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Shakespeare and the Politics of Absence

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William Shakespeare's work was constrained by the political dance of censorship. Censorship certainly lies at the heart of any attempt to contextualize Shakespeare's works, as all early modern dramas had to win the approval of the Master of the Revels, and possibly if to be published as a printed text, the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Bishop of London prior to entry in the Stationer's Register. Of course, to early modern writers, censorship was not merely a bureaucratic process to endure, but rather entailed a potential physical threat. The danger of violating the unseen and shifting boundaries of the permissible were vivid: John Stubbs famously had his hand amputated as punishment for writing imprudently about Queen Elizabeth's marriage prospects; other writers and publishers who violated boundaries were imprisoned or executed. While it has been suggested that the deposition scene of *Richard II* was censored (Gurr 111), we have no records of Shakespeare himself coming into direct conflict with the censors. However, the threat of such conflict would have curtailed his expression of political views, resulting in self-censorship.

Therefore, when considering the political elements of Shakespeare's works, absence often speaks to us as loudly as presence. The gaps in the text, the gaps in performances, portions excised from the text for performances and publication can speak eloquently about the limits of political discourse both in the early modern period and in subsequent periods.

Specific papers:

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* are plays that lend themselves to being read as republican and in the United States could have been used extensively as revolutionary propaganda during the colonial period. However, the absence of such performances is more notable than their presence. Esther Schupak will discuss the causes and consequences of this absence.

There is no clear-cut and direct censorship in Hungary nowadays. Political criticism is part of the agenda of theatres, as it has always been, but such control is at work in a variety of ways, and this has also changed since the political changes. Zsolt Almási will present an overview of paradigmatic changes since the 1950s, focusing on the Shakespearean oeuvre.

While early modern plays and defenses of theater often engage with antitheatrical arguments—refuting them, parodying them, dramatizing them, occasionally accepting them—they are surprisingly silent about the plague and its association with the stage. Reut Barzilai will focus on, and try to explain, the conspicuous absence of the plague from Shakespeare's plays and from early modern English defenses of the stage.

The Lord Chamberlain Men's performance of *Richard II* in 1601 was linked to the Essex rebellion, and almost a century later, in the 1680s, Charles II would suppress the controversial play (Kantorowicz 1957, 41). Luis J. Conejero-Magro will discuss how Shakespeare's *Richard II* lends itself to being read as a republican and revolutionary play, not only because of what has been stated above, but also because of what the play hides.