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## THE PRINCIPLES OF TYRANNY AND KINGSHIP IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

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**Abstract:** *This study covers the diversification of the hierarchy of Pagan and Christian values in Shakespeare's tragedies. Heroes' deeds and actions pivot around their system of values and fall into basic categories that pinpoint different aspects of the soul and personal character. Philosophical theories and psychological analysis are interlaced into Shakespearean literary art, granting the opportunity to apply various methods of analysis (comparative, historical, psychological) in several examples that illustrate the wholeness of human nature. The research also explores the boundary between tyranny and a "reasonable kingship," examining the trials and tribulations of marginalized attitudes towards power.*

**Keywords:** *virtue, Pagan, value, hierarchy, supernatural, empire, king, tyrant*

### Introduction

The interplay between kingship, tyranny, and moral hierarchy in Shakespeare's tragedies has been a subject of scholarly debate for centuries. Shakespeare's works are deeply influenced by Renaissance political thought, drawing upon classical, medieval, and early modern sources to explore the dynamics of power, virtue, and legitimacy.

One of the central philosophical foundations of Shakespeare's portrayal of monarchy and tyranny is Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532). Machiavelli asserts that rulers must prioritize power over morality, stating that "it is better to be feared than loved." His ideas resonate with Shakespeare's depiction of figures like Richard III and Macbeth, whose ascension to power hinges on manipulation, fear, and ruthless ambition.

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Conversely, Plato's "Republic" and Aristotle's "Politics" provide an idealized vision of kingship as a just and rational rule. Plato's concept of the "philosopher-king" aligns with the image of Henry V, who balances moral considerations with political pragmatism. Aristotle's distinction between a legitimate ruler (who governs for the common good) and a tyrant (who rules for personal gain) is reflected in Shakespeare's differentiation between virtuous kings and despotic usurpers.

Among the significant contributions, Cantor and Cox's *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture* (2009) provides a critical perspective on the intersection of literature and economic theory, offering insights into the spontaneous order in cultural production. This work, alongside other seminal studies, informs the research framework by elucidating the broader socio-economic and philosophical underpinnings of the subject matter. Through a systematic evaluation of these sources, this section contextualizes the research within existing academic discourse, identifying gaps and areas for further inquiry.

The role of the supernatural in Shakespeare's tragedies has been widely examined through a Jungian lens. Carl Jung's concept of the "shadow self" suggests that supernatural elements in Shakespeare's works – such as the witches in "Macbeth" and the ghost in "Hamlet" – symbolize the repressed desires and inner conflicts of the protagonists.

Modern Shakespearean criticism, including the works of Stephen Greenblatt (New Historicism), explores how historical, political, and theological contexts shape Shakespeare's representation of kingship. Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare reflects and analyzes contemporary power structures rather than merely glorifying or condemning monarchy.

## **Methodology**

Our study employs comparative literary analysis to examine the evolving values of kingship and tyranny in Shakespearean tragedies. By comparing Shakespeare's portrayals of rulers with historical and philosophical texts, including Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Plato's *Republic*, and Aristotle's *Politics*, we see how Shakespeare appropriates and reworks political theories. Through comparative analysis, we can trace the influence of classical and Renaissance political thought on his portrayal of monarchy and rule.

Placing Shakespeare's tragedies in the socio-political sphere of Renaissance England, we consider how Elizabethan and Jacobean knowledge of kingship, divine right, and political legitimacy shapes his dramatic representations. The

inquiry examines how these historical forces shape Shakespeare's depiction of power, taking into account the fears and ideals that defined rulership in his time.

From a psychological perspective, we use Jungian analysis to examine the presence of supernatural forces in Shakespeare's plays as manifestations of the inner turmoil of the characters. Lady Macbeth and Richard III are our best examples in the examination of the intersection of ambition, guilt, and morality, revealing the psychological dimensions of power and tyranny.

Through close reading of the texts, we dismantle significant excerpts from *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Henry V*, and *Coriolanus* to uncover Shakespeare's language of tyranny, virtue, and power. Through an analysis of rhetorical devices, metaphors, and philosophical allusions, we discuss how Shakespeare presents his opinions regarding kingship and governance and gain insight into the complex relationship between authority and legitimacy in his plays.

In the Renaissance period, the primordial initial archetypes of kings and tyrants acquired new interpretations and were extrapolated in different modifications according to philosophical and political approaches. The archetypes of kings and tyrants are viewed through the lens of different values because, after the adoption of Christianity in Europe, all Christian kings had to solve a dilemma, whether they were going to take immediate actions and make proportionate decisions on the resolution of the issues that demand instant reaction, or waste their time on useless reflections. To make matters worse, some of them thought they might indulge in bodily pleasures and criminal affairs. No wonder, Shakespeare's plays based on historical sources gave a story other than the one mentioned in the source as the ancient sources covered the issues of pagan courage and medieval chivalry which widely circulated in ancient times.

*Coriolanus*, for example, while addressing his troops, makes the following statement. "Valor is the chiefest virtue". However, *Henry V* giving pardon to captives offers a profoundly different justification: "This is a Christian, not a Turkish court".

Brilliant philosopher Nietzsche, in an attempt to reconcile the above-mentioned disparities and portray an ideal king figure, outlined the following: "We need a Caesar with a soul of Christ". But as long as such an ideal personality never existed, the tyrants would try to become kings, and kings with every single mistake could collapse into becoming tyrants.

Machiavelli demonstrated a cynically practical approach to these issues, stating that there are no bad tyrants and good kings, just "old princes and new princes". Old princes are a sort of complacent type of rulers who can rest on their laurels, enjoying the privilege of the right of succession. Such rulers inherit their right to

rule, like Richard II, who woke up overnight and found himself on the throne being just 10 years old, so he could take his time writing poetry, overlooking the challenges of the current political situation. He is presented as a Christian poet-king who does not match the standards of practical kingship because the mere right of succession doesn't imply the capacity to rule properly. Any Christian king, however hard he tries, cannot be truly Christian because sometimes he has to overstep the moral boundaries foisted by Christian morality ramifications. This type of morality dominates the scene because a pagan warrior like Macbeth thinks to himself that he is more appropriate for the position of the king as the king on rule is meek and timid. Macbeth is the one who brings in the victory of the silver plate and according to Coriolanus' standards (where valor is the chiefest virtue), he has his moral right to lay a claim to kingship. However, due to the new interpretations of the standards of ruling policies in the framing of new morals, valor does not suffice and it is not the chiefest virtue anymore. In this case, something new should appear on the top of the pyramid of values. In the Christian context, this category is law – divine and human; a law that rules upon kings, like heavenly law, and also legal power. In terms of this implication, tyrants are presumably false kings with no legal right to rule. Shakespeare is very explicit in outlining the boundaries.

Royalty by the right of inheritance used to be the unquestionable authority in Europe for a long period, but Shakespeare's contemplation on the definition of the character of royal governance and its validity and credibility emanates from different sources, philosophical, political, and literary. Among these sources, it is noteworthy to mention certain thinkers.

Plato, who could easily be considered the precursor of all political sciences, granted the role of governance to the aristocracy, assessing that access to ideal governance is a reasonable approach to all spheres of social and private life. Plato also defined tyranny and democracy showing their liquidity and mutability as one category can easily flow into the other.

"No man is good enough to govern another man without that other man's consent".

Conversely, Machiavelli elaborated his vision on governance on the flip side of Plato's approach, shifting from the principle of rational governance to the priority of power that should be retained at all costs.

"Power is the pivot on which everything hinges. He who has the power is always right; the weaker is always wrong."

Right might be divine, legal, and moral, it has the most decisive impact on kingship and royalty as divine succession is applicable for empires and strong states while legal authority is applicable for republics and more or less democratic structures.

Interestingly enough, in Roman plays Shakespeare specifies the concept of “A Man and a No Man”. Kings are always portrayed at the top of the masculine hierarchy thus they are “Man”. Tyrants are presumably “Man” from the start but later can gravitate towards the “No Man” category. (By “No Man”, the Romans meant anybody - a woman, a child, a servant. But only the heroes who could take decisive actions fell into the category of Man). The very moment the tyrant seizes power he positions himself as a “Man” as he forcefully gets on the top of the ruling hierarchy. In this respect, sometimes women can appear as men, i.e. Lady Macbeth whose numerous ambitions make her temper fluctuate between femininity and masculinity. She is the one to take the dagger and push Macbeth into crime though afterwards she tries to retreat into her femininity in spite of the fact that her actions are more relentless and ruthless than those of her husband’s.

Tyrants’ ties with supernatural forces (say witches) are grounded in the assumption that kings are generally anointed by divine providence so Macbeth needs to shore up his right to power by anything higher and more tenable than human will or legal authority. Nevertheless, the concept of the supernatural does not necessarily correspond with the divine commitment; therefore it often results in monstrosity. That is why actually any tyrant bears the shadow of a monster. From the rational point of view, it might seem quite feasible and easy to grasp that kings even cure with the “king’s touch” which means that they have the inherent endowment to bring good to the state and its citizens just by exercising routine actions and gestures. On the other hand, tyrants are capable of ruining everything by their mere existence. Richard III as the most vivid representative of tyrannical rule hates peace, peaceful gatherings, and all the manifestations of secular and court life. From the rational point of view, it is quite explicable that, being a great warrior, feeling himself unexcelled on the battlefield, Richard used all his authority and power to legalize war and murder and find himself in the most favorable position. The touch of monstrosity persists in any kind of tyranny, be it physical, spiritual, or supernatural. (Richard III is a hunchback, which implies a touch of physical monstrosity, Lady Macbeth is a lunatic, being physically very attractive, she nevertheless arouses fear sleepwalking and washing her hands from blood, and this psychic disorder manifests itself as a spiritual monstrosity).

All these virtuous people and potential monsters are presented in Shakespeare’s tragedies according to the hierarchy of values.

Hierarchy is a cosmogonic principle according to which all human types and categories are defined, classified, and estimated by their growth potential and possible inputs in the buildup of the given society. Religious and moral values might fit into that overall structure but their importance and interpretation might vary over time prioritizing different modes of conduct. Richard III voices the change and flexibility of so-called universal values.

“Conscience is a word that cowards use  
Devised at first to keep the strong in awe”.

With these words, Richard III demonstrates a Machiavellian approach to moral values. Machiavelli’s contemplations mainly revolve around the negative aspects of human nature. Men are in the habit of performing different actions merely by revenge, greed, or fear in terms of the Machiavellian approach.

“We can say this of most people: they are ungrateful and unreliable, they lie, they fake, they are greedy for cash and they melt away in the face of danger.”

Macbeth echoes this assumption contradicting the statements made by his noble courtmen.

“I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself  
And falls on the other.”

There might be different approaches to the set of values characteristic of royal power. This description appears in Macbeth as if to make a blatant illustration of Macbeth’s narrative.

“The king becoming graces as justice variety, stableness, for bounty, perseverance, mercy, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude”.

Now, let us get down to the supernatural ingredient in Shakespeare’s tragedies because this aspect is also subject to certain classifications. Witches are monstrous because they collaborate with tyranny that is why Banquo underscores this deviation from the norm with such words.

“You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.”

The supernatural forces that accompany kings are never ugly or monstrous; Hamlet’s father’s ghost looks a bit intimidating and conspicuous but never monstrous, never ugly.

The concept of the supernatural in literary works is strongly linked to the manifestation of the shadow presented by Carl Gustav Jung in his book “The Archetypes and the Unconscious”.

“The shadow is that hidden, repressed, for the most part, an inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors.”

Jung defines it as the shadow that is hidden, repressed, for the most part, inferior, and guilt-laden personality ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors.

In Shakespeare’s times, witchcraft was considered to be partially supernatural and partially a preternatural phenomenon i.e. existing but unexplained. (During Queen Elizabeth’s rule official decrees were signed in order to exercise punitive measures against witches and sorcerers). However, Shakespeare goes far beyond the aspirations of his times getting closer to modern psychology. In Shakespeare’s plays the supernatural acts as an undiscovered aspect of human character which holds immense potential, both positive and negative. All the supernatural forces in Shakespeare’s works exemplify the hero’s inner complexes and secret drives (Macbeth’s ambitions, Hamlet’s restrained feelings, etc.).

Not only could the supernatural divulge the hidden motifs of heroes’ actions, but the crowd acting on the backstage could also demonstrate different behaviors, outlooks, morals, and varying perceptions of kingship and tyranny.

Tyrants need a special type of population. Taking into account the fact that Shakespeare’s plays often emanate from ancient Greek, Latin, and Scandinavian sources it is easy to argue that the overall characteristics of the population address the transition of republican rule into an autocratic empire firstly in ancient Rome and then in 17th century England. Plato’s “Republic” ideologically resonates in Shakespeare’s works as he raises the issue of gifted tyrants and inept kings. In Roman tragedies, the distinction between Coriolanus and Julius Caesar, Julius Caesar, and Mark Anthony manifests itself in a very precise definition of “Fat Man

“and “Lean Man”, i.e., the adepts of pleasure and adepts of duty. In modern interpretation using Greek terminology, we can call this diversification the borderline between the concepts called “Thymos” and “Eros”. People who tilt towards pleasure demonstrate their proclivity to Eros: love for comfort, good food, drinks, and promiscuous sexual affairs.

“Thymos”, on the other hand, draws distinct borderlines between dignity and shame, duty and connivance. Thus, the population ruled by Thymos is typical for the republic, the warriors, those who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their personal and civic dignity while empires turn dignified citizens into casual observers. Those who do not feel the Thymos (from Greek, meaning something important residing in one's chest) are generally easily enslaved and neither hold themselves accountable nor demand accountability from their rulers.

All tyrants encourage Eros in their subjects as a person who indulges in spectacles and pleasures on a regular basis easily conforms to everything and never questions the tyrannic rule. On the contrary, kings are more likely to appeal to courage and shame as moral guidelines like Coriolanus addressing his troops. In Pagan Roman plays body and soul came together, but in Christian tragedies, especially in historical dramas the population of empires are imbued with the desire of Eros while the elites are obliged to act according to the rules of Thymos for the fear of being overthrown. In Roman times (which is reflected in Shakespeare's dramas), the kings who did not lead their troops on the battlefield were regarded as imperfect and inept rulers. In both Roman and Christian tragedies, Shakespeare now and then, remarks that kings who are good at poetry are bad at performing their duties, thus echoing Plato's views and ideas.

Where a good king is portrayed, as not an emotional and aggressive leader, but a brave and reasonable person (preferably a philosopher).

“Until philosophers are kings or the kings and princes of the world have the spirit and the power of philosophy and political greatness and wisdom...cities will never have rest of their evils.”

In Christian tragedies, however, the role of the population becomes more complicated because, with the advent of Christian ideology, the human body and soul were disunited and perceived as two encapsulated categories sometimes acting separately. The body of the person belongs to the state, while his soul is free. Tyrants are afraid of the independent free soul; that is why Macbeth and Richard III were concerned about people who thought freely rather than those who made inconsiderate actions. This suggests that the human soul and judgment are becoming increasingly determining factors in personal and historical contexts.



Thymos and Eros collide on the matter of destiny or faith as destiny hovering above God and people are no more domineering in the scene of Christian tragedies. With the acquisition of the independent soul, the lever of faith can play an important role only if it is projected into our personality. In ancient times, faith could be merciless and relentless, but it could not be circumvented. Moreover, it never lied, i.e., Apollo's or Cassandra's predictions were never doubted as faith according to Pagan perceptions could be cruel, but it could never be false. Anyway, in Christian tragedies, the factor of faith sometimes turns up as a perfidious trap that is very misleading and frequently misinterpreted. Thus, Macbeth, wavering between Christianity and Paganism, accepts the first part of the prophecy of the witches while at the same time trying to escape from the second prediction.

By the way, witches never push Macbeth into any action; they do not tell him to kill the king and to continue with the series of murders. The factor of the supernatural in Christian interpretation could never be decisive because the soul is stronger than faith; personality has the free will to act. Personality is the faith itself.

The Pagan approach to the strong and practical leader is replaced by the popular demand for a mindful, reasonable, and dignified person with moral scruples. This type of new leader exercises all mechanisms to establish and maintain just and impartial rule and equal care towards different layers of the population, taking into consideration all the opportunities that can presumably foster the well-being of his nation.

In this respect, Shakespeare sometimes dodges the secret law of divine inheritance, welcoming instead a random replacement of kings who do not develop into tyrants because they better fit "the project of kingship".

Richard II's inconsiderate actions and his inability to make sound decisions fail Richard and the Kingdom at the same time; that's why, in the end, Richard sums up his flaws by confessing, 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me'.

Shakespeare comes up with the idea that sometimes even the forceful seizure of power does not necessarily result in tyranny; it might pave a road for a worthier ruler (like Henry IV), but if the replacement does not address the required qualities, it is most likely to sprout as tyranny. A vivid example of such a "negative replacement" is the dichotomy of Hamlet's father and his uncle. Though Hamlet's father does not appear as an acting hero, his merits are presented by Hamlet himself. Hamlet portrays his father as sheer perfection.

"He was a man  
Take him for all in all  
I shall not look upon his like again."

Such examples are numerous, but Shakespeare's presentation of the conflict between reason and folly, merit and sin, legalized power and unlawful tyranny needs further research in terms of historical and psychological approaches.

## Conclusion

The data mentioned above proves that the issues of tyranny and other types of governance have been occupying political, philosophical, and artistic minds throughout centuries. Thus, different aspects of emotional and psychological conduct manifest themselves within the frames of the cultural code of the given times. Marginalized rulers fall into the category of tyrants or "inappropriate" kings. Neither literature nor politics can uphold the idea of unreasonable decision-making and hyper-agitated reactions to the duties of those in charge of people's lives.

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**Ա. Մեղրակյան – *Բռնակալության և թագավորության սկզբունքները Շեքսպիրյան ողբերգություններում***. - Ուսումնասիրությունն անդրադառնում է Շեքսպիրյան թատերագրություններում հեթանոսական և քրիստոնեական արժեքների տարբերայնացմանը: Հերոսների գործողությունները և սխրանքները պայմանավորված են արժեքային համակարգով, և յուրաքանչյուր ժամանակաշրջան կարևորում է հերոսների ինքնության կոնկրետ առանձնահատկությունները: Հոգեբանական և փիլիսոփայական տեսություններն ագուցվում են Շեքսպիրյան գեղարվեստական համակարգին՝ ստեղծելով մի իրատեսակ խճանկար,

որի ներդաշնակ համակցությունը թույլ է տալիս կիրառել մի քանի հետազոտական մեթոդ միաժամանակ՝ համեմատական, հոգեբանական, պատմական և քաղաքական: Հետազոտության մեջ առանձնացված են «կառավարման ողջամտության» և «բռնապետական ամենաթողության» սահմանազատումները, որոնք լավագույնս բացահայտվում են այն ժամանակ, երբ մարդը բխվում է արգելքների:

***Բանալի բառեր.*** առաքինություն, հեթանոս, արժեք, հիերարխիա, գերբնական, կայսրություն, թագավոր, բռնապետ

**А. Седракян – Принципы тирании и царствования в трагедиях Шекспира.** – Статья посвящена разграничению моральных и этических ценностей в рамках данного исторического периода. В шекспировских трагедиях все действия и свершения героев группируются в соответствии со значением той или иной системы и предпочтениями общества. Вследствие этого разные идентичности могут приобретать различные толкования. В шекспировских трагедиях психологические и философские тенденции тесно переплетаются с канвой художественного вымысла, и эта многозначность предоставляет исследователям возможность применять несколько методов анализа одновременно (исторический, психологический, сравнительный и политический). Исследование также определяет такие понятия, как "просвещённая монархия" и "необузданная тирания". В соответствии с этими категориями герои проявляют те или иные черты характера или демонстрируют их отсутствие.

**Ключевые слова:** добродетель, язычник, ценность, иерархия, сверхъестественное, империя, король, тиран