Shakespeare and Tragedy in South Africa: From *Black Hamlet* to *A Dream Deferred*

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ABSTRACT

This article starts with a somewhat naive question: what drives an identification with tragedy – and Shakespeare's tragedies in particular – in the context of South African politics? The first part of the article relates to the cultural dialectics of tragedy as a genre, its journeys across time and space as it is reworked to serve different purposes, to constitute distinct publics and to enframe new social and historical realities. The second part presents a case study: Mark Gevisser's biography of Thabo Mbeki, *A Dream Deferred*, which presents Mbeki as a Coriolanus-like figure. This aspect of the book has drawn criticism from South African commentators. The article considers Gevisser's construction of a tragic narrative architecture around the putative sympathy between a politician and a literary character. Finally, it offers a reading of *Coriolanus* as a tragedy that speaks to the very crisis of interpretation that is provoked by the itinerant, labile condition of the genre of tragedy itself.

When Sonny Venkatrathnam was sentenced to Robben Island by the apartheid government in the early 1970s, he was allowed to bring one book along with him. He chose Shakespeare's *Complete Works* – the 1970 imprint of the Alexander Text edition. He managed to take it with him when he was transferred to Nelson Mandela's single-cell B section by convincing a warder that it was his Hindu 'bible'. The edition was passed from prisoner to prisoner, and each signed his name next to a favourite passage. This unprepossessing edition of Shakespeare, autographed by many of the luminaries of the South African freedom struggle, including Nelson Mandela, has recently been propelled into the modest limelight of the Shakespeare cultural industry. Two full-length monographs are devoted to it: Ashwin Desai's *Reading Revolution* (2012) and David Schalkwyk's *Hamlet's Dreams* (2013).

The plays that collected the most signatures are *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. In a 2008 interview, Kwedi Mkalipi revised his original choice of Puck's apology in the epilogue of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Lady Macbeth's lament in the last act of *Macbeth*: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (5.1.35)[1] If we allow Mkalipi this belated revision, *Macbeth* could join the most-quoted list. Mandela chose Julius Caesar's martial lines: "Cowards die many times before their death..." (*Julius Caesar* 2.2.32-37). In Mandela's televised interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2001, he quotes the same lines verbatim in answer to her question, "Do you fear death?" It seems that it was Shakespeare's tragedies, rather than the comedies (excepting the anomaly of *As You Like It*), the histories, the romances or the sonnets, that appealed most generally to the prisoners. By 1994, when the African National Congress came to power in South Africa's first democratic election, this preference for tragedy had become even more pronounced – at least in public speeches: Mandela and his successor, Thabo Mbeki, referenced *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. The only romance that Mbeki ever referred to was *The Tempest* (notably, in 2000, to attack the opposition leader at the time, Tony Leon, by comparing him to Prospero). The predilection for quoting Shakespeare

1. David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.39.

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almost disappeared under the more populist governance of Jacob Zuma, who replaced Mbeki when the ANC 'recalled' him in 2008. The one Shakespearean quotation that Zuma has employed in various contexts, in order to deride the media and opposition parties, is from *Macbeth*: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (5.5.26-28)

This article starts with a somewhat naive question: what drives this identification with tragedy – and Shakespeare's tragedies in particular – in the context of South African politics? The first part of the article, then, relates to the cultural dialectics of tragedy as a genre, its journeys across time and space as it is reworked to serve different purposes, to constitute distinct publics and to enframe new social and historical realities. The second part of the article isolates a kind of case study. In Mark Gevisser's magisterial 2008 biography of Thabo Mbeki, *A Dream Deferred*, Gevisser employs Mbeki's admiration of Coriolanus, from Shakespeare's eponymous play, as a key to understand Mbeki's motivations and his particular predicaments. By reading Mbeki as a Coriolanus-like figure, the biography in fact mimics some of the conventions of tragedy. It is precisely this aspect of the book that has drawn most criticism from South African commentators. I will consider Gevisser's construction of a tragic narrative architecture around this putative sympathy between a politician and a literary character, then trace the way that, in this instance, tragedy manages to slip from the domain of narrative fiction to psychology to political biography. Finally, I will offer a reading of *Coriolanus* as a tragedy that speaks to the very crisis of interpretation that is provoked by the itinerant, labile condition of the genre of tragedy as it inhabits, modifies and engenders different modes for understanding the social.

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The question of the attractive force of Shakespearian tragedy in South African political life invites a preliminary blunt answer that collapses the distinction between tragedy as one of the key Western literary genres inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity and the more everyday use of the term. Under apartheid, disenfranchisement, forced removals, the ubiquitous legal separation of races in public and private space, pass laws, unequal education, job protection for whites, political imprisonment and a vicious military response to protest set the stage for countless tragedies. Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying the dying 13-year old Hector Pieterson after the police opened fire on protesting students in 1976 is a composition that is both tragic and incendiary: the vulnerability of the young bodies in their school uniforms, the naked grief and terror on Makhubo's face, the contraction of state brutality to the suffering of the three defenseless figures as they approach the viewers, locked in their own world of pain, presented an overpowering, personal indictment of the apartheid regime. The photograph maps the tragedy of the situation onto a tragic narrative, individualising the brutality of apartheid in a visceral way. It invites pity and fear, it is rooted in the fundamental order of the state rather than coincidental misfortune, its central characters are clearly foregrounded, it is serious. The picture was also globally intelligible, sparking outrage as it travelled around the world. There is an almost seamless connection between the massacre as an important moment in the history of resistance in South Africa and some of the fundamental categories of tragedy as a genre, as if the composition simply congeals around the events that it captures – like Nick Ut's famous 1972 picture of Kim Phuc, the nude Vietnamese girl running towards the camera after her village was bombed with Napalm.

Raymond Williams opens his 1966 book, *Modern Tragedy*, by identifying the permeable line between tragedy as a body of literature, an academic problem and an immediate experience. For Williams, tragic action cannot be reduced to an affirmation of disorder: it is, instead, preoccupied with understanding and resolving the disorder. Here Williams reaffirms Aristotle's insistence on tragedy as *cathartic*: it is through the purification of the emotions of pity and fear that tragedy fulfils its ethical function. Such a process of comprehension and resolution is, for Williams, fundamental to twentieth century revolutionary struggle:

> We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not cover it with names. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it. We

> make the connections, because that is the action of tragedy, and what we learn in suffering is again revolution, because we acknowledge others as men and any such acknowledgement is the beginning of struggle, as the continuing reality of our lives. Then to see revolution in this tragic perspective is the only way to maintain it.[2]

For Williams, then, the conditions of revolution provide a structural scaffolding for tragic comprehension: or, in Jonathan Dollimore's words, tragedy is "the effect of social and historical forces focussed in state power".[3] In *Sweet Violence*, Terry Eagleton invokes an even broader (and surprisingly trans-historical) dimension of tragedy, one that subtends historically located moments of social upheaval: "Tragedy deals in the cut-and-thrust of historical conjunctures, but since there are aspects of suffering which are also rooted in our species-being, it also has an eye to these more natural, material facts of human nature."[4] Nonetheless – and this is a point I will return to in my discussion – revolutionary conditions do not simply generate tragic situations in an unmediated way: in fact, the "tragic perspective", a point of view with its own extended history and disagreements, plays a performative role. It is *employed* in order both to understand events in a particular way and to propel a form of response that contributes to a revolutionary politics. But to insist on a rigid distinction between tragedy as a literary genre and tragedy in human experience is to maintain a particularly rigid and impracticable understanding of literature and the way it intersects with and reflects social life.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela describes a performance of Jean Anouilh's version of *Antigone* on Robben Island. Mandela played Creon, and observes:

> At the outset, Creon is sincere and patriotic, and there is wisdom in his early speeches ... But Creon deals with his enemies mercilessly ... His inflexibility and blindness ill become a leader, for a leader must temper justice with mercy. It was Antigone who symbolized our struggle; she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the ground that it was unjust.[5]

For Mandela, *Antigone* spoke directly to the tragedy of leadership under conditions of state injustice: in other words, the organising logic of the play made direct and immediate sense to him, and his moral reading of the play essentially fulfils its cathartic ambitions. Moreover, the play was performed right after two of Mandela's most personally tragic years in prison, 1968 and 1969. His mother fell ill and died, his wife, Winnie Mandela, was charged and arrested, and his oldest son, Madiba Thembekile, had been killed in a car accident: "What can one say about such a tragedy? I was already overwrought about my wife, I was still grieving for my mother, and then to hear such news ... I do not have the words to express the sorrow, or the loss I felt."[6] It is difficult to miss the transition, in just a few pages, from the loss of words that attends on everyday tragedy to the stoic lesson that Mandela identifies in *Antigone*; the shift from deeply-felt personal tragedy to the tragedy of public life, with the increasingly isolated and lonely but defiant figure of Antigone, who declares that "words are not friends", mediating between the psychology of private loss and the ennobling dignity of political tragedy.

Part of the attraction of tragedy for freedom fighters in South Africa and elsewhere can of course also be related to the virtue, status and gravity of the protagonists. As Njabulo Ndebele points out in "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary", first delivered at a conference in 1984 at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle: "The visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly

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2. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp.83-84.

3. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 2nd edition (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.xviii.

4. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p.xiii.

5. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* [1994] (London: Abacus, 1996), p.541.

6. *Ibid.*, p.531.

dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation."[7] While tragedy's preoccupation with individual psychology is not wholly compatible with the kind of morally unambiguous, spectacular literature that Ndebele describes, it offers a view of the world that accommodates tightness of plot, protagonists who are ennobled by suffering, an unjust social order that inflicts anguish, and a conflict between different forms of moral understanding. Specifically, it is not comedy, which, to follow the Aristotelian formulation again, presents characters who lack dignity and enjoin laughter and ridicule. In his well-known poem "City Johannesburg", first published in 1972, Mongane Wally Serote offers an ironic salute to Johannesburg:

> Jo'burg City, I salute you;
> When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
> I leave behind me, my love,
> My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,
> My death
> That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.
>
> (12-17)

What strikes one in this description, both forlorn and lyrical, is the incongruous reference to "comic houses and people": the relegation of the victims of this systemic deprivation to a position outside the ambit of dignity. What is at stake here can be read as generic. Serote describes an abysmal situation that cannot escape from the belittling frame of comedy. The appeal of tragedy, under such conditions, is its ability to translate the trivialisation of black life under apartheid to the more dignified predicament of tragedy, sometimes at the expense of some of the specific culturally laden literary nuances of the genre. Even in Mandela's quite sensitive reading of *Antigone*, where he credits Creon's initial statesmanship, something of the irresolvable ambiguity and ethical complexity of Sophocles' play is reinterpreted (as it is in Anouilh's version of the play, first performed in Paris in 1944 under Nazi occupation) as a more unequivocal, spectacular struggle between right and wrong, state power and ethical authority.

The appeal of the tragedies of Shakespeare, in particular, to resistance fighters in South Africa can be traced to the mission school education that many of Mandela's generation of African intellectuals received in institutions like Clarkebury and Healdtown in the early decades of the twentieth century, where English literature comprised an important part of the curriculum. As Isabel Hofmeyr points out, students were often required to learn passages off by heart.[8] Hofmeyr also observes that debating societies at these institutions were politically aware, relatively student-driven and practiced a skill that was seen as an apprenticeship to political leadership. In this context, Shakespeare offered a rich, socially legitimate reservoir for commentaries on political oppression and injustice.

In *Hamlet's Dreams*, Schalkwyk notes that the passages the prisoners signed in the Robben Island Shakespeare are often wrested out of an overall dramatic context that divests them of their ironic charge, or their dialogic function in the development of plot and character. For instance, Schalkwyk points to Walter Sisulu's choice of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" in *Merchant of Venice* and notes that "it is difficult to know whether Sisulu gave full weight to the contrary aspect of Shylock's appeal, in which the lesson of common humanity lies not in equality or companionship but rather a common propensity for retribution."[9] Similarly, in his choice of Jacques's speech in *As You Like It*, did J.B. Vusani "notice Shakespeare's ironic placing of Jacques's nihilist vision against the entry of Orlando, ... or did he merely recognize an old

7. Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2006), p.31.

8. See Isabel Hofmeyr, "Reading Debating/Debating Reading: The Case of the Lovedale Literary Society, or Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare" in *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and the Making of the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp.259-267.

9. Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams*, p.42.

platitude, uncontextualised by the rest of the play?”[10] One could add Jacob Zuma’s frequently quoted “it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” from *Macbeth* to remark that Macbeth is not deriding oppositional voices – the sense in which Zuma repeatedly employs it – but is rather reflecting despairingly on the insignificance and futility of life as he realises that he is doomed in battle. Shakespeare’s mixture of styles, in fact, facilitates this kind of decontextualisation, perhaps more so than the tightly organised classical theatre of Greece and Rome. Shakespeare’s portability across time and space is assisted by the distinctive polyvocality of his dramatic style. This confluence of a historically situated affinity for tragedy, the enduring understanding of Shakespeare as a figure of globally intelligible cultural prestige, the mission school education of many of South Africa’s great resistance leaders and the stylistic and thematic fluidity of Shakespeare’s plays help us to grasp the purchase that Shakespearian tragedy has enjoyed in South African political life.

However, as Timothy Reiss reminds us in *Against Autonomy*, tragedy is inherently a Western form, one that is inextricably bound to the insecure separation between a rational human law and a world of chaos, of the inhuman. As it was reconceptualised during the Early Modern period and the Enlightenment, Aristotle’s notion of catharsis became entangled with rational ideas concerning mental and emotional life. Under the aegis of this point of view, for Reiss, “tragedy could be a principal tool in an aesthetico-political ordering of the *civitas* against the ever-present threat of an increasingly immoderate nature”.[11] With the rise of individualism, the view that civil society was essentially a collection of distinctive individuals with distinctive personal aspirations, “tragedy was taken to set them, their desires, and their society either against others’ desires or against some ineluctable obstacle in the world”. In this way, the original preoccupation of tragedy with disjuncture in the social and legal bulwark against chaos was transformed into discord between individual desires and social obligations and order. Little wonder, then, that Freudian psychoanalysis draws so heavily on tragedy for its central terms. As Sarah Winters puts it in *Freud and the Institution of Psychoanalytic Knowledge*:

> Tragic *pathos* becomes in psychoanalysis a form of legitimation of a psychological theory based on the primacy of unconscious determination and guilt. Tragedy also designates a set of experiences and moral questions in relation to human capacities and limitations, over which psychoanalysis must continuously claim authority.[12]

If psychoanalysis found its primary terms in tragedy, psychoanalysis is also as a theory, a mode of praxis, heavily indebted to an antecedent comprehension of the fundamental predicaments that animate tragedy: a comprehension that started to solidify in the Early Modern period in Europe.

In 1937, Wulf Sachs, a Lithuanian-born doctor and psychoanalyst who settled in Johannesburg, published a case history of a Manyika diviner-healer named John Chavafambira under the title *Black Hamlet: The Mind of an African Negro Revealed by Psychoanalysis*. This was followed by a reworked version of the book called *Black Anger* in 1947.[13] In these books, somewhere on the boundary between biography and psychoanalytic case study, Sachs attempts to demonstrate that black South Africans suffered from the same neurotic complexes as the white, Western subjects comprising the bulk of case studies in the burgeoning discipline of psychoanalysis. Sachs diagnoses his patient-informant with what he calls “Hamletism”, an inability to act. The details and complexities of the relationship between Sachs and Chavafambira have been documented and discussed in several scholarly works, so I will not

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10. Ibid., p.43.

11. Timothy Reiss, Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.118.

12. Sarah Winters, Freud and the Institution of Psychoanalytic Knowledge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.19.

13. See Black Hamlet: The Mind of an African Negro Revealed by Psychoanalysis [1937] (Boston: Little, Brown Co., 1947) and Black Anger (Boston: Little, Brown Co., 1947).

cover the particulars here.[14] The outcome of the treatment, as Sachs outlines it in *Black Anger*, is that Chavafambira decided to become active against the political injustice of racist white governance. In his article "Treating Life Literally", Adam Sitze remarks that Chavafambira's cathartic moment arrives, at least in Sachs's account, when Sachs reads his manuscript copy of *Black Anger* to Chavafambira and his crippled wife, Maggie. "Just as *Hamlet* is a play the drama of which pivots on the performance of a play-within-a-play ... whose plot to that point resembles its own, so too is *Black Anger* a book that pivots on the reading of a book-within-a-book whose plot to that point doubles its own," as Sitze observes.[15] In Sitze's perspicacious argument, Sachs collapses the linear relationships of cause and effect that characterise the biography as genre into the linear progression of the genre of tragedy, and then "cures" Chavafambira by reading him his own life story:

> Sachs claims to cure Chavafambira of his Hamletism by pouring into his [Chavafambira's] ear precisely the time that Hamlet needs to act: to Chavafambira's otherwise inactive, repetitious, and essentially vegetative life, Sachs shall introduce the cure, the time of *bios*, reorganizing Chavafambira's disorganized discourse into a strictly linear, chronological narrative.[16]

One of Chavafambira's first acts, after he reorganises the logic of his life around the conflated temporality of biography and tragedy, is to attempt to murder his wife, Maggie, by poisoning her. (The bottle that he uses is in fact mislabeled "poison", so his attempt fails.) Sachs reads this attempted murder – rather curiously – as evidence that Chavafambira wanted to kill the introjection that trapped him in a state of indecision: in other words, it becomes a mark of his escape from circular time and inaction.

The remarkable story of *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* suggests a number of observations. The first is that by casting Chavafambira as Hamlet, Sachs performs the close relationship between tragedy and psychoanalysis, both originally Western forms built around a particular view of the relationship between the way time is structured and the notion of cathartic recognition. In the process, Sachs also shows the amenability of the biographical form to a tragic narrative. The second is that Sachs's narrative *displaces*, in his account in any case, Chavafambira's concept of time and causality with his own diagnostic narrative, one distinguished by its assumption of scientific superiority and universal explanatory power. The third is that the form of this narrative allows Chavafambira, again according to Sachs, to express his personal sense of victimisation and recurrent uncertainty in explicitly political terms. The fourth is that it produces a scapegoat in the form of Maggie, to whom Sachs never warms. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that for Sachs, she represents the heart of Chavafambira's crisis, his inability to reconcile the competing worlds of rural and city life, tradition and modernity. Despite Sachs's sympathy towards Chavafambira's beliefs and customs, the thrust of his treatment is to enjoin Chavafambira to become more rational and more modern in his understanding of himself and the world: even as Sachs gains understanding and sympathy for Chavafambira's reality, he is also advocating a form of deculturation that pivots around the organising principles of tragedy and its avatars.

To say that life under apartheid lends itself to a tragic lens, then, is not to claim some kind of epistemological priority for tragedy as a genre. Tragedy carries with it a series of ideologically charged assumptions and complicities in juridico-medical practices that were alien

14. Readers are referred especially to Andreas Bertoldi's ''Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis and the Colonial Encounter: The Case of Wulf Sachs's Black Hamlet'' in Post-Colonial Shakespeares, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (New York: Routledge, 1998); Saul Dubow's "Wulf Sachs's Black Hamlet: A Case of 'Psychic Vivisection?'", African Affairs 92.1 (1993): 519-556; Jacqueline Rose's "Black Hamlet" in States of Fantasy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Adam Sitze's "Treating Life Literally", Law Critique 18.1 (2007): 55-89.

15. Sitze, "Treating Life Literally", p.76.

16. *Ibid.*, p.81.

to South Africa before colonisation. Nor can tragedy be understood as a destructive imported cultural imposition: its particular way of framing the social has been reworked in various directions in South Africa, above all as a conceptual tool for the language of resistance.

Given that tragedy supplied some of the essential terms through which South African life was grasped under apartheid, it is difficult to escape the question of the role of tragedy after democracy. The next section of this article addresses this subject by adopting a close focus on a single text: Mark Gevisser's biography of Thabo Mbeki, *A Dream Deferred*, which was published in 2008, just before Mbeki was ousted as president by his party at the ANC's 52nd national conference in Polokwane.

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If "apartheid" and "post-apartheid" are important temporal markers in the South African imaginary, "pre-Polokwane" and "post-Polokwane" mark, for many South Africans, the most important schism in the democratic era. Thabo Mbeki was in many ways unlike his predecessor, Nelson Mandela. Taciturn, but given to oratorical flourish, he presented himself as an intellectual and patrician statesman, with grand ambitions not only for South Africa but for the African continent as a whole. Under his technocratic leadership, the government entrenched a centrist, essentially neo-liberal approach to governance and the economy that alienated the ANC's leftist partners. His ambitious market-friendly Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme incensed the powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), who were completely unprepared for this departure from socialist principles: in fact, they were so stunned when the plan was introduced in 1996 that it took them a full week to respond in a trenchant press release.[17] His flirtation with Aids denialists came at an immense cost for South Africa: the failure to roll out timely anti-retroviral programmes in state clinics and hospitals claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. His "quiet diplomacy" approach to Zimbabwe, whose economy was in melt-down right on South Africa's doorstep, also attracted considerable criticism. Nonetheless, his lively intellect, his broad education, his commitment to social reform and his pedigree as the son of Govan Mbeki, one of the great stalwarts of the anti-apartheid struggle, aligned him to the ANC of Pixley Seme and Albert Luthuli – middle-class black activists and intellectuals who fought for non-racialism and rejected all forms of tribalism. As Xolela Mangcu points out, "over the hundred or so years of its existence the ANC was always led by the schooled people: doctors, lawyers, priests and economists such as Thabo Mbeki."[18] For decades, Mbeki was groomed to inherit the mantle of leadership in the organisation. Indeed, Dennis Abrams notes that some historians believe that the leadership echelon of the ANC had agreed as early as the 1970s that Mbeki should be president of South Africa after the fall of apartheid.[19] The revolt against Mbeki at Polokwane, ostensibly to advance working class interests, changed the character of the party in ways that continue to send shock-waves through South African society.

Mark Gevisser is a well-known South African journalist who wrote numerous opinion pieces about Thabo Mbeki and his presidency. His interest in Mbeki culminated in a fascinating 892-page biographical tome called *The Dream Deferred: Thabo Mbeki*, which follows Mbeki's life from his birth in 1942 to the eve of the Polokwane conference. The book was published in 2007, a few months before this momentous event. Diligent followers of Gevisser's opinion pieces on Mbeki through the years will notice a recurring observation: Mbeki admired Shakespeare's play, *Coriolanus*. He liked its hero's uncompromising attitude in the face of populism, for saying "I play/The man I am" (3.2.15-16). Gevisser knows this because he found a

17. William Mervin Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (London: Zed Books, 2005), p.109.

18. Xolela Mangcu, *The Democratic Moment: South Africa's Prospects under Jacob Zuma* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009), p.36.

19. Dennis Abrams, *Thabo Mbeki*, Modern World Leaders series (New York: Infobase, 2008), p.87.

series of letters that Mbeki wrote while he was in the Soviet Union in 1969 to his friend Rhianon Gooding in the United Kingdom. In these letters, he tries to make the case that Coriolanus is not the tyrant he is often portrayed as in the West, but rather a modern-day revolutionary, an antidote to the "existential non-hero" in the serious literature of the West in the 1960s. "We shrink at 'hero-worship'," he writes in one of the letters,

> But to think of revolutionary struggle is to think of heroic feats by individuals ... Further, this heroic person in our times fights for revolutionary socialist transformation of the world; therefore it belongs to the new forces, the masses of ordinary people, to push for these moral qualities [of truthfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, absence of self-seeking, brotherliness, heroism, optimism].[20]

Gevisser notes that Mbeki felt a particular affinity towards Coriolanus, quoting again from Mbeki's letter to Gooding: "He is the scourge of the rabble, the unthinking mob, with its cowardice, its lying, its ordinary-people-ness; an inspirer of the thinking masses, who are purposeful, kindly, etc." Gevisser notes that Mbeki's developing affinity for Shakespearean tragedy while he was studying in Moscow was impelled by Soviet literary critics' fascination with these tragedies: "At the time, Mbeki had been turned on to the Soviet critics' love of Shakespearean tragedy, and particularly their rather odd notion that Shakespeare killed off his heroes as a way of critiquing the proto-capitalist societies in which they (and he) lived." It is worth pointing out that this notion – the death of the tragic hero as a consequence of social disjuncture – is perhaps not that odd, and remains central to a tradition of Marxist Shakespearean scholarship that extended well beyond the Soviet Union. What distinguishes Soviet criticism during Mbeki's stay in Moscow is perhaps more the insistence on the revolutionary *intentions* of the tragic hero. Sofia Nels summarises this view in the first chapter of her book *Shakespeare and the Soviet Stage*, published by the Moscow State Art Publishing House in 1960 and later translated as an article in the *Antioch Review* in 1964:

> In socialist art, the tragic hero recognizes that the history of man involves changing the world of social evil into a world of beauty and harmony. He recognizes that in this struggle for the happiness of his people all sacrifices are justified, even his own destruction. He knows that others will continue with his cause and that he is assisting the eventual triumph of that cause through his own tragic downfall. Here lies the objective rationale of his death. In his most tense and catastrophic moments, this reconciliation and purification enables him to transcend the inevitability of death. [21]

This link between Mbeki and *Coriolanus* is most fully developed in Gevisser's biography of Mbeki. Here Gevisser latches onto what he calls Mbeki's "eccentric" reading of the play in order to explain what he sees as the central contradictions in Mbeki's character, and to account for his uncompromising and unpopular stances during his presidency – like his Aids denialism.[22] A quick internet search of "Mbeki and Shakespeare" reveals that this Coriolanus-Mbeki assemblage has taken on a life of its own: opinion pieces, blogs and newspaper articles from all over the world refer to Mbeki as an almost self-evidently Coriolanus-like figure. In every single case, the source can be traced back to Gevisser. We can say that Gevisser is in fact the inventor of this influential and enduring tragic frame for reading Mbeki.

For literary scholars, this an interesting situation. Here we have Mbeki, a politician, who develops an attachment to a play by Shakespeare, and starts reading it for conduct lessons in revolutionary behaviour. He is in the Soviet Union, so his reading of the play is in fact guided by

20. Quoted in Mark Gevisser, *A Dream Deferred: Thabo Mbeki* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), p.283.

21. Sofia Nels, "Shakespeare and the Soviet Theater: The Optimism of Tragedy", *The Antioch Review* 24.1 (1964): 105.

22. Gevisser, *A Dream Deferred*, p.284.

a geographically and historically distinct tradition of literary scholarship. In this sense, a very particular Cold War use and understanding Shakespeare is exported to South Africa, where it enjoys a certain influence – if only for the fact that an important South African political figure identifies with a value system that he has been schooled to recognise in Shakespearean tragedy. But then we also have Gevisser, a journalist with a background in literary scholarship, who is uses Coriolanus as a kind of *symptom*, a key to unlocking the personality of his subject. This is a different way of using Shakespeare altogether: he is reading Mbeki's reading, a recursive exegetical exercise that makes sense in the genre conventions of the biography. Finally, we have *Coriolanus* itself, which is of course itself a politically charged interpretation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*: and it is also a play that deals precisely with the limits of interpretation and the relationship between external show and internal truth. In fact, it's almost irresistible to ask if *Coriolanus* can be used to read Gevisser reading Mbeki reading *Coriolanus*, like a series of Russian dolls.

The situation presents us with a series of elementary questions: what do people actually use literary works *for*? What happens to literary works as they move from one discursive domain to another? How do people understand the value of literature? How does Shakespeare reproduce his own canonical status in practice?

Gevisser really is a very good biographer, and *The Dream Deferred* stands out for the way in which it takes us to the complicated place where political practice meets fantasy, where the world of empirical facts begins to intersect with the virtual world of the literary imagination. The difficulty of writing about Mbeki is that he is a notoriously opaque person who rarely talks about his private life: the words "inscrutable" and "aloof" followed him throughout his presidency. This complicates a modern biographer's job, which is to create a sense of a fully formed subject with an interior life, self-doubts, and so on. By uncovering Mbeki's identification with Coriolanus, and labeling Mbeki's reading of the play as a *misreading* or an eccentric reading, Gevisser draws on a particular tradition of reading a text for omissions, slippages, mistakes, contradictions and so on. The idea is to disclose a hidden domain of truth that subtends and informs the surface of the text. This is called a symptomatic reading and it has enjoyed a central position in cultural and literary theory for many decades, although some of its central assumptions and tenets have recently been reappraised (notably by Rita Felski in numerous articles and in her 2008 "manifesto", *Uses of Literature*).[23]

Gevisser's claim is that Mbeki has formed an attachment to a literary character in a way that makes him oblivious to the character's flaws: essentially, Mbeki is forced to enact the tragic narrative of Coriolanus because he is blind to Coriolanus's faults. Mbeki's life, then, can be read as a form of tragedy, and Gevisser's biography can borrow aspects of its narrative structure from the genre of tragedy. Another assumption that animates Gevisser's reading is that literary works can effect identifications that begin to steer the course of a personality, with real effects in the real world: they offer what Freud called an "ego-ideal", and Coriolanus is Mbeki's ego-ideal. The necessity of *identification* with the tragic protagonist's predicament intersects with a dynamic that is also a vital concept in psychoanalysis. So if one wants to understand Mbeki's inner life, just peek behind the surface and one finds a fictional character. It's a remarkable claim – one lifts the lid to see what truth lies beneath the public facade, and what does one discover? A fantasy, a piece of fiction – so the idea of a subject with an interior truth and coherence becomes firmly implicated in a process of fictionalisation. As a speculative device, it allows Gevisser to use Coriolanus to fill in the missing pieces in his portrait of Mbeki: what motivated his Aids denialism? Why did he seem so uncomfortable among ordinary people? How do we explain his sometimes contemptuous attitude? We can refer to Shakespeare's play for answers. Shakespeare offers us a fully packaged, complex individual with a value system, an internal life and a political philosophy that we can map onto Mbeki: the Early Modern text, itself an attempt to construct what we now recognise as a modern subjectivity, surreptitiously begins to write Gevisser's biography *for* him, imposing its own narrative structure on the biography. As in

23. See Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

Sachs's *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger*, the biographical form enters into a formal alliance with tragedy.

This is of course not to dismiss Gevisser's claims, but rather to foreground a certain structural relationship here. Mbeki *did* profess his admiration for Coriolanus: it is not a large stretch of the imagination to see that Coriolanus's autotelic nature, his Stoic values, his martial disposition and his inability to dissemble and flatter would have appealed to a young Mbeki, perhaps precisely because these were virtues that he felt he needed to foster in himself if he were going to inherit the mantel of revolutionary leadership. The articulation between Mbeki and Coriolanus explains something of Mbeki's self-image in the framework of life writing, and in 2007 it even had predictive power: the first edition of the book was published before the events at Polokwane, so Gevisser's allusion to the banishment of Coriolanus seemed almost prophetic. (Although of course Mbeki never returned to "sack Rome", as many people expected him to do.)

Nonetheless, you have to ask what is at stake when we elevate a few enthusiastic letters written forty years ago by a university student about his Soviet syllabus to friends in London to a central explanatory role. Such an elevation introduces a seductive unity to Gevisser's subject through reference to a literary, narrative construct. Gevisser's critics insist that he got carried away by the narrative element at the expense of analysing the political and economic pressures that guided Mbeki's actions and decisions as president. The political scientist Adam Habib criticised the book for this very reason: he saw it as a liberal humanist contraction of political contestation to a question of individual character. Habib summarises his criticism in a response to the book at a panel discussion in 2008:

> I will engage Mark's analysis on why we stand here today. His book was fantastic on explaining Mbeki the individual, but not on explaining Mbeki the decisionmaker ... How did we arrive at this place, where the president is not consultative, state apparatus is manipulated, and BEE empowers the rich? The analysis given in explanation is about Thabo Mbeki the individual. The most sophisticated analysis in this regard is given by Mark Gevisser. The situation is a product of aloofness, which is a product of his daddy not being a daddy and of his being more an international than a national. But I don't buy it. It doesn't explain Mbeki's decisions. Men make history, but not as they please. It is not determined by the circumstances of the men themselves, but by the circumstances of the past. To understand decisions that have been made, we need to understand the systemic environment of the decisions. The ANC liberation movement inherits the straining state coffers, and [is] brought to power by people with legitimate expectations – of houses, schools etc. But the people with the money are the big companies and they are on an investment strike. So, to get investment, Mbeki has to make concessions. The result is programs like GEAR. But you don't pass it through parliament because you won't get it through your own party. So, you pass it through cabinet and say it is the implementation of the transition. But then you have to appoint premiers to implement these policies. The result is a centralised system. Hence, it is clear that in order to explain the current situation, analysis has to understand systemic variables. This is why Mark's presentation was weak.[24]

Gevisser has responded in interesting ways to these kinds of allegations. In an interview with Adam Biles in 2010, he remarked:

> My first class as an undergraduate at Yale was English 129, beginning with the Greek tragedies and ending with Joyce. I think I was always very conscious of narratives. One of the most common criticisms of my book is people who say to me: 'You've over determined Mbeki to fit your narrative.' I think that's a real problem with biography, and one that I sometimes fall into. I don't know many successful biographers who don't fall into it. Janet Malcolm said that people read biography as they read fiction, and that there is this kind of expectation of a narrative, of a protagonist who goes through all manner of trials. What you end up doing, if you're not careful, is imposing your narrative on the facts. So I have my

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24. Quoted in Harold Wolpe Foundation, "Harold Wolpe Foundation Minutes", 19 February 2008, p.3. (Online: http://www.markgevisser.com/images/pdf/wolpelectureminutes.pdf).

> story about Mbeki. I have no doubt that it is correct. That it is true ... No, true is the wrong word – I have no doubt that it is accurate. He is a tragic character in the Coriolanus mode, and his tragedy had to do with his disconnection. But what you end up presenting between the covers is one story. [25]

Here Gevisser concedes his literary background, and in particular his schooling in Greek tragedy at Yale. He admits that he was "tempted to impose a literary narrative" in his biography, but nonetheless claims that it is "true" – and then "true" is changed to "accurate", which is a semantic shift – and then moves back to this idea of a *story*, and the possibility of other narrative frames. One striking thing in his response is that it is aligned more with a modern understanding of tragedy than a classical one: the tragedy revolves around Mbeki's disconnection from the world that he inhabits; it is understood as the incommensurability of individual desires with social expectations.

A closer reading of *Coriolanus* suggests that within the broad coordinates of tragedy, other possibilities for apprehending the tragic nature of the play are also available. We can follow a critic like Kenneth Burke and see Coriolanus's tragic flaw as an excessive hubris that renders him "grotesque": "The grotesque hero is *excessively* downright, forthright, outright (and even, after his fashion, upright) in his unquestioned assumption that the common people are intrinsically inferior to the nobility."[26] In such a reading, the play stages the disjuncture between the tragic hero's personal qualities and the public role that he is enjoined to play. As Raymond Williams reminds us, this kind of interpretation is rooted in a neoclassical understanding of tragedy that focuses on the character of the hero: "the error is moral, a weakness in an otherwise good man, who can still be pitied".[27] It is also to this understanding of tragedy that *A Dream Deferred* is indebted. Alternatively, however, one could follow John Joughin's reading of the play in his book *Shakespeare and National Culture*. For Joughin, *Coriolanus* stages the "mapping of the national idea of Rome onto the body of the hero": that is, Coriolanus is placed in a position where he has to embody the idea of national value.[28] The personality traits that one could read as "character flaws" are precisely the characteristics that legitimate Coriolanus's ascension to this role: he represents a martial order, a conflation of violence and law that secures the boundary of the state and maintains the distinction between the civilised and the barbaric. How could the emblematic representative of the originary violence that enables Rome to exist be anything other than narcissistic, proud and disdainful? He is the bearer of the autotelic nature of the state itself. However, as Joughin points out, "the more that Coriolanus is identified, or identifies himself, with Rome, the more this becomes a partitive and separating motif, further widening the claims of others to make up or represent Rome."[29] The irony is that Coriolanus can say "I banish you!" (3.3.123) in response to his banishment only because he is fully identified with the sovereign power of the state to banish: his fullest expression of his identification with Rome is also his moment of exclusion from it. In this reading, the tragic element of the play derives from a fundamental inconsistency in the form of the state and the right of individuals to represent it.

The play presents a sustained meditation on the relationship between a powerful personality, one who has been elevated to a symbol of the city, and the inexorable logic of social process. Rome is at a tipping point: there are food shortages, ordinary people have gained a voice at the executive level in the form of people's tribunes, social unrest is brewing, and Rome is under attack by a foreign army. The patricians have to find a way to negotiate the situation

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25. Quoted in Adam Biles, "A Conversation with Mark Gevisser", *Festival Littéraire Shakespeare and Company*, 17 June 2010. (Online: http://www.festivalandco.com/index.php?page=719&lang=fr.)

26. Kenneth Burke, "*Coriolanus* – and the Delights of Faction", *The Hudson Review* 19.2 (1966): 187.

27. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p.26.

28. John Joughin, *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.242.

29. *Ibid.*, p.247.

without losing their power or seeing Rome collapse in social unrest. The predicament is eminently political, and driven by forces larger than the individual – crop failure, the emergence of a new political culture, economic inequality. It really stands out in Shakespeare's oeuvre for the way it places the crisis as something *innately structural* rather than the result of the actions of individuals:

> *Enter a company of mutinous Citizens, with staves, clubs, and other weapons*
> First Citizen: Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.
> All: Speak, speak.
> First Citizen: You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?
> All: Resolved. Resolved.
> (*Coriolanus* 1.1.1-4)

In these opening lines of the play, the issue is famine. At this point, Coriolanus really does very little, but just enough to catalyse a disaster that is already threatening to erupt. He is about to be elected as an unpopular consul on the strength of his military conduct. In the process, he is sarcastic and disdainful towards the common citizens of Rome. Despite attempts by the patricians to mediate the situation, the people's tribunes remove his consulship and banish him from Rome. Coriolanus in fact never exercises his power as consul. The entire tragedy is precipitated by a few minutes of Coriolanus's resistance to performing the words and actions he is enjoined to perform. To speak of Mbeki as a Coriolanus-like figure is not necessarily to reduce political complexity to a question of individual qualities – precisely because the play is in fact a very convincing deliberation on the way individual qualities can ignite a pre-existing crisis. The people, all gathered in a public forum, simply recognise that Coriolanus will not advance their interests. One could point to his personal qualities to understand the consequent events, or, in contrast, one could look at his moment of hesitance, one that is firmly embedded in the system of values that he represents and that underpins his reputation as a soldier, to read the ensuing crisis as the result of a political and ideological impasse that becomes briefly focused on the figure of Coriolanus. These two ways of reading the first act of *Coriolanus* mirror precisely the debate between Gevisser and his critics.

Something else that strikes one about Coriolanus is that for a man who is supposedly so immutable in his purpose, incapable of role-playing and fixed in his nature, he is constantly being misread, and everyone keeps changing their mind about him. In fact, if one stops looking at what he says about himself and one focuses instead on the action of the play, it becomes clear that he is a cipher that requires constant interpretation and revision; there is an unsettling excess to Coriolanus. For Stanley Cavell, this excess is identical to a deficit – he is misread because he cannot bear to participate in speech. There is an almost physical recoil from the intimacy of conversation and clarification: "Coriolanus wishes to speak, to use words, to communicate, without exchanging words; without, let us say, reasoning (with others); to speak without conversing, without partaking in conversation."[30]

First the citizens listen to his cutting but often ambiguous answers to their petitions and decide that he can be consul. Then they reflect on what he said, and recognise the insults, so they change their mind. He refuses to disrobe to show his war wounds in public as is customary – this is evidence of his pride, of course, but also an interesting refusal to disclose himself. He is banished from Rome on a tide of popular anger. Soon afterwards, the leaders of the people's tribunes regret his banishment and extol his virtues. Coriolanus enters the court of Aufidius, his sworn enemy – "the man of my soul's hate" (1.5.7), in his own words – in disguise. When he reveals who he is, Aufidius abruptly embraces him as a true friend and ally in a surprisingly erotically charged scene:

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30. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* [1987] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.165.

> Know thou first,
> I loved the maid I married; never man
> Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee here,
> Thou noble thing! more dances my rapt heart
> Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
> Bestride my threshold. Why, thou Mars! I tell thee,
> We have a power on foot; and I had purpose
> Once more to hew thy target from thy brawn,
> Or lose mine arm for't: thou hast beat me out
> Twelve several times, and I have nightly since
> Dreamt of encounters 'twixt thyself and me;
> We have been down together in my sleep,
> Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat,
> And waked half dead with nothing.
> (4.5.110-123)

Here the logic of war is refracted by dreaming and desire to become the foundation of a surprising alliance. Not long afterwards, Coriolanus decides not to sack Rome after all because of his mother's entreaties. Aufidius changes his mind again about Coriolanus and murders him for what he reads as his betrayal:

> Ay, Marcius, Caius Marcius: dost thou think
> I'll grace thee with that robbery, thy stol'n name
> Coriolanus in Corioli?
> You lords and heads o' the state, perfidiously
> He has betray'd your business, and given up,
> For certain drops of salt, your city Rome,
> I say 'your city', to his wife and mother;
> Breaking his oath and resolution like
> A twist of rotten silk, never admitting
> Counsel o'the war, but at his nurse's tears
> He whined and roar'd away your victory,
> That pages blush'd at him and men of heart
> Look'd wondering each at other.
> (5.6.101-113)

Immediately afterwards, he is "struck with sorrow" at his deed and praises Coriolanus:

> My rage is gone;
> And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up.
> Help, three o'the chiefest soldiers; I'll be one.
> Beat thou the drum, that it speak mournfully:
> Trail your steel pikes. Though in this city he
> Hath widow'd and unchilded many a one,
> Which to this hour bewail the injury,
> Yet he shall have a noble memory. Assist.
> (5.6.173-180)

In only 60 lines or so, in the same scene, we move from one form of reading to its exact converse. It is not merely literary critics who struggle to read Coriolanus, it is also the key characters in the play.

Something about Coriolanus is simply *in excess* of the symbolic roles he is enjoined to play; and nobody seems able to form a coherent opinion of him, at least not until he is dead. What we should recognise here is precisely the logic of the *subject* as it emerges in Early Modern literature and thought: Shakespeare creates a character who cannot settle in a particular place, driven by a kind of compulsion that seems to emanate from an interior space and that cannot be properly accommodated or pacified by society. At the same time, his subjectivity is an empty

place-holder, a result of a disjuncture in the social sphere: if Coriolanus cannot find a proper place, or be read properly, it is because he is located in the very space where value systems come into conflict with each other.

For Gevisser, the recourse to Coriolanus is an attempt to address Mbeki's opacity, to explain something of his contradictory nature, to give him subjective depth. But *Coriolanus* is itself a play that shows how misinterpretation, uncertainty and contradiction lie at the heart of subjectivity: the power, the modernity, of Coriolanus as a character rests on the failure to interpret him properly. At the same time, Coriolanus's opacity coincides with an idea of tragedy that is closer to the play's Greco-Roman roots: it marks a disjuncture in the political logic of the bulwark against chaos. Rome needs the stoic martial world that Coriolanus belongs to in order to protect itself from external threats. But it also requires the compromises and negotiations that stabilise the civic sphere from within. The remarkable achievement of Shakespeare's play is to accommodate both reading strategies: the space of the subject coincides exactly with an irresolvable disjuncture in the way the social is understood.

Two things happen when Gevisser yokes his biography of Mbeki to Coriolanus. The first is that a fictional world begins to animate our understanding of Mbeki, and Coriolanus provides a way of understanding Mbeki that explains his actions while remaining in the individualist frame of the conventional biography. Perhaps, as Habib claims, this does serve to overdetermine Gevisser's Mbeki at the expense of a broader, more structurally orientated form of understanding. But on the other hand, when you allow *Coriolanus* to inhabit the biography with its full literary force, something more interesting happens: the play itself offers a sustained meditation on the relationship between individual agency and structural processes, and it presents the self as something fundamentally unknowable – in the sense that it would be impossible, really, to write a fully persuasive account of Coriolanus's principles, to render his interiority in a convincing and intelligible way. The illusion of subjective depth is generated by this impossibility of bringing Coriolanus's internal life and motivations to the surface, where it becomes available to interpretation. Simultaneously, the very failure to know Coriolanus is consequent on the disruption of social structure, on irresolvable and volatile internal contradictions in the way Rome constitutes itself. Accepting the invitation to read Mbeki as Coriolanus instates a form of self-reflexive critique at the heart of Gevisser's biography: *Coriolanus* then fulfills a complicated dialectic in Gevisser's writing, one that speaks to the possibilities of tragic narrative as it circulates in public life, as it makes itself available to different uses and slips away from its historical and cultural origins.