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William Shakespeare and the Representation of Human Ambition in English Literature

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Abstract : Ambition is one of the constant topics in the works of William Shakespeare. It serves as an engine of political tragedy in Macbeth and Richard III, as suspicion in Julius Caesar, as jealousy in Othello and as a family affair in King Lear. This paper considers Shakespeare's treatment of ambition and the reasons for the significance of this representation within the context of English literature. It applies a close reading of some plays in the framework of the Elizabethan and Jacobean views on order, rank and providence and the tradition of criticism from A. C. Bradley to the contemporary cultural criticism. It argues that Shakespeare treats ambition neither as good nor evil but shows it as a human force that causes both achievement and destruction, always connected with conscience and with order around and exposing the self to deception. It shows that Shakespeare's plays distinguish three types of ambition: the ambition of desire for power, the ambition of resentment and the ambition of honour and binds each of them to a particular dramatic form and outcome.

Keywords: Shakespeare; ambition; tragedy; Macbeth; Richard III; Julius Caesar; Elizabethan world picture

Introduction

Ambition, the desire for rank, power or distinction, is a long-standing topic of literature, but in English literature ambition is not usually examined so intensely as in Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare's kings, soldiers, courtiers and conspirators are motivated by ambitions that lead them beyond the limits of morality and politics, and the plays reveal the details of the price paid for this crossing of the limits. This topic is also characteristic of the epoch. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were marked by social mobility, court rivalries and anxiety over succession, and the stage served as a means to examine these issues indirectly.

This paper deals with the treatment of ambition in Shakespeare and with its significance. Its central thesis is that the plays show ambition as a force that is neither condemned nor approved unambiguously. It is a force that motivates people to act but at the same time causes them to lose the moral and psychological balance necessary for actions. In tragedies the ambitious character does not receive just punishment; the most tragic thing is what happens to him during the course of pursuit of his ambitions.

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This research poses three questions. How do particular plays present different forms of ambition? What are the restraints put on ambition in Shakespeare and how do they function? What is the connection between this representation and the tradition of English literature? This paper aims at giving a coherent description of this theme that is usually treated play by play.

Literature Review

Critical writings on ambition in Shakespeare start with the study of character. A. C. Bradley (1904) considered the tragic hero as an exceptionally gifted person suffering from a fatal mental flaw, and in Macbeth he saw the man whose imagination made him sensitive to the temptation of the crown and incapable of enjoyment of it. Bradley's emphasis on the inner drama of conscience has determined many later interpretations, even those that oppose it. G. Wilson Knight (1930) considered the plays as poetic images and saw in Macbeth a play of darkness, blood and disorder surrounding the deed of ambition.

Second tradition interprets ambition against the background of the idea of order. E. M. W. Tillyard (1943) argued that Elizabethan thinking viewed the world as an order with corresponding ranks of beings, state and family, and with disturbance of any of them the whole order was disturbed. In this view the usurper in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies violated a natural and divine order, and the disturbance in nature caused by murder of Duncan or deposition of the king was the expression of the violation. The historical interpretation of the plays has been revised by later critics but it remains helpful in the study of the plays.

The criticism of later time has been much more skeptical about any definite order. Jan Kott (1964) viewed the plays as a witness to the cruelty of power and the repetition of the cycle of usurpations, and Jonathan Dollimore (1984) claimed that Jacobean tragedy exposed the ideology of order and showed the fragility of authority. Northrop Frye (1967) saw the tragic structure as a story of the rise and fall of fortune, with the central figure trapped in the cycle of time. These approaches shifted the focus from the personal moral failure to the political structures in which the ambition functions.

Biographical and cultural criticism added another aspect to this research. Stephen Greenblatt (2004) placed Shakespeare in the social setting of a provincial glover's son who became a successful playwright, understanding the problems of the pressures of rank and reputation. Harold Bloom (1998) claimed that Shakespeare created a new inner life of his characters with self-consciousness and self-deception at its center, and he considered Macbeth's imagination as the main source of the play's power. Marjorie Garber (2004) emphasized the interpretive potential of the plays. Frank Kermode (2000) drew attention to the language through which characters expressed and disguised their intentions.

Two gaps can be seen in this literature. First, most studies consider ambition as a feature of a particular play and few examine the various manifestations of ambition across the plays. Second, less attention has been paid to the connection between the form of ambition and the dramatic form that it creates. This paper attempts to fill these gaps by exploring three forms of ambition and by linking each to its dramatic outcome.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative literary analysis of Shakespeare's plays. The primary texts for this study are Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth and Coriolanus, which were examined in the edition of the Complete Works edited by Wells and Taylor (2005). The plays were chosen because ambition was the central element of their plot and because they covered history plays, Roman plays and major tragedies. The method of this study includes close reading of key speeches and scenes supported by comparative analysis and references to critical and historical sources. The analysis includes the type of ambition represented, the language in which it was expressed, the restraints imposed on it and the outcome. No quantitative data was gathered.

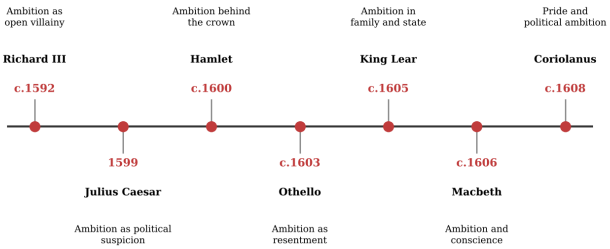
Forms of Ambition in the Plays

The selected plays are listed in Table 1 and presented in the chronological sequence in Figure 1. Reading them together reveals three recurrent forms of ambition, different by their origin, relation to the self and dramatic outcome.

Figure 1. Chronology of the plays discussed and the form of ambition in each.

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Ambition as desire for power

The clearest form of ambition is the desire for power found in Richard III and in Macbeth. Richard declares his intention in the opening soliloquy and the plot follows his scheming with alternating horror and admiration. This is the character who knows what he is doing and who enjoys the effect of his skills, and the audience becomes a participant of the deeds before the consequences catch up with him. Macbeth develops the same form with deeper psychological insight. When Macbeth evaluates the murder of Duncan he realizes that he has nothing but "vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on the other" (1.7). The metaphor here is that of the rider who overreaches and falls. He realizes the weakness of his intention and acts anyway. This knowledge makes Macbeth different from the usual villain, and it is the source of the tragedy that lies in his self-consciousness.

Table 1. Ambition in selected plays

Play	Ambitious figure	Form of ambition	Outcome
Richard III (c.1592)	Richard, Duke of Gloucester	Open desire for the crown, pursued with deliberate villainy	Isolation and defeat at Bosworth
Julius Caesar (1599)	Caesar; Cassius; Brutus	Suspected ambition for kingship; resentment; honour	Assassination, civil war and death of the conspirators
Hamlet (c.1600)	Claudius	Ambition for crown and queen achieved through murder	Guilt, failed prayer and death
Othello (c.1603)	Iago	Resentment over promotion and rank	Exposure and ruin of all concerned
King Lear (c.1605)	Edmund; Goneril and Regan	Ambition for status and land, linked to the family	Death of the ambitious and collapse of the kingdom
Macbeth (c.1606)	Macbeth and Lady Macbeth	Desire for kingship encouraged by prophecy	Tyranny, loss of sleep and meaning, death
Coriolanus (c.1608)	Coriolanus	Pride and honour tied to political office	Banishment, treachery and death

Ambition as resentment

In Othello and King Lear the ambitious characters are motivated not by the desire for the crown but by the feeling of having been deprived of something due to them. Iago resents the promotion of Cassio above him and creates a plot of extraordinary patience, and the play leaves his motives uncertain as if the resentment itself were sufficient. Edmund in King Lear resents his position as an illegitimate son and appeals to nature against the customs of the society. Their ambitions are a protest against the social order that has failed to recognize their talents, and give their speeches a peculiar strength. Shakespeare does not accept their grievances as a justification, but he treats it with sympathy showing that ambition may be born in genuine injustice, and this gives the plays political

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implications that appeal to modern critics (Dollimore, 1984).

Ambition as honour

The third form of ambition is ambition for honour when the character strives for distinction before others. Brutus in Julius Caesar fears the ambition of Caesar for the sake of the republic and when he joins the conspiracy he acts in the name of honour. Antony's speech at the funeral turns the word "ambitious" against Brutus by repeating it till it becomes ridiculous. Coriolanus, who cannot bring himself to ask the citizens for their vote, is the reverse example of the character whose pride in his merit prevents him from behaving as a politician. In these plays the issue is not whether the character is ambitious but how his ambition is judged by the community, and the plays show how easy it is to ruin a reputation with the word "ambitious".

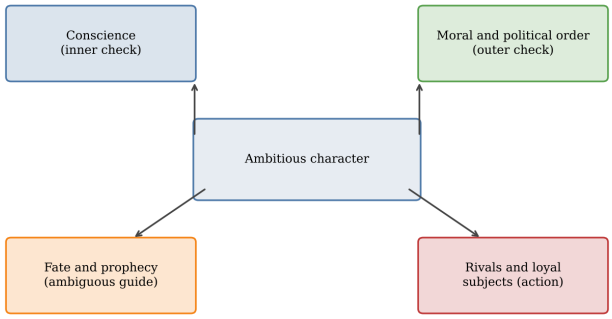
Table 2. Types of ambition and their dramatic outcomes

Form	Source	Representative plays	Dramatic effect
Desire for power	Appetite for rule	Richard III; Macbeth	Intense interior drama; sense of horror and complicity
Resentment	Sense of injustice or denied merit	Othello; King Lear	Intrigue; social and political critique
Honour	Desire for distinction and reputation	Julius Caesar; Coriolanus	Debate about the public meaning of ambition

Restraints on Ambition

Shakespeare surrounded ambition with several kinds of restraints depicted in Figure 2. The first of them is the voice of conscience. Macbeth hears a voice saying "Sleep no more" after the murder, and Lady Macbeth's later sleepwalking demonstrates the activity of guilt. The second kind of restraint is the moral and political order. In the histories and Macbeth usurpation brings the disorder in nature and the state, and at the end of the play the order is restored. The third is the ambiguous guidance of fate. The witches give Macbeth the prophecies that tempted him, but did not command him, and the play raises the question about his freedom. The fourth kind of restraint is the activities of rivals and loyal subjects that combine in order to overthrow the usurper.

Figure 2. Restraints on ambition in the Shakespearean plays.



These restraints do not make the plays mere moral lessons. Ambitious characters are often more vivid than the forces overthrowing them, and the dramatic sympathy for Macbeth, Richard and Iago shows that Shakespeare understood the attractiveness of the energy these characters have. The plays raise the question about the possibilities of directing this energy to good purposes, and the ease with which it is misused. In this way the treatment of ambition is also a reflection on the conditions of human activity in an ordered and uncertain world.

Discussion

The analysis has revealed that Shakespeare's treatment of ambition is much more profound than just a moral lesson. First, he distinguishes between the three types of ambition and avoids the monolithic image. Desire for power, the resentment of the deprived and pursuit of honour have different origins and social implications, and the plays show that if a society wants to understand ambition it has to examine its origin. Second, the plays connect the form of ambition to the dramatic form.

Third, the influence of the treatment on English literature has been great. The image of the self-aware usurper whose imagination destroys him has been used in later drama, poetry and fiction, and the link between ambition and guilt has been a staple of English moral philosophy. Shakespearean treatment can be compared

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to the earlier one in Marlowe, in which ambition is only a matter of aspirations, and the addition of Shakespeare is the interior cost. Bloom (1998) considered the interior aspect of ambition as a decisive step in the development of the literary treatment of the self.

Fourth, the plays have remained open to interpretations. Historical treatment of Tillyard (1943) finds in the downfall of the ambitious the restoration of a divinely ordered world, while the treatments of Kott (1964) and Dollimore (1984) find in the same events the repetition of the violence and the exposure of the fragility of power. This paper does not take any of them as the ultimate interpretation. It claims that the plays have kept both possibilities in tension, and that is the reason for the continuing importance of ambition as a subject for readers and spectators.

Conclusion

Shakespeare has presented human ambition as an important and ambiguous force. Plays distinguish between ambition as desire for power, resentment and honour, connect each of them to a separate dramatic form and set it against the restraints of conscience, order, fate and rivalry. The plays do not reduce ambition to vice, because they present it as a force motivating characters to act, but also show how it destroys those who follow it unconditionally. The treatment has contributed the lasting vocabulary and the characters to English literature, and still provides a way of thinking about the ethics of ambition. Further research might compare Shakespeare's treatment of ambition with that of his contemporaries and with later English writers who used his images.

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