

Divergent Monarchs in Henry V and King Lear

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Abstract

Henry V and King Lear present Shakespeare as being profoundly perceptive of power relations, besides other numerous sensitivities toward human conditions observed in his works. He portrays two divergent monarchic demeanors in these plays one of which depicts a shrewd king who expands and sustains his power, while the other puts forward an injudicious king who loses his power due to an indiscreet decision. As the most celebrated figure among the monarchs Shakespeare has created, Henry V is depicted by him as a ruler who is very heedful of the power “apparatus”, and hence fortifies his sovereign power that seems to be unassailable, whereas the old Lear is presented as an unwise king who loses his power on account of the imprudent decision of dividing his territory among his daughters. To discuss the issue of power in these plays, I resort to Foucault’s ideas about “sovereignty”, as founded on the possession of a large amount of land and the concept of divine protection, and exerted from the top of a hierarchical pyramid.

Key-words: power relations, monarchical institution, fixed hierarchy, juridical power

1. Introduction

The depiction of power relations seems to be one of Shakespeare’s major concerns, seeing that one of the recurring motifs of his massive dramatic oeuvre is the functioning of power mechanism, and from *Julius Caesar* to *Macbeth*, he portrays his historical or tragic figures in complicated power networks. He has dramatically illustrated various cases of sovereigns’ attempts to safeguard their power and schemers’ efforts to depose them not only in such historical plays as *Henry VIII* and *Richard III*, but also in tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and romances such as *The Tempest*. Two of the Bard’s plays that are discussed here, *Henry V* and *King Lear*, present him highly conscious of power mechanisms in monarchic societies where landowning was the foundation of power. While in the former play he portrays an astute king who is shrewdly conscious of power relations, in the latter he pictures a king who seems to be ignorant of them. The most celebrated figure among the monarchs Shakespeare has ever created, Henry V is depicted as a monarch who is very cognizant of the functioning of power “apparatus”, and hence fortifies the pillars of his sovereign power that seems to be unassailable, whereas the old Lear is presented as being ignorant of the very foundations of “monarchical institution” – landowning, and consequently loses his power as a result of the injudicious decision of dividing his kingdom among his daughters.

To elaborate on Shakespeare’s portrayal of the preservation and devastation of monarchic power in these historical and tragic plays, I resort to Foucault’s ideas about “sovereignty”, as he contends that unlike modern power which is “exercised” from various points, by diverse social institutions, pre-modern power was exerted by the sovereign, from the top of a hierarchical pyramid. Foucault also argues that “monarchical institution” was founded on the possession of a large amount of land and the conception of being protected by the divine power. In the light of these notions, I try to show Shakespeare’s astute picture of the working of power mechanisms in *Henry V* and *King Lear*. More than other contemporary critics, new historicists and cultural materialists have discussed the concept of power in Shakespeare’s canon. While new historicists “suggest that, even though many of Shakespeare’s plays give voice to subversive ideas, such questionings of the prevalent social order are always ‘contained’ within the terms of the discourses which hold that social order in place” (Selden 164), cultural materialists consider Shakespeare “impartial on the question of politics” (Dollimore 231). New historicists’ argument appeals more to me than Dollimore’s idea on Shakespeare’s impartiality, because in most of his works the Bard appears to be an advocate of aristocracy and monarchy, although in some parts of them some “subversive” voices are heard.

His endorsement of the British monarchic system is more highlighted in *Henry V* than his other plays, seeing that he “openly celebrates the achievements of a successful king” (Ousby 453) in that dramatic backing of English royalty. Unlike *Henry V* in which he “celebrates” a powerful monarch, his *King Lear* draws the picture of an irrational ruler whose loss of power is the direct outcome of his injudiciousness. The different conducts of these two kings that make their creator “celebrate” one and condemn the other would be discussed here by taking into account Foucault’s ideas.

2. Foucault’s Ideas on Monarchical Institution

Although Foucault has written many books on various subjects, from madness to sexuality, his major concern has always been “power relations”, as he affirms in an interview: “In my studies of madness or the prison, it seemed to me that the question at the center of everything was: what is power? And, to be more specific: how is it exercised, what exactly happens when someone exercises power over another?” (“On Power” 101-102). His theory of power is mostly put forth in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (1978) in which he argues that “power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” (*History, Vol. I* 93). Foucault’s “different conception of power” (91) challenges the ideas of such thinkers as Marx and Freud for whom power is “a purely negative force which acts from a position of exteriority” (Christmas 169), as he affirms here: “I am not referring to Power with capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations or within an institution, or an administration” (“Critical Theory” 38). Therefore he recommends analyzing power “as something which circulates [in a society], or as something which only functions in the form of a chain”, seeing that power is “exercised through a net-like organization” (“Two Lectures” 98).

Since Foucault believes that “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (*History* 94), he concludes that “the relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body” (“Power and Sex” 119), therefore these relations must be traced “not only in their governmental form but also in the intra-governmental or para-governmental ones” (119). Most of these issues, however, are the features of modern power. Distinguishing modern power from pre-modern power that was based on “monarchical institution”, Foucault confirms that an important change in the form of power occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that witnessed a shift “from a system where the king or queen is seen as the embodiment of the nation and power is dispersed from above, to a system where power is exercised within the social body” (Mills 43). Since he is a philosopher-historian, his investigations into pre-modern structure of power are not detached from his inquiries into system of thought. In *The Order of Things* (1966), he traces a “hiatus in philosophical thought which divides what he calls the Classical Age from the Age of Man or the Age of Modernity” (Christmas 162), and confirms that the “watershed between the Classical Age and the Age of Modernity coincides roughly with the life and work” Immanuel Kant (162). Elaborating on the “classical system” of thought, Foucault contends that “thought in the Classical Age had been united by the idea of an ordered universe which could be understood by analyzing it into simple elements” (162).

The originator of that “ordered universe” was God or the First Cause, and the top of hierarchical system of power on the earth – the Chain of Being, was the place of the powerful monarch, because it was a wide-spread belief that “Behind the presence of the king stood ... God himself” (During 147-48). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault scrutinizes the “monarchical institution” (88) that “developed in the Middle Ages” (86), but retained its power till the eighteenth century:

The great institution of power that developed in the Middle Ages – monarchy, the state with its apparatus – rose up on the basis of a multiplicity of prior powers, and to a certain extent in opposition to them: dense, entangled, conflicting powers, powers tied to the direct or indirect dominion over the land, to the possession of arms, to serfdom If these institutions were able to implant themselves, if, by profiting from a whole series of tactical alliances, they were able to gain acceptance, this was because they presented themselves as agencies of regulation, arbitration, and demarcation, as a way of introducing order in the midst of these powers, of establishing a principle that would temper them and distribute them according to boundaries and a fixed hierarchy. (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* 86-87)

Unlike decentralized modern power that is “exercised from innumerable points”, pre-modern power was centralized in the hands of the sovereign who, though emerging from a “multiplicity of prior powers”,

set its power above other powers by asserting himself through the claim of “regulation, arbitration and demarcation” for bringing about order, and by a “whole series of tactical alliances” gained the approval of those who possessed “land” and “arms”, thus imposed his power on them and “establish[ed] a principle” that would “distribute[power] according to” a “fixed hierarchy”.

Besides founding a system that seemingly resolved all conflicts, the monarch was supposed to represent God on the earth – hence the claim of being the “embodiment of justice”, due to possessing the *divine* right to decide what was “lawful” and “legitimate”. The notion of “King’s two bodies” (During 147) was exploited to strengthen the absolute power of the sovereign; he was “supposed to have both an actual and a symbolic body, the latter in attendance at state and juridical occasions” (147), since his “symbolic body” represented the divine power. Overall he possessed an unconditional, god-like power that allowed him to exclude, remove and obliterate whatever his “judgment pronounce[d] illegitimate”. Because of this, Foucault “speaks interchangeably of “sovereign power” and “juridical power”. To sustain the “sovereign power”, whenever its “law or rights [were] violated, the “juridical power” came “into play”, to “punish ... violation” by “hanging, drawing, quartering ... in cruel quasi-theatrical spectacles” (148).

Foucault confirms that “monarchical institution” retained its centralized power till the seventeenth century when “the view that power is a sovereign’s right was inverted”, and monarch’s “rights were transformed into so-called ‘natural rights’, considered to be derived from a pre-historical, social contract in which subjects gave up their liberties so as to establish social order” (During 149) – the well-known notion of “social contract”, propounded by Rousseau. As a result of questioning the absolute power of monarchy, kings were dethroned and lost their power through a series of uprisings and revolutions in the seventeenth century (in England) and the eighteenth century (over the continent). The target of those wide-spread insurgences, Foucault believes, was not the “juridico-monarchic” system, but the sovereign who “set [him]self above the laws”:

Criticism of the eighteenth-century monarchic institution in France was not directed against the juridico-monarchic sphere as such, but was made on behalf of a pure and rigorous juridical system to which all mechanisms of power could conform, with no excesses or irregularities, as opposed to a monarchy which, notwithstanding its own assertions, continuously overstepped its legal framework and set itself above the laws. (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* 88)

Whether those who revolted against kings “on behalf of a pure and rigorous juridical system” did actualize such a system is a momentous question that is out of the present article’s scope.

3. Divergent Monarchs in Henry V and King Lear

One of the recurring themes of Shakespeare’s dramatic canon is the operation of power mechanism in intricate situations he imagines and pictures his characters in. As a dramatist who was patronized by an aristocrat and performed his plays in the court, he was utterly aware of the ongoing struggles and hostilities in the monarchic system of England and thus engagingly portrayed power relations in his plays. Besides his historical plays in which he dramatizes various cases of sovereigns’ attempts to safeguard their power and schemers’ efforts to depose them, in his tragedies and romances as well one of the crucial matters is the issue of power. Two of his plays that are discussed here, *Henry V* and *King Lear*, despite belonging to two different dramatic genres, embark upon the concept of power and present Shakespeare as highly conscious of power mechanisms in monarchic societies where landowning was the foundation of power. While he portrays an incisive monarch in *Henry V* who is shrewdly conscious of power relations, he presents his Lear as a king who seems to be ignorant of the basis of those relations in a feudal system.

As the most celebrated monarch Shakespeare has ever created, Henry V appears to be a cognizant sovereign who is very mindful of the functioning of power mechanism, consequently strengthens his power that seems to be unassailable, while the old Lear is depicted as being unaware of the foundation of monarchic power – landowning, therefore loses his power because of the reckless decision of dividing his territory. Regarding Shakespeare’s attitude toward politics and his presentation of power-holders in his works, there is a disagreement between some contemporary critics, namely new historicists and cultural materialists, who have discussed power relations in Shakespeare’s canon. While the latter contend that Shakespeare was “impartial on the question of politics” (Dollimore 231) and did not take sides with anyone, the former “suggest that, even though many of Shakespeare’s plays give voice to subversive ideas, such questionings of the prevalent social order are always ‘contained’ within the terms of the discourses which hold that social order in place” (Selden 164).

New historicists' argument sounds more convincing to me than the idea of Shakespeare's impartiality, because in most of his works the Bard appears to be a firm advocate of aristocracy and monarchy, though in some parts of them some "subversive" voices are heard. His endorsement of the British monarchic system is explicitly shown in *Henry V* in which he "openly celebrates the achievements of a successful king" (Ousby 453) who restrains clashing forces of different districts and hence unites the country, and fights against and subdues the French and thereby expands his kingdom.

Like other eminent historians of the last two centuries, Foucault points out that sovereign power was fundamentally based on the possession of land; "monarchy", he states, "rose upon the basis of a multiplicity of prior powers ... [that were] tied to the direct or indirect dominion over the land" (*The History of Sexuality* 86). One can observe by far the crucial importance of land for establishing and sustaining the sovereign power in both *Henry V* and *King Lear*, but when Henry recognizes that important matter, Lear ignores it and decidedly dispossesses himself. Possession of some lands on which both England and France had claims is the cause of the war upon which the plot of *Henry V* is structured. The importance of that possession for the maintenance of the sovereign power is so crucial that the Henry uses the word "love" while speaking about it. Talking to the subjugated French princess at the end of the play, he makes efforts to convince her that he is not her enemy, because he *loves* France:

Catherine Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemi* of France?

King Harry No, it is not possible you should love the enemy of France, Kate. But in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for *I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it, I will have it all mine*; and Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and you are mine. (V. ii. 170- 176) [emphasis added]

Henry's craftiness in playing with language to convince the French princess is remarkable, especially in the last lines of the quoted part, nevertheless his desire to possess France to expand his territory and hence power is explicitly expressed at lines 173 to 175.

One of the "prior powers" "upon [whose] basis" monarchy "rose", Foucault confirms (*The History of Sexuality* 86), was the Church – the principal landowner of the Middle Ages. The close relationship between the sovereign and ecclesiastical powers, and how shrewdly the Church supported monarchy by referring to the holy texts are markedly depicted in *Henry V*. In the first dialog of the play, between the Archbishop Canterbury and Bishop Ely, the importance of the land for the Fathers of Church and also their support of the king for the sake of their own benefits are stated in a straight way. Canterbury tells Ely: "If it pass against us, /We lose the better half of our possession" (I. i. 7-8), and afterward they state:

Canterbury

The king is full of grace and fair regard.

Ely

And a true lover of the holy Church. (I. i. 23- 24)

Moreover Canterbury wishes the divine protection for Henry in the second scene: "God and his angles guard your sacred throne" (I. ii. 7). He considers Henry's throne "sacred", because he represents and reinforces the notion of king's sanctity, as mentioned in former parts, that "Behind the presence of the King stood...God himself" (During 147-48). When Henry asks Canterbury about the righteousness of his claim on French lands he has decided to seize (since he is related to the ancient ruler of the lands through descending from a female ancestor), Canterbury replies:

... There is no bar
To make against your highness' claim to France
But this, which they produce from Pharamond:
'*In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant*' –
'No woman shall succeed in Salic land' –
Which 'Salic land' the French unjustly gloss
To be the realm of France ...

.....
 Yet their own authors faithfully affirm
 That the land Salic is in Germany, (I. ii. 35- 44)

And then adds: "Howbeit they would hold up this Salic Law/ To bar your highness claiming from the female" (I. ii. 91-92). Finally he issues the Church's verdict of on Henry's righteousness!

King Harry
 May I with right and conscience make this claim?
 Canterbury
 The sin upon my head, dread sovereign.
 For in the Book of Numbers is it writ,
 'When the son dies, let the inheritance
 Descend unto the daughter'. Gracious lord,
 Stand for your own; unwind your bloody flag; (I. ii. 96- 101)

How artfully ecclesiastical power misused holy texts throughout the history of Europe and what Foucault calls "a whole series of tactical alliances" between monarchy and "prior powers" are quite obvious here. Besides Henry's alliance with the Church, the play depicts his "tactical alliances" with the Wales, Ireland and Scotland in order to control them and suppress any opposition. The very fact that the four commanders of his army, Gower, Fluellen, Macmorris and Jamie are English, Welsh, Irish and Scot might be considered the symbol of "the bonds of loyalty that [held] Henry's united kingdom" (Ousby 453). Even though Dollimore and Sinfield believe that "Shakespeare was impartial on the question of politics" (231), they cannot deny that the way of depicting non-English commanders and soldiers in *Henry V* "manifest[s] not their countries" centrifugal relationship to England but an ideal subservience of margins to center" (Dollimore 221). And Henry the "star of England", Shakespeare's "most heroic warrior king" (Wells 567) personifies that "center".

Another point Foucault refers to while discussing pre-modern power is the "fixed hierarchy" that sovereignty sets up after establishing its own power "upon the basis of a multiplicity of prior powers" (*The History of Sexuality* 86). Again Shakespeare depicts the Church as the sanctifying agent which underpins that hierarchy by calling it a divine order, as Canterbury does here:

Canterbury
 True. Therefore doth heaven divide
 The state of man in diverse 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. (I. ii. 183- 189)

The fixed social hierarchy based on sovereignty/obedience, in Canterbury's eyes, is a reflection of natural hierarchy, and both are established by the divine power! The notion that "the sovereign had rights that subjects were legally obliged to obey masked the brute fact of domination" (During 149) can be observed in his speech. The myth of sovereignty as the representative of God on the earth in *Henry V* goes to the extent of attributing the discovery of the betrayal of the Earl of Cambridge, Lord Scrope and Thomas Grey to the will of God, when Henry declares:

Since God so graciously hath brought to light
 This dangerous treason lurking in our way
 To hinder our beginnings. We doubt not now
 But every rub is smoothed on our way.
 ... Let us deliver
 Our puissance into the hand of God. (II. ii. 182- 187)

At lines 142-146 of the same scene, Exeter, Henry's uncle arrests them by the charge of "high treason". Here we observe what Foucault calls the "juridico-monarchic" (*The History of Sexuality* 88) power: "Sovereign power prohibits, confiscates, or destroys what sovereign judgment pronounces illegitimate" (Rouse 101).

The “juridico-monarchic” power “prohibits” or “destroys” what sounds “illegitimate”, because it possesses the absolute right to determine what is “lawful” and “legitimate”, as Henry tells Catherine at the end of the play:

O Kate, nice customs curtsy to great kings.
Dear Kate, you and I cannot be confined within the
weak list of a country’s fashion. We are the makers of
manners, Kate ... (V. ii. 265-70)

Henry proves himself to be a shrewd “maker of manners” who instead of being “confined within the weak list of a country’s fashion”, makes his own laws and determines what is “legitimate”, thereby embodies what Foucault means by “sovereign power” and “juridical power” .

On the contrary, Lear does not prove himself to be worthy of possessing either “sovereign power” or “juridical power”, because instead of sustaining his absolute power, as Henry does, he puts into practice a “manner” that destroys the purportedly unified system that existed before. While sovereign power “rose upon” the powers that possessed “land” and “arms”, and became the principal landowner itself, Lear submits willingly his lands to his enemies, though of his own blood. When monarchs “presented themselves as agencies of regulation, arbitration, and demarcation, as a way of introducing order” (*The History of Sexuality* 87), Lear’s imprudent decision in which there is no sign of “regulation” or “demarcation” brings about disorder in his kingdom.

The majority of monarchs throughout history, either in the West or in the East, did not submit even one percent of their power to anyone else, even to the members of their own family, and many of them killed or blinded their own sons, since they were afraid of losing their absolute power. But Lear in a completely illogical act that does not accord with the *norms* of “monarchical institution” and seems inappropriate for “juridical power”, decides to share his kingdom among his daughters and spend the rest of his life as a guest at their courts. At the beginning of the play he declares: “Give me the map there. Know we have divided/ In three our kingdom, and ’tis our first intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age” (I.i.37-39). In spite of that announcement for dividing his kingdom “in three”, he refuses to give any parts to Cordelia because of her honesty. Again he is pictured as an unreasonable and brainless king who does not deserve to hold the sovereign power, since he is easily deceived by the flattery of his elder daughters, as the faithful Kent points out:

... Be Kent unmannerly
When Lear is *mad*. What wouldst thou do, old man,
Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor’s
bound
When majesty stoops to folly. (I. i. 145-49) [emphasis added]

By losing his “land” and “arms”, the very foundations of “monarchical institution”, Lear actually loses his power, and a powerless king is “nothing”, as Shakespeare’s mouthpiece the Fool *wisely* states: “Now thou art an O without a/ figure. I am better than thou art, now. I am a fool;/ thou art nothing” (I. iv. 174- 176), since he is a landless, armless king. He also calls Lear a fool, because “All thy other titles”, he states, “thou hast given away” (I. iv. 144). When Goneril infuriates Lear by asking him to reduce the number of his attendants, the Fool calls him “Lear’s shadow”:

Lear Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
.....
Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool Lear’s shadow? (I. iv. 208-13)

He is no longer Lear but his “shadow”, seeing that he has practically lost his sovereign power by submitting all his territory to his deceitful daughters, while “sovereign power” is based on the possession of “land”, and now he must dismiss his attendants too. The Fool also mocks Lear’s willing decision for handing over his lands to his daughter by calling him a “bitter fool” who has performed a ridiculous action, as we observe in the following metaphoric passage:

Fool Dost know the difference, my boy, between a bitter
fool and a sweet one?

Lear No, lad. Teach me.
 Fool Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.
 Lear What two crowns shall they be?
 Fool Why, after I have cut the egg i'th' middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i'th' middle and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass o'th' back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away. (I. iv. 135-46)

Unlike the majority of monarchs through history, the tragic, indiscreet Lear with “little wit” in his head has given away the “golden” crown on his head by submitting the very foundation of his monarchic power to his sly daughter. The woeful scenes of madness in the stormy weather that follow Lear’s abject dismissal from the courts of both Goneril and Regan intensify the theme presented from the very beginning of the play: the king who gives his “golden [crown] away”, has “little wit in [his] bald crown” that entirely ignores power mechanisms, otherwise he would not have made such an imprudent decision by making which he proves himself to be a *mad* king.

4. Conclusion

Pre-modern power was exercised by the sovereign who had gained his absolute power by convincing the heads of preceding institutions of power to be wiser and more powerful than them for establishing a systematic order that was based on a “fixed hierarchy”. While Shakespeare’s Henry V is portrayed as a shrewd monarch who knows how to utilize power apparatus to his own advantage, his Lear fails to do so, as he imprudently decides to submit his lands (the foundation of monarchical power) to others, and in so doing proves himself to be a *mad* king.

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