

# Comparing the power struggles in shakespearean plays



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Power struggles are a defining feature in many of William Shakespeare's stories. *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, and *Julius Caesar* are three prominent examples of such stories, each depicting a powerful protagonist and their conflicts with others intent on gaining influence. In each of these stories, the separation between good and evil is clear, but in *Henry V*, this distinction is less clear, which begs the question as to the purpose of the other stories' characterization and the purpose of their clearer moralities.

The titular character in *Titus Andronicus*, though in possession of a great deal of influence, rarely makes use of his power. While others are engaged in a power-struggle between each other, Titus has no desire to become involved. Instead, he is shown to be a catalyst for much of the plot, as his lack of interest in maintaining his power causes others to seek to take it from him. However, one of the few motivations that trumps the power struggle is the need for revenge. This is the ultimate goal of Titus and Tamora. Though they both have different views on the power that they achieve, they each seek to use it in a similar manner, though Titus is shown to be justified, due to what Tamora's sons do to Lavinia, and the murder of Tamora's son by Titus is justified by the loss of most of his sons.

*Richard III* features a villainous protagonist and his obsession with power. Nearly every major character is shown to have some desire for the throne of England, whether to advance their own personal interests or to prevent someone else from obtaining it. Richard III represents the first group, while his antithesis and foil Richmond presents the latter. This distinction in motives also provides the audience with a clear distinction between good

and evil, which becomes necessary as Richard is further developed during the play, giving the audience a greater chance to sympathize with him.

Julius Caesar distinguishes itself from most other stories of its kind by featuring a protagonist whose name is not given by the title. The irony here is that both Caesar and Brutus seemingly have little to no interest in the power that they obtain. Though it is left unclear as to the nature of Caesar attitude towards his position, Marc Antony's speech provides evidence to support the theory that Caesar was an honorable man, fully aware of the responsibilities of his position. However, it is worth noting that Antony is hardly a reliable source, given his personal interest in depicting Caesar as a righteous leader, innocent of the crimes he was accused of, and Antony's speech after the death of Caesar to the people of Rome demonstrates his skill at twisting the truth. Brutus is shown to have no interest in wielding great power, only in securing the future of Rome, but in the same speech which Antony used to honor Caesar, Antony also attacks Brutus' character and repeats " Brutus is an honorable man" (123) even as he provides evidence to the contrary.

What is notable about Shakespeare's depictions of his ambitious characters is that the notion of power, which often comes with negative connotations, especially in the current political climate. Titus and Richmond represent the use of political influence for good, and they are the heroes of their respective stories. Showing these leaders as heroes would greatly benefit Shakespeare, as he received a great deal of support from Queen Elizabeth I. It was especially important for him to depict Richmond in a favorable light, seeing as he was one of the ancestors of Queen Elizabeth I. Additionally, the <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-the-power-struggles-in-shakespearean-plays/>

number of similarities between the reigns of Elizabeth and Julius Caesar provides a great deal of comparison to be made between the two of this, such as the construction of their governments, attempts on their lives, and the importance of holidays in society, as well as the simple fact that both were leaders of vast empires. With all of these similarities, it would seem as though Shakespeare was advocating an anti-monarchist movement. This would not be a good position to be in during that time, which is likely why, in the end, the conspirators end up paying for their crime. Titus Andronicus also uses the theme of promoting the establishment with the character originally in power, Titus, as the voice of reason and having his violent actions all be justified by the plotline and the demonization of the foreign menaces. This can also be an allusion to the reign of Elizabeth's sister, Mary, who was radically different from her father, who formed the Anglican Church, and the Protestant monarchs who followed her. During her reign, Mary persecuted Protestants and became heavily disliked because of this fact. In this way, there is a perceivable connection between Queen Mary and the villainous Tamora.

However, an exception to this idea that the hero is seeking power purely for the benefit of their people is contradicted in Henry V. While the motives of the heroes of the others stories are clear, this is not so for the titular King Henry V. Though there is some legal precedent for his invasion of France, it is mostly played for laughs, and this excuse was found after Henry decided that he wanted to invade France. Unlike Richmond from Richard III, Henry could be allowed to not be completely morally pure, as he had few ties to the reign of Elizabeth. Even so, this deviation from Shakespeare's usual pattern

of creating “good guy” heroes with few noticeable flaws. This aspect is strongly brought into focus when he threatens Harfleur, saying, “I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur till in her ashes lie buried” (97) as a punishment for the town refusing to surrender. Though Henry’s resolve is never called upon in this instance, the gravity of this speech in particular gives the entire conquest a less-than-innocent feeling.

Political power and the use of it was a sensitive subject in Elizabethan England, where there was no freedom of speech. Shakespeare understood that even as he wrote complex tales of intrigue and espionage, causing a certain trope of the hero leader and champion of the people to champion over the forces of evil, even while maintaining the status quo. While some works attempt to expand the mold somewhat, in the end, each of these stories is clearly an attempt to show the current regime in the most favorable lighting possible.