

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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## CHAPTER I

### GENERAL INTEREST IN POLITICAL THEORY

The widespread interest in forms of government and political theory which prevailed in Shakespeare's time found expression in many controversial treatises.

An early sixteenth century expression of this interest is found in Sir Thomas More's Utopia (1516), the account of a dream commonwealth which approximated a communistic form of government.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, free religious study made its contribution to the steadily increasing interest in political science; a representative passage taken by Gooch from Brown's Life and Manners, states that all true Christians are kings and priests.<sup>2</sup>

Elizabethan England turned eagerly to foreign sources for interpretations of political science. Two years after Jean Bodin, a French political scientist, has published his Six Livres de la Republique (1577), the treatise was taught at Cambridge from a Latin version. Bodin admired Plato, but he followed Aristotle's inductive method of reasoning;

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Gooch, English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century (London: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 3 ff.

he believed universal law might be ascertained by diligent study of all history.<sup>3</sup> Bodin in his Six Livres advised a prince to lead and influence his followers,<sup>4</sup> in contrast to Machiavelli who, in The Prince, advised a prince to compel and coerce his followers.<sup>5</sup>

Although there were no English translations of Machiavelli's works in the sixteenth century, the Elizabethans generally condemned Machiavelli's political theories. The English Church condemned him as a heretic. Cardinal Pole began a literary attack upon him in 1535. Antimachiavel, a superficial work by the Huguenot Innocent Gentillet, which took sentences here and there from Machiavelli's work and combined them to show his godlessness and evil, was translated into English in 1577. This work definitely established Machiavelli's character in the English mind. It is this evil character to which Marlowe refers in the Prologue of The Jew of Malta. Elizabethans saw that there was much similarity between Machiavelli's prince and the tyrant of Aristotle's Politics.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R. H. Murray, The Political Consequences of the Reformation (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1926), pp. 129-167.

<sup>4</sup> Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Nadja Kempner, Raleghs Staatstheoretische Schriften (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1928), pp. 23 ff.

Aristotle was the originator of that political science which was revived by Machiavelli and through him became the most controversial issue of the sixteenth century. The Renaissance was indebted to Aristotle for his formulation of a politics empirically derived. Students of Cambridge used the English translation of the Politics by Loys Le Royschen (1568), which contained broad political commentaries.<sup>7</sup>

Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the important English authorities on political science, used both Machiavelli and Aristotle as sources for his political discussions. Kempner has pointed out that Raleigh relied upon Machiavelli for historical data but condemned his doctrine, "policy" and "practices." It may be assumed that Raleigh, in his Maxims of State, preferred the classical authority of Aristotle to the proscribed learning of the Italian, inasmuch as he has used a greater bulk of material from Aristotle than he has used from Machiavelli, limiting his borrowing from The Prince to little more than one chapter.<sup>8</sup>

Among the historians and statesmen of Queen Elizabeth's court, Sir Thomas Smith gained prominence in political philosophy by writing De Republica Anglorum in 1583, a treatise on the form and administration of the government of England, which, according to Smith, is dependent upon the fixed interrelationships of the monarch, or the ruler,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 30 ff.



the gentlemen, or all above the degree of baron, the yeomanry, and the laborers.<sup>9</sup>

The Roman Church also exerted strenuous effort to place before the people its interpretations of sovereignty. In 1588 William Allen, the cardinal of England, published An Admonition to the Nobility in which he maintained that disorder resulted from the usurpation by a king of sovereignty not yielded lawfully to him.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, there seems little doubt that Elizabethan England was not only conscious of and concerned with governmental theories, but was receptive to diverse interpretations of political science.

Furthermore, the drama of the period reflects the contemporary interest in theories and practices of government. An elaborate study of the relationship between the drama and politics is made by Franz Grosse, who has pointed out that after the state had freed itself from domination by the medieval church, two opposing theories of government arose. One of these was the theory of absolute sovereignty of the monarch, for which Machiavelli was the chief apologist. The other theory was of limited sovereignty and the exercise of governing power by the people. The Reformation gave great impetus to this theory, which was warmly supported by Calvin

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<sup>9</sup> Wm. Huse Dunham, Jr. and Stanley Pargellis, Complaint and Reform in England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 95-213.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 351-352.



and the Huguenots. Grosse amasses much evidence which shows the political content of English drama from Gorbudoc to the plays of James Shirley.<sup>11</sup> It would be strange indeed if Shakespeare, who was otherwise so keenly aware of the main currents of thought in his age, should have failed to express an interest in this dominant concern of thoughtful Elizabethans. An examination of his plays will reveal a sharp consciousness of political ideology and a tendency to use historical fact as a means of substantiating his political ideals.

Before we can proceed with our study of Shakespeare's work, we should note carefully some of the limitations inherent in dramatic form and some of the assumptions which we can safely make to guide us in our study.

The first assumption is that the Elizabethans were profoundly interested in history. Recent events in England had greatly stimulated this interest. A new confidence in the monarch followed the triumph of the crown over feudalism (1485). Individual research and development of ideas were encouraged by the Reformation. The high tide of nationalism, which swept over the nation after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, brought with it a great enthusiasm for the study of England's past. A nation with confidence in its future tends to develop pride in its past. Thus, Shakespeare

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Grosse, Das englische Renaissancedrama in Spiegel zeitgenossischer Staatstheorien (Breslau: 1935), pp. 79-144.

could assume that his audience had a keen interest in historical drama. The great number of historical plays which appeared from 1588 to 1600 is evidence that the playwrights shared in the common enthusiasm. Forty-one plays dealing with historical subjects were entered for printing between these dates.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Shakespeare could expect of his audience a wide and detailed knowledge of English history. Such knowledge made unnecessary much exposition of historical movements and characters. For instance, in Richard II Shakespeare plunged directly into the last eighteen months of Richard's life, merely alluding to previous historical events, without any introduction to the situation. Since four dramas concerning Richard II's reign had preceded Shakespeare's production, the spectators' familiarity with the historical background may be assumed.<sup>13</sup> Sixteenth century Englishmen were familiar with family names and relationships of the nobles who had engaged in national enterprises from the Conquest to Elizabeth's reign, for history had attempted to satisfy the thirst for knowledge by producing many chronicles. Stow's Summary of English Chronicles (1565)

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<sup>12</sup> E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), IV, 382-387.

<sup>13</sup> J. A. R. Marriot, "Richard the Redeless," Fortnightly Review, CI (Jan. to June, 1917), 683-698.

and Holinshed's Chronicle (1578) were widely read. W. M. Camden's Britannia (1586) reached its third edition in 1590. Among the historical studies of rulers, Sir Thomas More's History of Richard III and Sir John Hayward's Lives of the Three Norman Kings: William the first, William the second, and Henrie the first, were very popular.<sup>14</sup>

We have already noted the Elizabethans' interest in political theory. Shakespeare certainly was aware that his audience was disposed to find hidden meaning of political nature in practically all of his plays, regardless of their type. His protestations of innocence on the occasion of the trial of members of his company who had performed Richard II as an alleged contribution to the conspiracy of Essex, does not mean that he was wholly unaware that his plays would be used for political purposes.

A third assumption is that the Elizabethans were keenly alive to the correspondence between their cosmological concepts and contemporary political conditions and theories. Hardin Craig has given an elaborate exposition of the "doctrine of correspondences" which stimulated much of the thought of the Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, Shakespeare was keenly aware of the correspondence between cosmic order and political principles. He drew from cosmology much of

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<sup>14</sup> Sidney Lee, "Sir John Hayward," Dictionary of National Biography, (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1891), vol. XXV.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., pp. 11-18.



the imagery by which he expressed the relations of the king to his subjects and the proper function and character of the ruler. He could rely on a ready understanding of such imagery by his audience.

A fourth assumption serves to put us on guard against a too ready acceptance of Shakespeare's historical and political material as a means of teaching lessons in history and politics. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare was primarily interested in the exposition of character and the study of individuals rather than in the study of institutions. But like most of his contemporaries, he saw in history a vast storehouse of illustrations and examples of ideas in action. It was Shakespeare's achievement to express the whole sweep of his nation's greatness as he used and probably felt the loyalties and prejudices of the Englishmen of his time.<sup>16</sup> He was willing to exploit the popular interest in historical drama in order to present dramatic expositions of the basic ideas and concepts of the age. Thus, we find in his plays that he used history as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Yet, there is evidence of a keen interest in political theory. The purpose of this study is to extract and examine the evidence for such a theory.

By theory of government we mean the principles and values underlying and inherent in various representations of government as Shakespeare presents them. The author reveals an attitude toward three potential sources of political

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<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Parsons, The Stream of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 367.

power. By studying his dramatization of government in action, one finds that Shakespeare places one kind of political power in a more favorable light than the others. But, being a dramatist who was primarily interested in character, Shakespeare was conscious of the fact that no form of government, no institution as such, is good unless the individuals in whom the power resides are, in character and conduct, worthy of their position. Moreover, we shall see that the prime essential of Shakespeare's favored form of government is order, patterned on the scheme of the cosmological hierarchy. Order as we will see, is expressed and made effective by law, the function of which is to assure harmony between the ruler and his subjects.

In many of the plays dealing with history Shakespeare used Holinshed's Chronicle as his major source. Shakespeare ordinarily followed Holinshed so closely that deviations from the source at once raise the question of why such departures were necessary. The author was essentially a dramatist, not a historian; his departures from Holinshed's Chronicle are generally accepted to be of dramatic necessity. But, as this study will show, such deviations also have the effect of throwing certain political ideas in sharper relief.

## CHAPTER II

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT

Among the general principles of good government known and discussed in Elizabethan England was that of order. This concept had come down to the Renaissance sanctioned by the medieval church and reinforced by scientific theories. It had been rudely challenged in the political sphere by Machiavelli, in the cosmological sphere by Copernicus, and in the sphere of theology and philosophy by Montaigne. Machiavelli had even asserted that the Prince must at times resort to the laws of the beasts to gain his ends. Copernicus had successfully challenged the easily pictured cosmic order of the Ptolemaic system, and by putting the sun at the center, and setting the earth between Mars and Venus as a mobile and subsidiary planet, he forced upon men the necessity of discarding a familiar idea of order and searching for a new meaning in cosmological data. Montaigne challenged the supremacy of reason as the guiding power of human life and asserted the power of the senses to be often confusing and inconsistent. It is not strange, therefore, to find a thinker as sensitive to the thought of his age as Shakespeare was, dealing with the principle of order and showing the evils which befall a state when disorder prevails.



Shakespeare's concept of order includes that of degree. He gives utterance to this idea in Troilus and Cressida. Using the familiar correspondence between the heavenly bodies and the degrees of mankind. Ulysses says:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and  
this centre

Observe degree, priority, and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
Office, and custom, in all line of order:  
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd  
Amidst the other; whose med'cinable eye  
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,  
And posts, like the commandment of a king,  
Sans check, to good and bad: but when the planets  
In evil mixture of disorder wander,  
What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny,  
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,  
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,  
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate  
The unity and married calm of states  
Quite from their fixture! O! when degree is  
shak'd,

Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,  
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark! what discord follows; each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong--  
Between whose endless jar justice resides--  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too,  
Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, a universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,

Must make perforce a universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.<sup>1</sup>

Although Shakespeare's source, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, does not introduce Ulysses as a character<sup>2</sup>, according to Greek mythology he was noted for his prudence and oratory. It is indeed significant that Shakespeare would select a wise and fluent speaker to declaim his conception of order. It is significant that the concept of order based on degree is here derived from the study of the heavens. When the planets are out of order, all kinds of evil hold sway in the political, moral, and social spheres. Hence, Shakespeare could intensify the dramatically tragic consequences of disorder in the state by portraying the parallel confusion in the phenomena of the heavens. The violent death of a ruler is attended by terrible happenings in the skies, as in Julius Caesar and Macbeth. The conclusion of the passage quoted above also shows how disorder in the nature of man results in his destruction. The state, to flourish, must maintain order.

This order depends on a close observance of degree. Every man must hold his own place and discharge the duties

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, Troilus and Crissida in The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), I, iii, 85-124. Edited by W. J. Craig. All subsequent references to Shakespeare's plays will refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde in The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), pp. 449-564. Edited by F. N. Robinson.

pertinent to his position. This is a familiar concept in English thought. Sir Thomas Smith, in his De Republica Anglorum (1583), states that the English commonwealth "divides men into four sorts", gentlemen, citizens, yeomen artificers, and laborers.<sup>3</sup> The welfare of the state is safeguarded by all of these classes' holding their proper places and maintaining the proper relationships to another.

Shakespeare gives us a graphic picture of the evil which besets a state when degree is not observed. The gardener in Richard II is discussing the state of the kingdom with Richard's queen. After comparing his system in keeping the garden to the kind of order which should prevail in government, Adam, the gardener, says of Richard II:

O! what pity is it  
 That he hath not so trimm'd and dress'd his land  
 As we this garden. We at time of year  
 Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees,  
 Lest, being over-proud with sap and blood,  
 With too much riches it confound itself:  
 Had he done so to great and growing men,  
 They might have liv'd to bear and he to taste  
 Their fruits of duty: superfluous branches  
 We lop away that bearing boughs may live:  
 Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,  
 Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.<sup>4</sup>

Although Shakespeare follows his source, Holinshed's Chronicle closely in The Tragedy of Richard II, he departs from this source when he introduces the gardener's comments on government. Apparently this scene is introduced to reveal the tragic situation to Richard's queen. Historically,

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<sup>3</sup> Dunham and Pargellis, op. cit., pp. 195-213.

<sup>4</sup> Richard II, III, iv, 55-66.



Anne of Bohemia died in 1394. Two years later Richard signed an agreement with Francis VI of France of twenty-five years duration which provided for his marriage to the child princess, Isabella, eight years of age. Richard was deposed in 1399. The garden scene is therefore historically improbable. It may be inferred that Shakespeare, by choice, thus presents a discussion of government which he regards as pertinent to Richard's situation. Had Richard "trimm'd and dress'd his land" by punishing unruly subjects, he might have controlled his kingdom.

Further evidence of Shakespeare's use of the concept of order is found in Henry V. The Archbishop of Canterbury compares the order of man's government as ordained by natural law to that of the bee kingdom:

Therefore doth heaven divide  
 The state of man in divers functions,  
 Setting endeavor in continual motion;  
 To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,  
 Obedience: for so work the honey-bees,  
 Creatures that by a rule in nature teach  
 The act of order to a peopled kingdom.  
 They have a king and officers of sorts;  
 Where some, like magistrates, correct at home,  
 Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad,  
 Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,  
 Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds;  
 Which pillage they with merry march bring home  
 To the tent-royal of their emperor:  
 Who, busied in his majesty, surveys  
 The singing masons building roofs of gold,  
 The civil citizens kneading up the honey,  
 The poor mechanic porters crowding in  
 Their heavy burdens at his narrow gate,  
 The sad-ey'd justice, with his surly hum,  
 Delivering o'er to executors pale  
 The lazy yawning drone. I this infer,  
 That many things, having full reference  
 To one consent, may work contrariously;  
 As many arrows loosed several ways,  
 Fly to one mark; as many ways meet in one town;

As many fresh streams meet in one salt sea;  
 As many lines close in the dial's centre;  
 So may a thousand actions, once afoot,  
 End in one purpose and be all well borne  
 Without defeat.<sup>5</sup>

Although in the passages preceding this metaphor Shakespeare followed Holinshed<sup>6</sup> almost word for word in representing the fear of the church that her enormous wealth might be legally confiscated and in the long history of the Salic Law<sup>7</sup>, there is no such picture of an ideal government in Holinshed. It may therefore be inferred that Shakespeare adds this picture of unity because he is intent upon revealing an ideal order.

In these examples of order Shakespeare has presented the idea of a chain of being, a definite sense of relationship in human government in correspondence with the order of the universe and the realm of nature. It is significant that he has drawn examples from two realms in which Elizabethans sought correspondences to their own conditions: the cosmological realm and the natural realm. As God rules over the angels, so the sun over the spheres, so the king over man, every part functioning in its proper place. Each ruler, God, the sun, the king, represents a strong central force.

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<sup>5</sup> Henry V, I, ii, 183-213.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Holinshed, Holinshed's Chronicle as Used in Shakespeare's Plays (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1943), pp. 71-73. Edited by Allardyce Nicoll.

<sup>7</sup> Henry V, I, i, 7-19, I, ii, 8-100.

The various elements of each system are so interrelated that the downfall of one part injures or destroys the harmony of the entire system. That such a tragedy may not occur, a strong central force is necessary to focus and unify all of the separate parts. Shakespeare does not allow his audience to forget that the monarch who rules the political government corresponds to the sun which rules the cosmic world. The plays are rich with images in which the king is likened to the sun.

Richard II, a weak, vacillating king, seeks to strengthen his position by reiteration of his divine right to rule, and by comparing himself to the "searching eye of heaven." He says,

..... when from under this terrestrial ball  
He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines  
And darts his light through every guilty hole,  
Then murders, treasons, and detested sins,  
The cloak of night being pluck'd from off  
  their backs,  
Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?  
So when this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke,  
Who all this while hath revell'd in the night  
Whilst we were wandering with the antipodes,  
Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,  
His treasons will sit blushing in his face,  
Not able to endure the sight of day, . . . .<sup>8</sup>

Always conscious of his majesty, Richard dramatizes his sun-like glory:

Down, down, I come; like glistering Phaeton,  
Wanting the manage of unruly jades.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Richard II, III, ii, 36-52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., III, iii, 178-179.



As he views his countenance after the deposition, he asks,

Was this the face  
That like the sun did make beholders wink?<sup>10</sup>

After he was deposed, Richard concedes to his successor the same uniqueness of power which he has possessed. Bolingbroke is now the "sun."

O! that I were a mockery king of snow,  
Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,  
To melt myself away in water-drops.<sup>11</sup>

Other characters in the play reflect Richard's consciousness of his position; they refer to his sovereignty, using images similar to those Richard has employed. As Richard appears at Flint Castle, Harry Percy says,

See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,  
As doth the blushing discontented sun  
From out the fiery portal of the east,  
When he perceives the envious clouds are bent  
To dim his glory and to stain the track  
Of his bright passage to the occident.<sup>12</sup>

In Henry IV, Part II, Sir Richard Vernon describes Prince Hal to Hotspur as being

. . . gorgeous as the sun at midsummer<sup>13</sup>,

and Prince Hal, in his soliloquy, attempts to show his madcap behavior to be a part of a planned action in which he imitates the sun:

. . . herein will I imitate the sun,  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., IV, 1, 283-284.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., IV, 1, 260-262.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., III, iii, 62-67.

<sup>13</sup> Henry IV, Part I, IV, 1, 102.

10 That when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.<sup>14</sup>

After Hal becomes King Henry V, he issues a warning to France in which he refers to himself as the sun:

. . . I will rise there with so full a glory  
That I will dazzle all the eyes of France,  
Yea, strike the Dauphin blind to look on us.<sup>15</sup>

Later, when King Henry's soldiers so desperately need stamina to continue in battle, he visits the ranks, filling the men with courage. His magnetic effect upon them is compared with the power of the sun:

A largess universal, like the sun  
His liberal eye doth give to every one,  
Thawing cold fear.<sup>16</sup>

After Henry V's death, the Duke of Gloucester is lamenting the loss of the strong monarch:

His sparkling eyes, replete with wrathful fire,  
More dazzled and drove back his enemies  
Than mid-day sun fierce bent against their faces.<sup>17</sup>

☞ In talking with Prince Hal, King Henry IV compares his majesty with that of Richard II, using images from the celestial bodies:

By being seldom seen, I could not stir  
But like a comet I was wonder'd at;<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., I, ii, 219-225.

<sup>15</sup> Henry V, I, ii, 278-280.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., IV Prologue, 43-45.

<sup>17</sup> Henry VI, Part I, i, 12-14.

whereas Richard appears so often that men's eyes

. . . sick and blunted with community,  
Afford no extraordinary gaze,  
Such as is bent on sun-like majesty  
When it shines seldom in admiring eyes;  
But rather drows'd and hung their eyelids down,  
Slept in his face, and render'd such aspect  
As cloudy men use to their adversaries. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Prince John in reproving Archbishop Scroop for his active participation in one of the rebellions against Henry IV, reminds Scroop of his treachery:

That man that sits within a monarch's heart  
And ripens in the sunshine of his favour,  
Would he abuse the countenance of the king,  
Alack! what mischief might he set abroad  
In shadows of such greatness.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Plantagenet boasts of the rebellion he will raise in England in order to acquire the crown. He will stir a violent storm which will not cease to rage

Until the golden circuit on my head,  
Like to the glorious sun's transparent beams,  
Do calm the fury. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Prince Edward, as he views the sunrise, strikes a comparison of the glorious sun and the three sons of the king:

Dazzle mine eyes, or do I see three suns?

His brother, Richard Plantagenet, seizes the figure and continues to enlarge it prophetically:

Three glorious suns, each one a perfect sun;  
Not separated with the racking clouds,  
But sever'd in a pale clear-shining sky.

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<sup>18</sup> Henry IV, Part I, III, ii, 46-47, 77-83.

<sup>19</sup> Henry IV, Part II, IV, ii, 11-15.

<sup>20</sup> Henry VI, Part II, III, ii, 349-354.



See, see! they join, embrace, and seem to kiss,  
 As if they vow'd some league inviolable:  
 Now are they but one lamp, one light, one sun.  
 In this the heaven figures some event.

Edward placed a final interpretation upon the scene in saying that the sons of Plantagenet

Should notwithstanding join our lights together,  
 And over-shine the earth. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Lord Clifford reviews Henry VI's weak rule by comparing it with Phoebus' leniency to Phaeton:

O Phoebus! hadst thou never given consent  
 That Phaeton should check thy fiery steeds,  
 Thy burning car never had scorch'd the earth;  
 And Henry, hadst thou sway'd as kings should do,  
 Giving no ground unto the house of York  
 They never then had sprung like summer flies.<sup>22</sup>

All of these many uses of the sun imagery have been cited at the risk of becoming tedious because they show how much inclined Shakespeare and his audience were to think of the crown as the central power of the state to which all other political elements must be subservient. It is of interest to note, in passing, that this imagery shows the effect that the Copernican cosmology was beginning to exercise upon political thinking as well as upon artistic expression.

While the king occupies this exalted position parallel with the sun in prominence, the security of his position is dependent upon his respect for and enforcement of law.

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<sup>21</sup> Henry VI, Part III, II, 1, 25-38.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., II, vi, 11-17.

Order is expressed and made effective by law. The function of each unit affects the whole by its harmonious cooperation, its recognition of the laws governing the arrangement. Therefore one may conclude that one of the functions of law in political government is to assure an orderly relationship between the ruler and his subjects.

Throughout the plays there is evidence of Shakespeare's immense respect for law. Especially does the Lord Chief Justice, officiating during the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, represent supreme law. Firm in his decisions, he is the symbol of the integrity and dignity of his profession. The Chief Justice reminds King Henry V that his position demands that he punish even the king's son if he offends the law of the realm as Prince Hal had done.

Your highness pleased to forget my place,  
 The majesty and power of law and justice,  
 The image of the king whom I represented,  
 And struck me in my very seat of judgment;  
 Whereon, as an offender to your father,  
 I gave bold way to my authority,  
 And did commit you.<sup>23</sup>

As the Lord Chief Justice exercised "the majesty of power of law and justice" during the reign of Henry IV, even so is he requested to continue his judicious control:

You are right justice; and you weigh this well;  
 Therefore still bear the balance and the sword  
 . . . . There is my hand:  
 You shall be as a father to my youth;  
 My voice shall sound as you do prompt mine ear,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., V, ii, 102-104, 117-121.

And I will stoop and humble my intents  
To your well-practic'd wise direction.<sup>24</sup>

While the king may be supreme in his sovereignty, he is conceived by Shakespeare to be less absolute than the Prince of Machiavelli. The ideal English king must recognize the function of law as the cohesive force by which the king himself is constrained to maintain the proper relationship to all other elements of the state. This fact is well symbolized in English court life by the practice of the "sergeants of the law" of wearing their hats in the royal presence. They above all other subjects have this distinction. Shakespeare is therefore accurately representing English thought and practice when he represents his ideal king as recognizing the dignity and authority of the law.

In contrast to the Chief Justice's rigid adherence to law, Shakespeare represents the possible abuse of legal powers by lesser authorities in his dramatization of the collusion between Falstaff and the country Justices, Shallow and Silence, who represent many of the vices which creep into positions of authority. Shallow reveals his stupidity by vague, monotonous repetitions. Even the servants, who are conscious of his incompetency, miss no opportunity to dictate his judicial policy. Being politically ambitious and feeling he can use Falstaff as a stepping stone, Shallow becomes an easy victim from whom Falstaff extracts one thousand pounds. Silence is on such

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., V, ii, 102-104, 117-121.



a low mental level that he vaguely responds in conversation; often he merely repeats the last phrase he has heard spoken.

The integrity of the Chief Justice is challenged by one of Shakespeare's greatest comic characters, Falstaff, who is notorious for confusing the issue by adroit turns in conversation. The Chief Justice is courteous in his encounters with Falstaff, for he is a great gentleman; but he never lowers himself to the intimacy which Falstaff attempts to establish in the conversations. Falstaff has ignored the Chief Justice's direct questions by attempting a discussion concerning the king's illness:

Ch. Just. What tell you me of it? be it as it is.

Fal. It hath its original from much grief, from study and perturbation of the brain. I have read the cause of his effects in Galen; it is a kind of deafness.

Ch. Just. I think you are fallen into the disease, for you hear not what I say to you.

Fal. Very well, my lord, very well: rather an't please you, it is the disease of not listening, and the malady of not marking, that I am troubled withal.

Ch. Just. To punish you by the heels would amend the attention to your ears; and I care not if I do become your physician.<sup>25</sup>

The Chief Justice again refuses to be diverted from his position as judge. Falstaff, more than a match for the sheriff's officers, is attempting to avoid the arrest requested by Mistress Quickly, when the Chief Justice intervenes. Falstaff, always alert with evasions, tries to show

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., I, ii, 130-144.

Mistress Quickly to be mad, even suggesting that she claims the Lord Chief Justice as the father of her child. The Chief Justice speaks,

Sir John, Sir John, I am well acquainted with your manner of wrenching the true cause the false way. It is not a confident brow, nor the throng of words that come with such more than imprudent sauciness from you, can thrust me from a level consideration; you have, as it appears to me, practiced upon the easy-yielding spirit of this woman, and made her serve your uses both in purse and person. . . . Pay her the debt you owe her, and unpay her the villany you have done her: the one you may do with sterling money, and the other with current repentance.<sup>26</sup>

The integrity of the individual bearing the responsibility of law suffers constant trial. Shakespeare has portrayed a Lord Chief Justice who is unswerving in administering law, the vital safeguard to order. Shakespeare has shown in the plays that order, based on degree, is an indispensable principle of government. He has emphasized the supreme position of a king by comparing his state with that of the sun. The security of the entire system, however, is dependent upon the recognition by the king of the authority of the law courageously and uprightly administered.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., II, i, 123-136.

## CHAPTER III

### THREE SOURCES OF SOVEREIGNTY

One of the most hotly debated political questions in the sixteenth century was that of the origin and exercise of sovereignty. Generally speaking, there were three sources of sovereign power considered: the people, the nobility, and the crown. Elizabethans had some knowledge of Aristotle's political doctrines, and, for the most part, they were disposed to accept the superiority of the queen's claim to supremacy and to treat lightly the claim of the commons to sovereignty in the state. They were aware of the medieval conflict between the crown and the feudal aristocracy. They were prepared to see the full import of any idea or incident in contemporary drama that reflected the bias of the author or of his dramatic company in regard to the issue of sovereignty. Shakespeare knew that he was writing for such an audience. It is not surprising, therefore, to find throughout his plays this contemporary political problem presented in its various aspects.

Shakespeare, in his plays, thoroughly represents all three political groups which were active in the formation of government and in the exercise of political power.



While he cannot, within the framework of English history, represent all forms of government, as Aristotle could do in his expository treatment, he can nevertheless portray in historical incidents the thrust for power by the crown, the nobility, and the commons. That he formed certain judgments of the relative aptitudes of these groups to exercise sovereign control is an inferential fact which this essay attempts to establish. Let us now examine Shakespeare's treatment of the commons as a political power, then his representation of the nobility, and finally, the characterization of his kings as rulers. We must not forget that Shakespeare was most highly esteemed in his own age and for a century thereafter for his delineation of individual character.<sup>1</sup> While the focus of our interest, too, is likely to be in his characterization of individual men, we see them living in a political society, their thoughts, feelings, and judgments affected by the political system of which they are a part.

#### The Commons

Before examining Shakespeare's portrayal of the commons we must establish their importance in English history as a governmental power. Weak kings feared the commons and

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<sup>1</sup> This generalization is amply substantiated by G. B. Bentley's recent study of the relative positions of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson in Seventeenth Century criticism. Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Vol. I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945.



feared those who were popular with them; all kings recognized the support of the common people to be necessary to the crown. Richard II, a weak, vacillating king, is uneasy because of Bolingbroke's popularity among the commons.

Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here and Green  
 Observ'd his courtship to the common people,  
 How he did seem to dive into their hearts  
 With humble and familiar courtesy,  
 What reverence he did throw away on slaves,  
 Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles  
 And patient underbearing of his fortune,  
 As 'twere to banish their affects with him.  
 Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench;  
 A brace of draymen bid God speed him well,  
 And had the tribute of his supple knee,  
 With 'Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends;  
 As were our England in reversion his,  
 And he our subjects' next degree in hope.<sup>2</sup>

Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, who has gained accession to the throne by ruthless murder, seems very solicitous for the approval of the common people. On the return of the Duke of Buckingham, who has been speaking to the people in behalf of Richard of Gloucester's right to the throne, Gloucester asks anxiously:

How now, how now! What say the citizens?<sup>3</sup>

But, while kings may be eager for the loyal support of the commons, the masses of people are pictured by Shakespeare as incapable of sustained loyalty. They are changeable, irrational, and easily swayed by demagogues. In Coriolanus, for example, the common people are pictured as politically unstable, capable of turning against a popular hero and

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<sup>2</sup> Richard II, I, iv, 23-36.

<sup>3</sup> Richard III, III, vii, 1.

capable too of violent contradictions in their loyalties. In the first scene the citizens consider Caius Marcius an enemy of the people; they plan to kill him that they may have corn at their own price. Caius Marcius' attitude toward the people is one of contempt, and with no diplomacy whatever, he retaliates:

He that depends  
 Upon your favors swims with fins of lead  
 And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye!  
Trust ye!  
 With every minute you do change a mind,  
 And call him noble that was now your hate,  
 Him vile that was your garland.<sup>4</sup>

Later Coriolanus warns the senators of the presumption of power by the commons who are "such as cannot rule nor ever will be ruled." When he saw the tribunes, he exclaimed:

Behold, these are the tribunes of the people,  
 The tongues o' the common mouth: I do despise them;  
 For they do prank them in authority  
 Against all noble sufferance.<sup>5</sup>

The hero, Caius Marcius, having gone out to fight for his people, returns from battle with the distinction of honor even in his name, Coriolanus. The people acclaim him their consul:

Fifth Cit. He has done nobly, and cannot go without an honest man's voice.

Sixth Cit. Therefore let him be consul.  
 The gods give him joy, and make him good friend  
 of the people.

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<sup>4</sup> Coriolanus, I, 1, 185-190.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., III, 1, 21-24.

All. Amen, amen.  
 God save the noble consul.<sup>6</sup>

But the tribunes influence the commons to revert to their previous attitude toward Coriolanus, and they drive him from the city to exile.

Citizens. Our enemy is banish'd!--he is gone!--  
 Hoo! ho! /They all shout and throw up their caps/.

Sic. Go, see him out at the gates, and follow  
 Give him deserv'd vexation.<sup>7</sup> him, . . .

The commons represented in Julius Caesar may be swayed emotionally to extremes. They too, are moved to unmanageable violence. After Brutus justifies his action by saying that he slew Caesar because he was ambitious, the citizens' response is one of approval.

Citizens. Live, Brutus, live! live!

First Cit. Bring him /Brutus/ with triumph home  
 unto his house.

Sec. Cit. Give him a statue with his ancestors.

Third Cit. Let him be Caesar.

Marc Antony, bearing the body of Caesar, has Brutus' permission to speak to the people, whom he sways adroitly.

Their response is:

First Cit. If it be found so, some will dear  
 abide it.

Sec. Cit. Poor soul! his eyes are red as fire  
 with weeping.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., II, iii, 139-145.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., III, iii, 134-138.



Third Cit. There's not a nobler man in Rome than  
Antony.

As Antony nears the conclusion of his oration, the agitation among the people has accelerated noticeably:

First Cit. . . . Come, away, away!  
We'll burn his body /Caesar's/ in the holy place,  
And with the brands fire the traitors' houses.  
Take up the body.

Sec. Cit. Go fetch fire.

Third Cit. Pluck down benches.

Fourth Cit. Pluck down forms, windows, anything.  
/Exeunt Citizens, with the body/<sup>8</sup>

The frenzied mob is now out of control, as its treatment of Cinna, the poet, dramatically demonstrates:

Third Cit. Your name, sir, truly.

Cin. Truly, my name is Cinna.

Sec. Cit. Tear him to pieces; he's a conspirator.

Cin. I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.

Fourth Cit. Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses.

Cin. I am not Cinna the conspirator.

Sec. Cit. It is no matter his name's Cinna;  
pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going.

Third Cit. Tear him, tear him! Come firebrands,  
ho! firebrands! To Brutus; to Cassius' burn  
all.<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare shows his knowledge of mob psychology also in the stage directions in the mob scenes. He assigns

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<sup>8</sup> Julius Caesar, III, ii, 53-56, 119-122, 258-264.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., III, iii, 28-43.



speeches at first to individuals who are designated as First Citizen, Second Citizen, and Third Citizen. But those men soon lose their individuality, and their voices merge in the shouts of the mob assigned to Omnes. It is clear that the dramatist expected little of rational behavior from common people en masse.

The people are portrayed in Jack Cade's rebellion, Henry VI, Part II, to be an unpredictable force. They voice one excited decision only to retract it when another speaker sways them. Lord Clifford speaks to the insurgents on loyalty to the crown. The response is "God save the king! God save the king!" Cade reminds the rebels of their purpose, and how nearly they have attained it, at which the mob cries all in one voice, "We'll follow Cade, we'll follow Cade!" Clifford again delivers a stirring oration on loyalty and unity in national purpose, to which they respond in unison, "A Clifford, a Clifford, we'll follow the king and Clifford." Jack Cade summarizes the reliability of the commons, when he says,

Was ever feather so lightly blown to and fro as  
this multitude?<sup>10</sup>

The commons, as Scroop, the Archbishop of Canterbury, sees them, represent an unstable governmental power:

A habitation giddy and unsure  
Hath he that buildeth on the vulgar heart.  
O thou fond many! with what loud applause  
Didst thou beat heaven with blessing Bolingbroke

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<sup>10</sup> Henry VI, Part II, IV, viii, 1-59.

Before he was what thou would have him be;  
 And being now trimm'd in thine own desires,  
 Thou, beastly feeder, art so full of him  
 That thou provok'st thyself to cast him up.  
 So, so, thou common dog, didst thou disgorge  
 Thy glutton bosom of the royal Richard,  
 And now thou wouldst eat thy dead vomit up,  
 And howl'st to find it. What trust is in these  
 times?<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare implies that they possess obvious limitations. The character of the commons is given significant coloring in the Jack Cade Rebellion. Shakespeare represents the rebels as a group of illiterate people absurdly revolting against learning. The insurgents are staging a trial for offenders at which Cade is questioning a clerk:

. . . Dost thou use to write thy name, or hast thou a mark to thyself like, an honest plain-dealing man?

Clerk. Sir, I thank God, I have been so well brought up, that I can write my name.

All. He hath confessed: away with him! he's a villain and a traitor.

Cade: Away with him! I say: hang him with his pen and ink-horn about his neck.<sup>12</sup>

Shakespeare's source, Holinshed's Chronicle, states the cause of the insurrection to be injustice to the common people, resulting from the king's poor selection of councillors:

[Cade] sent unto the king an humble supplication, affirming that his coming was not against his grace, but against such of his counsellours, as were lovers of themselves, and oppressors of the poore commonaltie; flatterers of the king, and

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<sup>11</sup> Henry IV, Part II, I, iii, 89-100.

<sup>12</sup> Henry VI, Part II, IV, ii, 113-121.

enimies to his honor; suckers of his purse, and robbers of his subjects; parcial to their freends, and extreame to their enimies, thorough bribes corrupted, and for indifferencie dooing nothing.

Holinshed reveals Cade's behavior when the lord's confer with him:

These lords found him sober in talke, wise in reasoning, arrogant in hart, and stiffe in opinion; as who that by no means would grant to dissolve his armie, except the king in person would come to him, and assent to the things he would require.<sup>13</sup>

True, Shakespeare's departure from his source may result from dramatic necessity, but the fact remains that Shakespeare can portray, with ridicule, a great mass of people who actually revolted because their ideals of justice had been challenged.

The general character of the commons is established by contemptuous references to them. Throughout the plays, the common people are spoken of as rabble, slaves, flatterers, time pleasers, the fond many, dumb statues, breathing stones, tongueless blocks, and many other such uncomplimentary expressions. Furthermore, the unpleasant physical characteristics of the commons are emphasized. The obnoxious odors of the masses especially are made evident. The mob takes on the aspect of a live, energetic force of conflicting emotions accentuated by a stench of odors arising from perspiration and unpleasant breath. Jack Cade, the leader of the rebellion in Henry VI, Part II, is told by Dick

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<sup>13</sup> Nicoll, op. cit., pp. 115-116.



that the laws of England will come out of his mouth, where-  
upon Smith remarks in an aside:

Nay John, it will be a stinking law; for his breath  
stinks with eating toasted cheese.<sup>14</sup>

Coriolanus speaks of the citizens' rank scent:

For the mutable, rank-scented many, let them  
Regard me as I do not flatter, . . . .<sup>15</sup>

And again

You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate  
As reek o' the rotten fens, whose love I prize  
As the dead carcasses of unburied men  
That do corrupt my air. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Menenius refers to the commons as having "the breath of  
garlic eaters," and in another instance addresses them:

You are they  
That made the air unwholesome, when you cast  
Your stinking greasy caps in hooting at Coriolanus'  
exile.<sup>17</sup>

Casca speaks of the stench of the masses in Julius  
Caesar. Caesar has rejected the crown the third time:

. . . and still as he refused it the rabblement  
shouted and clapped their chopped hands, and threw  
up their sweaty night-caps, and uttered such a  
deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused  
the crown, that it had almost choked Caesar; for  
he swounded and fell down at it: and for mine  
own part, I durst not laugh, for fear of opening  
my lips and receiving the bad air.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Henry VI, Part II, IV, vii, 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Coriolanus, III, i, 65-66.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., III, iii, 118-121.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., IV, vi, 130-133.

<sup>18</sup> Julius Caesar, I, ii, 241-251.



We may conclude that in Shakespeare's plays the commons are not represented favorably. Easily incited to violence, they are characterized as an unpleasant, irritating element which is difficult to govern. Certainly, Shakespeare represents them with little capacity for guiding or controlling the destiny of a state.

#### THE NOBILITY

A second possible source of sovereignty known to the Elizabethans was the nobility. As Englishmen well knew, English history for four centuries (1066-1485) had exhibited a continual struggle between the king and the feudal nobility for sovereign power. Shakespeare dramatizes this conflict most clearly in the English historical plays. It also appears in the Roman plays. In Julius Caesar the people were incapable of exercising the form of government entrusted to them, and their very inability gave rise to rivalries among the nobility. Shakespeare dramatizes emergence of the triumvirate, later the struggle for power by Octavius and Antony, which continues through Antony and Cleopatra, and finally the achievement of absolutism by Octavius.

We may look upon feudalism, not as a form of government, but as an arrested state caused by a deadlock between opposing forces. Geoffrey Parsons restates Jenks' conception of feudalism, in The State and the Nation, as a conflict between the principles of a patriarchal society and

those of a political state.<sup>19</sup> Feudalism in Shakespeare's plays is a challenge to established order, brought about by lords who are willing to sacrifice national principle for selfish interests. The nobles of King John's reign joined forces with a foreign power, France, with the intention of overthrowing the established government of England. The Wars of the Roses have been dramatically reproduced in a group of Shakespeare's English historical plays. Richard II, Henry IV, Parts I and II, Henry V, Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III, and Richard III reveal the arrested progress of England because of the conflict for supremacy between the House of Lancaster and the House of York. Many of the lords of Henry IV's reign, under the leadership of Hotspur, united forces with Scotland and Wales against the crown. Mortimer reveals the rebels' plan to divide England with their allies:

The archdeacon hath divided it  
 Into three limits very equally.  
 England, from Trent and Severn hitherto,  
 By south and east is to my part assign'd:  
 All westward, Wales beyond the Severn shore,  
 And all the fertile land within that bound,  
 To Owen Glendower: and dear coz, to you  
 The remnant northward, lying off the Trent.  
 And our indentures tripartite are drawn  
 Which being sealed interchangeably,  
 A business that this night may execute. . . .<sup>20</sup>

This plan to divide England between these nobles, Mortimer, Glendower, and Hotspur, could have been a crucial turn in

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<sup>19</sup> Parsons, op. cit., p. 367.

<sup>20</sup> Henry IV, Part I, III, i, 73-83.

the government of England, for had it succeeded, the feudal system would have become an aristocratic form of government parallel to the triumvirate established in Rome. However, the king's forces were strong enough to conquer the rebels attacking the state. Shakespeare follows Holinshed in describing these attacks, but he deviates from his source in defining the characters of these potential rulers of England. Before the tripartite indentures are signed, the participants are quarreling over the division. Hotspur speaks:

Methinks my moiety, north from Burton here,  
 In quantity equals not one of yours:  
 See how this river comes me cranking in,  
 And cuts me from the best of all my land  
 A huge half-moon a monstrous cantle out.  
 I'll have the current of this place damn'd up,  
 And here the smug and silver Trent shall run  
 In a new channel, fair and evenly:  
 It shall not wind with such a deep indent,  
 To rob me of so rich a bottom here.

.....

Glend. I will not have it alter'd.

Hot. Will not you?

Glend. No, nor you shall not.<sup>21</sup>

Although this quarrel may have been included for dramatic purposes, it also bears political significance in that it foretells the lack of unity which might result from divided powers.

We will next consider the treatment of the nobility in two of the Roman plays, Julius Caesar, and Antony and Cleopatra. In Julius Caesar, after the fall of the republic,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., III, 1, 97-118.



Marc Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus establish a triumvirate which supposedly consists of equal united authority. Yet in reality, dissatisfaction ensues before the first conference is completed: Antony, after sending Lepidus on an errand, describes him:

This is a slight unmeritable man,  
Meet to be sent on errands: is it fit,  
The three-fold world divided, he should stand  
One of the three to share it?

Oct.           So you thought him;  
And took his voice who should be prick'd to die,  
In our black sentence and proscription.

Ant. Octavius, I have seen more days than you:  
And though we lay these honours on this man,  
To ease ourselves of divers slanderous loads,  
He shall but bear them as the ass bears gold,  
To groan and sweat under the business,  
Either led or driven, as we point the way;  
And having brought our treasure where we will,  
Then take we down his load, and turn him off,  
Like to the empty ass, to shake his ears,  
And graze in commons.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the plays, the absence of one member of the triumvirate, encourages the other two members to discuss his downfall. Shakespeare emphasizes disagreement, envy, and suspicion rather than accord. Antony and Octavius disagree upon military strategy:

Ant. Octavius, lead your battle softly on,  
Upon the left hand of the even field.

Oct. Upon the right hand I; keep thou to the left.

Ant. Why do you cross me in this exigent?

Oct. I do not cross you; but I will do so.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Julius Caesar, IV, 1, 12-27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., V, 1, 16-20.



The same discordant triumvirate continues in Antony and Cleopatra. Antony, anxious to be the most powerful, consults a soothsayer:

Say to me,  
Whose fortunes shall rise higher,  
Caesar's or mine?

Sooth. Caesar's.<sup>24</sup>

After several attempts at unity, Caesar opposes Antony in battle. Caesar speaks of Antony:

He calls me boy, and chides as he had power  
To beat me out of Egypt; my messenger  
He hath whipp'd with rods; dares me to personal combat,  
Caesar to Antony. . . .

Let our best heads  
Know that tomorrow the last of many battles  
We mean to fight.<sup>25</sup>

Antony is conquered. The unsuccessful triumvirate gives place to the absolute power of one ruler, Octavius. Shakespeare in characterizing the joint rulers, has emphasized their lack of unity and their selfish desire for power.

In examining King Lear, we find disorder resulting from division of power. Unity was at last restored by one ruler, the Duke of Albany. The source of the story of Lear is from the early history of Britain, but, as we know, Shakespeare was inclined to use the drama regardless of the source or setting as a mirror of contemporary England.

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<sup>24</sup> Antony and Cleopatra, II, iii, 15-17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., IV, i, 1-12.

Hamlet reveals the purpose of a play in his advice to the players:

. . . . the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.<sup>26</sup>

John W. Draper has made an interesting study in which he reveals certain political implications. After 1603, Shakespeare's company of actors became the King's men. King Lear was written sometime between the years of 1604 and 1607 during the years in which King James was encouraging Parliament to pass a bill effecting unity between Scotland and England. King James frequently alluded to the years of misfortune which befell early Britain because of division. King James recommended the study of early British history. In his Basilikin Doran, James I impressed upon his son the necessity of maintaining a united kingdom.

Draper sees the whole plot of King Lear as dependent upon the division of the kingdom. Kent cries out against the division. Chaos and conflict of authority is the theme of the play. Had Cordelia had her share in the division, civil war and ingratitude would have come: Albany would have revolted against his wife because of her cruelties to Gloucester and Kent, also against Cordelia because she led a foreign army to English soil. Since Cordelia's share was divided among the other two, the two parts must

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<sup>26</sup> Hamlet, III, ii, 24-28.

have been north and south of England with Cordelia's portion in the middle. Cornwall is the south portion, and ancient Albany was north of the Firths of Clyde and Forth, which is Scotland. In other words, Shakespeare has arranged the name of the duke to match the territory which he receives. The Duke of Cornwall received the south of England and the Duke of Albany received ancient Albany. We will note that Albany's share lay in Scotland. Still more significant is the fact that there was a Duke of Albany when Shakespeare wrote the play, and that was King James. Mary Stuart had created the title for Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, whom she married. This fact probably accounts for Shakespeare's making the Duke of Albany a good character, a character who brings the nation back to unity after it has suffered disorder. The Duke of Albany in Holinshed's Chronicle was an evil character. Too, in Holinshed, Lear gave away only one-half of his kingdom, which was to be inherited by the daughters at his death. The dukes rebel however and seize all of the kingdom from him. In the old play, Leir, the daughters marry Cornwall and Cambria, each receiving one-fourth of the kingdom. In Shakespeare's play, Lear's division of his kingdom leads to his unhappy end; in Holinshed's account and in the old play Leir, the ending is happy. According to Draper, the play King Lear apparently contained propaganda for union, and was a compliment to Shakespeare's patron, King James. It definitely did as King James had urged; it went back to early



British History.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly, we may gain an insight to Shakespeare's political thinking by his characterization of those who represent this second possible source of sovereignty, the nobility. Shakespeare has pictured feudalism as a revolt against order by accenting the lack of cooperation among the lords. The nobility is not represented as being capable of producing the order which Shakespeare considers so necessary to successful government.

#### THE CROWN

The third source of sovereignty is the king who rules absolutely and by divine right. Elizabethan England believed that sovereignty should be vested in the king. England received its authority for this belief from the parallels in the realm of the spirit and in the physical world. As God ruled over his angels and the sun governed the cosmos, so the king reigned over the state. And, many believed that as God had created the sun in strength and power to rule the spheres, so had he created the king as his representative to govern man. Yet this belief was the subject of much controversy. Wherein did the king's power lie? Did his sovereignty come from God or directly from the people? We find much concern in Shakespeare's plays over these questions.

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<sup>27</sup> John W. Draper, "The Occasion of King Lear," Studies in Philology, XXXIV (1937), pp. 176 ff.



Many of Shakespeare's king make at least a pretense of believing that they are ruling by divine right. In Hamlet, King Claudius is besieged by a riotous group which cries, "Choose we, Laertes shall be king!" Claudius remains very calm as he quiets the queen:

Let him go, Gertrude; do not fear our person:  
There's such divinity doth hedge a king,  
That treason can but peep to what it would,  
Acts little of his will.<sup>28</sup>

The Bishop of Carlisle believes the king to possess a divinity which no subject has a right to question. When Richard II is being deposed, Carlisle speaks:

What subject can give sentence on his king?

. . . . .  
And shall the figure of God's majesty,  
His captain, steward, deputy elect,  
Anointed, crowned, planted many years,  
Be judg'd by subject and inferior breath.

. . . . .  
I speak to subjects, and a subject speaks,  
Stirr'd up by God thus boldly for his king.<sup>29</sup>

King Richard II relies almost solely upon his sovereignty derived from God to protect him from his enemies. On hearing of Bolingbroke's strong opposition, Richard declaims:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm from an anointed king;  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.  
For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd  
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,  
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the  
right.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hamlet, IV, v, 122-125.

<sup>29</sup> Richard II, IV, i, 122-133.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., III, ii, 54-63.

Prince Hall too, has much assurance of power derived from God. He tries on his father's crown as he speaks to the sleeping king:

My due from thee is this imperial crown,  
 Which, as immediate from thy place and blood,  
 Derives itself to me. Lo, here it sits,  
 Which heaven shall guard; and put the world's  
 whole strength  
 Into one giant arm, it shall not force  
 This lineal honour from me. This from thee  
 Will I to mine leave, as 'tis left to me.<sup>31</sup>

But the theory of divine right did not go unchallenged. Many political thinkers believed that the sovereignty of the king derived from the people, rather than from God; they therefore maintained that the people could depose a king and set another in his place.

This issue is one of the basic problems in Richard II. In fact, this play was actually used by the Essex group on the eve of their ill-starred rebellion, to prepare Londoners for the return of Essex and for his seizure of the throne. Elizabeth is reported to have said to some of her courtiers, "Know ye not that I am Richard the Second?" It is true that Richard was not a wise king, but one feels as he reads the play that Shakespeare had a strong personal sympathy for Richard. At any rate, Bolingbroke is always conscious that his right to the throne is a precarious one. His plans to go on a crusade are used by Shakespeare as evidence of his sense of guilt in stealing the crown from Richard.

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<sup>31</sup> Henry IV, Part II, IV, v, 40-46.

He admits to Prince Hal that his own right to the throne was not certain, but that no such handicap would hinder the Prince, who would succeed by birth and whose kingship would therefore bear the sanction of God's will:

God knows, my son,  
By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways  
I met this crown; and I myself know well  
How troublesome it sat upon my head:  
To thee it shall descend with better quiet,  
Better opinion, better confirmation;  
For all the soil of the achievement goes  
With me into the earth.<sup>32</sup>

Edward of York who plans to overthrow Henry VI, after gaining entrance to the castle and possessing the keys, hesitates to continue without God's sanction:

. . . but we now forget  
Our title to the crown, and only claim  
Our dukedom till God please to send the rest.<sup>33</sup>

But the people were not always so favorably inclined to the usurper. In Richard III Buckingham is sent to influence the commons in favor of Gloucester, and reports his experience as follows:

And when my oratory drew toward end,  
I bad them that did love their country's good  
Cry 'God save Richard, England's royal king!'

Glo. And did they so?

Buck. No, so God help me, they spake not a word;  
But like dumb statues or breathing stones,  
Star'd each on other and look'd deadly pale.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., IV, v, 182-189.

<sup>33</sup> Henry VI, Part III, IV, vii, 45-47.

<sup>34</sup> Richard III, III, vi, 20-26.



In addition to the violent differences of opinion on the question of whence the king received his right to rule, Elizabethans were inclined to look empirically on the fitness in character of their rulers. In other words, a king needed more than the right to rule; he needed the ability to rule well. Shakespeare gives large scope to this consideration, for he apparently became absorbed in the writing of his historical plays in the question of what constitutes the character of an ideal king. As we examine his English kings, we see that they failed or succeeded, not in terms of their theoretical right to rule, but in terms of their aptitude to govern. Richard II failed, because he was so intoxicated with his position as king that he neglected the responsibilities accompanying the position. Richard III failed for moral reasons. His character was so formed that he refused to assume the relationship between the crown and the commonwealth which the crown should bear. Henry VI lacked practical wisdom. He became absorbed in personal religious development, and left the decisions of government to those who were morally incapable. The king's character must possess a combination of necessary qualities which design and direct his action. He needs the king-becoming graces enumerated by Malcolm in Macbeth:

. . . justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
 Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
 Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude . . . 35

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<sup>35</sup> Macbeth, IV, iii, 91-94.



Shakespeare portrays one king, Henry V, who qualifies, who possesses all of the king-becoming graces. Henry V is just in that he places himself subservient to the law of the realm. In punishing the traitors, Cambridge, Scroop, and Gray, King Henry says,

Touching our person seek we no revenge;  
But we our kingdom's safety must so tender,  
Whose ruin you have sought; that to her laws  
we do deliver you.<sup>36</sup>

Fluellen testifies to King Henry's verity:

By Jeshu, I am your majesty's country man, I care not who know it; I will confess it to all the 'orld: I need not be ashamed of your majesty, praised be God, so long as your majesty is an honest man.<sup>37</sup>

King Henry V informs Falstaff, publicly, that he has repudiated his past intemperance:

Presume not that I am the thing I was:  
For God doth know, so shall all the world perceive  
That I have turn'd away my former self;  
So will I those that kept me company.<sup>38</sup>

King Henry V adopts the stable policy of following the wise council of the Chief Justice:

And I will stoop and humble my intents  
To your well-practic'd wise directions.<sup>39</sup>

The perseverance, courage, patience, and fortitude of King Henry are outstanding in the Battle of Agincourt. His men

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<sup>36</sup> Henry V, II, ii, 174-177.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., IV, vii, 117-121.

<sup>38</sup> Henry IV, Part II, V, v, 61-64.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., V, ii, 120-121.

were hungry; they were clothed in rags; but they had courage instilled in them by the king, who went from soldier to soldier with words of encouragement. They overcame superior forces because of their unified purpose. The king's devotion was also expressed in the Battle of Agincourt, revealing his devotion to his soldiers and his devotion to a cause. The king was merciful in pardoning a drunkard's rude behavior, explaining that the person would have been more careful had he not been intoxicated. King Henry also possesses "lowliness" in character. Pomp and show were not a part of his majesty. The king, disguised as a common soldier, talks to his men, in prose, significantly:

. . . I think the king is but a man, as I am:  
 the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the  
 element shows to him as it doth to me; all his  
 senses have but human conditions. . . .<sup>40</sup>

Of the three sources of sovereignty, the commons, the nobility, and the king, Shakespeare has presented only one source as competent of exercising power. A king who rules by divine right, but who also possesses kingly traits of character as did Henry V, may succeed.

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<sup>40</sup> Henry V, IV, i, 105-110.

## CONCLUSION

This study has revealed evidences of a widespread interest in forms of government and political theory, interpretations of which found their way into many dramas of the sixteenth century. In particular Shakespeare's plays show his political bias concerning a government based upon order, arranged by degree, and enforced by law. Shakespeare's interest in correspondences between the spiritual and physical realms is evidenced through figures of speech such as the comparison of the king to the sun and parallels between the government of man and that of the spheres. The plays show the three sources of sovereignty known to the Elizabethan, the commons, the nobility, and the king, with special emphasis on the fitness in character of each. From Shakespeare's characterization of the commons we find them to be incapable of exercising governmental authority. Shakespeare represents the character of the nobility as one which breeds disorder rather than one which seeks unity. There is evidence that a king with absolute rule and divine right, who possesses character equipped with kingly graces, may succeed. This conception reaches its clearest, most competent statement, in the drama of Henry V.



It remains now to examine the conclusion to which this survey obviously points. The efficacy of any government depends upon the character of those who govern. The success of any government lies not in the form, but in the character of the people who administer the government. It has become evident throughout this study that Shakespeare holds no brief for any form of government as such. With the vast majority of his contemporaries he accepts monarchy as the popular form, but with his dramatic insight into human nature, he recognizes the fact that a monarchy is no better than the character of the monarch. The essence of good government lies not so much in the external form as in the innate character of the ruler. Because of their inherent qualities, Shakespeare does not accept the commons as capable of exercising sovereignty. Their vacillating behavior, which fluctuates emotionally from remorse to violence, renders them totally incapable. Nor does Shakespeare rely on the character of the nobility as a source of sovereignty. Their exploitation of selfish interests and utter disregard for national unity result in the destruction of order and inevitable chaos. A government is no greater than the character of the people who control it.



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