EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Stage of Exception: Politics and Theatre in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*

Ellwood Wiggins
University of Washington, Seattle
wiggins1@uw.edu

On November 18 2016, Vice President-elect Mike Pence went to the theater. He viewed the Broadway production of *Hamilton*, a musical that dramatizes the origins of the United States. The show's historically-informed lyrics challenge assumptions about the founding fathers and reveal abiding divisions in race, wealth, and ideology that still animate American affairs. Even while stressing the roots of these persistent problems, the production's hip-hop rhythms and diverse cast celebrate America as a nation of immigrants – enslaved and free. They point with hope to American culture's potential to wrestle with and even overcome the injustices built into the foundation of the United States. On the night of this particular performance, however, the cast was not content to let the show speak for itself. After the curtain fell, the actor playing Aaron Burr glossed the play in an impassioned speech directed at Pence. An acting vice president addressed a vice president-elect: 'We, sir – we – are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us'.[1] Any time a public figure attends a theatrical event, his presence in the audience itself functions as a performance; this actor's post-show speech amplified Pence's role as a spectator. In doing so, it raised the question of the relationship between theater and politics. Not only did a politician

Earlier versions of this essay have benefited from conversations with many thoughtful readers. I would like to thank Adam Schulman, in whose sophomore language tutorial at St. Johns College I was first shocked into profound aporia by *Troilus and Cressida*. I am also grateful for helpful comments from Richard Halpern, Rüdiger Campe, Phil Chandler, the University of Washington Performance Studies Reading Group, and an anonymous reviewer for *Early Modern Literary Studies*.

[1] Christopher Mele and Patrick Healy, '"Hamilton" Had Some Unscripted Lines for Pence. Trump Wasn't Happy', *The New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2016, < https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/mike-pence-hamilton.html> (accessed 11 0ct. 2019).

make a show of his spectatorship, but an actor made sure to frame the performance as an act of speaking truth to power.

The episode prompted a series of tweets from President-elect Donald Trump disparaging the actors for 'harassing' Pence. 'The theater must always be a safe and special place', Trump tweeted.[2] Quite unintentionally, historically speaking, Trump was right. In many societies, the theater has been exempted from norms of the land and provided a (relatively) safe place in which to voice dissent and raise critical concerns.[3] The theater, in other words, has been a safe place to be dangerous.[4] This article will explore the logical dynamics of this exceptional space and its relation to political power in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601). The play, set during the Trojan War and composed in the shadow of Irish expeditions and palace intrigue in Elizabethan England, strikingly exhibits the double action of political theater and theatrical politics at work in Pence's night at *Hamilton.* I argue that Shakespeare's play offers a strident critique of the theater's exceptionality and reveals a hidden but necessary collusion between authority and performance. At stake is the legitimacy of any political theater tacitly or expressly sanctioned by the state.

A rich conversation has developed over the last two decades around the contributions of Shakespeare's dramas to twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses of sovereignty, exception, and political theology.[5] Whether scholars employ twentieth-century theorists to understand Shakespeare-era politics or use Shakespeare's texts to critique modern theories, they generally agree that Carl Schmitt's concepts of sovereignty, the state of

[2] Mele and Healy.

[3] Of course, this is not the safety Trump had in mind. His tweet desires the theater to be a space where the *audience* is safe from challenge and perturbation rather than the performers from suppression and censorship. He wants the theater to be a space of anodyne entertainment, not of moral efficacy, emotional catharsis, or intellectual provocation.

[4] For Elizabethan theater's simultaneous 'containment and subversion' of the status quo, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1988) p. 40. Though still subject to strict censorship, the early modern theater allowed oblique commentary on contemporary events, and it was a space exempt from some regulations, such as sumptuary laws.

[5] This article relies on and contributes to an active discussion of Shakespeare and political theology. See especially: Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); *Political Theology and Early Modernity*, ed. by Graham Hammill, Julia Lupton, and Etienne Balibar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Christopher Pye, *The Storm at Sea: Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); and *Political Aesthetics in the Era of Shakespeare: Rethinking the Early Modern*, ed. by Christopher Pye (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020). Interestingly, none of these studies have taken up *Troilus and Cressida* as a major focus.

exception, and their elaboration by Giorgio Agamben are highly resonant with the worlds that Shakespeare's plays call into being.[6] This essay builds on the claims of these scholars, especially Victoria Kahn's exploration of early modern fictions as spaces for 'making' political knowledge.[7] Nevertheless, these studies tend to neglect the *performative* aspects of the dramas they analyze. In my reading, *Troilus and Cressida* insists that the theatrical space is constitutive of political action. This claim is based on the hitherto neglected fact that the play's consummate politician, Ulysses, and its adept political satirist, Thersites, studiously avoid one another. Yet their policy and performance rely on each other to function.

The argument will unfold in five acts. First, an episode between Odysseus and Thersites from Homer's *Iliad*, freshly available in English translation at the time of *Troilus and Cressida*'s composition, demonstrates the extent to which Shakespeare's 'source' already subscribes to a proto-Schmittian concept of sovereignty. Next, I turn to Shakespeare's reimagining of these two characters: the person and agency of Shakespeare's Thersites exhibits *political theater* in its essential form while that of his Ulysses reveals the *theatricality of politics*. Importantly, the nature of the political has shifted from open theatricality in the Homeric Odysseus to hidden performativity with the Elizabethan Ulysses.[8] Fourth, these readings invite a return to the play's contribution to the sovereignty debates. Ulysses' and Thersites' actions inscribe the limits of agency in both theater and politics. Finally, these two characters' relations uncover a mutually unacknowledged collusion between the performance of resistance and the performance of power. This hidden symbiosis constitutes a perpetual exceptionality at the intersection of politics and theater. Ultimately, it is the visibility or invisibility of the state of exception that determines whether performances are political or theatrical.

[6] For a reading that is typical in its discourse partners (Schmitt, Kantorowicz, Agamben) but exceptional in its theoretical insight, see Anselm Haverkamp, *Shakespearean Genealogies of Power: A Whispering of Nothing in 'Hamlet', 'Richard II', 'Julius Caesar', 'Macbeth', 'The Merchant of Venice', and 'The Winter's Tale'* (New York: Routledge, 2011) pp. 47-56.

[7] Kahn calls 'poeisis' the 'missing third term…between politics and religion'; see *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 3.

[8] This essay works with the conceptions of 'theatricality' and 'performativity' as elaborated by Erika Fischer-Lichte. Performance is the broader term: any activity done *for* or *before* others. Theatricality is the subset of performances undertaken in the context of an aesthetic frame (which will vary from culture to culture). See *The Semiotics of Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 139-40.

1. Sovereignty among Homer's Greeks

Troilus and Cressida's two plots are seemingly at odds with one another. The love story between the titular characters is set in Troy and amounts to Shakespeare's farce of medieval romance.[9] These love scenes are interspersed with episodes from the Greek army besieging Troy's walls and depict a bowdlerized version of Homer's *Iliad*. The greatest Greek warrior, Achilles, has petulantly withdrawn from the fight and the Greek generals attempt to woo him back into the fray. The two disparate plots – combat and love – mirror each other in telling ways, however, as Thersites' recurring refrain drives home: 'war and lechery, nothing else holds fashion' (5.2.202).[10] The play is a travesty of heroic ideals whether in the bedroom or on the battlefield, which become increasingly indistinguishable.

Four years before *Troilus and Cressida* was composed, the first partial translation of Homer appeared in English. The Greek scenes in Shakespeare's play bear an uncanny resemblance to the events depicted in the seven books of the *Iliad* published by his fellow playwright George Chapman.[11] The differences between Odysseus' political engagements in the epic poem and Ulysses' in the drama are particularly instructive in highlighting what is at stake in competing notions of sovereignty at the time.[12] Tudor apologists in Elizabethan England largely subscribed to the definition of sovereignty expounded by Jean Bodin in *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576): the source of a regime's power must be supreme, absolute, indivisible, and perpetual.[13] Yet Odysseus' actions in the *Iliad* fundamentally call this understanding of sovereignty into question.

Book Two of the *Iliad* is an account of how the Greek High Command deals with the turmoil occasioned in the army by Achilles' decision to withdraw from fighting. It begins with Agamemnon's idea to 'test' the loyalty of the troops by staging a phony call to retreat and return to Greece. The commander-in-chief's speech, eloquently bemoaning all the

[9] Most pointedly, the play parodies Geoffrey Chaucer's poignant *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380s).

[10] William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David Bevington (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1998). All quotations from the play are from this edition, and cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line numbers.

[11] George Chapman, *Seaven Bookes of the Iliades*, 1598 (I, II, VII-XI).

[12] Although both Shakespeare and Chapman name Odysseus by his Latinate moniker, Ulysses, for the sake of clarity I distinguish between the two versions of the character in the following by referring to Odysseus when discussing the *Iliad* and Ulysses when analysing *Troilus and Cressida*.

[13] See Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of a Commonweal*, trans. by Richard Knolles (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) p. 84.

long years of failure and exhorting the soldiers to 'flie to our lov'd home' (2.118),[14] is far more successful – but with the opposite effect – than Agamemnon ever intended. Instead of eliciting from the warriors fiery oaths of determination, the army takes its leader at his word. As if all their pent-up fears and weariness were suddenly released at once, they rush like a mighty wave, shouting and shoving toward the ships. The narrator does not describe Agamemnon's reaction to this emergency, and this very silence leaves his image frozen hapless in the imagination, as meanwhile it is Odysseus who must save the situation. Agamemnon neither acts nor speaks again until all the measures Odysseus undertakes – first to quell the insurrection and then to prevent its recurrence by orchestrating its aftermath – are brought to a safe and successful conclusion. Agamemnon's helplessness during the 230-line crisis is emphasized by the way in which Odysseus takes charge. Odysseus' temporary coup could serve as a textbook instance of Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty: 'Sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception'.[15] Agamemnon is the nominal leader of the Greeks, but it is Odysseus who effectively declares a state of exception and takes both the actual and symbolic reins of governing into his own hands.

Odysseus' first act in response to the crisis is to seize the visible symbol of Agamemnon's sovereignty. Odysseus 'Himselfe to Agamemnon went, / His incorrupted scepter tooke, his scepter of descent, / And with it went about the fleete' (2.155-8). This is not a case where the leader begs for advice or requests aid; in fact, by wresting from the king's hands the staff, the visible sign of Agamemnon's power, Odysseus baldly usurps authority from his passive superior without so much as a by-your-leave. It is not clear from the text whether many people witnessed Odysseus' act of mutiny. The *Iliad*'s narrator lays much more emphasis on the public visibility of the results of Odysseus' presumption (i.e., what he does with the scepter) than on the public's knowledge of his means to power (i.e., how he obtained the scepter).

The use to which Odysseus subsequently puts this authority is telling. Homer reports two procedures, one for kings and men of influence, another for commoners. For the former, Odysseus employs 'soft words'; for the latter, hard blows with the staff. To both, though

[14] Homer, *Chapman's Homer. Vol. 1, The Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Quotations from Homer are from this edition, and are cited parenthetically by book and line number. I quote Chapman's Homer in this essay not out of any Keatsian sentimentalism, but because it is the version that Shakespeare would have had access to as he wrote *Troilus and Cressida*, and because Chapman's formulations display contemporary understandings of political action. The argument about sovereignty here is targeted precisely at the early modern conceptions of power reflected in the language of Chapman's translation, not necessarily the very different conditions of Archaic Greece.

[15] Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1993), p. 11. My translation.

with widely different emphases, Odysseus speaks of the importance of due respect to their rightful leaders. The pointed tension between Odysseus' words and actions in this scene is hard to miss. This is especially true with 'the man of the people', whom

> He cudgeld with his scepter, chid, and said: 'Stay, wretch, be still
> And heare thy betters. Thou art base, and in power and skill
> Poore and unworthy, without name in counsel or in warre.
> We must not all be kings. The rule is most irregulare
> Where many rule. One Lord, one king propose to thee; and he
> To whom wise Saturn's sonne hath given both law and Emperie
> To rule the publicke is that king'. Thus, ruling, he restrain'd
> The hoast from flight (2.168-176).

Here Odysseus takes the scepter – the very symbol of authority and degree that he has snatched from the man titled with authority and highest degree among the Greeks – and beats people over the head with it, before brandishing it while preaching respect to the one, singular, divinely appointed ruler. Odysseus' speech prefigures Bodin's definition of sovereignty as supreme, indivisible, and perpetual authority – while his actions undermine the very words he speaks. With this devious irony, Odysseus turns the metaphorical sign of power into the literal weapon that enforces it, thereby revealing the hollow semiotics of political authority.

Odysseus takes control, stems the retreat, and convinces the army to return to an orderly assembly, but his work is not yet done. One man still resists his urgings, Thersites 'of the endless speech', who stands up in front of the hosts and loudly indicts Agamemnon for his conduct of the war and for his unjust behavior. Thersites' complaints sound reasonable and his accusations justified. It is precisely on this account that they are so dangerous. Odysseus, however, knows how best to respond. Still in front of the gathered assembly, he accosts Thersites first with words of personal slander, and then with bald threats. At no point does he dare address the actual issues brought up by the dissenter. But even this is not enough to negate the effect of Thersites' subversive words on the morale of the troops: 'This said, his insolence/ He settled with his scepter, strooke his backe and shoulders so / That bloody wales rose' (2.230-2). Thersites cowers and weeps at the blows, and the result of this violence in its audience is that they *laugh* at its victim. Odysseus 'knows the minds of men' well enough to realize fully that they will not listen seriously to the words and message of anyone shown to be ridiculous. Laughter at the speaker renders his speech harmless. Only by submitting Thersites to public ridicule is Odysseus able to nullify the very dangerous effect the content of his words could have on

the morale of reasoning men. The Ithacan deftly avoids the pitfall of their *thinking* by diverting their attention to a comic show, by bringing them to laugh instead.

The lesson to draw from Odysseus' handling of this crisis is very clear. Though he is best known for his wise counsel, for his 'silver tongue' that can convince anyone of anything, Odysseus knows that mere words are often insufficient to move men's minds; that flagrant public violence comprises at times the most effective rhetoric. The distinguishing feature of his humiliation of Thersites is its theatricality. Odysseus gives speeches immediately before and after he strikes Thersites and makes him cry, but it is only in response to this act of public bullying that the narrator reports (in greater detail than 'they shouted their approval') the crowd's enthusiastic approbation of their leader: 'O ye Gods, how infinitely take/ [Odysseus'] vertues in our good! Author of Counsels, great / In ordering armies, how most well this act became his heate / To beate from Councell this rude foole!' (2.236-239).

This episode from the *Iliad* offers two important political lessons. First, in pointed contrast to Bodin's vaunted unity of sovereignty, the nominal and effectual wielders of power are different persons. The true source of authority is revealed in the state of exception: far from being indivisible or perpetual, sovereignty is fragmented and transient. Second, power is legitimized in its theatrical reenactment. Odysseus' successful suppression of the retreat in the Greek camp stems from his quick arrogation and display of the *visible symbols* of authority; he aims to prevent future disquiet by the timely choreography of physically silencing Thersites, the government's most vocal critic, as a public example and theatrical warning.

By reimagining this Homeric constellation of characters and events, *Troilus and Cressida* pushes this implicit critique of official ideology even further. Shakespeare's Thersites is a more biting political satirist than his Homeric template and his Ulysses is a more subtle manipulator than Odysseus. Their interaction in the play, moreover, differs startlingly from that in the epic. Together, they force a new reckoning with both the Homeric/Schmittian critique of Bodin's sovereignty and with the open theatricality of politics practiced by Homer's Odysseus.

2. Thersites' Political Theater

Thersites, in Homer a rabble-rouser easily disposed of by Odysseus' fists, takes on a much greater role in Shakespeare's play. He seems at first just a clever little nuisance, who can bandy words all around so stupid a dolt as Ajax, but who is not smart enough to avoid his

blows. The only things he ever bothers to utter are insults, unless he decides to vary the tenor of his speech with the odd curse or two. Even when he is alone on stage (and this happens with Thersites more than with any other character in the play), he chiefly assaults absent characters. Though audiences may begin by laughing off this 'scurrilous and deformed Greek' (*Dramatis Personae*), the depth and seriousness of his perceptions slowly become evident. Thersites' caustic speeches have justifiably been compared to the chorus of a Greek tragedy.[16] Already in his first appearance, his comment that Ulysses and Nestor yoke Achilles and Ajax 'like draught-oxen and make [them] plough up the wars' (2.1.108-9), is an acute critical analysis. Thersites later summarizes the entire war effort: 'Here is such patchery, such juggling, such knavery! All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to bleed to death upon. Now the dry serpigo on the subject and war and lechery confound all!' (2.3.73-7). Thersites' bitter and unrelenting denunciation of the hypocrisy and veniality of the war leaders condemns the fundamental immorality underlying both sides of the Trojan conflict, and by extension, all sides in any war.

Thersites' antics in the Greek camp function as political theater par excellence. His colorful commentaries repeatedly bring to light the vacuousness of the ideologies underpinning power, and simultaneously reveal the unjust subjugation of the lower classes of soldiers. Thersites' performances are non-mimetic theatrics that rely on improvisation and audience interaction. In fact, they function as a theatre of the oppressed, anticipating many of Augusto Boal's prescriptions for activist theater.[17] It is important to distinguish here between the *world of the play*, in which Thersites' theatrics are unscripted interventions against blind acceptance of hegemony, and the *world of the historical performance,* in which he is played by an actor on a stage who has memorized his role. The improvisational and participatory theatre envisioned by Boal is part of the diegetic fiction created in the play-world, not a function of the scripted and bounded performance of *Troilus and Cressida* for its extra-diegetic playgoers. Though the

[16] See Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). p. 70.

[17] See Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, trans. Adrian Jackson, (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3-7. Thersites at various points fulfils Boal's demands for 'newspaper theater', 'invisible theater', and 'the rainbow of desires'. His commentary on the battle scenes (especially the Paris/Menalaus fight and Troilus/Diomedes pursuit) is a kind of 'newspaper theatre', revealing the absurdity of viewing mortal combat as a scorekeeper or chronicler of noble sport. Thersites' remarks to Ajax and Achilles about their instrumentality in Ulysses' schemes (2.1.106f.) or his derivation of fools from Agamemnon down to Patroclus (2.3.45-70) share the goals of Boal's '*Rainbow of Desires*', 'which, using words… enables the theatricalisation of introjected oppressions' (Boal, *Aesthetics,* p. 5). In the betrayal scene, which has two separate sets of observers, Thersites comments on Diomedes' courtship of Cressida as well as on the spying Troilus, to reveal to the larger audience in their seats the workings of this reversed 'invisible theatre' (p. 6).

Elizabethan audience is not threatened by the direct action of political theater, they bear witness to a fictional *on-stage* dissolution of the barriers Boal wants to break down between spectators and actors. The way that Achilles, Patroclus and Ajax interact with Thersites during his lively improvisations could serve as an illustration for Boal's Spect-Actor.[18] Thersites hence represents a mimetic depiction of non-mimetic political theater.

Troilus and Cressida accomplishes many objectives Boal held necessary for the theater's full liberating potential to be actualized: a 'phase of the 'destruction' of the theater – of all its values, rules, precepts, formulas, etc' is required. Boal could be describing *Troilus and Cressida*, a notorious dramatic rule-breaker, when he writes about a play that accomplished these goals: it 'destroyed conventions […]. It even destroyed what must be recovered. It destroyed empathy. Not being able to identify itself at any time with any character, the audience took the position of a cold spectator of consummated events'. [19] Many critics of *Troilus and Cressida* have complained (or rejoiced, depending on their ideological bent) about this very feature of the play, its repeated resistance to empathetic identification.

Thersites, however, never reaches the constructive solution-making enterprise that Boal envisions for the theatre of the oppressed.[20] Unlike the character in Homer, Shakespeare's Thersites never makes the eminently sensible suggestion that the Greek soldiers give up their corrupt enterprise: he does not harangue the army to return to the ships and go home. By the end of the play the audience can only recite along with Thersites his dour litany of war and lechery; his commitment to telling truth to power remains mired in caustic observation, and never aspires to revolutionary protest. In order to understand the troubling impotence of political theater in *Troilus and Cressida*, it is necessary to examine the political structure in the Greek camp that both gives license to such piercing critique and simultaneously insulates itself from its effects. Let us turn to the engineer of all Greek policy, Ulysses.

3. Ulysses' Theatrical Politics

Shakespeare gives Ulysses more speeches, and longer ones, than any other character in the play. Despite this, we hear less of what Ulysses actually thinks than we do from any

[18] Boal, *Aesthetics*, p. 86.

[19] Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. and Maria-Odelia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000) p. 166.

[20] Thersites never achieves or aspires to 'Legislative Theatre'. See Boal, *Aesthetics*, p. 7.

of the other less wordy characters. Ulysses has no soliloquies: he always has an audience; and the desires, weaknesses, or faculties of his interlocutor determine the tenor and purpose of all his speech. Not once does Shakespeare's Ulysses mention his longing for peace, for Ithaca, for Penelope. It is impossible to construct any theory of Ulysses' motives on the basis of his own asseverations taken at face-value, and what one can ascertain by sifting through the varying strains of his conflicting dialogue in the play, playing a game of negation and reduction, judging from the actual results of his speeches in order to guess at his possible aims, is rife with conjecture. Nevertheless, the logic of his speeches and actions lead to two important revisions of the lessons learned from Homer's Odysseus. As will be seen in the final section below, Shakespeare's Ulysses takes the critique of Bodin's sovereignty even further than Odysseus does in the *Iliad*. The present section will focus on Ulysses' reevaluation of Odysseus' political theatricality. Strikingly, in contrast to Odysseus' open show of power, Ulysses *hides* his performative agency at every juncture.

In his advice to the Greek War Council (1.3), Ulysses launches into a disquisition on Tudor political orthodoxy, in ostensible defense of degree, hierarchy, and aristocratic privilege. As soon as Ulysses closes, Agamemnon – the captain and general of all the Greeks, who has been quietly soaking up all this talk about the importance of observing Degree – looks up to his inferior and implores, 'The nature of the sickness found, Ulysses, / What is the remedy?' (1.3.140-1). (Pause for laughter.) Even though he would seem to have his superior right where he might want him, i.e., begging for advice, Ulysses does not immediately take advantage of this opportunity to tell his betters what to do. He does not answer Agamemnon's direct request for policy, but instead launches into what is possibly the most irony-laden example of play-within-play-within-play prior to Pirandello. Just as in the model provided by Book II of the *Iliad*, the wily Ithacan has used rhetoric to maneuver his intended audience into a forum of receptivity, and now he shall clinch his victory with a bit of play-acting. This time, however, his spectators are not the Greek army but its generals, and so his showmanship must change accordingly.

When Agamemnon asks him what to do, Ulysses avoids the question and changes focus from general observations on disrespect in the army to specific grievances:

> The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns
> The sinew and the forehand of our host,
> Having his ear full of his airy fame,
> Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent
> Lies mocking our designs. With him Patroclus
> Upon a lazy bed the livelong day

Breaks scurril jests,
And with ridiculousness and awkward action –
Which, slanderer, he imitation calls –
He pageants us (1.3.142-51).

It must have been difficult for him to stifle his mirth, but so far is Ulysses from backing down that he goes on to exacerbate the wonderful irony of the situation by describing in cruel detail to Agamemnon and Nestor how Patroclus[21] mimes them for Achilles' pleasure. The characterization of Agamemnon is especially multivalent. It not only works within the framework of the scene to get Agamemnon (the subject and object of its rhetoric) to become enraged and pliable to Ulysses' wishes, but it also functions simultaneously as a critique both of the chief king's style of leadership (i.e., of bad politics), and of bad acting.

Sometime, great Agamemnon,
Thy topless deputation he puts on,
And like a strutting player, whose conceit
Lies in his hamstring and doth think it rich
To hear the wooden dialogue and sound
'Twixt his stretch'd footing and the scaffoldage,
Such to-be-pitied and o'er-wrested seeming
He acts thy greatness in; and when he speaks,
'Tis like a chime-a-mending, with terms unsquar'd,
Which, from the tongue of roaring Typhon dropp'd,
Would seem hyperboles (1.3.151-61).

How much fun Ulysses must be having as he acts out an actor's acting the imperious roar of his commander-in-chief. It must be a great relief for Ulysses when, by enacting how Achilles, 'From his deep chest laughs a loud applause' (1.3.163), he can release his own pent-up laughter at the whole affair. The effect this mummery has on the generals, meanwhile, is not to make them livid at Ulysses, whom the theatre audience sees to be brazenly poking fun at them to their faces, but rather to stir their dissatisfaction with Achilles, the star warrior and darling of the army. All Ulysses' contrivances throughout the play tend towards some definite end. In this case, the goal is to remove Agamemnon

[21] Ultimately my argument in the larger context of politics and theatricality in the play will hinge on why Ulysses names *Patroclus* (rather than Thersites) as the offending player, but for the present exposition of Ulysses' position it is immaterial who actually performs the mimicry, or even whether it is an invention of Ulysses' imagination.

and Nestor from the influence of Achilles by making them feel slighted by him. Ulysses needs to cotton them to the seemingly self-defeating notion of humiliating and disrespecting the Greek's greatest weapon.

The scene, no matter how amusing and effective in its self-aware theatricality, is just one example out of many theatrical means Ulysses exploits to achieve his political ends. The 'policy', 'wisdom', and 'prescience' that Ulysses counts as vital to running the army, which certainly seem to be just the opposite of theatrical operations (one associates them more with secret intelligence units or sequestered cabals), are in fact at the very heart of Ulysses' dramatic politics. Whereas Homer's Odysseus grandstanded the show of governing in front of the masses of soldiers, Shakespeare's Ulysses always stays in the background, 'performing' at most to one or a few individuals. In the Greek Council scene he is acting out his own production, but more often Ulysses functions more as the director or stage-manager of the scenarios he plans and produces. The 'still and mental parts' that Ulysses extols are indeed nothing other than dramaturgical policy-making, as evinced by all his appearances on stage. In every other scene in which Ulysses plays a role, he appears not as a dramatic player in the action, but rather as the instigator and conductor of all the other characters, who perform as actors under his direction. Ulysses concocts elaborate pageants to 'puff up' Ajax and to 'scorn' Achilles. All the generals have their roles to play, and Ulysses, like the actor in *Hamilton*, follows up by giving the intended audience program notes so that they do not miss the point of the performance (2.3, 3.3). The essence of politics lies in the proper conception of the world as stage, with one's fellows as players to be guided *and* as audience-members to be influenced.

Ulysses' famous speech to Achilles about Time's forgetfulness, and the necessity of continual public action, is itself a lesson in the nature of performativity. To maintain one's public image, one must constantly strut before a fickle audience prone to forget the heroic acts of two minutes ago in favor of the mediocre sensations of the moment. 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin', Ulysses claims in what is likely the most (mis)quoted line from the play. This unifying bond of humanity is not the noble compassion that most of the line's citers would like it to be, but rather 'that all with one consent praise new-born gauds' (3.3.175-6). The constant desire for novel entertainment is what unites humans. Anyone who realizes and exploits this trait will gain influence and power; the best politician must understand glitzy showmanship.

Though Ulysses preaches the necessity of constant showmanship, though he urges Achilles never to let the intermission between his public acts of greatness drag out too long, he himself never appears before any crowd in the play. Ulysses seems content to remain in the shadows, working and organizing from behind the scenes while others

garner all the stage glory.[22] This tendency is further stressed by the next turn that Ulysses' persuasive strategy with Achilles takes. When he pauses to catch his breath after his long speech on the fickleness of public esteem, Achilles replies guardedly, 'Of this my privacy / I have strong reasons' (3.3.190). Ulysses immediately and nimbly changes tack from the sociological and philosophical ruminations of his previous remarks to the personal and concrete. He bluntly lets Achilles know that the leadership is aware of his secret indiscretions with a Trojan daughter of Priam. Ulysses then launches into an ominous speech extolling the omniscience of the state.

> The providence that's in a watchful state
> Knows almost every grain of Pluto's gold,
> Finds bottom in th' incomprehensive deep,
> Keeps place with thought, and (almost like the gods)
> Do thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles.
> There is a mystery, with whom relation
> Durst never meddle, in the soul of state,
> Which hath an operation more divine
> Than breath or pen can give expressure to (3.3.195-203).

This description of a mysterious intelligence service (which is often compared to Elizabeth's extensive spy-network, of which Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights – like Marlowe – had grounds to be wary) seems at first a political investment of Ulysses in direct opposition to the theatrical. Its requirements for secrecy and anonymity are hard to square with the showy publicity of political pageantry. I would argue, however, that this passage is a precise exposure of a necessary and essential element of theatricality: direction and production. Only a fraction of the people involved in show-business are stars, or even actors. Much more powerful are producers who choose what projects are worth their investment, and directors who orchestrate and conduct the actual working of the show.[23] Both of these roles require the kind of intimate knowledge of their audience that Ulysses lauds in this speech, which echoes his earlier defense of the 'still and mental parts' in leadership. I maintain that Ulysses' contentment to remain out of the limelight

[22] Actors are referred to as 'shadows' several times in Shakespeare's plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth*, and, arguably, *Richard III*. Ulysses, then, ever working from the shadows, would be the actor *par excellence*.

[23] There were no 'directors' in the modern understanding of the job in Elizabethan theatre, but Philip Henslowe's recordkeeping shows just how much power the directors of players' companies had over both the writers and actors in their companies. *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

and manipulate actors and events from behind the stage does not contradict, but in fact results directly from his dramaturgical conception of politics.

It is in this aspect of Ulysses' *hidden* theatricality that *Troilus and Cressida*, moreover, departs from the kind of politics dramatized in *Richard II* (1595). In the earlier history play, Richard is so obsessed with the importance of the outward signs of his majesty that it is easy to equate the symbols of authority with their political efficacy. Even Henry, Richard's ouster, realizes the need for a public display of the prescribed ritual for the transfer of these symbols. It has been often noted that Shakespeare's histories can be read as meditations on the legitimacy of the various regimes they represent,[24] and *Richard II* is the play that most explicitly examines legitimacy as the theatrical representation of the symbols of power. *Troilus and Cressida* goes to the other extreme. If Odysseus in the *Iliad* makes use of the scepter both as a symbolic and as a practical tool (i.e., to beat people into submission), Ulysses in the play dispenses with these physical symbols altogether. Though he is careful never to make a show of power per se, he still repeatedly instigates theatrical scenarios to influence and persuade. Instead of lifeless symbols like scepters or crowns, Ulysses concerns himself with manipulating people to play (and most importantly, to be seen playing – either by themselves or by others) certain roles. For Ulysses, the persons around him become symbols and tools who function simultaneously as spectators and players in the negotiations of influence. Both *Richard II* and *Troilus and Cressida* are plays about the theatricality of politics, but the former is a grandiloquent tragedy of power as representation while the latter is an expose of power as backstage machination. If the one vests material things with life and virility, the other treats living people as objects to be manipulated.[25]

[24] Many scholars agree that legitimacy is a major theme – if not *the* theme – of the history plays (and some go on to make it the subject of the romances, as well), but they have widely divergent interpretations of how the plays treat this theme. Some claim that the plays enact a Machiavellian denial of legitimacy as an intrinsically meaningful category, but reveal it as a propagandistic tool for and against the existing exercisers of power – e.g., Tim Spiekerman, *Shakespeare's Political Realism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) – while others see the plays as meditations on both valid and invalid claims to legitimacy, and as affirmations of the rights and duties of both the rulers and the ruled that will be respected in a legitimate regime – e.g., Constance Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997). Haverkamp exposes the aporia upon which Tudor myths of legitimacy rest and makes Richard II into a paradigm of Agamben's 'paradoxical *exclusion within* the law' (*Genealogies*, p. 52).

[25] This observation about the objectification of characters in *Troilus and Cressida* is also echoed in several deconstructive readings of the play, which point out how it pits notions of subjectivity against ideas of identity. See especially Linda Charnes, '"So Unsecret to Ourselves": Notorious Identity and the Material Subject in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.4 (1989), 413-40.

4. Limits of Politics and Theater

If *Richard II* has been one of the two foci of the elliptical Shakespearean contribution to political theology, *Hamlet* is the other.[26] It turns out that *Troilus and Cressida* is the hitherto unnoticed center. Victoria Kahn convincingly argues that Schmitt's opposition of the aesthetic and the political ignores the many ways they rely on each other in early modern texts. *Hamlet* exposes the two-sided falseness of this dichotomy: not only does the aesthetic do political work, but the political can be conceived of only in terms of aesthetic fictions. To speak with Kahn, political forms and realities come into being through the action of artistic poiesis.[27] *Troilus and Cressida* takes this mutual interdependence as a given and pushes it to the extreme, surprisingly, by revealing a radical *avoidance* between the aesthetic and the political.

It is true that the ultimate figure of the political, Ulysses, relies on theatrical machinations to achieve his ends. It is also undeniable that the targets of Thersites' satirical invectives are political. Yet though Ulysses' politics are theatrical and Thersites' theater is political, the two nevertheless eschew each other in this play. Their mutual avoidance underscores what Johannes Türk, in his reading of Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba*, identifies as 'a zone where the situation of an *existential conflict insists in the aesthetic play itself* in the form of manifest absence'.[28] For Türk, this zone is the definition of 'the tragic'. The generic ambivalence of *Troilus and Cressida* may owe much to its perpetual skirting around this 'zone' between aesthetic play and existential conflict. Shakespeare's play hence illustrates Walter Benjamin's distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*: whereas tragedy turns on an individual character's decision (or lack thereof – e.g., Hamlet); the baroque mourning play depicts the displacement of sovereignty from decision making.[29] Benjamin specifically cites the tyrant's indecision about the state of exception, but in *Troilus and Cressida* the seeming decisiveness of any given character is always already determined elsewhere. The play hence reveals itself as a Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* through and through.

---

[26] For *Richard II*, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957); Haverkamp, *Genealogies*, pp. 47-56; Victoria Kahn, *Future*, pp. 63-67. For *Hamlet*, see Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba: der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985); Kahn, *Future*, pp. 38-53; Johannes Türk, 'The Intrusion: Carl Schmitt's Non-Mimetic Logic of Art', *Telos* 142 (2008), 73-89.

[27] Kahn, *Future*, pp. 23-53.

[28] Türk, 'Intrusion', p. 83, original emphasis.

[29] See *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (Verso: London, 1977), p. 71.

Even though theatricality might seem ontologically tied to the showiness of *presence*, I claim here that this *absence* is suggestively represented by the space of the stage. Agamben's glosses on the state of exception are instructive about the space of such a 'mutual inclusion of excluded opposites'.[30] Agamben repeatedly writes about the state of exception in spatial terms: he describes its topography, and characterizes it as a locus, place, zone, no-man's land, border, threshold, field, or as an emptiness, kenomatic state, lacuna, caesura, gap.[31] Like Peter Brook's study of theater, Agamben's treatise on politics is concerned with exploring the sources and potentials of *The Empty Space.*

This liminal vacuum of theater's relation to politics is at the heart of *Troilus and Cressida.* The impotence of Thersites' truth-telling theater in the play stems from its ultimate imbrication with Ulysses' power. The hidden relation between these two characters points to both the unavoidable marginalization of subversive theater and the limits of political show. Shakespeare's play, while positing the powerful rapprochement of politics and theater explored earlier, simultaneously announces its discomfort with this explanation as a satisfactory or exhaustive model.

The principal contention here is based on the following observation, which scholars have neglected: Ulysses never comes into conflict with Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*. Whereas the Thersites/Odysseus face-off serves as the central piece of political theatricality in Book II of the *Iliad*, in Shakespeare's play they never share a scene together.[32] So far is Ulysses from physically assaulting Thersites in public that he avoids

---

[30] Türk, 'Intrusion', p. 83. For Türk's Schmitt, it is important that effective political theater be 'non-mimetic'. In the activity of Thersites, the aesthetic has abandoned mimesis altogether. Thersites' theater is not one that 'holds a mirror up to nature', but one that speaks truth to power – so long as that 'power' is held by the generals who do not truly coordinate the policy of the Greek army. He engages in witty 'derivations' of Agamemnon, proving with dense logic that the ostensible chief of the Greeks is a fool. He does not, despite Ulysses' re-enactment of the sportive mockery in Achilles' tent, mimic the 'real' leader: the sovereign who decides on the exception.

[31] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), pp. 1, 6, 23, 24, 35, 36, 40.

[32] Other than where they are both secret eavesdroppers: Thersites observes Troilus and Ulysses observing Cressida with Diomedes in 4.5, but there is no interaction between the sets of observers in the scene. Ulysses never mentions Thersites by name, and only alludes to him once, in order to explain to Nestor why Ajax is angry with Achilles:

> Nest. What moves Ajax thus to bay at him?
> Ulyss. Achilles hath inveigled his fool from him.
> Nest. Who, Thersites?
> Ulyss. He. (2.3.93-6)

Ulysses thus provides the means to make the following analogy with Homer's *Iliad*: Thersites is to Achilles and Ajax (in *Troilus and Cressida*) as Brisies is to Agamemnon and Achilles (in the *Iliad*). The slave girl

him entirely. Ulysses, in fact, though he seems most earnest when he speaks about the 'still and mental parts' of the 'watchful state', consistently refrains even from mentioning by name – let alone censoring or quelling – the agent most guilty of demoralizing the Greeks.

What could explain this impotence of Ulysses and the state in the face of Thersites? That they recognize Thersites as their most dangerous opponent is clear. Yet after Ulysses explains that Troy stands not by her own strength but by the weakness and divisiveness of the Greeks, he mimics the disrespectful antics of *Patroclus* in Achilles' tent. Patroclus, however, seems constitutionally unable to participate in any exchange of barbs other than as a straight man, much less to put on the incisive kind of political satire that Ulysses describes. Just observe the way that he crumples before Thersites' glancing quip (2.1), his elaborate send-up (3.2), or his scathing ire (5.1). It is clear to all in the camp and in the audience that Thersites is the wit who mocks the generals. As soon as Ulysses finishes his account of the mummery in Achilles' tent, Nestor immediately leaps up to cite Thersites as the prime offender. Yet Ulysses in his wisdom not only avoids directing the state's energies against Thersites, he refrains even from mentioning his name in a situation that clearly refers to him.

All accounts of this scene in the critical literature seem to take it at face value. Even if they question the sincerity of the 'degree speech', they all assume that Ulysses is genuinely enraged by the amateur theatrics of Patroclus.[33] I instead argue that Ulysses

'of the fair cheeks' – the instigation for Achilles' wrath, subject of Homer's entire epic – thus, is replaced by 'a scurrilous and malformed Greek'.

[33] Typical of the accounts in the critical literature is the following: '[Ulysses'] pride injured by the mocking taunts of Achilles, the Greek commander delivers the following diagnosis of his army's problems…' This is from the same writer who claims of the degree speech that we must not take it out of its ironic context, and who argued that 'we should not assume that "Ulysses… completely expresses his creator's views"' (as A.L. Rouse, for instance, did); see Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare, Politics and the State* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986), p. 34. Other accounts of Ulysses in the Greek council scene differ in their treatment of the levels of irony in the degree speech, but all assume Ulysses' earnestness both in accusing Patroclus and in wanting to quell the mimicry; see Barbara Bowen, *Gender in the Theater of War: Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida'* (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 129ff; Charnes, 'Unsecret', pp. 430ff; Christopher Flannery, '*Troilus and Cressida*: Poetry or Philosophy?' in *Shakespeare as a Political Thinker*, ed. by John Alvis and Thomas West (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2000), pp. 164-75 (p. 169); Daniel Juan Gil, 'At the Limits of the Social World: Fear and Pride in *Troilus and Cressida*' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.3 (2001), 336-59 (pp. 352ff); René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), pp. 160-66; Grady, *Universal Wolf*, pp. 68ff; Heather James, *Shakespeare's Troy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 97ff; Ekkehart Krippendorf, *Politik in Shakespeares Dramen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 78ff; Paul Yachnin, '"The Perfection of Ten": Populuxe Art and Artisanal Value in *Troilus and Cressida*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.3 (2005), 306-27 (pp. 318-322).

invents it as a golden rhetorical opportunity to move Agamemnon and Nestor to outrage at Achilles. Ulysses also relishes the chance to mock his inferior betters. Most significantly, however, Ulysses avoids attributing these supposed performances to the only character likely to have performed them (Thersites), and instead deflects the generals' ire towards a character much closer to Achilles personally (Patroclus). When Thersites logically derives the leveling label of 'fool' for everyone from Agamemnon down to Patroclus, Achilles laughingly calls him a 'privileged man' to prevent the offended Patroclus from interrupting his fun (2.3.55). The status of Thersites' privilege runs deeper than even Achilles' support can account for.

This strange lassitude on Ulysses' part towards Thersites is echoed from the other side. Just as the state refrains from quelling Thersites' treasonously demoralizing cabaret, the clown is less vicious about some leaders than others. Though Thersites spares no one in the play from his curses and abuse, he rarely lashes out at Ulysses. He only he mentions the Ithacan twice: once in order to put Achilles in his place with the draught-oxen analogy, and once with the rather mild 'dog-fox' epithet (5.4.10). Compared to the vitriol of invective he levels at Agamemnon, the nominal head of the Greek host, these remarks can almost be read as compliments to Ulysses, the true wielder of power among the Achaians.

The Greek leaders' hesitancy to suppress their most dangerous opponent and the gadfly's reticence to sting the state's true leader are indications at once of the limits of politics and the limits of drama, as well as the unavoidable implication of the one in the other. On the one hand, for a play that reveals, in Ulysses' careful staging of the state's policies, the political *as* essentially theatrical, any subject/spectator who recognizes the corrupt 'botchy core' behind the show (the fact that nothing is represented by the state's representation) represents a political failure. Thersites is an entirely unimpressionable audience and sees through all the glitz and rhetoric to the flimsy props of the state's stage scenery. He is proof that the perceptive critical viewer can be immune to the sway of political pageantry. Politics as theatre can work only as long as the audience does not realize that it is viewing a performance: as long as they do not know themselves to be an audience. The limits of the political, in this understanding, are hence identical with the in/visibility of the stage. It will turn out that the same can be said for the limits of the theatrical. This is the core of my contention: the theatre, just as political power, can function only in a state of exception. When the limits of this state of exception are acknowledged, the performance is 'theatrical'; when they are invisible, the performance is 'political'. Ulysses and Thersites reveal both flipsides of this relation, as well as its hidden unity.

Ulysses' inability or unwillingness to suppress Thersites' vocal criticism (his counter-theatre, so to say) could be seen as the failure of political force to silence its enemies. I argue below, however, that the state (Ulysses) is compelled to work with anti-state elements (Thersites) in order to maintain the very structures that authority's opponents aim to undermine.

Thersites' cunning analyses and accusations against the corruption of the system are eagerly consumed by his audiences. But Thersites' theatrics are never effective in changing the attitudes or actions of his spectators. Thersites' acerbic truth-telling is a diversion for the indolent Achilles, never a gall to reform or rebellion. In fact, perhaps the most compelling argument for Ulysses' hands-off approach to Thersites is his realization of the ultimate impotence of theatre to effect anything beyond the threshold of its own inscribed limits. One is reminded of the proliferation of brilliant political satire in the Age of Trump, which has in no way diminished the popularity of the former president among his supporters.[34] The theater is a place where permissiveness is allowable without repercussion outside its walls – whether canvas (as in Achilles' tent), wooden (as in the Globe), or entirely imaginary. The worlds created to enliven the empty space of the stage cannot survive beyond the confines of Prospero's fragile magic circle.

Thersites' incisive skits do not bring an early end to the Trojan War, any more than the Chamberlain's Men's 1601 performance of *Richard II*, paid for by Essex's supporters, instigated a popular uprising to depose Elizabeth. Even the most damning political satire, when consumed as entertainment or diversion, can be useful to the state in providing their subjects with the feeling – however ephemeral or imaginary – that they are involved in a knowing dialogue. One East-German director, famous for his controversial productions full of anti-state allusions in Dresden during the eighties, complained that the theatre had become a place for harmless venting: a 'safety-valve' for the pent-up frustrations of the populace.[35] Boal offers an analysis of Aristotelian theater that shows how its forms and conventions work to support the status quo of existing power structures.[36] Yet *Troilus and Cressida*, which has been decried and lauded as anti-Aristotelian in every manner,

[34] Entertaining political satire also runs the risk of being interpreted according to its audience's own preconceptions. See Heather LaMarre, Kristen D Landreville, and Michael A Beam, 'The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in The Colbert Report', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14.2 (2009), 212-31.

[35] Dieter Görne, quoted in Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 367-8.

[36] Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. and Maria-Odelia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 1-47.

shows that even attempts at revolutionary theatre are ultimately embroiled and implicated in the structures against which it rebels.

It is important not to confuse this inoculation of the theatre with Ulysses' ultimate failure to change the Greek policy through his theatrical devices. Thersites cannot effect change because the whole world sees him as theatrical; the efficacy of Ulysses' theatrics lies in their avoidance of that label. What power he has derives from his adroit manipulation of performance at various levels; one must search for the causes of his failings elsewhere.[37] Alternatively, a performance could easily stage the final success of Ulysses' performative stratagems to manipulate Achilles' return to the battle, despite all successive setbacks. Michael Boyd's 1998 RSC production of the play did as much by having Ulysses engineer the death of Achilles' lover and blame it on the Trojans: 'Ulysses, with an ambiguous gesture, instructed Diomedes to shoot [Patroclus] in order to win Achilles back into the fray'.[38] In order to be effective, this gestural performative, though visible to the theater audience, must remain invisible to the other characters.

5. Collusion Between Theater and Politics

Troilus and Cressida does not rest satisfied with revealing the mutual reliance of power and theater structurally. It goes on to implicate the theatrical artist even more criminally in the legal construction of the state. Thersites does not limit his anti-establishmentarian work to speech acts. He is the one who delivers Polyxena's letters from Troy to Achilles (cf., 5.1.7-9). Ulysses' spy network, which is aware of Achilles' illicit affair, must also know about the pandering middleman who makes the whole thing possible. The Greeks could easily – and, what's more, justly in the eyes of the public – hang Thersites for treason, thus ridding themselves of his libelous performances without incurring the reputation of undue illiberality in censorship. Why would Ulysses not take advantage of this golden opportunity to knock off Thersites without any bad press? At the very least, Ulysses' 'watchful state' knows of Thersites' treacherous conveyance and allows it to continue. This permissiveness tacitly condones the traitorous correspondence and effectually renders Thersites an informant, whether he is a conscious double agent or

[37] René Girard blames mimetic desire for Ulysses' failure. 'The Politics of Desire in *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 187-208.

[38] Anthony Dawson, 'Introduction' in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 62.

not.[39] Shakespeare would have known of the frequency with which his fellow playwrights, such as Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, worked as spies for Elizabeth's government. The pressure on artists and journalists in authoritarian regimes to act as informants to improve the chances of their work reaching the public is well documented in all ages.

Many twentieth-century productions have cast Thersites as a journalist or war correspondent.[40] Though Thersites, even more ludicrously than Falstaff, proves himself an utter coward on the battlefield, he is never afraid to tell the truth. Honesty is Thersites' only virtue, and it is the one virtue that Ulysses conspicuously lacks. It also happens to be the one human value Ulysses does not mention in his Time speech as being victim to decay and degradation. 'For beauty, wit, / High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service, / Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all/ To envious and calumniating Time' (3.3.172-175). In a play that reveals the inefficacy and hypocrisy of all cherished human endeavors, it is perhaps fitting that the honest man, though a wheedling, deformed coward, is the only character who does not fall at some point under the magical sway of Ulysses' dramatic conniving,[41] and, conversely, that resistance to the state's showmanship is relegated to the poorest, stricken dregs of society. Listen to Boal justify his critique of Aristotle:

> As for poor old me, I come from Penha, a working-class area in the north of Rio de Janeiro, where we call a spade a spade. So I have to be more direct, more objective. I have to tell the brutal truth! It's my destiny; I'm condemned to speak clearly.[42]

[39] A 2006 production of *Troilus and Cressida* made this hidden symbiosis between Ulysses and Thersites – between politics and theatre – visible on stage. Thersites, a camera-carrying journalist played by Molly Schindler, entered and exited the stage area from the audience. She was thus an observer of every single scene in which she did not actively participate. She delivered a sheaf of documents, clearly labeled 'TOP SECRET', to Ulysses when he makes his case to the Greek War Council for why Troy should have already fallen 'but for these instances' (1.3.77). This is one of the ways the production made evident in performance the collusion between Ulysses and Thersites that remains silent in the text. (The Barnstormers, *Troilus and Cressida*, dir. Ellwood Wiggins, Johns Hopkins Spring Shakespeare Production, Baltimore, Maryland, April 29-30, 2006.).

[40] For a thorough overview of the performance history through 2005, see *Shakespeare in Production: Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Frances A. Shirley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[41] Besides, significantly, Cressida who, unlike Thersites, actually encounters Ulysses on stage and manages to get the best of him (4.5.46-53).

[42] Boal, *Oppressed*, p. xix.

Though his phraseology echoes Troilus' protestations about his vice of 'being true', Boal's self-description would be more accurate of Thersites' telling the truth. Truth-tellers, however, are liable to be labeled either 'insane', like Cassandra on the Trojan side, or 'entertainers', like Thersites among the Greeks. Either way, they are rendered harmless by society's inoculating categories. Poets and madmen have more in common than Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* let on: no matter how damning, the truths they utter are nullified by the understanding of hearers that they exist in a state of exception, not transferrable to the world of normalized assumptions and actions.

The states of exception constitutive of politics and theater are not identical: the former is a necessary suspension of law in order for laws to take effect in the world; the latter is a brief imagined respite from those legal realities. Yet the two are related in surprising ways. This essay has shown how the rhetoric of the political in *Troilus and Cressida* reproduces the conditions of its own subversion. First, by choreographing an intertextual dance between Shakespeare's Ulysses and his counterpart in Homer's *Iliad*, the play lays bare a conception of sovereignty at odds with the precepts of Bodin and Tudor orthodoxy. Odysseus' actions serve as an illustration of Carl Schmitt's identification of sovereignty with the decider of the state of exception, but a comparison with Shakespeare's Ulysses pushes this critical reading even further. *Troilus and Cressida* repeats the state of exception at several levels. As with any drama, merely by entering the theater we step into a space where the norms of the land are suspended during our sojourn there. But this play repeatedly reexamines the problematic exception at the root of any move from theory to practice, from real to ideal, from law to legal action, which Agamben identifies as the paradox underlying – and defining – the political. A further layer of exception in the play becomes visible in the hidden collusion between Ulysses and Thersites, which reveals the treacherous complicity at the root of exercising power. They are bound together by operations akin to Agamben's 'force-of-~~law~~',[43] and represent the structural relation of players to audience on the one hand, and of rulers to subjects on the other. Thus the play

[43] See Agamben, *Exception*, pp. 32-40. Terry Eagleton also wrote about *Troilus and Cressida* among a constellation of plays in the context of the paradoxical transition of *langue* to *parole* and of codified to practiced law. But while he aimed his treatment of the legal half of this syllogism (langue : parole :: legal norm : practical realization of law) towards *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, he limited himself to a discussion of the linguistic pair for *Troilus and Cressida*. See Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1986), pp. 35-63. For other explorations of the auto-deconstruction of language in *Troilus and Cressida*, see Charnes, 'Unsecret'; and Elizabeth Freund, '"Ariachne's Broken Woof": The Rhetoric of Citation in *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 19-36. None of them remarks on the collusion between Ulysses and Thersites uncovered here.

both makes a robust pronouncement of the theatricality of politics and provides an incisive structural critique of the problem of the political.

The early modern construction of political realities in artistic poiesis, as diagnosed by Kahn, is enacted on stage in *Troilus and Cressida*, but with remarkably mixed results. Ulysses' antics reveal the reliance of politics on theatrical forms, but Thersites' theater shows the ultimate impotence of dramatic play to make any real political difference. By interrogating traditional assumptions about theater and politics in the context of the founding myth of the Western canon, *Troilus and Cressida* throws the fictions underpinning authority into sharp relief and questions the very possibility of basing an open and just society on the shared foundations of this classical heritage.

A year after attending the Broadway production of *Hamilton*, Vice President Pence seemed to have taken a cue from Ulysses about the perils of publicly engaging with theater's exceptional space. On October 8, 2017, Pence attended an NFL game. When some players knelt during the national anthem in protest of the unequal treatment of black Americans by police, Pence got up and left the stadium.[44] In contrast to standing frozen during the actor's harangue after *Hamilton* a year before, he now slipped away in order not to witness others bearing witness to oppression. But Ulysses' lesson was imperfectly learned. Pence made a showy public spectacle of *not* being a spectator to dissent before the football match. Just as his spectatorship the previous year amplified the voices of the actors in *Hamilton*, his widely reported non-spectatorship now drew more attention to the protesters in Indianapolis. As long as the administration in power shows off its spectatorship *or* its refusal to witness the theater of the oppressed, it will only increase the visibility of the protests. When protesters model their performances on Thersites' fatalistic satire, however, the truths they speak will never escape the empty space of their own echo chamber.

Four years later, during the 2021 January 6 insurrection in Washington D.C., Pence showed more Ulyssean restraint in a scenario that revealed the locus of Schmitt's sovereignty in the U.S. government. Though called upon by the sitting president to trigger a state of exception to prevent the certification of the 2020 election, Pence refused to subvert the legal transfer of power. The destructiveness of the resulting protests at the

[44] Mark Landler, Ken Belson, and Maggie Haberman, 'Trump Tells Pence to Leave N.F.L. Game as Players Kneel During Anthem', *The New York Times*, 8 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/us/politics/pence-anthem-colts.html?module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Politics&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=article> (accessed 11 Jan. 2018).

capital, following Trump's thinly veiled calls to disrupt the proceedings, resembled the fury of the Greek soldiers fleeing to their ships after Agamemnon's speech to test their resolve. Instead of seizing the symbols of power and browbeating the protesters like Homer's Odysseus, however, Pence emulated Shakespeare's Ulysses and calmly moved the senate's deliberations to a more secure location beneath the public chambers and continued the procedural certification. The 'still and mental parts' of a literally 'deep state' saved American democracy – this time, at least – from

> What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
> […] frights, changes, horrors, [that]
> Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
> The unity and married calm of states
> Quite from their fixure! (1.3.96-101).