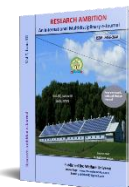




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## THE KINSHIP AND THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: *HAMLET AND MACBETH*

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### KEYWORDS

Kingship, Hamlet, Macbeth,  
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### ABSTRACT

There are so many studies have been written about Shakespeare's plays and life such as *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944) by E.M.W. Tillyard, *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare* (1972) by Ruth L. Anderson, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (1973) by W.C. Curry, (Lal. 1985. P26) and others, but few has been written in the political side of the tragedies, and particularly about the relationship between kingdom and power. This paper is an attempt to cover this area.

In Shakespeare's tragedies: *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* one notices that the main element of the collapse of the kingdom was the king's kinship but not the king. The political struggle to seize power mainly stands on the military powers, This paper tries to find out the main political, social and religious factors that lead to political conflict in the kingdoms in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the elements of similarity and dissimilarity of the political fight to seize power of kingship in the two plays and whether this way of political conflict to seize power a universal fact that stick to the nature of kingship and its continuity. The Lahjian Arab poet was right when he advised his Sultan of Lahj saying:

“It's said: Do not fear the King but be afraid of his relatives and servants.”

### Introduction

Reading Shakespeare's two tragedies: *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, one finds out that both deal with the political conflict to seize power of the kingdom, and this conflict is restricted to the king's kinship.

It seems there is a similarity in the plots of the plays which their events happen between the king's relatives represented in the King's wife and brother, in *Hamlet*, or between the military leaders: Macdownwald, Macbeth and Malcolm, in *Macbeth*. Besides to this political military conflict, there is the problem of the powerful between clergymen and military men. They were aware that feudal society was on its way to extinction and that a new world of individuals came carrying new forms of power that competing with old ones; new religious concepts emerged where the Puritans attempt to “purify” the church of rituals and certain dogmas; and where the role of women was changed.

Kinship was an important issue at Shakespeare's time due to the change of ruler, which will affect the lives of the population; and the Queen Elizabeth was working hard to protect her country from enemies.

The researcher passes by Scotland, England and Denmark in Shakespeare's time; at the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and James I., the king of England and Scotland (1558-1603) to find:

- In *Hamlet* there was a border disagreement between Denmark and Norway and had been settled by the kings of the two countries in single combat – a fight that won by Old Hamlet.

- In *Macbeth* there was a battle between Scotland and its rebels whom were aided by the Norwegians.

- King Duncan of Scotland now has grown old, and two of his nobles are in revolt against him. These two are Thane of Cawdor and Mackdonwald and they are aided by the King of Norway. Macbeth and Banquo, the two brave generals, could won the battle and defeat the rebellion, but the conflict to seize power continues among the three M's: Macdonwald, Macbeth and Malcolm who make violent attempts to seize the throne.

### King's Relations and Fight for Power

Politicians either kings or princes or their relatives in the monarchy represent the first political class, then comes the clergymen who support the monarchs 'as chosen by God' – known as “The Divine Right of Kings”.

In *Hamlet* the king and his relationships with his loyal nobles make Scotland sound a gentle place, where social bonds rest on mutual affection and genuine respect. (1.4. 14-29). Old Hamlet is portrayed as a good king been deceived by his relatives: his brother, Claudius, and his wife, Gertrude.

**Hamlet**, son of the murdered Danish king Hamlet and nephew of Claudius, the current king. Is very intelligent prince and beloved and well considered person by people of his country, but now he suffers from great psychological grief for three reasons: his father's death, his mother's fast marriage to (Claudius), the suspected murderer, and the conflict between his principles and morals and his desire to avenge. So, in order to catch the murderer, Hamlet feigns madness.

**Hamlet II** is portrayed as a “semi-prophet” – as it were, as a scholar, a

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poet, dare and brave whose studies are interrupted by his father's death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He was put, by fate, in that difficult situation as to take revenge but because of his good nature he suffers a lot. Hamlet not only had to fight for the truth his uncle, King Claudius, and his mother, but also his beloved Ophelia, her brother Laertes and their father Polonius, and which is more he faced his friends.

In Macbeth the king's relatives (Macdonwald, Macbeth and Malcolm) fight severely to seize the throne, whereas King Duncan is portrayed as a good, dignified, gentle, fair who respects and love his subjects. For instance when the bloodied captain brings news to Duncan he calls him an "aliant cousin" and "worthy gentleman". Duncan is generous and appreciative ruler whom Macbeth is aware of his virtues "that will plead like angels", and is qualified as "the gracious Duncan". He is compared to Jesus Christ even at his death:

In (Act 1, Scene 4) for instance Duncan, who is compared to Christ, says: "There's no art / to find the mind's construction in the face." (1.4.15-6) that alludes to Samuel 16.7: "For God seeth not as man seeth: for man looketh upon the outward appearance, but the Lord beholdeth the heart". Duncan represents a good king in the play. He is fair, kind and generous. Like Messiah, Duncan is killed by his traitorous ally. This is portrayed in Act 1 when Duncan, says to Macbeth and Banquo after they returned from battle:

**Duncan:**

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour  
To make thee full of growing. Noble Banquo,  
That hast no less deserved, nor must be known  
No less to have done so, let me enfold thee  
And hold thee to my heart. (1.4.34-7)

The metaphor of growth permeates the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. The concept of 'planting men' appears repeatedly in the Old Testament. In Jeremiah 11.16) it reads: "*For the Lord called thy name, a green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit; with the noise of a great tumult he hath kindled fire upon it, and the branches of it are broken.*"; Jeremiah 12.2: "*Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins.*"; and Psalms 92.12,13: "*The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon/Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God.*" In the New Testament, the metaphor appears in Corinthians 3.6,7: "*I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase/So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase*". Shakespeare is careful to illustrate Duncan's status as divinely appointed king throughout the play. Duncan's goodness is necessary to increase Macbeth's feelings of guilt and deep regret.

Even in his death King Duncan is portrayed as Christ. Christ had been crucified with two bandits, and Duncan been murdered with his two guards – the suggestion is there.

To compare characters from Macbeth to characters from biblical stories,

one can find Macbeth, from a religious side, can be compared to two Biblical figures. One is the figure of Judas who betrayed Christ, as the book of Luke narrates. This can be read in Act 1 where Macbeth is talking of the assassination he is going to carry out, says: "**If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly**" (1.7.1-2). In the book of John, Jesus, knowing of Judas' dealings, tells Judas: "*Hurry and do what you are going to do.*" King Duncan can identify with Christ, or at least be seen as a Christ-like figure for he has a good and pure heart and so kind and generous to subjects; and like Christ, he has been murdered by his treachery ally. So also Hamlet resembles Christ, as George Bernard Shaw has observed, in that Hamlet struggles against the old way order, which requires an eye for an eye, as Christ did.

Among the conflict, one notices that Woman plays an important role in the two plays. Hamlet's wife in *Hamlet*, has plotted with Claudius, the King's brother to murder her husband King Hamlet. And in Macbeth Macbeth's wife plays the role of inciting to her man to get him a king and to be a queen.

**Conclusion**

In the two plays Shakespeare focuses on the overthrow of a corrupt monarch by the kings' relatives. Thus, the kinsmen and kinswomen in Shakespeare's tragedies are the only responsible persons for the political and military conflict in the kingdom but not the king. And, here falls the playwright's role in defending the throne of England, of Scotland, and of Denmark. In short Shakespeare defends the idea of the Divine Right of Kings. The idea that the kings were God's counterpart on Earth, and since only God can judge an unjust king, the king can do no wrong. The doctrine implies that any attempt to depose the king or to restrict his powers runs contrary to the Will of God. So. All people must be obedient subjects.

Among the themes of both plays is loyalty. The historical Macbeth (1005-1057) lived and ruled during the transitional final days of the Anglo-Saxon era which would give way to the values and lifestyles of Medieval Great Britain. One of the prominent values during the time period was loyalty – to leaders, to fellow soldiers and to community. To understand Macbeth, the character it is important to understand the notion of loyalty. Hamlet is loyal to his father's memory, as is Laertes to the memory of his father, Polonius, and his sister, Ophelia. Gertrude is splitted between loyalty to her man, Claudius and her son Hamlet. Horatio remains loyal to Hamlet to the end. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, school pals of Hamlet, betray Hamlet and spy on him.

There is contradiction lies in the feudal society of medieval Scotland, the religious conflict between Caths and Protestants where new thoughts and notions emerged; and there are the political changes that turned some Thaners such as of Cawdor and Macbeth, the brave, worthy and loyal noblemen; and Claudius, Polonius and others, kinsmen and kinswomen become treasonous to themselves when destroying the system of values they have embraced and built their life about. The Lahjjan Arab poet was right when he advised his Sultan of Lahij saying:

It's said: Do not fear the King; for there is no fear for you from him,

But be afraid of his relatives and servants.

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