The Constant Sovereign

Shortly before his death, Julius Caesar responds to the pleas of Metellus Cimber by refusing to pardon the latter’s brother, Publius Cimber. Others might be moved, says Caesar, “But I am constant as the Northerne Starre.” By putting these words in Caesar’s mouth, Shakespeare touches on one of the major topics of sixteenth-century moral and political thought, that of constancy, the key to the stability of the state against upheaval. In a play about crisis in the Roman polity, Shakespeare raises the question of whether the state can be stable at all, of whether, in facing the instability that its purpose requires it to overcome, it can do any more than provide an image of stability. Indeed, Julius Caesar suggests that state stability can only be achieved as a theatrical illusion, a function of the histrionics of the sovereign—and that hence it may be quickly lost when the illusion breaks. Caesar makes a point of saying that his constancy is at least as spectacular as substantive:

Let me a little shew it, even in this:
That I was constant Cymber should be banish’d,
And constant do remaine to keep him so.
(3.1.71–73)

Caesar indicates that the key to being constant is to show that he is constant, that he will maintain stability by putting on a show of sovereignty.

Here as in other plays, Shakespeare deploys metatheatrical devices in order to present the maintenance of sovereignty as a matter of staging; he likens the state to a theater and the sovereign to an actor, frequently exploring the implications of this assimilation. His plays were also part of the apparatus of state pageantry—Julius Caesar, although its initial composition dates to 1599, is part of the system of public Romanized spectacle with which, beginning in 1604, James I marked his new kingship, presenting the durable or

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constant image of Rome as the model for the stable English state. At the same time, as Jonathan Goldberg has pointed out, Shakespeare’s Roman plays examine English state power in its public theatrical function. Moreover, the theme of constancy ties Julius Caesar to the first major neo-Stoic philosopher of the sixteenth century, Justus Lipsius, whose 1583 De constantia appeared in English translation in 1594, under the title Of Constancie, shortly before Shakespeare composed the play. In the same year, Lipsius’s other major work of political philosophy, the 1589 Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex, or simply the Politica, was also published in English. Although scholarship has been all over the map on the question of Shakespeare’s interest in politics, recent research, most notably by Andrew Hadfield, makes the case that the Bard engaged seriously with the political thought of his time. Lipsius’s exposition in the Politica of the necessary connection between constancy and sovereignty suggests that his work is worth considering in relation to Julius Caesar. My purpose in this paper is not simply to offer insight into a likely Shakespearean source, but also to demonstrate that Julius Caesar constitutes, among other things, a detailed response to Lipsius, which, when seen as such, may add to current understandings of early modern thought on the relationship of constancy and politics.


5 In both Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2004) and Shakespeare and Republicanism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), Hadfield relies on detailed and careful research to make a compelling case for particular political positions that the Bard at the very least addressed. Hadfield’s work comes in the wake of New Historicism and cultural materialism, which, as he notes, in contrast to understandings that hold Shakespeare to be either apolitical in his pursuit of more timeless matters or a conservative, “reversed [the latter] positive reading … and showed how his work was implicated in the history of class oppression, misogyny, racism and other ideologies of exploitation” (Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics, vii). Stating that the New Historicist approach is “close to being exhausted,” Hadfield deems that it doesn’t fundamentally alter the reading of Shakespeare as a conservative and hence that “Shakespeare’s relationship to his literary, historical and cultural context remains the same” (vii). As I will show in this essay, textual evidence suggests Shakespeare’s active interest in political ideas and debates of his time—along with Hadfield, I aim to foreground the playwright’s relationship to early modern political culture.
The main problem with Caesar’s affirmation of constancy, one in a series of ironies concerning the term that runs throughout the play, is that moments later he dies: the constancy of the sovereign is quite shakeable if he is subject to death, as all human beings are. The irony is all the stronger since Caesar has claimed, following his declaration of constancy and apparently as a consequence of it, that his steadfastness makes him a god, beyond the power of human strength to move: to Cinna’s appeal he responds, “Hence: Wilt thou lift up Olympus?” (3.1.74). But it is utterly clear when the conspirators stab him that he is not a god, and that his constancy is worth nothing—that despite his affirmation he cannot be constant because he is subject to death. This fact suggests that the only constancy available to him, and indeed to all human beings, is a matter of theatrics. But the very purpose of a constant sovereign is to assure the constancy of the state against instability. The play thereby raises the question of just what constancy is in connection with the continuity of a state. This is one of the central thematic questions of Julius Caesar, which it presents from the beginning: among the reasons that Cassius initially proposes for assassinating Caesar is that, in becoming a tyrant, he has altered the very nature of Roman virtue:

... for Romans now

Have Thewes, and Limbes, like to their Ancestors;
But woe the while, our Fathers mindes are dead,
And we are govern’d with our Mothers spirits,
Our yoake, and sufferance, shew us Womanish. (1.3.90–94)

Bound by the yoke of tyranny, Romans are turning into something other than Romans—that is, they are not constant. And the principal virtue they are losing, the strength that enables them to be constant, is their constancy. Servitude makes them “womanish,” the very opposite of constant.6

The idea of constancy in Julius Caesar is highly charged: the constancy of the Roman Republic, which is that of its citizens, is at stake, the chief threat to it being a quality in himself that the sovereign presents as constancy. In order to restore this quality of the Republican state, the conspirators will commit an act that disturbs the constancy of the sovereign and hence of the state. The

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6 Coppelia Kahn offers a commentary on this passage, signaling a mixture of Roman and English ethical principles: “Women—untrained in reason, dwellers in the domus excluded from the forum, and susceptible in the extreme to the affections—lack access to ‘constancy,’ meaning control over the affections, adherence to rationally-grounded principles like those of the republic, firmness. It is men who are firm, women who aren’t. Sir Thomas Elyot states that woman’s inconstancy is ‘a natural sickness’…” Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women (London: Routledge, 1997), 97. In The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), in which I begin observations on Shakespeare and Lipsius that I expand here, I address the relationship in Julius Caesar between femininity and constancy (230–32).
play of course dramatizes the instability or inconstancy of the state in the form of the escalating civil wars that follow on the assassination of Caesar. Shakespeare is playing with a clash of different versions of constancy, and the result is that the play presents an examination of whether this virtue can be either effective as such or an effective property of the state. The meaning and applicability of constancy change throughout Julius Caesar—that is, the play stages constancy as mobile or inconstant. Hence it suggests that constancy might be a matter of theatrical appearance donned by actors and that this condition is the very inconstancy of constancy. Shakespeare’s metatheater offers the occasion to consider how this theatrical aspect of politics works.

**Constant Staging**

The conspirators also realize that if their plan is going to be successful, they must be constant, as Brutus states explicitly. Of the eight occurrences of the words *constancy*, *constant*, and *constantly* in Julius Caesar, this is the first. As he does the other times he uses it, Shakespeare gives the word a blatantly theatrical connotation, thereby introducing the theme of constancy as dramatic illusion. And as I will explain below, its context in Brutus’s speech in this scene also ties the word directly to Lipsius:

Good Gentlemen, looke fresh and merrily,
Let not our lookes put on our purposes,
But beare it as our Roman Actors do,
With untyr’d Spirits, and formall Constancie.  (2.1.223–26)

Constancy may well be understood as the most famously Roman virtue, but here it stems less from the strength that enables one to remain steadfast in the face of adversity than from the skill in appearing to do so. Several commentators have examined the wonderful paradox of insisting on the constancy of actors. While actors have a stake in maintaining the consistency of the characters they are playing, their capacity to drop a character so as to play another entails an excess of inconstancy. Geoffrey Miles points out that the expression “formal constancy” implies a theatrical quality, the disposition of actors who maintain the outer form of constancy. He also signals the pun of “untyr’d,” meaning both “steadfastly withstanding adversity” and “unat-
tired.”10 Although actors are by definition attired when playing their roles, their spirits are not, since the latter are the source of strength in maintaining consistency of character. Of course, Brutus is asking his fellow conspirators to be constant in concealing their plans, but the use of the term raises the question of what the very important theme of constancy means over the course of the play, in addition to the consideration of the relationship of politics to theater and theatricality.

This use is entirely in keeping with Caesar’s own just before his death. But it runs exactly contrary to Lipsius’s understanding of constancy, in a way that goes well beyond previous assessments of the largely undefined notion of the Dutch philosopher’s ‘influence’ on Shakespeare. In several places in Julius Caesar and other plays by Shakespeare, there is an ironic allusion to the 1594 English version of Lipsius,11 and furthermore a development of the concepts at work in the latter’s texts in a manner that may best be termed critical. In chapter 1 of book 1 of De constantia Lipsius introduces his dialogue as the result of his travels out of the Netherlands in order to escape civil war; the character named Lipsius is a younger version of the author, a naive student susceptible to the teachings of a wiser person. The latter is the character Langius (based on the historical Carolus Langius, or Karel de Langhe), whom Lipsius encounters in Vienna. Langius begins their dialogue by counseling, “Our mindes must be so confirmed and conformed that we may bee at rest in troubles, and have peace even in the midst of warre” [“firmandus ita formandusque hic animus, vt quies nobis in turbis sit & pax inter media arma”].12 Through Langius, Lipsius offers constancy as a defense for citizens against the emotional turmoil brought on by social and political instability:

10 Ibid., 124.
11 Miles reports that the standard Roman sources on constancy in Shakespeare’s time were Cicero and Seneca, as well as “Continental ‘Neostoics’ like Justus Lipsius and Montaigne” (1). He provides a six-page exposition of Lipsius’s thought (70–75), but suggests no specific textual links with Shakespeare. He argues correctly that Shakespeare borrows from Montaigne’s refutations of stoicism, citing the long-accepted likelihood that Shakespeare knew John Florio and hence read the latter’s translation of the Essais before its 1603 publication (83–84). In The Northern Star: Shakespeare and the Theme of Constancy (Worcester: Blackthorn, 1989), Charles Wells quotes Lipsius in Stradling’s translation as the epigraph to the first section of his book (13), without commentary specifically tying the words to Shakespeare nor any further mention. Goldberg makes no reference to Lipsius.
12 Justus Lipsius, Of Constancie, trans. John Stradling (1594), eds. Rudolf Kirk and Clayton Morris Hall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1939), book 1, chapter 1, 72; this edition is a facsimile of the 1594 version, and I refer to it mainly because of my interest in examining close textual connections between Lipsius and Shakespeare. The Latin is from Lipsius, Concerning Constancy, ed. and trans. R.V. Young (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 1.1.18. This edition incorporates a tool indispensable to most early modernists, a facing text translation. Henceforth I cite both in the body of the text.
CONSTANCIE is a right and immoveable strength of the minde, neither lifted up, nor pressed downe with externall or casuall accidentes. By STRENGTH, I understande a steadfastnesse not from opinion, but from judgement and sound reason. (1.4.79—emphasis in text)

Caesar, despite his own affirmations, seems rather to bear a quality that Langius is careful to distinguish from constancy, obstinacy or “frowardness” [“Peruiaciam ... sive Pertinacia”]: “Which is a certaine hardnesse of a stubberne mind, proceeding from pride or vaine glorie” (1.4.79) [“quae & ipsa obstinati animi robur est, sed a superbiae aut gloriae vento” (28)].

The difference between the two authors’ uses of the term constancy is hence evident, but they encounter each other, curiously enough, through Lipsius’s continuing elaboration of the word. In 1.8 Langius identifies the three greatest enemies of constancy as “DISSIMULATION, PIETIE, COM-MISERATION or PITY” (88) [“Simulatio, Pietas, Miseratio” (40)]. By addressing it first, he accords dissimulation the greatest importance among the three. To illustrate the point that the larger public interests are not served by those who, during a calamity, put on a show of concern for the welfare of their homeland, while their own is solely at issue, he provides the example of one of the best-known Roman actors:

And as it is recorded in histories of Polus a notable stage-player, that playing his part on the stage wherein it behooved him to expresse some great sorrow, he brought with him privily the bones of his dead son, & so the remembrance thereof caused him to fil the theatre with true teares indeed. (1.8.88)

The actor engages in dissimulation by presenting emotions genuinely inspired by personal grief as something quite different, the grief of the character he is playing. Langius continues his instruction by comparing this actor to the person who would lament troubles to his country: “You play a Comedy, & under the person of your country, you bewail with tears your private miseries. One saith The whol world is a stage-play” (1.8.88–89) [Comediam o boni luctuque, & velati persona patriae, priuata vestra damna veris et spirantibus lacrymis lugetis. Mundus vniversus exercet histrionem, ait Arbiter” (40)]” (The phrase in italics is a quotation that, in his original Latin, Lipsius attributes to Petronius [“Arbiter”], and its importance for Shakespeare is patent—I will return to it below.) So, in this conception, the citizen who pretends to be concerned for his country is really motivated by no care but for his own person and possessions, hence not contributing anything to and indeed detracting
from the public good. Shakespeare’s presentation of constancy as a matter of histrionics suggests that this virtue itself may function as a cover for self-interest. Even if it doesn’t in the case of Brutus, Cassius, the first in the play to invoke constancy, makes it clear in his famous speech that he is advancing his own interest and acting under the sway of envy (1.2.90–160). Whereas for Lipsius constancy provides a remedy to using virtue as cover in this fashion, in *Julius Caesar* constancy itself becomes the disguise. After all, even Brutus, who is honorable to a fault, presents constancy as theatrical dissimulation: it turns out to be the ability to maintain dissimulation over time, against sometimes violent inclinations and the general human tendency to waver.

**Montaigne and the Inconstant Self**

A consideration of one of Shakespeare’s long-acknowledged sources, Michel de Montaigne, may illuminate the playwright’s treatment of constancy, in both *Julius Caesar* and other plays, as constantly on the brink of wavering. In a 1583 letter that he published in 1586, Lipsius expressed the highest admiration for Montaigne, characterizing him as a new Thales—hence as the first true modern philosopher, in allusion to Aristotle, who regarded Thales the first Greek philosopher. Though praising Lipsius in return, Montaigne was more measured: in a passage first published in 1588, from chapter 12 of book 2 of the *Essais*, “An Apologie of Raymond Sebond [Apologie de Raimond Sebond],” he refers to him as “the most sufficient and learned man now living [le plus sçavant homme qui nous reste]”—not necessarily one who used his knowledge wisely. Montaigne was of course fascinated with the idea of constancy, or rather the inevitability of inconstancy: it is a major theme of the *Essais* and also the occasion for the title of two chapters of his book, “De la


15. Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Lord Michael of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (London: E. Blount, 1603), BNF digital edition, 2.12.336; *Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey (1580, 1588, 1595) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 2.12.578. I refer to the 1603 Florio translation because one of my points in this essay is to examine close textual connections with Shakespeare, who was familiar with it; I add indications of the three textual layers. I will henceforth cite both these editions in the body of the text.

constance [Of Constancie]” (1.12) and “De l’inconstance de nos actions [Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions]” (2.1).

Indeed, both Paul J. Smith and Michel Magnien,\(^{17}\) in addition to several other scholars, affirm the likelihood that Lipsius’s turn from philology to philosophy, which resulted in first *De constantia* and then the *Politica*, was occasioned by his reading of Montaigne. Magnien has written about their correspondence, which probably took place between 1587 and 1589, and which by Lipsius’s account was quite extensive.\(^{18}\) From this exchange only three letters survive, all by Lipsius, which Magnien reproduces in Latin and translates into French.\(^{19}\) Both Smith and Magnien detail and comment on the extensive allusions and borrowings that each author made from the other’s work, which occurred beginning with *De constantia*, through the publication of both the augmented 1588 edition of the *Essais* and the 1589 publication of the *Politica*, to the posthumous 1595 edition of Montaigne’s book. I raise all my observations on this relationship with an eye to understanding both Montaigne’s treatment of Lipsian constancy and Shakespeare’s engagement with this part of sixteenth-century political thought.

In “Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions,” Montaigne provides a series of observations justifying his view that constancy is the last thing one should expect from most people. Already in the A layer of 1580 and 1582 he is presenting a challenge to the ideas that Lipsius will pursue: “There is nothing I so hardly believe to be in man, as constancy, and nothing so easy to be found in him, as inconstancy” (2.1.193) [“Je croy des hommes plus mal aiséement la constance, que tout autre chose, et rien plus aiséement que l’inconstance” (332)]. Although Montaigne does not quite rule out the effectiveness of constancy, he submits that natural human tendencies run in just the opposite direction: “Our ordinarie maner is to follow the inclination of our appetite, this way and that way, on the left, and on the right hand, upward and downward, according as the wind of occasions doth transport us” (2.1.194) [“Nostre façon ordinaire, c’est d’aller après les inclinations de nostre apetit, à gauche, à dextre, contre-mont, contre-bas, selon que le vent des occasions nous emporte” (333)]. But his questioning of the very possibility of constancy becomes more acute in a passage from the B layer of the *Essais*, representing the textual additions he made for the 1588 edition. He augmented these in the C layer that Marie de Gournay incorporated into her posthumous 1595 edition of her mentor’s work, from which Florio did his translation:

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\(^{19}\) Magnien 2004.
Montaigne here develops quite descriptively the different states his mind can be in, hence illustrating through *accumulatio* the daunting evidence against easy access to a constant state for any human being. But he goes further than that: for the person who “shall hardly see himselfe twice in one same state” [“ne se trouve guere deux fois en mesme estat”]—that is, everyone—this inconstancy takes hold “voire et en son jugement mesme” [“yea and in his very judgement”], in that same faculty by which he or she would make the observation about what state he or she is in. If each state of mind is actually different and mostly unrelated to preceding and succeeding ones, then the judgments in these states will not be comparable to each other, and any idea of maintaining a steadiness of emotion in the face of anything, never mind adversity, becomes completely out of the question. This evaluation of constancy is effectively a reply to Lipsius’s *De constantia*. 
Montaigne, Lipsius, and the State

The closest Montaigne comes in the *Essais* to blatantly taking aim at Lipsius is in “How One Ought to Govern His Will [De mensager sa volonté]” (3.10), first published in 1588 with additions in 1595, where he relies on the same phrase on stagecraft that Lipsius quotes, a slight rewording of John of Salisbury’s paraphrasing Gloss on Petronius. In his edition of the *Essais*, Albert Thibaudet indicates Lipsius as Montaigne’s source for this quotation, on this point following Pierre Villey.

Montaigne’s focus differs somewhat from that of Lipsius in *De constantia*: whereas

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Lipsius insists that the constant citizen must never engage in the dissimulation of theater, Montaigne takes the inevitability of such dissimulation as a given, making the case that the citizen will do well by not taking the requisite roles too seriously.

However, Montaigne is not speaking generally here of citizens, but rather of those involved in affairs of state, those who hold charges (positions of service to the state)—he thereby highlights the political dimension of the arguments of *De constantia*, in anticipation of the *Politica*, which was published in the following year, 1589. In the latter work constancy also plays a major role, as Lipsius affirms by tying the two together in his opening remarks. In chapter 5 of book 3, Lipsius specifies five requirements for the counselors to the sovereign: piety, liberty of speech, constancy, modesty, and secrecy. For such persons, explains Lipsius, constancy is necessary, although it differs from the same virtue in citizens, which excludes “pietie” (“pietas,” *De constantia*, 1.8.88/40—“dutifulness,” a reverence for one’s homeland). He quotes Sallust:

> [Nam illaudati, qui ex aliena libidine hoc illuc fluctuantes agitantur: interdum alia, deinde alia decernunt. Uti eorum qui dominantur simultas atque arrogantia fert, ita bonum malumve publicam existimant (358)].

The larger reason for the constancy of counselors is that the state must be constant, and hence the sovereign also. The stable government, says Lipsius, is the one that is “severe, constant, and restrained” (4.9.78) [“Severa …, Constans, … Adstricta” (427)]. He explains the second requirement:

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22 Justus Lipsius, *Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction*, trans. and ed. Jan Waszink (Assen: van Gorcum, 2004): “You see that the work which I now present to you is a politics. In which it is my aim, just as it was in *De Constantia* I equipped citizens for endurance and obedience, now to equip those who rule for governing” (“The Rationale and Form of This Work,” 231) [“… nunc tibi damus, Politica esse vides, in quibus hoc nobis consilium, ut quemadmodum in Constantia cives formavimus ad patiendum et pareendum; ita hic eos qui imperant, ad regendum” (“De consilio et forma nostri operis,” 230)]. Although I will subsequently quote the 1594 English translation of the *Politica* by William Jones, since this section of the book does not appear in the latter version, I rely on this extraordinary facing text edition; it is also my source for Lipsius’s Latin. Henceforth cited in the body of the text.

23 Justus Lipsius, *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine*, trans. William Jones (London: William Ponsonby, 1594), book 4, chapter 9, 47. For the same reasons I quote from other early editions, I quote from this one; italicized text in the *Politica* usually signals a quotation, which is attributed in the margins of the book. Henceforth cited in the body of the text.
The second thing I desire, is that the forme of government may be constant, which I interpret to be, when it runneth after one and the same ancient tenour. What do you talke of change? heare the true opinion of Alcybiades: Those men live safest, who do governe their commonwealth, without altering awhit their present customs and lawes, albeit they be not altogether good.” (4.9.80)

[Secundo, Constantem volui imperii Formam: quod interpretor, uno et veteri tenore fluentem. Quid mihi mutas? Alcibadem audi vere censentem: … Eos hominum tutissime agere, qui praesentibus moribus legibusque, etiamsi detiores sint, minimum variantes, rempublicam administrant (428—I omit the Greek text that Lipsius quotes).]

It is of note that for Lipsius, stability outweighs justice—indeed that changing the laws is the mark of state instability. He writes,

And there are two reasons of this paradoxe. First, that the lawes themselves have not sufficient strength and life, when they are to be soone altered, or abrogated … Next, that the Prince is little set by, who wavereth in such sort.

[Et inopinati dogmatis caussa duplex. Quod nec leges ipsae vim et vitam satis habeant, vertendae statim aut evertendae … Et quod Princeps vilescit, qui sic vacillat …]

The bedrock of state constancy is the constancy of the sovereign.

However, quite unlike the citizen’s constancy, sovereign constancy must depend on dissimulation, indeed is impossible without it. Since few people will be honest when dealing with a head of state, the sovereign can establish trust only by giving an appearance of it:

And therefore Dissimulation is necessarie, which I have set downe and taught in the second place: the which may rightly be sayd to be the daughter of distrust. But some one will say unto me, What needeth this dissembling, if there be a mutuall faith betweene us? Dissimulation is that which discovereth the countenance, and covereth the mind. (4.14.117; the quotation, the latter italic text, is from Cicero)

[Litque Dissimulatio adsumenda, quam posui et suasi loco altero: quae vere Diffidentiae huius proles. Quid enim ea opus, si mutua inter nos fides? Haec est, quae frontem aperit mentem tegit. (516)]

Lipsius here anticipates an objection stemming from his own De constantia, expressed again with a quotation from Cicero: “This will peradventure displease some liberall and free heart, who will say, that we must banish from all conditions and sorts of life, disguising and dissembling” (117) [“Displicebit hoc ingenua alicui fronti, et clamabit: Ex omni vita Simulatio, Dissimulatioque tollenda est” (516)]. To this Lipsius responds, articulating the contrast between citizen and sovereign constancy, that of De constantia and that of the Politica: “I advouch, it ought not to bee amongst privat persons, but in a state I utterly deny it. They shall never governe well, who know not how to cover well …” (117) [“De privata, factor: de publica, valde nego. Numquam regent,
qui non tegent ...” (516)]. As Lipsius elaborates this idea, he returns to the
notion of the political world as a stage: “They which are so open,...who car-
rie their heart, as they say, on their forehead shall never be fit to play their part
upon this stage ...” (117–18—the quotation is from Ennius) [“Et qui animum,
quod dictur, in fronte promptum gerunt: Numquam apti huic theatro” (518)].
So those who govern must do so wearing a mask, or playing a role, and can
be most effectively constant if they do so.24

By discussing the inevitability of role-playing for those holding state ad-
ministrative positions, Montaigne anticipates this passage. But by indirectly
citing De constantia in “How One Ought to Govern His Will” through the
quotation that paraphrases Petronius, he is also playing two different notions
of constancy against each other. Montaigne makes it clear that the role-
playing in government, when one takes it too seriously, will lead to bad gov-
erning. Speaking of his own administrative duty, that of Mayor of Bordeaux,
he advocates a strict division between private and public life: “The
Maior of Bordeaux and Michell Lord of Montaigne, have ever been two, by evident sepa-
ration” (3.10.605) [“Le Maire et Montaigne ont toujours esté deux, d’une sep-
aration bien claire” (1012)]. But the reasons for this distinction are different
from those of Lipsius: whereas for the latter a controlled role-playing will
permit the constancy of the private person to be publicly effective in his or
her exercise of sovereignty, for Montaigne the corruption of public role-
playing is inevitable but will not affect private life if one recognizes the dif-
ference between the two. This ends up being true for the public situation of
not just those in government administration:

To be an advocate or a Treasurer, one should not be ignorant of the craft incident
to such callings. An honest man is not comptable for the vice and folly of his trade,
and therefore ought not to refuse the exercise of it. It is the custome of his country;
and there is profite in it. (605)

[Pour estre advocat ou financier, il n’en faut pas mesconnoistre la fourbe qu’il y a
en telles vacations. Un honneste homme n’est pas comptable du vice ou sottise de
son mestier, et ne doibt pourtant en refuser l’exercice: c’est l’usage de son pays, et
il y a du profict. (1012)]

Here Montaigne slyly turns his discussion of dissimulation against the treat-
ment of the topic in De constantia: since the deception of law and finance
cannot be avoided, there is no point in trying to do so—yet doing so doesn’t
affect the honesty or honor of the private person, as long as the latter pre-
serves his or her own realm. This is the case even when the dishonest profes-
sion brings advantages for the honest person.

24 On the state as a metaphorical stage on which the sovereign acts before citizen spec-
In the next sentence, Montaigne returns to the question of dissimulation and the sovereign:

But the judgement of an Emperour should be above his Empire; and to see and consider the same as a strange accident. He should know howe to enjoy himselfe aparte; and communicate himselfe as James and Peter; at least to himselfe. (605)

[Mais le jugement d’un Empereur doit estre au dessus de son empire, et le voir et considerer comme accident estranger; et luy, doit sçavoir jouyr de soy à part et se communicuer comme Jacques et Pierre, au moins à soy-mesmes. (1012)]

The sovereign must maintain a complete separation between himself and his function as emperor. That is, his role as emperor, his exercise of judgment over it, must be quite distinct from his own private self, his moy, which, whenever Montaigne treats it in the *Essais*, is anything but constant. The constancy of an emperor, his capacity to be firm and maintain stability, subsists entirely in his role-playing. Montaigne anticipates the notion of the dissimulation or stage-acting of the sovereign that Lipsius will advance in the *Politica*. The essayist does this by way of an indirect commentary on *De constantia*: he is critical of both notions of constancy, finding the one untenable and the other something whose effectiveness is dependent on one’s taking ironic distance from it. His oblique reference to Lipsius, by way of the Petronius phrase, is in keeping, then, with his practice of quotation, which frequently involves marked alterations or even inversions of contextual meaning.\(^\text{25}\) He does this through close textual borrowing in connection with Lipsius elsewhere in the *Essais*, particularly, as Smith extensively demonstrates, in “Of Vanitie [De la vanité].”\(^\text{26}\) Although Montaigne didn’t read the *Politica* until its 1589 publication, in an extant letter from 1588 Lipsius refers to a prior discussion of his book in progress with his correspondent.\(^\text{27}\) Especially given his intimate knowledge of and engagement with his Dutch contemporary’s work up to that point, Montaigne’s detailed anticipation of certain ideas of the *Politica* is quite plausible.

**Staging Constancy**

That Shakespeare was familiar with Montaigne has long been accepted: the Bard probably knew John Florio, Montaigne’s translator, and may well have


\(^{26}\) Smith (2003, 2007) shows how Montaigne takes implicit aim at Lipsius in “De la vanité,” criticizing him through ironic inversions.

seen the translation in manuscript several years before its 1603 publication.\footnote{More than a century ago Elizabeth Robbins Hooker first suggested that Shakespeare likely read Florio’s translation of Montaigne in manuscript: “The Relation of Shakespeare to Montaigne,” \textit{PMLA} 17.2 (1902): 349–50. See also Hugh Grady, \textit{Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet} (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 50–51; Miles, 83–84.} But beyond acknowledgement of one clear reworking of Montaigne’s “Of the Caniballes [Des cannibales]” (1.31) in \textit{The Tempest} and a number of apparent allusions, there have been few scholarly attempts at considering a detailed engagement on Shakespeare’s part with Montaigne. Miles admits the idea that Montaigne is a source for Shakespeare’s treatment of constancy in \textit{Julius Caesar}, but he doesn’t pursue textual specifics and hence doesn’t examine the consequences for current understandings of early modern political thought. Whatever one wishes to make of a biographical likelihood of such an engagement, the critique of Lipsius that Montaigne effects also turns up in \textit{Julius Caesar}. It is not only the case that actors provide the model for constancy in the play, but also that Caesar’s private person is quite distinct from Caesar the emperor, who is constant through theatrical display. The difference is underscored by the rampant personal inconstancy that he displays in advance of his affirmation of constancy at the very end of his life. In the exchange with Calphurnia that begins with her account of the portents of his death (2.2), Caesar sways repeatedly in the face of her emotions. In response to her, he at first insists on his firmness. But Calphurnia continues to speak of the danger, asking him to regard the fear as her own and not his. Moved by her pleading, he tells her, “For thy humor I will stay at home” (2.2.56). He thus allows himself to be inconstant, displacing his fear onto the very worst, quite feminine source of inconstancy, her “humor.”

But a moment later he is swayed again. When Decius arrives to escort him to the Senate, Caesar responds by saying that he is not going: “The cause is in my Will” (2.271). Now he is appealing to the Stoic agency of constancy, the will, which will overcome all opposition. Shakespeare is also punning on his own name, suggesting that his character’s constancy is an effect of the dramatist’s work and of drama itself, hence continuing the play’s paradox of constancy. Then Decius overpowers Caesar’s will through theatrical persuasion, presenting arguments that he clearly doesn’t believe. The first of these is an alternate interpretation of Calphurnia’s foreboding dream, and his subsequent proposals have the character of theater and also underscore the inconstancy that runs through Roman state functions:

\begin{quote}
The Senate have concluded  
To give this day, a Crowne to mighty Caesar.  
If you shall send them word you will not come,  
Their mindes may change. Besides, it were a mocke
\end{quote}
Apt to be render'd, for some one to say,
Breake up the Senate, till another time:
When Caesars wife shall meete with better Dreames.
If Caesar hide himselfe, shall they not whisper
Loe Caesar is afraid? (2.2.93–101)

Decius makes the effort to tempt Caesar through imperial spectacle, the
crown that will confirm the public image of the latter’s status. Since it is Cae-
sar’s very constancy, Decius signals, that prompts the Senate to do this, a lack
of resolve on Caesar’s part will lead to the Senate’s own inconstancy on the
matter. Then Decius attempts to persuade Caesar with the prospect of mock-
ery at ceding to Calphurnia’s humor. That is, maintaining power over the
Senators requires Caesar to keep up appearances. Part of these, says Decius,
involves an image of fearlessness: the implication is that suspicions of Cae-
sar’s fear may be well founded. All these considerations affect Caesar’s abil-
ity to give an impression of constancy before the Senate. He extends the par-
adox: in order to maintain his constancy, he responds with inconstancy,
yielding to Decius’s theatrics and changing his mind. It is not clear which of
Decius’s arguments Caesar is reacting to; whether it is all or any of them, his
words expose his constancy as a spectacular effect, performed as a general
response to the theatrics of Decius and the Senate.29

The play in which Shakespeare makes a central theme of princely waver-
ing is of course *Hamlet*, which was probably written about the same time as
*Julius Caesar*,30 and which is also of interest in connection with Lipsius, theat-
rics, and constancy. In his inconstancy, Hamlet becomes envious of an actor
for being able to put on a show of grief, in words that seem to allude striking-
ly to the phrase “fil the theatre with true teares,” from the passage in the
translation of *De constantia* in which Lipsius discusses the Roman actor Polus.
The wording of this part of the soliloquy first appears in the Second Quarto
of 1604:

What would he doe,
Had he the Motive and the Cue for passion
That I have? He would drowne the Stage with teares,
And cleave the generall eare with horrid speech;
Make mad the guilty and apale the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed,
The very faculty of Eyes and Eares.31

29 Miles: “Immovable Caesar vacillates between the demands of fear, ambition, and dread
of ridicule” (131).
Unlike Polus, Hamlet’s actor can put on a compelling show of tears with no real cause for grief; if he had such a cause, his display would be that much more spectacular. The actor’s simulation demonstrates Hamlet’s action, or rather inaction, hence providing the prince with a model for expressing his own grief. Polus is the actor who needs true grief in order to cry convincingly; Hamlet is the prince who looks to the actor as an exemplar of the constancy he knows his office to require, following his father’s murder. As do characters in Julius Caesar, Hamlet appears to take it for granted that the most effective governing, which is the most constant, is modeled on the comportment of actors. However, his notion of constancy diverges considerably from that of Lipsius: rather than distancing himself from shows of emotion, Hamlet wishes to embrace them as the proper way to be decisive and constant in the face of disruption to the state.

In As You Like It Shakespeare unmistakably alludes to John of Salisbury/Petronius when he writes, “All the world’s a stage.” This line, which opens Jaques’s “seven ages of man” speech, announces the most pervasive and overarching theme in the corpus of Shakespeare’s drama, a Latin version of which for years was even said to be the motto of the Globe Theatre, an idea that has met with serious contestation. But even if it did figure on the building, which was completed in 1599, it appeared first in As You Like It, which Shakespeare probably wrote in late 1598 or 1599, soon after the time that Florio, his biographer Frances Yates believed, began his translation of Montaigne. The speech provides a panorama of the social roles that human beings play as they progress through life in a fashion entirely reminiscent of Montaigne’s accounts. Since the quotation was available to Shakespeare in both Montaigne and Lipsius, becoming a commonplace through them, this use of it can correctly be called an allusion to both these authors. Florio’s rendition, “All the world doth practise stage-playing,” quite literally conveys the phrase “Mundus universus exercet histrionem.” Stradling’s translation in Of Constancie is “The whol world is a stage-play.” Curiously, Shakespeare’s phrase seems to combine the two—just as his treatment of constancy and theatrical dissimulation in Julius Caesar suggests a detailed response to
Lipsius by way of Montaigne, a mobility of the notion from one author to the other in the late sixteenth century.

The Stage of Sovereignty

Textual evidence notwithstanding, it is only of minor interest that Shakespeare likely drew on Lipsius as a source; what matters for literary criticism and current understandings of early modern political thought is the critical effect of this process on the reading and circulation of Lipsius’s text. Certainly in the treatment of constancy in *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare follows and extends Montaigne’s critique: when even a Roman tyrant wavers in his personal behavior, his characterizations cut into the very possibility of the constant self necessary to Lipsius’s exposition in *De constantia*. Moreover, when Caesar and the most noble Brutus are constant mainly through theatrical machination, there is a direct engagement with the Lipsian idea that such a procedure undermines personal constancy. Shakespeare takes this critique even further by confronting Lipsius’s notion that the sovereign reinforces his constancy through theatrics, since in *Julius Caesar* theater performed as constancy only works to weaken and even destroy the latter. For Shakespeare, constancy becomes nothing but a cover for a lack of constancy and continual promotion of self-interest, exactly what for Lipsius it should not be—the sovereign, for Lipsius, engages in dissimulation in order to preserve the polity. The very idea of state constancy becomes problematic when Rome itself is shaken to its foundations—the city and empire served as a model for state legitimacy in early modern France and England, both through assimilations of the modern state to the ancient one and through narratives of continuity between the two.

Of course, historians and other writers also emphasized the civil wars that made Rome a model of instability and inconstancy. As Montaigne writes of the state of Rome in “Of Vanitie,” “It containeth in it selfe all formes and fortunes that concerne a state: whatsoever order, trouble, good or bad fortune may in any sorte effect in it” (3.9.574) [“Il comprend en soy toutes les formes et avantures qui touchent un estat: tout ce que l’ordre y peut et le trouble, et l’heur et le malheur” (960)]. What is remarkable in Shakespeare’s rendition is not simply that Rome concentrates both order and trouble, constancy and inconstancy, but that constancy itself stems directly from inconstancy and becomes part of it. Shakespeare’s work raises questions about its own role in state legitimation, and in the same set of gestures it interrogates the legitimating function of Lipsius’s political thought by casting doubt on its very tenability. In making these observations, I do not mean to recycle the idea of Shakespeare’s political subversiveness; I do, however, wish to take issue with lingering understandings of his politics as largely reflective of dominant state
interest. As I mentioned at the outset, recent research explores Shakespeare’s engagement with sixteenth-century political thought: nonetheless, there remains plenty of room to discern the critical stances that his plays frequently take. My purpose in this essay is to propose a consideration of previously unrecognized ways in which political thought circulated in early modern Europe, and how effective it was as it did so. It turns out that the very important notion of constancy is mobilized in the writings of both Montaigne, a writer usually thought to be reserved in his political statements, and Shakespeare, a dramatist who contributed heavily to pageantries of royal legitimation.
Works Cited


