

# **A Critical Insight into Shakespeare's Political Plays**

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There are many ways to approach Shakespeare's plays. One can study his genius as a poet, one can analyse his skills as a dramatist and one can explore the many insights into the nature of the human condition that Shakespeare's plays embody, his reflections on such universal human concerns as love, marriage, friendship, the family, ageing and death. This paper concentrates on the subject of Shakespeare and politics. His thinking about political subjects affects his understanding of all aspects of human life. His ten history plays concentrate on political matters dealing as they do with the variety of English kings they raise a whole series of political issues. Shakespeare is concerned only with the issues that preoccupied his contemporaries. He was forced to operate within political categories that he observed from his immediate intellectual environment.

Politics is the centre of most of Shakespeare's plays. Politics was an intellectually liberating subject for Shakespeare because it freed him from thinking solely in terms of the categories of the community in which he happened to live. Like all great political characters, Shakespeare extended his philosophical horizons by extending his political horizons. Shakespeare was immune from political bias and his political characters are therefore true for all time. He was not interested in the merits of aristocracy or democracy as a form of government. He was interested in Coriolanus as an individual who happened to be confronted with a political situation which arrives in every period of history and remains with us today. Shakespeare was forced to take the political field broadens it to include all human activities in which private passion or personal conviction is brought into relation with public life. He writes about the practical necessities in a kingdom or commonwealth, to shape a policy or control in application.

Brutus, the republican philosopher is asked to accept the absolute rule of Caesar. Richard II, wayward and introspective, is compelled to measure his frail genius against the cold efficiency of Bolingbroke. Henry V, is summoned to show posterity a successful man of action conforming instinctively with a genius of his countrymen emerging triumphantly as master of the event. Richard III, is called upon to exhibit an unbridled intelligence in the attainment and exercise of power. Coriolanus, presents the aristocrat in a vain effort to come to terms with the common man. Grouped around these principal figures of a political scene is a crowd of courtiers, prelates and

councilors; of loyalists and rebels, of zealous partisans or detached observers; of men who follow their principles or seize their opportunities. Some of the characters are sketched with a few apparently negligent strokes; others are drawn with elaborate care. All can be necessary as political characters that have their counterparts in every generation.

The problems and situations that have confronted public men have changed but little. The political characters of Shakespeare may not be immediately recognizable in the public men of today. They have changed their names, and their environment has been superficially transformed. But in their essential qualities, dispositions and conduct they remain the same. The expedients to which they resort, the devices by which they are governed, the principles which they profess, even the language which they use to glorify can be matched from history at any period. A politician can find no better handbook of success than the political plays of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare presents a mirror for all times and all occasions. He wrote for all, but he was a citizen of Tudor England. No one has contrasted more vividly the person conduct of honest Tom, worthy Dick and sensible Harry as separate individuals, with their collective behaviour as a mob or as a regimented community. It is the crowd which turns from Brutus to Antony, the plebeians who listen to Menenius Agrippa the citizens who assemble to buckle fortune on the back of Richard of Gloucester, the rebels who follow Cade, the yeomen soldiers at Agincourt to whom a little touch of Harry in the night brings comfort and inspiration-in a word, the people of ancient Rome or Plantagenet England or any time or land whose collective person is a vociferous or silent protagonist- it is true to any political situation.

It is impossible to divorce a political character from the colleagues with whom he is associated or from the opponents with whom he is confronted. Brutus must be simultaneously with Antony, Cassius with Caesar; Henry of Manmouth with Harry Hotspur, his Grace of Canterbury, John Bates and Michael Williams. Each character will accordingly be presented in the company of those who helped or hindered him in his designs be shown against his own political background. Brutus, with his confederates and opponents in 'Julius Caesar', Richard II, with those who played their parts in the sad story of his deposition and death, Henry V, with the companions of his regenerate days, Richard III, with the distinguished ruffians, and Coriolanus, with those who hailed him as a saviour of society or hated him as an enemy of the people.

Shakespeare has thus impartially presented such a variety of political characters described without prejudice such a diversity of political situation had profound political convictions of his own. Above all Shakespeare viewed duty to the country should outweigh all other considerations. England was a glorious country. It was

“This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars

This other Eden, demi paradise

..... this little word.

This precious stone set in the silver sea” (Richard II | Act 2, Scene 1)

No sacrifice was too much for such a country. It was a land of soldiers and no conqueror could crush her liberty:

“This England never did, nor every shall

Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror

Come the three corners of the world in arms

And we shall shock them” (King John | Act 5, Scene 7)

All these clearly show that Shakespeare was proud of his country, proud of his sovereign and could not tolerate any act which was anti national or anti patriotic. Treating Shakespeare as a serious political thinker cannot exhaust the depth and breadth of his achievement, but it does allow us to grapple with some of the most important concerns in his work. And this approach by no means entails neglecting Shakespeare’s other interests. Indeed, one might argue that Shakespeare had to understand politics before he could understand the limits of politics and what lies beyond the political realm. Shakespeare’s tragic vision may ultimately rest on his appreciation of the necessity of politics in human affairs, together with his sense of its incompatibility with other legitimate realms of value, such as love and the pursuit of truth. Although concentrating on the subject of Shakespeare and politics may seem at first to narrow our appreciation of his genius, in the end this approach leads us into a wide-ranging exploration of the full range of his interests and achievement.

## Works Cited

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