



# The Republic in Shakespeare: in special reference to Hamlet and Prospero

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*Abstract : Nicholas Udall's 'Res publica' and Sir Thomas Smith's 'Commonweal' revived in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus in 1590 when he makes a conspicuous effort to show that extremes of government are less desirable than a balanced and mixed constitution as it makes all the estates within society co-operate it. In fact, Shakespeare's treatment of republication ideas was inflected with political discourse and ongoing crisis of succession, as Hamlet's pursuit of self-rule with unresolved tensions between monarchical rule and republican culture. Here Shakespeare's choice to dramatize the Amleth myth establishes a republican framework. On the other hand, Prospero pursues a political project which parodies the top heavy social structure of late Renaissance despotism. These are some perspectives which I wish to explore in this paper regarding Hamlet and Tempest with political contexts and classical republican ideas which Shakespeare had drawn on in his works.*

**IndexTerms** – res publica, politicization monarchical rule, absolutist ideology

## INTRODUCTION

*The good old cause or the common cause*, are vague terms; yet they are also in effect translations of Latin res publica and into English not republic but commonwealth. English word commonwealth is a calque of res publica, and its use in English is closer to how the Romans used the term res publica. With the passage of time, the term comes from the greek word *politeia*, which in English is thus known as 'The Republic'- a form of government, polity or regime. Aristotle's 'Politics' discusses various forms of government. One form Aristotle named *politeia* as one of the ideal forms of government. J.G.A Pocock argued that the republic was an ideology with a history and principles distinct from liberalism. Bruni and Machiavelli used the term to describe the states of Northern Italy, which were not monarchies. By the time in 'The Prince', Machiavelli had decided to refer to both aristocracies and democracies as republics. Plato and Aristotle also saw three types of government: democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. In this way, mixed government was considered ideal. First Plato and Aristotle, and then Polybius and Cicero, developed the notion that the ideal republic is a mixture of these three forms of government. The writers of the Renaissance embraced this notion.

Renaissance scholars used the ideas of ancient world to advance their view of an ideal government. Thus the republicanism developed during the Renaissance is known as 'classical republicanism' or 'civic humanism'. This ideology is based on the Roman Republic and the city states of ancient Greece and focuses on ideals such as civic virtue, rule of law, and mixed government. Renaissance authors that spoke highly of republics were rarely critical of monarchies, while Niccolo Machiavelli's 'Discourses on Livy'(1531) is the period's key work on republics. He also wrote 'The Prince' on how best to run monarchy. In fact, when Englishmen said that England was a commonwealth, they often meant that it had a good form of monarchy; for them a commonwealth was not the antithesis of monarchy, but was incompatible with tyranny,

In the sixteenth century, England was becoming a powerful nation under its great and clever queen Elizabeth I. English explorers and colonists crossed seas to search strange new worlds, London was bustling, exciting center of commerce, full of travellers from abroad, and though many Europeans still looked down on English culture, they admitted that London's stages boasted some of the best plays and actors to be found. Travellers from all over admired the dramas of Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, and the new name on the scene William Shakespeare. The recovery of ancient historical texts fostered a view of history and emergence of territorial and national state, which gave rise to a clear perception of the state or the nation as the unit of historical development. People read and discussed the works of George Buchanan, the Scottish thinker who was a great admirer of the Venetian Republic, Tacitus, Sallust and Suetonius (who wrote histories of Rome), Lucan whose *Pharsalia* was work against tyrants and arguably a republican classic, Cicero, especially his 'De Officiis' and 'De Amecitia', the Greek author Herodian, Polybius and other writers advocating forms of republicanism.

In fact, the politicization of history was primarily Renaissance phenomenon. Integral to the politicization of history and among the most widely held historical theories in the Renaissance, this concept asserted that nations and government exhibit a process of birth, flourishing and decline, a process that does not cease upon completion but recurs again and again. In addition to growing and declining, types of government tended to change into others, monarchy might pass into oligarchy, for instance, or oligarchy into democracy. These two theories- the cyclical and that of constitutional change-were utilized, often in tandem, by the Renaissance writers to explicate and assess historical events. While republicanism lived on enfeebled in practice, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it conquered new ground intellectually but not thoroughly. According to Norbrook:

Historians of political thought have remarked on the absence of explicit republican theory in England before the 1650s; they have paid less attention to the many situations in which republican political practice was actively imagined<sup>1</sup>.

In such a phase, that we might call imaginative and linguistic; writers from More and Sidney to Shakespeare and Jonson conduct political debate through the dramatization and publication of the classics.

Nonetheless, republicanism in Shakespeare's time was so contradictory and difficult to pin down and Shakespeare as a systematic thinker was just as contradictory and just as difficult to pin down. Andrew Hadfield also admits that Shakespeare is 'highly politicised and radical thinker interested in republicanism'<sup>2</sup>, infact, writing within a culture of political arguments, for a theatre which had a tendency to wriggle free of ideology formation. And he was not the only one. Marlowe, Jonson, Spenser, Sidney and Chapman display a marked interest in republic government, though none as intensely as Shakespeare who narrates more of the republican story than any other dramatist working in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Shakespeare was as preoccupied with republican ideas as he was with royalty. Shakespeare's plays do not pursue a republican line; rather the plays' political complexity derive at least in part from both its immediate political contexts and Shakespeare's immersion in the classical republican writing.

Particularly, Shakespeare's treatment of Roman material shows distinct evidence of republican learning. His early Roman tragedy 'Titus Andronicus' (1590) ends with the empire tottering on its last legs, the Goths already within Rome's gates. His great narrative poem 'Lucrece' (1594) returns to much earlier moment of Roman political history, when a rape led to the banishment of the last Roman king and the birth of republicanism. Shakespeare's English contemporaries, who were well-versed in ancient Greek and Roman history, probably detected parallels between Julius Caesar's portrayal of Rome's shift from republicanism to imperialism and their own country's trend toward consolidated monarchical power.

Hamlet was written in London in 1600-1 when William Shakespeare, a successful playwright and actor in a leading company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was in mid-thirties. Shakespeare's company had recently (1599) established itself in a rebuilt theatre, the Globe. The tension between the declining aristocratic tradition, emergent capitalism and Post-reformation, religious and intellectual turmoil characterized Shakespeare's London. Though Elizabeth's reign was one of the most secure known by the English in hundred of years. But her throne came under attack from Roman Catholic plots to replace Protestant monarch with a catholic. Elizabeth's own favorite, the Earl of Essex rebelled in 1601, intending to replace

the Queen's secretary of state, Sir Robert Cecil, with a group of young aristocrats. His plan failed. But even more damaging attacks on the idea of monarchy came from loyal puritans. Radicals like Peter Wentworth and John Field wanted democracy and called for liberty, freedom and enfranchisement. Queen Elizabeth had no heirs to follow her on the throne. In 1599, when she was ill, people feared that civil war and religious struggle would be the only way the question of her succession could be answered.

Although Shakespeare was writing about Rome, he was also posing questions about his own time. Who is fit to take this authority away? Is authority justified by legal or divine right? Can rebellion against authority ever be justified?

The same tension emerges in the power, energy and complexity of his plays. The conflict between aristocratic honor-codes and the rule of law; competing ideas about the nature of monarchy; the cultural function of a commercial theatre; the status of women; and new conceptions of mental illness. These elements show the conflict between the mediaeval and the modern in Hamlet. The stage avenger was often a figure whose mission set him beyond the margins of correct social conduct, but that mission also dramatized a political dilemma. This gave rise to many questions: What was an aggrieved party to do when it was the state, in the form of the monarch, who had committed the crime? Claudius is Hamlet's king but also his father's murderer, or should the avenger leave all to divine Providence?

Hamlet was created amidst these particular pressures and anxieties of Shakespeare's time. His introspective speeches on death and his puzzling inability to avenge the murder of his father reflect the hopes and fears of every modern alienated male teenager. However, his actions were shaped by England reformed protestant sensibilities, and the consonant fears concerning salvation and the afterlife. Hamlet is an individual who is increasingly alone in an alien political world as the play proceeds. To Ophelia he rejects, Horatio disappears for a long section of the play; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he welcomes as student companions turn out to be spies.

Hamlet's consciousness of his slavery implies a desire for freedom, although he would not seem to be the most likely exponent of republican liberty. It is important, however to recall that the republican ideal of self-rule, the notion that a city and its citizens could be rulers unto themselves, drew upon the broader ambition in mediaeval and Renaissance moral philosophy that each individual should strive to be ruler of his or her self. This moral ambition that each person should achieve self-rule was not specifically republican although it nourished republican political thought. Hamlet expresses no desire for republican rule although he condemns tyranny, but his pursuit of self-rule, particularly in the context of perceived corruption, was symptomatic of the unresolved tensions between monarchical rule and republican culture. Moreover, the latent republicanism in Hamlet's struggle against self-enslavement sheds greater light on Shakespeare's choice to dramatise Amleth myth. In the history of the Danes, Amleth's father king Horwendil of Denmark is killed by his brother Feng. Feng subsequently marries Gerutha who is Horwendil's widow and Amleth's mother. Amleth secretly vows to take revenge on Feng. It also resembles Livy's legend of Lucius Junius Brutus who liberated Rome from the kings. In Livy's Roman history, Brutus, son of Tarquinia, the sister-and possibly also the wife of Tarquino the Proud, who had usurped the reign of Servius Tullius drives the king from Rome. In commenting the similarities between Saxo and Livy, Gollancz says:

It is clear from this, that however much the Hamlet story may have already resembled the Brutus story before it appearance in Danish History, Saxo must have recognized the kinship of the two stories, and added to their common traits. These points of contact, however, belong only to the earlier career of Hamlet, as narrated in Saxo's Third Book. An ingenious theorist has even gone so far as to maintain that the Hamlet story is nothing more than a Northern transformation of the Roman Brutus saga.<sup>3</sup>

In Hamlet, Shakespeare chose to retain the comparison between Rome before and after the death of Julius Caesar. For this reason, Hadfield argues that Hamlet ‘stands as a distinctly republican play’<sup>4</sup> which engages with the republican response to tyrannical rule which is permeated by Tacitean pessimism as there is no hope for reform to consider what should be done when confronted by tyranny. In fact, the distinction between the Roman republic and empire is made in order to advance the nostalgia for a golden age which so frequently accompanied the Tacitean view of politics. In fact, Shakespeare was not trying to present republican dilemma for action to his audience: he was like Boccacini, ‘picking his amidst the ruins of the Republic tradition.’<sup>5</sup> Reformation also prepared the reception of Tacitus and Seneca in a further way: namely, through an insistence upon the inherent sinfulness and misery of man.

Hamlet follows this transition from the optimistic emphasis upon the dignity of man in the early Renaissance to the misery of man in the post-reformation Renaissance, making an ironic speech on the dignity of man, ‘What a piece of work is man’, in which he appeals to the commonplaces of the dignity of man genre- noble in reason’, ‘infinite in faculty’, ‘in apprehension like god’- only to dismiss all of these qualities as ‘ quintessence of dust’ and to conclude ‘man delights not me’<sup>6</sup>

Hamlet does not exclude himself from the rot that is Denmark. His discovery of lust and treachery begets his profound disillusionment with human nature, he tells Ophelia that he himself as a representative of human kind, ‘proud, revengeful, and ambitious, with more offences at my back than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven’, he continues, ‘we are arrant knaves; believe none of us’ (3.1.126-29). He later confirmed that he could do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on’ (3.3.361-2). Before speaking with his mother he must persuade himself, ‘let not ever the soul of Nero enter this firm bosom?’(3.3.385-86). According to Tacitus account, to which Shakespeare is referring, Nero had his mother Agrippian stabbed to death, Hamlet steps back from this extreme ‘I will speak draggers to her but use none?’ (3.3.366).

Prospero, in ‘The Tempest’, represents the subject of political philosophy, in fact, the tension between philosophy and politics, wisdom and power. While the conflict between politics and philosophy has many dimensions, the critical question can be stated as: how does a regime combine both wisdom and power when the wise are disinclined to rule and the rulers are disinclined to consult the wise? On the one hand , there is the classical position represented by the image of Plato’s ‘Philosopher king’, which honours the philosophical or contemplative life above the political, and which views the resolution of the conflict between them primarily in the chance or fortune that would elevate a philosopher to political power. In contrast, the modern position, represented by the image of Machiavelli’s Prince, honours the political life as the highest way of life, and seeks to resolve the conflict between politics and philosophy by reducing the intelligence and energy of the philosophic life to the relief of man’s necessitous estate. Even the allusions of Machiavelli begin with the title of the play’ The Tempest’, rather than, say ‘Prospero’s island’.

Prospero is a political archetype created during the reign of James. James was the first English monarch to propound aggressively and unequivocally the concept of the divine right of kings. Prospero is a god on the island just as the idealized James was the little god ruling over English island. Prospero, the legitimate yet deposed Duke of Milan, faces a challenge typically political. Banished from Milan to an island of indeterminate place, Prospero is ruling a ghostly state, its subjects are his daughters and two servants, one indentured for a term, the other apparently enslaved, for life. Once populated by Alonzo’s subjects, Prospero’s island does become the site of kind of rule, however, obscure. His government is mysterious, its effects are unaccountable, and its means verge on the sinister. Without a court, he lacks counsellors, at least of a usual kind. Towards Ariel, the airy spirit thirsting for freedom, Prospero is strict and friendly, praising

and blaming at the proper time. Towards Caliban he is the most complete oriental despot. Caliban is the English slave of the monarch's absolutist practices.

The storm of *The Tempest* celebrates the vanity of art-Prospero's political art and Shakespeare's theatrical art. The storm Prospero creates is specifically designed to give the men of sin the occasion to consider their misdeeds. Through his potent knowledge and the 'rarer action'<sup>7</sup> of substituting clemency for vengeance, Prospero achieves civilizing effects for which James himself was often praised. Sun-like Prospero melts the 'darkness' and 'ignorant fumes' ( 5.1.66) from the minds of the erring royal party, just as James dispelled the supposed mists enveloping the fearful subjects of dying queen. Prospero does not lose his humanity, though he is privy to omnipotent arts and finds his enemies in his grasp; the triumph of his magnanimity is, therefore, all the more resplendent.

Prospero is highly allusive exemplar of the Renaissance allegorical tradition, a tradition marked by free association of symbols, iconographic imagery, and eclecticism rather than by rigorously extended philosophical or poetic architecture. The significance of each level invariably reflects back on Prospero. Prospero's titular functions are numerous. He is a father, a governor of men and spirits, a learned humanist and mage, a semi-divine figure, and an authorial persona. He is the product of a typical Renaissance fusion of realms, genres, and influences, of an intentional authorial confusion of perspectives, and of a confusion that derives from the play's sheer inclusiveness.

In fact, in the English context the act of representing a republican culture was itself a progressive gesture and Shakespeare's commitment throughout his corpus to aristocratic rule in general, and monarchical power in particular, resulted from the combined influence of absolutist ideology, Renaissance dramatic theory and practice, and the institutional proximity of crown and theatre in the nation's capital. Hamlet portrays the heroics defeat of the finest representatives of the aristocracy by those other members of their class who embody the more typical and despicable features of power. Prospero represents naïve rulers lose out to ambitions and savvy rivals concerned only with securing power.

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