

Shakespeare, Politics and Renaissance Theatre

Tatjana Dumitraskovic, PhD

University of East Sarajevo, BiH

Abstract

The paper deals with the research of the theatre as an institution that provides opportunities for the theoretical study of a society and its critique through possible interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. When it comes to the theatre in the Renaissance and its role in the society, there are also two contrasting views, one of which sees the theatre as a means of keeping the subjects in subjection, while the other considers it to be demystifying and undermining the ruling order. Shakespeare was very interested in problems related to the political power and the power of the institutions of government, its pressures and promises, and he mercilessly condemns corruption and abuse of power whenever there is a chance for it. Through his plays, he shows that politics should be overcome by morality or ethics.

Keywords: Theatre, institution, Shakespeare, morality, political power.

Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, ideologies, clear models of explanation, and even the criteria for critical consideration, were questioned and began to be considered somewhat out of date. It had and still has an influence on the theatre and the performance of plays, that is, on the political theatre and the performance of plays. The theatre can no longer seek its place outside the society to criticise it and to create some alternative idea. In the postmodernist vision of the world there is no such place outside the social, cultural and symbolic order. This means that postmodernist art must find its place as a part of postmodernist culture. Supposing that the theatre works through the same presentation tools that are fundamental to the political and social presentation of the hierarchy and structure of power, it should always deconstruct these presentation tools. If that does not happen, the theatre re-affirms the given structures instead of criticising or undermining them (Auslander, 1992).

When it comes to the tradition of a "political theatre", then it usually refers to a theatre that promotes certain political ideas and encourages thinking about moral values. There is also an attitude that sees the theatre as an element

in a overall political struggle against hegemonic forces and as a different experimentation in the form, in order to raise audience's consciousness. Such a theatre asks the same questions that we ask about Shakespeare, for the political nature of these plays is not only about what they say about the events and the way they say something about them, but it is also about the fact that they are talking about these events at all (Leggatt, 1988).

The socio political perspective of materialist criticism is especially concerned with the political dimensions of Renaissance drama, which leads to the observation of the theatre as an institution and literature as a social practice. Materialist criticism focuses on the political dimensions of the Renaissance drama in the context of its political perspective. Dollimore depicts renaissance drama in the context of radical social and political realism. He believes that the English drama from the beginning of the seventeenth century had a subversive role. According to him, not only do its writers, including Shakespeare, destroy religious orthodoxy, but they criticise dominant ideologies of state power and politics. These ideologies articulate conflicts, which could be interpreted differently. The Elizabethan culture, with its image of the world, has been influential, but Shakespeare's plays have not always been in the direction of the apology of the present state, but in the direction of its undermining. They have demystified politics and power (Dollimore 1984).

At the end of the sixteenth century, English society was very politicised. The preoccupation with politics involved dealing with issues of power and obedience, as well as issues of mutual relations in society (Knights, 1985).

The theory of the divine right of kings supported royal absolutism in politics because it placed the king in a moral and legal sense beyond any human law and restriction. It strengthened the right of the monarch to assert his authority bypassing the parliament, but it ultimately led to the disintegration of the hierarchical order when the kings attempted to maintain an undeniable status and impose their will displaying it as God's will. In these conditions of absolutist rule, the Elizabethan picture of the world lost its credibility and became increasingly subject to criticism. The disagreement between the ideal picture of the world and what was happening in reality led to the development of opposing attitudes and political awareness. The theatre has become a popular dramatic framework for opposing the ruling class. In this way, the Renaissance drama began not only to reflect reality but also to change it. It became very "conscious" of the historical moment. That's why drama was more than a literary genre. They considered it a powerful means of explaining facts and confronting the current state of affairs. The theatre was a place for entertainment as well as a place for social propaganda and political

provocation, as it was the result of a pragmatic concept of literature with an almost exclusive emphasis on the effect of the theatre artefact (Roston, 1982).

What was important was the action and the transformation. The new sense of social reality and politics made it possible for drama in Renaissance England to become "aware of politics." So drama became a political theatre. The politics touched upon all areas of life, including literature and arts. There was a lot of interest in things that were related to power and effective expression of power. The true connection between the theatre and politics that existed at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I, made the Renaissance theatre "antidramatic", and the study of this theatre became the study of the role of monarchs, social hierarchies and cultural systems, whose important part were theatres, too (Orgel, 1975).

It is therefore that members of the new historicism and cultural materialism consider that the renaissance society and politics were profoundly theatrical and that any research of the Renaissance theatre implies something deeper historical and "more real" than exploring the way of entertainment or the aesthetic principles of the plays (Brannigan, 1998).

In Renaissance England, there was a prominent preoccupation with politics. An interest in politics was expressed in all areas of life, and drama as a social force shaped this interest and different expectations from the literary point of view. The interest in politics was intensely felt in plays because the theatre was a place where people shared "common awareness" about the historical situation through a provocative act and manipulation of a playwright. This meant that drama was not neutral at all. It was often used to undermine some form of power and demystify imposed patterns of belief. This was particularly related to tragedy as a kind of drama that was traditionally considered capable of transmitting a historical moment and showing universal truths. Playwrights were not indifferent about historical events that took place in their time and often used drama to criticise government policy. On the other hand, the government regarded drama as a public danger that threatened the security and stability of the state, but also as an entertainment that could keep people away from any political engagement in a particular historical context.

Shakespeare, Politics and Renaissance Theatre

The Elizabethan theatre, as an institution, was, according to Walter Cohen, a unique, dangerous, product of a brief historical moment and a fundamental "agent" between drama and society. In the first place, playwrights and actors were mostly modest, but when it comes to playwrights, they were university-educated. They were moving in the company of monarchs and nobles, who were often their patrons, but they belonged to lower social classes. The playwrights had a special and quite "diverse" view of society and interpreted it from a point of view that was not exclusively the viewpoint of

one class. They became interpreters of historical events. The playwright gave his own interpretation through a dramatic approach provoking a certain attitude and affection of the audience. He was not neutral in his presentation of facts and social criticism. This was especially evident in history plays where the playwright manipulated and depicted the historical facts available to him in a form of a play. This resulted in a specific interpretation of reality with a concrete meaning. For example, in his dramatisation of the reign of Edward II, Marlowe attempted to give a different view of the monarchy trying to find out what qualities should be possessed by the ruler in order to conquer both the divine right and the people's support to rule, because his rights are no longer inalienable (Cohen, 1985).

Then, the theatre audience was mixed and consisted of people of all social positions and classes. Thus, the playwrights had to pay attention to a whole range of different perceptions and interests. Finally, as Michael Bristol pointed out, theatres were places where people gathered in their free time, and were of more free behaviour that would be completely unacceptable elsewhere and in other situations. That is why, the defenders of decent behaviour and social order protested against public theatres and these protests had all the elements of dangerous criticism (Bristol, 1985).

It is the political nature of the Elizabethan theatre that should be emphasised here. Shakespeare's allusions on certain topics and satirical comments about the social and political circumstances of his time were both bold and cautious at the same time. The state monitored and censored the theatre continuously and thus made theatre visits become potentially subversive and rather risky, similar to today's going to demonstrations or political rallies. The authorities were afraid of theatres, arguing that they were nests of corruption and rebellion. However, such a negative attitude towards the theatre was not only a matter of morality but also politics. Thomas Nashe testifies that there were many brothels and casinos in London at the time, and that only theatres were mercilessly "persecuted" by the Mayor (Nashe, 1981)

The theatre was considered a site of political subversion and opposition. As a social institution, the theatre was considered dangerous, because the official order supporting by the church and the state saw it as a danger of losing power. The control over the theatre, in fact, meant the control the authority exercised over the lives of ordinary people, their subjects. However, although the theatre was under the watchful eye of censorship and although plays had to have a permission to be performed, the position of the theatre as an institution was not at all simple. On the one hand, the plays were performed at the court, by invitation, and this made the theatre look like a propaganda machine of the royal government. On the other hand, it was a form of cultural production that was most exposed to the influence of lower classes as well as those that were emerging. This made impossible any coherent

relationship between plays and ideology, and one could not even expect a direct connection between plays and ideology; on the contrary, it suffered great pressures in the theatre, and all the contradictions of the dominant culture could be demonstrated implicitly or explicitly here. It is more likely that the topics dealt with in the plays were directed at the constant reconsideration of the ideology (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985).

Considering the theatre in the Renaissance and its role in the society, there were also two opposing views. The supporters of one view considered the role of the theatre to teach the people, with the aim of keeping them obedient. According to Haywood, the plays were written and performed to teach the subjects to be obedient. The supporters of the other views thought that the theatres had the power to demystify and destroy power. According to Samuel Calvert, the plays reflected the society of the modern age, not saving the king, the state, or the faith, with so much freedom that everyone feared to hear them (Dollimore, 1994).

One example of an attempt to exploit the theatre in order to undermine power is Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which was performed just before the Essex rebellion of 1601. Although Queen Elizabeth admitted implicit identification with Richard, the problem was that the show was performed repeatedly in open places, which increased the number of people who attended it, so that there was no such kind of control that existed in the theatre, so the gap between obsession and reality disappeared. In that sense, the theatre could be viewed as political in the same way that at certain times the churches or mosques were places of political gatherings. This meant that the theatre was the place where the communication began, either in the form of public preaching or hidden challenges to the dominant order. Therefore, the Renaissance theatre was not only a place for social gatherings, but also a political institution where the established values were reconsidered. Kastan argues that any explicit ideological content of the plays in the Renaissance theatre, especially those dealing with national history, inevitably weakened the structure of power. On the stage, the king became the subject - at the same time the object of the imagination of the playwright and the object of attention and the assessment of the audience that consisted of his subjects. The theatre's policy was to allow the redistribution of what should be and should not be seen and this was happening in the interaction between the audience and the play. The same as today, the Renaissance theatre served as a means of shaping the perceptions of a specific society through images that it had projected functioning as a kind of "laboratory" for cultural and political negotiations (Kastan, 1986).

In a certain sense, it seems that the theatre had a homologous attitude to political life and experience. In Shakespeare's plays there are no indisputable views or facts. For his plays, it can be said that they are essentially political, if under political, we mean, among other things, the context of

pluralism in which each agreement is, at best, temporary. The Elizabethan stage was, as Howard shows, comparing different attitudes and opinions allowing their reconsidering through harmonious dramatic effects which were similar to debates, cultural struggles and negotiations (Howard, 2006). The plays drove ideas, which flowed not only through characters, but also through dramatic structures through which the good and bad, the elevated and low, took turns, following the rhetorical principle that everything was subject to constant reconsideration (Altman 1978). According to Howard, in the Elizabethan theatre, the elements of the play were capable of confusing and complicating the ideological meaning of the performance itself. In particular, history plays not only awoke in the visitors to the theatre the feeling for their national past, but allowed them to experience a uniquely complex study of various political ideas that circulated in different forms in other areas of national culture (Howard, 2006).

Since Shakespeare has been the leading figure of English culture since the eighteenth century, he has been portrayed and interpreted as a national poet, as a genius that transcends his age and writes plays that have timeless value and that abound with basic truths about the universal human situation and destiny. However, his plays are full of topics that are very interesting for new history studies of the social relations of the Elizabeth and Jacobian era, especially for exploring the ways in which institutions such as the church and court influenced and shaped the culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century cultures. Cultural materialists regard Shakespeare's works as an area in which the ideology, cultural struggle and change were created and they largely advocate change the way Shakespeare was observed and studied in the past.

Shakespeare's interest in ethical issues is intertwined with topics from philosophical anthropology - the nature of human existence, dilemmas concerning human existence and social relations - and metaphysics. This interest is explicit in tragedies that place emphasis on human characters, in history plays that deal with issues of duty, loyalty, and betrayal, and we can find them in comedies that emphasise both personal and social interactions. In this way, they show the relationship between political and social theory and ethics. However, Shakespeare's plays can also be read as a kind of political speech or debate. They deal with clear political issues: debates on sovereignty and legitimacy, state issues, the struggle for power, the corruption of institutions of government, the issues of their stability, and the problems of disparity between universal social values and relations between citizens and institutions of government. *Julius Caesar*, in that sense, deals with the political and ethical problem of which means are justified in the struggle for power and the preservation of the state. Shakespeare is well aware that those politicians who are able to manipulate the passions of the mob get power and that it is

very easy for some politicians to control the mob. They shape events by influencing the mob, and they do it by rhetoric, by the way of speaking, by some type of verbal deceit. Shakespeare has shown how powerful politicians can become by winning the confidence of the mob without convincing arguments, using various verbal frauds and the expressions that support them. The importance of rhetoric and manipulation with different symbols is essential. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare in a critical way refers not only to war problems, but also to its protagonists, prominent soldiers, and military leaders. Despite the absurdity of the war they lead, they become more and more aggressive, directing their energy to killing without thinking and, for purely selfish reasons, they turn conflicts into personal accounts. Shakespeare has managed to demystify and display in the right light irrationality and the nonsense of all the values of the militaristic culture in general, as well as the behaviour of its protagonists trying to impose their personal frustrations and vanities as generally accepted values that must be fought for. Among other topics, *The Merchant of Venice* also deals with the hypocritical judiciary in a society that is almost destroyed by economic exploitation, ethnic struggles, and religious antagonism. It is a connection between the judiciary and the ruling class that is emphasised here. The ruling class uses law at its own discretion, interpreting it as it suits them. The judiciary unreservedly helps this with its hypocrisy, custody, corrupt lawyers, and dubious judgements. Today, we are witnesses of numerous montages of court proceedings that have little or no relation to law, justice, and fairness, and whose "chiefs", through their obedient judges, try to hide the goals of their conquering policies and their greedy aspirations for creating a world order suiting their interests. Such system only serves the interests of the great and powerful, against the weak and oppressed (Finlayson & Frazer, 2009).

By dealing with the topic of the abuse of religion by the clergy and rulers, as well as the immorality and corruption of the clergy of the period described in his history plays, Shakespeare touches on the universal issues of the abuse of religion and clergy. His parasitic, corrupt, greedy, immoral clergy is a priesthood not only of his and previous epochs, but of the epoch that will follow until today, and religion has always been and will remain a powerful means of manipulation in order to achieve political power and material gain.

In short, Shakespeare is very interested in the problems related to the political power and power of the authorities, its pressures and promises. Rhetoric is a basic feature of both the life of the Elizabeth era and the plays that emerged during the Tudor era. Shakespeare's plays explicitly deals with various rhetorical strategies, their significance for political life, showing how these strategies constitute renaissance debates about the nature and origin of political power. They are also part of the "ongoing" debate within the evolution of drama rhetoric. At Shakespeare, therefore, we can find all kinds

of political ideas, but also a specific way in which he shows which of these ideas can and which cannot be presented at all.

Under the influence of the new historicism, the analysis of the plays is based on how Shakespeare used allusions in contemporary plays considering political and social events, scandals and controversies. It is also analysed how Shakespeare deviates from its sources and introduces new elements of action to make a certain allusions related to the topic. This points to the fact that Shakespeare was an extremely attentive and intelligent reader of historical and contemporary events and an outstanding political commentator. He is interested in changes in society, the nature of government, its functioning and influence within a certain social order, the rise and fall of people in high positions, as well as when violence is used. The new historicism goes on, dealing with the ways in which Shakespeare uses available resources, undermining or transforming their ideas (Skinner, 2002).

However, Shakespeare's dealing with the relationship between ethics and politics may seem disturbing His plays more discuss certain problems than give ultimately and irrevocable solutions. By showing examples of political and social behaviour in his plays, he showed how to leave or remain loyal to political doctrine without explicitly expressing one's own attitude. In *Othello*, apart from other topics, Shakespeare dealt with the problem of forbidden love, in *Hamlet* he dealt with the problem of the role of the king as sovereign, and in *Antony and Cleopatra* he showed the tragedy of two lovers (Blair, 2004).

Shakespeare's plays always shows unambiguously what Shakespeare is for and what he is against. He condemns corruption and abuse of power whenever there is a chance for it. Through his plays, he emphasises that politics should be overcome by morality or ethics. Shakespeare has no understanding when politicians must be, in some way, inhumane, and when they must pretend to be what they are not. Politics and its institutions are part of life, but that does not mean that Shakespeare is not aware of its "flaws." The duplicity of politicians may be necessary to achieve the common good, but this is nevertheless the duplicity, and it should not be placed above transparency and truth. Shakespeare never misses the opportunity to convey specific messages. He offers various models of human life - pure love, honest behaviour, and politics is not familiar with them. His plays provide different interpretations of politics, and none of them is at all attractive from the ethical point of view. For example, in *Othello* politics involves state affairs as well as Yago's manipulative intrigues, his hypocrisy and recklessness in order to achieve his goals. In history plays politics is portrayed as a struggle for power but, as well as a constant struggle between the need to recognise the sovereign power and an attempt to resist that power. Shakespeare's depiction of kings in these plays is based on the understanding that it is more important what the

kings are actually doing than what they really are or what they claim to be (Finlayson, & Frazer, 2009).

Elizabethan England was a state that was resting on repression and it sanctioned every form of rebellion. Shakespeare could not write freely in such a state and openly oppose Elizabeth and her government. That is why he had to use the allegory and each of his plays represented an act of rebellion. This primarily refers to his history plays. They are symbols of resistance to the rule of force and war policy, and this message is implicitly found in the manner of representing kings. By dealing with politics in such a way, Shakespeare offers a sophisticated and discerning study of the phenomenon of political power. His plays show what it looks like when somebody is at the height of power or when he loses it, how to cope with power, how to gain or lose political influence and how to be a successful or unsuccessful ruler.

A critical feature of the phenomenon of political power is ambivalence and uncertainty. This is evident in many plays. The idea of sovereignty appears in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and history plays in such a way that this idea becomes vague and ambiguous. By affirming the order, it is, in fact, being subverted. Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare's characters unconsciously play new roles and thus establish relationships that subvert traditional descriptions of the social order (Greenblatt, 1988).

An important aspect of such a subversion also relates to patriarchal relationships in which women were completely subordinate to men. Subversion, in this case, means a rebellion against the position of a woman in which they cannot expect anything. The great pressure exerted on them by the dominant male ideology within the hierarchical order is opposed by heroines that Shakespeare in his comedies also presents as women who are at the intellectual level equal with men. Sometimes they are morally stronger, have a higher power of perception, and are more humane than men. Female figures like Lady Macbet, Kleopatra and Volumnia dominate their men and decisively change the course of events. Some of Shakespeare's plays explore the consequences of female domination. Thus, Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* imposes her own intimate tendencies by claiming her right to choose a husband. Women thus regain their role and position in the patriarchal order.

Conclusion

Dealing with the phenomenon of the politics of power through the institutions of political power, Shakespeare described the nature of political dynamics and experience by showing the struggle for a political position and influence that can be ethically demanding. Describing the uncertainty, the duplicity, and the dynamism of political values and relations, it is obvious that Shakespeare's plays offer a clear sense of the way in which the political power

and its institutions functioned in his time. Shakespeare could examine the concepts and categories we usually use when we speak or think about political institutions and events today, examining the probability of mutual relationships between events, actions, and processes. His plays encourage us to expand our moral frames, expecting us to accept the dominant conceptions of the world at the same time calling us to destroy these concepts. Shakespeare offers us a special experience of the contradictory and complex nature of social and political life. So we begin to think about politics in terms of what it means when it comes to culture, class and nation. This does not happen only within the text of the play, but in the interaction between the text and us as an audience in a unique place called the theatre.

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