

Boris and the Bard

Johnson's Naked Shakespearean Ambition

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"BUT man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd—
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep"

— Shakespeare: Measure for Measure

Did you know that in a deal believed to be worth £500,000, Boris Johnson was writing a book on Shakespeare when its progress was halted by his appointment as Prime Minister? His publisher, Hodder & Stoughton, has now said that they have "no plans" to publish *Shakespeare: The Riddle of Genius* "for the foreseeable future."

Johnson would be well aware that the mastermind behind the immortal works knew a thing or two about the arts of government. He wrote as if he lived and breathed politics and moved effortlessly in the corridors of power. Many of Shakespeare's leading characters relish the language of ambition and political intrigue, yet he was also acutely aware of their often fatal flaws.

Take his Richard III. He has limitless self-regard and a compulsive desire to dominate. He is pathologically narcissistic and supremely arrogant. He has a gross sense of entitlement, never doubting that he can do whatever he chooses. The feelings of others mean nothing to him. He has no natural grace, no sense of shared humanity, no decency. In short, he is a self-serving bully: "I, that have neither pity, love, nor fear... I am myself, alone" (*Henry VI, Part 3*).

This could be a perfect description of Donald Trump. Or for that matter Boris Johnson himself, of whom his Eton master, Martin Hammond, wrote in 1982 of the seventeen-year-old: "I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else".

Listening to Johnson's maiden speech as Prime Minister in the Commons in July and comparing it to Jeremy Corbyn's reply, I couldn't help thinking of the contrast in *Julius Caesar* between the funeral orations of Mark Antony and Brutus on Caesar's death.

The essential difference is that while Brutus appeals to reason and logic, as Corbyn did, Mark Antony, while denying any ability to "stir men's blood", appeals to emotion in a rabble-rousing speech full of rhetorical flourishes, just like Johnson. Coincidentally, Johnson has actually published a collection of his writings

the title of Mark Antony's opening, *Lend Me Your Ears*.

There is also – provided the parallel is not too closely drawn – a certain similarity of character. Brutus, "the noblest Roman of them all", is a gentle man of high ideals who is too good for this world, rather like Corbyn, while Mark Antony shares Johnson's cunning opportunism and is also a pleasure-seeker, "given to sports, to wildness and much company".

The truth is that Richard III, Macbeth, Claudius, Iago and almost any other of Shakespeare's Machiavellian villains share affinities with Johnson. They display naked ambition and exploit people and events to serve their own ends, just as Johnson has used Brexit as a power-play to become Prime Minister.

But hold on a minute. Surely, this can't be right. Shakespeare's bad men are generally humourless characters, whereas 'Boris' is a fun guy. Is he not more like the clowns in the plays or even Falstaff? Yet significantly Hamlet warns that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain", and Donalbain in *Macbeth* notes that "there's daggers in men's smiles".

Johnson's jolly, eccentric showmanship enables him to voice sinister ideas and get away with it, like describing black people as "crowds of flag-waving piccaninnies" with their "watermelon smiles", gay men as "tank-topped bumboys", or Muslim women wearing niqabs as "letterboxes".

With Johnson, it is the court jester with a dark side who has assumed the throne. He is, as his former *Telegraph* editor Max Hastings put it, "Machiavelli, disguised as Bertie Wooster". Indulging this lying charlatan because he is entertaining is therefore a dangerous act of irresponsibility in a world gone mad for racist and nationalist demagogues.

There is little substance to the act. He probably believes in nothing much except his own self-aggrandisement. Ultimately, in his case Macbeth was right. The nihilistic cult of Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". □