

## Exploring Power Dynamics: The Common Man's Role in Shakespeare's *King John* and *Richard II*

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### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare in his initial plays depicts the trepidations of the common folks instead of admiring the landed gentry. His concern is presented through the conflict between the ordinary, conventional character like Falconbridge, the bastard and the ruler, King John. Shakespeare's common man is not subdued rather he emerges as the political design. His attitude to surrounding events indeed is one which we are invited to share and to feel as a delinquent. Ordinary man seems to be a judge and commentator of the actions taken by the aristocratic society. His judgment seems to be impartial and motif does not seem to be amoral and unscrupulous but rather he asserts his will which expresses his restricted dogmatic conflict.

Same theme prevails in *Richard II* where common man especially country-dwellers raise their voice against the political system. In this play, Shakespeare becomes more visionary as far as politics is concerned. The crowd openly criticizes unethical values which are followed by the rulers particularly by Richard II. With the help of rebellious mass *Richard II* is dethroned and the individuals show their trust in Bolingbroke, who later becomes Henry IV.

Thus, it is evident that Shakespeare represents medievalism in these plays. He shows his awareness to political assassination, elected government, alternative constitutions, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the problem of power without responsibility. The present paper focuses on the representation of a common man as a political force in Shakespeare's two plays: *King John* and *Richard II*.

## **PAPER**

Like the most influential and persuasive writer in all of English literature and undoubtedly the most significant playwright of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare became the most popular writer in England. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I who ruled from 1558 to 1603 and James I who ruled from 1603 to 1625; he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by endowing them with the status of king's players. At the time of Shakespeare's death, luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed him as the apogee of Renaissance theatre. The legacy of Shakespeare's body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

The concept of republic is very old but it has several connotations. Plato discussed five types of Republics:

1. Ambitious Republic
2. Oligarchy Republic
3. Democracy Republic
4. Tyranny Republic
5. Aristocratic Republic.

Beginning with the Athenian democracy in ancient Greece, particularly in *Pericles*, moving on to the rise of the ancient Roman Republic depicted in *The Rape of Lucrece*, followed by its attendant stresses and strains in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, finally showing its fall in *Antony and Cleopatra*, one can make sense of Shakespeare's continuous interest in the subject, indicating his inclination towards its growth as a more desirable political order than that of monarchy or oligarchy. There are plays like *Hamlet*, *King John*, *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V* and *Henry VI*, which depict the rise of tension between monarchy and the people, marked by its high watermark in Cade's rebellion against *Henry VI*.

Romans have followed the democratic type of Republic in which the ordinary people used to participate in the Government. But later, it has been found that the Aristocratic type of republic became very popular. Plato also, after democratic type of republic considered the Aristocratic type

of republic the best one which is based on justice and philosophy. But in modern days, it is preferred that democracy is the best republic which is followed by almost all the countries. However, Shakespeare's republic was different as the situations were different and therefore, he preferred the aristocratic type of republic along with democratic republic. It is evident in Shakespeare's English history plays that the monarchs used to go to the parliament for the final decision. Parliament system originated with the Clarendon Code laid down in 1215 during the rule of King John. Shakespeare believed that a king should be a philosopher and just. The purpose of governance be to maintain order in the society. He further points out that whosoever the king, if is unable to maintain the order, his fall is certain. For instance, King Richard II is dethroned by Henry IV since Richard is unable to do justice to the people. A clear indication of Shakespeare's interest in the issue of the Republic is his setting of the opening scenes in public places in many of his plays, with characters from the margins holding the stage. Another indicator of Shakespeare's interest in the relationship between the people and the state is the indirect, and the silent, presence of the people, working as a force, influencing the state politics in several of his history and other plays.

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Thus, it is evident that Shakespeare represents medievalism in these plays. He shows his awareness to political assassination, elected government, alternative constitutions, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the problem of power without responsibility. The present paper focuses on the representation of a common man as a political force in Shakespeare's two plays: *King John* and *Richard II*.

*King John*, first printed in the 1623 Folio, is one of Shakespeare's great historical tragedies, expressing historical and political ideas. His history plays are primarily concerned with public life of his nation, the terrible hundred years of civil strife and wars against the French that haunted the imagination of Elizabethan England and that earlier time of crisis in the reign of King John. His plays express the deepest and the most widespread feelings of his countrymen. To them, political matters were not merely of theoretical concern; they dreaded the return of a chaos that they knew would involve them and their families in untold sufferings.

The action of the play centers on the reign of King John and the contested crown which he held. The issue is, who will be the rightful king- John, who officially holds the crown or his nephew Arthur. John was the younger brother of King Richard I who died without children and the son of Henry and Eleanor while Arthur is the son of Geoffrey, elder brother of King Richard, the first. Arthur and his mother Constance are in France, trying to persuade King Philip, to back the claim that Arthur is the rightful king and that John to be deposed. They enter a power struggle aligning themselves to the French king. Therefore, an ambassador Chatillon is sent to King John at the very outset of the play where King John is denoted as the "borrowed majesty" (*King John*, 63) and the embassy claims the right of Arthur.

As the French prepare to storm the town, John and his army shows up to challenge the French while on the other hand, King Philip of France is willing to have a war against the King. This is all about the politics of power. In a hilarious development, the two sides appeal to the citizens to hear the case and decide who the rightful king is and whom they should open the gates to. However, the townspeople in a rather clever dodge, decide that they just cannot decide and the two armies with their powers can give their judgment. The complexities of war time politics are revealed when the town refuses to admit either the king of England or the king of France as its rightful ruler until the two kings have fought out the question - whereupon the kings decide to agree on a truce, just long

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enough to wipe the town out together, then go back fighting one another.

Obviously, this could work in the interest of the town since the two armies would decimate each other and they might end up safe in the bargain. The folks support a radical view of ‘might makes right.’ Finally, a citizen proposes:

Lady Blanche is niece to England...  
Is the young Dauphin every way complete...  
To these two princes if you marry them.  
This union shall do more than battery can  
To our fast closed gates...  
The mouths of passage shall we fling wide open  
And give you entrance. (*King John*, 92)

After offering such bait the citizen proves that he can be as seemingly intransigent as the kings who stand below: “without this match / the sea enraged is not half so deaf” (*King John*, 93). All agree to this and King John assures the dowry to be given in terms of land. All this is done to stay in tune and remain as king not opposed by the common men. Plato, in his Republic assures the participation of the common man. King John recognizes the power and desires of the ordinary men and takes decision in favour of them. He also proposes Arthur as the Duke of Brittanie and Earl of Richmond “and this rich fare town / we make him Lord of “. (*King John*, 97) For all this politics, Bastard comments: “mad world, mad kings, mad composition”.

The foundation of King John is political, for it deals with the question of law and power. The government rests upon power and law, cemented by loyalty, i.e. it requires the ability to rule effectively within a certain consensus of the king, the courts, and the people. King John is not a particularly attractive or admirable figure. His “turbulence and grandeur of the passions...inconstancy of temper...mixture of good and ill...series of misfortunes” are seen as being the elements that “might make him very fit for a hero in a just composition.” (*Shakespeare’s History Plays*, 127) Shakespeare implies in *King John* that “knowledge is never complete in a fallen world and the values are subtly modified by the way one senses the ambient air” (*The Lost Garden*, 89)

John’s success turns to despair at the end, like that of Macbeth whose ambitions are gradually displaced by fears and by compulsive and self-defeating attempts to shore up his diminishing power. Like Macbeth, when he stops listening to his wife, John seems to lack insight, particularly

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after the death of his mother. Montaigne puts it as: “there is nothing that throws us so much into dangers as unthinking eagerness to get clear of them,” for “fear sometimes arises from want of judgment as well as from want of courage” (*Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 85)

*Richard II* is one of Shakespeare’s ‘history’ plays: It is the first part of a tetralogy which deals with the historical rise of the English royal House of Lancaster. (The plays that round out the series are Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2, and Henry V). The play was probably composed around 1595, and certainly no later than 1597. It was used by the Earl of Essex to try make a point shortly before his unsuccessful rebellion in 1601; Queen Elizabeth, no dummy, commented “I am Richard II, know ye not that?” (*The Review of English Studies*, 208)

Richard has a cousin, named Henry Bolingbroke, who is a great favorite among the English commoners. Early in the play, Richard exiles him from England for six years due to an unresolved dispute over an earlier political murder. The dead uncle whose lands Richard seizes was the father of Bolingbroke; when Bolingbroke learns that Richard has stolen what should have been his inheritance, it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. When Richard unwisely departs to pursue a war in Ireland, Bolingbroke assembles an army and invades the north coast of England in his absence. The commoners, fond of Bolingbroke and angry at Richard's mismanagement of the country, welcome his invasion and join his forces. One by one, Richard's allies in the nobility desert him and defect to Bolingbroke's side as Bolingbroke marches through England. By the time Richard returns from Ireland, he has already lost his grasp on his country because of the opposition of the commoners.

There is never an actual battle; instead, Bolingbroke peacefully takes Richard as a prisoner in Wales and brings him back to London, where Bolingbroke is crowned as King Henry IV. Richard is imprisoned in the remote castle of Pomfret in the north of England, where he is left to ruminate upon his downfall. There, an assassin, who both is and is not acting upon King Henry's ambivalent wishes for Richard's expedient death, murders the former king. King Henry hypocritically repudiates the murderer and vows to journey to Jerusalem to cleanse himself of his part in Richard's death.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare chose to portray a weak and arbitrary king who at last dethroned by a man, strong and daring enough to raise his hand against God’s anointed ruler. His rule was

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anarchical. Plato believed that an anarchic ruler is accompanied by a group of flatterers who have their own vested interest. Such rulers do not take care of their common public. In *Richard II*, anarchic type of republic is evident which Shakespeare criticizes. The king loses his credibility to the extent that the commoners throw dust on him. The gardener expresses that Richard has not taken care of his kingdom. He says:

Bolingbroke hath ceased the wasteful king. O, what pity is it that he hath not so trimmed and dressed his land as we this garden! We at time of year do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit trees, lest, being over proud... Had he done so to grate and growing men, they might have lived to bear and he to taste their fruits of duty... Had he done so, himself have borne the crown, which waste of idle hours, hath quiet thrown down. (*Richard II*,)

Analysis of the two plays *King John* and *Richard II* indicates that the best ruler is that who is unopposed by the plebeians. Shakespeare prefers a king who is a:

multiform, and full of different manners; and that, like the city, he is fine and variegated, and with very many men and women would desire to imitate his life as he hath in him a great many patrons of republics and of manners. (*Republic, Book VIII*)

King Richard does not possess any of these qualities whereas King John has some. It is important to bear in mind that these plays and their events are part of a larger context: that is, they are part of the long continuum of English history, and belongs to a tradition of documents and literature that chronicles the wars and the dynasties of English royal houses. In Shakespeare's history plays, nothing happens in a vacuum; all the action is informed by earlier events.

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