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► **To cite this version:**

Paul Franssen. The Thane and the Scullery Maid: Making Shakespeare Address the Populist Crisis. 2019. halshs-02145011

HAL Id: halshs-02145011

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02145011>

Preprint submitted on 31 May 2019

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The Thane and the Scullery Maid: Making Shakespeare Address the Populist Crisis

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Arguably, most of the crises that have beset Europe over the last few years have had one common denominator: the disgruntlement of large sections of the population under the banner of nationalist populism. On the face of it, finding a Shakespearean angle to this problem should not be too difficult. In the Jack Cade rebellion in *2 Henry 6*, as well as the often quoted supposedly Shakespearean additions to the *Book of Sir Thomas More*, we find obvious analogues to modern popular discontent that may be, and in fact have been, used to address modern-day problems; and in the Roman plays, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, we also find representations of groups of common citizens that, under the influence of a gifted but unprincipled rhetorician, or because of the arrogance of a patrician opponent, turn into the stereotypical “many-headed multitude” (*Cor.* 2.3.16-17).¹ Yet, in so far as such analogies focus on the stupidity of the masses, then and now, they are problematic, if only because Shakespeare wrote during and for an age in which modern concepts like democracy and egalitarianism would have been anathema. Simply reproducing seventeenth-century class prejudice, however much Shakespeare may qualify it, would hardly be a productive way of making the early-modern age illuminate our current crisis.²

One way of avoiding this problem is through turning to those of Shakespeare’s plays that do not foreground the fickleness of the masses, but focus on individuals, as seen in their various dimensions, not as flat characters or classist stereotypes. Besides, Shakespeare often comes to us in adaptations—one might say, the moment Shakespeare’s works are transferred from the page to the stage, we inevitably shape them in accordance with our own values and preconceptions. Accordingly, in this paper I will begin with a spin-off of a Shakespeare play,

and attempt to show how it is relevant to today's populist crisis, without losing touch with ideas inhering in Shakespeare's text. I will also broaden my argument to show how many other contemporary Shakespeare productions, irrespective of the degree of textual rewriting that they involve, take the populist crisis as their chief point of departure. Finally, I will investigate, not just how Shakespeare is, or may be made, relevant to current problems, but also whether, and if so, how, he may be deployed in helping to solve them. I will take most of my examples from my own country, the Netherlands, but also include examples of Shakespeare appropriations in the Anglophone world and in France.

1.

When I was casting about for a topic to illuminate the connection between Shakespeare and crisis, an image appeared before my mind's eye, of a young woman with reddish curls, dressed in a white farthingale, who enthusiastically welcomed us, the audience, to a performance of her tragi-comic one-woman show, *Lady M*, in the Hague, on 26 November 2016.³ The actress, Annemarie de Bruijn, introduced herself as the original of that Gentlewoman to Lady Macbeth who makes a brief appearance in Shakespeare's play (5.1), together with a doctor, to witness and discuss her lady's illness, her sleepwalking and obsessive handwashing. She is pleased and grateful that such a large audience has turned up to listen to her side of the story—which, or so she claims, would have merited far more than that brief appearance as a “bit part” in a single scene of Shakespeare's play (Koerselman, 2016: 21). Her story is that of a rise in fortunes, from a humble scullery maid who has to put out the dustbin, to Lady Macbeth's Lady in Waiting. At the outset, she hero-worships her mistress, her lord, and particularly the king, and takes great pride in making the latter's bed as meticulously as possible. Then her great chance in life comes when she inadvertently

witnesses the murder of Duncan while hiding underneath his bed. She is discovered there by Lady Macbeth, who buys her silence by offering to promote her to her Lady in Waiting. Over her simple white garment, the former scullery maid now wears a rich red bodice, as a token of her social rise but also of her sharing in the guilt of the Macbeths; and like her betters, she pays for her elevation by not being able to sleep anymore. Again, like her betters, she is caught up in the maelstrom of events that follow—which she all narrates and mimes in a lively manner. The collapse of Macbeth’s kingdom causes friction between herself and her mistress. When she blames Lady Macbeth for bringing about this state of affairs, the lady replies: “you only live by the grace of me,” and threatens her with a knife (Koerselman, 2016: 57). This is the moment when the Gentlewoman changes history, or so she claims, by grabbing the knife and frenziedly killing her mistress: “will you please remember that I committed her suicide,” is her final request to the audience (Koerselman, 2016: 59).

The general idea behind *Lady M* may seem familiar. Rewriting Shakespeare’s tragedies from the perspective of minor characters, particularly of a lower class, has been with us at least since Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966). It has recently been expanded to other authors and genres, such as Jane Austen, whose *Pride and Prejudice* has been turned upside down by viewing it from the servants’ perspective in Jo Baker’s novel *Longbourn*. Yet, there also seems to be a further dimension to this particular play, *Lady M*: whereas the focus on the bystanders of a Shakespeare play or Austen novel usually serves to show that ordinary people also matter, and deserve to be taken seriously, here it is the scullery maid herself that demands to be acknowledged, first by her mistress, and later, most of all, by Shakespeare; and she does so in a disturbingly rancorous tone. In that respect, she is somewhat reminiscent of the Shakespeare-inspired monologues by Tim Crouch, which also “speak for the under-represented—the minor character, the young person,

the audience,” by giving the floor to these, often disgruntled, minor characters themselves (Crouch, 2011: no page). Most worryingly, the scullery maid in *Lady M* feels entitled to the world’s attention because she has committed a murder. The reason why she kills Lady Macbeth is that the latter is obsessed with her own feelings of guilt, while ignoring those of her Lady in Waiting. The latter responds bitterly: “Well, what a coincidence! The reason I can’t sleep anymore, my Lady, is because your conscience is too heavily laden” (Koerselman, 2016: 56). As for Shakespeare, she protests that he has relegated her to a single scene, has given her even less coverage than the drunken porter, and most of all obscured her moment of historical significance, by merely stating that Lady M, “as ’tis thought, by self and violent hands took off her life” (Koerselman, 2016: 21). “[A]s if I never happened,” the Gentlewoman protests: “not interesting enough to be blamed for this, Shakespeare must have thought” (Koerselman, 2016: 58-59). She ends the play by a loud exclamation: “FUCK SHAKESPEARE!” (Koerselman, 2016: 59). Feeling neglected and undervalued, this former member of the repressed underclass, once she has come into a little significance, turns into a complete monster, who will assert her importance, if necessary even by priding herself on having committed a murder, her sole claim to fame. “Tonight, I exist, thanks to you”, she tells her audience (Koerselman, 2016: 21).

The revenge of the repressed, one might say. As such, this play can also be interpreted as a response to one of the major causes of the current crisis in Europe: the rise of populism, interpreted as the reaction of simple people, who perhaps have a legitimate grievance against those that have long exploited them, yet react by extreme measures once they sense that they have the power to do so. Shakespeare is the vehicle for a rumination on this phenomenon. The fact that *Lady M* originally dates from 2006, though it was revised since, does not invalidate that reading as anachronistic: as far as the Netherlands are concerned, the first

phase of the populist revolution came to a head with the steady rise in the election polls of maverick politician Pim Fortuyn, followed by his assassination in 2002. Geert Wilders trod in his footsteps with his extreme right-wing Freedom Party as of 2004. Both relied on their appeal to large groups of voters who felt left out of the economic boom of the preceding years, and threatened by immigration and globalisation, which were also increasingly associated with the concept of Europe; and in their frustration and rancour, these voters turned to extremist politicians who promised redress, even if the measures they proposed looked unworkable. The election victory of Donald Trump, helped by those whom Hillary Clinton had rather ungenerously called “deplorables,” can be seen as another instance of this impulse.

2.

The main issue at hand, however, is whether it is really Shakespeare that has put this political development on the agenda. Is this play an instance of facing the crisis with the help of Shakespeare’s play? Or is this merely an appropriation of Shakespeare for ends of which he was blissfully unaware? One might argue that the latter is obviously the case. After all, the Gentlewoman’s rancour expresses itself also in a rejection of Shakespeare (“fuck Shakespeare!”) for having neglected her role in history—as indeed, one must agree that Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories, for all their occasional sympathy for the plight of commoners, do concentrate on the suffering of princes and noblemen. Besides, this play is a totally new creation, and not really Shakespeare’s work at all.

To begin with the latter point, one might object that this sort of appropriation also happens in productions that are more closely based on Shakespeare’s own texts. In fact, many recent productions of Shakespeare’s plays comment on aspects of the populist crisis, with

various degrees of directness. For example, the 2014 staging of *Julius Caesar* by the Dutch company Het Zuidelijk Toneel framed the Roman tragedy about the rise and assassination of a populist leader as an analogue to the rise and death of Pim Fortuyn – for instance through the choice of a bald-headed actor for Caesar, and by casting a young man as Calpurnia, Caesar’s wife: Fortuyn was bald and openly gay.⁴ Similarly, in the USA, there was the controversial 2017 Public Theater production of *Julius Caesar* in New York’s Central Park, with the eponymous hero bearing a clear resemblance to Donald Trump. These, too, were appropriations of Shakespeare that confronted populism, but used his own text throughout. In a 2018 Dutch production of *Othello* directed by Daria Bukvić, largely but not entirely following Shakespeare’s text, Iago was made to speak Pim Fortuyn’s slogan “At your service.” Though the entire production was in Dutch, these words were in English, so that they echoed the English line with which Fortuyn used to whip up support for his party; ironically so, since his own command of English was notoriously weak, and the groups in society where he found most support were those that felt left behind by the globalisation that used English as its preferred vehicle. In Bukvić’s conception, Iago was a narcissistic personality from the lower ranks, intelligent, yet feeling—not entirely without justification—that those belonging to the higher orders, like Cassio and Desdemona, patronised and despised him. This motivated his racism, his misogyny, and his hatred of those of superior rank, like Cassio, whom he also victimised.⁵ So one might go on. In 2016, there were two British productions of *King Lear* with its original text largely intact: Deborah Warner’s Old Vic production, starring Glenda Jackson as Lear, as well as Tom Morris’s staging at the Bristol Old Vic, featuring Timothy West. Both of these productions were widely interpreted by reviewers as comments on the root causes and dangers of Brexit. In 2018, the centrifugal dangers of populism throughout the EU in general, as exemplified by Brexit, were even more

clearly the subject of a joint Belgian-Dutch production of *Lear* by Het Zuidelijk Toneel and Het Paleis, directed by Simon de Vos, this time on the basis of a thoroughly rewritten and modernised text.⁶ These examples suggest that, for contemporary theatre makers who wish to address the rise of populism and its attendant problems, such as racism and isolationism, one important vehicle to do so is through appropriating Shakespeare's tragedies. In such productions the original text may either be left largely intact or be totally rewritten, in accordance with national traditions: whereas Anglophone countries tend to respect Shakespeare's word, Flemish and Dutch productions feel free to mine the plays for what Brecht called their "Materialwert," their value as material that may be taken apart and reassembled to make meaning (see Guntner, 2008). Either way, Shakespeare can be and has been fielded against the rise of populism.

That still leaves us with the issue of the relation between modern uses of Shakespeare and the meaning supposedly inherent in his works. The more thoroughly Shakespeare's text is rewritten to bring out the parallels between it and our modern predicament, the more urgent the question becomes: is this still Shakespeare's supposedly authoritative voice that speaks against populism? Or is it the modern author who is hijacking Shakespeare, ventriloquising to make the bard say whatever the modern age, or at least, sections of the modern audience, desire to hear him say? In this respect, *Lady M* is a rather extreme example in that it deviates so far from Shakespeare's original text, yet I would argue that it also follows Shakespeare's lead in some essentials. The one-woman show translates the story of Macbeth to a lower social level that modern audiences can "relate to." The character of the Gentlewoman may be largely an addition to the play, yet her development from a modest, long-suffering drudge into an upwardly mobile yet vengeful and violent person is similar, one might say analogous, to Macbeth's development. Originally content to do Duncan's dirty work, Macbeth is praised

by everyone for his nobility and valour. Having defeated the enemies of the realm, he is offered a reward for his efforts: he will take the place of the Thane of Cawdor, one of the traitors he has defeated. Yet, rather than satisfying him, this promotion whets his ambition for more. As David Norbrook has argued, Macbeth may even have some legitimate expectations of being offered more: the succession to the throne. As a number of modern critics have pointed out, there is some evidence that in Macbeth's lifetime Scotland was an elective monarchy, and that this was also known to some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The very fact that Duncan names Malcolm as his successor means that this was not a foregone conclusion, so Macbeth may have a legitimate reason to feel aggrieved at being bypassed in favour of the king's son (Norbrook 1987: 94). William C. Carroll agrees that in the alternative version of the story by the Scottish historian George Buchanan, Macbeth is "more clearly wronged" than in Shakespeare's tragedy (Carroll, 2004: 71). Similar arguments have been put forward by Albert Rolls (2002), Alvin Kernan (1995: 78-79), and Alan Sinfield (1992: 102). Macbeth may have good cause to feel neglected, then, but nevertheless his response, murdering Duncan, is a bloody and far from honourable deed. Ironically, had Macbeth not done that, he would not have ended up as Shakespeare's protagonist.

Summarised like this, we can see that there are parallels between Shakespeare's hero and the Gentlewoman. Both are originally modest, hard-working servants, whose labour is not always rewarded fairly. Then both are promoted, but this only whets their appetite for more. Both then react violently when frustrated; and because of their violent crime, each is immortalised as the protagonist of a play—though the scullery maid still complains that it is not Shakespeare who turned her into a protagonist. In this view, the main difference between Macbeth and the scullery maid is class: her career is a demotic version of Macbeth's aristocratic rebellion. This is underlined when the scullery maid describes and mimes how

she is doing all kinds of dirty household work, such as collecting the eggs in the chicken coop and putting out a dirty and heavy dustbin while a rat runs down her back, while at the same time Macbeth and Banquo are carving up the king's enemies on the battlefield (Koerselman, 2016: 23-26). Clearly, the scullery maid's work is presented as a mock-heroic version of what Macbeth does; yet, as is often the case in a mock-heroic, the comparison calls attention not just to the incommensurability of warfare and domestic labour, but also to the underlying similarities, despite the class difference.

Obviously, this analysis also leaves aspects of Shakespeare's play out of account: the metaphysical prompting of the witches, and Lady Macbeth's appeal to her husband's manhood, for which there are no equivalents in the scullery maid's story; or the fact that Macbeth kills his first victim, Duncan, for the sake of calculated ambition rather than out of spontaneous rancour, as seems to be the case with the scullery maid-turned-gentlewoman; or that he subsequently turns into a serial killer. In other words, *Lady M* presents us with one possible view of Macbeth out of a large range of possibilities; just like the Julius Caesar resembling Pim Fortuyn or Donald Trump is just one possible Julius Caesar. Such adaptations and appropriations flatten the original, make a choice out of several possible readings, to make their Shakespeare speak to issues alive in the present. "Shakespeare doesn't mean: *we* mean *by* Shakespeare," as Terence Hawkes would have it (Hawkes, 1992: 3); yet we can do so only because Shakespeare's text lends itself to so many different readings as it is so rich.

What does this mean, then, for our question: does Shakespeare help us face the current crisis in Europe? I think the answer to that must be: not automatically; not in himself; but he can be used to shed light on such issues, because of the great variety of human motivation that is present in his work. The roots of populism can be extracted from his plays,

if we look for them diligently enough. It must be a process of cooperation, in which we bring our questions, perhaps even our own embryonic answers, to his texts; and in which he can then (often) yield the raw material on the basis of which we can formulate and shape our answers more precisely.

In their foreword to the published text of *Lady M* and other “Monologues not by Shakespeare,” as the volume is called, the authors themselves are unsure to what extent they are using Shakespeare’s material, and to what extent they are reading their own concerns into his works. In one passage they say: “The continued dreaming and thinking about the characters created by Shakespeare, however small, repeatedly offers a new view of the, as yet, untold world that he managed to hint at with the smallest turn of phrase” (De Bruijn / de Bruijn, 2016: 7); in another, they say: “We proudly present to you the results of our research into what can be read between the lines, or into what Shakespeare, possibly out of pure foolhardiness, never wished to reveal” (De Bruijn / de Bruijn, 2016: 9). Is it discovering what Shakespeare had to say about issues like populism, even in the smallest hints? Or is it reading such modern issues into his work? As I have suggested, it may be a little of both. Shakespeare is a point of reference for us to start discussing European crises; yet, we also need to read into his lines—or investigate how others, such as theatre makers, have done so for us.

3.

In that sense, of helping to diagnose the problem, Shakespeare is useful; but there are also limits to his usefulness. It is questionable whether *Lady M*, or any of the other productions mentioned here, will stop the rise of populism. This is not a matter of the impotence of art generally, of Auden’s conviction that “poetry makes nothing happen” (Auden, 1976: 197),

but of the elitist image of the theatre in particular, in our modern age. Particularly a production of or related to a Shakespeare play is likely to appeal more to a class of spectators who have a considerable degree of education, who will not immediately see their own plight reflected in that of the chambermaid, and who are unlikely to support populist parties to begin with. Certainly in a Dutch setting, a theatre production is more likely to preach to the converted than to reach any new audiences.

Obviously, one must make allowances for cultural differences between countries. If in the Netherlands, Shakespeare is the epitome of high culture, and as such mistrusted or seen as incomprehensible by large sections of the population, this is not necessarily the case elsewhere. In France, initiatives like the Printemps des Collégiens project have reached out to a wide variety of schoolchildren, inviting them to stage abbreviated Shakespeare plays, selected by the pupils themselves. The schools cooperating on this project came from very diverse neighbourhoods, and ranged from a bilingual school catering to the globalised elite to institutions of secondary education with a largely immigrant population. Yet the latter, too, were successful in staging a Shakespeare play like *Measure for Measure*, whose chaste Isabella, the pupils explained, appealed to their own values.⁷ Even in the Netherlands, the 2018 free adaptation of *King Lear* thematising Brexit and the spectre of European disintegration was designed as a production partly aimed at schoolchildren of age 16 and over. In the United States, Shakespeare productions have been staged successfully in prison settings, for and sometimes by the prisoners: there the high status of Shakespeare's drama was not regarded as a problem but as an asset, because it gave the inmates who had mastered, say, *Hamlet*, a chance "to reclaim their social status" by giving them "access (...) to the ownership of some cultural capital" (Herold, 2016: 1201, 1203).

Useful as such Shakespeare-based productions for (and by) special audiences may be, they will only ever reach relatively small sections of the population: those for whom they are seen as educational or therapeutic. Plays like *Lady M*, though relatively accessible because of its tragi-comic elements, and most of the other examples of Shakespeare against populism that I have mentioned, have as their primary function to help us understand the problem of the gap that has opened up within societies, which can be and has been exploited by populist politicians. However, it is this very gap, which also separates those who will and those who will not voluntarily go to a theatre, that disqualifies Shakespeare from bridging that gap. For ways to make the broader population reflect on the premises of populist politics, perhaps different media might be more successful: one thinks of television soap operas or thrillers that, though not necessarily based on Shakespeare's work, share with his plays the ability to look at matters from several perspectives, including those of refugees, racial and religious minorities, women, LGBT, and so on. Possibly also pop songs with protest lyrics might catch on.

There is one more important point to be made here: the gap that has opened up in society is not necessarily due to those of lower education alone. As Andrew Murphy has argued, the fact that Shakespeare is now widely regarded as high-brow and incomprehensible, which was not yet the case in the nineteenth century, is partly due to the snobbism of Modernist critics. These promulgated the myth of Shakespeare as a difficult writer by the abstruse language of their analyses, thus turning a right understanding of his works, according to their criteria, into an admission test for the cultured elite (Murphy 2008: 184). For that reason alone, those well-educated citizens who have passed that test, who love to go to the theatre and see a Shakespeare play or spin-off there, might also consider looking in the mirror that a production like *Lady M* offers to them: though they may not see their own image

reflected in the scullery maid turned Lady in Waiting, they may discern a resemblance between themselves and her manipulative and exploitative betters, the Macbeths. Solutions to populism may lie not just in preaching to those who fall to its lure, but also in listening to their genuine grievances and taking those seriously.

Admittedly, this takes us far from the text of *Lady M*, and even further from Shakespeare's own texts, except possibly the additions to *Sir Thomas More*; yet, the scullery maid's angry reaction to being neglected might give rise to uncomfortable questions about the grievances of her modern-day equivalents, such as: who has benefitted from globalisation and the free labour market, and who has paid the price for it? Were the voices of all groups heard equally when decisions were made, over the past half century or so, about attracting foreign labour, about housing guest workers and refugees, and about schemes to integrate them in society? Without subscribing to the so-called solutions offered by populism, such considerations may form the basis of a renewed understanding between various groups in society.

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¹ See Wiegandt 2016: 71 and *passim*. Cf. Rumour’s reference to “the blunt monster with uncounted heads,/ The still-discordant wav’ring multitude,” *2 Henry 4* induction, 18-19.

² That Shakespeare was far from elitist has been argued by Patterson, 1989.

³ See Koerselman, 2016 for the full English text; for a review, see Franssen, 2016.

⁴ For a review of the production, see Franssen 2014.

⁵ For a review, see Franssen 2018a.

⁶ For a review, see Franssen 2018b.

⁷ My knowledge of this programme derives from March and Valls-Russell 2018, supplemented by private communications.