

Ideological Conflicts in Shakespearean Tragedy: A Study

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Abstract

Shakespearean plays bear ample testimony to the fact that he did have an ideological position which evolves over the years with its own contradictions. Many academic critics tend to miss this point for one reason or other. In modern Shakespearean criticism it has been held that Shakespeare affirmed and celebrated the virtues of traditional social and ideological order by testing their validity against the failing, frustration and crimes of psychopaths. Yet, he saw these, psychopaths not so much as cases of deviation as crucial instances holding the key to the very nature of the social order such as values like love, loyalty and truth. He placed them against a dynamic social contract wrecked with conflict, confusion and contradiction to understand the underlying ideological forces working against one another. This deranged social order was often portended by ghost and witches epitomized and embodied in the imagination of Lear, Macbeth or Othello. One can see here these characters typify a sense of common humanity through their very isolation from it. A new reading has been attempted in this paper to show how different dominant ideological conflicts had impacted on Shakespearean tragic characters either to accept or reject the prevailing social order.

Key words: ideology, psychopaths, deranged, deviation.

Introduction

David Bevington's *Tudor Drama and Politics* (1968) is an invaluable guide to the political role of drama in the Elizabethan period. It provides detailed and irrefutable evidence that issues in politics and religion that deeply agitated the minds of their contemporaries were habitually focused by Elizabethan playwrights in their drama. They did not share the horror of propaganda and didacticism that romantic aesthetics prescribes. Popular plays like Sackville's and Norton's *Gorboduc*, *King Cambis's*, *Wood Stock*, *Horestes*, the *Tragedy of Hoffman's Old castle* and a host of important or ephemeral plays, including Shakespeare's plays, make direct or veiled comment on contemporary political affairs. Tudor drama offered advice on the question of royal succession, the content of royal authority, commented on nature and consequences of tyranny, the rights of rebellion and resistance, ideal monarchy and so on and so forth. While official homilies pushed the orthodox government line, what we may call the public reaction to the issue is aired more freely in the theatre. Bevington's book thus supplies a much needed corrective to the notion that Shakespeare and Elizabethan playwrights in general merely echoed in the verse the official line on obedience and degree of the Homilies.

One of the most important points made by Bevington is that apart from the puritans their opponents venting their respective viewpoints through the drama, intellectual humanists also made use of the stage as a “means to influence the centre of power and to mould a new leadership in their own image”. The closing decades of the sixteenth century found the Elizabethan people agitated on a wide front by political corruption, monopolies, the woes of war and heavy taxation, intense lobbying and rivalries among various factions of the nobility at court, religious feuds that were about to decide the future of the Church in England and a host of other questions. The government was thoroughly alarmed and even apprehended popular insurrections. Stringent measures of censorship and repressions were adopted from time to time. But the inadequacy of the state machineries of those days made it imperative that the apologists of order and stability were also encouraged to meet the challenge of criticism on the stage. Thus Elizabethan stage almost played the role of the press in contemporary society in its representation and discussion of public affairs.

Bevington is of course more concerned with the histories and explicitly political plays of Shakespeare in this context. But as the other critics have pointed out, Shakespeare is led more to examine the various political principles used by the politicians and their propagandists to legitimize, justify or vindicate their action and political positions. The deeper examination of such principles leads without a break to the great tragedies and Hamlet provides an example. But while Bevington’s book very convincingly demonstrates the political function of Tudor drama, he has naturally no interest in the literary examination or interrogation of ideology that we have drawn attention to our reading of Hamlet.

Objectives of the Study

An attempt has been made in this paper to have a rereading of Shakespearean tragedy which throws some new light on the ideological conflicts during Shakespeare’s time. This new reading postulates certain degree of ideological commitments on the part of Shakespeare as the key to the meaning of the play.

Significance of the Study

An intelligent and sensitive reader can always test different theories held by critics like Carlyle and Dickens by his appropriate responses to the text and appropriate them for his own purposes. The present study would no doubt provide an opportunity for such an indulgence. Despite different ideological positions and orders resorted to by multitudes of characters introduced in different plays of Shakespeare. A sense of the common humanity in its intense form is upheld by the dramatist even in the very state of isolation from society by the ideological groups whom we call social aberration, and maladjusted social psychopaths.

Sources of Study

History of English Literature by writers like W.H. Hudson, Andrew Sanders, R.J. Reese and the penguin Guide to English Literature by Boris Ford along with the view of critics like C. Bradey, G.W. Knight, E.M.W. Tillyard, J.F. Danby and H. Gohain have been used as the secondary source of the study while Hamlet edited by Herold Jenkins, the Arden Edition of William Shakespeare published in 1982 by Methuen & Co. Ltd. has been used as the primary source.

The Benignant Nature of Bacon and Hooker

Francis Bacon and Robert Hooker were two outstanding philosophers of Elizabethan world who expounded the ideologies of benignity of nature as advocated by the Greek scientists and Christian theologians. They believed in the theory of the divine origin of the universe. The point might be underlined in connection with Bacon's passage. He believed that Nature is a rational arrangement and the Nature's internal structure is almost crudely rational. Man's discourse or reason proceeds by obstructions from the particular to the general. There is direct connection between man's logical order and the order of the physical universe. He further argued that nature is not only rational but also benevolent one. It has been arranged by God. If we observe it or think about it closely enough it will conduct thoughts back to God "For no one can treat of --- the internal and immutable in nature without rushing at once into natural theology". Nature displays a wisdom, regularity and beauty more than human in its devisal.

In his Ecclesiastical Polity Robert Hooker has discussed the idea of Nature's supreme art by the figure of Nature holding up to some absolute shape or mirror which he has taken as a model from which to copy the actual words.

"Yes, such higher dexterity and skill appeareth, that no intellectual creature in the world were able by capacity to do that which nature doeth without capacity and knowledge, it can not but be nature hath same director of infinite knowledge to guide her in all her ways. Who the guide of nature but only the God of nature 'In him we live more and are'. Thus which nature is said to do, are by divine are performed using nature as an instrument".

This brings us to the view that Nature is in the same sense an idea, an ideal pattern. For both Bacon and Hooker Nature is bound to God. The actual and the Ideal therefore have his absolute shape. "Sadly impaired, in man's case, by Man's own action". Man does not dress himself as Fuller would say by the ideal mirror. As we should say in man's case the forms are only norms.

Custom is the expression of the inner pattern of Nature, the basis of law and the practical guide to man. During long period of time and over large numbers of men the absolute shape will tend to establish itself, for the ideal arrangement is actually the most satisfactory. Man works best when he acts in accordance with the real nature. It is only this real nature, in fact which he gives his proper fit in the community of things and people which constitutes his universe.

Man can only know himself in terms of his proper place. Place here means his relation to the rest of his environment human and non-human. It follows necessarily, therefore, that his task is to conform. The individual pattern can only be preserved by a man maintaining his right positions in regard to grand universal pattern.

The Elizabethans, on the other hand, would best discover the patterns of his inner nature by looking out on the world of his fellows and forefathers. Hooker would conclude that individual must first understand his intrinsic limitations. Then wisely he must observe tradition. Restraint therefore as well as reason and benevolence are inalienably associated with Nature.

Not everyman, even in Hooker's time shared the full calm confidence. As we shall see like King Lear, Hamlet, Polonius and Fortinbras incorporate alternatives to this rational

optimism, just as they incorporate thunder and vicious corruption in state politics. Hooker's axiomatic decencies however, are those which Lear and Hamlet hold to. It is decencies that they see continually violated and in expostulating them they voice their essentially angelical conscience.

In condemning Claudius, Polonius and Gertrude, Hamlet is tacitly condemning the unjust social order they stand, his remarks are a foreshadowing of the fruitless and insincere prayer of Claudius. Nature abused by them is also the abusive standard of the perverted society which they set. In one sense both the new king and the Queen are of course very properly dressed befitting to the dignity of their royal stature. Their involvement in drinking and sexual excitement is indeed a model fashionable society. But at the same time not all customs are good. While good customs are to be revered as the expression of man's common nature, perverse and unnatural customs can at all times creep in and become established. The theory of Nature did not necessarily commit one to the status quo no matter what. The standards to be observed are not derived from society. Society in fact must conform to what the reasonable man, by God's light, would recognize natural.

Not all established patterns are necessarily the absolute Shape. It is possible for customs to be un-natural and for society to be corrupt. Hooker makes the point and it is implicit in what Hamlet says about Polonius and Claudius. Subsequently, he will take up other positions from which to arraign society.

The Malignant Nature of Hobbes and Machiavelli

J. Hobbes was a dominant and determining Elizabethan and Restoration mind. Born into Armada Year surviving to philosophy into Restoration Hobbes vision of man in society is the projection of philosophic plane of Polonius and Claudius in Hamlet, Edmund, Goneril and Regan in king learns. Hobbes begins with appetite, 'the universal woulf'. The facility of this life consisteth not in the repose of mind satisfied. For there is no such finish ultimus, utmost aim, not sumum bonum, greatest good, as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers- not can a man any more like whose desires are at an end than he whose sense and imaginations are at a stand I put for a general inclination of all mankind, perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death (Leviathan Ch. XI)

Three principal causes of quarrel in human nature Hobbes found to be 'competition, diffidence, glory': the impulses to acquire, to provide for one's security, to extend one's prestige. The key word in Goneril's speech in kinglier like that of Claudius in Hamlet is politics:

Goneril: This man hath had good counsel, a hundred Knights
 T'IS POLITICS and safe to let hem keep
 At point a hundred knights, that on every dream.
 Each buzz, each fancy, each compliant, dislike
 He may enguard his dotage with their powers
 And hold our lives in mercy (King Lear)

By it, Shakespeare reminds his audience of the race Machiavelli's he has been dealing with since Henry VI. He points also to a constant challenge to the whole range of meanings which his generation has felt to be serious one. From the triangular relations among Hamlet, Polonius and Claudius, Shakespeare was underlying the Hobbesian account of human nature, its

inherent competitiveness based on fear, it mechanical 'everyman against everyman'. The Hobbesian conception needs for its embodiment in at least Claudius and Polonius.

The same picture Shakespeare had reflected through Edmund in king Lear who insists that customs can be unreasonable and society unnatural thereby making a point of departure from conventional view of benevolent and orthodox view of nature. In contrast to Hooker and Bacon, he finds it quite easy to 'to treat of metaphysics or of the interval and immutable in nature without rushing at once into natural theology. The Sentiment of Polonius speech like that of Edmund in King Lear must have been widespread in Shakespeare's society. There are no doubts that similar ethical views were implicit in the eminent generality or of the public conduct at any time during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Whatever Goddess this is, she seems the guardian of powers we approve, strength of mind, animal vigour, handsome appearance, instinctive appetite, impatience with humbug, iconoclastic force.

Nature is close system for Polonius. It is structure laid down, devoid of intelligence, impervious to reason. This being so it is ridiculous to blame the stars for once misfortune.

Nature is a dead mechanism and it does not include man except as he is, an animal body. Apart from his body man has a mind. As mind, man is free of nature and superior to it. He knows its lash; he can manipulate it for a given effect. Human nature too, can be known and manipulated. The Machiavelli will know it better than anyone else and he will be freer to manipulate it. It is significant that in the figure of Claudius the sense of separation from nature and superiority to it goes with a sense of individual separation from community and feeling of superiority to his fellows. As Nature goes dead, community becomes competition and a man nexus of appetites. Reason is no longer a normative drive but calculator of the means to satisfy the appetites with which we are born.

Conclusion:

The view that each creature is a compound of two 'natures' doesn't not necessarily involve a dualistic view either of the creature concern or of the universe in which it participates. It obviously lends itself, however, to dualism. Two parts of man which when properly related form the unity of absolute shape. Can we regard as hostile contestants representing irreconcilable powers? Such a view was widely recurrent in Elizabethan times.

We have seen that the playwrights and their champions in Elizabethan times habitually associated ideologies only with private ethics but also with large public issues. Lily B.Campbell has rightly pointed out that Hamlet's instruction to the players merely repeat platitudes of Renaissance criticism. But that is to miss the richness of content and nuances that the well-worn terms and phrases acquire from their dramatic and historical context.

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