Review of *Lend Me Your Ears*

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Abstract

Lend Me Your Ears is a *Slate* podcast miniseries hosted by Issac Butler that considers how some of Shakespeare's plays responded to events in his time, and how they help us understand current events in ours.

The current political moment has inspired an outpouring of presentist readings of Shakespeare in both the academy and the public sphere. The 2019 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America featured seminars and workshops directly addressing the #metoo movement and white supremacy. The Public Theater's 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park made headlines for depicting the assassination of a Donald Trump-esque Caesar. This production followed upon many think pieces and editorial cartoons during the 2016 election cycle comparing Trump to the likes of Macbeth, Richard III, and King Lear.[1] It seems as though we have never so urgently felt the need for readings of Shakespeare that "talk with the living," rather than "speak with the dead" (Hawkes 2002, 4).

One of the more successful recent examples of reading Shakespeare both in the present and in public has been *Lend Me Your Ears*, a 2018 podcast dedicated to "Shakespeare and Politics" produced by the news site *Slate*. *Lend Me Your Ears* is written and hosted by Isaac Butler, a theater director, cultural critic, and frequent *Slate* contributor. The series was a six episode, limited-run release that ran monthly from May to October 2018. Each episode focuses on a single Shakespeare play, with episodes on *Julius Caesar*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, and *Coriolanus*.[2]

Many of the most popular podcasts on the Internet adopt a loose, conversational format,[3] but *Lend Me Your Ears* is far more formally composed. The series is much closer in spirit and format to the productions of National Public Radio and its own podcasts, such as the celebrated *Serial*.[4] In addition to Butler's own commentary, each episode features sound bites from interviews with academics, theater practitioners, and critics, as well as performances of dialogue from the

plays; music cues guide the listener between each of the given episode's segments. The formality of the production suits Butler's subtle readings of the plays. However, for a project aiming to show Shakespeare's relevance for the crises of the present, Butler's takes can be a little too subtle, and I found myself wishing for a touch more provocation.

As Butler explains in an introduction to the series published on the *Slate* website, *Lend Me Your Ears*' concerns are both historical and presentist. The series aims to uncover the "political currents [that were] likely influencing Shakespeare while he's writing his plays" and "what we can learn about our present political moment from reading his works now" alike (2018, "Introducing"). These are difficult questions, and it is remarkable how much ground Butler covers in each episode, the longest of which stretches to a mere 43 minutes.

Each episode is split into four "acts." The first segment generally offers a critical summary of the play in question, peppered with dialogue performed by professional actors. These summaries focus on a topic relevant to both the given play and contemporary politics: legitimacy in *Richard II*, racism in *Othello*, populism in *Coriolanus*, and so on. The second and third segments more directly engage these critical questions. Here, Butler describes the historical context, the reception, and the performance histories of each play, and refers to interviews with experts from those fields. The fourth segment is generally a brief summing up of Butler's own conclusions about the play. Here, Butler draws suggestive parallels with the present and invites his listener to consider the resonance of the play in our own age. For example, at the end of the *Caesar* episode, Butler concludes:

> Shakespeare points out again and again that the institutions we depend on in government — well, they're just made up of people. The legacy of norms in politics, what the ancient Romans called *mos maiorum*, or the customs of our ancestors, only survives if individuals want them to. As institutions and norms erode, the quality and character of individuals matters more and more, because individuals have more power within the system. [...] [Shakespeare] was obsessed with performance. It's perhaps the dominant theme of his work. And in *Julius Caesar*, performance is one of the vehicles that drives Roman society off of a cliff. The play suggests that when politics becomes a competition to see who can get the most applause from the crowd, you are in deep trouble. It's almost inevitable that a skilled demagogue like Mark Antony will take center stage.

This is similar to the approach taken in Stephen Greenblatt's recent *Tyrant*, where Donald Trump goes unnamed — but only barely.[5] And while Butler can force the comparison between Shakespeare's villains and our own, he generally does so only in cheeky introductions at the outset of each episode,[6] before moving on to a more subtle account like this reading of *Caesar*. While

Butler considers the similarities between deteriorating "norms" in our world and that of early modern England or ancient Rome, he also encourages his listener to be mindful of their differences.

The great strength of the series is its ability to introduce specialized academic debates to a general audience. Shakespeareans will no doubt be impressed by the appearance of scholars as esteemed as Kim Hall, David Scott Kastan, and Ayanna Thompson in the series' interview segments. But Butler himself is an able guide to the topics at hand. In addition to discussions of the historical context of the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, Butler clearly elucidates formal and textual issues of the plays. There are discussions of the historically specific meanings of "superflux" in *Lear* and of "precise" in *Measure for Measure*, for instance. And given his own background in the theater, Butler is particularly interested in reporting on the performance histories of the plays. The episode on *Othello* is especially strong in this regard, thanks to the insights of Hall and Thompson.

Butler is fond of the classroom-style discussion question, and *Lend Me Your Ears* would work wonderfully if it were assigned to students in place of another introductory reading assignment. Each "act" generally ends with an open-ended inquiry like: "[*Richard II*] is a play that Shakespeare's contemporaries thought had a lot to tell them about their current political predicaments. Can it help us understand our own?" or "Is [*Othello*] a play about racism, or is it a racist play, or is it both?" *Lend Me Your Ears* could surely introduce engaged students to both the array of responses to Shakespeare's drama, as well as the ways that the works themselves continue to ask "some really big questions."

Given the brevity of each episode, one can find plenty to nitpick. In the *Lear* episode, for example, the Gloucester subplot goes untreated, and the Fool is barely mentioned at all. (Butler and guests discuss the Fool at more length on the bonus episode available to *Slate Plus* subscribers). But ultimately what I found most frustrating about *Lend Me Your Ears* was this emphasis on asking "really big questions" for the listener to ponder and then leaving it at that. Ultimately, Butler concludes that Shakespeare is a "writer too possessed by doubt to offer easy, attractive solutions to social problems." This seems to me to be a somewhat cynical rephrasing of the familiar appeal to negative capability. At any rate, it seems an admission that there may not be much that we "can learn about our present political moment from reading" Shakespeare after all. Butler resists the idea that we can infer whether Shakespeare's drama is liberal, radical, or reactionary, but such a reading need not be "easy" or "attractive."

Slate has a reputation for being contrarian and iconoclastic.[7] But aside from the interview with Thompson, who says in the *Othello* episode that she "hate[s]" the play, *Lend Me Your Ears* rarely provokes. While Butler has assembled an impressive collection of experts on the theater to discuss

the political nature of Shakespeare's art, I would have liked to hear more on that subject from experts on politics.[8] *Lend Me Your Ears* is hosted and produced by a news site that produces numerous other podcasts addressing the political present and past.[9] Could we also hear from journalists, activists, or even politicians about the parallels that they see between Shakespeare's world and our own? Would they only ask more questions, or would they be able to articulate any answers about the role Shakespeare, or his readers, may play in political practice? *Lend Me Your Ears*' finest moment is a reading of *Othello*, which links the way the play's own narrative appears to "enforce[e] conservative essentialist ideas of identity" in the third and fourth acts to the way such ideas have been weaponized in both early modern colonial encounters and in contemporary British and American immigration policy. But Butler is not always this direct.

I enjoyed *Lend Me Your Ears*, which introduced me to new ways to present the plays to my students, and I have recommended Butler's podcast to colleagues. The series is a thoughtful engagement with the plays and their thorniest issues; it is a professionally crafted broadcast that is a pleasure to listen to. But the series notes repeatedly that Shakespeare must have courted controversy when he reworked the past for the stage. And given the urgency of the current moment, as well as the impermanence of the podcast medium itself, I found Lend Me Your Ears to be overly cautious and restrained.[10]

Notes

1. Jeffrey Wilson identifies the finest of these pieces as instances of "Public Shakespeareanism." See Parvini (2016) for an interview with Wilson and for a bibliography. I thank Jeffrey for sharing his research with me.
2. Supplementary "bonus" episodes, which generally take the form of a roundtable discussion between Butler and guests, are available to paying subscribers to *Slate*'s membership program, *Slate Plus*.
3. For example, see two of *Slate*'s other podcasts: *Political Gabfest* (Bazelon et al. 2014-present) and *Cultural Gabfest* (Metcalf et al. 2014-present).
4. For a reading of the first season of Serial and its relation to Othello, see Corredera (2016).
5. For example, Greenblatt refers to Jack Cade as a "master of voodoo economics" who "promises to make England great again" (2018, 37, 41).
6. For example, the *Lear* episode begins: "what happens when your country is run by an aging narcissist who demands constant flattery from everyone who serves him[?] What happens when the guy in charge is not entirely stable? What happens when men are threatened by female power?"

7. In 2009, the site inspired a Twitter meme ("#slatepitches") in which commenters presented sample headlines, written in *Slate*'s house style, making ludicrously counterintuitive claims (e.g. "Sucide: Why It May Not Actually Kill You") (as cited in Lapidos 2009).

8. The one exception among Butler's interview subjects is Roy Tsao, a professor of political philosophy, who contributes to the series' final episode on *Coriolanus*.

9. See *Slow Burn*, a *Slate* podcast hosted by Leon Neyfakh, which "excavates the strange subplots and forgotten characters of recent political history" (2017-18). The first season focused on the Watergate scandal, while the second focused on the Clinton impeachment. In both seasons, Neyfakh compared these scandals with those of the current administration.

10. The editors would like to acknowledge the copyediting and markup work of Ginny Morris and other students in Sujata Iyengar's ENGL 4810 class at the University of Georgia in Fall 2019.

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