

Monarchy in shakespeare's king lear and richard



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Introduction

This short essay seeks to examine how the theme of the monarchy has been featured by two of Shakespeare's most popular plays, King Lear and King Richard II. The essay begins by contextualizing the theme of monarchy from Shakespeare's perspective before exploring how each of these plays projects that theme both individually and comparatively. This is then followed by a brief conclusion. As this essay documents, one of the issues that Shakespeare successfully presents in his plays is the question of the monarchy, its role, relevance, lifespan and characteristics.

Theme of Monarchy in Shakespeare's King Lear and Richard

The 17th Century concept of absolute monarchy is overtly featured in both in King Lear and King Richard II. King Richard comes out as one who had neglected his country to the extent that even the nobles perceive a potential to seize additional power once the throne is usurped (Ure, 1961). This is clearly voiced in Act II Scene 1, by John of Gaunt a unique noble who sees from the eyes of the English peasantry, "That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself." John of Gaunt thus scorns King Richard since he can see that the monarchy system was beginning, "For sleeping England long time have I watched; Watching breeds leanness, leanness is all gaunt." (Act II, Scene 1).

The play begins with Henry Bolingbroke accusing Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk, of killing the Duke of Gloucester, King Richard II's brother. King Richard decides to settle the conflict by letting the men joust but later changes his mind and banishes them from the kingdom. This mistake of judgement

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introduces a series of events that the audience can use to predict the downfall of Richard II (Ure, 1961). The king loses all favour when he decides to seize Gaunt's estate who dies in grief of his banished son, Bolingbroke. The estate provides the king with money to wage war against the Irish.

The climax of the play reaches when Henry Bolingbroke secretly returns to England to find most nobles unhappy and revolting against the absent king. Henry Percy is the most vocal of the nobles in criticising King Richard for overtaxing commoners, fining nobles unfairly for their ancestor's crimes, wasting England's wealth and stealing from Gaunt. Richard returns to England from the Irish war to find his kingdom lost and the monarch is thus forced to confess the numerous crimes committed against England. Bolingbroke is thus crowned King Henry IV.

Richard is not the only failure king Shakespeare conceived in his depiction of the monarch. King Lear is one play that is solely based on power, resultant poverty and the controversy of inheritance. This Shakespeare uses to focus on the outcome of catastrophic power redistribution. Lear himself is very rich and powerful at the start of the play. He enjoys a complex social identity as a King and also a Patriarch of his family. As a king, he is looked upon to provide meaning, order and wisdom to the society. His kingship authority is marked from the very opening scene when the Sennet announces the arrival of the king thus 'Royal Lear' and 'Most Royal Majesty'.

Despite being an extremely complex character, Lear is neither good nor bad to the extremes. His main problem is folly (misjudgements) it seems, as can be judged from the very beginning of the play. Having opted to retire, King

Lear then decides to divide the kingdom among his daughters. His intention is to prevent any succession conflict in future between the three daughters. The problem is that the decision is unwise since it has the potential to invite conflict between rightful heirs to the throne.

The problem is that King Lear bases his decision about the size of the inheritance each daughter gets by their speech. Goneril and Regan get each a third of their father's kingdom simply because they profess their love for him. King Lear cares not of the kingdom but of his daughters speech saying, " Tell me, my daughters, since now we will divest us both of rule, interest of territory, cares of state, which of you shall we say doth love us most? That we our largest bounty may extend?" (Act I Scene 1 at King Lear's palace). King Lear takes for granted the interest of the territory and cares of the state and awards the best kingdom shares to the daughter who says she loves him most.

That is why when Cordelia refuses to flatter her father, he threatens, " How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little, lest it may mar your fortunes" (Act I Scene 1 at King Lear's palace). When the most beloved of his daughter cannot profess false speech of love, she casts her away, divides her share of the kingdom between her sisters and curses any of her suitors who still love her. He says, " Come not between the dragon and his wrath. I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight! So be my grave my peace, as here I give her father's heart from her!" (Act I Scene 1 at King Lear's palace).

The king's folly is outright even to Earl of Kent. Kent is bold enough to tell the King of his folly to his face, saying, "When Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man? ... When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound, when majesty stoops to folly. Reverse thy doom; and, in thy best consideration, cheque. This hideous rashness: answer my life my judgment, Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least; Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound ..." (Act I Scene 1 at King Lear's palace). To reward Kent for challenging his decision, the King then banishes him from the kingdom irrespective of Kent's proven patriotism. As Lear says, Kent should not have, "come between our sentence and our power" (Act I Scene 1 at King Lear's palace).

This tendency to make rash decisions is evident in the entire play and not just in the first scene. The King thus signifies the most imperfect picture of the monarchy (Rolfe & Litt, 1908). This is not the only error King Lear is responsible for. Perhaps the criticism of the monarch becomes as comprehensive as it is in this play because King Lear's greatest fault is his character (Rolfe & Litt, 1908). His egotism causes great damage from the start of the play. Instead of dividing his land evenly, he uses a baseless rationale to structure the inheritance. All this foolery is then accompanied by ostentatious ceremonies of the Renaissance monarchy. The ceremonial pomp which is actually futile self-worship portrays both King Lear and King Richard II as inadequate kings (Rolfe & Litt, 1908). The ceremonies can be regarded as a gaudy display existing in lieu of royal virtue (Rolfe & Litt, 1908).

Conclusion

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As seen in the argument of the essay, Shakespeare writes both King Lear and Richard portrays the very worst of monarch qualities. He successfully paints a picture of imperfection when the monarchy is under the rule of an ambitious, self important and self-consumed king and when it is under the rule of a seemingly rash, foolish and egotistic king. As noted in the essay, these are the seeds of the collapse of any monarchy, something that happened after the reign of Elizabeth II (civil war), the English absolute ruler at the time the plays were written.