

War and Political Ambivalence in the Roman Tragedies of Shakespeare

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Abstract: War and politics are the main concepts in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. Apart from their dramatic appeal, they provide a different culture and cultural forms of ancient Rome. This article draws on a range of literary, theatre, academic and professional journal sources with a view to exploring the portrayal of Shakespeare and his Roman tragedies in relation to war and politics. The exploration is timely and very much pertaining to bring out their relevance in modern context. The study has focused on the political and military culture of ancient Rome particularly from historical perspective of Roman Republic and Roman Empire. Through explorative reading and individual interviews, the researcher will provide critical insights on war; discover new aspects of war; and analyze the concept of war used by Shakespeare in his Roman plays. Content analysis, textual analysis and reading method have also been incorporated as data collection methods for the study.

Introduction

"War is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural forms" (Keegan, 1994). Politics, conflicts and war are the main themes in the Roman tragedies such as Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus and Titus Andronicus. These Roman tragedies of William Shakespeare are about power, plot and politics having the rise and fall in the main characters, rapid movement in action and suspense in the thematic progression. The protagonists of these plays fight for glory, and they had to defend themselves and their followers from the onslaught of their enemies, even if it meant to adopt unscrupulous means. So, the treatment of war has a universal appeal of the endless struggles against all kinds of oddities, irregularities and illegal activities that break the order of the society. The central event of the play Julius Caesar is the assassination of Julius Caesar at the peak of his most powerful and successful position. The political decision making process of Brutus and his decision to commit a murder after Caesar's death, has a strong appeal in the real sense of political arena. Unlike other tragedies, where war is a medium in the fulfillment of the ambitions the tragic heroes cherished in their heart, *"Antony and Cleopatra"* portrays the idea that even infatuation or individual choice may lead to a war and Roman generals are vulnerable to this. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare did not give much attention in displaying personal valour in battle field but highlighted secret plotting, retreating, surrendering to situational demand and intrigues making treaties sensing own weakness and suicidal tendency. Coriolanus, like other ambitious warriors in Shakespeare's tragic plays, was brought with only one purpose in life, the acquisition of glory. However, it establishes that arrogance and autocratic power cannot draw sympathy from the commoners and wars bring suffering to the innocent. Another great point in this play is, what is virtue in war is a vice in peace, and the time alters its interpretation accordingly. The Roman general, Titus Andronicus, returns victorious and brings home captive the beautiful Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her three sons. The eldest son of Tamora is chosen to be sacrificed. Even after endless pleas of Tamora, Titus, however, saw the sacrifice as both a patriotic and religious duty and unleashes a cycle of violent retribution of rape, mutilation and cannibalism, which continues unabated until the final bloody scenes of the play.

The physical description of the war in the Roman plays of Shakespeare—the Armoury, the battle grounds, the warfare skills—might be time-bound considering stage performance but have long-range implications of the intelligence in accumulating the components and the tactics are still relevant in modern warfare. The problems before the rulers in Shakespeare's Roman plays is that they have come to power as power hungry generals rather than monarchs, often adopting dishonest and crooked means. Also they lacked intellect in the diplomatic arts, and are often subject to dirty politics and uncontrolled ambition. In this study an effort has been taken to analyze the relevant texts and bring out the concept of politics and war through close textual reading. The study will also endeavor to analyze the themes of war and politics from a historical perspective.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of this study is to find out justification, motives, tactics and strategies of the wars and political ambivalence used in William Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. The specific objective is to study the Roman tragedies of Shakespeare and analyze the common factors, politics, motives, goals, tactics, strategies and the entire nature of the wars. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore critical insights and bring out their relevance in the present context.

Research Methodology

The research method will encompass textual analysis, literature review, content analysis, document analysis and semi-structured interview. Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is followed with a view to interpreting the text to find out the sense or meaning out of it. A literature review can elaborately be explained as a more or less systematic method of collecting and synthesizing previous research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Content analysis is a broadly used qualitative research technique to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data. Document analysis is a social research method and is an important research tool in its own right, and is an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation, the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions (Sage Pub).

Problem Statement

Shakespeare used the concept of War and politics in his Roman plays but the point of concern is how far they are commensurate with the modern context. The strategies, tactics, principles of war, nature of weapons and reasons for war and their consequences are to be determined from the background situations or context of politics and conflicts and wars used in those plays. In ancient Rome, innumerable wars and battles like Battle of Philippi, Battle of Actium, Battle of Pharsalus and Gallic Wars were fought but very little tactics, nature of weapons, nature of strategies and the overall background politics could be known to the intelligentsia of those battles and wars.

Literature Review

Out of Shakespeare's four Roman tragedies, Titus Andronicus is clearly the odd one out. It is a gruesome Senecan tragedy, which has hardly any grounds in history (Vos, 2010). But other three tragedies, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus are history plays. All these three plays are closely based on North's translation of Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Coriolanus depicts the conflict between republicanism and absolutism and this is continued in Julius Caesar. Antony and Cleopatra is different from two other different plays in which it focuses much on the personal tragedy of the lovers but it also deals with the power struggle which directly results from the murder of Julius Caesar. All these three tragedies represent fierce conflicts and reflect how personal lives are involved with and become victims in the process of political ambivalence.

Henn (1958) comments that Shakespeare's Military World elsewhere. The first chapter deals with war as a 'musical harmony', and stresses both the importance of sound in the production of battle scenes and (by inference) what the modern audience misses through ignorance of the conventions and commands of trumpet and drum. Under the title of 'Major Discords' Professor Jorgensen continues his musical image, to discuss at some length the various conflicts arising out of the problem of joint

command, and from rivalries between subordinates. Indeed the problems of divided command were as urgent, and as potentially catastrophic, in Elizabethan military history as they were in the Second World War, or today. Draper (1957) says that the plan of the work, indeed, leaves something to be desired; for it seems to make the book, not a monograph as the title implies, but a series of essays on phases of Shakespeare's military background. Professor Jorgensen does not attempt a general summary of these studies and brings together a considerable amount of previous scholarship; but the book as a whole hardly fulfills the promise of its title. Rene (1991) explains that the theater deals with human conflict. Shakespeare's view on conflict is rather paradoxical. In Shakespeare, the characters are in conflict not because of their differences, but the characters disagree because they agree too much. Brutus did not hate Caesar, but his love and appreciation for Caesar made Him consider Caesar as an incomparable guide, an unsurpassable teacher, as well as the unbeatable champion and therefore. an insurmountable obstacle. No one can hope to equal him and that is exactly what Brutus craved for. Philip (2015) says Shakespeare drew on his audience's understanding of the political structure of Rome around the time of Caesar. Warped by the events of the civil wars in the generation before Caesar's rise to power, the Roman political structure had turned away from the individualized politics of the early Republic toward a kind of institutionalized factionalism.

Jorgensen (1949) in his paper tried to show that Shakespeare drew principally upon the military situation of his own era and country in reshaping the Plutarchan story. In this reshaping, Coriolanus emerges as a soldier whose life comprises two significantly related phases: the soldier at war and the soldier in civil life - the latter being given central importance in Shakespeare than given by Plutarch. The limited nature of Coriolanus' military genius is dramatically evident in the battle scenes. His simple, ardent pugnacity is indicated when raged Coriolanus enters the gates of Corioles without support, befits an adventurer rather than a general. Plutarch's Coriolanus, in fact, does not enter the city alone. And it is not unlikely that in thus enhancing the daring of his hero, Shakespeare was recognizing and exploiting Coriolanus' resemblance to Elizabethan military adventurers of Essex and Grenville's daring commands. According to Mac Callum, Coriolanus is not merely a general with strategic skill; "he has the forethought and insight of a statesman, at any rate in matters of foreign and military policy." And Hardin Craig has recently written: "Volumnia has brought up her son in a highly specialized way. She has quite definitely brought him up to be a soldier, a thing which means in chivalric opinion that he has been reared in pure nobility.... She chose to breed in him absolute knightliness and pure idealism." Mac Callum's praise, as will later appear, is deserved more by Plutarch's than by Shakespeare's hero. Professor Craig's remarks raise the important question of whether Coriolanus, brought up as a soldier, may serve as an example of "absolute knightliness." For his limitations, whatever may have been Volumnia's efforts, are persuasively described by J.E. Phillips: "He is 'the arm our soldier.' There is no evidence . . . that his celebrated.

Daniel Derrin (2018) interrogates Shakespeare's invitation to laugh in the context of war. Previous critical accounts have offered too simple a view: that laughter undercuts military ideals. Instead, this article draws on the Aristotelian description of laughable 'deformity' and Plato's description of laughable ignorance in order to characterize Shakespeare's laughter in the context of war more carefully as an expression of 'relative painlessness'. Wyndham Lewis is perhaps the only critic who did not hesitate to comment on Shakespeare's political ideals expressed in his plays. Lewis as a pioneer termed Shakespeare a complete man who looked into social sensibility and kept a remarkable signature in political and social awareness for the people (Stockton, 1996). According to Utpal Dutt (2015) Jesus, Prometheus and Hamlet were great warriors. They were born to change society. Jesus was the symbol of justice. All the heroes in Shakespeare's plays are to some extent warriors, some fought in the battlefield, some worked as social reformers.

David (1978) in the article Rape and Revenge in "Titus Andronicus" says that the play opens with a choreographed confrontation of opposites, which provides a highly formal structure to contain potential violence. The balanced entrance of opposing forces establishes a careful visual patterning which dramatizes the conflict between the two Roman brothers. Mike (2008) Compared and contrasted Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus and Martin McDonagh's The Lieutenant of Inish more and found that the most obvious similarities are that -they are extraordinarily bloody and violent, both having an 'eye-for-an-eye' principle of vengeance, and both having central characters driven by

militaristic codes of honour, which have patriotic and religious elements to them. Royster (2000) has shown whiteness in the foreground in an attempt to dismantle a black/white binary. He explores the denaturalization of whiteness in *Titus Andronicus* and its construction along an unstable continuum of racial identities. Though Aaron's adulterous lover, Tamora, has attracted much less attention, the racial issues she raises are no less interesting. Aaron is black and, as an outsider, is barbarous in Roman eyes. But, just as important, Tamora's susceptibility to Aaron provides a multihued palette of barbarism.

Knights (1953) try to show how Shakespeare, without solving any "problems" for us, can nourish our thinking about the perennial issues of politics. Julius Caesar and Coriolanus though have an overt political content, but in the manner of their working they are representatives of a wide range of literature.

Jagendorf (1990) has expressed that political thinking and, consequently, writing about politics have traditionally made use of certain master tropes that remain constant in principle even when the nature and content of political discourse change. Although Coriolanus may be one of Shakespeare's most politically naïve characters, he is the protagonist of a play that is hugely, indeed grotesquely, political. David (1971) mentions that in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* contains a sustained attempt to impose the analogy of the body politic on a political situation. The initial difficulty in approaching Coriolanus has been deciding whether the play is essentially political—perhaps a demonstration of the need for civic order—or personal—the exhibition of the fall of a noble but deeply flawed hero. The "chivalric opinion" to which Professor Craig refers was at one time influential in English military life and had many reflections in dramatic literature. Upon Coriolanus' return from the Volscian war, he begins his brief political career. It is with reluctance that he stands for consul, not because of any profound analysis of his own capabilities, but because of an intuitive distrust of any way of life other than his own—warfare. This distrust is partially responsible for his disinclination to deal intimately with the people and their problems. Plutarch's Coriolanus shows his wounds to the citizens as a matter of course.

Shakespeare possibly could not conceive of Coriolanus, a genuinely proud man, demeaning himself to the cheap displays of Ancient Pistol. Plutarch's Coriolanus, though an aristocratic ruffian, is capable of "gentle words." He does not need his mother's help in devising the right utterance, and, unlike Shakespeare's hero, he requires no urging to present himself for trial. He is credited with an "eloquent tongue," and for this reason Aufidius does not wish him to speak before the Volscians in his own defence.⁴² Plutarch's hero thus reveals occasional characteristics which, to the Elizabethans, befitted a gentleman-warrior. Finally, Shakespeare altered the circumstances of Coriolanus' death so as to make the catastrophe result from his simple and violent nature. Plutarch's hero is slain before he has a chance to speak in his defence. In Shakespeare's version he is allowed to speak, and "gentle words" might save his life. But he is taunted by Aufidius so that by an outburst he will alienate popular sympathy. There is thus a dramatic fitness in Shakespeare's conception of the way in which his hero should die.

Hunt (1991) shows despite the importance of contrariety for the design of Coriolanus, the principle of complementarity most accurately illuminates the relationship of the play's warriors. Writers like Grierson and Spencer have seen Shakespeare as completely apathetic to the political issues which the death of Caesar presented. Ernest Schanzer has more recently argued, in fact, that Shakespeare was deliberately ambiguous in his portrait of Caesar, playing for dramatic purposes upon his audience's divided attitudes towards Caesar and the tightness of his assassination, and thus creating a kind of "problem play" like *Measure for Measure*. Modern scholarship has come to recognize, however, that Shakespeare was deeply concerned with the political problems of his age and that he reflected that concern in his plays.

The political attitudes of Antony, of Caesar, and of Cleopatra are all basically archetypes of conflicting sixteenth-century views on kingship. Caesar is, politically speaking, the ideal ruler like most of the Tudors. For Caesar, war is an instrument of high policy. For Antony, it is a vehicle for valor. Wars are fought to display the prowess of the generals. The political power which victory brings comes only incidentally, a by-product of chivalry. Once thrust upon Antony, its sole use is to add luster to his name and to enable him to lavish fitting rewards upon his friends—true generosity. Antony's kingship then is a poetical ideal, not a political one. His whole career is a romantic image; he is never a real

politician. Moreover, his political domination can be tolerated at large for its having been won honorably, by valor. It is when he meets Cleopatra and the valor is submerged by love that the political misfortunes begin in earnest.

In Mary Sidney's closet drama *The Tragedy of Antony* (1592), the chorus of Roman soldiers asks if —wretched trophies will narrate the past which symbolizes their own violent inheritance. The Trophies bear a compelling relationship to the colossus, another type of memorial and expression of militant nostalgia from Act 5 of *Antony and Cleopatra* where Cleopatra remembers Antony as a Colossus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which depicted Apollo. Like the colossus, Shakespeare's Roman military subject cannot be perceived entirely by his —surviving devotee or audience. Because the colossus optically distorts the viewer's gaze. Likewise, the idea of distortion is central to the Roman plays' treatment of the figure of the armored figure. This is a reversal of Cominius's earlier statement and indicates an important shift in how Coriolanus is perceived as a civic and military leader. The construction of Coriolanus as a military subject is successful, but crucially he is unable to be transferred from the military to the civic realm, a failure that is characterized by Aufidius in terms of military dress. In other words, military clothing can control and command and must therefore be shed as one enters civic life, but it is precisely this costume change that Coriolanus cannot perform. This problem of transitioning is central to the play. Coriolanus cannot be removed from his Roman military context to the realm of the civic.

Much like Eliot's numerous other female characters with whom the Egyptian queen is compared, Cleopatra is a problem insofar as she is artificial, even inanimate, and she represents the antithesis of the "life" and "rebirth" that are so central to Eliot's poetics. In all of the poet's depictions of his Cleopatra surrogates, the "problem woman" represents darkness, a devouring sexuality, and she is treated in a manner consistent with the discursive practices of imperialism: the Cleopatra figure is embedded in a discourse that recognizes her as an object of desire, but one which can be contained through discourse. Through representation, it is possible to "know" her and thus diminish her power (John 2008).

Reflection of War and Political Ambivalence in the Roman Tragedies of Shakespeare

Shakespeare perhaps knew as much about war as he did about love. But the fact is that huge research works have been done on Shakespeare's treatment of love; on the other hand, treatment of war in his plays was not widely analyzed by the scholars. Although the presence of war in most of his tragedies especially in Roman plays was highly significant, it was neglected in the field of qualitative research. An online word search (on www.opensourceshakespeare.org for example) shows that 'war' is used just 28 times in Shakespeare's comedies, 88 times in tragedies and 112 times in the history plays; 'soldier' appears 47 times in comedies, 134 times in tragedies 152 times in histories (Alexander, 2014). Again in the same source the word 'power' occurs 424 times and 'justice' 170 times in Shakespeare's works. Repetition of those vocabularies of warfare clearly emphasizes that Shakespeare's Roman tragedies are profoundly political plays which deal with conflicts, war and assassination. England and Europe and more importantly the Roman Empire that he knew well was the product of politics and war through conflicts and those were never far from the mind of the general people of the Elizabethan era.

There is no denying the fact that world literature would not have been so rich without the events of war. The University of Dhaka organized an international conference —The Great War and English Studies on December 18-19, 2014. The conference theme set out to explore the link between the war and literary studies (Fakrul Alam, Tahmina Ahmed, Zerin Alam, 2017). It is also found by the PhD research work of Mahmud titled —Kobitay Juddhol and the list of books on the War of Liberation in 1971 and World War I and II. Shakespeare recognized this reality long before and proved it in his Roman plays. So far the study on treatment of war in the Roman plays of Shakespeare and its relevance with modern context has explored the tactics, strategies, types of war, category of weapons are rarely mentioned in any research work. Again the comparison between Shakespearean strategies with modern strategies, tactics, weapons, types of war, and the aftermath are a neglected field.

The battles and wars like Battle of Philippi, Battle of Actium, Battle of Pharsalus and Gallic Wars and innumerable known and unknown wars fought by Shakespeare's generals and kings had different

strategies, tactics, and types of weapons. So far the research works on —Shakespeare's Treatment of War in Roman Plays, and Relevance to Modern Context were becoming vivid. But very few research works have been done on this particular topic. Considering all the aforesaid problems, it may be said that it would be a useful work of research which will generate knowledge not only for Shakespeare Studies for the military paradigm as well. The contemporary military as well as the civil society may be benefited out of this research work in following the best possible strategies, tactics, types of wars, category of weapons and also in following Shakespeare's social sensibility to bring positive changes in the society.

It is expected that the study of war in Shakespeare's Roman plays will explore a new horizon, more importantly, it is hoped that its discussion will get a new momentum in the field of research on wars. More so, out of this research, the military will be highly benefited. The outcome of the research may draw a conclusion that may help generate concepts in doctrinal changes also. Finally, the research is expected to bring concepts in doctrinal changes, stability, sustainability in relation to peace and justice in the society as a whole.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this research are, only four Roman tragedies of Shakespeare have been selected for conducting the research. Shakespeare experts are not easily available and their number is very few in Bangladesh.

Significance of the Study

Wars, as everyone knows, are fought for a purpose. The main reasons for fighting wars are political interest, national interest, personal interest and social reform etc. In Shakespeare's Roman plays, wars were declared as hostile conflict between political units. These political units may be states or nations or political factions within a single state or nation. The earliest Roman societies battled with each other for supremacy and the story of warfare has continued right up to the present day. The ancient Romans fought many battles and wars in order to expand and protect their empire and in few cases it was for social reform. There were also a number of civil wars where Romans fought against Romans in order to gain power. However, as Clausewitz stated, a successful military strategy may be a means to an end, but it is not an end in itself (The Roman Army, 2009). Where a state has a long term political goal to which they apply military methods and the resources of the state, that state can be said to have a grand strategy. It is expected out of this research that the tactics, strategies, types of war, category weapons, and causes of war used by Shakespeare in his Roman plays will be explored. Finally, the research will elaborately compare and contrast Shakespeare's use of war with the modern one and thereby justify their relevance for modern context. Through the research process, it may conclude with a proposal of a doctrinal change as its significance for the betterment of any military.

Conclusion

The problems before the rulers in Shakespeare's Roman plays are that they have come to power as generals rather than monarchs let alone elected or selected representatives. And their ascending to the throne is not achieved through honest means but by adopting a crooked, a zigzag way or even a path of bloodshed. The protagonists in the Roman plays displayed their prudence, professionalism, potentialities, heroism and dedication with the fullest zeal and enthusiasm which earned victory for them in the war field but they lacked intellect in the diplomatic arts while running the government in peace. War is often the outcome of dirty and subtle politics and great warriors are used as pawns to fulfill the ill-motives of the clever politicians, rulers or even by their courtiers what great war-heroes overlooked for their military prowess. According to Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare's Plays (1765), the greatness of the playwright is that his epoch making characters and their motives behind their action are not modified or encircled by the customs of particular place or action; —they are the genuine progenies of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find irrespective of war and peace It has been envisioned that research on treatment of war and ambivalence politics in those unique master pieces will enrich literary research as well as attract the attention of lovers of history of war.

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