



## THE CORRUPTING INFLUENCE OF POWER IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

*To commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of [William Shakespeare](#) (1564-1616) the discussion this month will focus on "The Corrupting Influence of Power in Shakespeare's Plays". [Lord Acton](#) famously maintained that "power tends to corrupt. And absolute power corrupts absolutely." Shakespeare's plays qualify as so many imaginative investigations into the consequences of possessing power. From one perspective his dramas depict the effects of possessing power upon the soul of the person thus endowed. At the same time the plays portray the transitive effects of exercising power upon those who find themselves subject to the possessors of means to benefit or to harm. For both those who apply their power and those subject to the wielder thereof, Shakespeare's works display the exercise of power to have consequences that bear upon one's understanding of liberty and responsibility. The lead essay is by John E. Alvis, professor of English and director of American Studies at the University of Dallas, and the other participants are Sarah Skwire who is a senior fellow at Liberty Fund, Inc., David V. Urban who is a professor of English at Calvin College, and Michael Zuckert who is Nancy R. Drexel Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame.*

### THE CORRUPTING INFLUENCE OF POWER IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

by John E. Alvis

[Lord Acton](#) famously maintained that "[power tends to corrupt. And absolute power corrupts absolutely.](#)"<sup>[1]</sup> Shakespeare's plays qualify as so many imaginative investigations into the consequences of possessing power. From one perspective his dramas depict the effects of possessing power upon the soul of the person thus endowed. At the same time the plays portray the transitive effects of exercising power upon those who find themselves subject to the possessors of means to benefit or to harm. For both those who apply their power and those subject to the wielder thereof, Shakespeare's works display the exercise of power to have consequences that bear upon one's understanding of liberty and responsibility. So what do we find once we survey some of Shakespeare's plays with a view to trying out Acton's proposition?



***John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton***

Of the many forms in which power reveals itself—in politics, in families, between lovers, in the relations linking human beings to supernatural powers divine or demonic—suppose we confine our inquiry to the political. Do the political plays of Shakespeare support Acton's cautionary regarding the corruption worked by possessing and deploying power? If so, do any of these dramas suggest means of limiting corruptive tendencies

in the powerful? Do these dramas depict any characters who manage with absolute power nevertheless to avoid being corrupted thereby?

We could begin with *Macbeth*, a play in which political power is gained in abundance and at least *imagined* to have been gained to an absolute degree. Macbeth arrives suddenly at the apex of political authority, first, on the strength of his military prowess and soon thereafter by his assassinating the reigning monarch. Macbeth is remarkable among Shakespeare's rulers because of what we might term the "purity" of his will to power. Men who desire political sway typically desire it in order to gratify other desires that, to be attained, depend upon acquiring force sufficient to oblige others to comply with the powerful person's wishes. Macbeth, however, appears to seek power as an end in itself. Early on he admits to himself that he has no spur to motivate him but "only vaulting ambition."

"I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
[Vaulting ambition](#), which o'er-leaps itself  
And falls on the other."  
[Act I, Sc. VII, 24]

Later in the play, Malcolm will test Macduff by listing some of the gratifications that he would indulge in himself if he had royal prerogatives. Macduff will accept much in the way of corruption but draws the line at Malcolm's pretending he would destroy "human concord."

"But I have none: the king-becoming graces,  
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,  
I have no relish of them, but abound  
In the division of each several crime,  
Acting it many ways. Nay, had I power, I  
should  
[Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell](#),  
Uproar the universal peace, confound  
All unity on earth."  
[Act. IV, Sc. III, 91-100]

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Macbeth reaches this point when he wills to spill "all nature's germans."

"I conjure you (the three witches), by that  
which you profess,—  
Howe'er you come to know it,—answer me:  
Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches; though the yesty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up;  
Though bladed corn be lodg'd and trees blown  
down;  
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations; though the  
treasure  
[Of Nature's germens tumble all together](#),  
Even till destruction sicken; answer me  
To what I ask you."  
[Act IV, Sc. I, 50-61]

Macbeth does not anticipate the self-destructive effects of getting what he wills, for he suffers the consequences of his corruption in diminishment of strength, first, within himself. He deprives himself of sleep and troubles himself with fears of the living and even of the dead (Banquo's ghost) and of the yet to be born (Banquo's royal descendants). He loses his wife to her own paralyzing fears. He thinks he has lost—that is damned—his immortal soul. At last he loses power to intimidate when his troops come to detest him more than they fear him. Then he loses crown and life at the same time to a surviving son of the legitimate king he had killed. For those subject to the power of a ruler beset by ambition and fear, the consequences are what often must attend a quest for absolute power: looking to the ruler, constant fears of violent death at the hands of another; looking to

those who are ruled, destruction of civic friendship, now giving way to a general distrust. Macbeth installs in every prominent family spies so as to detect disaffection. One consequence thereof: no one can know whether within his own household he deals with friend or enemy.



**William Shakespeare (circa 1600-1610)**

Yet the play *Macbeth* may seem the most reassuring of Shakespeare's political dramas because the playwright has endowed a nemesis he terms "*Nature*" with means of "self-correction" sufficiently ample to make tyranny short-lived. Still, on second thoughts do we not realize that Shakespeare has created an incompetent aspirant to effective tyranny? His sophomoric version of the Machiavellian opportunist-immoralist serves to provide a handbook instructive in what not to do. To make himself secure in his new access to political power, Macbeth could learn from the example of the ambitious Agathocles commended by Machiavelli. Had he done so he would have made better use of the occasion fortune had provided by responding to the opportunity with an Agathoclean thoroughness. That would have meant slaying Duncan's sons together with Macduff and Banquo while all were yet guests within Macbeth's castle. Within his own walls he has available a retinue adequate to encompass the several killings, as we know because the other houseguests fear to confront him though they are not deceived by the flight of King Duncan's sons. (These

sons, too, know their lives now lie vulnerable, their fate confined as one says in "an augur hole.") Macbeth trusts too much the way of the fox, when circumstance had called for the naked power of the lion. From Machiavelli he could also learn better to deploy lupine cunning in sustaining himself once he comes into possession of the throne. He would supplement his cadre of spies with dependent lairds, securing their loyalty by redistributing lands and honors. Macbeth does not know how to employ faction for a truly effective corruption of a society. He does succeed only in absolute self-corruption. He inures himself at last against residual promptings of conscience, natural affection for his wife, and, by the end of the play, has extinguished every concern for his status in God's reckoning. But to be rationally assured of the operation of a moral reaction, a self-cleansing nemesis, Shakespeare would have had to show it operative against a tyrant more cunning by half than Macbeth. Macbeth's merely partially tyrannical measures in service of power-seeking corrupt (him) absolutely, but his limited intelligence prevents his actually attaining absolute power.

With his depiction of Cleopatra, Shakespeare imagines absolute power possessed by hereditary right. In the same play Antony's power comes by way of a triumvirate that, as such, obviously puts limits upon his authority. Yet it appears his power over the eastern empire may not be subject to any "constitutional" restrictions, although Octavius Caesar claims Antony has obligations under their partnership. Cleopatra has been invested with a sacerdotal authority-- in which Antony is said at one point to share inasmuch as the couple dress themselves in garments associated with two divinities. Evidently Antony can either "[enfranchise](#)" or more thoroughly subject some kingdoms at will. Given the Roman conquest of Egypt, Cleopatra must owe some obedience to Antony, but she speaks as though she were sovereign and clearly does command her Egyptian fleet.

Corruption in consequence of the couple's having extensive power is uncertain if only because the world presented in *Antony and Cleopatra* lacks a standard for measuring integrity. Antony behaves in the manner of a tyrant at times. Cleopatra's tyranny extends to trying out

upon her subjects “[easy ways to die](#)” (not confining experimentation to prisoners condemned for capital crimes as Shakespeare had read in Plutarch). Otherwise, it appears we have little indication of the character of her rule. Antony’s corruption registers in his inattentiveness to military obligations. Here the cause lies in his love. His dotting upon Cleopatra is lamented by his officers and becomes the cause of his losing to his rival Octavian the decisive sea battle of Actium. If the standard by which Shakespeare guides our judgment consists in the self-command needed for generalship as well as for effective political rule, then both rulers suffer corruption. Yet judgment awaits a clarification inasmuch as the erotic preoccupations of the lovers seem not more afflicting to the people they rule than the partisan political scheming of the grand Roman power brokers. With the demise of the republic vanishes any sense of a common good to be served by political virtue. As Shakespeare presents it, political life has become altogether personal. Thus between Egypt and Rome there’s not much to choose. In fact the most sodden moments are those spent by the triumvirs in their attempt at Bacchic carousing aboard Pompey’s galley. So personal have become political as well as military allegiances that the question must arise: is not the personal loyalty between lovers to be considered on a par with the no less personal bonds connecting generals to their subordinates and colleagues?



*Antony and Cleopatra*

If loyalty in love attests incorruption as satisfactorily as loyalty between superior and subordinate, is it not true that as Antony loses power he becomes more loyal to Cleopatra and vice versa? Does that support Acton’s Law by affirming its transposition, i.e., declining in power may

overcome corruption? Of course one could say that in matters of love between the sexes one must add some criteria to produce a satisfactory judgment. Must one judge lovers by their wisdom in knowing and their generosity in pursuing the true good of the beloved? During their heyday of cultivating the “no life comparable” by supplementing lovemaking with auxiliary stimulants of drinking, feasting, and self-display, the lovers do not appear to ennoble one another. But once loss of power becomes certain, each seems more disposed to self-sacrifice on behalf of the beloved, thus honoring the example set by the beloved.

Toward the end of *Antony and Cleopatra* two epochal changes appear imminent. Christianity supplants classical paganism, and feudalism follows upon the demise of that Roman Empire, which in the play is just being consolidated by Caesar Augustus. All the political dramas set in the post-Roman era portray men and women who profess belief in a personal God who uniquely among personal beings possesses absolute power, and no Shakespearean character supposes any person other than God can be trusted with such. But when Acton, or anyone, speaks of power being absolute we understand that what is at issue is absolute within a particular nation. In Shakespeare’s England (depicted not later than the reign of Henry VIII) monarchs approach absolute power, at least in the opinion generally voiced by their subjects. Richard II offers us an interesting case of a ruler who by natural endowment or by his situation vis-à-vis other men is weak but who thinks himself unlimited by constitutional provision. He comes near to regarding himself as a god among men. Yet Shakespeare shows the effectual truth to be that Richard, like all English kings, owes such authority as he has to a “social contract” between barony and monarch, a tacit covenant stipulating that the king honor every nobleman’s hereditary rule over a particular territory within England in exchange for these noblemen agreeing to regard the monarch as rightful ruler over all England. Supplementing this agreement we find a theo-political aggregate of beliefs which are assumed to confer upon the monarch supernatural support. He is “God’s anointed,” enjoying a preeminence that has its counterparts on every step of a hierarchy of being

mounting upwards from inanimate matter, to living beings, to man and angels, ending in God. So reliant upon these convictions is Shakespeare's Richard that he can half-believe himself entitled to order the very earth of his island-realm to deny sustenance to rebels.

“Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash [the balm from an anointed king](#);  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.

For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd  
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,  
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the  
right.”

[Act III, sc. II, 54-62]

Yet one must say “half-believe” because Richard cannot but be aware that lacking a standing army he relies for coercive power upon the willingness of the well-affected among his barons to gather and equip their retainers and tenants. God saves the king only insofar as the king can secure loyalties of well-born men, fealties ever subject to change. Nonetheless Richard's presumptuous attachment to the notion of his having in God his providential sponsor causes this king to neglect whatever actual force he might otherwise have summoned from his native allotment of prudence and courage. His own corruption he has worked by wasting his revenues upon extravagant patronage of flatterers. Then, his official resources thus reduced, when he comes to make war in Ireland he breaks the tacit contract by expropriating the patrimonial property of one high-placed heir to a Dukedom (Bolingbroke) who in revenging himself will succeed in usurping the throne. Thereby with Richard, Shakespeare has given us to witness corruption inflicted by indulging merely an irresponsible supposition of absolute power on the basis of a generally held belief.

Shakespeare's [Richard II](#) has also instructed us in the cure (though no more than partial) of corruption by way of a monarch's extracting knowledge from his enduring privations. Richard arrives at such wisdom as he can attain—as well as some courage--not until he has

experienced loss of office, wife, possessions, friends, and honor, and while suffering imprisonment with expectation of imminent death by violence to be dealt him by the usurper. His access to virtue almost coincides with his last fatuous expression of vestigial presumption, when he responds with indignation to the report that his horse had stepped more proudly with the usurper in the stirrups than when previously the animal had borne his anointed royal owner.

Richard: “[Rode he on Barbary](#)? Tell me, gentle friend,  
How went he under him?

Groom: So proudly as if he disdain'd the ground.

K. Rich.: So proud that Bolingbroke was on his back!

That jade hath eat bread from my royal hand;  
This hand hath made him proud with clapping him.

Would he not stumble? Would he not fall down,—

Since pride must have a fall,—and break the neck

Of that proud man that did usurp his back?

Forgiveness, horse! why do I rail on thee,

Since thou, created to be aw'd by man,

Wast born to bear? I was not made a horse;

And yet I bear a burden like an ass,

Spur-gall'd and tir'd by jauncing Bolingbroke.”

[Act V, sc. V, 81-94]

Belatedly Richard comes to self-knowledge, saying, “[I wasted time and now doth time waste me](#).” This, in turn, evidently prompts the spasm of courage that enables the deposed king to kill one of his assailants before dying himself. At this moment for once, Richard succeeds in regarding not himself but (impersonally) the sacred office here being subjected to violence. Hitherto he had not shown himself capable of viewing royalty as something the possessor holds in trust, one imposing moral obligations, not, so he had been given to think, that simply confers privileges.



*Prospero and Miranda*

To put Acton's aphorism to a different sort of test we might do well to consider an instance of absolute power voluntarily renounced. For this *The Tempest* offers occasion to reflect upon a demonstration not to be found among the other plays. Prospero differs from all Shakespearean characters by virtue of his having supernatural powers at his disposal. If one estimates the range of these powers by his own catalogue of previous demonstrations, Prospero has somehow achieved feats comparable to those Christians attribute to the Son of God. He claims to have brought back the dead to life: "[graves have oped at \[his\] command](#)"; he calms seas and bedims the noon sun. We observe Prospero baffling demons, damning or saving men, and putting souls through a kind of penitents' purgatory. His factotum Ariel is named after an angel. By means of his magic Prospero could live the life of Plato's philosopher, or Socrates's philosopher-king, or inclining to a more modern ideal, he could live out the career of a Baconian sage mastering empirical science. That's to stay within the range of the upright. If inclined to demonic satisfactions his means to absolute dominance could realize wicked projects hatched by whatever Satanic minds with whom he might care to compete.

Yet he comes to denigrate this "[rough](#)" [magic](#) and at play's end professes to have ceased to practice it.

“ ... I have bedimm'd  
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous  
winds,  
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault  
Set roaring war: to the dread-rattling thunder  
Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak  
With his own bolt: the strong-bas'd promontory  
Have I made shake; and by the spurs pluck'd up  
The pine and cedar: graves at my command  
Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let them  
forth  
By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
I here abjure; and, when I have requir'd  
Some heavenly music,—which even now I  
do,—  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And, deeper than did ever plummet sound,  
I'll drown my book.”  
[Act V, sc. I, 41-57]

Instead his "[every third thought](#)," he says, will be his grave. His other two thirds are presumably divided between ruling his now-restored Dukedom of Milan, and, perhaps, arranging to further that education of Miranda and Ferdinand he had begun on the island. I don't suppose an exegesis that would reduce all Prospero's powers to those practiced by Shakespeare as artist would make much difference to resolving the mystery of why this renunciation. Prospero/artist could enjoy doing what the artist does without care for anything other. Or, if supreme happiness consists in freedom to alter one's way of living—changing from decent to demonic and back again at will, knowing one will enjoy the freedom of savoring every variety thereof-- if thus to be master of change should constitute felicity, then retaining his magic should enable Prospero to provide for himself unbounded freedom. Whatever else it may be, freedom is power. Prospero could turn Acton's maxim on its head.

But presumably knowing all this, Prospero chooses to put himself and those dependent upon him back into a world not new to him who has experienced its evils, its transiency, and who knows, as well, that the peace he has patched will hold only so long as it is willed by men not thoroughly or permanently purged by Prospero's efforts on the island. (Witness the plotter [Antonio's last sarcastic words](#) and Caliban's untrustworthy promise of repentance.)<sup>[2]</sup> If we could know why Shakespeare imputes this choice to the one mind with which he has invested best claim to wisdom, we might put Acton's principle to a more definitive test.

### Endnotes

<sup>[1.]</sup> *The Acton-Creighton Correspondence* (1887), Letter I <[/titles/2254#Acton\\_PowerCorrupts1524\\_24](#)>.

<sup>[2.]</sup> See:

Caliban: O Setebos! these be brave spirits, indeed.  
How fine my master is! I am afraid  
He will chastise me.

Sebastian: Ha, ha!  
What things are these, my lord Antonio?  
Will money buy them?

Antonio: Very like; one of them  
[Is a plain fish, and, no doubt, marketable.](#)

Prospero: Mark but the badges of these men,  
my lords,  
Then say, if they be true.—This mis-shapen  
knave,—  
His mother was a witch; and one so strong  
That could control the moon, make flows and  
ebbs,  
And deal in her command without her power.  
These three have robb'd me; and this  
demidevil,—  
For he's a bastard one,—had plotted with them  
To take my life: two of these fellows you  
Must know and own; this thing of darkness I  
Acknowledge mine.  
[Act V, sc.I, 260-76]

And also:

Caliban: "Ay, that I will; and I'll be wise  
hereafter,  
And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass  
Was I, to take this drunkard for a god,  
And [worship this dull fool!](#)"  
[ Act V, sc. I, 294]

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## POWER AND INNOCENT BLOOD

by Sarah Skwire

John Alvis begins his intriguing discussion of absolute power in Shakespeare's plays with reference to Lord Acton's observation that "power tends to corrupt. And absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"...POWER TENDS TO CORRUPT. AND  
ABSOLUTE POWER CORRUPTS  
ABSOLUTELY."

In reply, I would like to begin by suggesting an alternate quotation from the much-neglected political theorist Abigail Adams, who noted that "arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken." I turn to Adams because, while I agree with Alvis that Shakespeare's plays are deeply interested in the problem of the corrupting influence of power, they are even more interested in the problems that arise for ordinary people as a result of the instability of power and the resulting "game of thrones" that is played among rulers.

Given that the majority of Shakespeare's life, from birth to middle age, was spent living under the stable reign of the famously long-lived Elizabeth I, it may seem strange to think of him as a writer with profound concerns about political instability. But the memories of the aftermath of the death of Henry VIII—Edward's six-year reign followed by Jane Grey's nine-day reign, and Mary's five years on the throne, all surrounded by tumult and dissent—were still fresh in the historical memories of the

English. The fact that a new monarch could easily mean a new state religion and renewed persecutions of those who failed to hew to the official faith added to these worries. And with the unmarried and childless Queen Elizabeth's persistent refusal to name an heir, the people of England were rightfully worried about their future throughout her reign, no matter how stable, wealthy, and peaceable this Elizabethan Golden Age can seem from a distance.



*Queen Elizabeth I*

What this meant for Shakespeare as an Elizabethan Englishman was a steady flood of political pamphlets written in support of or in opposition to various potential candidates for a successor to the Queen and an equally steady flood of worries about the ways in which successions could go wrong.

The plays naturally reflect and reflect upon this cultural preoccupation.

We could begin nearly anywhere, but perhaps the most succession- and stability-obsessed of Shakespeare's plays are the Henriad, or Shakespeare's second tetralogy of history plays. These plays, beginning with [Richard II](#) (est. date of composition 1595-6), taking us through [parts 1 and 2 of Henry IV](#) (1597-8), and culminating with [Henry V](#) (1598-9) can at times seem like a thought experiment in the ways that the reigns of kings can end badly. *Richard II* begins amid accusations of treachery and murder, and

concludes with the imprisonment of the increasingly ineffectual King Richard II; the usurpation of his throne by Henry Bolingbroke, who becomes Henry IV; and Richard's eventual murder at the hands of one of Henry IV's ambitious nobles.

The *Henry IV* plays take us into a reign troubled by treason and uprising, haunted by the spectre of Richard's murder and the usurpation, and presents us with a king terrified of the vision of the future offered by his legitimate heir, the reckless Prince Hal. And while Hal defies expectations and redeems himself when he assumes the throne and becomes Henry V, his reign is cut short by an early death and leaves England to suffer all the familiar woes of a country "ruled" by an infant king.

The Henriad then, in four plays, gives us a discussed abdication, a usurpation, a murder, a death with a legitimate but chancy heir, and an early death with an infant heir. If we add in the tragedies and others we can add several more murders, insanity, many deaths in battle, and a variety of other ends to assorted fictional and historical reigns.

But Shakespeare is not saying, with Richard:

[For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground](#)

And tell sad stories of the death of kings;

How some have been deposed; some slain in war,

Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;

Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;

All murder'd: for within the hollow crown

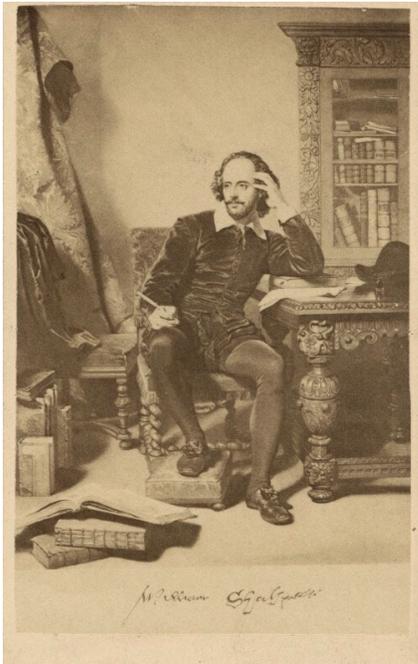
That rounds the mortal temples of a king

Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits.

(*Richard II*, 3.2.155-62)

No matter how much sympathy Shakespeare may have with the kings who undergo these sad fates—and he has great sympathy for Henry V's early death after such greatness, and even for Richard II's descent into maudlin irrelevance—he never loses sight of the costs that these turbulent reigns and the turbulent transitions between them exact on the populace.

We can begin, of course, with the costs of war, heartrendingly depicted in the deaths of the “[boys and the luggage](#)” in *Henry V*, and in the discussion of the effects of war on France at the end of the same play.<sup>[3]</sup> Similarly, Macbeth’s attempts to obtain and maintain power do not merely destroy him; they destroy the innocents around him. The slaughter of Lady Macduff and her children are only the most potent example of this collateral damage. The play as a whole gives us an image of a world turned upside-down by Macbeth’s bloody push for absolute power. Horses eat each other. Night turns to day. [Falcons are killed by owls](#). Similarly, Hamlet’s Denmark is haunted by ghosts and filled with spies and poison. Lear’s England is threatened by French power and riven by internal dissent. Alvis is right to observe that all of that is very bad for the sovereigns who oversee these horrors. But how much worse must it be for the ordinary people who live within it?



**William Shakespeare**

Consider Ophelia, driven mad by the political machinations that surround her. Or [Lear’s Fool](#). Or even Claudio and Juliet from [Measure for Measure](#), who are nearly destroyed by the legal changes brought about by a change in power that seems to happen for no reason but the passing whim of a Duke. Or Falstaff’s soldiers whom

he recruits only from the most ordinary Englishmen who are most desperate to stay at home and whom he calls “[food for \[gun\]powder](#).” These are the people most threatened by the lust for absolute power. While Shakespeare’s plays do not generally make these people their primary focus, these are the people who get our sympathy.

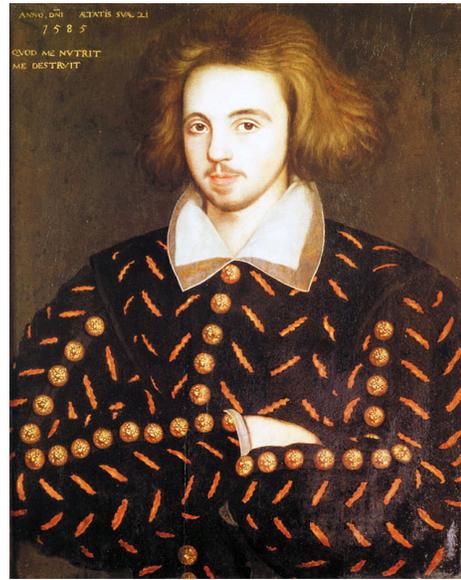
Many things make the desire for absolute power terrifying. The corruption it creates in the soul of the holder of power is one. That absolute power is so fragile and that so much blood is shed when it splinters is another. That the blood is so often innocent blood is most horrifying of all.

### Endnotes

<sup>[3]</sup> The Duke of Burgundy's speech in *Henry V*, Act V, sc. II, 33-67:

“What rub or what impediment there is,  
Why that the naked, poor, and mangled Peace,  
Dear nurse of arts, plenties, and joyful births,  
Should not in this best garden of the world,  
Our fertile France, put up her lovely visage?  
Alas! she hath from France too long been  
chas’d,  
And all her husbandry doth lie on heaps,  
Corrupting in its own fertility.  
Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,  
Unpruned dies; her hedges even-pleach’d,  
Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,  
Put forth disorder’d twigs; her fallow leas  
The darnel, hemlock and rank fumitory  
Doth root upon, while that the coulter rusts  
That should deracinate such savagery;  
The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth  
The freckled cowslip, burnet, and green clover,  
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,  
Conceives by idleness, and nothing teems  
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burs,  
Losing both beauty and utility;  
And as our vineyards, fallows, meads, and  
hedges,  
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,  
Even so our houses and ourselves and children

Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,  
The sciences that should become our country,  
But grow like savages,—as soldiers will,  
That nothing do but meditate on blood,—  
To swearing and stern looks, diffus'd attire,  
And every thing that seems unnatural.  
Which to reduce into our former favour  
You are assembled; and my speech entreats  
That I may know the let why gentle Peace  
Should not expel these inconveniences,  
And bless us with her former qualities.”



*Christopher Marlowe*

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## POWER AND CORRUPTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

by David V. Urban

John Alvis's essay calls us to consider the intriguing subject of how Acton's famous maxim manifests itself in Shakespeare's plays. As a rule, absolute power does not fare well in Shakespeare's plays. None of Shakespeare's characters exhibit the unmitigated power exercised by Marlowe's Tamburlaine in *Tamburlaine the Great*,<sup>[3]</sup> who, devoid of conscience and undefeated by external challenges, conquers vast territories, defeats countless enemies, and dies of natural causes at an advanced age. The closest Shakespearean analogy to Tamburlaine is Richard III, a Machiavellian character who rises to the British throne through lupine cunning (including pretense of piety) and the brute power of the lion and who, I aver in response to Alvis, has an even stronger "will to power" than Macbeth. But even the seemingly conscienceless Richard is eventually tortured by nightmares of his murdered victims;<sup>[4]</sup> soon after, deserted by many of his forces during the Battle of Bosworth field, he is killed by the rebel leader, Richmond.<sup>[5]</sup> Richard's outcome is typical for Shakespeare's characters who seek absolute power. They corrupt themselves while seeking and obtaining it, but their forays into absolute power are ultimately defeated by factors internal and external to themselves.

Richard III's ascension and downfall can be compared to those of Macbeth, whom Alvis addresses at length. Like Richard III, who arranges both the murder of his brother Clarence and the murders of his nephews the young princes,<sup>[6]</sup> Macbeth breaks a taboo by murdering his sleeping guest, King Duncan, in his efforts to gain Duncan's throne. Alvis postulates that Macbeth is insufficiently Machiavellian to effectively secure power, pointing out Macbeth's failure to kill Malcolm, Danalbain, Macduff, and Banquo when he kills Duncan. But Macbeth, conscience riddled before he murders Duncan and even more so just afterward, is in no emotional shape to commit additional premeditated murders that night or in the short time after while his guests remain with him.<sup>[7]</sup> Perhaps we can say that Macbeth at that point is not yet corrupted enough to secure absolute power. His rash murder of the framed guards the next morning shows both his continued moral descent as well as the incompetence Alvis mentions.<sup>[8]</sup> But it is only later in the play, when in Act 3 he orders the assassinations of Banquo and Banquo's son Fleance (who escapes)<sup>[9]</sup> and then in Act 4 when he orders the slaughter of Macduff's family,<sup>[10]</sup> that Macbeth reaches absolute corruption even though, as Alvis observes, Macbeth's "limited intelligence prevents his actually attaining absolute power."

Macbeth's descent into absolute corruption runs parallel to his rejection of conscience, a rejection Alvis notes. Late in Act 1, just after speaking of his "Vaulting ambition," which Alvis notes, Macbeth is ready to repent of his bloody aspirations, telling Lady Macbeth, "[We will proceed no further in this business](#)" [*Macbeth* 1.7.31.] She then insults his manhood, goading him on to murder. In the next scene, while preparing to kill Duncan, Macbeth sees a vision of a bloody dagger, but instead of relenting, he tells himself that it leads him to his deed.[\[11\]](#) Conscience plagues him immediately after the murder as he recounts to Lady Macbeth hearing Malcolm and Danalbain praying in their sleep. He is so incapacitated that she must take over and place his bloody daggers with the guards.[\[12\]](#) But Macbeth continues to reject conscience, ordering more murders to secure his throne. After Banquo's murder, conscience torments Macbeth again through his vision of Banquo's ghost,[\[13\]](#) but he does not repent; rather, he arranges for the aforementioned murder of Macduff's family, sealing his absolute corruption and confirming Macduff's resolve to kill the usurping king. We can compare Macbeth's final rejection of conscience to King Claudio's similar rejection in *Hamlet*. Conscience stricken while watching the play whose events parallel his murder of his brother, King Hamlet, Claudio (another of Shakespeare's Machiavellian rulers) forgoes his opportunity for genuine confession and instead embraces total corruption by resolving to murder Prince Hamlet,[\[14\]](#) an unsuccessful plot that ends in his own and many others' deaths.

I will speak more briefly to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Clearly Antony's attempts at absolute power are limited, as Alvis notes, by "[h]is doting upon Cleopatra" and his resultant "inattentiveness to military obligations," an inattentiveness Alvis specifically calls Antony's "corruption." There is an ironic dynamic at work with Antony's corruption and power. On one hand, Antony's power is what gives rise to his relationship with Cleopatra, whose penchant for powerful men was established with Julius Caesar. On the other hand, Antony's corruption through ungoverned affection for Cleopatra brings about his defeat to Octavian at Actium, ensuring that he will *not* gain absolute power. Alvis rightly observes that

Antony fails to demonstrate "the self-command needed for generalship as well as for effective political rule," a self-command he had exhibited so glowingly after Caesar's murder in the earlier play. The character in *Antony and Cleopatra* who does demonstrate such self-command is Octavius, whose cold calculation foils Antony's emotional weaknesses. And, of course, Octavius becomes Caesar Augustus by the end of the play, attaining absolute power. But Shakespeare's Octavius, though a calculating politician, is not thoroughly corrupt, and one would be hard pressed to charge the historical Augustus Caesar with absolute corruption. His reign was not proper material, it seems, for another Shakespeare Roman play.



**William Shakespeare**

In his discussion of Antony, Alvis asks whether "declining in power may overcome corruption?" This question applies even better to Richard II than Antony, as Alvis's analysis of *Richard II* suggests. Alvis effectively discusses Richard's corrupting arrogance and weakness for flattery, as well as his turn to virtue upon his deposition. Quoting Richard's famous statement, "[I wasted time and now doth time waste me](#)," Alvis observes that Richard "Belatedly ... comes to self-knowledge." Richard's belated self-knowledge recalls the situation of another deposed Shakespearean ruler who

had been seduced by flattery, King Lear. After his arrogant disowning of his beloved daughter Cordelia, his duplicitous daughter Regan points out, "[he hath ever but slenderly known himself](#)" [*King Lear* 1.1.292-93.]. It is only after his humiliating downfall that Lear repents of his mistreatment of Cordelia as well as his negligence of the unsheltered, admitting, as he is pelted by the storm, "[O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this!](#)" [*King Lear* 3.4.32-33.]. As with Richard, Lear's decline in power paves the way for the honest self-reflection that significantly reduces his corruption.

Richard's pious dignity leading up to his premature execution contributes mightily to the pall his death casts on the reigns of both his usurper, Bolingbroke (Henry IV), and Bolingbroke's son Henry V. Corrupted by Richard's usurpation and slaying, the new king Henry IV concludes *Richard II* by announcing his imminent pilgrimage to the holy land,[\[15\]](#) a venture that has been called a Machiavellian display of piety,[\[16\]](#) and just before his death in *Henry IV, Part 2*, he cries, "[How I came by the crown, O God forgive](#)" [*Henry IV, Part 2* 4.5.218.]. Henry's reign is plagued by civil war that prevents him from effectively exercising absolute power, and in his final scene, just before his aforementioned plea for forgiveness, Henry advises Prince Hal "[to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels](#)," [*Henry IV, Part 2* 4.5.213-14.] advice that the newly crowned Henry V takes to heart when he leads a united England to victorious war against France in *Henry V*.

Although Henry V can be viewed as Shakespeare's most noble monarch, the case for his corruption is compelling. Matters of conscience concern him at key moments in the play, and he at least partially assuages his conscience as he proceeds forth with problematic action. Significantly, his claim against France is dubious. After hearing Canterbury's absurd justification for attacking France,[\[17\]](#) Henry asks him, "[May I with right and conscience make this claim?](#)" [*Henry V*, Act I, sc.II, 96] Canterbury precedes his remaining justification with, "[The sin upon my head, dread sovereign!](#)" [*Henry V* 1.2.96, 97.] Henry ascends to the war only after he deflects responsibility first upon Canterbury and then

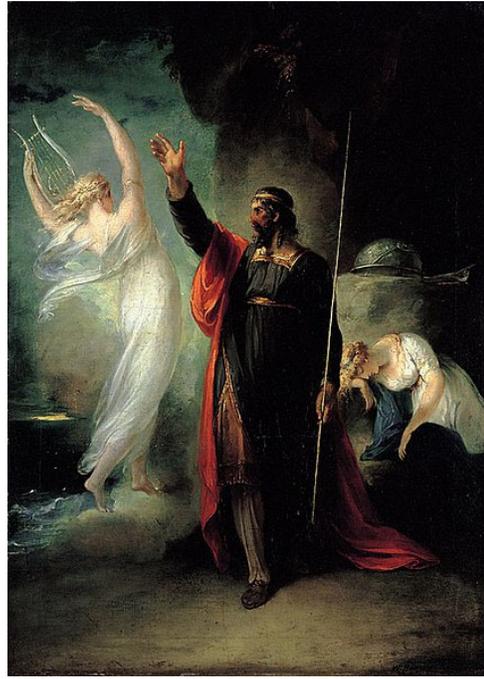
afterward upon the French Dauphin, who offends Henry with a gift of tennis balls.[\[18\]](#) Although the English people enthusiastically support the war, I suggest, in light of the thousands of French slain in an unjust war, that the absolute power Henry attains as ruler of England and France is attained at the cost of his corruption. As several scenes in *Henry V* display, he becomes habitually self-justifying,[\[19\]](#) and even if he believes his own self-justifying rhetoric, Shakespeare wants us to challenge it.

A mitigating factor against Henry V's absolute corruption, ironically, is his continued pangs of conscience regarding his father's usurpation of Richard.[\[20\]](#) In solitary prayer before the decisive victory at Agincourt, Henry, even as he prays for victory, tells God, "[I Richard's body have interred new, / And on it have bestowed more contrite tears / Than from it issued forced drops of blood.](#)" [*Henry V* 4.1.2.288-90.] Henry has also commissioned continual prayer and regular masses for Richard's soul. After his massive victory at Agincourt, Henry publicly credits God for England's triumph.[\[21\]](#) It would be easy to charge Henry, like his father, with Machiavellian religiosity, but the solitary nature of his aforementioned prayer argues against such an accusation. Nonetheless, Henry's war is deeply problematic, and Shakespeare's chorus concludes *Henry V* by stating how after his premature death his gains in France were lost by Henry VI and his various associates.[\[22\]](#) I do not believe that Shakespeare portrays Henry V as absolutely corrupt, but he does portray the futility of absolute power, whose collateral damage is enormous.

The case of Prospero in *The Tempest* is remarkable, as Alvis notes, for its example of "absolute power voluntarily renounced." Prospero's absolute power over his island is complex on a number of levels. Most significantly, early in the play, he tells his daughter, Miranda, "[I have done nothing but in care of thee.](#)" [*The Tempest* 1.2.16.] This statement, I contend, reveals the core motivation for all his controlling actions on the island prior to and throughout the play, and his genuine love for Miranda, while perhaps inappropriately justifying some of his corruption, also works to prevent the vengeance he might otherwise indulge in. A charge often

leveled against Prospero is his mistreatment of Caliban. I do believe Prospero likely overreacted to Caliban's romantic advances toward Miranda by charging him with rape and enslaving him.<sup>[23]</sup> But Prospero's response is that of a protective father. He is far from absolutely corrupt, and his addiction to control is made understandable by both his love for Miranda and his previous usurpation by his trusted and beloved brother, Antonio.<sup>[24]</sup> Prospero's relative goodness is seen early in the play in relation to the evil of Antonio, who, aided by King Alonso and Alonso's brother Sebastian, usurped Duke Prospero 12 years before. Antonio exemplifies one whose corruption is more total than his power; he shows no remorse for his treachery against Prospero, whom he believes dead; he mocks the very idea of conscience; he goads Sebastian into attempting to murder the sleeping Alonso.<sup>[25]</sup> Shakespeare even indirectly mocks Antonio's corruption as he satirizes the corrupting effects of seeking power—even over a small island—through the comically ineffectual attempted murder of Prospero by Caliban and his drunken companions, Stephano and Trinculo.<sup>[26]</sup>

Prospero's giving up his absolute power on the island is predicated upon both his love for Miranda and forgiveness. Through his power—largely by controlling Ariel—Prospero is able to secure for Miranda engagement with Prince Ferdinand, Alonso's son. But in the process of this arrangement, Miranda exercises independence, challenging or disobeying her father on several occasions,<sup>[27]</sup> foreshadowing the fact that, as he gives her to Ferdinand, Prospero must relinquish the absolute control, however benevolent, he has exercised over her. Even more momentous is Prospero's willingness to forgive Antonio, Alonso, and Sebastian when they are completely at his mercy, even though only Alonso repents.<sup>[28]</sup>



*Prospero and Ariel*

But forgiveness for Prospero goes both ways. He knows he is not above reproach, as his epilogue's confession makes clear and as he suggests in his admission regarding Caliban: "[This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine.](#)" [*The Tempest* 5.1.275-76.] I disagree when Alvis calls Caliban's repentance "untrustworthy." Rather, in his repentance Caliban ironically becomes an example Prospero imitates. Caliban promises to "[seek for grace,](#)" [*The Tempest* 5.1.295.] which is exactly what Prospero does in his epilogue minutes later. Speaking to the audience, Prospero says,

Now I want  
[Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,](#)  
 And my ending is despair,  
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
 Which pierces so that it assaults  
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
 As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
 Let your indulgence set me free.  
 [*The Tempest* Epilogue 13-20.]

In giving up absolute power, Prospero seeks freedom from corruption, appealing to the One who, to quote Alvis, "uniquely among personal beings possesses absolute power," and humbly asking others to appeal to

God's mercy on his behalf. The man who held absolute power over his small realm gains freedom because he realizes his powerlessness, his corruption, and his need for grace.

### Endnotes

[3.] Marlowe, "Tamburlaine the Great," in *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. A.H. Bullen (London: John C. Nimmo, 1885). Vol. 1. <[titles/1687](#)>.

[4.] See *Richard III* 5.3.118-206.

[5.] See *Richard III* 5.5.

[6.] See *Richard III* 1.3.324-56 and 4.2.1-82.

[7.] See *Macbeth* 2.2.

[8.] See *Macbeth* 2.3.97-115.

[9.] See *Macbeth* 3.1.76-143 and 3.3.

[10.] See *Macbeth* 4.1.144-54 and 4.2.75-81.

[11.] See *Macbeth* 2.1.33-64.

[12.] See *Macbeth* 2.2.8-60.

[13.] See *Macbeth* 3.4.38-108

[14.] See *Hamlet* 3.3.36-72 and 97-98 and 4.3.62-72.

[15.] See *Richard II* 5.6.45-52

[16.] Irving Ribner, "Bolingbroke: A True Machiavellian," *Modern Language Quarterly* 9.2 (June 1948): 177-84.

[17.] See *Henry V* 1.2.33-95 and later 98-100.

[18.] See *Henry V* 1.2.9-32 and 260-97.

[19.] See also *Henry V* 2.1.79-83, 4.1.120-184, and 5.2.265-71

[20.] See *Henry V* 4.1.282-98.

[21.] See *Henry V* 4.8.105-120

[22.] See *Henry V* Epilogue 9-12.

[23.] See *The Tempest* 1.2.344-47.

[24.] See *The Tempest* 1.2.66-151.

[25.] See *The Tempest* 2.1.200-92.

[26.] See *The Tempest* 3.2 and 4.1.194-262.

[27.] *The Tempest* 1.2.455-83 shows Miranda directly challenging Prospero several times; 3.1.16-59 shows her secretly disobeying him at least twice.

[28.] See *The Tempest* 5.1.106-34.

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## MORE LIKE ARISTOTLE THAN ACTON

by Michael Zuckert

John Alvis has put to Shakespeare the question: Do you, bard of Avon, agree with Lord Acton's famous adage about power? It is an interesting question to pose to Shakespeare, for of all the writers we know of, he seems to portray the widest variety of human types, as well as to see most deeply into the human soul. Who better than Shakespeare to render a judgment on Lord Acton's pronouncement?



***John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton***

A judgment by a Shakespeare would be of value, for it is not as though Acton's adage is self-evidently correct. Consider the views on Acton's topic taken by two of Shakespeare's most important predecessors. Aristotle had a more positive view of the

potential effect of wielding power, for he saw it as necessary to the rounding off and completion of practical virtue. Aristotle would, on the whole but not universally (see his treatment of the ancient monarchy), agree with Acton that *absolute power* is a problem, thus his favoring of the aristocratic republic or the polity as the best regimes in most circumstances. But he would take a more nuanced position on the inherent tendency of power to corrupt. It can ennoble as well, and the actual effects of power-holding are apparently more circumstantial than Acton allows. Thus Aristotle does not seem to share Acton's libertarian-leaning politics.

At almost the opposite extreme lies the other Shakespeare predecessor of interest here—Machiavelli. The Florentine would take issue with Acton's apparent presumption that human beings are or tend to be incorrupt save for the temptations of power. Human beings are by nature corrupt, if by corrupt we mean indisposed to play nicely with one another on their own. As Machiavelli says in one place: "it is very natural to desire to acquire"<sup>[29]</sup>—more than others and at the expense of others. Machiavelli might almost but not quite reverse Acton's saying: being subject to and even exercising power is needed to make men incorrupt, if by incorrupt we mean better suited to live together in social life.



*Niccolò Machiavelli*

John Alvis is either a bit uncertain or a bit cagey in extracting Shakespeare's judgment on Acton's claim. Indeed, his very last words are these: "If we could know why Shakespeare imputes this choice [to return to the 'real world' without his magical powers] to the one mind with which he has invested [the] best claim to wisdom, we might put Acton's principle to a more definitive test." Shakespeare, in Alvis's judgment, does not put Acton's principle to a "definitive test," and thus the issue remains unsettled. This conclusion to Alvis's treatment of Shakespeare's Prospero holds, I believe, for his essay as a whole. He finds Macbeth a poor test because Macbeth, not following Machiavelli enough, never achieves absolute power to provide a good test. Antony and Cleopatra are also inconclusive because we cannot find a proper standard to gauge their corruption just as we cannot judge the degree of power they hold. Richard II is also inconclusive, for he believes himself absolute by virtue of his constitutional and divinely ordained power, but is in fact anything but because of his dependence on the barons and his personal weakness and poor judgment. Alvis does notice one pattern in the plays that might indirectly partially confirm Acton's assertion: several of the character are made less corrupt by their loss of power. They became wiser, more moderate, more loyal to others.

To generalize a bit on Alvis's conclusion and to push his analysis further: Shakespeare shows us such a range of human types that it is not possible simply to affirm or deny Acton's principle. Shakespeare partakes of both the perspectives of Aristotle and of Machiavelli on the issue, but, I would say, he is ultimately more Aristotelian.

To be more concrete, let us begin where Alvis does, with Macbeth. Alvis seems to see Macbeth as a poor test of Acton's thesis for, among other reasons, he sees Macbeth as thoroughly corrupt before he takes power. He sees "Macbeth [as] remarkable among Shakespeare's rulers because of what we might call the 'purity' of his will to power." He cites Macbeth's admission that he has no motive for supplanting Duncan but "only vaulting ambition." I would not, however, identify "ambition" with "will to power"; the latter is abstract and particularly

objectless in a way the former is not. Ambition has an object—honor. By appealing to his desire for honor, Macbeth is raising a certain claim to justice, a claim with a special resonance in Macbeth’s Scotland. Desire for him is the desire to have one’s worth duly recognized and rewarded. Macbeth’s worth has been demonstrated and partially recognized early in the play where he is credited by Duncan for dominating the battle against the many enemies of the sitting king. His worth is partially recognized when Duncan promotes him to Thane of Cawdor, but at the same time Duncan admits that this reward is not commensurate with Macbeth’s desert. Yet, at nearly that very moment in a move that demonstrates Duncan’s incompetence as king, he promotes his son Malcolm to the status of successor to the throne, a recognition that his son does not deserve on the basis of the standard of excellence most widely recognized in Macbeth’s Scotland, military prowess.



### *Scene from Macbeth*

Macbeth may not have a public-policy agenda as extensive as Hillary Clinton’s, but he has a claim of justice lying beneath his admission of ambition: he is more deserving of rule than Malcolm or than Duncan, for that matter, if we understand justice to require the commensuration of highest honor with highest worth. Shakespeare may not agree with Macbeth about military prowess as the highest claim of worth, but he no doubt does agree that honor is a respectable and valid aim of rule. Aristotle surely does agree. Honor can be a good and incorrupt aim, for it may lead a ruler to attempt to

rule in such a way as to deserve honor, that is to say, to rule in a way that benefits his subjects and thus earns their esteem. Ambition is not corrupt in itself and it does not seem that Shakespeare means to show that honor achieved through attaining power is necessarily corrupting. A clearer case of one who is corrupt before attaining power is Richard III. It is difficult to say that possessing absolute or near absolute power made him worse; it merely gave him the opportunity to do more mischief.

Alvis’s account of Macbeth omits mention of the role of the witches, who do, after all, play a large part in both Macbeth’s acquisition and fall from power. Likewise, he ignores the role of Duncan’s selection of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland: “[That is a step/on which I must fall down, or else o’er leap.](#)” [*Macbeth*, Act I, sc. IV, 48-49]. The witches’ prophecy brings Macbeth to believe he can be king. The elevation of Malcolm makes him realize there is no noncriminal path for him to take to his destination. Once he faces that necessity he develops qualms, but not over the injustice of the deed. He fears “the consequences”<sup>[30]</sup>—in this world not the next—of the murder. In a word he fears he will be caught and punished. Macbeth’s ambition is not so neutral a thing as first described: he seeks honor but is not committed to achieving it honorably. In attaining power, then, Macbeth is not corrupted but more nearly reveals what he has inwardly been. Creon in Sophocles’s *Antigone* had stated that only in rule does a man’s “soul” become knowable, for in ruling, a man is no longer trammled by fear of punishment as is the case for most men. Macbeth is not one who is corrupted by power but one who reveals what he already is—an unjust man.

Although Macbeth is but one case, it is not clear that Shakespeare shows any individual who became corrupted through possession of power. Does he show any who are made better through holding power? There is of course the difficult and complex case of Prospero. But on balance he seems to have become better not through wielding power but through losing power. When Duke of Milan, he spent his time and attention on his studies to the neglect of his dukedom and his duties. It is only when

supplanted and exiled that he comes to take seriously his responsibility for the welfare of those over whom he rules. On his island and with his small polity he becomes less corrupt in the sense of more responsible. But as Alvis rightly says, Prospero remains an enigma.

Perhaps a more straightforward case is Theseus in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the beginning he is a tyrant in both his domestic and political actions. He approaches his marriage to Hippolyta as the reward due to one who has triumphed in war. He acts to impose severe penalties on various of his subjects when they seek to act freely in choosing their marriage mates. He suppresses their freedom in firmly maintaining the prerogative of the fathers to control their children's marriages. By the end of the play he is quite transformed. He no longer treats Hippolyta as a mere spoil of war but as a loved and loving companion. By the end of the play he no longer supports or imposes the tyrannical laws that thwarted the lovers' desires. The exercise of power has made him better. Just how is a complex story that cannot be recounted in the space available here.

Even this brief sketch shows that Shakespeare is closer to Aristotle than to either Lord Acton or Machiavelli. Much of what he shows about men in power is Creonic. Often he may remind one of Machiavelli, but the examples of at least two—Prospero and Theseus—strongly suggest otherwise. These are rulers who do not live down to Machiavelli cynical theory. As I suggested earlier, Shakespeare's view appears closest to Aristotle's: not so deterministic or antipolitical as Acton, not so harsh on human nature as Machiavelli.

### Endnotes

[29.] See for example, Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, First Book, chap. V:

On that occasion there was much discussion as to which was the most ambitious, he who wished to preserve power or he who wished to acquire it; as both the one and the other of these motives may be the cause of great troubles. It seems, however, that they are most frequently

occasioned by those who possess; for the fear to lose stirs the same passions in men as the desire to gain, as men do not believe themselves sure of what they already possess except by acquiring still more; and, moreover, these new acquisitions are so many means of strength and power for abuses.

In Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, tr. from the Italian, by Christian E. Detmold (Boston, J. R. Osgood and company, 1882). Vol. 2. <[/titles/775#Machiavelli\\_0076-02\\_234](#)>.

[30.] Macbeth says:

“If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly; if the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come.” [[Act I, sc. VII, 1-7](#)].

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## POWER, CHARACTER, AND DISORDER

by John E. Alvis

I'll respond to all three of these thoughtful commentaries on my attempt to apply Lord Acton's celebrated axiom to Shakespeare. But I'll not respond to everything the three have said, but only to what I think may advance the question: what does Shakespeare understand regarding the effects of exercising power.

First, as Zuckert points out for good or for ill, the exercise of power is necessary to reveal character. I'll call this (after Zuckert) the Creonic principle. In accord with that principle Theseus, most clearly, and Prospero less clearly, improve in their exercise of power. So, Shakespeare disagrees with Acton if Acton's principle were taken to mean access to power simply (=always) corrupts. Acton, however, said it “tends” to do so. He

knew the tendency could be counteracted, as have I suppose all who inveigh against power unchecked. Besides God, perhaps, as Aristotle says, the best mode of rule would be that of a good and wise man without any hindrance whatsoever.<sup>[31]</sup> (Not even rule of law? Yes.) Does Plato's Socrates disagree with Aristotle, since he says he (sometimes) thinks himself monstrous?<sup>[32]</sup> If he only means in dreams or some such libidinal recess from goodness, no problem; we'll risk that. But Prospero is Shakespeare's best test case. I don't know if he feels passion at the crisis when he says he must "still his beating mind" (*The Tempest*, Act IV, sc.I, 163) or whether this is just another demonstration he thinks needed to further the education of Ferdinand. Anyway, the problem here is not his counter-example of becoming better by gaining (?) power in the insular condition. The mystery lies in determining whether with renunciation of magical power he becomes better or worse. Actually Prospero gains political power (restored Dukedom) but becomes thereby not less but more dependent upon the will of others.



***Aristotle***

I think Machiavelli would say of us four, and maybe of Aristotle as well, "Your mouths are full of milk. The four of you attempt to evade the question of Shakespeare's own tutelage from (not against) my wise precepts. To use

Shakespeare to refute me, I maintain, you would be obliged, first, to show a full-blooded pupil of mine, not the Macbeth of half-measures and effeminate conscience, nor the Richard Crookback who begins to lose his self-command the moment he ascends the throne." He would add: "Don't worry about corruption if by that you mean merely moral corruption. But you should take care not to allow your mastery to corrupt, self-mastery as well as command over others. And, in any event, don't worry regarding your access to absolute power because neither you nor anyone will ever have it. A man need worry only that he may lack power sufficient to achieve and keep whatever he desires."

Wouldn't Machiavelli's objection throw us back to the question with which Glaucon-Ademantus challenge Socrates in *The Republic*: why be just, as distinct from being just only to the extent that to appear so enhances one's power? Wisdom is prudence, and prudence consists in modifying principle to suit circumstances. But is it not necessary so to modify principles held to be (morally) good if the application of the good policy undermines one's power?

Skwire is right to point out that Shakespeare shows not so much that self-corruption suffered by rulers is the consequence of their acquiring power, but rather that the more baneful result is harm dealt the (relatively) innocent. Hence we should be aware that the corruption of which Acton speaks is in Shakespeare's plays corruption of the state itself. Does this not teach us that we should do whatever is possible to make power not less potent but more responsible? But have I just made a distinction without a difference? Power made responsible *is* power diminished. So the question becomes how to confer such power as rulers need to make citizens restrain their desire to have power without responsibility, yet confer it in such manner that those who govern others govern themselves as well. Then, doesn't that mean there must be something in the constitution of the realm that can hold the king accountable? Shakespeare's British history plays speak frequently enough of a "Parliament" for us to know he wants us to be aware of its existence.<sup>[33]</sup> But Shakespeare never depicts this legislative body in action. We may

wonder why he does not. And the pertinent question for Acton would be whether Shakespeare indicates this legislative body has any authority—or does Shakespeare imagine it to be merely advisory. This provokes the question of whether Shakespeare has made us mindful of any institution that can make the king accountable?

Skwire is also right to make us aware that Shakespeare's England suffers as much from instability as from overweening kings. To my mind the besetting weakness of Shakespeare's England is that the monarch lacks a standing army. This insufficiency of power is most obvious in *Richard II* where, faced with one rebellion in Ireland and another at home, the king finds himself reduced to begging armed assistance from one of his nobles in order to confront another. Is it then the case that on the basis of our reading of the plays we should attribute to diminishment of central power all the civil disorders the playwright has depicted? Must we therefore almost reverse Acton and conclude that diminishing power corrupts the state and that diminishment approaching an absolute degree corrupts so thoroughly that civil society disintegrates? Isn't this most apparent in the four plays depicting the reign of Henry VI and concluding with *Richard III*? Yet, so to conclude may go too far, since I should not suppose Acton fails to realize that too little power causes difficulties comparable to an excess thereof.

David Urban notes the morally salutary effects of losing power in the case of Richard II and of voluntarily renouncing power in the case of Prospero. He stresses the connection between regeneration and Christian piety he thinks displayed by several characters in *The Tempest*, the repentant political enemies of Prospero, Caliban, and Prospero himself. I agree that the question of what authority Shakespeare attributes to Christian teaching must be addressed and that Prospero's rejecting vengeance and forgiving those who have wronged him argue for a morality distinctly Christian. Two problems occur to me. First, Prospero's forgiveness relies on provisions he has arranged—restoration of his ducal powers now supported by marital alliance with the king of Naples. Second, if he professes Christian belief

Prospero seems ambiguous in his practice. He does not pray. As for doctrine, he attributes his relenting to "reason" rather than to grace. And he is a mortalist: "[our little life is rounded with a sleep.](#)" (*The Tempest*, Act IV, sc. 1, 157). True, when speaking as the play's Epilogue he [refers to the Lord's prayer](#) in asking plaudits from the playgoers. (*The Tempest*, Epilogue, 16). There are many indications throughout the plays that Shakespeare is aware he writes for Christians. In our discussion we can profitably pursue the issue of Shakespeare and Christian doctrine since that matter bears upon our inquiry into what may be the limits upon absolute power.

Urban has pertinent comments on Henry V that we might take up in an approach to the question just mentioned. The Chorus of the play commends Henry Monmouth as "[the mirror of all Christian kings.](#)" (*Henry V*, Act II, Chorus, 6). Would it be worthwhile to consider what would be required of such a king and to examine the thought and policies of Henry V with a view to discovering whether Shakespeare himself shares the enthusiasm of his Chorus? This would also bear upon the issue raised by Zuckert vis-à-vis the playwright's affiliations with political philosophers. How would one go about considering the claim that Shakespeare can best be understood from an Aristotelian perspective? Then we have not spoken of Hobbes. But are there not grounds for thinking that Shakespeare's plays keep audiences aware of what Hobbes will describe as a "state of nature" ever impending? I mean a condition in which [every man is at war with every other man.](#)<sup>[34]</sup> Accordingly, I would propose sharpening our leading question by assuming Acton's cautionary regarding absolute power to be borne out by some of the plays. But now at issue is what theological-moral-political precepts afford guidance in seeking to make power responsible?

### Endnotes

[31.] Aristotle on the good and wise ruler, see *The Politics*, Book III <[/titles/579#Aristotle\\_0033-01\\_467](#)> in *The Politics of Aristotle, trans. into English with introduction, marginal analysis, essays, notes and indices* by B. Jowett. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1885. 2 vols. Vol. 1.

[32.] In "Gorgias" Polus calls Soicrates "monstrous". See, *The Dialogues of Plato translated into English with Analyses and Introductions by B. Jowett, M.A. in Five Volumes. 3rd edition revised and corrected* (Oxford University Press, 1892). </titles/766#lf0131-02\_head\_026>.

[33.] In *King Henry VI Part III* see the exchange between the King and Exeter on using force against Parliament:

K. Hen.: Be patient, gentle Earl of Westmoreland.

Clif. Patience is for poltroons, such as he: He durst not sit there had your father liv'd. My gracious lord, here in the parliament Let us assail the family of York.

North.: Well hast thou spoken, cousin: be it so.

K. Hen.: Ah! know you not the city favours them, And they have troops of soldiers at their beck?

Exe.: But when the duke is slain they'll quickly fly.

K. Hen.: Far be the thought of this from Henry's heart, To make a shambles of the parliament-house! Cousin of Exeter, frowns, words, and threats, Shall be the war that Henry means to use.

[Act I, sc.I, 61-73]

[34.] Thomas Hobbes on "the condition of a War of every man against every man", in *Hobbes's Leviathan reprinted from the edition of 1651 with an Essay by the Late W.G. Pogson Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909). CHAP. XIX.: Of the severall Kinds of Common-wealth by Institution, and of Succession to the Sovereigne Power. </titles/869#Hobbes\_0161\_514>.

## REASON AND GRACE

by David V. Urban

In "Power, Character, and Disorder," John Alvis responds to me in part by writing that Prospero "attributes his relenting to 'reason' rather than to 'grace.'" Here, it seems that Alvis sets up a false dichotomy between reason and grace, a dichotomy contradicted by many writers in the tradition of liberty, a dichotomy I suspect Alvis himself does not really affirm.

The scene to which Alvis refers takes place within this exchange between Prospero and his spirit servant, Ariel:

Prospero: [Say, my spirit,](#)  
How fares the king and's followers?

*Ari.*

Confin'd together  
In the same fashion as you gave in charge,  
Just as you left them: all prisoners, sir,  
In the line-grove which weather-fends your cell;  
They cannot budge till your release. The king,  
His brother, and yours, abide all three  
distracted,  
And the remainder mourning over them,  
Brimful of sorrow and dismay; but chiefly  
Him, that you term'd, sir, 'The good old lord  
Gonzalo:'

His tears run down his beard, like winter's  
drops

From eaves of reeds; your charm so strongly  
works them,

That if you now beheld them, your affections  
Would become tender.

*Pro.*

Dost thou think so, spirit?

*Ari.*

Mine would, sir, were I human.

*Pro.*

And mine shall.

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling

Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,  
 One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,  
 Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou  
 art?  
 Though with their high wrongs I am struck to  
 the quick,  
 Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury  
 Do I take part: the rarer action is  
 In virtue than in vengeance: they being  
 penitent,  
 The sole drift of my purpose doth extend  
 Not a frown further. Go, release them, Ariel.  
 My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,  
 And they shall be themselves.

(*The Tempest*, [5.1.6-31](#))

Significantly, it is the spirit Ariel who urges Prospero to refrain from wrath against his enemies, upon which he speaks the above words concerning his "[nobler reason](#) 'gainst my my fury / Do I take part." The play's context makes clear that Prospero's "nobler reason" was inspired by the grace urged and represented by Ariel, called by Maurice Hunt "a grace-giving Spirit" who "shar[es] tenderness with Prospero so as to soften his heart."[\[35\]](#)

And the idea that grace often works hand in hand with reason is commonplace in the Christian tradition of liberty. Consider first Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Early in the *Inferno*, the character Dante, lost and hopeless in the dark woods, meets with Virgil, who represents reason but who, like and even more explicitly than Shakespeare's Ariel, is an instrument of grace. During their initial encounter, Virgil tells Dante that he has been sent by God in response to the prayers of Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice.[\[36\]](#)

Dante, of course, was inspired by Aquinas, and I commend readers to Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, part I, question 12, article 13, which says in part: "... [human knowledge is assisted by the revelation of grace](#). For the intellect's natural light is strengthened by the infusion of gratuitous light; and sometimes also the images in the human imagination are divinely formed, so as to express divine things better than those do which we receive from

sensible objects, as appears in prophetic visions; while sometimes sensible things, or even voices, are divinely formed to express some divine meaning."[\[37\]](#)

And Calvin puts forward a similar position when, explicitly drawing upon Augustine, he writes, "[It is a faculty of the reason and the will to choose good with the assistance of grace](#)."[\[38\]](#)

Finally, consider the opening chapter of Isaiah, in which God calls to Israel, "[Come now, and let us reason together](#), saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (1:18).[\[39\]](#) Here the Author of Grace explicitly appeals to his audience's reason in a way that resembles Ariel's plea to Prospero.

### Endnotes

[\[35.\]](#) Maurice Hunt, "Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Human Worth," *Ben Jonson Journal* 20.1 (2013): 58-71 at 65.

[\[36.\]](#) See [Canto 2, lines 49-117](#), in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and a Commentary by Courtney Langdon*, vol. 1 (Inferno) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918). English version.

[\[37.\]](#) Aquinas, Thirteenth Article. WHETHER BY GRACE A HIGHER KNOWLEDGE OF GOD CAN BE OBTAINED THAN BY NATURAL REASON? in *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas. Part I QQ I.-XXVI. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Second and revised edition* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920). Vol. 1. <[/titles/1979](#)>.

[\[38.\]](#) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.ii.4. In the edition on the OLL the phrase is "It is a power of reason and will to choose the good, grace assisting?". See, John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846). 2 volumes in 1. <[/titles/535#Calvin\\_0038\\_905](#)>.

[\[39.\]](#) *The Parallel Bible. The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments translated out of the Original Tongues: being the Authorised Version arranged in parallel columns with the Revised Version* (Oxford University Press, 1885). <[/titles/2361](#)>.

## MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE

by David V. Urban

I would like again to address Shakespeare's depiction of how matters of conscience limit the extent of corruption and corrupt exercises of power. Significantly, the conscience-stricken rulers I discuss in my original response--Richard III, Macbeth, Claudio, Henry IV, Henry V, and Prospero; we could also add [Lord Angelo in Measure for Measure](#)<sup>[40]</sup>--experience their internal torture within an explicitly (or Prospero's case, implicitly) Christian context. Some 150 years later, however, Adam Smith argues forcefully that conscience operates powerfully even within persons of no belief in God:

[The man who has broke through all those measures of conduct](#), which can alone render him agreeable to mankind, though he should have the most perfect assurance that what he had done was for ever to be concealed from every human eye, it is all to no purpose. When he looks back upon it, and views it in the light in which the impartial spectator would view it, he finds that he can enter into none of the motives which influenced it. He is abashed and confounded at the thoughts of it, and necessarily feels a very high degree of that shame which he would be exposed to, if his actions should ever come to be generally known. His imagination, in this case too, anticipates the contempt and derision from which nothing saves him but the ignorance of those he lives with. He still feels that he is the natural object of these sentiments, and still trembles at the thought of what he would suffer, if they were ever actually exerted against him. But if what he had been guilty of was not merely one of those improprieties which are the objects of simple disapprobation, but one of those enormous crimes which excite detestation and resentment, he could never think of it, as long as he had any sensibility left, without feeling all the agony of horror and remorse; and though he could be assured that no man was ever to know

it, and could even bring himself to believe that there was no God to revenge it, he would still feel enough of both these sentiments to embitter the whole of his life: he would still regard himself as the natural object of the hatred and indignation of all his fellow-creatures; and, if his heart was not grown callous by the habit of crimes, he could not think without terror and astonishment even of the manner in which mankind would look upon him, of what would be the expression of their countenance and of their eyes, if the dreadful truth should ever come to be known. These natural pangs of an affrighted conscience are the dæmons, the avenging furies, which, in this life, haunt the guilty, which allow them neither quiet nor repose, which often drive them to despair and distraction, from which no assurance of secrecy can protect them, from which no principles of irreligion can entirely deliver them, and from which nothing can free them but the vilest and most abject of all states, a complete insensibility to honour and infamy, to vice and virtue. Men of the most detestable characters, who, in the execution of the most dreadful crimes, had taken their measures so coolly as to avoid even the suspicion of guilt, have sometimes been driven, by the horror of their situation, to discover, of their own accord, what no human sagacity could ever have investigated.<sup>[41]</sup>

But to what extent has the irreligious man's conscience proven efficacious against the absolute corruption Acton considered endemic to absolute power? We might consider that the worst atrocities of 20th-century dictators were committed by those who--like Marlowe's Tamburlaine--set themselves up above any divine accountability. Responding to Skwire, Alvis states, "Power made responsible *is* power diminished." From Shakespeare's perspective, human power is responsible to a Higher Power, and if the human power does not acknowledge this himself through virtuous self-regulation and the appropriate diminishment of power, defeat from without is inevitable. Indeed, we may say

that plays like *Macbeth* and *Richard III* offer a metaphysical comfort not present in most interpretations of the modern totalitarian state.

#### Endnotes

[40.] See *Measure for Measure* 2.4.1-17:

Angelo: [When I would pray and think, I think and pray](#)

To several subjects: heaven hath my empty words,  
 Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,  
 Anchors on Isabel: heaven in my mouth,  
 As if I did but only chew his name,  
 And in my heart the strong and swelling evil  
 Of my conception. The state, whereon I studied,  
 Is like a good thing, being often read,  
 Grown fear'd and tedious; yea, my gravity,  
 Wherein, let no man hear me, I take pride,  
 Could I with boot change for an idle plume,  
 Which the air beats for vain. O place! O form!  
 How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,  
 Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls  
 To thy false seeming! Blood, thou art blood:  
 Let's write good angel on the devil's horn,  
 'Tis not the devil's crest.

[41.] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, III.2.9. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982). [Glasgow Edition], p. 118. Online Dugald Stewart edition of 1853: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments; or, An Essay towards an Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves. To which is added, A Dissertation on the Origins of Languages. New Edition. With a biographical and critical Memoir of the Author, by Dugald Stewart* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853). <[/titles/2620](#)>.

## SHAKESPEARE'S MORAL UNIVERSE

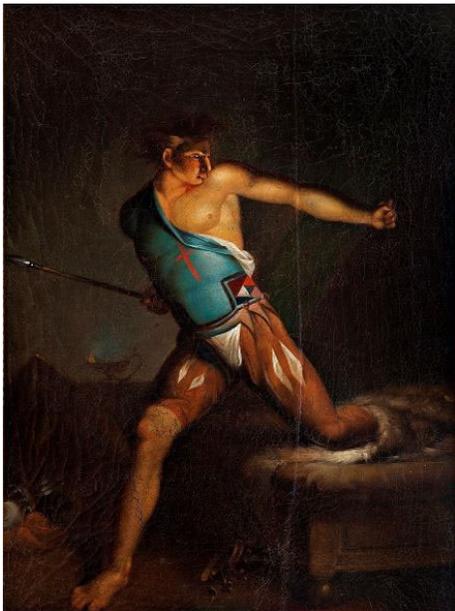
by Michael Zuckert

In his response John Alvis proposes that we focus our attention on the question, “What theologico-moral-political precepts afford guidance in seeking to make power responsible?” This seems to me a good question on which to focus, but it also seems a difficult question to answer on Shakespeare’s behalf. First of all, as we have noticed in earlier parts of our discussion, Shakespeare gives us precious few examples of corrupted men of power becoming more responsible. Prospero and Theseus have been mentioned. David Urban has appealed to the place of conscience: quite a few of the rulers we see in the plays are indeed afflicted by bad conscience. He brings forward Richard III, Macbeth, Claudio, Henry IV, Henry V, Prospero, and Angelo. If conscience is such a force to reproach and correct the tyrant, then we appear to be in good luck that such a natural (per Adam Smith) or divinely ordained force so universally present (or nearly so) rises to reproach men for their bad behavior. But Urban goes on to raise the nearly unavoidable question: “to what extent has the irreligious man’s conscience proven efficacious against the absolute corruption Acton considered endemic to absolute power?”

That is to say, in men not already moved by religion (really moved), conscience is not very efficacious. Such seems to be the lesson of Shakespeare’s plays, especially when we consider such rulers as Macbeth and Richard III, among the truly dangerous tyrants Shakespeare gives us. Conscience may afflict them, but it does not turn them to better ways. As Urban says, external forces are needed to bring them down.

Another reason that it is difficult to extract from Shakespeare an answer to Alvis’s question is that Shakespeare has no monocausal explanation for the corruption of men of power. It certainly is not the mere exercise of power in itself. Let us consider two examples of rulers who acquire and use power in a corrupt way. We

have spoken already of Macbeth. He is corrupted, we might say, by his sense of justice, by his sense that he deserves the highest reward in recognition of his consummate virtue. Richard III is an entirely different matter, however. Richard makes no claims on the basis of his merit or worth. Quite the contrary. As he tells us in *Henry VI, Pt. III*, Act III, sc. II, 165-68: [“since this earth affords no joy to me/](#) But to command, to check, to o’rbear such/As are of better person than myself,/ I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the crown....” Or, putting it another way, “since I cannot prove a lover ... I am determined to prove a villain” ([R II, I,1](#)). Nature has done him an injustice; he will commit injustice to get even with “dissembling nature,” by which he has been “cheated.”



***Richard III***

Macbeth and Richard III—driven to their injustice by such different motives. Is it likely that one source of precepts, that any precepts, will make them “responsible”? One can imagine a conversation between Socrates and Macbeth, in which the Athenian philosopher attempts to prove either that he cannot “jump the life to come” (Phaedo or Myth of Er) or that honor is not the highest good and that he should turn to philosophy instead. More milk, Alvis would say. So let us imagine a conversation between Machiavelli and Richard III, in which the Florentine attempts to cure Richard of

his resentment by teaching him that nature is actually *fortuna*, an impersonal set of forces neither just nor unjust, and thus nothing to “get even” with.

Within the plays we do not find these conversations. Instead Shakespeare shows us what his characters learn only too late—in the long run you’ll never get away with it. This is the assurance that we live in an effectively moral universe. This may temper many. (Still more milk, says Alvis?). Shakespeare also provokes in his audience—or some of them—the kinds of conversations I mentioned above.

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## ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE TEMPTATIONS OF ABSOLUTE POWER

by Sarah Skwire

I was a little surprised to come back from my summer vacation and find that our discussion of power and politics in Shakespeare had become a discussion of grace and Christian theology in Shakespeare. I was particularly surprised to find that *The Tempest* and Ariel had become the focal point for that discussion.

I’ve always seen Ariel as a symbol of pagan magic and custom rather than as a symbol or messenger of divine grace. Possessed of near infinite magical capabilities—Ariel can control the weather, foil human designs, fly, walk through fire, change his appearance, become invisible, and so on—he nonetheless becomes the servant of two powerful magicians. First, he serves the witch Sycorax. When he refuses to follow her [“abhor’d commands”](#) (I.2.409), she traps him inside a tree. Freed from that tree by Prospero, he becomes Prospero’s servant for an agreed-upon term of years. (This term does seem up for renegotiation, and early in the play Prospero says he will free Ariel after only [two more days of service](#) [I.2.438-439].) I have always associated the trapping of Ariel in a tree with the old myths of an aging Merlin being trapped inside of a tree, a tower, or a cave by a young a lovely sorceress he has been training. One

can imagine Shakespeare enjoying the inversion of characters here—as an ageless and lovely spirit is trapped by a decrepit and hideous witch—as well as appreciating the dramatic possibilities of allowing Prospero to have all the powers of pagan magic at his command.

So I have trouble reading Ariel as a heavenly messenger of Christian grace.

Ariel is, instead, part of the long list of things that Prospero must “[abjure](#)” (Act V, sc. 1, 51) in order to put down his borrowed magical powers and resume his hereditary powers as the Duke of Milan. Freeing Ariel is part of what allows him to admit that it is time for him to take that step. The seductions of commanding a servant with nigh-on-infinite powers, who literally gives Prospero the ability to play with the inhabitants of his island as if they are no more than men on a chessboard,[\[42\]](#) are the very temptations that a ruler must face and must reject if he is to be a good ruler.

If an education in good rulership is achieved by the end of the play, it is achieved because of Ariel—that is true. But it is achieved because Prospero decides to do without Ariel, not because he decides to keep him close. That makes *The Tempest* a fairly good example of a tale that might be used to inculcate lessons about ethical leadership, the temptations of absolute power, and the dangers to oneself and others that arise from it. But it would be a very strange way, indeed, to talk about divine grace and its messengers.

### Endnotes

[\[42.\]](#) See Adam Smith on how “the man of system” treats people like chess pieces on a chess board in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

The man of system, on the contrary, is apt to be very [\[343\]](#) wise in his own conceit, and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it: he seems to imagine that he can

arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as [the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board](#); he does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might choose to impress upon it. If those two principles coincide and act in the same direction, the game of human society will go on easily and harmoniously, and is very likely to be happy and successful. If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments; or, An Essay towards an Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves. To which is added, A Dissertation on the Origins of Languages. New Edition. With a biographical and critical Memoir of the Author, by Dugald Stewart* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).< [/titles/2620#Smith\\_1648\\_674](#)>.

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## REASON AND GRACE: A RESPONSE

by John E. Alvis

Now indeed we’ve entered deep waters. David Urban reminds us that an even greater and much more controversial issue than power corrupting has been the relation between reason and divine grace.

Urban suggests we take the Ariel of *The Tempest* as some sort of minister of divine grace. Thus, if I have correctly grasped his argument, he seeks to answer the question I posed at the start of this conversation: to what cause are we to attribute Prospero’s decision to renounce his power (i.e., his magic however interpreted) and return to Milan (the world as we know it with all the attendant hazards

thereof). If we follow Urban's proposal we must go back one step and put the question why does he first forgive his enemies? *For the choice to forgive may precede the choice to renounce magic and return to Milan, or so Urban supposes.*

With regard to mercy he supposes Prospero had been otherwise inclined previous to his response to Ariel's intervention on behalf of the two parties of bedazzled wanderers whom Ariel has been hitherto tormenting on Prospero's instructions. Urban does not specify what form of grace Ariel consults. It would be what theologians of Shakespeare's time and ours term *prevenient*. Grace these theologians define as a supernatural help from God which enlightens the mind and clarifies the will to do good. The *prevenient* version operates during a moment of choice influencing a soul to do good when it may have been inclined to do evil.

I'll add two items of corroborative evidence for Urban's contention. First, Prospero replies to Ariel's suggestion that he forgive in a manner that suggests the notion of pardon has just now occurred to him. This is consistent with a supposition that Shakespeare means us to infer the operation of *prevenient* grace. Second, Prospero's decision anticipates the appeal he makes to the audience at the end of the play. Because that appeal makes allusion to "The Lord's Prayer" (i.e., "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us") it would seem consistent with a prior dispensation of *prevenient* grace wherein Prospero fulfils a condition for God's pardoning his transgressions.

Urban then moves from an assertion regarding operative grace in *The Tempest* to the more comprehensive claim that divine intervention occurs elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays, citing *Richard III* as one example followed by citations of a speech by Henry VI declining to employ force against Parliament and a speech by Angelo of *Measure for Measure* prompted by his consciousness of his own guilt. Urban's point, I think, is that I have made too severe a dichotomy between reason and grace, or reason and conscience.

I'll speak first to matters pertaining to grace in *The Tempest*, then make a general remark prompted by Urban's citations from the other plays.

First, a concession. As Urban has suspected, I do not think there is an opposition between grace and reason. But my statement invited such an inference. I understand the operation of grace to be as Urban conveyed through recalling Aquinas and Calvin: it is a supernatural help that enlightens the intellect through rectifying reason and through acting upon the imagination. So perhaps it would be better to substitute the word *nature* and to ask whether Shakespeare means for us to think Prospero has made a choice caused by nature or by grace operating upon nature.

Prospero "prays" to Shakespeare's audience, but not to God. He does not think Ariel a minister of grace. He asserts authority over Ariel and says that a demonic Sycorax had once imprisoned Ariel in a tree. To my mind the two indications of subordination disqualify Ariel for functioning as either an angel or a symbol for divine grace. As for Prospero's past, he claims to have done what Christians believe only Christ had done. Prospero claims to have raised the dead. (Shakespeare may intend this claim to be adjusted to an allegory that would reduce to a dramatist resurrecting historical personages.) What to make of his claim (5.1.43-44) to have split "[love's stout oak/ With \[love's\] own bolt](#)"? (Again innocuous enough if referred allegorically to theater stage business.)

I had also mentioned in the earlier exchange that Prospero is a mortalist—"our little life/ [Is rounded with a sleep](#)"(4.1.157-158)—a position which I assumed, perhaps wrongly, would not be consistent with Christian belief. I grant, however, that Shakespeare need not be in agreement with Prospero.

Prospero seems to say in the speech Urban cites that he has intended for Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonzo something other than indefinitely protracted dementia if they should prove repentant. If we are so to take his remark to Ariel, there would be no need of divine grace to correct him at this point.

Prospero does once mention "[providence divine](#)" (I.2.158), but the act to which he refers is an act of foreseeing kindness done by Gonzalo. Elsewhere he attributes present favorable circumstances to "[bountiful Fortune](#)" (I.2.159 , repeated 178). Then he attributes to

his magic, with its instrument Ariel, the penitential trials inflicted on the noblemen cast up on his island.



*Prospero commanding Ariel*

Nothing I've said here is decisive for the larger question which is whether Shakespeare's plays convey a vision of man and the world that conveys, or implies, Christian belief on the part not of some of the characters he has imagined but on the part of Shakespeare himself.

I see in the plays nothing that conclusively would deny the idea of Shakespeare's professing Christian belief, but little to confirm the supposition. It's worth considering how one might put the matter to a test. Is it dispositive to find that in *Henry VI* (5.3.s.d. ) we are given a stage direction presenting demons in attendance upon Joan of Arc? We might argue for another demon (Hecate) in *Macbeth* if the disputed lines are allowed to be Shakespeare's (3.5.2-32). The two theophanies which occur in other plays present pagan divinities: Jupiter in *Cymbeline* (5.4.93-113), Diana in *Pericles Prince of Tyre* (5.1. 241-250). Of course historians tell us laws forbade theatrical presentations depicting God. But there are no depictions of the Christian deity in Shakespeare's narrative poetry. Are there references to Christ in the sonnets or to a God who must be understood to be the Supreme Being of Christian belief?

I have a sense the metaphysical proof texts just mentioned will strike Shakespeareans as a flat-footed way of approaching the question and that a demand will be made instead for a different kind of inquiry on the order of ascertaining Shakespeare's beliefs by the measure of

the poet's conception of human nature and destiny. Fair enough. What then?

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## RENOUNCING POWER

by David V. Urban

I will use this response to try to redirect our conversation more explicitly back to matters of power and corruption in Shakespeare's plays. Sarah Skwire is skeptical regarding Ariel being a "messenger of Christian grace," and I am happy to agree to disagree; I will argue, however, that my theological interpretation of Ariel -- whose name means "Lion of God" and can be connected to the symbol of the tribe of Judah<sup>[43]</sup> -- well demonstrates his role as one who encourages his listeners to throw off the corrupting chains of ill-gained and ill-exercised power. Note that in Act III, scene iii, when Ariel confronts the "[three men of sin](#)" (53)--Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian--he specifically tells them that "[I and my fellows / Are ministers of fate,](#)" telling them that "[The powers, delaying, not forgetting,](#) have / Have incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures, / Against your peace"; regarding Ariel's confrontation, Prospero says, "[a grace it had devouring](#)" (60-61; 73-75; 84, italics mine). Ariel's confrontation effects the conviction of sin all three men experience, the working of, in Gonzolo's words, "[Their great guilt](#)" (105). Alonso soon responds to his conviction of sin by repenting before Prospero, renouncing *power* gained through *corrupt* means. He tells Prospero, "[Thy dukedom I resign, and do entreat /](#) Thou pardon my wrongs" and humbly asks Miranda for "[forgiveness](#)" (V.i.118-19; 200). Similarly, Ariel's previously discussed exhortation that Prospero pity his captives inspires Prospero to renounce the *corruption* of seeking revenge and cast off his corrupting *absolute power* over the island and its inhabitants. (*The Tempest*, [V.i.16-57](#)). I have already discussed the theological underpinnings of Caliban's repentance and Prospero's Epilogue.<sup>[44]</sup> That Shakespeare utilizes the theologically mysterious figure of Ariel<sup>[45]</sup> as an instrument of grace and couches his ultimately Christian message of repentance and

forgiveness within a pagan setting and more ambiguous spiritual diction (e.g., "fate," "powers") is unsurprising considering that *The Tempest* was written under the constraints of the 1606 Act to Restrain the Abuses of Players, which curtailed references to God or the Trinity on the stage.<sup>[46]</sup> But for our forum's purposes, we may recognize that Shakespeare uses Ariel to convict characters of corruption, the renunciation of which coincides with renouncing corrupt power, even absolute power.



We should also consider, within the broader context of Shakespeare's plays, Ariel's role as Prospero's wisdom-giving counselor. Indeed, Prospero's decision to receive wise counsel and voluntarily renounce absolute power and its attendant corruption appears unique among Shakespeare's rulers. Conversely, various of Shakespeare's rulers demonstrate their corruption by rejecting wise counsel. In *Measure for Measure*, Angelo, to whom the absent Duke gave absolute power over Vienna, self-righteously rejects Escalus's advice to show mercy to Claudio (*Measure for Measure* [II.i.1-31](#)); but soon after Angelo becomes enamored with Claudio's sister, the novice Isabella, and contrives to violate her. (*Measure for Measure* [II.ii.169-94](#); [II.iv.142-71](#)). In *Coriolanus*, Coriolanus's downfall begins when he arrogantly disregards Volumina's, Cominius's, and Menenius's exhortations that he speak humbly to the plebeians. (*Coriolanus* [III.ii](#) and [III.iii](#)). And Julius Caesar's disregard of the Soothsayer's warnings to beware the ides of March (*Julius Caesar* [I.ii.15-24](#)) demonstrates the prideful self-sufficiency that propels his drive for absolute power and inspires his subsequent assassination. Significantly, King Lear explicitly rejects

Kent's wise counsel in favor of Goneril's and Regan's flattery (*King Lear* [I.i.118-77](#)), a peevish response that demonstrates the corruption of Lear's absolute power even as he foolishly seeks to cast off power's responsibility. Lear's folly exhibits the corrupting influence of flattery, which, in its deception, appears to reinforce the ruler's problematic exercise of power instead of wisely challenging it, a deception that Lear embraces at the cost of his own and others' lives. Lear's tragic outcome illustrates the deadly nature of flattery and instructs readers as to why Dante gave a special place in Hell for the flatterers (*Inferno*, canto [18.115-36](#)) and why the mild Erasmus not only exhorts rulers to avoid flatterers but even advocates their execution.<sup>[47]</sup>

But I argue that Henry V is the Shakespearean character with the most complicated relationship with counselors. As I noted earlier, Henry's dubious decision to invade France is inspired by the counsel of both his dying father and the Archbishop of Canterbury. (*Henry IV, Part 2* [IV.v.213-14](#) and *Henry V* [I.ii.9-221](#)). As I hope to discuss in a final post, Henry's decision to follow such counsel is, albeit successful in securing and expanding Henry's power, both problematically Machiavellian and morally corrupting.

### Endnotes

<sup>[43.]</sup> Herbert Marks, ed., *The English Bible: King James Version. Vol. 1: The Old Testament. A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: Norton, 2012), notes on Isaiah 29:1. Significantly, Jesus descends from the tribe of Judah and is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" ([Revelation 5:5](#), KJV).

<sup>[44.]</sup> See my post "Power and Corruption in Shakespeare's Plays," par. 11.

<sup>[45.]</sup> W. Stacy Johnson, "The Genesis of Ariel," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2.3 (1951): 205-10.

<sup>[46.]</sup> Hugh Gazzard, "An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)," *Review of English Studies* 61.251 (2010): 495-528.

[47.] See Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, ed. Lisa Jaradine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54-61.

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## ACTON'S AXIOM AND SHAKESPEARE: TWO FURTHER PLAYS FOR CONSIDERATION

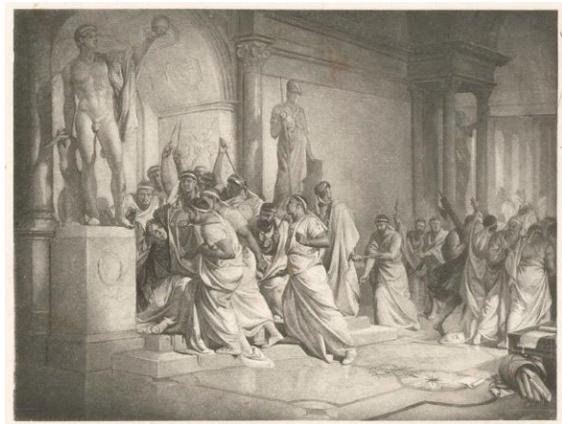
by John E. Alvis

We've applied Lord Acton's axiom regarding the corruptive effects of possessing power to several of Shakespeare's plays, noting instances of power corrupting in the case of Shakespeare's Richard II and Richard III. Then we proposed two examples of characters who acquire additions to their power without becoming corrupt. Theseus of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has just come to authority in Athens, but seems not to suffer any moral diminishment thereby. Prospero may be the sole character who is shown to possess "absolute power." He appears to become better in the course of the play, yet it may be that his improvement owes in part to his renouncing the unlimited power he has enjoyed by virtue of his magic. In my first contribution to this discussion I suggested we might be in position to discern Shakespeare's view of the Acton proposition if we could understand why Prospero renounces absolute power to settle for much less. I don't see that we've arrived at an answer to that question. Maybe David Urban was suggesting that Prospero renounces because he is a Christian, and Christians may be enjoined to trust in divine providence rather than rely upon their own resources. If so, then do we conclude Prospero did indeed corrupt himself by availing himself of whatever is that power he attains by his studies in what he himself calls "magic"?

I'm not convinced that we've come to the bottom of the question of Prospero, nor that we've shown Shakespeare refutes Machiavelli's challenge to Acton, viz., one must strive for more and more power, because power is glory

and that is man's greatest happiness. Moreover, Machiavelli would say, "If promoting morality is incumbent upon human beings, as my detractors claim, then the more power one attains the better one is positioned to contend with men who are immoral."

But suppose we extend our discussion to take up one play in which Shakespeare presents a celebrated instance of a quest for absolute power and a second play which depicts several characters who continually suffer diminishment of power to the point of its extinction in death. I'm referring to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for the first subject and to *King Lear* for the second.



### *Murder of Julius Caesar*

Caesar aspires to absolute power in the sense Acton employs the notion. Acton meant absolute in a *political* context wherein *absolute* means not unbounded simply—as might be the case with Prospero's wielding his magic—but unchecked by any political institution. Another way of putting it would be to say absolute power means a condition in which there is no determination of public action other than the will of the ruler at any moment. Shakespeare has his Caesar express this condition in a single statement. Replying to a Roman senator who asks Caesar to state some cause why he refuses to attend the meeting of the Senate on the scheduled day, Caesar says: "[The cause is in my will: I will not come.](#)/" (2.2. 70-71) Every Roman would grasp that if Caesar can make the Senate accept that declaration as an adequate statement of "cause" (i.e., as in "due cause") the republic will have been destroyed, and in its place will have been

installed a single sovereign whose “will” henceforth must have the authority previously ascribed only to law (as in “rule of law”). Because the republic’s reason for being was precisely to prevent anyone’s being entitled to say, “The cause is in my will,” and have that satisfy any self-respecting republican Roman, least of all Rome’s Senate.

Republican government rests upon the conviction that men are to be regulated by general laws. Then the form of republican government is so designed as to insure that a coordination of discrete interests will be consulted before any proposal achieves the status of law. That, in turn, was secured in Rome by a constitution that provided against any person, or single class or group interest, enjoying such authority as to be able to have its will unimpeded. Hence, the Senate upon deliberation issued not laws but recommendations which would become law only if approved by the people in their various popular assemblies. In executing and adjudicating law, elected officials brought to bear their intelligence (as well as their interests) in applying the law. On the basis of this play one might suspect Shakespeare holds such republican institutions to be the appropriate means to providing against the corruptive effects of power. So a regime such as that Caesar craves would be corrupted in the proper sense of the word: i.e., the form would undergo change from that of a mixed regime (as Aristotle would put it, and Polybius did) to some version of autocracy.

Does that mean Shakespeare has shown Caesar to have become personally or morally corrupt? Not necessarily. Would not that question depend upon one’s judging whether the Roman senatorial class together with the common people are shown no longer to possess sufficient political virtue to sustain a republic? Is it clear that Caesar does not intend such justice as is available given Rome’s corrupted conditions?

*King Lear* depicts a reapportionment of power. Absolute power invested in a single monarch is to be replaced with a three-part divided sovereignty, or, more precisely, by three separate nations. Lear’s intended division is not the sort of division accomplished in the Roman republic and that resulted in sharing political authority. Instead, Lear intended three separate monarchies ruled by the

husbands of Lear’s three daughters, with the old king still retaining some sort of unspecified vestigial royal status. This, Lear’s initial plan, gives way to a two-part division in consequence of Lear’s anger against the daughter he had hitherto favored. What follows is good for no one. The realm suffers corruption of the general good in warfare between the two new sovereigns and between them and France. All the principal characters die, except Edgar. Characters presented unsympathetically are further corrupted in their newly powerful condition. Characters flawed but sympathetically portrayed seem each and all to become morally improved by their sufferings. One of these, Edgar, gains power, perhaps even that monarchical sovereignty over all of England possessed by King Lear at the outset. Edgar seems to improve morally and that partly in consequence of his choice to descend almost to ground zero with regard to power as ordinarily understood. Do we have here a pattern recognized in other plays: dilution or neglect of power brings ruin to a state and its people, but bereft of powers once enjoyed, the good become morally better?

Wickedness would prevail (in the person of Edmund) at the end of the play were it not that a husband (Albany) of one of the selfish sisters has preserved sufficient authority to have the allied army at his command, or had not a mere servant slain the rival Duke of Cornwall, and had not Edgar the bodily strength to vanquish Edmund in a trial by judicial combat. Thus Edgar comes to rule an apparently reunified England. Desire for increase of power corrupts those inclined to evil by their natures, whereas loss of power improves Lear, Gloucester, Cordelia, Kent, the Fool(?), and Edgar. But does the all-but-universal destruction indicate that the sole joy befalling the good personages is the friendship of the good? Do we arrive at the net conclusion that power is insufficient to assure personal happiness or happiness for the well-being of a nation, but that some power in the right hands on the right occasion is indispensable?

## TYRANNY IN *THE WINTER'S TALE*, PART I

by Michael Zuckert

A Shakespearean play that speaks in a pointed way to the set of issues John Alvis first raised is *The Winter's Tale*, a play hitherto unmentioned in this discussion. Leontes, the ruler of Sicilia, is apparently not a case of Creonism, as Alvis and I have been speaking of that. He has been a ruler for a longish time, and from all evidence has been a good ruler, surely not a tyrant. He has a loving wife and loyal and admiring courtiers. There is no sign that his people are restive or dissatisfied under his rule. And yet, at a certain moment, he becomes a tyrant. He plots the death of his old friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia; he accuses his wife of the crime of adultery without any evidence against her; and he stages a “trial” in which he will be accuser, judge, jury, and executioner. He plans the death of his own newborn child, believing her to be the offspring of his wife’s adulterous relationship with Polixenes.



*William Shakespeare*

Leontes’s corruption or descent into tyranny does not appear to fit the Acton-mold. But, Alvis might say, he does not wield absolute power and thus is not a good test of Acton’s law. Well, we do not know just how much power he holds as king—Shakespeare does not give us a

disquisition on Sicilian constitutional law. But we might infer from events following his turn to tyranny that he does in effect have absolute power. He is successful in establishing a “trial” for his wife that violates every norm of due process. He is able to intimidate into silence all in his court but Paulina. The only limit on his power seems to lie in his inability or unwillingness to act openly against Polixenes, for he plans a clandestine assassination. So Leontes possessed absolute or near absolute power for some number of years without succumbing to being “absolutely corrupted.” His power was not the cause of his corruption. This is not to say that Shakespeare is signaling his approval of absolute power, for he shows us that even if power did not corrupt Leontes, his more-or-less unlimited power allowed him to act in a frightfully tyrannous way when the temper overtook him. We come away from the play with a reminder of the need for checks and limits on power, a timely reminder in the Stuart England in which Shakespeare was writing. The king, James I, was notorious for putting forward a theory of divine right of kings, which was at the same time a theory of absolutist monarchy. *The Winter's Tale* can be seen as in indirect response to James’s theory as well as a warning evocation of the actions of another king, Henry VIII, whose accusation of adultery against his Queen, Anne Boleyn, and less-than-fair “trial” that found her guilty of a capital crime remind more than a little of the action in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare is putting in a quiet word for the more constitutionalist side of the English political tradition, a tradition challenged by the Tudors and now by the Stuart king.

One of the mysteries of the play, however, is to identify what produced Leontes’s corruption, for all of a sudden, as Polixenes prepares to return home, Leontes contracted a ferocious suspicion of his wife and his friend, leading to a certainty in his mind that they have been having an illicit affair during the entire nine months Polixenes has been visiting his court. It is a common if not universal view of critics that Shakespeare has not provided sufficient motivation for Leontes’s sudden outbreak of jealousy, which in turn led him to tyranny. Consider E.M. Tillyard’s 1938 judgment on this aspect of the play: “Leontes’s obsession of jealousy is terrifying in its intensity. It

reminds us not of other Shakespearian tragic errors, but rather of the god-sent lunacies of Greek drama.... It is as scantily motivated as these, and we should refrain from demanding any motive.”<sup>[48]</sup> But should we refrain? If we wish to gain some wisdom from Shakespeare on those forces that corrupt rulers and produce tyranny, is it not worth probing the text to see if Shakespeare has not planted the materials from which we may piece together an explanation for Leontes’s “obsession of jealousy”? I have a theory, which I will float by my fellow discussants in my next post.

### Endnotes

<sup>[48.]</sup> E.M. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1938), p. 41.



*Hecuba and Polixenes*

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## TYRANNY IN *THE WINTER’S TALE*, PART 2: LORD ACTON REDUX

by Michael Zuckert

I have promised a theory for the jealous rage of Leontes and his descent into tyranny. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the causes of the rupture between Leontes and Polixenes is subtle and elusive. A full explanation would take far more than my allotted words, as will even this abbreviated version. So I must be concise where prolixity is required.

The play opens as Polixenes, King of Bohemia, prepares to leave the Sicilian court of his childhood friend Leontes. He has been there for “[nine changes of the wat’ry star](#)”, i.e., nine months, and his kingly duties, to say nothing of his wife and son at home, call him back after so long a visit (1.2.1). He fears he has overstayed his welcome. Besides, the two will soon see each other again, since Leontes is scheduled to visit Bohemia “[this coming summer](#).”

It does seem a good time for Polixenes to leave, but on the day before his scheduled departure one of the most remarkable events of a play filled with them occurs: Leontes becomes quite insistent that Polixenes remain one week longer. One week after nine months! What can be the reason for his insistence on an extra week when the reasons for his friend’s departure are so solid? This question is worth pursuing because in seeking to prevail, Leontes enlists Hermione, his wife, to plead his case with Polixenes, in which effort she proves successful. It is her success, it seems, that triggers Leontes’s jealousy. So the question of why Leontes wishes so much for that extra week looms as the first pressing question.

The two have not seen each other since they were boys, though they have kept up on Facebook and exchanged Amazon gift cards (1.1.25-31). We are several times presented with descriptions of their boyhoods together. In the very first scene, Camillo, of Leontes’s court, tells how the two youths “[were trained together in their childhoods and there rooted betwixt them such an affection...](#)” (1.1.21-24). In the next scene Hermione quizzes Polixenes about the kings’ time together as boys. Answers Polixenes: “We were, fair Queen, / [Two lads that thought there was no more behind](#)/ But such a day tomorrow as today,/ And to be boy eternal” (1.2.62-64). They lived in an eternal present—nothing to do but

to be with each other. Even more revealing is Polixenes's expansion on their early days together:

[We were as twinned lambs](#), that did frisk  
 And bleat the one at the other; what we  
 changed  
 Was innocence for innocence; we knew not the  
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed  
 That any did; had we pursued that life,  
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared  
 With stronger blood, we should have answered  
 heaven  
 Boldly, "not guilty", the imposition cleared,  
 Hereditary ours (1.2.67-74)

Although there is more than a few hundred words worth to say about these two speeches alone, let us leave it at emphasizing two things: innocent intimacy. Polixenes's phrase "twinned lambs" captures the idea well. So innocent were they that Polixenes can declare them innocent of original sin. But he recognizes that as they went through puberty to adulthood and became separate persons they lost this innocent intimacy, never, he seems to accept, to be recovered.

Polixenes is an adult. He can look back to his innocence and to his and his friend's intimacy with nostalgia and sense of loss, but with recognition that this is not to be in the future. But what of Leontes? Why that one more week? For one last chance to capture that intimacy of long-ago youth, the loss of which he has not become so inured to as his friend has? Though an adult in years, he is not quite an adult in understanding or emotion. Polixenes's unwillingness to stay must strike him as one more piece of evidence of the lost unity of the two. They are no longer all for all for each other, dwelling effortlessly in an eternal youth.

We do know some very important facts about their present situation, and can infer the psychological consequences of those facts. In the very opening speech of the play we find Archidamus (of Polixenes's court) apologizing for how poor Bohemia is compared to Sicilia. Polixenes will never be able to repay the splendid hospitality Leontes has shown the Bohemians. The point of this opening exchange becomes clear when contrasted

to the description of the two kings as boys—twinned lambs. Now they are no longer twinned, nor are they lambs. "Rooted betwixt them" as boys is a deep affection which, Camillo tells us, "[cannot choose but to branch now](#)." Camillo may mean "branch" in the sense of flourish, as some notes to this passage have it, as when a tree branches out. But on the basis of what we have just heard of the two kings in their present, "branch" has quite a different meaning—to diverge. The two metaphors, "twinned lambs" and the "roots betwixt" that "branch, capture in a very few words the complex background in the relations of the two that begins to make explicable the onset of Leontes's jealous rage.

### Resentment and Projection

After having politely but firmly been resisted by Polixenes, Leontes turns to Hermione and requests that she add her pleadings to his. She too is rebuffed at first, but when she puts the request in such terms as lead Polixenes to believe he would offend his hosts by leaving as planned, he accedes to their request. As presented, it is his sense of what good manners requires in the situation more than anything else that sways him. Surely the circumstances do not fit Leontes's suspicion that there is some love interest behind Hermione's pleading or Polixenes's acquiescence, for she is nine months pregnant and soon to give birth, not an ideal condition for illicit romance. Nonetheless, Leontes comments on hearing of Polixenes's decision to stay: "[At my request he would not](#)" (1.2.87). This comes immediately after the "twinned lambs" speech, i.e., after the evocation of their earlier intimacy and innocence. Leontes's reaction: "[Too hot, too hot!](#)/ To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods" (1.2.108-110). He sees in Hermione's success a sign of a kind of deep intimacy between his wife and friend, an intimacy that now in less innocent adulthood amounts to "mingling bloods."

Against the backdrop of his still yearning for unity, soul to soul, with his friend, he fears or posits a kind of unity between wife and friend. He suspects his wife's unfaithfulness going all the way back to the conception of their son Mamilus ([1.2.119-120](#)). Of course, any unfaithfulness then could not have been with Polixenes.

Apparently he can attribute her alleged deeds to womanly inconstancy. But why might he now suspect his friend of such a thing? Not only have they lost the “twinned lambs” character of their original relationship, but they have “branched,” with Leontes the more eminent and successful of the two. As the exchange between Camillo and Archidamus reveals, it is understood in both courts that Leontes is in an enviable position compared to the Bohemians. Although he never says so, Leontes surely shares this view or at least knows that it is widespread.

Though we see no evidence that Polixenes in fact envies or resents Leontes, it is natural for the latter (as the Sicilian courtiers appear to do) to assume that Polixenes feels his inferiority and resents Leontes’s relative position. To this resentment Leontes may attribute their lost intimacy. But seeing the success of Hermione’s plea, he may carry his surmise of Polixenes’s resentment and envy one step further and project onto his one-time friend a hostile intention toward him, a desire to even things up by harming him by striking up a not-innocent intimacy with his wife. As the sequel reveals, especially in the trial scene, *Winter’s Tale* is a play of projection and delusion. Leontes displays the frame of mind of the typical conspiracy theorist—every fact and event is taken to prove the conclusion he has drawn in his head—President Bush brought down the Twin Towers, or Polixenes is having an affair with Hermione—no fact can penetrate or undermine the construct the theorist projects onto the situation and in terms of which he understands it. (See e.g., [2.1.149-154](#)). Just so is Leontes acting when he first accuses Hermione of adultery.

### On Tyranny

The preceding argument is, as I will be the first to admit, highly conjectural. But having gone so far, let us speculate further and explore some of the broader implications of what Shakespeare has shown us.

Once we understand Leontes’s jealous rage, only two further insights are needed to understand his fall into tyranny. First, as part of his paranoid-conspiracy mentality he projects a conspiracy against his life, led by Hermione and Polixenes. He must rid himself of them—

legally or not—to protect himself and his regime. Even more, Leontes admits his need for vengeance:

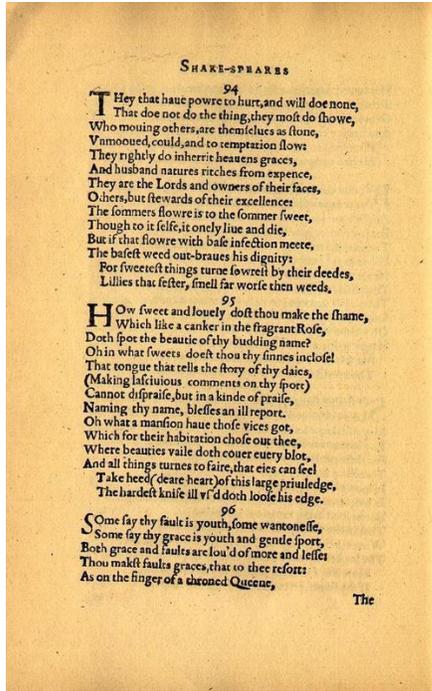
#### For present vengeance

Take it on her. Camillo and Polixenes  
Laugh at me, make me their pastime at my  
sorrow;  
They should not laugh if I could reach them,  
nor  
Shall she within my power.

He feels diminished if he cannot get revenge. He has been contemned; he feels they are gloating at his expense. It is that that galls him the most. His descent into tyranny derives from his preexisting delusions, producing feelings of physical and moral vulnerability. Unlike his youth, when he and Polixenes “[knew not/ The doctrine of ill-doing](#), nor dreamed/ That any did,” he now knows and attributes “ill-doing” quite readily to others ([1.2.69-70](#)). Self-regard lies behind both of Leontes’s fears: he cares for his particular life, body, and rule; he cares even more perhaps for the esteem or contempt others have for him. This care for self contrasts strongly with the unself-conscious intimacy of the boys, an intimacy for which Leontes still yearns. Leontes points to something both powerful and paradoxical in the human soul: the desire to affirm and even elevate the self combined with a desire for an intimacy and union with others that overcomes self. It is the task of human beings to somehow negotiate this janus-like feature of human nature. That negotiation is always in danger of failing, as it does in the case of Leontes. As James Madison said, “If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control” against tyranny. To some large degree Shakespeare agrees, and though he does not accept the thesis that it is the possession of power per se that tends to corrupt, he seems to accept that the possession of power can facilitate an urge to tyranny arising from more complex motives inherently part of human selfhood, as he shows in *The Winter’s Tale*. This far he agrees with Lord Acton.

# DO THE SONNETS HOLD THE KEY?

by Sarah Skwire



## *Facsimile of Sonnet 94 from The Sonnets, Quarto 1 (1609)*

As is often the case these days, I find myself wondering whether Shakespeare’s sonnets might be the key to unlocking some of these question about the plays.

We have Michael Zuckert’s excellent question about *The Winter’s Tale*, “What’s the problem with Leontes, anyway?” We have John Alvis’s detailing of Lear’s mad plan to divide his power in three parts and yet, somehow, still retain it. We have the clash between Caesar and the Senate over the extent of the personal power or “will” of the ruler. And we seem to have no way of discerning what Shakespeare himself may have thought, in the end, about any of those conflicts.

I have nothing to offer here but more Shakespeare, and particularly the finely distilled Shakespeare of the sonnets. In this discussion, the sonnet that comes to mind most often is [Sonnet 94](#).

They that have power to hurt and will do none,  
That do not do the thing they most do show,  
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,  
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow;  
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces  
And husband nature's riches from expense;  
They are the lords and owners of their faces,  
Others but stewards of their excellence.  
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,  
Though to itself it only live and die,  
But if that flower with base infection meet,  
The basest weed out-braves his dignity;  
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;  
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

The sonnet, impersonally discussing an indifferent beloved, seems to me to provide an accurate depiction of what may be the best that one can reasonably hope for from a ruler. A ruler who has “[power to hurt and will do none](#)” is like an Angelo who can resist the urge to enforce neglected and oppressive laws, or like a Prospero turning away from his magically enhanced omnipotent rule. A ruler who “moving others [is himself] as stone” is like a Lear freed from the childish narcissism that destroys his family and nearly destroys his kingdom. A ruler who is “unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow” may not sound particularly appealing in this century of charismatic leaders and emotional appeal. But such a ruler would avoid the passions that lead Macbeth to his excesses.

A ruler with those qualities may not be personally appealing—may be much more like the King Henry V who turns away Falstaff and much less like the raucous and funny Prince Hal—but such a ruler will, we are told, “husband nature’s riches from expense” and be “the lord and owner” of his face. That responsibility combined with confident self-ownership may be the best inoculation against the “base infection” to which power leaves us so vulnerable.

# THE TEMPEST'S ANTONIO, CONSCIENCE, AND ADAM SMITH

by David V. Urban

A brief discussion of Prospero's traitorous brother, Antonio, seems in order. While we have noted the Machiavellian aspects of numerous Shakespearean characters, it is also worth noting that the opportunistic Antonio has been compared at length to the Machiavellian prince.[\[49\]](#)

In this short post, however, I will focus on Antonio's easy rejection of conscience, a notable dismissal in light of our earlier discussions of how conscience plagues many of Shakespeare's most sinister characters. Antonio's rejection is also remarkable for its likely albeit ironic influence upon [Adam Smith's presentation of conscience](#) in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) (III.ii.9).[\[50\]](#)



*Adam Smith*

In Act II, scene i of *The Tempest*, while King Alonso, his councillor Gonzalo, and Alonso's other men sleep, Antonio encourages Sebastian, Alonso's brother, to murder Alonso, even as he brags of his own usurpation of Prospero. Sebastian asks him, "[But, for your conscience?](#)" (II.i.277). Antonio responds:

Ay, sir, where lies that? If 'twere a kibe,  
'Twould put me to my slipper; but I feel not  
This deity in my bosom. Twenty consciences  
That stand twixt me and Milan, candied be they  
And melt ere they molest. (278-82)

Antonio's reference to conscience as a nonexistent "deity in my bosom" ironically anticipates Smith calling conscience--which Smith also calls "[the impartial spectator of our conduct](#)"--"[this demigod within the breast](#)" (III.ii.32, p. 131) and "[the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct](#)" (VI.iii.25, p. 247). In my research, I have found no other reference to conscience that uses the idea of conscience being a deity or demigod in the individual's breast or bosom. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), God the Father announces, "[I will place within them \[humans\] as a guide / My Umpire Conscience](#)" (3.194-95), but Smith's presentation of conscience much more closely reflects Antonio's diction. Could Smith, whom Murray Rothbard accused of not properly acknowledging his sources,[\[51\]](#) have hidden his debt to this unsavory Shakespearean character in his presentation of his noble concept of the impartial spectator?

In any event, although Smith writes of conscience's ability "[to haunt the guilty](#)," "allow them neither quiet or repose," and "often drive them to to despair and distraction" (118), Antonio easily dismisses the notion of conscience merely by saying that he doesn't "feel" it within him, adding that even if he had "Twenty consciences" he would simply ignore such impotent entities.

I will go out on a limb and speculate that Smith may have maintained silence about his likely borrowing from Antonio because absolutely corrupted characters like Antonio make especially problematic Smith's argument for an impartial spectator that can regulate conduct apart from any appeal to transcendent moral grounding. In *The Tempest*, of course, Prospero's ability to thwart Antonio's murderous designs and to eventually forgive Antonio requires supernatural intervention and grace, both effected through the mysterious ministrations of Ariel. But what can Smith's impartial spectator do to

thoroughly corrupted characters such as the petty tyrant Antonio? We do well to consider both Thomas Hobbes's reminder: "[A man's conscience and his judgment is the same thing](#)," and, as the judgment, so also the conscience may be erroneous";<sup>[52]</sup> as well as Saint Paul's warning against those whose "conscience [is] seared with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2).

#### Endnotes

[49.] See Arlene Oseman, "The Machiavellian Prince in *The Tempest*," *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 22 (2010): 7-19.

[50.] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments; or, An Essay towards an Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves. To which is added, A Dissertation on the Origins of Languages. New Edition. With a biographical and critical Memoir of the Author, by Dugald Stewart* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853). <[/titles/2620](#)>.

[51.] Murray N. Rothbard, *Economic Thought before Adam Smith: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, vol. I (1995. Reprint: Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006), 442-43. <<https://mises.org/library/austrian-perspective-history-economic-thought>>.

[52.] Thomas Hobbes, *Hobbes's Leviathan reprinted from the edition of 1651 with an Essay by the Late W.G. Pogson Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909). <[/titles/869](#)>.

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## THE CORRUPTING EFFECTS OF GONZALO'S HYPOTHETICAL 'MAN OF SYSTEM

by David V. Urban

In light of Sarah Skwire's astute observation that Prospero acts like Adam Smith's "[man of system](#)" as described in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I would like to point out that *The Tempest* displays another man of system:

the well-meaning councillor to King Alonso, Gonzalo. We do well to consider the significance of a character who demonstrates the opposite of moral corruption advocating a naively problematic scheme of government.

Gonzalo's benevolence is made clear throughout the play. In his list of characters, Shakespeare describes Gonzalo as "an honest old councillor." Prospero tells Miranda that Gonzalo's efforts amid Antonio's usurpation of Milan saved Prospero's and Miranda's lives and provided them with both various necessities and Prospero's books ([L.i.159-170](#)). Indeed, Prospero seems to equate Gonzalo's goodness with "Providence divine" (159). Later, Ariel refers to the councillor as the one Prospero calls "the good old lord, Gonzalo" ([V.i.15](#)). Shortly thereafter, Prospero embraces Gonzalo, calling him "[noble friend](#)" (120).

Gonzalo's undeniably good character must be remembered when in Act II, scene i, Gonzalo waxes about how he would rule the island "[were I king on 't](#)" (148). His speech is interrupted and mocked by Sebastian and Antonio, who point out its absurdities:

*Gon.*

I' the commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
No occupation; all men idle, all;  
And women too, but innocent and pure;  
No sovereignty,—

*Seb.*

Yet he would be king on't.

*Ant.*

The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

*Gon.*

All things in common nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,  
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,  
Would I not have; but nature should bring  
forth,  
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,  
To feed my innocent people.

*Seb.*

No marrying 'mong his subjects?  
None, man; all idle; whores and knaves.

*Gon.*

I would with such perfection govern, sir,  
To excel the golden age

*Seb.*

Save his majesty!

*Ant.*

Long live Gonzalo! (150-72)

King Alonso wearily tells Gonzalo that he "[talk\[s\] nothing](#)" (173), and Lawrence E. Bowling employs understatement by writing that Gonzalo's "romantic commonwealth would not be practical."[\[53\]](#) Indeed, if we examine Gonzalo's plan more carefully, we may safely say that his highly prescriptive plan for his commonwealth would result in economic deprivation and martial vulnerability (in spite of his commonwealth's remote location), and it seems clear that the dangerously naive Gonzalo, who would be neither feared nor even loved once his plan inevitably failed, would be a sitting duck for the kind of usurpation his friend Prospero suffered 12 years earlier. Were I King Gonzalo's councillor, I would instruct him to read Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* I (focusing on matters of the division of labor and commerce) and [IV.vii.b \("Causes of the Prosperity of New Colonies,"](#) especially paragraphs 1-3);[\[54\]](#) John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.i.8-11 (on original sin, corruption, and depravity);[\[55\]](#) [Romans 3:9-18](#) (on human depravity); and,

with some misgivings, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, [chapter 19 \("a prince must avoid being contemned and hated"\).](#)[\[56\]](#)

Although Gonzalo's detailed outline of his hypothetical rule certainly smacks of Smith's description of "the man of system," it would be a mistake to suggest that, were Gonzalo to attain the kingship he speaks of, that he would fall into direct moral corruption. And we should observe, as Sebastian points out, that Gonzalo seems conflicted on the degree of power he would exert over his subjects. But were he able to effect the severe restrictions on commerce, agricultural development, industry, self-defense, and human relations that he outlines, his state would soon be in ruins and he would succeed in corrupting his resentful subjects. Such would be the unintended consequences of Gonzalo's proposed benevolent dictatorship and its unwise failure to address the painful realities of human nature.

#### Endnotes

[\[53.\]](#) Lawrence E. Bowling, "The Theme of Natural Order in *The Tempest*," *College English* 12.4 (1951): 205.

[\[54.\]](#) Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith, edited with an Introduction, Notes, Marginal Summary and an Enlarged Index by Edwin Cannan* (London: Methuen, 1904). Vol. 2. Part Second: Causes of the Prosperity of new Colonies <[/titles/119#lf0206-02\\_label\\_174](#)>.

[\[55.\]](#) John Calvin on original sin, corruption, and depravity (II.i.8-11) in John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846). 2 volumes in 1. .

[\[56.\]](#) Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 19 "A prince must avoid being contemned and hated" in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, tr. from the Italian, by Christian E. Detmold (Boston, J. R. Osgood and company, 1882). Vol. 2. <[/titles/775](#)>.

## CAN POWER IN THE RIGHT HANDS PREVENT TYRANNY?

by John E. Alvis

I'll comment briefly on Zuckert's last remarks on *The Winter's Tale*, introduce one more play not yet considered, then offer some final generalizations regarding Shakespeare and Acton.

Zuckert's speculations upon the sudden jealousy of Leontes I find a most plausible solution to the often noted problem of accounting for the abrupt alteration of the king toward his old friend. I think the generalization he applies regarding Shakespeare's modification of Acton's axiom is warranted by the tendency of our discussion. It does seem to me that Shakespeare, in Zuckert's words, "does not accept the thesis that it is the possession of power per se which corrupts[;] he seems to accept that possessing power can facilitate an urge to tyranny arising from motives inherently part of human selfhood." The human being prefers himself to all others, and yet, just as unavoidably, he wants to love and to be loved by others, or at least by one other. This, combined with Zuckert's remarks on Shakespeare's Theseus (pointing to this founder's understanding of that in human nature which dissociates self from self yet ever exists in tension with that which associates and causes us to desire freely to be loved), seems to underlie Shakespeare's address to the various issues posed by the use and abuse of political power.

We might do well to consider *Coriolanus* in connection with what I said in my last regarding *Julius Caesar*. I had said that in *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare depicts a ruler who seeks absolute power in Acton's sense of the phrase, i.e., power not accountable to any other political institution--"his word is law"--or, as I've mentioned, Shakespeare has his Caesar proclaim, "[The cause is in my will.](#)/That is enough to satisfy the Senate." (2.2.70-71 ) This speech defines absolute power as *arbitrary*, i.e., dependent upon will alone, therefore giving a license to a sovereign for willfulness. This indicates how the possession of unaccountable sovereignty corrupts absolutely, or tends

to do so. ("Tends" because we've noted Shakespeare may present absolute sovereigns who succeed in overcoming the tendency.) Only in God is there assurance of an identity between what is willed and what is good. I also noted that for Caesar to succeed in making this statement to be accepted by Rome is to destroy the republic--because the reason for there being a republic at all is to guard against any person's or group's having such power as to get away with saying what Shakespeare's Caesar has claimed for himself and has challenged his countrymen to accept.

But in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare has depicted the Roman republic in action, and, consequently, puts to the test the form of regime designed to prevent absolute power residing in the hands of anyone. So in that play we can assess the merits of a constitution designed to answer to Acton's desiderata for a means to prevent aggregations of power amounting to absolute. What do we discover?

The Rome of *Coriolanus* is so designed that the polity takes action through promulgating laws, not by issuing edicts from one man or several. Laws are general, rationally directed, and publicly manifest. These characteristics tend to militate against arbitrariness. Beyond that, two parties in cooperation are required to make a law. The Senate formulates the regulation after debate and deliberation. But that formulation does not have force of law unless or until it secures the approval of a popular assembly. Hence, the class of the few and wealthy must work together with the classes of the relatively poor but more numerous. The advantage of thus dividing authority in safeguarding against absolute power is obvious but it is not sufficient. Because the great danger ever threatening is that some man or some party will become sufficiently popular to control the assemblies and intimidate the Senate. This threat has one avenue through the tribunes who protect the rights of the people but also, as the play demonstrates, work upon the populace to control assemblies and through applying the pressure of crowds outside the prescribed assemblies. The protagonist of the play warns of this danger but to no avail. He goes the length of advertising his loathing of commoners partly because he perceives the danger of the

demagogue: the extremely popular figure who will rule without check upon his will by virtue of his ability to create majority sentiment at will. This will occur when a strong member of the senatorial class can overcome genteel snobbery—or appear to have—and flatter the common people. Interest contending against interest will prevent impulse and opportunity to coincide (to employ Madison’s language). Thus a certain kind and degree of class conflict is relied upon to secure freedom defined as liberation from such concentration of power as to be deemed absolute. Coriolanus’s refusal to court the commoners brings about his destruction. Yet Caesar combines the military and political prowess of his patrician class with willingness to cultivate, even to flatter, the common people. Caesar also exploits another circumstance that has resulted from Rome’s imperial expansion. The polity is no longer a city-state surrounded by hostile neighboring city-states. In the time of Coriolanus the continual threat to survival had greatly assisted in giving the contending classes a common cause while still allowing for class discrimination to protect from demagogues within the walls. With empire comes the all-but-irresistible opportunity for both classes to live together on other people’s productivity confiscated.



*Julius Caesar*

For Machiavelli, and likely for Hobbes, such an arrangement would seem to be acceptable. Is it also acceptable to Shakespeare? Does Shakespeare contemplate such a possibility in the foreign policy of Henry V? Another possibility—a monarchy that lives by rule of law and has its laws produced by a monarch who must, however, win the assent of a legislative body within which membership in one of its two parts is determined by election from a suffrage somewhat popular, somewhat propertied. Can a constitution of this sort manage to prevent absolute aggregations of power in any class or in a demagogue, or in an emperor? This line of inquiry might end with the question: however Shakespeare may diverge from Acton, does he provide guidance for avoiding what Acton would have us provide against?

Urban’s directing us to Adam Smith strikes me as a promising extension of our discussion. Would not such an extension lead to our asking what provides moral bearings for Smith’s candid “[spectator within the breast](#)” and further to ask whether the answer to that question would satisfy Prospero as well.

[Sonnet 94](#) is, as Skwire maintains, the most explicit statement by Shakespeare on the proper conduct of one who possesses power, and she is right to point out the resemblance of Prospero to that figure powerful, cold, yet evidently liable to corruption and otherwise unidentified. If we could surmise what it means to “rightly inherit heaven’s graces and husband nature’s riches from expense,” I suspect we would also perceive the answer to our question of why Prospero renounces his access to a power greater than that possessed by any other Shakespearean character. One possibility of heaven’s riches is man’s freedom to choose his way of life. The expense of that freedom would then consist in choosing what annuls the freedom of other beings equally endowed with that liberty distinguishing the species. Prospero’s continued employment of his power, even though directed to good ends, would annul the freedom of those subject to his rule. Prospero may reason that if God himself has chosen not thus to exercise his absolute power even to ensure the good, it does not behoove one

inferior to God to choose to rule in a manner which God has declined.

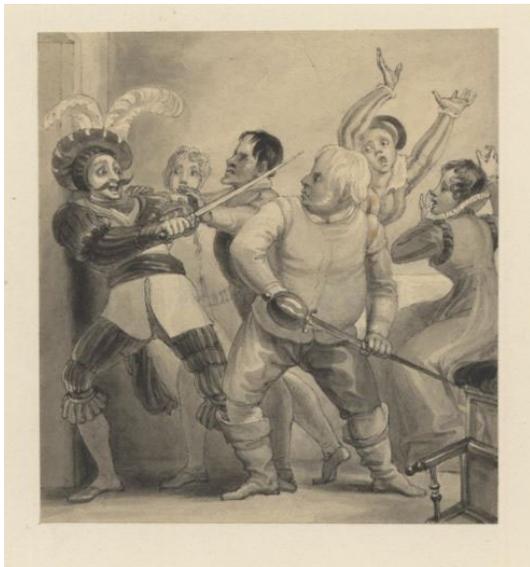
Do we arrive at the net conclusion that power is insufficient to assure personal happiness or for securing that common good which is the well-being of a nation, but that some power in the right hands on the right occasions is indispensable for preventing tyrants or for escaping tyranny once it has arisen? What would be the equivalent within the soul of an individual for a republic in the political order?

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## HENRY V: CORRUPT BEYOND THE MACHIAVELLIAN NORM?

by David V. Urban

In my final post I will discuss the extent to which [Shakespeare's Henry V](#) corrupts himself in the course of his pursuit of conquest over the French. Keeping in view Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince*, I will argue that Henry corrupts himself by following a Machiavellian strategy to increase his power even as he consciously portrays himself as a devoutly Christian ruler.



*Scene from Henry V*

Shakespeare's Chorus implicitly draws our attention to Erasmus when it calls Henry "[the mirror of all Christian kings](#)" (II.0.6). But early in *Henry V*, Henry exploits Christianity in ways that justify an unjust war and shifts the blame upon others even as he maintains the appearance of innocence. Speaking to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry says,

[My learned lord, we pray you to proceed,](#)

And justly and religiously unfold

Why the law Salique that they have in France  
Or should, or should not, bar us in our claim.

And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,  
That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your  
reading,

Or nicely charge your understanding soul  
With opening titles miscreate, whose right  
Suits not in native colours with the truth;

For God doth know how many now in health  
Shall drop their blood in approbation

Of what your reverence shall incite us to.

Therefore take heed how you impawn our  
person,

How you awake the sleeping sword of war:

We charge you in the name of God, take heed;

For never two such kingdoms did contend  
Without much fall of blood; whose guiltless  
drops

Are every one a woe, a sore complaint,

'Gainst him whose wrongs give edge unto the  
swords

That make such waste in brief mortality.

Under this conjuration speak, my lord,

And we will hear, note, and believe in heart,

That what you speak is in your conscience  
wash'd

As pure as sin with baptism.

(I.i.9-32)

As R. V. Young has noted, Henry's words initially seem in line with Erasmus's deep concerns about war. Erasmus declares that a prince "will never be more hesitant or more circumspect than in starting a war" because "war always brings about the wreck of everything

good, and the tide of war overflows with everything the worst."<sup>[57]</sup> But Young then states that the seeming piety of Henry's speech is undercut by the fact that Shakespeare has already informed readers, through the mouth of Canterbury, that the archbishop has earlier offered Henry an unprecedented donation from the Church should Henry declare war (see [Li.75-81](#)). "Upon inspection," writes Young, Henry's speech "turns out to be a piece of cynical manipulation by which a king who has already made up his mind about what he wants to do pressures corrupt clergymen to furnish a rationalization--indeed take moral responsibility--for a war of doubtful legitimacy."<sup>[58]</sup> As I noted in "Power and Corruption in Shakespeare's Plays," Canterbury publically absolves Henry's conscience of blame, declaring, "[The sin be upon my head, dread sovereign](#)" (I.ii.97).<sup>[59]</sup> But Canterbury's deflection of blame to himself directly contradicts Erasmus's teaching. Writing about the extreme carnage of war, Erasmus states that a ruler should ask himself, "Shall I alone be the cause of so much woe? ... shall all this be laid at my door?"<sup>[60]</sup> Henry and the Archbishop may employ their rhetorical ruse, but it does not absolve Henry; rather, it implicates Canterbury in Henry's guilt.

As various scholars have noted, Henry's decision to pursue war with France is highly Machiavellian in nature. It goes without saying that Henry follows Machiavelli's advice that a ruler "[should seem to be merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright](#)" even as he trains himself "to change to the opposite" "when occasion requires it." (*The Prince*, chap. 18.) Moreover, Avery Plaw notes that in *The Prince*, Machiavelli commends Ferdinand of Aragon, who gained fame as an exemplary Christian king by attacking Grenada, an "[undertaking that was the very foundation of his greatness](#)" and which was funded by "[t]he money of the Church." (*The Prince*, chap. 21.)<sup>[61]</sup> Plaw comments, "By relentlessly pursuing a war of conquest, Harry cynically fulfills his dying father's Machiavellian advice to him, to "[busy giddy minds / with foreign quarrels](#)" (2 *Henry IV*, IV.v.213-14). Plaw also notes that while Harry's father "was driven by his guilty conscience to talk endlessly about a crusade to the Holy Land, Harry sets his sights on the more practical target of France."<sup>[62]</sup>

Plaw does not mention, however, that both Henry IV's anticipated crusade and Ferdinand's actual were against Muslim enemies, whereas Henry V's battle was against a fellow Christian nation. When we consider this crucial detail, the relationship between Canterbury and Henry V parallels the relationship described in Dante's *Inferno* between the false counselor Guido da Montefeltro and the corrupt Pope Boniface VIII. The damned Franciscan Guido relates that Boniface fought neither "[Saracens or Jews / For Christian all were enemies of his](#)" (Dante, *Inferno*, canto XXVII); Guido is damned for providing Boniface counsel to act treacherously against the Colonna family--does Shakespeare expect any less divine retribution for Canterbury's deceptive use of [Numbers 27:8](#) (see [Henry V I.ii.99-100](#))? Does Henry V resemble Dante's despised Boniface VIII even more than he resembles Ferdinand of Aragon? Is it possible that Shakespeare presents Henry V as even more problematic than Machiavelli's model prince?

In "Power and Corruption in Shakespeare's Plays," I suggested that Henry's nagging guilt concerning Richard III's usurpation and his pious concern for Richard's soul relieves him from the charge of absolute corruption.<sup>[63]</sup> Plaw is not so charitable toward Harry. Plaw writes that Henry "is trying to buy forgiveness without real penitence, which would entail at very least public recognition of [his father's] crime, if not renunciation of his ill-gotten position. Otherwise, he is just 'imploring pardon,' not repenting."<sup>[64]</sup> We can speculate what Henry's conscience might feel later, in the wake of his own war crimes. Will he be plagued by the "pangs of an affrighted conscience," what Adam Smith calls "[the daemons, the avenging furies](#), which, in this life, haunt the guilty, which allow them neither quiet nor repose, which often drive them to despair and to distraction"?"<sup>[65]</sup>

As noted above, Shakespeare's Chorus calls Henry "the mirror of all Christian kings," but the Chorus also undercuts Henry's achievements in the play's epilogue, noting that his conquest of France was soon after lost. Sarah Skwire rightly points to the difficulty in

ascertaining Shakespeare's position on the various conflicts we have discussed, but I will speculate nonetheless. In light of the bloody consequences of Henry's unjust war against fellow Christians, is Shakespeare suggesting a corruption of Henry's character that goes far beyond what the Chorus initially seems to indicate? Let us remember the Chorus's words' context. The Chorus reports that the youths and men of England are following "[the mirror of all Christian kings](#)" (see II.0.1-7). We may easily argue that the perception of Henry as said "mirror" is on the part of those who follow him--not on the part of the Chorus or Shakespeare himself. We should also consider different definitions of the word "mirror." The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes the Chorus's above phrase as an example of the definition "a model of excellence; a paragon."[\[66\]](#) But the next definition of "mirror" is "a person or thing embodying something to be avoided; an example, a warning."[\[67\]](#) Does Shakespeare in fact portray Henry as so thoroughly corrupted that he ought to be viewed through the lens of the latter definition?

### Endnotes

[\[57.\]](#) Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, ed. Lisa Jaradine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 102. Young cites a different passage.

[\[58.\]](#) R. V. Young, "Shakespeare's History Plays and the Erasmian Catholic Priest," *Ben Jonson Journal* 7 (2000): 106.

[\[59.\]](#) See David Urban, "Power and Corruption in Shakespeare's Plays," par. 7.

[\[60.\]](#) Erasmus, 106.

[\[61.\]](#) Avery Plaw, "Prince Harry: Shakespeare's Critique of Machiavelli," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 33.1 (2005): 23-24.

[\[62.\]](#) Plaw, 23.

[\[63.\]](#) Urban, "Power and Corruption in Shakespeare's Plays," par. 8.

[\[64.\]](#) Plaw, 38.

[\[65.\]](#) Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* III.2.9 (page 118 of Liberty Fund edition).

[\[66.\]](#) "Mirror," definition 1b, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

[\[67.\]](#) "Mirror," definition 2, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

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