

USE OF POWER BY TWO MONSTROUS MONARCHS OF SHAKESPEARE: TITUS ANDRONICUS AND MACBETH

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Every work of art deserves to be enjoyed and evaluated on its own merits. When we consider an artist of stature, the temptation to see each effort as part of an entire oeuvre is irresistible. Such is the case especially with ‘William Shakespeare’, author of the greatest, most influential body of literature that one person has ever written. Shakespeare wrote plays including tragedies, histories and comedies. Few dramatists have achieved the comparable success in any one of these genres, and none has triumphed in this wide range of forms, nor has any matched Shakespeare’s linguistic imagination and beauty of expression. He stands alone, the pinnacle of Western literature.

Shakespeare was the man of commercial theatre. The audience he sought to entertain encompassed all the levels of society: from the well-to-do and educated to the poor and illiterate. Four hundred years ago Shakespeare wrote plays for performance and today we read them. In the eighteenth century, the poet Alexander Pope popularised the idea that Shakespeare, “grew immortal in his despite” meaning that he could not have anticipated that for centuries after he wrote the plays, would be read.

Shakespeare has often been seen as a conservative political thinker characterised by an over-riding fear of ‘mob. Shakespeare’s writing emerged out of an intellectual milieu fascinated by republican ideas. From 1590s onwards, he explored republican themes in his poetry and plays: political assassinations, elected governments, alternative constitution and perhaps most importantly of all, the problem of Power over responsibility. Sixteenth century political history reveals that republicanism was ubiquitous. The Latin term ‘res publica’ literally meant the public thing but it was most frequently translated as a common weal or commonwealth. This meant that republicanism was either directly or indirectly a ghostly presence in English political life, from early sixteenth century onwards.

This paper deals with the use of power by the two monstrous monarchs of Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus and Macbeth. It focuses on the dark side of these monarchs and their illegitimate use of power for their own benefits. One of the strongest motivations in the plays of Shakespeare is Power, more specifically the desire to rule over others. It is a substantial part of Shakespeare’s Republic. In this paper, “Titus Andronicus” and “Macbeth” demonstrates that when the urge for power is enacted, moral reasoning is often swamped by the desire for power. It also shows that having some power is not enough; it generally creates desire for more power.

Certain characters are so consumed by the lust of power that they lose whatever ethical centre they might have had. Those who reach positions of power inevitably undergo changes in personality and values. According to Noam Chomsky, “Power, unless justified, is inherently illegitimate. The burden of proof is on those in authority to demonstrate why their elevated

position is justified. If this burden can't be met, the authority in question should be dismantled. Authority for its own sake is inherently unjustified". It becomes the duty of the people having power and who are ruling others to justify their positions.

MACBETH

“Fair is foul and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air”.

William Shakespeare's eponymously titled play Macbeth is one of the most celebrated writings in history and is still being performed and studied today. The play reflects the established socio-cultural beliefs of power and the effects of an illegitimate rule during the Jacobean period. Written in the seventeenth century when belief in a divine-ordained hierarchy prevailed, it was thought that if monarchical power was accessed via illegitimate means, destruction of mind and state would result. James Allen, the British philosophical writer, once said “Evil is not power; its the ignorance and misuse of good”. Allen states that power itself is not evil; it is how you use power that determines goodness or evilness. He states that when using power negatively, the users are ignorant, as power itself is intended for good. This quote relates to The Tragedy of Macbeth as Macbeth is an ambitious lord with a ruthless wife that schemes to seize the throne. Shakespeare uses temptation, deceit and guilt to show what a power starved person will do to survive. Temptation is an urge without a solution. Although some people may know how to suppress this feeling but many do not. It is shown that Macbeth is a fearless leader on the battlefield but he fails to demonstrate these qualities in personal life. This is displayed when Macbeth is lured by the witches as they prophesize he will be the king. He demonstrate once again when entice by his wife as she persuades him to kill King Duncan. Macbeth knows that even listening to these ideas was dangerous but still he did what his wife said. He is so tempted for gaining power that he does not see the abnormality of killing to earn it. Power can change people in a way that is incomprehensible. Power can make one so greedy that he/she will do anything for it and won't let anyone, or anything stand in his /her way. Macbeth gets corrupted by the avarice for power. The way Macbeth himself gets corrupted is very evident. For example at the beginning of the play, Macbeth seems like the sort of person who wouldn't commit the act of murder. This is known because at the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth is the one that manipulates Macbeth to commit the crime. Macbeth has his doubts, but Lady Macbeth coaxes him to do it. In this dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Macbeth expresses his concerns and Lady Macbeth reassures him.

Macbeth: “If we should fail?”

Lady Macbeth: “...screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail”.

The strong theme that prevails throughout the play is, the destruction wrought when ambition goes unchecked by moral constraints. It finds its most powerful expression in the play's main character and the monarch in the play, Macbeth. At first he is a courageous Scottish journal who is not naturally in inclined to commit evil deeds, yet he deeply desires power and advancement. He kills Duncan against his better judgment and afterwards stews in guilt and paranoia. Towards the end of the play he descends into a kind of frantic, boastful madness. The problem in the play is that once one decides to use violence to further one's quest for power, it is difficult to stop. Thus it portrays the role of Macbeth as a monarch who uses his power illegitimately just for his ambitions and lust for powers. And it becomes evident that his rise to power causes a fundamental fracture in his character.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

Now coming on to Shakespeare's other play Titus Andronicus, it is also another play portraying a hero's wrong use of power. By S. Clarke Hulse's count, Titus Andronicus is a play with fourteen killings, one rape, one live burial, one case of insanity and one of cannibalism, an average of 5.2 atrocities per act, or one for every ninety-seven lines. Titus Andronicus is a non-stop pot-boiler catalogue of abominations. Abraham Lincoln said that nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power and same was the case with Titus Andronicus. The Roman General, who is more like a monarch for Rome and Romans, returns from a brutal ten years war to bury his sons, he has lost in conflict. To honour their defeat he executes the eldest child of his enemies' Queen. The end of the war and this final act of sacrifice is not the end of bloodshed. A chain of murder and retribution engulfs Rome because of Titus' wrong decision. And he himself struggles to escape the horror of violent deeds done in a violent world.

Shakespeare's way of slowly morphing Titus' personality from honourable to absolutely mad throughout the course of the play is extraordinary. Titus, a Senecan hero pursues revenge to the end and dies in the process. Titus illegitimate use of his power is evident throughout the play. First of all he captured Tamora, Queen of Goths, her three sons and Aaron the Moor. As per the Roman rituals and being a saviour of Rome he sacrificed Tamora's eldest son of his own dead sons and sowed the seeds of hatred in the heart of Tamora. It surely wasn't a wise decision by a man like Titus. He could have proved his genius mind by taking a correct decision but his decision spoilt everything. If Titus would have spared Tamora's eldest son all this bloodshed could have stopped. According to Lord Macaulay, "The highest proof of virtue is to possess boundless power without abusing it". But what Titus did was clearly visible to all. In this power between Titus and Tamora, so many people lost their lives. Titus kills his own son for interfering in Lavinia's (his own daughter) engagement to the new Roman emperor. Then he also kills his own daughter Lavinia when she tells him about her rape by Tamora's son Demetrius and Chiron.

Titus brutality crosses all its limits at the final act of the play. In his madness of taking revenge he again misuses his power and kills Tamora's son and makes pie out of them. He feeds the pie to their in the final scene, after which he kills Tamora also.

Thus while concluding, we can add Lord Acton quote, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" which displays the nature power has to corrupt and outlines once one has a large amount of power they are liable to additional corruption. Once one has power, the need to protect that power is created, resulting in the inability to enjoy and use power positively but bring forth paranoid, fearful and defensive position in attempt to maintain the one's power and it suits both the plays of Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus and Macbeth.

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