

## **Against Absolute Aristocracy: An Evaluation of Insurrection, Sedition and Deception in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Henry IV and the Tempest**

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The desire for freedom lies deeply embedded in the heart of man, and he will not be enslaved for long, though he may be subdued for a little while by the use of brute force. Shakespeare's major works revolve around the rise and fall of Emperors and Empires, and among the many reasons that threaten his monarchs is popular unrest, which Marx defined as the reason for the demise of the Slave and Feudal Societies, and for the establishment of a government by popular consent. This paper will attempt to analyse the factors behind the subversion of the state and revolt against the aristocracy by the other classes that existed in Elizabethan society by applying Marxist principles, and further the conclusions drawn shall be used to evaluate the implications of the changes in power dynamics between these classes and the state, and how this change undermines the authority of the republic as a whole.

*The exhalations whizzing in the air*

*Give so much light that I may read by them. Brutus*

In all his major tragedies, Shakespeare has dealt with the fall of kings, the decay of order into chaos, the death of the monarch as representing the death of the state. This decay is not an isolated event but influenced by social and political forces, and the final destruction that ensues after the long sequence of events that leads up to the demise of the ruler, and the fall of the state into anarchy, is something that comes about as a natural result of the chain of incidents that precede it. The state in the time of Shakespeare was seen as a bone of contention between different players, all of whom wanted to have access to complete and absolute power that the throne implied, and were willing to go to any lengths to achieve that aim. The primary conflict was between legal and otherwise heirs to the throne, such as the House of Lancaster and the

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House of York in the years 1455 and 1485, also called as the War of the Roses, in which victory ultimately went to Lancaster, headed by Henry Tudor, Queen Elizabeth's great grandfather. Parallel to this was the persistent battles between the Church and the State, and between Rome and the Protestants, both of which were considerably influenced by the monarch in power, and in turn influenced the throne as well. The best example of this might well be the case of Henry VIII, who was in fact responsible for the separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church, and who brought about the English Reformation, starting the trend of discrimination against non conformist churches, something which was only to be reversed later during the reign of Mary and afterward Elizabeth I. The English Throne was thus a seat of constant controversy and disputation, and it was only Elizabeth who imparted some stability to it when she came to power in 1558. This was the state of affairs in the English court as Shakespeare found it, and depicts these with considerable merit in his histories, in which he takes his plots from recent as well as distant history. Even in some of his comedies, particularly *The Tempest*, he investigates the balance of power and the struggle that comes with it, although his sources and treatment of the subject varies, as does his sympathies. He not only describes the intrigues and open rebellions against the monarchy, but also provides psychological insight into the various factors that lead up to the revolt itself

The first play that this paper will deal with in this context is Julius Caesar, which is a remarkable example of man's desire for power and glory, and how that desire brings about his inevitable destruction. Shakespeare begins with Caesar's victorious return from war, and the growing conspiracy against him spreading through the kingdom. Caesar is seen by Cassius and others as a threat the republic itself, which they believe that he wants to convert into an autocracy with him at the top of the ladder. On the basis of this suspicion, they convince Brutus, his close friend and aide, that it is in the best interest of the country that Caesar be stopped before he becomes invincible. It turns out to be a surprising turn of events that Brutus, once an ally of Caesar, is turned against him, when he is made to believe that it is in fact the general opinion that Caesar has become a tyrant and must be annihilated. Finally Caesar is stabbed by Brutus and others, and the conspirators make it clear that they have performed this act for the good and welfare for the state and the people. But, the well known speech by Marc Antony in Act III

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Scene II, delivered over the dead corpse of Caesar, wins over public opinion away from the conspirators towards the dead king, and the former are forced to flee the kingdom. At the battle of Philippi, the conspirators are defeated by Marc Antony and Caesar's son Octavius, when Cassius is killed in battle and Brutus commits suicide. Marc Antony recognizes the innocence of Brutus, however, when towards the end of the play he calls him as the noblest of all Romans. Though Brutus was involved in the plot against Caesar, he acted out of intentions that were pure.

What is exceptionally interesting about Shakespeare's portrayal of sedition in this play is that he does not denounce it outright, and imparts it some justification, if not legitimacy. On one hand, Cassius and the others who plotted against Caesar are shown as evil-doers working against the state for their own benefit, in that they are not rebels but maverick dissidents, who merely want to topple the government and seize power. They are no different from reactionary forces depicted in other Shakespearean histories and tragedies. Cassius might be juxtaposed with Antonio from *The Tempest*, for they work towards the same goals with the same ends in mind. But by the introduction of the character of Brutus, and especially by painting him in purely heroic terms, Shakespeare complicates the plot and adds another dimension to it. Without Brutus, the play would have been the simple tale of mutiny, war and the chaos that ensues. But as it is, Shakespeare intricately appends another layer of interpretation to the play by the nobility he imparts to the character of Brutus, a quality that forces the reader to become sympathetic towards the rebellion, for even though the means through which Brutus is convinced are dishonorable, still he is unaware of the falseness of the conspiracy, and thus he is faultless in his suppositions, and his noble intentions keep his actions pure and his innocence intact. It is his nobility, in fact, which sparks doubt in his mind over his actions, and which, fuelled by the appearance of Caesar's ghost, causes this doubt to become more and more pronounced, when finally with the addition of grief, it crushes his soul to the extent that he commits suicide. Thus, even though he is a perpetrator of a crime against the state, he becomes a contender for the title of the hero of the play, for it is as much his tragedy as it is a tragedy of Julius Caesar. It is evident that while Shakespeare does not condone the conspiracy against Caesar, which becomes clear as the rebellion fails, and all conspirators are put to death, and the noble Brutus finds a more heroic end when he chooses to commit suicide, he does at least grant it an air of nobility and virtue, and the

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reader is as much grieved by Brutus' death as he was by the murder of Caesar. Nor is this all. Marc Antony's glowing elegy to Brutus at the end of the play signifies Shakespeare's own sympathies with him, though it was necessary to portray his death, as much as required by the doctrine of poetic justice as much as to ensure that an entirely new era of peace and harmony is begun in Rome, with no connections to the dark and ominous events of the previous reign. Shakespeare makes it clear that while individual greed and self interest might be able to temporarily subvert the authority of the state, in the end the collusion will collapse and order will be restored. There is yet another dimension to the treatment of the question of accession and the deviation from the conventional pattern of the transfer of the crown from successor to successor. In Shakespeares time there was a general question of the succession of the crown, since Elizabeth had refused to marry and there was no legal heir to take over after Elizabeth. This gave rise to the fear that on their being no definite nominee to take over the throne, general chaos would ensue upon Elizabeth's death, and it might even result in a civil war. Taking into account the tumultuous nature of the English crown, and considering the history of the throne before Elizabeth took over, it was only natural and understandable that nobility and the public alike wished for Elizabeth to appoint or at least name a successor to ensure the stability of the functioning of the state, and as the future would eventually show, this fear would prove to be something not entirely baseless, since, although not directly a result of this predicament, the monarchy would eventually face a major setback with the execution of Charles I. This was the general anxiousness about transfer of power and succession of the monarchy which Shakespeare portrayed in his play. The threat of civil war which was looming over England and the mood of the public both found their expression as Shakespeare took up a lesson from history as an attempt to predict the dangerous results of uncertainty in the question inheritance of the crown. The republic stood at the helm of two words, the stability that Elizabeth left behind her, and the chaos that seemed to hover over accession after her. Shakespeare in this play evaluates the situation from a historicist perspective, with the belief that history can be predicted before it is made, and traces the past juxtaposing it with the present, to get a vague outline of what the future might hold for the English nation. But at the same time, inspite of the gloomy nature of the tragedy itself, and the vast destruction that it forebodes, the future as predicted by Shakespeare is one of steady hope and optimism. Towards the end of the play, Octavius Caesar too admits the heroic,

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albeit tragic nature of Brutus' actions, and calls of celebration of their victory. Octavius becomes the new emperor of Rome, and the question of succession finds an answer, howsoever tragic its path might have been. Caesar, who himself had acquired the throne after defeating Pompey in a civil war, even though he was a noble ruler, was assassinated, and Octavius, who ascends the throne after him, gains power after defeating the conspirators and thus acquiring legitimacy as a rightful heir. Shakespeare only reflects public opinion when he portrays the deadly consequences of civil war and uncertainty in accession on the nation state. But the final note of optimism is a hint at the resilient and spirited nature of the English people, and the belief that in spite of the confusion that prevailed, there was still hope, although it required urgent action both on account of the monarch Elizabeth and the general public.

Shakespeare continues this trend in *Macbeth*, but here he shifts the focus from the welfare of the state to individual gain and personal ambition. The tragedy of *Macbeth* is entirely out of his aspiration to the throne, something which is shared by his wife, and together they embark on the journey to treason and ultimate self annihilation. *Macbeth* is initially a loyal general in King Duncan's army, and he is shown as brave and patriotic, having defeated the allied forces of Norway and Ireland, and is returning home when he encounters the three witches who tell him his fate. They foretell that it is in his destiny to become King of Scotland, and it is this prophecy that propels him to commit murder after murder to reach his goal. As opposed to *Julius Caesar*, where the motivation was national affluence and the welfare of both the nation and the people, *Macbeth* offers another insight into the reasons behind insurrection and subversion of the authority of the state – that of personal vantage. Absolute power and control is suo moto avaritia for any man, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is no exception to this rule. He acts at first out of his adherence to and in reverence to his duty to the state and to his King, and in this role he discharges his office well and without caprice, but once the desire for further gain is awakened in him, and the opportunity for ascension presents itself, he cannot but not avail himself of the good fortune that has fallen upon him. But this requires him to not only forego his allegiance to his state, but also involves perfidy towards his monarch; treason inevitably claims perfidy as requisition, and *Macbeth* has to descend to this to accomplish his task of becoming King. Yet this is easier said than done, and in the case of *Macbeth*, it becomes evident that the spirit of

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patriotism that drove him to fight for his country and emerge victorious in the battle for the honour and integrity of his nation does not allow him to easily cast off the path of righteousness and stoop to conspiracy and murder. The prophesy that sends him down the road to perdition comes in conflict with his affiliation to his state, and this unrest in his mind continues till the very end of the play. It is Lady Macbeth, who makes the decision on his behalf to grab the opportunity presented to them, and it is she who pushes him to kill Duncan, and persuades him to frame the guards of the crime. The murder of the king itself, however, is insufficient for Macbeth to succeed in his plans. Further diplomatic arrangements are required on his part, and he has to act with great statesmanship to make sure that everything goes well and in accordance with his design, and his actions at this point illustrate complicated political intrigue, along with the manipulation of political affiliations, to serve ends completely contrary to what those affiliations intend to serve. After the murder, Macbeth knows that the blame would fall on him, as the murder was committed in his home. To prevent this suspicion from taking ground, his wife places the bloody knife on the guards on duty outside Duncan's chambers, whom Macbeth stabs to stop from telling the truth. His position is further accentuated when the heirs to the throne, Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain seek shelter into exile outside Scotland, out of fear for their lives. Due to the absence of the rightful heirs, the final obstacles in Macbeth's path are removed, and he is proclaimed as the new king of Scotland.

As in *Julius Caesar*, in this play as well Shakespeare reaffirms loyalty to the state as the only mean of prosperity and success, and any deviation on this account is neither acceptable nor tolerable. The witches that prophesied that Macbeth would become king later also warn him about his inevitable end, that he would be killed by Macduff, who is later revealed not born of a woman, in that he was born of a Caesarian section, when the forest of Great Birnam walks up to Dunsinane Hill. At first Macbeth is revealed, thinking that since no man born can be but not of a woman, and since forests cannot move, he would be invincible. Here Shakespeare points out that though it might seem like the benediction of avarice is permanent, it rarely is so, and recalcitrance seldom leads to inveterate rewards. It is interesting to note that in this context two significant inferences can be drawn from the playwright's adherence to loyalty and unwavering patriotism towards the nation and the monarchy. Firstly, from the very beginning there looms an

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inevitability over the course of the action that is presented in the play. From the moment the three witches make the prediction about Macbeth's future rise to the throne, it becomes apparent to both Macbeth himself and to the reader that while it is in fact destined for Macbeth to ascend to the throne, the intricate web of deceit that Macbeth has to conjure to reach that end is at once fatal and the conclusion of which is ultimate destruction and complete and utter for everyone involved in the tragedy, including innocent bystanders, like Macduff's wife and children, and the conspirators themselves, like Lady Macbeth. Here Shakespeare points out that it is but inevitable that a state will have dissenters, and not only those whose aims and ambitions have been frustrated because of its policies and regulations, but those as well whose ambitions are in contradiction to those of its rulers. Macbeth is a general in the Scottish army, and not only does he enjoy power and prestige in his present situation, but also because of his loyalty and his service to the state he is rewarded, so that more respect and honour is bestowed on him. In the beginning of the play, he is awarded with the title of Thane of Cowdor, replacing his previous title of Thane of Glamis. But he aspires to more than this, and his final aim of becoming king is achieved when he displaces Duncan as the monarch through treacherous conspiracy and murder. Secondly, the very act of sedition implies vindication, and that justice will be served, no matter how improbable or unlikely it may seem. In the play, though it seems to Macbeth that his victory is complete, yet he takes every possible precaution and puts every safeguard possible in place to ensure that the final prediction of the witches doesn't come true. He orders the murders of Macduff's innocent wife and children; an irony is thus introduced, that on account of this news, Macduff, who initially had fled to England, vows revenge, and comes back to Scotland to avenge the deaths of his loved ones. Macbeth thus paves the way for his own destruction, and on account of Macduff's plan of using boughs from trees in Birnam Wood, the rest of the prophecies come true, and finally Macbeth is killed by the latter, bringing the cycle of mayhem and madness to a close, and exacting poetic justice. Thus Shakespeare makes clear his belief that while any state will be inflicted with sedition and subversion, it is also inevitable that such actions will nevertheless lead to the downfall of the conspirators and the restoration of order.

The fact that Shakespeare's conception of rebellion was one of antagonism is also conspicuously discernible in *The Tempest* as well, as the play also has the familiar backdrop of

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an attempt at sedition, which this time too succeeds, and the kingdom in this case as well is subject to usurpation on account of an over-ambitious greed for power, and there is an evident analogy to *Hamlet* when the usurper is discovered to be none other than the brother of the king himself. But there are remarkable features in the play which not only render it to interpretation in a variety of different ways, but give it a distinctive quality that is absent in Shakespeare's other works. For one, the play itself is not a tragedy, and the plot culminates on a joyous note, with everybody being reconciled at the end and the perpetrator admitting his wrongdoings, being absolved of his guilt and his affirmation of refraining from such behaviour in the future. This is an interesting departure from Shakespeare's severe and unforgiving indictment of seditious activities in his previous plays as *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Where previously Shakespeare insisted that human behaviour is not subject to change, and that evil shall remain evil until it is vanquished, and monsters shall remain so until they are they are slayed. This contrariety is notable on account of the fact that Shakespeare, in this play goes against his own conventional tendency of denouncing every action which hints of rebellion against the state, in this play he suggests at, even if subtly, a possible renunciation and a chance at redemption, if the reprehensible deed is renounced and further aberration is proscribed. Although at first Prospero is furious at Antonio and Alonso, time mellows his grief and his anger is subdued. At the end of the play when he shows Antonio the errors of his ways and makes him aware of the fact that his trustworthy servants are in fact not what he had thought them to be, and his revelations of the truth bring about in him a change of heart. What is even more remarkable is that he is welcomed with open arms by Prospero, who wishes nothing more than that his crown should be returned to him and that all should be settled amicably. This shift in perspective comes partially from Shakespeare's own mellowed attitude that replaced his previous dark desolation that marks the culmination of his tragedies towards the end of his literary career, as well the melioration of the social and political paradigms in which he wrote. James I had succeeded Elizabeth, and the uncertainty over the succession of the monarchy had been rendered irrelevant. There was relative stability in government, and even though there were numerous conflicts that affected the reign of James I, the wave of literary genius that had begun under Elizabeth continued, and the written word continued to be promoted and innovation in invention encouraged. In this tranquil mood Shakespeare let himself get carried away, and thus he ends his literary canon on an ambrosial



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note, and instead of the recriminations that would have followed such a sacrilegious act.

An entirely different scenario can be witnessed in Shakespeare's historical plays *Henry IV* part first and second. While in the other plays discussed here the plot ends with either renunciation or death of the rebel, in the case of the *Henry IV* plays the plot revolves around the fact that Henry Bolinbroke acquires the throne through illicit means by committing the murder of Richard II, and the legal heir to the throne, the successor appointed by the latter, the Earl of March, becomes increasingly frustrated at this injustice, and finally revolts, leading to the battle of Shrewsbury. It is interesting to note how in this particular play Shakespeare's affinities are towards the seditious elements rather than the state itself, and it is clearly evident that both Henry IV and his son Hal are portrayed in a positive manner, and Shakespeare's allegiance is towards them rather than the slain king Richard II and his lineage. This idiosyncrasy is further accentuated by the fact that Hal, later Henry V, is initially portrayed as a careless and irresponsible sybarite, whose only goal in life is to live a merry life regardless of his duties and responsibilities. This goes to show that Shakespeare's allegiance towards the state is unconditional, even if the monarch is unfit to rule and there is lawlessness prevalent throughout.

To conclude, it is evident that Shakespeare's allegiance towards the state is unconditional and complete, and he regards all forms of sedition as delinquent and ignominious. His only cure for this malady is annihilation of the rebellious forces and restoration of all order. It is admissible that he became somewhat tolerant of this behaviour in his later years, but nevertheless he refused to allow any deviation other than complete accordance with the law of the land.

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