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Respect for Power:
Was Shakespeare a Machiavellian?
By Greg Bye

Essay Editor's Note: The following essay considers the question of William Shakespeare's view of power. This view, Bye argues, is evidenced in Richard II, 1 Henry IV, and 2 Henry IV. These loosely historical plays are built around the tale of King Richard II's weak reign, Henry IV's powerful usurpation of Richard and the slaying of rebel, Hotspur, by Henry IV's son—Prince Hal. Pointing to the plays found in The Riverside Shakespeare, Bye discusses two philosophical doctrines concerning power: "Divine Right" and Machiavellian "Right by Might."

Shakespeare's support of the doctrine of Machiavellian ability, over that of divine right, is quite evident in the plays in question. For example, once Bullingbrook (Henry IV) has taken power from Richard II, there is no sustained outcry, by any of the characters, against his presumably illegitimate occupation of the throne. What there is, instead, is a general acceptance of the fact by the characters. This is especially true in 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV.

While in power, Richard is shown to be quite high-handed in his royal decrees, including the banishment of Bullingbrook for "six frozen winters" (Richard II, I.iii.211). The response to this and other decisions is compliance.

However, when Richard decides to finance his campaign to "supplant those rough rug-headed kerns" (II.i.156) through the seizure of Bullingbrook's "plate, coin, revenues, and moveables" (II.i.161), he ignores warning by York that "you pluck a thousand dangers on your head, / You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts" (II.i.205-206). The reply is an organized revolt. This includes "[t]he banish'd Bullingbrook [who] repeals himself" (II.ii.49) by returning to England.

Although it is not difficult to understand why Bullingbrook and his allies act as they do, they are, according to a strict interpretation of the Doctrine of Divine Right, traitors. Also, it would follow if Shakespeare were a disciple of this doctrine, his support of Richard would be abundantly clear.

However, while Richard is in Ireland, the only major character to oppose the traitors is York. For, as York tells Bullingbrook, "Thou art a banish'd man, and here art come,/ Before the expiration of thy time./ In braving arms against thy sovereign" (II.iii.108-112). But, despite York's being "loath to break our country's laws" (II.iii.169), he admits that "my power is weak" (II.iii.154), and withdraws his opposition.

Furthermore, after being convinced of the power they wield, York goes as far as to invite Bullingbrook to "ascend his throne," and proclaims "[L]ong live Henry, fourth of that name!" (IV.i.111,112).

This capitulation by York leaves only Richard as the last true believer. Yet even he invites Bullingbrook to "seize the crown" (IV.i.181). If Shakespeare were committed to divine right, he would likely have had his characters put up a braver fight. This is not the case. Shakespeare's description of crown-seizing leads us to assume that he is a not a believer in divine right to power; Shakespeare is a follower of another, more Machiavellian doctrine.

According to the doctrine of divine right, Henry is an illegitimate usurper. But in 1 Henry IV, no one seems upset that Henry has taken the crown from Richard. The revolt in this play occurs because Hotspur is angry at the King Henry's refusal to ransom "[h]is brother-in-law, the foolish Mortimer" (I.iii.80).

This refusal prompts Hotspur to ask his father, Earl of Northumberland, this question: "[D]id King Richard.../ Proclaim my brother Edmund Mortimer/ Heir to the crown?" (I.iii.158). Northumberland replies: "He did, myself did hear it" (I.iii.158). Afterwards, Hotspur sets out to organize another rebellion.

On the surface, it may appear that Hotspur is driven by devotion to the Doctrine of Divine Right. But he is actually given to an opposite inclination, rebellion, as is seen in the remainder of this play and in its sequel. These plays focus not on questions of Henry's illegitimate rule, but on rebellion and the adventures of Prince Hal.

In order for the uprising to be successful, Hotspur needs to gain the allegiance of allies. Believing that his father and uncle are standing with him in the struggle—"bearing our fortunes in our strong arms:" (I.iii.298)—his next step is to get the support of "Glendower and Lord Mortimer" (I.iii.295).

Shakespeare devotes one long scene to Hotspur's failed efforts. In it, he wishes to make clear that the failure is due to Hotspur's poor diplomatic skills and his avarice.
Glendower, for example, maintains that, among other things, "[t]he heavens were all on fire, the earth did tremble" (III.i.23) when he was born.

Instead of indulging Glendower’s superstitious beliefs, as a competent politician would have done, Hotspur mocks him: "O then the earth shook to see the heavens on fire./ And not in fear of your nativity" (III.i.24-25).

Later on, Hotspur greedily demands a larger share of the land that is to be divided between himself and Glendower. Hotspur tells the Welshman that while in a "bargain, mark ye me,/ I’ll cavil on the ninth part of a hair" (III.i.137-138). Not long after this meeting, much to his dismay, Hotspur learns that Glendower will not be joining the allies. Glendower sends the excuse that he cannot "draw his power this fourteen days." Is there any wonder why?

Shakespeare makes no excuses for Hotspur’s failure in the revolt. We would expect some excuse if Shakespeare were in sympathy with divine right rule. Hotspur is defeated (in the midst of bad organizing efforts) because of King Henry’s superb battlefield tactics and superior fighting ability of the king’s marshalled forces. No other reasons are given.

Shakespeare gives an account of the defeat of Hotspur’s rebel forces. The playwright accomplishes this mainly through descriptions of the effective tactics of the king and the fighting of Prince Hal. For instance, there is Douglas’s bafflement at the number of kings on the battlefield: "Another king? [T]hey grow like Hydra’s heads" (V.iv.42).

The particular king to whom Douglas addresses the question is the "King himself"—Henry IV—and a king in obvious danger. Fortunately for Henry, Prince Hal arrives on the scene to challenge Douglas: "It is the Prince of Wales that threatens thee" (V.iv.42).

Prince Hal then proceeds to chase Douglas from his position. Immediately following this display of battlefield prowess, Hotspur, a "very valiant rebel of the name" (V.iv.62), enters and challenges Hal: "[T]he hour is come/ To end the one of us" (V.iv.68-69).

The play ends with king’s army firmly in control of the situation. The dying Hotspur declares, "O Harry, thou hast robb’d me of my youth!" (V.v.77). Lord Douglas, realizing that all is lost, "fled," we are told, "with the rest,/ And falling from a hill, he was so bruised/ That the pursuers took him" (V.v.20-22).

Then the king resolves to confront his remaining adversaries, both diplomatically and militarily, and ensure that "[r]ebellion in this land shall lose his sway" (V.v.41).

In 2 Henry IV, after discovering that the "rebellion/ had met will ill luck" (I.i.51), members of the king’s opposition are hit with one certain reality: For "safety and revenge" they will need to "make friends with speed" (I.213,214). In other words, if they are to prevail against Henry, they must be as well organized the king. Also, they complain that defeat was due to the rebel’s shortcomings. This blaming of weakness further demonstrates Shakespeare’s view of power: Those who best use power ought to rule, and those who fail are "food [for] worms" (1Henry IV V.iv.86-87). They have no one to blame but their weak selves.

Lady Percy, Hotspur’s widow, reflects this sentiment when he assails Northumberland for his failure to "[b]ring up his powers" (2Henry IV II.iii.14). Such negligence of power caused her husband’s defeat, she says, knowing she will never again "hang [on] Hotspur’s neck" (II.iii.44).

Of course, Lady Percy and her mother-in-law, Lady Northumberland, have clear intentions: They seek to convince Northumberland that the time is ripe for him to make tactical retreat "to Scotland" (II.iii.50), to remain there, as Lady Northumberland advises, "[t]ill the nobles and the armed commons/ Have their puissance made little taste" (II.iii.51-52).

Lady Northumberland goes on to advise, "If they get around and vantage of the king./ Then join you with them, like a rib of steel" (II.iii.53-54). Shrewd advice from the meek and mild.

In the latter part of 2Henry IV, the forces of the king reveal that they are willing to maintain power by means of utmost treachery. If Shakespeare had any sympathy remaining for divine right, he herein loses an opportunity to exploit it. The king’s messenger, Westmerland, after flattering the archbishop ("The dove, and very blessed spirit of peace" [IV.i.46) and other rebel leaders, asks them to attend a meeting with Prince John. That meeting is ostensibly offered as the means which could produce equitable peace: "In sight of both our battles we may meet,/And attend a meeting with Prince John/To remain /For our restored love and amity" (IV.v.61). Then, John says, "Let’s drink together friendly and embrace./ That all their eyes may bear those tokens home/ Of our restored love and amity" (IV.v.63-65). Unfortunately for the rebel leaders, John has no intention of toasting their health. Once the rebel leaders dismiss their troops,
Westmerland arrests them for treason. Mowbry cries foul: "Is this proceeding just and honorable?" (IV.ii.110) Triumphant Westmerland replies: "Is your assembly so?"

The scene is a primer for Machiavellism. Prince John gets his enemies, through diplomacy, to release their power; then he unleashes his power, vanquishing them.

Notably, after the episode concludes, Shakespeare offers no further comment. The implication is clear: Shakespeare probably endorsed John's effective, if deceitful, use of power. If not, he missed a chance to revile the illegitimate usurpers for their evil actions. Shakespeare also passed on opportunity to support the Doctrine of Divine Right.

Reflection

Looking at myself, a smile does not appear. I remember the people that cared for me, friends that I thought I fooled. Thinking of the places that shaped me, I wish to visit them again. This moment, that scars me is the moment that I recall. These thoughts haunt me. I feel the pain again, the pain I believe has shaped me in a way that I cannot change. I weep when I forget my past. This past is who I am. The tears I shed are my true life, tears that will not fall to the ground like rain, tears that shape the vision I hold, not allowing it to fool my true reflection.

Michael Merrill