself, if one can, from the disorientation of the daily news cycle—from the shock of one day’s events after another—and to find some virtue in obliquity, in a look aside.”

Greenblatt’s “Janus faced” new historicism skirts Stanley Fish’s “professional correctness,” just as Shakespeare’s “oblique angles” outmaneuvered Elizabethan censorship. But many Shakespeare scholars hated Greenblatt’s *Tyrant*. After noting, with the taste of shit in their mouths, that he now writes for a popular audience, they derided the book as politics masquerading as literary criticism. It is a little ungenerous for scholars to lob bombs at a work with book jacket plugs from Philip Roth and John Lithgow. It smacks of the University Wits complaining about Shakespeare, *But he’s not talking to us!* Scholars, like Renaissance playwrights and American progressives, rarely suffer from an excess of solidarity. But any critique of Greenblatt’s book—including the one below—needs to be predicated on a celebration of his willingness to speak to the public rather than the profession. We have been calling for public humanities for years; let’s support scholars heeding the call. Nitpickers need to recognize that Greenblatt leveraged his authority to allow Shakespearean drama to set the agenda for national conversations about politics. Surely that is a good thing. Analytical activism—academically informed yet publicly accessible, using the past to better understand life today—is the antidote to both political activism (nauseating polemics telling people what to do) and academic passivity (weak scholarly quietism doing nothing with knowledge).

“Oblique angles” elevate the conversation to an abstract level, denying the enemy entrance to the discussion by refusing to name him. That strategy reappeared at Shakespeare’s Globe in London in July 2018 when Trump was in town. After a performance, the cast asked audiences to “speak and act against those like our visitor to the U.K. this weekend, He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.”¹¹ The audience erupted in laughter and applause, but this strategy of not-naming feels immature,

and weirdly aligned with witchcraft superstitions (hence the Harry Potter reference). It does not empower Trump to name him. Refusing to name him is aligned with preaching to the choir, a move made when speaking with others who already agree, but a practice that does nothing to enlighten the audience most in need of education. Trolling the powers-that-be is not a crafty Shakespearean evasion of censorship; it is an evasion of a teacher's responsibility. Greenblatt's approach is not the one needed right now. If a slightly smug assurance that the Left is on the right side of history were all the country needed, Hillary Clinton would have won.

A week after reading Greenblatt's book, I heard a better alternative from Daniel Spector at a Shakespeare conference.¹² More actor than scholar, Spector runs the Shakespearean performance program at New York University, "training actors in the persuasive, other-centered ways of Shakespeare." Shakespearean characters are rarely thinking about themselves when speaking, he explained, so techniques for representing psychological realism, like method acting, are not especially helpful. Shakespearean drama is fundamentally a rhetorical negotiation: characters are both trying to persuade someone else and susceptible to change themselves. But Spector's students had been struggling with this approach. They were defaulting to fighting rather than arguing, a tendency that he connected to a shift in the way political opponents were imagined in the United States: from Obama in 2008 ("They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion . . . as a way to explain their frustrations") to Clinton in 2016 ("You could put half of Trump's supporters in what I call the basket of deplorables"). Obama's adversaries were persuadable. *Oh no they're not*, Clinton snapped. Spector extrapolated to Americans in general: our devotion to our own side in the 2016 election closed us off from the other side. This unrhetorical recalcitrance is fundamentally un-Shakespearean. Spector used it to explain his students' resistance to Shakespearean acting and to highlight the political potential of working with Shakespeare:

Shakespeare may be just what my country needs right now to wrest us from this morass—not for any of its thematic content or cautionary tales or profiles in courage and weakness, but for its form: its setting of two opposing forces against, and at the same time, in collaboration with one another in a dialectical relationship that, regardless of the *outcome*, always maintains

Excerpt • Introduction | vii
Temple University Press

the *possibility* for change, for transformation. [Emphasis in original]

Allow me to make explicit something that neither Stephen Greenblatt nor Hillary Clinton did: I am a progressive liberal, but I want to invite conservatives into a conversation. I am from middle America and hold strongly to the heartland values my parents instilled in me: hard work, toughness, calling it like I see it, sure—but also telling the truth and being kind to people. These are basic conservative values—the big-time conservatism upholding the moral ideals of America, not the bullshit conservatism dedicated to perpetuating the wealth and power of the wealthy and powerful. Conservative readers may not like all the ideas in this book. I'm eager to hear where you think I have misconstrued things. I am persuadable; I hope you will be too. You and I have much more in common than either does with the powers-that-be. I do not want to convince you as much as I want to try to understand your situation so that my ideas are fully accountable to it. I hope that being trained to interpret literary characters helps me see the world through your eyes. If my ideas are good enough, you might change your mind. You might change your vote. Or I might. Either way, it will not be because one has convinced the other. It will be because together we have gained clarity and allowed truth to guide politics and ethics.

VI

I didn't want to write this book. I'm not a very political person. Actually, I hate politics. But I love interpretation. That is why I love literature. The interpretation of literature is practice for the interpretation of life. That is why we read books: not to distract ourselves from what is going on around us, but to help us think about it. This book is not a political statement. It's an analytical statement. Politics is easy; analysis is hard. Everyone has an opinion, but a good interpretation is hard to find. And if *Hamlet* teaches us anything, it's that when you try to fix a world you don't understand, you and your whole family might die.

Knowledge is power. A better understanding of our political situation gives us power over both our current unease and our future direction, and Shakespeare can help: that is the basis of this book. It flows from the notion that we can do a literary criticism of life. The terms of literary studies—*plot, character, villainy, soliloquy, tragedy, myth, met-*

aphor, and so forth—identify not only features of fiction but also elements of society. What happens when someone trained as a Renaissance historicist applies those methods to current events? In literary studies, once you know the form of a text—sonnet, epic, satire, etc.—you have at your disposal a vast library of scholarship on that form, and on particular examples of it, to help you suss out its structure and logic: where it comes from, how it works, why it matters. If we can identify the formal features of the Trump phenomenon, we can mobilize the scholarly tradition to reveal its hidden causes, meanings, and possible futures. The imaginative power of literary expression can reveal what is going on behind the small slice of this moment in history we have access to.

Thus, *Shakespeare and Trump* pursues a criticism that revises the traditional relationship between Shakespeare and theory. Usually, scholars use literary and cultural theory to unpack Shakespeare, but understanding Shakespeare is not the be-all and end-all of life, at least not for me. Shakespeare studies are means to an end. By thinking society through Shakespeare, we can use Shakespeare to create new theory—working up from literary texts to generalizable ideas that explain life beyond the texts, such as *tragic populism* (Chapter 1), *cultural affirmative action* (Chapter 3), and *conscientious complicity* (Chapter 4). With that realignment comes a change in audience, Shakespeare scholars no longer writing only for other Shakespeare scholars. *Shakespeare for theory* is both *Shakespeare across the disciplines* and *Public Shakespeare*.

For instance, Greenblatt's thesis was "tyranny," a political term. Mine is "tragedy," a literary term shifting attention from a corrupt individual to a volatile social situation. Shakespeare's tragedies show that when power is centralized at the top, the state hangs on the fragile emotions of privileged men, and bad government amplifies routine individual moral failings—like deceit, revenge, and ambition—into social catastrophe, the suffering of helpless citizens, death, and the downfall of dynasties. Every empire falls. America will too. We might be watching it without knowing.

VII

The five numbered chapters that follow tell five stories. First, Trump's chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, wrote two far-fetched Shakespeare adaptations in the 1990s. Second, the 2016 election saw the rise of a new kind of literary criticism: the Shakespeare-inspired commentary

Excerpt • Introduction | 72

Temple University Press

on modern U.S. politics. Third, days after the election, students at the University of Pennsylvania protested against Trump by tearing down a monument to Shakespeare. Fourth, Trump's first 100 days in office can be read in light of the Netflix hit *House of Cards*, based on Shakespeare's *Richard III*. And fifth, in the summer of 2017, the onstage assassination of a Trump-esque Julius Caesar led corporate sponsors to pull their support for New York City's famed Shakespeare in the Park.

These stories reveal a surprising—even bizarre—relationship between William Shakespeare, provincial English playwright from the age of monarchy, and Donald Trump, billionaire president of the United States. Taking stock of these flashes of Shakespeare in recent U.S. politics, holding nostalgically to the notion that literature can help us understand life, I let Shakespeare elevate our conversation about Trump above daily headlines and comment sections to gauge how our moment fits into the larger themes of human history. Mired in the storm of the here and now, we have not yet thought imaginatively enough about how this all ends. Shakespeare both helps us comprehend the tragedy of our historical moment and teaches us where to find joy during times of turmoil. Shakespeare helps us see how our story might be told 400 years from now. That's why Shakespeare matters to me: because of the conversations his art enables across centuries, between his time and ours, through the steady flow of modernized performances, stretching back into the ancient world that was reborn during the Renaissance.

VIII

Why Shakespeare and Trump? Why have these two figures—so different in so many ways—consistently collided over the past few years? What, beyond bad hair, do they have in common? Why are Shakespeare scholars suddenly thinking about twenty-first-century politics? Why are political commentators turning to Shakespeare? What is the relationship between art and politics? And how does this discourse illuminate Shakespeare and Trump in ways more traditional analysis might miss?

It's not that Trump loves Shakespeare and regularly cites him, as Lincoln and Bill Clinton did. Instead, there is an alignment between what happens in Shakespeare's plays and what happens in Trump's politics. For one thing, both Shakespeare's plays and Trump's politics blend villainy and comedy *en route* to tragedy. For another, Shakespeare's plays are so political, and Trump's politics so theatrical, that their collision seems

Excerpt • Shakespeare and Trump

inevitable. Third, there is a tension between what Shakespeare and Trump symbolize. Shakespeare signifies art, creativity, thoughtfulness, understanding, the greatness of the human mind, joy, compassion, critique, skepticism, self-abnegation; Trump represents politics, instinct, raw power, Machiavellianism, self-assertion. Shakespeare's language is beautiful; Trump's is horrible. I want to resist saying that Shakespeare is good and Trump bad. Some will find it repugnant to put them on the same level, but, again, I am making an analytical statement about who we are, not a political statement about what we should do. We elected Trump; he represents us, politically and symbolically. As long as we continue to say *they* elected Trump—the Republicans, the Russians, the red states—we will continue to misunderstand our moment. We—Americans—elected him and need to figure out why.

Our question runs in both directions. From one angle, why *Shakespeare* and Trump? Why not Chaucer, Austen, or Faulkner and Trump? Perhaps it is simply that Shakespeare is the most popular Western writer; perhaps “Shakespeare and Trump” stands in for “literature and Trump.” But we do not see massive discourses on Homer and Trump, Virgil and Trump, Dante and Trump, or Whitman and Trump. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are both very popular, but there is relatively little discussion of Hobbits or Hogwarts and Trump. Something about Shakespeare speaks to Trump.

Shakespeare is a frequent point of reference for American presidents, in part, because—uniquely among authors in the Western canon—he wrote stories whose main character is a head of state. Dante and Milton emphasized encounters between the human and the divine; Chaucer and Dickens, between the upper class and the lower; Austen and Woolf, within the upper class; Twain and Steinbeck, among the working class; Dickinson and Whitman, within the self; Ellison and Morrison, among African Americans. With our democratic ideology, American writers are especially attracted to the Everyman: there are no great American novels about heads of state. Apart from classical epic (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*) and tragedy (*Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, the *Oresteia*), Shakespeare's plays are the only works in the center of the Western canon to focus at length on social conflict involving the highest in the land. So why not Homer and Trump, or Aeschylus and Trump?

From the other angle, why Shakespeare and *Trump*? There were blips of Shakespeare and Clinton, Shakespeare and Bush, and Shakespeare and Obama, but nothing like Trump. We haven't seen Shake-

Excerpt • Introduction | 75

Temple University Press

spere and Trudeau, Putin, or Merkel. The occasional Shakespeare-and-Brexit pieces are noteworthy because of parallels with Trump. But the tag “Shakespeare and Trump” is not just a stand-in for “Shakespeare and power” or “Shakespeare and politicians.” Again, something about Trump calls for Shakespeare.

The best explanation I can offer is this. A figure from what scholars call the “early modern” age, Shakespeare stood between two epochs. He represented the politics of medieval times—brute force, kingship, dynasty, feudalism, servitude, the haves and have-nots perpetuated over time through family inheritance and structural social inequality—coming into contact with the politics of modernity, which increasingly emphasized liberty, equality, justice for all, and individual self-determination. All of Shakespeare’s political rulers are medieval kings living in modern worlds. Donald Trump, with his privileged background, massive wealth, petulant personality, and penchant for making knee-jerk decisions based on his emotions of the day, has thrown us back into medieval politics. He is a medieval king living in a modern world. Shakespeare had a strategy for dealing with this situation. He called it *tragedy*: stark social inequality, self-important leaders of privilege, rampant corruption and hypocrisy in government, fear, anger, resentment, hostility, incivility, warring factions—and then some random event ignites this political powder keg, leading to widespread violence, pain, suffering, death, and the downfall of nations. Let’s hope he was wrong.

Excerpt • Temple University Press