HISTORICAL FABULATION AS HISTORY BY OTHER MEANS: SHAKESPEARE’S CAESAR AND MOFOLO’S CHAKA AS OPPOSITES IN RUBICONESQUE LEADERSHIP

ABSTRACT

My paper argues that analyzing the characters of William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Thomas Mofolo’s Chaka (Zulu) in terms of the interrelationships of each character’s secret self, private self, and public self offers a more plausible account of the nature and ends of each character’s ambition and leadership style: in the case of Caesar as a democratic dictator and in the case of Chaka as a demonic dictator.

Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar probably premiered in 1599 as the Globe’s inaugural play and first appeared in print in the First Folio (1623). The compilers of this Folio place the play under Shakespeare’s tragedies and title it The Tragedie of Julius Caesar, but in the Folio’s table of contents the title becomes The Life and Death of Julius Caesar. An editorial essay in the (1980) 3rd edition of The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Scott, Foresman publisher) aptly notes the implication of this double title: the Folio’s table of contents lists the play “as The Life and Death of Julius Caesar as though it were a history” (Bevington 1032). This double or alternate title phenomenon hints at the fact that Shakespeare’s drama fabulates (rather than fabricates) out of history the life and death of Julius Caesar, the Roman general and ruler who lived from about 100 B.C. to 44 B.C. Shakespeare principally owes his history for his Caesar play to Thomas North’s 1579 English translation of Jacques Amyot’s 1559 French translation of a Latin translation of Plutarch’s (A.D. 2) book Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans. However, Shakespeare refashions or remolds this Plutarchian history by omitting or adding or modifying certain events or characters. For instance, Plutarch does not have a deaf Caesar, but Shakespeare does. Shakespeare shortens or resituates the historical chronology: he conflates the October 45 B.C. celebration in Rome of Caesar’s defeat of Pompey’s with the annual February Feast of Lupercal, which commemorates the legendary founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus. In Shakespeare, both celebrations occur March 14, one day before the ides of March. Octavius Caesar
reaches Rome long after Caesar’s death but in Shakespeare he gets there on the day of Caesar’s assassination. Furthermore, the forging of the second Roman triumvirate of Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Aemilius Lepidus, which in Plutarch occurred over a year after Caesar’s death, occurs in Shakespeare shortly after his death. In Act III, a Roman mob attacks Cinna the poet, but in Plutarch the mob attacked Cinna the poet because it truly mistook him for Cinna the conspirator. The play ends with the victory of the triumvirate in the 42 B.C. Battle of Philippi. Hemingway’s “theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” seems relevant to Shakespeare’s Caesar (Hemingway, A Moveable Feast 75). In Shakespeare’s Caesar drama we feel the character of Julius Caesar as Caesar tries to make his public life consistent with his private and secret self.

Similarly, when a 1928 critic challenged the historical accuracy of Thomas Mofolo’s 1925 novel Chaka, the novel’s author replied, “I am not writing history, I am writing a tale, or I should rather say I am writing what actually happened, but to which a great deal has been added, and from which a great deal has been removed, so that much has been left out, and much has been written that did not actually happen, with the aim solely of fulfilling my purpose in writing this book” (Mofolo xv). In the first two sentences of the opening paragraph of chapter 5, the novel’s we-narrator addresses (though vaguely) the novel’s purpose or focus: “The events in Chaka’s life were overwhelming because they were so numerous and of such tremendous import; they were like great mysteries which were beyond the people’s understanding. But since it is not our purpose to recount all the affairs of his life, we have chosen only one part which suits our present purpose” (153). Hemingway’s thinking also applies to Mofolo’s historical fabulation. In Death in the Afternoon, he advises, “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the reader is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (Hemingway, Death in the Afternoon 192). Mofolo focuses on one part of Chaka, the part behind the historical parts of Chaka, the part Chaka forever tries to hide from the public. This secret self of Chaka goes under the alias Isanusi, a so-called soothsayer, the godhead of his diabolical trinity of himself, Ndlebe and Malunga – a trinity which mostly functions as Chaka’s secret self. In a 1950 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin contends that “There is no document of Civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 256). Mofolo’s we-narrator dwells on Chaka’s tragic attempts to convert his private world and his public world into his secret world. What happens when a leader tries to force his own family and