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“Tott’ring Fortune / Who at her certain’st reels”: Shakespeare’s Politics of Chance

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Practice dwindling. A mighthavebeen. Losing heart. Gambling. Debts of honour. Reaping the whirlwind. [...] Weathercocks. Hot and cold in the same breath. Wouldn’t know which to believe.

(Joyce, “Aeolus”, Ulysses)

*Orléans: O seigneur! Le jour est perdu. Tout est perdu!
Dauphin: Mort de ma vie! All is confounded, all!
Reproach and everlasting shame
Sits mocking in our plumes! O méchante fortune!*

(Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV, Scene 5)

Every man shift for all the rest, and let / no man take care for himself, for all is / but fortune.

(Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act V, Scene 1)

The title quotation, deeming fortune symptomatically deceptive even as one reaches the “certain’st” summit of success, comes from the closing scene of the late, contested collaborative play *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (V.4.20-21).¹ Their debatable provenance aside, the lines serve as more than an apt epigram for our “darker purpose”, capturing the “reeling”, unpredictably subversive moment of Fortune. The very concept of Fortune, in her various Classical, medieval and early modern permutations, has served as a philosophical or religious template of coming to terms with the moment of crisis and its aftermath. Fortune’s wheel, the iconic *rota fortunae* made eminent in the many emblematic representations, duly and unfailingly revolves in the medieval model, with the figure of the goddess enthroned or standing by the wheel, her hand firmly on its handle, featuring the implacable four stages of

¹ Act V seems to be most often attributed to Shakespeare, alongside Act I, while the rest traditionally falls to Fletcher. This line is spoken by the Second Knight in an exchange among three anonymous knights, just before Palamon learns of Arcite’s untimely fall from horseback, signalling the momentous turn of Fortune where impending death takes the former victor, rendering his reward (Emilia) to Palamon. All the quotations are taken from the *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds. A. Thompson, D. Scott Kastan, A. Proudfoot (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

the never-ending cycle of all things, commonly signified by the metaphor of the ascending and diminishing figure of the king: *regnabo – regno – regnavi – sum sine regno* (I shall reign – I reign – I reigned – I do not reign, literally “I am without reign”). This medieval model of Fortune – exemplified by the figure of the goddess controlling the wheel, yet ideologically subsumed under Christian dogma, transformed into a symbol of the imperfections of the post-lapsarian world, overseen by an omnipotent Christian God, bringing about, with implacable, steady rhythm, the ups and downs that befall all living things, represented in turn by the ascending and descending moment on the wheel – is still present in much of Shakespeare’s work. As Phyllis Rackin summarizes, “the medieval model for describing the progress of human life in time was the wheel of fortune, an endlessly recurrent cycle of rising and falling, designed to show the transience of earthly glory” (Rackin, 1990: 6). However, this medieval model is increasingly challenged in the early modern period by the revival of the ancient, Classical attributes of Fortune – represented by a figure of a blindfolded (naked or sparsely dressed) woman balancing walking or standing on a revolving stone sphere, often suspended in the air. In this model of Fortune taken up and developed by early-modern visual art,² the cosmic role of the goddess is exemplified by attributes highlighting hazard and precarious vicissitudes – in other words, the impending moment of imbalance on the revolving sphere upon which the goddess walks or rests. In fact, the image of a “blind woman standing on a round stone”, “a ball of fortune” (Robinson, 1946: 214),³ echoes all the way back to the ancient Greek goddess Tyche, symbolising *kairos* (opportunity or propitious moment, later reconfigured as *occasio*). Revolving across time in recurring iconographic representations, as

² E.g. early- and mid-16th-century engravings by Albrecht Dürer or Hans Sebald Beham, or books of emblems such as Alciato’s vastly popular *Emblemata*.

³ “In ancient art the wheel was an attribute of Isis, of Nemesis, and of Dike, as well as of Tyche and Fortuna” (Robinson, 1946: 212).

Daniele Maiano attests in his recently published book on the representation of Fortune in archaic and republican Italy: “In later literary evidence, Fortuna is occasionally represented as standing in precarious balance on a spherical boulder to represent her instability” (Maiano, 2018: 21).⁴ This representation of Fortune is different from both the earlier Roman model of the goddess Fortuna steadily steering, holding a *gubernaculum* (rudder) or carrying a cornucopia, or indeed the medieval figure of the enthroned but otherwise disempowered Fortuna controlling her wheel as a kind of moral clockwork – “an assistant of the Christian God, she no longer stood for pure arbitrariness, but rather for the decrepitude of all that is worldly” (Brendecke and Vogt, 2016: 2). This re-emergent *contemptus mundi* directly linked to Fortune connects the Stoic tradition of frowning upon worldly ambition with the later, specifically Christian, moral philosophy. Looking back and channelling the pagan iconography, Fortune is once again increasingly prone to “reeling” and “tott’ring” in the emergent early-modern reinterpretation of the universe which re-employs older Classical models of the goddess’s attributes and paraphernalia.

We shall now briefly address some of the intricacies of Shakespeare’s ample and varied use of Fortune before moving on to specific examples in his political dramas and history plays to discuss the aesthetic effects and ethical repercussions of attributing political intrigue and war strategy to elements of contingency. This ongoing research seeks to uncover wider implications of Shakespeare’s conceptualisation of Fortune, discussed in relation to the crises unfolding through diplomacy, intrigue and war as well as to traditional, providential models of history, and, finally, to explore parallels in relation to the crises of political representation in our current times.

⁴ “Fortuna standing on a globe in precarious balance also appears in Plutarch’s *De fortuna romanorum*” (*idem*, 186).

Shakespeare uses the word “fortune” nearly four hundred times (375 times, to be exact – 328 simply as “fortune”, forty-seven times in the genitive, and twice in the Latinate form of “Fortuna”, with a considerable dose of panache in each case: Pistol’s devil-may-care “*Si fortuna me tormenta, spero me contenta*” in the final scene of *Henry IV, Part Two*, and Armado in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, who remarks flippantly on the “*fortuna della Guerra*”).⁵ By comparison, Ben Jonson uses the word “fortune” or its genitive form only 121 times in his plays. War and the sea were the traditional domains of the ancient goddess Fortuna, as Armado’s and Pistol’s lines, uniquely aligned in linguistic kinship in their Italian and mongrel mix of Romance languages, respectively, rather neatly attest to. As Michael Witmore expounds,

Fortune, the pagan goddess and poetic abstraction [and its] resurgence in early modern iconography and poetic imagery has been extensively documented over the course of this century. Gendered female because of her unpredictability, Fortune presided as a deity over the seas and war but could also be invoked as the cause of any outcome that could not be predicted in advance. (...) Fortune assumes the narrative position of an agent or actor who can be credited with events that have no immediate organizing cause. (Witmore, 2001: 23)

In a typically patriarchal gendering, Fortune is fickle and unreliable, hence “a woman”. And these gendered aspects are naturally copiously exploited in Shakespeare’s work – from the many intricate examples of Fortune’s calumny, she is deemed “a strumpet” (*Hamlet*, II.2.231), “outrageous” in her torturous metaphorical “slings and arrows” (*Hamlet*, III.1.75), irredeemably “*méchante*” (*Henry V*, IV.5.6), or, perhaps more interestingly yet, she is “the false huswife” whose “wheel” Cleopatra threatens to “break” in her epic outrage at Anthony’s death (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, IV.15.13).⁶

Gendering aside, Fortune in Shakespeare functions as a trope symbolising the inscrutability, contingency and the unavailing arbitrariness of existence, called upon in

⁵ <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/>

⁶ “In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, forms of the word *fortune* appear forty-one times, or almost twice as often as in other high-frequency plays like *Lear* or *Timon of Athens*” (Williamson, 1968: 423).

moments of crisis – political, existential, ethical. While images of Fortune in Shakespeare are often tied to comedic elements, they are seldom straightforwardly comical – in this respect we might recall, for instance, Feste’s famous acerbic remark to Malvolio, channelling the inexorable retributive potential of Fortune over time which somewhat darkens the ending of that festive comedy: “and thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges” (*Twelfth Night*, V.1.372-3). From the tragic spectrum of Shakespeare’s oeuvre, we might recall Margaret’s fateful reprimand to the murderous exploits of Richard III: “Thus hath the course of justice whirl’d about / and left thee but a very prey of time” (*Richard III*, IV.4.105-6).

While in both the examples above “Fortune becomes the instrument of retributive justice” (Pierce, 1971: 114), the following passage from *Henry V* is one of the very few exceptions where Fortuna functions comedically, featuring the famous four-nation stereotypes supplying comic relief in *Henry V*, resonating with the above-mentioned Classical iconography of the free-wheeling, “reeling” and “tott’ring” Fortune as opposed to the medieval model, where the goddess is enthroned above or sat perfectly stable by the wheel which she turns with her hand (rather than balancing blindfolded on the rolling sphere as she does here):

PISTOL. Bardolph, a soldier, firm and sound of heart,
And of buxom valour, hath, by **cruel fate,**
And giddy Fortune’s furious fickle wheel,
That goddess blind,
That stands upon the rolling restless stone--

FLUELLEN. By your patience, ensign Pistol. Fortune is painted blind, with a muffler afore her eyes, to signify to you that Fortune is blind; and she is painted also with a wheel, to signify to you, which is the moral of it, that she is turning, and inconstant, and mutability, and variation: **and her foot, look you, is fixed upon a spherical stone, which rolls, and rolls, and rolls:** in good truth, the poet makes a most excellent description of it: Fortune is an excellent moral. (*Henry V*, III.6.25-38; emphasis mine)

While the outstanding comedic effect of the tiresome exchange between the relentlessly wordy Welsh parody that is Fluellen and the boastful English ensign Pistol, a descendant of the *miles gloriosus* of Roman comedy, is rather self-evident, our attention here is drawn to

the striking familiarity with which the two simple soldiers discuss the iconography of Fortune on her “spherical stone, / which rolls, and rolls, and rolls”. Poetic licence aside, this points to the contemporary ubiquity of Fortune-related imagery⁷ – in the vastly popular books of emblems, recognized as well as mocked here, in Fluellen’s tedious retelling, for their often “naïve and far-fetched correspondences”⁸ – but also in various pamphlets and other marginalia in steady circulation on the streets of early-modern England. Clearly, Shakespeare is playing with something that is familiar to the audience, groundlings included, not only aimed at entertaining the educated few in the upper tiers – after all, Henslowe’s choice of name for his new playhouse set to rival the Globe is a case in point, attesting to the uncontested prevalence of Fortune and her symbolism at the time.

Continuing with, indeed developing the “excellent moral” of Fortune, our second passage exemplifies a slightly different case, where the chance and contingency that Fortune epitomizes serve as a structural model or a lesson for a unifying, transhistorical moral argument about politics and the fatefully recurring moment of crisis. Spanning across the second tetralogy, it is the narrative arc of Northumberland, the treacherous “ladder” facilitating Bolinbroke’s illicit succession in *Richard II*, prophesied by the deposed Richard as the precedent for the future betrayal of Henry IV. This results in powerful dramatic (and historic) irony attesting to Fortune’s “giddy” and “fickle” ways as well as to her moral “retributive potential” over time. Our quotation comes from *Henry IV, Part 2* – the dying king reflects on the Northumberland rebellion in conversation with Warwick; he stresses the

⁷ The poet complimented by Fluellen for his “most excellent description” is most probably Ovid: cf. the numerous examples of Fortune’s emblematic fickleness in *Epistulae ex ponto*. In the *Henriad*, “pictorial and proverbial emblems are a pervasive, self-conscious and exuberant quality of the imagery of all four of the plays” (Hoyle, 1971: 512).

⁸ Hoyle, 1971: 526. Claudia Corti, in her enlightening chapter on the emblematic aspects of Shakespeare, makes a direct correlation between Alciato’s Fortuna and Hermes emblem (“*Ars naturam adiuvat*”) and Fluellen’s description: “The correspondence with one of the most famous among Andrea Alciato’s emblems is exact” (Corti, 2017: 30). However, the correlation is only partial, as while Fluellen mixes in the traditional medieval attribute, the wheel, this is lacking in the cited 1621 pictorial variation of Alciato’s emblem.

baffling, arbitrary beginnings of fateful future events, thwarting the ambition and schemes of man. While the following segment recalls the famous lines from Seneca's *Agamemnon*: "As Fortune rotates the headlong fates of kings" (cited in Parkinson, 1946: 214), Shakespeare's *Henriad* is also performing universal mutability, one of the chief philosophical concerns of the Renaissance, in close emblematic relation to the medieval, providential, moral arch, privy to view in transhistorical perspective only – there is a sense that "[b]ehind her apparent whims, Fortune is part of [the] cosmic order", "tied to an inflexible causal chain", "appear[ing] fickle only in the limited human perception" (Goy-Blanquet, 2003: 148).

KING HENRY IV. **O God! that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times**

(...)

**how chances mock,
And changes fill the cup of alteration
With divers liquors!**

(...)

'Tis not ten years gone
Since Richard and Northumberland, great friends,
Did feast together, and in two years after
Were they at wars: it is but eight years since
This Percy was the man nearest my soul,
Who like a brother toil'd in my affairs
And laid his love and life under my foot

(...)

To *WARWICK*

Richard

(...)

Did speak these words, now proved a prophecy?
**'Northumberland, thou ladder by the which
My cousin Bolingbroke ascends my throne;'**
Though then, God knows, I had no such intent,
But that necessity so bow'd the state
That I and greatness were compell'd to kiss:
'The time shall come,' thus did he follow it,
'The time will come, that foul sin, gathering head,
Shall break into corruption:' so went on,

**Foretelling this same time's condition
And the division of our amity.**

WARWICK. There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of **the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intresured.**

Such things become the hatch and brood of time (*Henry IV 2*, III.1.45-92)

While the king's interpretation is tied within the providential moral and the retributive potential of Fortune, Warwick's lines – "the main chance of things" "which in their seeds / And weak beginnings lie intresured", eventually becoming "the hatch and brood of time", combine the Ovidian rhetoric of universal mutability⁹ with the distinctive diction of Lucretian atomism. While, as we said earlier, the unifying moral line of Providence still looms over Shakespeare's historical perspective in these plays, the gap between this providential rigidity of history and the extreme cosmos of pure chance is bridged in this momentous caveat of Warwick's. Reading these lines with the Lucretian concept of *clinamen* in mind, the slightest "swerve" or "weak beginnings" and "seeds" have the potential to eventually enact "the main chance of things", thus becoming "the hatch and brood of time" itself.¹⁰ As Stephen Greenblatt usefully summarizes the crucial impact of atomist philosophy on the early-modern mindset: "The swerve is the source of free will", "for if all motion were one long predetermined chain, there would be no possibility of freedom. Cause would follow cause from eternity, as the fates decreed. Instead, we wrest free will from the fates" (Greenblatt, 2011: 188-9).

The king's last words relating to the exchange signal towards a characteristically cold, pragmatic solution: "Are these things then necessities? / Then let us meet them like necessities. / And that same word even now cries out on us" (*Henry IV 2*, III.1.93-5). This pragmatism betrays a seminal shift in the worldview of the epoch, epitomised by the character and strategies of Henry IV – the medieval outlook, steeped in the predetermined confines of Christian teleology represented by Richard II gives way to the new humanist

⁹ As Ovid puts it in his *Amores*, "*omnia vertuntur*" – everything changes (in the fortunes of man).

¹⁰ Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) and its impact on the development of the Renaissance outlook is portrayed in Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*. As Greenblatt explains, the Lucretian concept of the "swerve", called in the original "*declinatio, inclinatio, or clinamen* ... is the most minimal of motions, *nec plus quam minimum* (2.224). But it is enough to set off a ceaseless chain of collisions" (*idem*, 188).

perspective, where fates can be forged by the hands of able men. As Brendecke and Vogt aptly summarise in their introduction,

with Fortuna's help, a new relationship of the individual to history can be marked out, thus enabling us to follow the two great epochal trends of the early modern period, namely the development of a new understanding of historical time (and open future) and the constitution of a self-consciously acting subject (*idem*, 2-3).

This new, "self-consciously acting subject", is at the centre of Machiavelli's vastly influential treatise on politics and power, *The Prince*, and is very much tied in with the agonistic aspects of civilisation and history-making. Chapter 25 is dedicated to the role of Fortuna in human affairs, offering various strategies of withstanding her whims or even subduing her to one's ambition. Although Machiavelli concedes that Fortune is like a "violent river" that "floods" and "destroys" everything in its path and everyone "flees" from it, he posits that she is "the arbiter of half of our actions" only, leaving "the other half" "for us to govern" – crucially, Fortune only obliterates where man has neglected to exert his *virtù*, his daring enterprise and free will (Machiavelli, 1998: 98). Machiavelli's Fortune is conceptualised as something between an elemental fury and a malleable woman who, in a traditionally patriarchal understanding, favours resolution, ambition and audacity, even aggressive boldness, rather than timidity. However, it does not pay off to rely on her entirely, as one tends to lose when she turns. And here we must return to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* – and one of its telling trans-historical arcs, namely the Northumberland rebellion. As Rackin expounds:

The conservative critics of the mid-twentieth century saw the plays as essentially medieval, the expressions of conservative ideology, cautionary tales based upon a political theology that attributed all the sufferings of the Wars of the Roses to the deposition, two generations earlier, of the divinely anointed Richard II. The newer generation, in our time as in the sixteenth century, prefers the Machiavellian version of historical causation, explaining history in terms of force, fortune, and practical politics. (Rackin, 1990: 43)

The Machiavellian relationship to Fortune is neatly epitomised by Northumberland’s son and heir, Sir Henry Percy, aptly nicknamed Hotspur – in Shakespeare’s rendition cast as a younger man than history would have had it, ever endeavouring to ride even the unfortunate spur of the moment to his utmost advantage. Shakespeare’s Hotspur is playing at high stakes – recalling Machiavelli’s treatment of the principle of *occasio*, he is playing a highly competitive game of chance, grabbing the propitious moment at full force. Crucially for Hotspur, described at the beginning of *Henry IV, Part 1* as “sweet Fortune’s minion and her pride” (*Henry IV 1*, I.1.83), the prince who is in tune with the times will prevail, while the prince whose actions are out of joint with the times will fail. Hotspur needs must fail, according to Machiavelli’s explication, because he relies wholly on Fortune, and, crucially, because he is also *out of joint* with the times (Machiavelli, 1998: 100). In a wider historical context pertaining to Shakespeare’s portrayal of these epoch-breaking events, with “the ascension of Henry IV, medieval England recedes into the past. Medievalism, in fact, becomes anachronistic. Hotspur, who attempts to live by the code of feudal chivalry, seems misplaced in the world of Henry IV” (Rackin, 1990: 136). The following exchange illustrates the acute rhetorical as well as dramatic build-up, with specific seminal lines highlighted in bold:

HOTSPUR. Sick now! droop now! this sickness doth infect
The very life-blood of our enterprise;

(...)

Yet doth he give us bold advertisement,
That with our small conjunction we should on,

To see how fortune is disposed to us;

(...)

EARL OF WORCESTER. Your father’s sickness is a maim to us.

HOTSPUR. A perilous gash, a very limb lopp’d off:

And yet, in faith, it is not; his present want
Seems more than we shall find it: were it good

To set the exact wealth of all our states

All at one cast? to set so rich a main

On the nice hazard of one doubtful hour?

It were not good; for therein should we read

The very bottom and the soul of hope,

The very list, the very utmost bound

Of all our fortunes.

(...)

EARL OF WORCESTER. But yet I would your father had been here.

(...)

think how such an apprehension
May turn the tide of fearful faction
And breed a kind of question in our cause;

(...)

HOTSPUR. You strain too far.

I rather of his absence make this use:

It lends a lustre and more great opinion,

A larger dare to our great enterprise,

Than if the earl were here; for men must think,

If we without his help can make a head

To push against a kingdom, with his help

We shall o’erturn it topsy-turvy down. (*Henry IV I*, IV.1.29-85)

This speech resonates with Hotspur’s deliberate, passionate raising of the stakes – by goading the hazard, Hotspur posits a moment of heightened possibility and pregnant opportunity, “a larger dare” at “a rustling time”. This daring attempt to combine *virtù* and *occasio* thrives on the inherent instability of structures and systems, proposing to use contingency as an advantage in political and military strategy. While Shakespeare (and history) does not ultimately favour Hotspur’s persistently agonistic strategy, combined with riding the random tide of events, as we have seen in our reading of Machiavelli’s exposition on Fortune, Hotspur’s case nonetheless marks another vital point in the transgressive development of early-modern conceptualisation of history and history-making – for where a “providential view of history constructs an unbroken chain of historical causation”, “a Machiavellian view interrupts that chain, constructing each age as unique, the product of Fortuna, or accident, and individual will” (Rackin, 1990: 54).

Here, then, we are on the cusp of a world increasingly governed by untrammelled contingency and conflict alone – simultaneously looking back to Classical models but also fast-forwarding in time, past the empirical paths of established humanism and the emerging Enlightenment, and into the uncertain, anarchic modernity of non-charterable history. If, as

Peter Vogt unfolds, the seventeenth century developed theories of probability, modern, empirical ways of accounting for contingency and chance, rendering Fortuna a sign of obsolete pre-modern mentality (Vogt, 2016: 148), Shakespeare's particular use of Fortune in the second tetralogy performs the shift from the medieval model of history ruled exclusively by Providence to the early-modern mindset's restoration of the Classical emblematic Fortuna balancing blind on her rolling sphere. Shakespeare's Fortuna looks back to the Antiquity, bringing back to some degree a pagan sense of the cosmos ruled by indiscriminate chance as well as inscrutable, retributive Fates, but also adumbrating various inklings of something more unsettling and irregular, a world of the "singular randomness of events":

[t]he forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. (...) the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause, where there is only the 'iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance.' (Foucault, 1977: 154-5, citing Nietzsche's aphorism 130 from *Daybreak*)

Fortune's changing attributes and related symbolism across millennia also betray a certain irony – from the inscrutable, unstable Fortune of Classical iconography to the medieval wheel handled by a stationary Fortuna in the service of divine Providence and its dependable morality, the symbolism turns back, in Renaissance emblems, to the reeling Fortuna on the rolling stone, marking the revival of Greek and Roman philosophy and iconography. This is followed, in turn, by empirical disbelief and the consequent abolishing of Fortuna as obsolete in the light of modern models of accounting for chance, such as theories of probability, and a seemingly final eclipse of Fortune in the onslaught of Enlightenment thought. Eventually, however, we come to the crisis of the Enlightenment project and its empirical line of enquiry, leading to the re-incorporation of the inevitability of chance as an inherent universal factor shaping human history, exemplified in Nietzsche and subsequent modern philosophy, and further still to our current understanding of the cosmos,

in which traditional causality is challenged by the infinitesimally complex quantum interactions. However, the crowning historical irony epitomised by Fortune is not in the tracing of the fluctuating ethos of science here, but in the recent, prominent political recourse to populism, characterised by blatant mistrust in empirical proof *per se*, disavowing expert opinion, marking a divide between scientific progress and political strategy sharper than we have seen in the last few centuries. If key 20th-century's crises were propitiated by the power structures' avowal of malignant pseudo-scientific theories such as eugenics, some of our contemporary problems stem from the power structures' disbelief in scientific prognoses (most prominently exemplified by the climate crisis).

Increasingly today, we see the flourishing of the post-secular, but also aberrations of political discourse such as the post-factual or post-truth, which present an unprecedented impasse to political rhetoric and logical argumentation. The past three years have seen the ascent of a new figure of impending chaos, a powerful force of global agency whose absolute unpredictability and off-the-cuff approach to politics unleashes daily mayhem and disorder unto the world – the current President of the United States, Donald Trump. The media have not been blind to this apparent symbolism, and there are dozens upon dozens of satirical depictions of President Trump as the new apparent personification of Classical Fortune, thwarting the logical efforts of contemporary socio-political science and rational enquiry and introducing instead onto the established scene of top global politics a stubborn strategy of personalised mayhem hardly conceivable before and highly unlikely to be uprooted any time soon now that it has gestated.

Just over a month after Trump's inauguration as 45th President of the United States, on 1 March, 2017, the magazine *Fortune* featured a telling, Fortune-evoking cover, cut

diagonally in half, speculating as to the economic “rise” or “fall” of the Trump administration. In just a few months spanning the election campaign and the settling into his presidency, the eminent political scene has been forced to become accustomed to and rather urgently think of new strategies to tackle the political-theory-defying phenomenon of “fake news”, the disenfranchisement of established mainstream media and a general overhaul of traditional political rhetoric, blatantly disavowing of any kind of critical debate. It is hardly surprising, then, that President Trump’s impending presidency had also been associated with the fateful symbolism of tarot cards – such as the cover of the 2016’s issue of *The Economist*’s special prognostic annual, *The World in 2017*, featuring eight tarot cards (among them “The Wheel of Fortune”, Angela Merkel, Marie Le Pen and Geert Wilders tied to it, combining the *regnabo – regno – regnavi – sum sine regno* model and the Catherine wheel), with the card titled “Judgment” depicting a Fortune-like Donald Trump wearing coronation regalia, sat balancing on a rolled-up American flag on top of planet Earth, while the 2016 Republican primaries were in turn often visually associated with another timeless emblem, that of the *navis stultorum* – the ship of fools.

As ever at a time of historical crisis, with empirical lines of enquiry failing us, many frustrated critical responses have called on the Bard, consulting the political lessons of his plays in an attempt to come to grips with this untimely turn of events – perhaps most famously Stephen Greenblatt’s *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*, which never explicitly names its immediate correlative, but asks unambiguously: “how is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant?” (Greenblatt, 2018: 1). Troubled by Fortune’s recently rejuvenated afterlife, we may recall Cleopatra’s fateful words: “’Tis paltry to be Caesar. / Not being Fortune, he’s but Fortune’s knave, / A minister of her will” (*Anthony and Cleopatra*,

V.2.2-4). The concept of Fortune has always been used to account for the cosmic inevitability of crisis, functioning within various teleological frameworks as a coping mechanism – its recent revival in political cartoons by the expert mainstream press is non-religious, of course, but attests to the frustration of critical enquiry which has resorted to this ancient emblematic iconography. In a world where politics is regularly played out on social media but also, in a more sinister fashion, increasingly governed by social media and its clandestine manipulative algorithms, we needs must, to paraphrase Pistol’s line from *Henry V*, “beware giddy Trump’s furious fickle tweets”.

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