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Review on Philip Goldfarb Styr, *Shakespeare in the Present: Political Lessons*. Routledge, 2024.

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Philip Goldfarb Styr's *Shakespeare in the Present: Political Lessons* is a unique and inventive critical analysis of the relevance of Shakespearian plays in contemporary American politics. The author is an Assistant Professor of English at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, IA, and his first book with similar topicality, *Shakespeare's Political Imagination: The Historicism of Setting*, was published in 2021. His second book, *Shakespeare in the Present: Political Lessons*, was published in 2023 and with its 100 pages and engaging language is a quick read, which makes it ideal for catering to a diverse readership from both academia and general audience. In his book, Styr argues that Shakespeare's works bear relevance in the present, because "Shakespeare's insights into human character, politics, and the absurdities that these two create when combined are still applicable today, even though the world has shifted" (1). However, the book's novelty does not lie in comparing present-day politics and Shakespeare's plays, but rather in its immediacy and contemporariness since the author focuses on the still unfolding events of (post)-Trump administration America. In contrast to other, contemporary political readings and interdisciplinary analyses of Shakespeare's works, Styr's approach is original, because he emphasizes that the conflicts and characters are directly connectable to contemporary political dilemmas, and, as the title foreshadows, argues that Shakespeare's insights should serve as actionable political lessons to contemporary politicians. To support his argument, he applies real-life examples and case studies, which provide a fresh, presentist view, and distinguish his analysis from other thematically similar, yet more abstract and theoretical works. Lastly, another singularity and virtue of Styr's book is that the comparison between contemporary events and past ones, and contemporary political figures and certain characters in Shakespeare's plays are not a mere analogy, but a complex study of both similarities and differences. In his words, "[w]e cannot search among Shakespeare's characters, hoping to rip off a mask in the style of Scooby-Doo and find our contemporaries hiding underneath" (85). The book consists of six chapters, each reflecting on different concerns and aspects of contemporary American politics, the Biden administration, and the president himself.

The book's first chapter examines partisan polarization and draws parallels between the political landscape of late republican Rome—through the lenses of the plays of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*—and the current state of American politics. Styr reflects on the contrast between the leaders of Roman factions, Brutus and Cassius, identifying the previous with the idealistic, nostalgic view of unity that hearkens back to the early days of the Republic, and the latter with a more pragmatic leadership, who recognizes the dangers of factionalism and uses Brutus's tragic flaw against him. The comparison between Trump's political maneuvering to Cassius's deception is more nuanced than a simple character equivalence, and the author does not fall into the temptation of "citational opportunism" (12). The chapter also sheds light on the fractured political landscape of Shakespeare's

Henry VI and *Richard III*, where Styrt analyzes how personal grievances and conflicts led to factional warfare and peaked during the War of the Roses, which parallel enhances the characteristic of adaptability as a timeless value in political navigation. This chapter serves as a warning about naivety and idealistic thinking since it can have significant implications on political leadership, as well as reminds the leaders never to underestimate the dangers of polarized politics.

The second chapter, “Pretextual Insurrections and Unpunished Crimes,” focuses on the attempted insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the Big Lie of the stolen 2020 election, which Styrt interprets as a phenomenon of its own, and “not merely another symptom of deepening partisan divides within America” (23). He compares these contemporary events and three Shakespearean plays: *Richard II*, *Coriolanus*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Firstly, he posits that Henry Bolingbroke’s rebellion against the unjust and poor ruler, Richard II, is illegitimate and ill-motivated, which shows that treason can be committed under the guise of lawful and justified actions. The comparison between Henry’s and Donald Trump’s actions may seem debatable, given that Trump was a legitimate president and Henry a usurper, yet the author does not apply a simple character parallelism; in fact, he acknowledges significant distinctions between the two. What he highlights through this comparison is “the corrosive idea that a facially plausible excuse should be allowed to smooth over what everyone knows is an illegitimate action” (25). The most conspicuous similarity is the blending of legally justified and illegitimate actions: in like manner to Henry’s unlawful rebellion leading to the Wars of the Roses in 14th-century England, Trump’s insurrection was an attack against legitimacy and authority. Furthermore, Styrt examines the disputed elections and their chaotic aftermath in *Coriolanus*, which warns about the potential consequences of the contemporary political unrest, and power transitions. Lastly, the chapter delves into the question of accountability and punishment through the character of Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. By highlighting forgiveness and overlooking Don John’s past misdeeds, the author raises awareness of the importance of holding individuals accountable for their actions, in general, and especially in public offices. In sum, this chapter is yet another cautionary tale about the fragility and volatility of power, and legitimacy and to not leave wrongdoings, even of people in very high positions, without appropriate punishment.

In the third chapter, “The Tyranny of Expectations,” Styrt emphasizes the contrast between Trump’s four-year presidency and Joe Biden’s long political history and his rise from one of the youngest senators to the oldest president. He argues that while it is a change in presidency, it serves as a renewed hope in political continuity, and stability. The voters experienced a sense of familiarity with Joe Biden, and his extensive political career set up high expectations towards him. The author mentions the “Diamond Joe” public

image that is connected to Biden, which made him an everyman, a relatable person to all his voters. The chapter focuses on the question of managing and, in the case of *King Lear*, mismanaging public expectations. Styrst posits that external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the foreign policy crises, alongside the way he communicates his negotiations made it challenging for Biden to manage the high expectations of his voters. As an allegory for the leadership journey, he uses the example of the transition of Hal to Harry from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which also shows that expectations do not always meet reality and that political leaders must possess awareness and adaptation to public expectations and changing politics. The chapter proves that expectations and political reality require prompt management and these challenges are inherent issues of leadership throughout history.

In the next chapter, the author delves into coalition building and issues with the majority within Congress in modern America. Despite the Democrats' rule of the White House, they have a very "slim majority in the House of Representatives and an even fifty-fifty split in the Senate," this division with the rules of the Congress that requires a supermajority of votes to end debate undermines the political negotiations of Democrats and Biden (52). The author draws parallels between the political negotiations in the Congress and the allegiances of noble houses during the War of the Roses, with its scope on Warwick, the Kingmaker's character in the *Henry VI*. Styrst communicates the message that political alliances, no matter how strong, can quickly dissolve, therefore, leaders must not be overconfident in their power and strategies, but be ready, vigilant, and adaptable for power shifts and changes in the political landscape. Furthermore, he analyzes the Democratic Party dynamics and demonstrates how individual senators, such as Senator Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema can influence the legislative agenda via their support or opposition, and consequently how certain senators can mean both an ally and a source of indebtedness for the President. Again, the characters of Warwick, Clarence, and Buckingham from Shakespeare's world serve as warnings about the perils of mismanaged coalitions and shifting alliances, and carry the message that it is pivotal for any leader to understand the complexities of party dynamics and the stakes of one's loyalty.

The fifth chapter, "Illegitimate Justice," discusses the challenges faced by the Biden administration in connection to the federal judiciary system, due to obstruction of Republican appointees, especially considering the composition of the Supreme Court, where three justices were appointed by Donald Trump. Here, Styrst compares the contemporary legal challenges to the injustices faced by Katharine of Aragon in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and Shylock in his *Merchant of Venice*, and the potential biases in the judicial system. With this parallel to Shakespeare's courts, which do not reflect fairness or impartiality, the author invites the reader to reflect on the damaged justness and unbiased nature of today's legal procedures, and contemplates the erosion of traditional checks on the Supreme Court. He

illustrates this issue with the case of Justice Clarence Thomas and raises ethical dilemmas of corruption, conflict of interest, and judicial integrity. The message of this chapter is that the decisions of courts could be the target of abuse and manipulation.

The final chapter, “Lost France and Lost Afghanistan,” revolves around one of Biden’s most controversial decisions, the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021. In addition, the author contrasts the historical warfare of Shakespearean plays with modern warfare and argues that despite the technological advancements and changes, conflicts of the past and present are both framed in terms of victory and loss, as well as the control of territory. Styrk reflects on the media’s parallel making of Biden’s “loss” in Afghanistan to the loss of the Vietnam War. He also includes a comparison between the discourses on “lost France” in Shakespeare, and “lost Afghanistan” in contemporary America. However, as he emphasizes, France was never truly England’s, therefore France served as a state that was always unattainable, distant, and a target of national territorial ambitions. While the motives are different—the United States never claimed to own Afghanistan in contrast to England’s territorial claim of possession over France—the two cases share similarities in terms of the abandonment of home ruling over the obsession with foreign territorial claims.

In conclusion, Styrk suggests that to connect Shakespeare’s time and the present, we must acknowledge how the plays depict individuals’ reactions and motivations to individual circumstances and events, and understand that even though we read them in the present, they were written in the past and “they depict yet other pasts and other societies” (86). A potential criticism that might occur about the book is that drawing a parallel between the themes of the Elizabethan era and contemporary political frameworks possibly oversimplify their complexity. Nevertheless, Styrk successfully transposes the political wisdom of the proto-modern plays to the current political context, without being simplistic, especially by avoiding the risk of reducing the characters to prototypes. Another possible pitfall is the narrow scope of his analysis, as the book solely focuses on political themes, which may create a didactic and moralistic tone for Shakespeare. Some might argue that the book could have benefited from a more holistic and broader analysis, yet, it is important to note that the author clearly and repeatedly emphasizes that the scope of his work is limited and he only intends to provide “a sketch of an approach to presentism through a certain kind of politics” (85). In addition to this acknowledgment, he proposes other unexploited connections between Shakespeare and contemporary issues for further research, such as the relevance of Shakespeare’s ideas on race and gender, or how some pressing issues of contemporary society, like the pandemic, immigration, or abortion laws can be reflected on through the lens of Shakespeare. To conclude, *Shakespeare in the Present: Political Lessons* fulfills the initial goal of the author: it encourages the reader to recognize these plays’ potential to offer insights into present-day political issues and concerns, and to treat them

as cautionary tales and lessons from the past that still resonate in the present. In light of the current presidential elections, this book can play a vital role in interpreting open questions for readers interested in American political games.

