

ON SHAKESPEARE AND THE QUEST FOR POWER

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays abound in remarkable characters who are leaders – Henry V, Macbeth, Richard II, Othello, to mention but a few. His entire work reflects what human nature is about and has been about for the past 400 years since his birth. The portrayal of leaders, be them military leaders, greatest warriors, civilian leaders, effective or ineffective leaders is the true reflection of a true leader of nowadays, wittily depicted in his own language, often used in current politics. Shakespeare's concern with issues of leadership and power all through his career, to the very end, is illustrated by his reflection on various kinds of power. They are memorable characters who leave their mark on readership and present connections with the realities of our world. The present paper is meant to be an analysis of the powerful leaders in Shakespeare's plays and the lessons learnt from their expert mastery of the art of politics, that is highly appreciated by nowadays' actors in world politics.

Keywords: political power seeking, manipulation, strategy, privileges, statecraft, divine right, rule of law

1. 'Shakespeare's legacy' and the echo of his work throughout the ages

Shakespeare's works have influenced writers and readers throughout the world and the motifs his works provided still inspire many cultural productions, from stage to screen. His plays still impress and move actors to this very day. There are lessons to be learned from his works, famous quotations to be remembered and countless words to have been introduced into the English language from his works, having reshaped English along the way. A lot has been written about learning 'leadership from Shakespeare' by experts who have put in hard work to decipher his language or to translate the words on the page into action on the stage, but one thing is sure: by speaking and listening to Shakespeare's language, perhaps even repeatedly, one gets accustomed to get an insight into reading "beyond the lines", sensibly grasping beyond the meanings and understanding why things happen the way they do.

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Following the recent commemoration of his death, modern readership continues to enjoy reading his plays and learn lessons for life. His plays used to address readers across social layers and time boundaries, yet the idea of universality requires a careful approach to historical realities of his era, since the effort to insist on his timelessness is actually a re-connection with the historical and literary context: “The plays bring live, in other words, the experiences, ideas, and issues peculiar to their era, but beneath the historical contingencies can be discerned the permanent truths they embody, which make the plays universally intelligible.” (Ryan 2015: 33)

William Shakespeare had a tremendous influence on the art of drama and the English language. His writings presented compelling plots, complex characters, in different genre. His use of the soliloquy went beyond the conventional plot description to explore his characters’ thinking and state of mind. His writing influenced many playwrights and novelists that followed, such as *Charles Dickens*, *Herman Melville*, *Tom Stoppard*, and *William Faulkner*.

By reading his plays, one undergoes a unique experience, getting witnessing murders and revenge acts, building or destroying kingdoms that are so close to our world scene today. The way Antony Cimolino (2011) suggestively observes: *human nature hasn’t really changed in the 400 years since Shakespeare stopped writing for the stage, nor have the basic dynamics of rise and fall, conflict and resolution, in the stories of human lives. So the more you get to know Shakespeare’s plays, the more you’ll see our own world reflected in them.*

2. Portrayal of characters with relation to the concept of political power and its use in Shakespeare's plays

Power in International Relations. To international relations power is a central concept (Albu, I., 2004), but it is difficult to define or measure power with precision, thus being one of the essentially contested concepts in the study of international relations. It implies *coercion, influence, force* and *authority*. In an attempt at defining power, to Karen.Mingst (1999) it is the “ability not only to influence others, but to control outcomes in a way that would not have occurred naturally.” (Mingst, 1999: 106)

The present paper looks into the notion of power depicted in Shakespeare's plays, mirroring the way it appears on the international scene today, where the same, unchanged attributes of *influence* and *authority* prevail and wherein the 'good' or 'genuine' uses of power are dependent upon the skill of a good leader. The analysis looks at Shakespeare's characters' traits of *leader*, a typology of which is best illustrated by Antony Cimolino in his work (2011). The outcome of this analysis serves one to explain the complexiy of representations on the uses of power and their dependence on political interests in all [historical] times.

Power is a central theme in Shakespeare, too. All of his history plays, from the Roman plays—*Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, to *King John* and *Henry VIII*, are about aspects of *political power*: how power is obtained, how it is used and misused, how it affects the one who uses it, how it is lost.

Shifts of power lie at the heart of the **tragedies**, too (Cimolino, 2011), from *King Lear*, in which its main character makes the mistake of letting go of power while still expecting to enjoy the respect and privileges it commands, to *Othello*, in which a subordinate, Iago, makes exquisite use of the power of suggestion to turn his commanding officer into his subject.

Even in the **comedies** the pursuit of power is a visible theme, although one is inclined to think of them as being more about love than about war or politics. It's certainly central to *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as in other comedies too. The action of *As You Like It*, for instance, takes place in the wake of a palace coup: the amiable Duke Senior has been deposed by Duke Frederick, his despicable brother and has gone off to lead a government-in-exile in the Forest of Arden.

Shakespeare's concern with issues of leadership and power goes to the very end of his career. *The Tempest* is an extended meditation on various kinds of power. Its central figure, Prospero, is another ex-duke who has been deposed by his brother, having allowed himself to get distracted from the practical business of ruling by his interest in the magic. In the end, Prospero exercises the hardest power of all to acquire, i.e. the power to forgive.

According to A. Cimolino (2011), Shakespeare's "most exhaustive study of leadership" is perhaps found in the two great cycles of history plays of the Tudor dynasty (the reign of his own monarch of the time, Elizabeth I), written by the great playwright in reversed, not chronological order. The first cycle of plays begins with *Richard II*, followed by two plays about the reign of Henry IV, and ending with *Henry V*. The second cycle is composed of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. The plays, to a large extent, can be read as a collective guide to help Elizabeth select the next ruler of England, since it appears that the message prevalent in the plays comes as a reaction to the succession problem and the potentiality that Elizabeth and her council might choose an heir lacking in this area. When reading the message of the plays, it appears that a good ruler must be both "anointed" and "shrewd" (Orgel 1999: 26), politically speaking. A monarch's right to rule is based on his/her ability to bear the responsibility incurring from the divine right of succession, to make the welfare of the nation prevail and to rule the people wisely and securely. This philosophy seems to be a combination of Tudor and Machiavellian theories on the nature of kingship and power (Mabillard 2000).

3. Leaders and their role in Shakespeare's plays

Richard II is one of the Shakespearean examples of an “*ineffective leader*”. Richard’s divine right to the crown exemplifies the Tudor political thought of the sixteenth century. The Tudors adopted the theory of the Divine Right of Kings in the attempt to maintain a strong government, and to counter the Papal authority as the state attempted to break away from the church. The theory became the foremost doctrine of the time regarding the nature of kingship, and rests on four main statements: (1) the monarchy is a divinely ordained institution; (2) heredity right is indefeasible (the right acquired by birth to rule must not be forfeited through any acts of usurpation); (3) kings are accountable to God alone; (4) non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God (under any circumstances resistance to a king is a sin, and ensures damnation. (John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, [London: 1923], p.8 quoted by Mabillard A., 2000) He acts without regard to law, as if the rights and powers that accompany his office as king were privileges of his own person. He seems to have no clear idea of what he wants to use his power to achieve. As a result, he makes arbitrary and impulsive decisions that earn him the enmity of the very people whose support he should most be cultivating: the nobility. One of the people he alienates is his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, the man who will prove his downfall by launching a rebellion and thus deposing Richard, assuming the throne himself as King Henry IV. He ends up being imprisoned by the new King Henry and, inevitably, murdered. Richard’s belief in what was called the Divine Right of Kings is best illustrated by Shakespeare in the character he portrays, i.e. that of a man who doesn’t understand his very role of leader.

In *Richard II*, Gaunt is the voice of reason, wisdom, and, above all, patriotism. Shakespeare further enhances Gaunt’s patriotism and loyalty to the king in order to emphasize Richard’s divine right to rule. Protecting Richard’s position as anointed one is imperative to Gaunt. For whatever crimes Richard has committed, it is the responsibility of God alone, not Richard’s subjects, to judge and punish him for his offences.

Gaunt’s speeches in Act II, scene I, are foreshadowing the actions of Bolingbroke and the suffering that will occur as a result. Bolingbroke will make numerous other English men and women feel the repercussions of his act of deposing the rightful King Richard.

*Gaunt. . . . To stir against the butchers of his life!
But since correction lieth in those hands
Which made the fault that we cannot correct,
Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven . . . (I, ii, 3-6)
God’s is the quarrel; for God’s substitute,*

*His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caused his death; the which is wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge; for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister. (I, ii, 37-41)*

What Richard lacks is the ability to make insightful political decisions. He is ordained, as stated above and has the rightful authority and obligation to lead his subjects, but, being weak and self-absorbed, he cannot fulfil his duty. Thus, Richard, perfectly plays the role of an *incompetent* ruler, makes political mistakes and his conduct illustrates his lack of concern for governing properly, having thus committed the crime of gross negligence against his subjects.

By contrast to Richard II, **King Henry IV** does not have the Divine Right of Kings. He is politically wise, has all the characteristics of a great Machiavellian despot. Henry IV, nevertheless, comes to the throne as a usurper and an illegitimate monarch. Besides, he was responsible for the death of Richard, the king anointed by God. Because of all these, Henry's ability to rule is diminished, and instability reigns all over England. Henry is the typical Machiavellian ruler. Henry's abilities are evident, however, no scene in the play illustrates Henry's political determination better than when Henry confronts his son, Hal, in Henry IV, Part I.

The principal reason why Henry's political abilities are essential to govern successfully is his desire to keep the favour of the common people, and for this he will perform any action, and assume any persona. It does not matter if he is deceitful, as long as he conveys the right sentiment to the people, as long as he appears "merciful, trustworthy, upright, humane, and devout" (Machiavelli, 2011: 63). His awareness of the necessity of the people's support, in what is called nowadays statecraft, will lead him to make decisions based on what will benefit the state and the common men and women, brilliantly illustrating his mastery of the Machiavellian rules on what makes a good ruler. It should be noted that as Amanda Mabillard points out, the contrast between the characteristics of a "good" versus a "bad" ruler, outlined in Machiavelli's *Prince*, can apply directly to Richard II and Henry IV as presented in the plays: "one is considered ... 'effeminate and weak', another 'indomitable and spirited'; one affable, another haughty; one lascivious, another moderate; one serious, another frivolous" (Machiavelli 2011: 55).

Usurping the crown is the cause of Henry IV's troublesome ruling. Not only does the crime plague his thoughts, but it seems to have cursed his reign with rebellion, and tainted future generations. Henry's reign will be plagued with disorder, despite his political abilities. The fact that he is illegitimate hinders his ability to be the perfect monarch, in spite of the fact that he is a strong and intelligent leader. This is why Henry fails as king.

Further on, in the gallery of Shakespearean leaders, the portrayal of **Henry V** is that of Henry's son, Hal, the embodiment of the wisdom and authority a ruler for England should have been deemed right. His portrayal is much like his father; much like the Machiavellian *Prince*. He aims at gaining popularity by getting closer to the people he knows he will one day rule. This popularity will be vital to his reign as Henry V. He proves to be highly skilled in the art of war, has good military abilities and is a cunning decision-maker. He inherits the throne being a legitimate king, whose father knows that his past would not affect his son, maintaining that good image sketched already in Henry IV, Part I. In the play, Henry himself goes to the gates of the town and heralds a warning to the people and does not tell others to 'send them the word':

*If not [surrender]—why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shreaking daughters,
Your fathers taken by the silver beards
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes ... (Henry V, III.iii.33-37).*

Having spent time with ordinary people, Henry knows his audience; knows exactly the effect his words will have upon the people, so as to get them on his side. Speaking before the army he leads before the Battle of Agincourt, he skilfully masters his discourse by making the soldiers think it is their choice to stay or leave, but tells them that if they win the battle, they will make history. He does have a shrewd plan of hanging out with the low people in taverns to the despair of his father, but it is by this that his powerful image as a future king is reinforced, in all its magnificence. His reign is a great success, as well and he is, the very portrait of nowadays' *effective leader*.

The historical background at the time Shakespeare wrote was marked by the hassles of the succession to the throne. Elizabeth I was nearing the end of her reign. Having had no heir she was faced with the daunting task of selecting the next king or queen out of all the possible successors. The succession struggle had raised the concern of the people and Parliament as early as 1566. Only one seemed to come close to fitting the criteria required – James VI of Scotland. Henry VIII, declared in his will whom he thought was rightfully in line to the throne. In his will Henry excluded the Stuart line altogether and left the crown to the House of Suffolk. Henry had shifted the succession to Mary, the younger daughter of Henry VII. Henry VIII's will was considered faulty, however. Although James VI was actually a foreigner, he was the most legitimate candidate Elizabeth had to choose from. Crowning James would ensure that the next king of England had the divine right to rule. In spite of the fact that he was not a perfect ruler for Scotland, James had the authority to govern England, and moreover he had those important Machiavellian qualities that Henry IV, Henry V, and even Elizabeth herself

possessed. Nevertheless, he never came close to embodying the characteristics of a great statesman as did Henry V, and appeared not to be interested in the life and concerns of the Scottish people. While King of Scotland, James was, at times, more interested in art than in politics, and had an unusually strong passion for writing poetry and prose that took up much of his time. He was also a physically weak man, and could not possibly lead his men, if need be, into battle as did Henry V.

Coriolanus is the embodiment of a great military hero, he is a masterful leader of men on the battlefield, a great soldier, famous all over Rome, but not skilled enough into politics, which leads to his failure. He is not willing to manipulate his audience. Mastering the political statecraft does not apply to him, and he seems not to be aware that in order to succeed in this, he has to get deeper involved into politics and not place it beneath his persona. Being arrogant does not appeal to the people, he cannot speak the language of the people while treating them from above. As a consequence, he is rejected by his own people and thus goes to side up with his enemies in attacking his own city. This places him in a difficult condition and as it usually happens when joining one's opponents inevitably, loyalties are divided.

Macbeth is himself a military hero, too, who aims at kingship, firmly believing that he is meant for a higher role and sacrifices everything in the pursuit of *power*. But in the end this will lead but to his self-destruction. The whole play is an illustration of the harmful effect of seeking power by evil means, with the price of a murder. The striking thing here is that by committing murder, he acts in the best interest of himself, as Duncan was neither weak, nor a bad king, and upon seizing the throne, strengthening his own power is his sole concern.

Several other portrayals of heroes or leaders can be traced in Shakespeare's plays that are indirectly linked to power as such. It is the figure of the *moral leader* that Cimolino so well depicts in his astute analysis of Shakespearian characters, be it Philip the Bastard, Cordelia or Prospero to name but a few. And here we talk about an ever present issue of **morality and politics** and/or morality in politics.

4. Conclusions

This brings us back to Machiavelli, who recognizes the true nature of the 'reason of the state' and what is needed to preserve the interests and security of the state takes precedence over all other considerations. According to him, *morality* has no place when the interests of the state are at stake. In *The Prince* he makes it clear that politics is separated from conventional morality. He has often been criticized for advocating the use of the most *unscrupulous means in the quest for political power*. Machiavelli implied that the morality appropriate to politics is not one based on ideals, but is a consequentialist morality where actions are judged according to the good consequences they promote for the general good of society.

The series of examined rulers confirm that *political skills* need to match intuition and take into consideration the wider political and international agenda. In between popularity and fall, Shakespearean princes and kings appeal or reject the interests of their subjects, express patriotism or manifest high subjectivism, switching between the *strengths* and *weaknesses* of a *homo politicus* of that time.

The aim of the analysis presented in this text was to look at political leaders as they appear in Shakespeare's plays by drawing a parallel to the ones on the international scene today and the way *power* is depicted all through their actions. *Power* is a multifaceted concept, rooted in past historical context and implying coercion, force and authority-attributes that are and have been used by leaders of all time all throughout their political actions, either pursuing their own interest or for the benefit of the state they represented. It might be implied that the deliberate use of power may have an impact on responses of the public to the problem of a good leadership. The attributes and characteristics of *today's* power tend to reflect past reality as depicted by Shakespeare and is resistant to changes, proving that power today is not any different from power from the past!

Leaders and political actors are and have always been in the pursuit for *power*, be it in the interests of states or their own interest, ever since the world Shakespeare lived in, or in the current political scene. Therefore, reading and living through the plays of Shakespeare offers the reader a reflection of the ever-present world to be

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