



POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE BEHIND THE HISTORY PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright of Renaissance England, wrote great number of history plays about English history. Prominent historical events of the middle ages and the lives of the medieval kings were the main sources of his history plays. However, the political atmosphere of Renaissance England was also influential on Shakespeare, when he was writing his history plays. In these plays, Shakespeare usually distorted historical facts for the favour of the reigning monarchs and advocated the political views of Elizabeth I and James I through the bridges he built between the similar events of his time and the middle ages. The aim of this paper is to review the turning points in the political atmosphere that influenced William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) when he was writing his *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Richard III* and *the Life and Death of King John*. Briefly stated, there were significant social, political and religious events of early modern England behind the history plays of William Shakespeare. Therefore, it is important to know these major political events to understand and analyse Shakespeare's histories better.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Renaissance English Theatre, Literary History

1. Introduction

Political and social events of the middle ages were the main sources of the history plays of William Shakespeare. He took the political agenda of his time into account when he was writing his history plays. According to new historicist critics of the 1980s, like Stephen Greenblatt, Leonard Tennenhouse, Jonathan Dollimore or Alan Sinfield Shakespeare's history plays were part of the state propaganda and Shakespeare supported the status quo in Early Modern England. For Leonard Tennenhouse, for instance, there was a bilateral relationship, between the monarchy and Shakespeare's history plays, which allowed two sides to benefit mutually: "Shakespeare [used] his drama to authorise political authority, and political authority as he [represented] it, in turn [authorised] art" (1986: 111). In his work *The Purpose of Playing* Louis Montrose describes theatre as one of the strongest 'ideological state apparatuses' of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Eras for the political propaganda of the monarchy (1996: 99). Based on this view, when *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Richard III* and *the Life and Death of King John* are analysed in the light of new historicist approach it is possible to see how Shakespeare distorted historical realities in his history plays. In his plays, Shakespeare advocated the political views of Elizabeth I and James I through the bridges he built between the similar events of his time and the kings that he recounted in his plays.

Briefly stated, there were significant social, political and religious events of early modern England behind the history plays of William Shakespeare, and he reflected these political events in his plays in accordance with the political views of the monarchy. Therefore, it is important to know these major political events to understand and analyse Shakespeare's histories better. In this perspective, this article aims at underscoring the turning points in the political atmosphere of the Medieval and Early Modern England that influenced Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) when he was writing his history plays.

2. Important Political Events of the Medieval and Early Modern England

In 16th century, England's economy was greatly based on agriculture and the political power was in the hands of the land owners. In this feudalist system, the peasants paid great amount of tithes to these local landowner lords for they lived and worked in their lands. The power of the monarchy greatly depended on these lords, who were strongly represented in the House of Lords, the upper house of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. The king or the queen was the head and biggest of these feudal land owners.

2.1 The Tudors

Coming of the Tudors was an important event in itself, because it ended the civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses which took place between the two royal houses of York and Lancaster. These wars came about between 1455 and 1485, and ended with the death of the last Plantagenet King Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth. As a result of this war, Henry VII, a member of the Tudor House, ascended to the throne.

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Because it was the end of the civil war and the beginning of a new period under the Tudor dynasty, it can be seen as one of the turning points in the history of England. During the Wars of the Roses between 1455 and 1485 many powerful lords died in the battles. When Henry VII came into power in 1485, he did not appoint new lords in lieu of the dead lords and he confined the number of the lords to control them more easily (Kavanagh: 150). In *Richard III*, Shakespeare recounts the War of the Roses. In the play Shakespeare tells the defeat of the last Yorkist king Richard III and the victory of Henry VII, the first king of the Tudors. He distorts the historical facts and exaggerates the physical appearance of King Richard III. Shakespeare describes Richard III as a hunchback, but a recent study conducted by a group of scientists called Grey Friars Research Team (2015: 132) from University of Leicester has proved the fact that Richard III was not hunchback. Similarly, Shakespeare presents Henry VII as a hero who brings an end to the chaotic years of England. However, in reality Richard III was the real king and Henry VII was a usurper.

Commencing with Henry VII until the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, the Tudors ruled England for more than a century. Having ruled England for six years, Henry VII died and his son Henry VIII ascended to the throne. One thing is certain that King Henry VIII (1491-1547), his marriages and his children who ruled England successively had very important roles in the history of England.

2.2 Invention of Printing and the Emergence of Protestantism

Prior to delineating the important political and social events of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, it is highly remarkable to remember the invention of Gutenberg's printing and its role during the Reformation movement as the basis of the main political, religious and social events of all Europe. Printing had emerged as one of the greatest inventions in the history of mass communication, a century before Shakespeare was born. It triggered the Reformation and Renaissance movements which then started enlightenment or age of reason in Europe, to say nothing of its impact on people's literacy. Gutenberg's printing system soon proved the fact that whoever controls the information had one of the most powerful weapons in the world. That is to say, controlling the media provides politicians with a great power, and all political powers in the world would wish to have it. In the wake of his invention of the printing press, Gutenberg published the Bible as the first important book in 1455 and he could distribute the holy book to all layers of society. So as to appreciate the importance of printing in the history of mass communication, figuring out its role in the Reformation movement would be adequate. Because when all strata of society, initially in Germany and then in all Europe, got the correct information about the real Christianity, they reacted against the Catholic Church and started to protest against the religious authority. Many people followed Martin Luther in his Reformation movement which was a protest against the Catholic Church. The Reformation was launched in Germany during the early sixteenth century. It was a religious movement and started under the pioneership of Martin Luther in order to alter the unfair attitudes and doings of the Roman Catholic Church. "Martin Luther a Catholic Monk... distributed printed documents to promote his religious arguments" (Paxson: 6-7). In the end, their rebellion resulted in constituting a new Christian denomination called 'Protestantism'. As a consequence, it is possible to claim that Luther was the first person to control the power of media in the most effective manner which formed a new Christian denomination in the end. After he had declared his *Ninety-five Theses* against the Catholic Church in 1517, they were printed and quickly spread throughout Europe including England in 1518. Payton Paxson describes the Reformation movement as an effort "to change what they saw as wrongful beliefs and activities within the church, which resulted in many followers leaving the Roman Catholic Church in protest and forming new Christian sects" (2010: 6). This huge power of printing has inevitably altered everything in the western world thoroughly. Firstly, the number of available books augmented day by day and their prices reduced sharply to competitive levels thanks to printing. Secondly, the number of literate people increased. These two factors accelerated the conveyance of knowledge to the furthestmost places and then had a notable role in the commencement of the Reformation movement. This triggered the enlightenment period which later opened the gate of the modern age for the western world. According to Irving Fang printing was the beginning of the modern world (1997: 6). Therefore, Gutenberg brilliantly completed a project which had already started in China with the invention of paper, which accelerated the conveyance of information everywhere on printed documents.

In the same period in England, William Tyndale translated Bible into English for the first time. As Stephen Greenblatt explains in his work *Renaissance Self Fashioning* from 1525 to the death of Tyndale in 1536 approximately 50,000 copies were printed and distributed in England and people could read it secretly because it was dangerous to read it publicly (1980: 95-96). Although Protestantism started to find supporters in England during the reign of Henry VIII, the real proliferation of this new denomination happened during the reigns of his son King Edward VI and daughter Queen Elizabeth I. Like in all other countries of Europe, Reformation of the Catholic Church and the emergence of a new sect was probably the most important event



of the 16th century in England. However the transformation of English society from Catholicism to Protestantism had different characteristics than its counterparts in Europe. In *the Life and Death of King John* Shakespeare underlines the problem between the Papacy and King John. This emphasis reminds us the problem Queen Elizabeth had with the Pope.

2.3 Henry VIII and the Anglican Church

Although people had the chance of reading the English version of the Bible, it is possible to state that the Reformation movement in England started just after King Henry VIII had a dispute with the Catholic Church. This became the beginning of the transformation of English society from Catholicism to Protestantism. The main reason of the dispute with the Papacy was Henry's demand of annulment of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. Catholic Church did not permit their divorce, and King Henry VIII simply rejected the Papal supremacy. Then he established the Anglican Church and declared himself as the head of this new English Church by the First Act of Supremacy, in 1534. Today this Act of Supremacy is thought as the beginning of English Reformation movement. Having divorced Catherine of Aragon, Henry married with Anne Boleyn and they had a daughter named Elizabeth. When Elizabeth was just three-years-old Anne Boleyn was beheaded with the accusation of adultery. This meant that Elizabeth would not have been able to claim to be the heir to the throne because of illegitimacy.

The fall of Anne Boleyn and the subsequent bastardisation of Elizabeth meant that Henry VIII was temporarily without an heir. A second Act of Succession, announcing Henry's right to nominate his own successor in case Jane Seymour could not give him an heir, was introduced to Parliament in June 1536. The Duke of Richmond was the name on everyone's lips (Childs: 111).

But prior to his death, Henry VIII had declared Elizabeth as his legitimate daughter in a third Act of Succession and therefore, she became a legitimate heir of the throne. Similarly, in *the Life and death of King John* Shakespeare mentions the matter of illegitimacy of King John. In the beginning of the play France interferes with England and declares Arthur as the rightful heir. Chatillion, the messenger of King Philip of France says:

Chatillion. Philip of France, in right and true behalf
Of thy deceased brother Geoffrey's son,
Arthur Plantagenet, lays most lawful claim
To this fair island and the territories,
To Ireland, Poitiers, Anjou, Touraine, Maine, (1.1.7-11)

The dissolution of the Monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII caused a great amount of people working as monk or nun to be homeless and poor. Similarly, agrarian developments in the second half of the 16th century triggered the emergence of capitalist system and this created a great number of jobless poor people in Elizabethan England. The discovery of a new continent and colonies on the other hand, boosted mercantilism. Abundance of raw material which were brought from the colonies caused a high inflation in England. Transformation of English society from feudalism to capitalism, boosting mercantilism and the dissolution of the Catholic Monasteries after the formation of the new Anglican Church created a poor labourer class, who did not have their own land, and a new bourgeois class getting richer in the 1500s.

Queen Elizabeth was successful in following a susceptible policy between the bourgeois class and the feudal noble lords. She also tried to protect the social rights of the poor through a series of laws put into effect in 1563, 1572, 1576 and 1597. Finally in 1601, she introduced the Poor Law, which is today considered to be the first government supported welfare programme in the world.

She was successful in balancing the economic relations between the bourgeois class and feudal lords. But this was not the only issue in Elizabethan England. Besides the transformation of society from feudalism into capitalism, there was the transformation of society from Catholicism into Protestantism. After Henry VIII his three children ascended to the throne successively. In 1547 Edward IV, the son of Jane Seymour and Henry VIII, ascended to the throne as the first Protestant ruler of England. Following his early death in 1553, Mary, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, became the Queen of England. She was Catholic and attempted to restore the Catholic traditions in England. She married Philip II of Spain who was the son of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. During her six year reign, Queen Mary arrested Protestants and many of them "were burned at the stake" (Murphy: 191). Many Protestants had to move to Germany or Switzerland and most of them were influenced from Calvinistic thought. She fought against the Protestants and Elizabeth fought against the Catholics. For this reason, a big struggle was launched between Elizabeth and Mary. As Stephen Greenblatt explains in his article 'Invisible Bullets' both Catholics and Protestants used to call each other



atheists (1994: 19). Then in 1558, after the death of Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I ascended to the throne and Protestantism prevailed in England again. This time Elizabeth did everything so as to protect her authority: "To meet the threat, the state does what it believes it must. It enacts increasingly harsh penalties on Catholics, and seeks out and confiscates Catholic books and religious articles" (Murphy: 194). As we learn from Murphy's quoting from a historian, it was treason to belong to a particular group of people, the Roman Catholics, in Elizabethan England (2012: 194). Protestants who fled to Germany and Switzerland returned when Elizabeth I ascended to the throne of England. These Puritans were influential Protestant minority who had been influenced from Calvinist doctrine during their stay in Germany and Switzerland. When Puritans came into the power, they closed all theatres in 1642.

2.4 Elizabeth I

Elizabeth I was not only the last member of the Tudor Dynasty, but also the second Protestant monarch of England who ruled under Protestantism and fought against Catholicism for 45 years. Therefore, she had an unprecedented role in converting her country from Catholicism to Protestantism. But the political chaos did not come to an end from her ascending to the throne in 1558 until her death in 1603. She had to struggle with a series of uprisings and plots against her authority nearly all her life. While opposing powers were planning to bring a Catholic ruler to the throne, Queen Elizabeth I was trying to secure her Protestant regime with severe precautions. To put it briefly, Protestantism came to the forefront in England in 1547, when Edward VI ascended to the throne. Following the death of Edward VI in 1553, his Catholic sister Mary ruled England until she died in 1558. In the wake of her death, Elizabeth I ascended to the throne of England. In her reign, Protestantism dominated England for 45 years uninterrupted. During this period, Catholics arranged many plots and uprisings in order to bring Queen Elizabeth I down from the throne and bring a Catholic ruler in lieu of her. Elizabeth I was childless and the next legitimate heir of the throne, Queen Mary of Scotland, was Catholic. There was a competition between the two queens and they did not have friendly relations.

Because Mary Queen of Scots had claimed the throne of England previously, Elizabeth saw her as a threat and imprisoned her in 1568 when she came to England (Pollard: 44). Her coming to England triggered the unsuccessful rising of the discontent lords of North in 1569, but Elizabeth could suppress this Northern Rebellion. A year later Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Pope in 1570. In 1571 a banker called Roberto Ridolfi organized another unsuccessful plot to restore the old faith again. Although it was an abortive attempt, the Ridolfi plot drew the attention of English Parliament to the potential threat against Queen Elizabeth I. Similarly, in 1584 another plot attempt by Sir Francis Throckmorton was revealed before it was put into practice. The aim of all these plots was to free Queen Mary of Scots and make her the Catholic queen of England.

So as to understand the level of threat coming from the Catholics it is useful to look at the research of David Dean about a bill discussed in the House of Commons in Elizabethan England. According to Dean:

Some MPs thought the bill should provide for an interim government if the Queen was assassinated. Indeed, some had wanted Mary to be specifically named and a suggestion that any heir in league with the Pope be disabled was rejected because it interfered with the succession, 'a thinge most dislikinge to hir Majestie and utterlye forbid- den us to deale with' (2002: 64).

Two years later in 1586, Queen Mary of Scots this time organized the Babington Plot in order to assassinate and overthrow Queen Elizabeth I (Cheetham: 148). Anthony Babington, the leader of this conspiracy, was appointed by Queen Mary of Scotland. He failed in the plot and "Was destined to play a key role in Queen Mary's downfall" (Cheetham: 147). After the plot had failed and the support of Mary Queen of Scotland for the assassination had been revealed, Queen Mary's tragic end started. She was initially put in prison and stayed there for some time. Then she was convicted of treason and executed at Fotheringhay Castle on 8 February 1587 (Cheetham: XXII). After the execution of Queen Mary of Scots Spanish King Philip II, the leader of one of the strongest naval armies of the World decided to avenge and invade England. It was a great threat for England and Protestantism. A year later, in 1588, Spanish Naval Forces came to England. But England's decisive victory over the Spanish Armada not only secured the Protestant regime of Elizabeth I and protected England from a Catholic invasion but also helped to the creation of England as a nation-state. In *the Life and Death of King John* there is a similar threat of foreign invasion by France. King Philip of France threatens King John with invading England.

Among the plots and uprisings, Essex Rebellion of 1601 was a different one in terms of its characteristics. Although it was an uprising, rebels neither aimed to restore the old faith nor wanted to harm



Queen Elizabeth. They just wanted to warn Queen Elizabeth against harmful people around her, especially Robert Cecil (Dickinson: 50-51).

Briefly, from 1558 to 1603 during the Elizabethan Era, Protestantism prevailed in England without interruption. Although Catholics arranged many plots and uprisings in order to bring the Queen Elizabeth I down and bring a Catholic ruler instead, they failed each time.

2.5 James I

In the wake of the death of Queen Elizabeth I, in 1603, James VI of Scotland from the House of Stuart ascended to English throne as King James I of England. Thus, he became the first joint ruler of England and Scotland. Ironically, sixteen years after the execution of the Queen Mary of Scots, her son James VI of Scots, became King James I of England in 1603. He was born in 1566 and grew up in Scotland while his mother was in captivity from 1568 until her death in 1587. Therefore, he did not have the chance of knowing his mother. Catholics in England were in great expectations after his ascending the throne. But he was not a Catholic, he was a Protestant king who was influenced from Calvinistic thought. This detail became important in the history of England and Protestantism. Catholics organized the famous Gunpowder Plot against him in 1604, but they could not be successful. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* soon after this plot. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare recounts the negative results of a plot to assassinate a king and underlines the divine right doctrine of King James I. As a king who grew up in Scotland, James was not familiar with the tripartite administration system of England. Instead, he preferred to rule England alone with full absolutism. (Tennenhouse: 110) Since he thought he was an experienced king and he was only responsible against God, he did not pay attention to the power of the parliaments in England. Since he did not understand the value and the importance of the tripartit system, his ignorance of the decisions of the parliaments started to become a problem. The conflicts between the parliaments and the Stuart Kings, successively James and his son Charles, would eventually lead to a civil war which would result in the execution of King Charles and the declaration of England as a Commonwealth.

James was not a successful king in his policies and relations with the parliaments. He tried to be absolutist and did not want to recognise the rights of the parliament. There were high inflation rates and increasing wealth of the bourgeois class. But the wealth of the king and feudal lords did not increase during the same period. In this sense feudal lords supported James I or they had to support James I against the bourgeois class. Most of the time, he underscored the importance of the divine rights of the kings (Patterson: 28) and had conflicts with the Puritans over the structure of the Anglican Church.

During his first year as the king of England, James organized a conference at Hampton Court in 1604 and invited Puritans to discuss their demands about the status of the Anglican Church. Puritans proposed to purify the Anglican Church. They believed that Anglican Church had still some Catholic traditions. James I refused all proposals of the Puritans. The only proposal of the Puritans that James accepted at the conference was to get the Bible translated into English (Croft: 157). In 1611, the translation of the James I version of the Bible was completed. Today it is still considered one of the best Bible translations of all times. Political conflicts between the Puritans and the Stuart kings, James I and later his son Charles I caused a civil war in the early 17th century. Puritans who were under the pressure of the monarchy had to move to the new continent to worship and live freely.

3. Conclusion

William Shakespeare lived in both Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and witnessed the decline of feudalism, the dissolution of Catholic Church and the rise of England as a nation-state in which Protestantism prevailed. Theatre in Renaissance England was the only and most influential instrument so as to reach the masses. Consequently it is not astonishing that both Queen Elizabeth and King James might have wanted to control the theatre in order to influence or manipulate the perception of society in accordance with their political viewpoints. Although the House of Lords and the House of Commons had some powers of legislation and taxation, their powers were not much enough to control the policies of the monarchy in those years (Braddick: 24). Shakespeare, who lived under an authoritarian regime, tried to endorse the political views of the monarchy by distorting historical facts and giving messages in accordance with the ideology of the monarchy in his history plays. Mentioning Richard III as a hunchback was a part of Tudor propaganda. In his plays, Shakespeare advocated the political views of Elizabeth I and James I through the bridges he built between the similar events of his time and the kings that he recounted in his plays. Briefly, there were significant social, political and religious events of early modern England behind the history plays of William Shakespeare, and he reflected these political events in his plays in accordance



with the political views of the monarchy. Therefore, it is important to know these major political events to understand and analyse Shakespeare's histories better.

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