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Political Shakespeare: A Reflection Of Politics In Shakespeare's Works

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Shakespeare's plays have been historically intertwined with politics, reflecting the social and political realities of Elizabethan England. This research examines the political dimensions of Shakespeare's works, exploring the influence of contemporary political events, the role of monarchy, and the use of Shakespeare's plays for political purposes throughout history. By analyzing plays such as Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Henry V, and Richard II, this paper illustrates how Shakespeare addressed key political issues such as legitimacy, tyranny, civil war, and leadership. It also highlights how Shakespeare's works were adapted for political commentary in different historical and cultural contexts, emphasizing the lasting relevance of his plays in addressing power dynamics and governance. Through a detailed exploration of both Shakespeare's personal context and the broader political implications of his works, the paper delves into the intersection of literature and politics, revealing the nuanced ways in which Shakespeare navigated the dangerous political landscape of his time.

Keywords: Shakespeare and Politics, Political Reflection, Elizabethan England, Power Dynamics, Civil War, Monarchy and Legitimacy, Political Adaptations, Tudor Propaganda

1. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's works have often been treated as mere artistic expressions of drama and poetry. However, deeper analysis reveals that his plays are replete with political commentary, reflecting the ideological and political turbulence of his time. From the rise and fall of kings to the examination of republican ideals, Shakespeare's works engage with questions of governance, legitimacy, and power. This paper investigates the political dimensions of Shakespeare's oeuvre, drawing upon plays that are explicitly political in nature as well as those that reflect more subtle commentaries on power and statecraft.

From London to Paris to Alexandria, Virginia—and even Central Park—there's no shortage of political drama today. It's hard not to wonder what Shakespeare, the great Bard of Stratford-upon-Avon, would make of it all—or more importantly, how he might portray it on stage. However, wondering is likely all we can do. While we know a great deal about Shakespeare's life, his personal opinions remain elusive. His plays are undeniably political, and his grasp of politics was so sharp that one British politician believed his works must have been written by someone with firsthand political experience. This conclusion, however, was mistaken. Shakespeare's keen insight into politics stemmed from his deep understanding of human nature, as politics is inherently tied to humanity.

The reason we know little of Shakespeare's personal political views is because he was a master dramatist. He never preached; instead, he allowed his characters to speak, leaving us to speculate if any of them voiced his own thoughts. Nonetheless, certain themes repeatedly surface, and some of the messages within his plays are impossible to overlook. These themes are particularly prominent in four of his greatest works, which Polonius might describe as "tragical-comical-historical." These plays focus on the state in times of crisis and the political actions of individuals. Across these four plays, six central themes emerge: the necessity of order, the consequences of regicide, the traits of a good ruler, the perils of ambition, the instability of crowds, and the dangers of unchecked power.

2. POLITICS IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

Shakespeare lived in an age of political intrigue and instability, where monarchs exercised absolute power, but also faced significant challenges from religious factions, foreign powers, and internal dissent. The political landscape of Elizabethan England—dominated by the Tudor monarchy—shaped much of Shakespeare's writing. The struggles between Catholics and Protestants, the consequences of Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church, and the ever-present threat of rebellion played into the themes of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies.

The political turbulence of the time is vividly mirrored in Shakespeare's history plays, such as Richard II, Henry V, and Henry VI. These plays not only document historical events but also serve as propaganda tools that promoted the legitimacy of the Tudor monarchy. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard III as a villainous usurper and Henry V as a heroic ruler underscores the political motivations behind his works

3. REFLECTION OF POLITICS IN SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

Shakespeare's politics are deeply embedded in the structure and content of his plays. For instance, Julius Caesar and Coriolanus explore the tension between republicanism and monarchy. Both plays present the complexities of leadership, the fragility of power, and the fickleness of public opinion. The assassination of Caesar, framed as a defense of the Roman Republic, delves into the morality of political violence, a topic that resonates with the political discourse of Shakespeare's time(Politics shaks).

In Richard II, Shakespeare examines the concept of divine right and the legitimacy of rebellion. Richard's deposition by Bolingbroke, who later becomes Henry IV, reflects the uneasy relationship between power and authority. Similarly, Macbeth explores the consequences of political ambition and tyranny, with Macbeth's ascent to power marking the destruction of the moral and social order.

4. SHAKESPEARE'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

While it is difficult to pinpoint Shakespeare's own political beliefs, his works suggest a nuanced understanding of governance and the human condition. Shakespeare often critiques unchecked ambition and tyranny, as seen in Macbeth and Julius Caesar. He also advocates for the maintenance of social hierarchies and the responsibilities of rulers to their subjects, most clearly exemplified in Henry V and Hamlet. In Henry V, Shakespeare portrays an ideal king who identifies with his soldiers and commands loyalty through virtue, while in Hamlet, the political intrigue of the Danish court highlights the perils of corruption and misrule.

Shakespeare's politics also extend to his comedies and romances. In plays such as The Tempest and Measure for Measure, the intersection of politics and personal morality is explored. These plays delve into the concept of justice and the balance between leniency and tyranny, providing a platform for Shakespeare to comment on the role of the state in maintaining order.

5. POLITICAL USES OF SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's works have been appropriated for political purposes across history and geography. In Elizabethan England, his history plays served to legitimize the Tudor claim to the throne, while his Roman plays commented on the fragility of republics and monarchies alike. In modern times, Shakespeare's plays have been adapted to reflect contemporary political issues. For example, adaptations of Julius Caesar and Henry V during the 20th century were used to comment on authoritarian regimes and militarism.

In colonial and post-colonial contexts, Shakespeare's works have been reinterpreted to challenge imperial power. The Tempest has become a favorite play among postcolonial scholars, with the character of Caliban serving as a symbol of resistance against colonial rule. Similarly, in modern Arab theater, Hamlet has been used as a vehicle to critique political tyranny and corruption, highlighting the adaptability of Shakespeare's political themes to different cultural contexts.

5.1 ORDER

Renaissance Europe was a time of both creativity and uncertainty. The old order, centered around the church, was fading, while a new political order had yet to fully emerge. Political concepts were still often framed in religious terms. Life was fragile: the poor faced the threat

of starvation, the powerful risked losing the king's favor, and everyone was vulnerable to plague, chaos, and war. In such a world, the most desired thing was stability and order.

This transition between eras is reflected in Hamlet. Hamlet's father resolved territorial disputes through armored combat, while Claudius employs diplomats—something new to the Elizabethan world. Hamlet himself comes from a Protestant university, while the ghost of his father hails from a Catholic purgatory.

The closest Shakespeare comes to delivering a political lesson is Ulysses' speech in Troilus and Cressida to the Greek council of war, as they discuss how to end Achilles' withdrawal from battle. Ulysses emphasizes that "degree"—or authority and hierarchy—is vital for maintaining societal order.

O when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogeniture and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?

This view was common in Elizabethan world: an order based on natural harmony, sometimes compared to the cosmic order, was necessary for all social organization. Reciprocal obligation binds people together as cosmic forces bind the planets. It is this social hierarchy that keeps the peace:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy; . . .

Social order in turn provides political order. In Asia this creed is called Confucianism: Order through a system of mutual obligations, reinforced by ceremony. Without the social order conflict would be universal: "Each thing meets in mere oppugnancy." This, taken to extremes, ends in the war of all against all.

Without this political/social order there would be no moral order:

Force should be right; or rather right and wrong.
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their name, and so should justice too.

Fifty years later Thomas Hobbes wrote in Leviathan (Chapter 13), "To this war of every man against every man, this is also consequent that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and

wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice." As Troilus and Cressida itself shows, in ungoverned war there is neither honor nor justice, for order is a prerequisite for both.

5.2 REGICIDE

For Shakespeare, monarchy is the natural form of government. People instinctively seek out a king. When Brutus declares that he killed Caesar to save the Republic, the crowd ironically responds by asking for Brutus to be made Caesar. Similarly, Jack Cade, leading a rebellion in Henry VI, aims to make himself king. In The Tempest, even the virtuous and elderly Gonzalo imagines a utopian society with no wealth or poverty, where all people are pure and idle—but still envisions himself as king in order to realize this dream.

Shakespeare's plays consistently convey the same message: order is restored by the arrival of a new ruler—Fortinbras in Hamlet, Malcolm in Macbeth, Edgar in King Lear—or by the return of a rightful ruler, as seen with the Duke in Measure for Measure or Prospero in The Tempest. After Caesar's assassination, stability only comes at the end of Antony and Cleopatra, when the triumvirate transitions into monarchy. In Henry IV Part II, the crowning of a new king brings an end to the chaos of Eastcheap.

If monarchy represents order, then overthrowing or killing a king is the gravest of crimes. Regicide leads to civil war, which is far worse than foreign conflict. While foreign wars may be celebrated, civil war is depicted as the ultimate tragedy for a country. Although the Wars of the Roses were over a century in the past when Shakespeare wrote his histories, their legacy lingered, much like the memories of World War I today.

The history cycle begins with Richard II, where Richard is deposed and murdered by Bolingbroke. Despite being an ineffective and self-absorbed ruler, Richard's inadequacies do not justify his overthrow. Bolingbroke's ambition and hunger for power drive him to force Richard to abdicate, leading to the Bishop of Carlisle's ominous warning.

And if you crown him, let me prophesy:
The blood of England shall manure the ground . . . .
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound. (IV, i, 125-132)

Bolingbroke has the bishop arrested.

His reign as Henry IV is disturbed by rebels claiming the throne. He suppresses them, but never sleeps easy. When his son, Henry V, sails for France he executes three noblemen in the pay of France. Their leader, the Duke of Cambridge, is another who has a claim on the throne. Later on, the night before Agincourt, Henry prays:

Not today, O Lord,
O not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown. (IV, i, 289-291)

Henry V's victories in France bring a brief period of peace to England, but he dies young. His successor, Henry VI, ascends the throne as a child and grows into a weak king, prone to bouts of mental illness. During his reign, rebellions escalate into a full-blown civil war. The three parts of Henry VI depict the loss of France, followed by the violence, murders, and chaos of the Wars of the Roses, which trace their origins to Bolingbroke's unlawful seizure of the throne. Peace and stability are only restored when Henry VII defeats Richard III and unites the houses of York and Lancaster. Regicide not only causes immediate strife, but leads to a prolonged chain of conflicts.

5.3 THE KING

In a monarchical order the King is all-important. The history plays show us kings who are weak or violent; Henry V presents an ideal.

Ideals are dull. Some notable critics, Auden, Yeats, and Harold Bloom, agree in finding Henry unattractive. Henry suffers by comparison with Falstaff, a kind of anti-ideal, and the man he rejects when he becomes King. Henry cannot match Falstaff's human qualities: the wit and lust for life. Falstaff wins the love of many, including, it is said, Queen Elizabeth. But he is a Lord of Misrule, not a King. Henry's first speech as King tells us of his transformation:

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dreamed of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But being wake I do despise my dream. . . .
Presume not now I am the thing I was.

To be a King means, first, the transformation he has undergone. But it is through Henry V that Shakespeare really develops the ideal King, brave and ruthless in war, yet a man among other men. He leads from the front at Harfleur and goes among his men (as in many epics, including the Iliad, which Shakespeare read in Chapman's translation) without becoming one of them.

5.4 AMBITION

Hamlet is striking for his absence of ambition, which is a negative quality in Shakespeare. Macbeth falls because of "vaulting ambition"; Caesar's supposed ambition is the justification of his murder. Claudius, trying to pray, speaks of, "The effects for which I did the murder/My crown, mine own ambition and my queen." Ambition in this sense is suspect; it is a rebellion against "degree", the system of rank according to birth. It is as though not being ambitious is an important quality in a king.

Henry, on the eve of Agincourt thinks of the responsibilities of office:

What infinite heartsease
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?
And what have kings that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
That beats upon the high shore of this world –
No, not all of these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep as soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with a body filled and vacant mind
Gets him to rest.

Such thoughts are common in Shakespeare's kings. Richard II reminds his companions that he too is a man:

For you have but mistook me all this while;
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends—subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king? (III, ii, 174)

Henry VI, fatally weak as a king but touching as a person, contemplates his defeat at Towton and speaks about how much better it would have been to be a shepherd, concluding:

Ah what a life were this! How sweet! How lovely!
Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade
To shepherds looking on their silly sheep
Than doth a rich embroidered canopy
To kings that fear their subjects treachery?" (Henry VI pt 3, II, v, 41)

The only Shakespearian king whose private thoughts are not about the burdens of office is Richard III. Here they are as he expresses them earlier in the same play:

Why, I can smile and murder whiles I smile,
And cry, "Content!" to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions. (III, ii, 82-85)

And then, after murdering Henry VI:

I have no father; I am like no father.
I have no brother; I am like no brother.
And this word 'love' which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another,
And not in me! I am myself alone. (V, vii, 80-84)

5.5 THE CROWD

London in Shakespeare's day was a city of 200,000, mostly poor and uneducated. Crowds were fearful things. With no police and no media except word of mouth, crowds could fall prey to rumors and become dangerous. The nobility protected themselves with armed guards; the rest could find themselves at the mercy of the crowd. In Henry IV, Rumour "painted full of tongues" explains:

Rumour is a pipe
Blown by surmises, Jealousy's conjectures, . . .
That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
The still discordant, wavering multitude,
Can play upon it.

Plays were about high society: palaces, princes, and kings. The common people do not have a large part in Shakespeare's plays. Sometimes they are humorous; sometimes, like Bates and Williams, they are straightforward and admirable. As a crowd they are dangerous. An early glimpse of Shakespeare's talent comes in his first play, Henry VI Part II. This comes suddenly to life in the scenes of the Kentish rebellion led by Jack Cade, a mixture of comedy and cruelty:

CADE: There shall be in England seven halfpenny loaves sold for a penny, the three-hooped pots shall have ten hoops, and I will make it a felony to drink small beer. All the realms shall be in common, and in Cheapside shall my palfry go to grass. And when I am king, as king I will be—

ALL: God save your Majesty!

CADE: I thank you good people—there shall be no money, all shall eat and drink at my score, and I will apparel them all in one livery, that they may be agreed like brothers and worship me, their lord.

BUTCHER: The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers. (Henry VI Part I, IV, ii, 66-76)

Later Cade is confronted by the King's representatives. The crowd sways this way and that, first taking the King's offer of pardon, then returning to Cade, finally deserting him. Cade is caught and killed trying to eat grass in a private garden: "I, that never feared any, am vanquished by famine, not by valour." (Cade is dangerous and ridiculous, but Shakespeare gives him some dignity in death).

5.6 Ungoverned Power

The wars in Shakespeare's plays are mostly civil wars. In only two plays do foreign wars play a central part. One is Henry V, a patriotic play of famous victories. The other is Troilus and Cressida.

What is this play about? The Prologue tells us: beginning in the style of an epic:

In Troy there lies the scene. From isles of Greece
The Princes orgulous, their high blood chafed,
Have to the port of Athens sent their ships,
Fraught with the ministers and instruments
Of cruel war. Sixty and nine that wore
Their crownets regal from the Athenian bay
Put forth towards Phrygia, and their vow is made
To ransack Troy, within whose stout immures
The ravished Helen, Menelaus' queen,
With wanton Paris sleeps." (I, O, 0-10)

Then, in the middle of this overblown, though magnificent, language come three notes of bathos. First, continuing from the passage above:

—and that's the quarrel.

The epic conflict turns out to have an ordinary, even sleazy, cause. Then, after more over-gorgeous lines, the Prologue explains that he has no idea what is going to happen in the play but he is there,

to tell you, fair beholders, that our play
Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,
Beginning in the middle, starting thence away,
To what may be digested in a play.
Like or find fault; do as your pleasures are;
Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war. (I, 0, 27-31)

"Beginning in the middle" is in the tradition of the epic: They begin in medias res.[5] In English, however, it sounds mockingly casual. The rest is even more casual: What is going to happen? "'Tis but the chance of war." The high sounding introduction ends aimlessly.

As in wars, there are times when there is more talking than fighting. The Trojans debate whether they should return Helen to Menelaus and make peace. Hector, their greatest warrior, wants to give her back; Troilus his impetuous youngest brother speaks for fighting on. Paris is on Troilus' side: To give Helen up would be to admit a wrong; defending her is a cause that

ennobles those who die in it. Hector wins the argument, but then, for no clear reason, he gives in to his brothers. Troilus, joyful, agrees:

She is a theme of honour and renown,
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds (II, ii, 199-200)

The play goes on to show that the opposite is true. Troilus is making the classical, circular argument of countries at war. Lives have been lost; to honor their sacrifice more must be lost. Paris goes back to Helen and the others go off to fight. Helen is worthless; the Trojans, excepting Hector, are shallow; but Hector allows himself to be overruled.

The Greeks are no better. In case we might miss this, Shakespeare introduces Thersites, listed in the Dramatis Personae as "a deformed and scurrilous Greek." He acts as a chorus on the Greek side commenting on their faults. His opening sally sets the tone:

Agamemnon, how if he had boils—full, all over, generally? . . . And those boils did run? Then would come some matter from him. I see none now.

The joke is in "matter" which means both pus and also substance. Not in good taste, perhaps, but Thersites has a point. Agamemnon is an old windbag. Thersites' summary of the play, more informative than that of the Prologue, is: "All the argument is a whore and a cuckold."

The first point of Troilus and Cressida is that a world without order, our first theme, is a world of pure power—and power without limits is self-destructive, as is appetite—ambition—without limits.

Its second theme is that betrayal of love complements betrayal of honor. Troilus and Cressida yearn for each other in Act I, and are brought together in Act III where they kiss and swear faithfulness:

If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,
When Time is old and hath forgot himself,
When water drops have worn the stones of Troy
And blind oblivion swallowed cities up,
And mighty states, characterless are grated
To dusty nothing, yet let memory,
From false to false, among false maids in love
Upbraid my falsehood. When they have said, 'as false
As air, as water, wind or sandy earth,
As fox to lamb, as wolf to heifer's calf . . .
Yea let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
As false as Cressid (III, ii, 173-186)

This is exactly what they do say. From Medieval times on, Cressida is a byword for faithlessness, though Shakespeare being Shakespeare, his Cressida is more complicated than that:

TROILUS: What offends you, lady?

CRESSIDA: Sir, my own company.

TROILUS: You cannot shun yourself.

CRESSIDA: Let me go and try. (III, ii, 142-144)

Self-destruction is part of her make up, but she is also a victim of war. Sent in an exchange to the Trojan camp, she does what many women do in wars to survive, though not, in her case, with much reluctance.

In Troilus and Cressida, there is no sense of before and after, no frame of moral or temporal reference, no mention of religion, no even the gods that have such an important part in the Iliad. Everything is disconnected. Everyone is on his or her own. The Chorus' strange setting of the scene ("Beginning in the middle, starting thence away, to what may be digested in a play") locates it nowhere. Each character in the play decides how to act, for that moment only. This too is part of a world at war, where all sense of order has been lost. This is the closest the Renaissance world comes to Samuel Beckett: a world at war, where for each individual there may be no tomorrow, where, under the imperative of survival, morality comes second: "Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war."

Five years after Troilus and Cressida Shakespeare gives us another dystopian universe in King Lear. The language of Troilus and Cressida is beautiful, and its ideas are powerful, but none of its characters or scenes escape the stage and live in the imagination as they do in King Lear.

In King Lear cruelty and despair are made flesh. The story is of the disorder that follows Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters, excluding the youngest in a fit of pique. In parallel, the Earl of Gloucester's bastard son deceives him into turning his good son out of doors. The play unfolds through Lear's madness as he is exposed to anger, grief, old age, and the elements; and through the blinding of Gloucester, when he tries to help Lear, by one of Lear's sons in law.

In this catastrophe the precepts we have in earlier plays are shaken. The Duke of Cornwall and his wife, Lear's daughter, who blind Gloucester, do so in full view of the audience. They are the highest ranked in the land. One of their servants, appalled, rises against them and kills Cornwall. Other servants go to help Gloucester. There is no doubt where the sympathies of the playwright lie, and the audience will join him. In this world turned upside down, the servants are right to attack their masters; the blind see more clearly than the sighted, and truth is spoken by the fool and the madman.

Is this is Shakespeare's voice or Ulysses'? We do not know. But the fineness of the language catches the ear, and this story is played out in Troilus and Cressida and in many other plays.

6. SHAKESPEARE TODAY

In the past hundred years Shakespeare's plays have often been given a contemporary twist. Orson Welles' production of Julius Caesar in 1937 omitted large parts of the original, made Caesar a fascist dictator and Brutus an ineffectual liberal. (It ran for a record 157 performances). Under the influence of Vietnam, some critics, wanting Shakespeare on their side, interpreted Henry V as an anti-militarist play, though it is not clear that anyone attempted this on the stage.

We can do what we will of Shakespeare. If it works on the stage that is enough; if it brings people to read Shakespeare themselves, that is even better. But we should not imagine that Shakespeare shared these views. Here I take an equally ahistorical guess at how Shakespeare might look at today's world.

Much has changed, but not everything. Order is still better than chaos, though some regimes (North Korea) test this proposition to the limit. Kings rule today in few countries, but governments still have a touch of monarchy about them. The monarch may be temporary, and his or her power may be less than absolute, but in almost every country, authoritarian or democratic, leadership rests with one man or woman. Succession is still the key question, no matter what the system. Legitimacy, complicated, intangible, and subject to constant evolution, remains the foundation of order.

The destruction of a regime—the modern equivalent of regicide—is still likely to bring brings chaos or civil war: Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria; going further back, China and Russia. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 were exceptions: Their historical experience, and a benign encompassing environment (the European Union and NATO) saved them. Even so, their continued success cannot be taken for granted. Russia, on reflection, for all its unpleasantness, has at least avoided a civil war.

The qualities needed in leaders have not changed: Constancy, responsibility, courage, a sense of justice, and the common touch are all as valuable today as in the 17th century, and as rare. Learning from Hamlet, we might add skepticism to our list of good qualities. Hesitation has its merits: Eisenhower procrastinated on Vietnam; Carter did nothing about Iran; Reagan did not take revenge in Lebanon but instead withdrew the remaining American forces. The occasions when decisive action is the best course are fewer than we think.

The biggest change, perhaps, is that ambition, once a sin against order, is now a prerequisite for office. Shakespeare would be astonished to find we have invented a system of choosing leaders that is so arduous and unpleasant that only those with overwhelming personal ambition will think of submitting themselves to it.

Shakespeare thought crowds were dangerous; this remains valid. That authoritarians fear them is no surprise. Democrats should be as wary of their modern equivalent: the referendum, a pseudo-democratic way of bringing out the worst in people.

Does the superb Troilus and Cressida mean that Shakespeare saw war as futile? Not necessarily. It is one possibility. But this is a play, not a sermon.

It is tempting to sum up by saying that, in today's terms, Shakespeare is a skeptical conservative. But that misses the point: both his skepticism and his conservatism reflect a distrust of ungoverned power. Shakespeare and Montaigne shared a hatred of cruelty. Their age was not yet the age of Enlightenment, but they point the way to it.

Shakespeare is skeptical of principles and certainties: We should put people first. This is a playwright who understood men, including their faults. Even those who are dangerous like Jack Cade or ridiculous like Malvolio get sympathy from their author. Somewhere here is a glimpse of the modern world and of the idea of the worth of individuals, but it is a glimpse, not a doctrine.

A few months ago, in the Warsaw State Theatre, someone pointed me to a quotation from Shakespeare, in Polish, on the main staircase. My guide didn't want to translate for fear of getting the words wrong. Why should the Polish State Theatre quote Shakespeare? Then I saw it was from Hamlet and I knew what it must be.

Shakespeare has a trick that he uses when he has something important to say. He announces that it is coming, but then delays it with qualifications and conditions, as if it is difficult to say it straight out. Thus in Twelfth Night, when Viola is admitting to herself that she loves Orsino, she speaks hesitantly:

My father had a daughter loved a man
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship. (II, iv, 107-9)

Here is Shakespeare explaining what he is doing when he writes for the theater:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is quite from 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.

7. CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's exploration of power, governance, and statecraft continues to resonate with audiences and political thinkers today. His nuanced understanding of human nature, governance, and political ambition allows his works to transcend time and place, making them

relevant to a wide array of political contexts. By engaging with Shakespeare's plays as political texts, we gain insight not only into the political concerns of Elizabethan England but also into broader questions of leadership, legitimacy, and justice that remain pertinent in the modern world. Shakespeare's legacy as a political thinker endures, making his works an essential part of political discourse both historically and in contemporary society.

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