Apparently, we live in ‘the age of offence’. A general feeling across the political and social spectrum is that ‘the taking of offence is ubiquitous in modern life’. As one memorable statement has it, ‘[i]t’s like we’re all talking on eggshells in case we cause someone offence’. Some commentators identify positive aspects of ‘the culture of offence taking’. They point to its origins in oppressed minorities’ long struggle for equality, and note that it provides us with ‘an increasingly rich vocabulary to identify, distinguish and denounce sources of injustice’. Many others, however, are alarmed by what they see as negative consequences of the phenomenon. Among these consequences, they include the alleged rise of the ‘Generation Snowflake’ – young people who lack resilience, cannot face being challenged, and combine ‘apparent hyper-sensitivity’ with ‘an almost belligerent sense of entitlement that their feelings should take precedence’. Such snowflakes, the case goes, have moved ‘from the domain of ideas to that of emotions’, replacing reasonable disagreement and logical argument with the subjective statement ‘I am offended’, which ‘closes down conversation and debate’. This leads to an erosion of ‘Enlightenment values’, a rising ‘climate of censoriousness’, and a ‘devaluation of the freedom of speech’. Democracy itself ‘suffers when sensitivity gains the upper hand. Important questions are being put to one side in the interests of “respect” and “appropriateness.” Sometimes, whole issues are declared off limits.’ To its critics, then, the key danger which ‘the age of offence’ poses is the shift from reason to emotion, from the objective to the personal. This shift stifles rational

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8 King, ‘The Age of Outrage’.
debate and empowers demagogues adept at manipulating people’s feelings. To its defenders, taking offence is an important bulwark against hate speech and discrimination, and an instrument of advancing social justice.

In this paper, I do not attempt to resolve the question of whether offence taking is a good or a bad thing. I do not take sides in the debate between the advocates of social mechanisms designed to limit offence (safe spaces, no platforming, and trigger warnings) on the one hand and the champions of untrammelled free speech on the other. Instead, I propose to look at the phenomenon of offence and some of its manifestations through a specific lens – that of Shakespeare and performance. As I will demonstrate, performance is a form uniquely suited to bringing to light and debating crucial social and political problems. Through concrete characters acting out specific situations, performance embodies issues that could otherwise be seen as abstract in ways that arouse audiences’ emotions – including those of offence. Consequently, drama practitioners and theorists have produced much literature that – directly or indirectly – addresses the offence-related problems with which we are grappling now. Taking into account what previous ages thought about offence and how they debated it through performative arts might help us look at our current debates from a slightly different, broader perspective. My case study is Shakespeare not because I consider him the best playwright ever or the fount of wisdom from which we can draw the answers to all our questions, but because of his position as the author known, taught, staged, filmed, and quoted across the globe, and invested with unique cultural authority and significance.9

My discussion will proceed in three stages. First, I will examine how the issue of offence is represented in some of Shakespeare’s plays. Then I will consider a couple of recent cases when a Shakespearean performance caused offence. Finally, I will reflect on what makes performance (theatrical performance in particular) a useful tool for reflecting on the issues of free speech, democracy, reason and emotion, which feature so prominently in the debates surrounding offence. Some of the questions I hope to raise – if not necessarily fully answer – are:

What is offence/offensive?
How do we deal with offence?
What offends us in Shakespeare?

Can an exploration of offence in and through Shakespeare and performance offer us some insight into the current socio-political debates?

**Offence in Shakespeare’s plays**

In Shakespeare, the words ‘offence’, ‘offend’, and their derivatives occur 303 times, which demonstrates a sustained interest in the issue of offence. A closer look at how these words are used indicates that pinning down their meanings is anything but straightforward, as they often move between and sometimes simultaneously point to several distinct areas of human experience, among them religion, law, morality, customary codes of behaviour, as well as individual feelings and impressions. To illustrate this, here are a few of the most relevant definitions of the word ‘offence’ from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

**Offence**

1. A breach of law, rules, duty, propriety, or etiquette; a transgression, sin, wrong, misdemeanour, or misdeed; a fault.

2. *Law*. An illegal act or omission; a punishable crime.

3. The action or fact of offending, wounding the feelings of, or displeasing another (usually viewed as it affects the person offended); an instance of this.

4. Offended or wounded feeling; displeasure, annoyance, or resentment caused (voluntarily or involuntarily) to a person. Frequently in *to give (also cause, etc.) offence to*: to offend, displease; *to take offence*: to be offended, to feel resentment, to take umbrage […].

These definitions demonstrate how slippery the issue of offence is. The first two indicate that, depending on the source of authority which one defies, offence can be of very different magnitude and its consequences can considerably vary. It is one matter if one breaches etiquette – one may be frowned upon in polite society – and quite another if one sins against God – the punishment can be as serious as eternal damnation. Similarly, if someone breaks the rules of a football game, they may be red carded and suspended for a few matches, but if someone violates the official law of the land they are liable to be fined, imprisoned, or even executed. Meanwhile, definitions 3 and 4

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10 To offer some comparison, derivatives of ‘forgive’ occur 90 times; ‘hate’ 290 times; ‘respect’ 144 times; ‘debate’ 31 times. See ‘Concordance of Shakespeare’s Complete Works’, <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/> [accessed on 9 September 2020].
question what the chief source of offence is: number 3 implies that offence is the responsibility of the offender (it is the action of offending that counts), while number 4 indicates that it resides in the subjective feeling of the offended person (offence happens if somebody feels offended, even if this wasn’t intended by the offender).

We encounter similar problems when looking at the definitions of the word ‘offensive’:

**Offensive**

1. Of or relating to offence or attack; attacking, aggressive; adapted or used for purposes of attack; characterized by attacking. Opposed to **defensive adj**.

2. Causing painful or unpleasant sensations; used esp. in reference to taste or smell or sight, or to the moral sensibilities: disgusting, nauseous, repulsive.

3. Giving, or liable to give, offence; displeasing; annoying; insulting.

As an adjective, the word could be reasonably expected to describe observable qualities of an object, person, or action. This seems to fit with definition 1 – something is objectively used or adapted as an instrument of attack. With definitions 2 and 3, though, the unpleasant sensations ‘caused’ by the offensive thing seem to reside not so much (or at least not exclusively) in the thing itself but rather in the recipient of offence. As a result, the same object or action can be offensive to one person and perfectly innocent or even pleasing to another. To what extent, then is offensiveness in the eye of the beholder?

If these issues are baffling enough when we look at dictionary definitions, they acquire particular intensity and urgency when they are embodied in human characters and debated on stage in emotionally charged situations. Time and again, Shakespeare presents us with dramatic situations in which different aspects or definitions of offence are pitted against each other, questioning where offence resides, whose responsibility it is, and whether its consequences are proportionate to its magnitude. For example, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the messenger who brings the unwelcome news that Antony is married to Octavia pleads with Cleopatra: ‘Take no offence, that I would not offend you’ (2.5.100). We could hardly imagine a clearer case of the ‘offender’ being less guilty of offending than here – as the messenger rightly says, ‘I that do bear the news made not the match’ (2.5.82). Nevertheless, since Cleopatra does take offence, he does offend her, and suffers the consequences: she ‘strikes him down’ (s.d. 2.5.74-74), ‘hauls him up and down’ (s.d. 2.5.76-77), and draws a knife on him (s.d. 2.5.89-90). She exclaims: ‘Hence, horrible villain, or I’ll spurn thine
eyes / Like balls before me! I'll unhair thy head!' (2.5.77-78), and threatens him with being 'whipped with wire and stewed in brine, / Smarting in ling'ring pickle’ (2.5.79-80). And to her lady-in-waiting’s reasonable objection, ‘The man is innocent’, Cleopatra replies: ‘Some innocents scape not the thunderbolt’ (2.5.93-94).

Cleopatra’s hyperbolic reactions and extravagant threats, combined with the fact that in the end the messenger escapes relatively unscathed, make this scene somewhat comic in the middle of the unfolding tragedy. Nevertheless, we catch a glimpse of what can happen when somebody who holds unassailable power decides both what offence is and how it should be punished. We have a darker hint of such a situation in Henry IV Part II, where the Archbishop of York uses the analogy of what we would now call domestic abuse to speak about the King’s relationship with his subjects:

[...] this land, like an offensive wife
That hath enraged him on to offer strokes,
As he is striking, holds his infant up
And hangs resolved correction in the arm
That was upreared to execution. (2 Henry IV, 4.1.213-17)

What is most chilling in this comparison is that the responsibility for the unspecified offence and the brutal punishment is placed squarely on the wife. To come back to the OED definitions, we do not know how the wife has offended the husband: by breaching ‘law, rules, duty, propriety, or etiquette’, or by being ‘annoying’ or ‘insulting’; we do not know whether her offence was a ‘transgression’, a ‘sin’ or a minor ‘misdemeanour’. The fact that the husband is ‘enraged’ seems to be sufficient justification for making the wife ‘offensive’, which in turn warrants the ‘correction’ of a beating.

While these brief examples question what offence is, who is responsible for it, and how we should (and should not) react to it, Hamlet presents us with a more sustained and probing interrogation of these issues. In this play, obsessed with crime, sin, guilt, (im)propriety, hurt feelings, and introspection, offence takes centre stage from the very first scene. When Horatio attempts to question Old Hamlet’s ghost and the apparition refuses to respond, Marcellus comments: ‘It is offended’ (1.1.58-59). At this point, we may think that it is simply the mortal’s impertinence in addressing it that offends the ghost. However, as the play unfolds, we are drawn into the mystery of whether an offence (i.e. a crime) has been committed, and into an exploration of a range of behaviours that offend particular characters’ norms and sensibilities. At various points, different meanings of the words ‘offend’ and ‘offence’ are brought into productive tension. This happens when
Hamlet, soon after speaking to the Ghost, apologises to Horatio for his ‘wild and whirling words’: ‘I’m sorry they offend you, heartily’ (1.5.146-47). Horatio reassures him: ‘There’s no offence, my lord’, to which Hamlet retorts: ‘Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio, / And much offence too’ (1.5.149-51). The two friends are clearly speaking of different types of offence here: Horatio is referring to offence only as a reaction towards impoliteness or crossing the rules of a civil conversation, while Hamlet halfway through the dialogue alludes to the other, darker meanings of the word: ‘crime’ and ‘sin’.

If the meaning of offence in Hamlet proves slippery and ambiguous, so does the determination of who exactly the offender and the offended party are, as we can see in the following exchange between Hamlet and his mother:

GERTRUDE Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET Mother, you have my father much offended. (3.4.10-11)

As in the previous example, the mother and the son do not define ‘offence’ in the same way. The former is talking about rudeness and upsetting somebody, while the latter is referring to a much more serious issue: betrayal and complicity in murder. Moreover, they do not mean the same person by the perpetrator of the offence and by its victim, or even by ‘father’. Gertrude is accusing Hamlet of offending Claudius, her current husband and thus Hamlet’s stepfather. Meanwhile, Hamlet is making her the offender and his natural father, Old Hamlet, the victim of the offence. In effect, talking about offence brings into light a crisis of familial relationships and even personal identities, as Gertrude asks: ‘Have you forgot me?’, and Hamlet answers: ‘You are the queen, your husband’s brother’s wife, / But – would you were not so – you are my mother’ (3.4.16-19). When it is debatable who your father is and you yourself wish to reject your mother, your own position in the world becomes uncertain indeed.

Finally, Hamlet sheds much light on the issue at the very heart of this paper: the relation between offence and performance. Most of us would agree that the Prince of Denmark has some legitimate and serious reasons to feel offended. After all, his father was murdered, his mother married the murderer, and the murderer took the crown which Hamlet should have inherited. Under these circumstances, it may come as a surprise that when Hamlet explicitly declares that something deeply offends him, it is not any of these wrongdoings that he is talking about. Instead, he is lambasting bad stage acting: ‘Oh, it offends me to the soul to see a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable
of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise […]’ (3.2.6-8). Now, perhaps Hamlet is something of an aesthete, a university man, an intellectual unwillingly thrown into the world of court intrigue and politics. However, nobody would accuse his ruthless uncle/stepfather of being an impractical, artsy type. And yet Claudius too is seriously concerned about offence in a theatrical performance, asking Hamlet about the play that is being performed in front of them: ‘Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in’t?’ (3.2.202). In the light of what we have already seen regarding the definition of offence, Hamlet’s answer – ‘No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest: no offence i’th’world’ (3.2.203) – is both truthful and disingenuous. There is no actual offence, in the sense of ‘crime’, in the play, as the murder is of Gonzago is only enacted and nobody really dies. Yet, of course, there is an offence in the sense of ‘wounding the feelings’ and ‘causing displeasure’ to Claudius. But then, is this offence really in the play’s argument, or rather in what Claudius makes of it? Indeed, watching the play shakes Claudius so much that he acknowledges – if only to himself in a soliloquy – his own crime: ‘O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven: / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder’ (3.3.39-41). As it turns out, the offence –crime and sin – is not in the play, but in Claudius, and the play makes that offence come to light by causing offence – discomfort – to him. This is of course exactly what Hamlet hoped for when he declared: ‘The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King’ (2.2.536-37).

In demonstrating how a play stirs Claudius’s emotions in order to expose his crime, Hamlet follows Sir Philip Sidney’s description of the key function of tragedy. According to Sidney, tragedy ‘openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; […] maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours’, and ‘with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded’. In other words, tragedy provokes the audience’s emotional response in order to expose the faults which society (and particularly those who hold power within it) would rather keep hidden. Tragedy, and theatre in general, force us to notice what we usually ignore, overlook, marginalise, or take for granted. The experience of being confronted with such issues can be deeply uncomfortable, but ideally it can improve society: the hope is that, if kings fear to be exposed as tyrants, they will avoid behaving tyrannically. However, as Claudius’s case proves, it is equally possible that the offended members of the audience will lash out at the ostensible cause of the offence (the play or those responsible for it) instead of critically reflecting on their own faults and mending their ways. The next section of this paper examines a couple of recent cases when a

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Shakespearean performance caused offence, focusing in particular on the reactions of those who took offence at them.

Recent Offensive Shakespeares

Offensive Shakespeare in the UK

On 23 April 2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company held a star-studded gala in Stratford-upon-Avon to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. Among many other tributes, the programme, broadcast live on the BBC, featured a rendition of a speech from the collaboratively written early modern play Sir Thomas More. The speech, often attributed to Shakespeare, defends ‘the wretched strangers’ – foreigners settling in England – from the hostile native populace violently seeking to remove them. Its performance caused a swift backlash from the conservative press, politicians, and members of the public. The Tory MP Peter Bone complained about the programme’s ‘bias’, accusing its producers of ‘us[ing] Shakespeare to push pro-immigration agenda’. Some of the online comments posted in response to the Daily Mail’s coverage of the incident called the BBC ‘a mouthpiece for the extreme left’, ‘bunch of commies’, and a ‘Marxist cabal’ disseminating ‘left wing anti British propaganda’ [sic]. A number of posts quoted John of Gaunt’s ‘sceptred isle’ speech from Richard II (2.1.31-68) as the patriotic corrective to the controversial lines from Sir Thomas More, one commentator introducing the rival quotation with the sarcastic: ‘William Shakespeare eh? This is William Shakespeare’. Meanwhile, others defended the show as illustrating that Shakespeare ‘has so much to say to the modern world’ and criticised the opposing side for its own political bias and perceived narrow-mindedness.

Occurring, as it did, shortly before the referendum on the UK’s continuing membership of the European Union, in which the issue of immigration played a crucial role, the performance clearly touched a raw nerve. It exposed the ‘ulcers’ festering within the British society: xenophobia, racism, and classism pitted against the discourses of multiculturalism and inclusivity; and deep-rooted


14 Online comments on ‘Fury as the Bard is dragged into refugee row: BBC accused of using Shakespeare celebration to push “Left-wing, pro-immigration agenda”’, Mail Online, 24 April 2016 [https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3555755/Fury-Bard-dragged-refugee-row-BBC-accused-using-Shakespeare-celebrations-push-Left-wing-pro-immigration-agenda.html#comments] [accessed 24 August 2020], n. pag.
divisions between the perceived ‘cosmopolitan elite’ and ‘ordinary people’. Both sides of the debate claimed to know and understand the ‘real’ Shakespeare: respectively, the universal poet of all humanity and the patriotic, national bard. Those who were offended by the inclusion of the ‘immigration speech’ made much of the fact that it was ‘obscure’ and ‘never performed during the playwright’s lifetime’, with Bone saying ‘You’d have thought they could at least have found something which was published under Shakespeare’s name for a start’, and one online commentator writing: ‘A speech celebrating Shakespeare on the BBC was not by Shakespeare and had nothing to do with him or the immigrant crisis but they thought that it should be connected’. While there was much sound and fury in the Mail comments section, with plenty of abuse hurled at the BBC and repeated calls to abolish the TV licence, overall the episode itself did not escalate much further. As far as I know, the show’s creators and performers were not directly threatened and the funding was not withdrawn from the BBC or the RSC as a result. An offensive Shakespeare incident in the US the following year, however, had more serious consequences.

Offensive Shakespeare in the US
My final case study concerns the Public Theater’s 2017 performance of Julius Caesar in the outdoors Delacorte Theatre in New York’s Central Park. This modern-dress production drew explicit parallels between the play’s titular character and the recently elected President Trump. The look, speech, and mannerisms of the actors who played Caesar and his wife Calpurnia clearly alluded to those of Donald and Melania Trump, and men wearing red baseball caps saying ‘MAKE ROME GREAT AGAIN’ appeared on stage. The dialogue kept to Shakespeare’s script with one exception: the insertion of the words ‘on Fifth Avenue’ into Casca’s scornful description of the Roman women who pity and forgive Caesar. To echo Trump’s boast that he wouldn’t lose any votes even should he ‘stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody’, the speech was changed to ‘if Caesar had stabbed their mothers [on Fifth Avenue] they would have done no less’. It is fair to say that the Trump-like Caesar was portrayed in an unflattering light, which could easily offend the President’s supporters. However, the outrage that erupted when reports of the play began to circulate seemed to be motivated chiefly by the assassination scene. Some commentators took the Caesar/Trump identification literally, with a headline in Mediaite declaring: ‘Senators Stab Trump to Death in Central Park Performance of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar’, and Fox & Friends stating:

15 ‘Fury as the Bard is dragged into refugee row’.
16 Throughout this section, I draw on James Shapiro’s extended discussion of the production and its aftermath in Shakespeare in a Divided America (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), pp. 8-22 and 227-47.
17 Quoted in Shapiro, p. 15.
‘this is a play put on in Central Park in New York City that very obviously depicts the assassination of a US president’.18

What followed was a storm of protests. Some of them occurred in the flesh, with several attempts to disrupt live performances, but most of the offence played out on social media. The offended reactions took several main forms: verbal outrage, sometimes expressed in insulting or obscene terms; questioning of the funding behind the event, including lobbying for a withdrawal of corporate sponsorship; suggestions of legal action against those involved in the production; and direct threats of violence towards them. Unlike in the British case, most negative comments did not claim that the production misused a ‘real’ Shakespeare or offer alternative passages or interpretations. Instead, they focused directly on the political aspect of the event – the real or imagined attack on the US President under the cover of ‘art’, possibly ‘funded by the taxpayer’.19 While physical violence did not materialise, a number of theatre practitioners – some of them collateral damage, not even involved in the production – received intimidating emails and phone calls, some going as far as threatening death or rape. The threats were serious enough to warrant police and other government agencies becoming involved in managing the situation. And in one respect the protesters managed to inflict measurable – if only financial – damage on the company, by persuading Delta Air Lines and Bank of America to withdraw their sponsorship. Thus, the offence in this case went beyond the realm of pure debate (even if by ‘debate’ we mean a shouting match) and firmly entered the domains of economics, crime, and law enforcement. Similarly to the British case, the performance exposed festering ‘ulcers’ and ‘wounds’ in American society, particularly the unresolved disputes surrounding the nature of democracy and the style of government that Americans were prepared to embrace, as well as the ever-present fear of political violence. There is also no doubt that it ‘stirred the affects’ so powerfully that some people were prepared to cross not only the bounds of civility but also of lawful behaviour.

Ban offence, ban the theatre?
The fallout of the ‘Trump Caesar’ production seems to offer proof of the negative effects of the modern culture of offence, in which emotion overshadows reason and both artistic expression and free speech are in danger of being stifled by those who replace rational debate with raw expressions of outrage. By his own admission, the play’s director, Oskar Eustis, wished to present both sides of the debate – the dangers of tyranny and the equally serious dangers of opposing tyranny by violent means – and to argue that ‘like drama, democracy depends on the conflict of different points of

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18 Quoted in Shapiro, pp. 233 and 236.
19 Donald Trump Jr.’s tweet, quoted in Shapiro, p. 237.
view’. As James Shapiro argues, ‘Eustis wanted a dialogue, even a heated one, while those offended by his memorable production opted for silencing him and his company’, trying to stop the play by protests, cutting off the funding, and threats. However, before we simply conclude that the quality of public debate and democratic institutions have lamentably declined in the twenty-first century, we should note that, in proposing to stop an event that fanned people’s ‘irrational’ feelings, Eustis’s opponents were in good – if perhaps unexpected – company.

As we know, Western theatrical tradition has its roots in the traditions of ancient Athenian democracy. Nevertheless, the Greek philosopher Plato advocates banning dramatic poets from his ideal republic:

[…] we shall be justified in not admitting him [the poet] into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine reason. As a country may be given over into the power of its worst citizens while the better sort are ruined, so, we shall say, the dramatic poet sets up a vicious form of government in the individual soul: he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regards the same things as now one, now the other; and he is an image-maker whose images are phantoms far removed from reality.

Plato’s objections to dramatic poetry are remarkably similar to some of the charges levelled at the culture of offence – both are alleged to undermine reason and encourage emotions, which are viewed not only as lower faculties but also as a danger to the rule of law and order in both individuals and societies.

Of course, Plato’s is not the only or definitive voice in the debate on the virtue or vice of drama (and, by extension, literature and art in general). His own student Aristotle disagreed with the idea of banning dramatic poets from the commonwealth. Unlike Plato, Aristotle argues that drama’s emotional impact can be beneficial: tragedy in particular, by ‘arousing pity and fear’, can bring about a ‘catharsis of such emotions’. The term ‘catharsis’ encompasses a range of meanings, including ‘purgation, purification, transformation, and more’. Thus, while Plato sees drama as a route to indulging and giving free rein to emotions, Aristotle presents it as a way of dealing with them:

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20 Quoted in Shapiro, p. 21.
21 Shapiro, p. 247.
23 Aristotle, Poetics [c.350-330 BCE], in Reader in Tragedy, pp. 18-28 (18).
24 Nevitt and Pollard, ‘Antiquity and the Middle Ages’, in Reader in Tragedy, pp. 7-17 (8).
bringing them out into the open and, potentially, refining them into a format that can be productive, rather than destructive, for the right conduct of private and public lives.

The debate about the value of drama which Plato and Aristotle initiated has continued in the following centuries, with successive generations of critics and practitioners taking sides in it. As we have seen, in Shakespeare’s period, Philip Sidney spoke in favour of Aristotle’s view, but the very fact that his treatise is entitled *A Defence of Poetry* indicates that he was responding to those, who, like Plato, found much harm and vice in literary expression, and drama in particular. There is no space here to summarise other, later contributions to the debate, but its persistence owes much to the vexed issues of whether the passions that drama arouses are a good or a bad thing, and whether they are a danger to reason, order, and democratic government – the issues that also preoccupy current commentators on the problem of offence. This is why performative art may be a good testing ground for advancing our understanding of the ‘age of offence’. After all, many expressions of offence seem performative, almost theatrical – we do not only *feel* but *act* offended. Perhaps approaching manifestations of offence with the tools of dramatic analysis can thus prove productive.

Moreover, as Sara Ahmed persuasively argues, reason and emotions are not separate phenomena, the former logical and objective, and the latter instinctual and personal. Indeed, emotions ‘should not be regarded as psychological states but as social and cultural practices’.25 Emotions are part of our cognitive apparatus, through which we make sense of the world and our place with it. They are not simply instinctive and automatic, but rather they are both produced by and in turn they influence our contact with objects and other people. Thus, if we dismiss them as lower, animalistic reactions which simply stand in the way of the more advanced faculty of reason, we risk neglecting ‘the process of production or “making” of emotions’.

And in doing so, we overlook the social norms and ideological underpinnings which shape our emotions; we neglect the fact that ‘emotions “matter” for politics’.27 Since emotions – including that of offence – are both relational and embodied, drama – as the form which deals with embodying, impersonating human interactions on stage, seems to be a perfect laboratory for analysing them.

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26 Ahmed, p. 11.
27 Ahmed, p. 12.