

## **Elizabethan Concept of Political Power as Seen in Shakespeare's Plays**

**Fr. Herman Fernando**

A poet or a novelist can write for the future and can wait for that future to understand and recognize his work. The playwright cannot afford to do that. His work must appeal to the audience before which it is performed. Otherwise it is doomed.

The playwright, therefore has to have a greater contemporary relevance than other artists. A playwright achieves this greater contemporary relevance by having a greater contemporary sensibility. In other words, the playwright as an artist has to deal with those universal unchanging aspects of life by dealing necessarily with contemporary issues around him; at least with which his audience is familiar.

Political power is an issue to be assessed at any time. This becomes all the more necessary when the rulers are hard on people. In fact at such a time it becomes the sacred duty of the artist - the playwright - "to hold the mirror as it were," as Shakespeare himself would say in Hamlet, "to nature.....to show.....the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure" (Hamlet Act 3, Sc. 2: 25-26)

During Shakespeare's time political power was totally in the hands of the sovereign. The king was the supreme lord of the land. Any examination of the concept of political power as it was used or abused, therefore, had to bring the image of the incumbent ruler on to the stage. This certainly was not an easy task nor was it safe. Men and women in seats of power whether it be then or now or at any time are very sensitive and touchy to any with of criticism. Least hint of dissension is often taken as instigation to rebellion and it was not seldom that the playhouses in London were so often closed during the life-time of Shakespeare because the rulers were not happy with Shakespeare's plays.

Shakespeare had therefore, to approach the subject of political power not directly but indirectly. In other words he had to examine the subject of power as it was exercised by his contemporary rulers not directly showing them on the stage but by dramatizing them as historical figures. This means that Shakespeare had to examine his present through the past. This is why it is said that Shakespeare's contemporaries went to his theatre with their eyes and ears open to pick up any hint since they knew that in his plays Shakespeare was not dealing with the past but with the present; especially when he was dealing with the concept of political power.

There were two main events that shaped the concept of power during Shakespeare's time. They were,

1. The English Reformation and
2. The publication of **The Prince** by Nicholas Machiawelli.

The English Reformation provided the English monarch the necessary historical reasons to concentrate all power in himself. The other gave the theoretical support for ruthless government. An examination of Shakespeare's plays shows how Shakespeare was aware of the influence of these events on the contemporary concept of power.

First, let us examine how the English Reformation influenced the contemporary concept of power and how Shakespeare has captured it in his plays.

What is meant by the English Reformation is Henry VIII's break - away from Rome and establishing his own church in England in 1536. Henry VIII wanted to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn. He applied to the Pope for a divorce. The Pope refused to grant a divorce. Henry VIII then broke away from Rome and established his own church in England and declared himself the supreme head of the church of England. He thus became both the religious and civil authority of England.

As a result of Henry's action England was divided. There were some who were loyal to the king. There were others who were loyal to Rome. During the life - time of Henry VIII, itself there was a rebellion against him by those who were loyal to Rome. After his death there was another rebellion in 1549 and yet another in 1569 during the reign of Elizabeth I. In addition to these open revolts, there were several plots against the life of the queen. Therefore, throughout the century there was always a fear in England that the native Roman Catholics would rise up against the throne and conquer it to re-establish royal loyalty to Rome.



In view of this constant fear of an uprising against the throne, there was the need for a political theory which would prevent challenges to royal authority and help to establish lasting peace in the country. It was in this context that a political theory known as the '**divine origin of kingship**' was developed and announced. In short, the theory said that the ruler was God's lieutenant-representative-on earth; no subject, however exalted, had the right to actively oppose him. To do so was a sin against God punishable with suffering here and hereafter.

In Shakespeare's history plays there are numerous instances when this contemporary notion of kingship finds expression. For example, we have this notion that the earthly ruler is the representative of God in **Richard II** expressed by one of the characters, namely John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. He replies to his sister-in-law, the Duchess of Gloucester who reminded him that the reigning king Richard II was responsible for the death of her husband who was also Gaunt's brother.

"God's is the quarrel for God's substitute,  
His deputy anointed in his sight,  
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully,  
Let Heaven revenge for I may never lift  
An angry arm against his minister."

(Richard II, Act I, Sc. 2: 37-41)

The reader will note that this passage witnesses not only to the Elizabethan idea that the king was representative of God. There is something more in it. The passage also speaks about the duty of the subjects not to rebel against God's anointed deputy. Even if the king does wrong, revenge does not belong to the ordinary citizens of his. It belongs to God.

The play Henry IV part I in fact deals with rebellion and punishment. With that Elizabethan view of revenge from the king belonging to God and not to men, the play opens with a man who has rebelled against the ruler and is paying his due for his crime. This is the civil strife in the kingdom. He suffers also from the behaviour of a wayward son- prince Hal. Henry IV is thus shown as a man guilty of and suffering from the sins of usurpation and regicide.

One might be tempted to think that this theologizing of power by the English Reformers was a justifiable theological process. Rather than trying to teach about God, it was an attempt on the part of the rulers to politicise God; to tame him sufficiently to suit their purpose. There is in fact nothing strange about it. Rulers always think that God is with them and that they stand in God's shoes. It is in that belief that Queen Elizabeth I on one of her proclamations declared: "For as much as it is manifestly seen to all the world how it hath pleased Almighty God of his most singular favour to have taken this our Realm into his special protection, these many years even from the beginning of our Reign....with special preservation of our own person as next under His Almightyness, supreme Governor of the same" (G. B. Marrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* P.89)

In this same work Harrison further states, "In many ways English revolution of the first half of the sixteenth century was comparable to the Nazi and Communist revolutions in the twentieth century" Generous-minded historians have called English reformation " the age of English Renaissance-the age of the emancipation of the individual from ancient bondage." In actual fact, what really happened was the individual English men and women were plunged into a life of terror. As the Nazi and Communist dissidents were eliminated, in England too those who chose to obey their own conscience and not follow the dictates of the ruler were brutally punished by fines, imprisonment, torture and execution.

When the Nazi and the Communists gained power in Germany and Russia they had their own myths about themselves. Hitler talked about the supremacy of the German race. Stalin believed in the supremacy of the superstate. The English ruling class had similarly invented the theory of the '**divine origin of kingship**' to glorify themselves.

While Reformation thus occasioned the myth of the semi-divinity of kingship of the Elizabethan ruling class, there was another factor that strongly influenced the contemporary concept of power. That was Machiawelli. Niccolo Machiawelli (1469-1527) was a Florentine statesman; a political theorist and writer. Alarmed by the anarchy of the Italian city-states of his day he advocated the establishment and maintenance of authority by any effective means. Even evil acts of the ruler were justified by the evil acts of the ruled, according to Machiawelli.

The book in which he published his ideas was referred to as **The Prince**. **The Prince** was published in 1513. Machiawelli wrote in his work that he thought it better to follow the effectual truth of the matter than the imagination there of...for there is such a distance between how men do live and how men ought to live that he who leaves that which is done, for that which ought to be done, learns sooner his ruin than his preservation.

L.G. Salinger in his **The Age of Shakespeare** states "There was enough in common between contemporary Europe and the Italy of 1513 to give point to the tone of grim irony in which "**The Prince**" had been written. Machiawelli was no doubt abused in public for his views. But he was also studied in private for his effectual truth."

Machiawelli probably was not only studied in private, he was also as well practised in the Elizabethan world though of course not so acknowledged. Machiawelli was not so well acceptable in public unlike the theory of divine origin of kingship.

We have a typical Machiawellian character in Shakespeare's **Antony and Cleopatra**. That is Octavius Caesar. More than anything else, what Octavius Caesar represents is the impersonality of political power. Octavius Caesar in other words is the ruler who exercises his power with no thought for moral or human aspects of life. The individual did not count for him. He wanted to



subjugate everything to Rome, the superstate. In fact in the play, Octavius is called the "Universal Land - Lord" because his one ambition was to bring everything into the subjugation of Rome. He wanted to defeat Cleopatra and parade her in Rome not because it would give him any personal satisfaction but so doing would be a fine sign of the subjugation of 'Egypt' to 'Rome.'

There is an incident described by Enobarbus in the play, which brings out extremely well this inhuman character of power,

Alexas did revolt and went to Jewry on  
Affairs of Antony there he did persuade  
Great Herod to incline himself to Caesar,  
And leave his master Anton, for this pain  
Caesar hath hanged him...'

(Antony and Cleopatra, Act. IV, Sc. 6: 12-16.)

Power seeks only its own preservation and cares nothing for the human being. Octavius thought that Alexas who had once revolted against his master Antony and got Herod to incline himself to Caesar would repeat the same practice with regard to Octavius too. So before he could do that Octavius hanged him.

Elizabethan rulers perhaps were not much different from Octavius when it came to self-preservation. There was the famous case of the royal physician Dr. Roderigo Lopez. He was tried and unjustly convicted of attempting to poison Queen Elizabeth I and was put to a horrible death. Probably it was done as a lesson for anyone who would make an attempt on the life of the queen.

What has been so far examined was how the Elizabethan rulers invested themselves with the mantle of divinity posturing to be the representatives of God and sacrificed the individual on the altar of power. Shakespeare referred to these powerful men and women as "Great Fellows" in the play **Antony and Cleopatra** (Antony and Cleopatra, Act II, Sc. 7: 131) and delivered his judgment on them in one of the most savage scenes of irony he has ever written. That is the 'galley scene' in the play; (the Act II, scene 7) In this scene Octavius, Lepidus, Antony and Pompey, the most powerful of the Roman Empire at that time are stripped of all their affectations to power and are seen to be common drunks. Later Cleopatra calls Octavius the Great Caesar "an ass unpolicied," (Act v, Sc 2: 306), Unpolicied here means tricked.

This discussion on the theme of political power as found in the works of Shakespeare, is not complete unless we also refer to **King Lear**. It seems that here lies Shakespeare's own political wisdom as against the contemporary views he presented in the other plays.

Shakespeare presents that wisdom, through the eponymous hero of the play, King Lear. Lear at the beginning of the play is the typical Elizabethan monarch-willful and conceited. His willfulness and conceitedness make him divide his realm among his daughters and expect them to

honour him as the sovereign. The same conceitedness makes him misunderstand Cordelia's honesty-her honest declaration of love for him. He also fails to understand the plans of his other two daughters. All this reduces him to the level of the "unaccommodated man" which is a problem in the forefront of the play.

Lear's transformation comes through his experience of the heath-through his identity with the poor. His identity with the 'naked wretches' leads him to a state of humility and detachment - to his redemption. Having attained a state of humility and detachment he is able to contemplate the world of evil, suffering and misery with equanimity. He tells his daughter Cordelia:

"Come, let's away to prison;  
 We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.  
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
 And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,  
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;  
 And take upon's the mystery of things  
 As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
 In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
 That ebb and flow by the moon."

301.05  
 MAN

(**King Lear** Act V, Sc. 3: 9-20)

Earlier in the play Lear had asked, "who is it that can tell me who I am?" (Act I, Sc. 4; 252) Lear had raised that question when he was still wearing the mantle of royalty and yet that same royalty had not been able to establish his identity; he did not know who he was in spite of the fact that he was the sovereign.

In the passage quoted from Act V, Lear has found his identity. He and his daughter are in fact God's own spies meaning angels. On the heath he had cast his royalty aside. He had torn off in a rage royal costumes, the emblems of power and privilege and become one with the naked wretches.

The moral of **King Lear** thus is a profound one. One finds one's own identity; one gains enlightenment not through the brutal exercise of power but through selflessness, love and compassion. It is through that enlightenment that one really becomes a deputy of God because one takes upon oneself the mystery of things as if one "were God's spy" Thus Shakespeare in his mature wisdom shows that divested of power and paraphernalia and invested with selflessness, love and compassion as happens to Lear, one really stands in God's "shoes."