



DE GRUYTER
OPEN

DOI: 10.2478/rjes-2014-0010

THE PROBLEM OF KINGSHIP IN SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS

TATJANA DUMITRAŠKOVIĆ

Teachers' Training Faculty, Bijeljina

Abstract: *Elizabethan England was a state of repression and Shakespeare could not write his plays freely and he could not oppose Elizabeth and her government openly. So he had to use allegory and every one of his plays is an act of rebellion. This paper deals with Shakespeare's history plays which are symbols of resistance to the rule of force and war politics, and that message is implicit in the way of presenting kings.*

Keywords: *history plays, kings, politics, power, Shakespeare*

1. Introduction

In the eighties, there were a number of new approaches that interpreted Shakespeare's history plays from different positions of poststructuralist theories. According to the representative of new historicism Steven Greenblatt (1988:2-21), Shakespeare's history plays, although they largely reproduce the ruling ideology and even represent an integral part of the power of Tudor monarchy, they also include an opposite opinion. The texts of the history plays are therefore interpreted as places where one could follow the dynamics of effects of authority and the subversion directed against that same authority. However, that subversion does not endanger the dominant ideology but helps it to be maintained. The provocation, the challenge and the defeat of subversion are strategies that make the dominant power and its ideology secure.

The British version of poststructuralist historicism is *cultural materialism*. Representatives of cultural materialism Dollimore and Sinfield (1985:211-216), in the text about *Henry V*, show that in Shakespeare's plays one can see how ideology and the state are characterized by internal contradictions and conflicts. Ideology can provide an apparent solution to social conflict only if it deals with its own internal conflicts. And if it deals with them, they must be revealed and not hidden. *Henry V* can be read as an ideological apology for Henry V and his conquest of France, but also as a subversive questioning of the whole dubious legitimacy of the enterprise.

This paper deals with the question of legitimate sovereignty and the problem of kingship in Shakespeare's history plays, showing how Shakespeare dealt with English history in order to express his resistance to the rule of force and war, and to criticize contemporary rulership, pointing out its internal contradictions and conflicts.

2. Shakespeare's Presentation of Kings in History Plays

During the 1590s Shakespeare wrote ten plays which dealt with the history of England, and only one later (it was *Henry VIII*, 1612-1613). In all these plays he mostly used facts from Hall's *Chronicle (The Union of Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancastre and Yorke - 1548)*, covering the period of the reign of Richard II to Henry VII, the period which most of the literature dealt with. Taking into account Elizabeth's age (she was fifty-seven years old in 1590), her problematic right to the crown, and the fact that if she did not leave an heir, the crown would pass to the Stuart dynasty, whose members had previously been excluded as potential successors for their Catholicism, there was no small wonder that history plays were very popular among theatre-goers of Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare's presentation of kings in all his history plays is based on the understanding that it is more important what kings do than what they really are or what they say they are. And it is in situations of power that Shakespeare shows the basic problem of man, which is the contradiction between the truth and the mask, between the man's interior and the mask he brings upon himself. One who is on the throne has to abide certain laws which are "imposed" by the throne itself, and people close to the throne are obliged to act according to those laws, which sometimes can be very strict and cruel. Shakespeare's history plays depict unfortunate kings that behave more or less poorly and fail to receive the support they need to function as rulers.

No one who was involved in writing during the 1590s did fully believe in the Tudors as a legitimate dynasty which was chosen by God's will to govern England, which does not mean that many did not support the regime, and believed in the necessity of the monarchy as a form of government. There was a range of powerful symbols created by artists, poets and other propagandists who were under the protection of the court, which indicated that the queen or king is God's deputy on earth. Tudor propaganda quickly realized that religion could be used as an additional way to try to persuade the people to accept the legitimate authority of the ruling class, no matter how doubtful it was. Elizabethan England was a country based on repression and sanctioned all forms of rebellion. In such a state Shakespeare could not write freely and he could not oppose Elizabeth and her government openly. So he had to use allegory and each of his plays is an act of rebellion. This is first and foremost related to his history plays. They are symbols of resistance to the rule of force and war, politics, and the message is implicit in the way of presenting the kings.

3. The Problem of Kingship in Shakespeare's History Plays

Henry VI wants to be an ordinary citizen rather than the king, and his pursuit culminates in his speech on the hill where he expresses his desire to be a pastor while all around him there is a furious battle (III, *Henry VI*). Just prior to his imprisonment and murder he discovers his perplexity when faced with problems of royal power. Henry VI has not got the abilities that a king should have, and therefore he experiences failure.

Richard III is an influential protagonist who is, from the standpoint of morality, an evil manipulator, a deceiver and a fraud. These features require special competence and eloquence and action that helps Richard at all times to recognise his position in relation to the power he has over the other characters in the play and over the audience. His power stems from his ability to manipulate the other characters in the play and the audience. Although destructive, this power becomes more spectacular considering his performance on the stage, especially in the opening soliloquy, in the scene of courtship and in the dream scene where the audience meets a

completely different Richard. In each of these scenes he is at the same time furious, gallant, wise and full of remorse. Although contradictory, each of these terms makes a complex unity of Richard's character. But there is one aspect of the interpretation of *Richard III* which is extremely important. This is the interpretation of the play in the light of Richard's violence over innocent children. This play contains the most vicious scenes of violence against children and is Shakespeare's strongest revolt against such violence and his uncompromising condemnation of it. The children, who in the play represent an obstacle for Richard to conquer absolute power, because they are his eldest brother's sons, were eliminated in blood. Neither does their children's wisdom help them to stay alive, but it only brings them trouble because they become even more of a threat to Richard (which is explicitly seen in the first scene of Richard's interview with the children in act III). Richard, without any mercy, orders the killing of the children and, while those who should carry out the execution feel a little regret, Richard shows no signs of remorse. For the first time we hear the killer of the children who refers to the king as "bloody" (IV, iii) and Shakespeare completes his bitter, ironic parable of the wicked king and the tragedy of a country, England.

In his play *Richard II* Shakespeare makes it clear that the rule of a king is far more dependent on the support of the people or the good will of his subjects than the inheritance rights he has. Richard's contempt for the aristocracy, providing promotions for those who were not favored by the people, and the neglect of his duties as a king (III, iv), are what led to his loss of the crown. The entire first two acts are manifestations of Richard's capriciousness and self-will that does not even respect the people of established rights. King Richard is the owner who rents his own kingdom, he is cruel and unfair to his uncle Gaunt, and by snatching his cousin Bolingbrook's heritage, he undermines the foundations of his own power. Revenge comes with Bolingbrook coming to England with the army and most of the nobles greet him with enthusiasm. Upon the completion of the second act, we begin to understand the language of politics in the play. Bolingbrook and his supporters insist that he came back just because of his inheritance and titles. But we all know that he returned to get the crown, and Shakespeare will skillfully deal with his hypocrisy until Richard's transfer of power. Both Richard and Bolingbrook are forced to act, motivated by the desire for power, and they both show a combination of Machiavelli's inner contempt for everyone but himself and his "greatness". *Richard II* reveals a multiperspectival view of the Machiavellian concept of power that leaves us at the end of the troubled but not totally destroyed world. The play does not refute Machiavelli's observation that in the world of bad people it is crazy to be good. However, Richard's problems have nothing to do with whether he is good or bad. His decline occurs as a result of his political incompetence and the conflict between skilled and less skilled Machiavellian means. The whole play, in fact, shows a successful and unsuccessful rule, as Machiavelli described it in his *Prince*. (Grady 2002:79-80)

What distinguishes the first and second part of *Henry IV* from other history plays is that Shakespeare depicted the life of England outside the walls of the court and aristocratic circles. In a sense, the motive for this celebration of the common people of England lies in the traditional interpretation of the transformation of prince Hal in an honest and honorable king Henry V. Where Hall in his *Chronicles* justifies the behavior of young prince Hal by youthful volatility, preceding the king's famous victories, Shakespeare wants to show the prince is very calculated in everything he does. He seems to be a lost son who meets a world that could be more than an alternative to the volatile and corrupt world of his father's court. However, Hal does not leave the ruling class to which he belongs, but only "falls into" the society of those whom he rules. Through the acquaintance with Falstaff, he meets the magic of life without responsibility and morality, but at the same time he has to learn the importance of responsibility and respect for

order. Sanders notes that, while for Falstaff honor is “a motto on the coat of arms,” Hal must confront his father’s bitter enemy Hotspur. Where Falstaff cynically demonstrates his outrageous methods of mobilising people, Hal must, with the same degree of cynicism, master the skill of deception and fraud which are an integral part of the military command. Of course, it is not at all difficult to him. It is true that he has been training all the time for the role of “an ideal Christian ruler.” (Sanders 1996:155-157) Young prince Hal is a debauchee, a masked robber who, imitating his father and Hotspur, assumes the role of a knight. Scenes of debauchery and irresponsibility, friendship and generosity are shifting throughout the play. Everything is still moderate; because of Hal’s transformation there is no danger that it will all turn into a permanent state and thus threaten the existence of the monarchy. Prince Hal is thinking about what sort of image people and the general public will have of him playing a variety of roles, and successfully manipulating people around him, including the amazing, brilliant Falstaff. And all this in order to gain power, real tangible power that brings popular appeal and acceptance, for in Shakespeare’s time it was – as it is today – a key element of a successful and long-term rule.

In the second part of *Henry IV* rapacity, treachery, and force dominate. Falstaff and the tavern world become less attractive and Hal seems less calculated. The play contains a series of scams and it just highlights the main form of political communication. Greenblatt (1988:15-18) divides characters into “good” and “bad”, considering that the “good” ones that fit into order can maintain it only if they break the promise. He’s interested in lies, hypocrisy and hate of force that is present in this play. The rule of the modern prince is based on deception, intimidation and cold expediency; the politics dominating the system is based on fraud, and it again confirms its power. In this way, subversion only helps ratification of power.

Falstaff introduces the spirit of game into Hal and Henry’s world of the military spirit. He mocks the hypocrisy, vanity, ambition and moralization of Henry IV, and his actions are a parody and political satire on the world of court and the politics of Henry IV. This play also contains the voices of marginalised groups. Besides Falstaff, Poins and Pistol, there is a waitress and her friend Doll Tear-sheet, country justices Shallow and Silence. The Boar’s Head Tavern of Mistress Quickly can also be seen in the light of political satire. It is the image of England in which there is nothing better than in her brothel. The abuse Falstaff conducts in recruiting soldiers also reflects the image of Henry IV’s England. Since the rich paid not to be recruited, Falstaff gathers “such as, indeed, were never soldiers, but discarded unjust serving men, young sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen...and such that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals, lately come from swine keeping, from eating draff and husks” (IV, ii, 620). And the speeches of Prince Hal and Henry IV on the problems of their reign, about how difficult it is to maintain and preserve the state and how war is necessary for the sake of that goal, sound hypocritical. For, since he crushed internal rebellion, Henry IV promises to his people another war in the Holy Land. Realising that for a country there is nothing worse than a civil war and that an outer enemy unites the country, he decides to lead a Crusade. He has chosen the Crusade – a Holy War, hoping that God will forgive him his sins. The sin for which he felt guilt and hidden fear was the overthrow of the rightful king Richard II. It is that sin that his son, the future king Henry V will try to expiate in another war (Bettenhouse 1975:32-52).

There are many debates about whether *Henry V* should be read as a praise for “the mirror of all Christian kings” (as it is presented by Olivier in his film from 1944), or as a politically subversive public condemnation of a Machiavellian monster (as Kenneth Branagh clearly indicated in his film in 1989). Neither of these interpretations is entirely acceptable. When *Henry V* is read in relation to Machiavelli’s political theory, the main issue becomes the difficulty of the

dynasty that took power illegally to retain that power, regardless of the ability of its ruler. Shakespeare's Henry V is an example of a Machiavellian ruler, and he gives a striking criticism of Henry's Machiavellian politics and the political thought that he embodies. Henry himself is presented as an ambiguous figure – a very talented and inspiring ruler who is ready for terrible moral debasement in order to unite the country and thus ensure the legitimacy of his dynasty. His huge ambition to be king as soon as possible and continue on the path of his father is made clear when Henry gently hugs the crown of his sleeping father. The authority of the royal power is deeply undermined and called into question in *Henry V*, by explicitly showing Henry's hypocrisy and the use of religion to justify his own goals. God is there to give permission to a magnificent "project," of conquering another country, killing its soldiers, raping its women, plundering and looting.

In order to show a single image of the kingdom Shakespeare had to fit a large number of differences, which was very demanding and complicated because it could endanger the ideological illusion of unity. This unity of the play is threatened by a traitor among the high nobility, rebellious subjects, soldiers who ask questions about how much the king's goals are justified. The authority of the royal power is deeply undermined and brought into question in the first place by the problem of usefulness of the war that Henry wants to wage against France. If this is the avoidance of internal disturbances, which is however vaguely and indirectly suggested (*Henry V*, II, ii), its validity is completely undermined (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985:215-216).

Henry's entire politics is based on the war with France. Pushing the country into a war of conquest he accepts the Machiavellian cynical advice of his father on his deathbed: "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels" (II *Henry IV*, iv). This is exactly what Henry V will do next, following Machiavelli's advice that a ruler must primarily be engaged in war, and that there should be nothing else to think about, or nothing else to teach others than warfare. This is especially true for a ruler whose position is problematic and who therefore has to find an excuse to go to war immediately and, if possible, secure the support of the church (Machiavelli 1998:57). The strategic character of Henry's war policy with France is clearly stated at the beginning of the play, as Shakespeare calls into question the legitimacy of the war.

Before the decisive battle of Agincourt Henry is disguised as an officer; he comes among his soldiers and, talking to one of them, he wants to check their readiness for combat. There is no such scene in any of the sources. Shakespeare introduces the question of the institution of royal power, suggesting the English officers think they are doomed to be defeated in the battle that would follow. Henry believes that the king must lead the army and he knows that all his men are afraid. He also knows that they must not show any fear because it will prevent the king to lead the army. The conclusion that follows is that no one must examine the actions of the king. In this war Henry must depend on soldiers Williams, Bates and Court, but his attention is only partly focused on what they have to say. He avoids key issues, trying to manipulate his soldiers to begin to think like him. Bates and Williams point out that the cause of war must be honest; if it is not, then the war crimes will be the responsibility of the king himself. Williams shows the king as one who is to blame for the fate of his army. In his reply to Williams, Henry says that the king cannot be responsible for the afterlife of his subjects if they die sinful deaths for his purpose, thereby cleverly avoiding the questions of the widows and orphans. This response only reinforces the impression of the way in which, with a lot of cynicism, ordinary people were used by the church and its leaders, who are willing to risk ordinary people's lives for their dubious justice. After this interview, his complaints of how difficult a position the king holds and how his subjects have little understanding for the heavy duties that he carries out in their best interest, sound ironic. The battle of Agincourt has proved the unscrupulousness and brutality of Henry's character, when the

“exemplary pious Christian ruler” at one point orders that every soldier kill his prisoners, and so makes the war even bloodier (IV, vi). Henry’s order to kill the prisoners was not a favorite subject of British critics. Herschel Baker (1974:933) mildly observes that Henry’s chilling speech at Harfleur (III, i) and the command to kill the prisoners were allowed by the rules of war in the fifteenth century. Others see this command as the expression of Henry’s special characteristics as a war leader.

John Sutherland, in his essay on Henry, asks if he is a war criminal. Describing in detail the parts that tell about Henry’s order to kill prisoners, he notes that, from the way Shakespeare presented him on the stage, Henry could know, when he issued the order, if the French cavalry simultaneously carried out the massacre of boys who were in his army background. Since Henry could not know that and a single messenger did not bring any such news to him, Sutherland concludes that the motive could be military caution and that makes this action even scarier (Sutherland and Wats 2000:109-115).

Henry V, far from being a patriotic play, is a refined analysis of the problem of royal power that can be read along with *Richard II* – a play depicting overthrowing a king who began a difficult cycle of ruling the English monarchy of the late Middle Ages. The problems that are central in the last play of the tetralogy take us back to those set out in the first. *Henry V* forces the reader to reconsider the rule of the most celebrated ruler of England (Hadfield 2005:70-71).

King John is a chronologically isolated drama; it tells the story of a king whose right to the throne was pretty suspicious and whose reign was controversial. Protestants celebrated him as the first king of England who opposed the oppression of the Roman Church. Catholics – with an emphasis on John’s complicity in the murder of his nephew Arthur, son of the previous king Richard I (whose claim to the throne was stronger), and his conflict with the Pope (which resulted in the king’s excommunication, before he finally had to yield and obey the Pope) – saw in John a usurper, a murderer and a heretic. Andrew Hadfield (2005:70-71) claims that *King John* is probably one of the first of Shakespeare’s plays (if the date 1590/1 is an exact one) that continually highlights the problem of legitimacy. Shakespeare makes John’s right to the crown more problematic than it was in the sources. Arthur, John’s nephew, was the legitimate heir of Richard the Lionheart, as Mary Queen of Scots could be considered a successor of Henry VIII, after the short reign of Edward VI and Queen Mary. There are certainly parallels between Queen Elizabeth and King John. But this implicit comparison was quite dangerous, and Shakespeare was quite careful to emphasise the similarities too.

Shakespeare sees John as a vulnerable, insecure, imperfect, apparently successful ruler who has “bright” moments, fitting fully the Protestant tradition as one who opposed Cardinal Pandulph, but also as someone who has succumbed to the corrupting power of political need so that his collapse is inevitable and complete. John’s difficult and uncertain rule is displayed along with the striking success of Philip, the Bastard, true son of Richard the Lionheart, whose life parallels the life of his king. Shakespeare invented this character to convey his ironic stance against politicians who are ready to betray each other for the sake of their own interests. In the first half of the play, the Bastard is portrayed as a satirical character. In the second act he plays the role of commentator and comments on the action of the play from a distance. As an observer, he makes fun of all politicians including King John, mostly because of their pretending or bombastic speeches. The Bastard’s famous speech about commodity is extremely important. He makes fun of a compromise that kings make to their own benefit. In the second part of the play, the Bastard admits that he cannot resist greed and he keeps making fun of greedy kings: “Since kings break faith upon commodity” (II, i), the bastard then says he will seek gain for himself. This is the ultimate form of human opportunism and a caricature of unprincipled kings. The

Bastard is a character in whom Shakespeare shows treachery and baseness of political life. As a man of his age, he is “naturally” gifted to flatter and his strength is his power of rapid assimilation. While John is troubled by doubts that prevent him from operating efficiently, the Bastard successfully uses all the opportunities, thus dominating the English campaign against the French. In contrast to John’s resignation there is a tremendous confidence of the Bastard who encourages John to begin to behave as the king should behave. Bloom thinks that the Bastard should become king since no one in the play behaves like a real king. According to him, John is a “traitorous coward” whom historians now only remember for Magna Carta (Bloom 1998:51-64).

King John points out the necessity that rulers behave like kings. The play attracts attention by significant similarities between the reigns of John and Elizabeth, in that they were not at the mercy of the Pope. However, the logic of the Bastard’s vaunted courage, his undoubted success in countering all the inconveniences of his position as an illegitimate child and his role in supporting King John could mean that actions are more important than titles.

4. Conclusion

In Shakespeare’s history plays the approach to policy is demystifying. The plays demystify the politics and power, giving a fragmented picture of the world in which power is not only used but very often abused. The politics is seen as *realpolitik*, i.e. as the dynamics of interests, ideological trickery, manipulation, instrumentation and exploitation. Shakespeare makes it clear that the rule of a king is far more dependent on the support or the good will of his powerful subjects than on the inheritance rights he may have. All royal protagonists in Shakespeare’s history plays fail because their views are limited to their own ambitions and dynastic conflicts. They also do not fulfill or violate their moral principles, civic and royal responsibilities. In general, Shakespeare accepted the opinion that good rule meant the rule of a persistent and moral ruler who has the support of the people, yet ultimately, he was not only interested in the question of good royal power but also in the process of losing humanity.

References:

- Baker, Herschel (Ed.). 1974. “Introduction” to *Henry V, Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston Houghton, pp. 930-934.
- Bettenhouse, Roy. 1975. “Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool”. *PMLA* 90:32-52.
- Bloom, Harold. 1998. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, pp. 51-64.
- Branagh, Kenneth (Dir.). 1989. *Henry V*. Renaissance Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Curzon Film Distributors.
- Dollimore, Jonathan and Sinfield, Alan. 1985. “History and Ideology: the instance of Henry V”. *Alternative Shakespeares*. London: Methuen& Co. Ltd., pp. 215-216.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1988. *Shakespearean Negotiations, The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Grady, Hugh. 2002. *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*. Oxford University Press.
- Hadfield, Andrew. 2005. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. The Arden Shakespeare.
- Hall, Edward. 1970 (1809). *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York 1550*. H. Ellis (Ed.). Facsimile.
- Machiavelli, Nicollo. 1998. *Prince*. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield. 2nd Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olivier, Laurence (Dir.). 1944. *The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fifth with His Battell Fought at Agincourt in France*. Two Cities Films (A Laurence Olivier Production).
- Sanders, Andrew. 1996. *The Short History of English Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1992. *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*. London: Chancellor Press.
- Sutherland, John and Wats, Cedric. 2000. *Henry V, War Criminal and other Shakespeare’s Puzzles*. Oxford University Press, pp. 109-115.

Notes on the author

Tatjana DUMITRAŠKOVIĆ was born in Kraljevo on February 23, 1973. She graduated from the Faculty of Philology in Priština as the best student in 1995. She holds an MA in English Literature from the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, in 2004, and a PhD in English literature from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of East Sarajevo, in 2012. She is working as an assistant professor at Teacher's Training Faculty in Bijeljina. Her research interests are English Renaissance, Shakespeare Studies and Cultural Studies.