



POWER AND MONARCHY: SHAKESPEARE'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MACBETH AND HAMLET

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ANNOTATION:

William Shakespeare began writing and performing plays in the latter quarter of the fifteen hundreds. Elizabeth Tudor began her reign as Queen in 1558, and died on March 23, 1603. Thus, two of the most prominent individuals from sixteenth and seventeenth century English history lived as contemporaries. They interacted with each other at Court. Both walked the streets of London. Shakespeare's company performed for the Queen. Did such level of interaction between the monarch and the playwright lead to Elizabethan influence on Shakespeare's writing? Shakespeare does give female protagonists power within many of his plays. In his comedies, the female protagonists act in authoritative ways with success.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, Elizabeth's monarchy, portrayal of women, Macbeth, Hamlet.

Undoubtedly Shakespeare considered current issues in his writing. Scholars debate, however, the degree to which his plays should be interpreted as contemporary political writing versus universal philosophical statement. In the book *Shakespeare's Politics*, authors Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa criticize the limitations of interpreting Shakespeare within historical terms. Nonetheless, they concede that his writing produced an accurate thematic picture of the current social concerns: "The poet is an imitator of nature; he reproduces what he sees in the world, and it is only his preoccupation with that world which renders him a poet" (1996, p.8). In reproducing the world, the playwright necessarily reconstructs current social and political concerns as well as universal themes. Other scholars also contend that the historical depiction cannot be overlooked in significance. Leonard Tennenhouse (1986), author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, acknowledges that Shakespeare was distinctly a Renaissance individual and playwright, and his writing cannot be separated from this perspective: Where the literary figure is presumed to have written truths that obtain over time and across cultures, the man Shakespeare is situated in a Renaissance context. His writing is largely topical and allegorical as he comments on the figures and policies of his time in relation to which, then, one can fix his political identity... Shakespeare becomes a means of turning the canonized Shakespeare into a window onto Renaissance social relations, a mirror of his times, a text that presupposes a context „outside“ of itself. (p.1) Tennenhouse suggests that Shakespeare's writing reveals the character of the Renaissance world as well as it portrays individual characters in the plays. Regardless of the perspective under which scholars suggest Shakespeare should be studied, they agree that his writing provides an opportunity to examine cultural perspectives during and immediately after Elizabeth's reign. Shakespeare opens a window on the nature of the Elizabethan world. Not only does Shakespeare capture some of the cultural currents of the day, his writing has a decidedly political bent. Shakespeare's subject and themes often revolve



around issues of power and politics. John Wain,(1994), author of the book *The Living World of Shakespeare*, finds that “Shakespeare is from first to last an intensely political writer. He knows that the happiness of the common man is very much bound up with the question of who has power at the top” (p.23) . Wain elaborates on Shakespeare’s thematic goals and finds that the stability of the sovereignty had greatest importance: “The English scene, viewed from an Elizabethan standpoint, was dominated by one urgent need: the need for political stability, guaranteed by an undisputed monarchy” (Ibid., 24). The instability of the Tudor monarchy, plagued with the problems of Henry’s succession, the failed marriage of Mary, and the ambivalence of Elizabeth’s feelings toward matrimony, had created a desire within the culture for a stable monarch. Female rule lacked stability and thus contained an inherent danger. This danger resulted in an undefined anxiety among the English people who questioned whether Elizabeth provided fit rule. In some ways, her gender itself suggested that she did not. Carole Levin (1994), an Elizabethan historian, presents the dilemma of Elizabeth’s womanhood for the typical English subject: Many of the English reacted with ambivalence to the idea of a woman ruler. The ambivalence centered directly on the conflict between her rule and her femininity. If a queen were confidently to demonstrate the attributes of power, she would not be acting in a womanly manner; yet womanly behavior would ill-fit a queen for the rigors of rule. (p.3) A female monarch created many troubling questions. Could a womanly queen lead the state through war? Could a womanly queen rule over male subjects? Could a womanly queen provide an heir without transferring power to her husband and possibly to his family? And at a core gender relations level, was a woman fit to represent the great English nation? Or did the inadequacy of her gender debase the state itself? Many Elizabethan English struggled with these questions, and among them was Stratford’s own, William Shakespeare. Ultimately, the anxieties produced by these concerns led the culture to long for the stability represented by a king, not a queen. This desire for stability manifests itself in the themes of both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. In *Macbeth*, a strange and an unreal suggestion of future kingship leads Lady Macbeth to convince and help her husband to commit treason by killing the king and claiming an offered crown. The play *Hamlet* portrays the murder of a monarch by his brother and the subsequent marriage of this brother Claudius to Queen Gertrude. This union subsequently throws the power of the crown in disagreement between Hamlet, the King’s son, and Claudius, now spouse of the Queen. In both of these plays, women’s actions lead to political instability, and a disturbance of natural harmony occurs because of their involvement in the political processes. Although neither play is a direct commentary on Elizabeth, each drama reflects social anxieties from decades of female monarchical rule. Analysis of these plays reveals their specific correlation to the Renaissance world and especially the concerns surrounding the leadership of Elizabeth Tudor. Lady Macbeth’s disruption to the political culture stems from her ambition, and this dangerous ambition is made highly unnatural by her gender. When she reads Macbeth’s revelation of the witches’ predictions, she immediately assumes that only her persistence will lead Macbeth actively to pursue and acquire the desired kingly position of power and authority. She summons the absent Macbeth with reproached words: Hie thee hither, That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; And chastise with the valour of my tongue All that impedes thee from the golden round. (



Macbeth, I.v.25-28.) Lady Macbeth claims an ability to handle the character of Macbeth to her purposes and goals. Tennenhouse describes her characterization in influential political terms: “At the outset of Macbeth, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth the very same elements which other Jacobean playwrights use to display the absolute power of the state. He shows how these might be used subversively” (p.128). Certainly Lady Macbeth’s suggestions are subversive in that she leads her husband into murdering the rightful, current monarch in their home. With this ploy, she assumes the absolute power of the state by acting as if she were accountable to none and deserves no censure. Thus, Lady Macbeth exemplifies a negative representation of female ambition and power within a Renaissance context. In considering Lady Macbeth’s characterization, one must remember that feminine desires for power were seen as unnatural. In fact, Shakespeare expresses these desires in emasculating terms to give them increased gravity. Lady Macbeth renounces her femininity for power: Come you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here; And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full Of direst cruelty! (Macbeth, I.v.40-43) When Lady Macbeth desires to be “unsexed,” her words reveal the assumed disagreement between feminine nature and political ambition. By putting these desires in masculine- or gender-neutral-form, Lady Macbeth explicitly suggests their unnaturalness. Shakespeare’s language here encourages tension and reflects the political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world. Wallace MacCaffrey (1993) comments upon this discrepancy between femininity and political strength in his biography of Elizabeth I: “For a woman the demands made on the occupant of the throne were supremely difficult to meet, since the characteristic qualities which a monarch was expected to display were largely masculine” (p. 358). While Lady Macbeth wishes to be “unsexed,” Elizabeth asserted the title King as frequently as Queen and sought to establish her own power by transcending the gender issue. Nonetheless, as Levin (2013) notes, not even Elizabeth could escape her femininity: “Elizabeth might incorporate both male and female in her sovereignty, but her body was a very human female one and, hence to both Elizabeth herself and to her people, an imperfect one” (p.147).

The state of women in power is not the way things “ought to be.” Scholar James Emerson Phillips (1940) emphasizes how Shakespeare advocates a return to unquestionably patriarchal systems to restore harmony: “Although it claims its heroic victim, the evil power is in none of the great Shakespearean tragedies allowed to emerge triumphant at the end of the play. Claudius is killed and Fortinbras restores order to the kingdom of Denmark; Malcolm is restored to his rightful throne and civil peace returns to Scotland at the death of Macbeth” (p.144). Shakespeare’s resolutions do not suggest positive involvement of women within the political structure. In fact, the resolution comes with the ablation of women from the political realm. Thus, Shakespeare’s drama reflects the Elizabethan world. Within the plays Hamlet and Macbeth, one sees potential conflicts arising from female ambition for sovereign power and corruption of the politic body through corruption of the female sovereign body. In both plays, Shakespeare mirrors anxiety from within the Elizabethan culture relating to the existence of and dependence upon a female monarch. Also, both plays end with the diminution of female sovereign authority and an apparent return to a state of normalcy within a



more traditional, patriarchal framework. This return to patriarchy represents both Shakespeare's political resolution and the Elizabethan cultural desire.

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