

# AUTHORITY AND SUBVERSION IN SHAKESPEARE

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to portray the dynamics of subversion through which the so called 'anti-social' forces of misgovernance seek to challenge and subvert the socio-political as well as economic authority of the sovereign powers of the state machinery. In *Twelfth Night* the disruptive forces are evidenced in the form of the carnivalesque, in *Measure for Measure* it takes the form, of a malignant social evil, while in *King Lear* it manifests itself in the form, of an extremely personal issue with disastrous consequences.

**Keywords:** carnivals que, disruption, authority, subversion, deception.

The Renaissance as an era can perhaps claim for itself the distinction of being one of the high-water marks of progress and development in terms of aesthetic sensibilities and literary creativity as well as socio-political and economic outputs in the history of human development. The Renaissance as the name itself signifies was an age of 'rebirth' of the arts and crafts and of the aesthetic sensibilities and creative outpourings of man with man himself being the focal point of concern in every aspect of human endeavor and social sciences – whether they be political, economic, sociological or literary. It comes as no surprise therefore that the Renaissance should also be the age of introspection, of soul searching as to what were man's achievements and short comings.

It was perhaps the slow but steadily dawning consciousness of the apparently centrifugal position and importance of one's existence vis-à-vis the rest of the created order that led to the desire to remold and create anew the existing rules and codes of socio-political order. In other words , it pandered to man's desire to subvert and turn upside

down the pre-existent socio-moral order which acted as a reflection of both the macrocosmic world order and the microcosmic order of human existence.

It is this inherent desire in man for subverting the established codes of order, discipline and restraint that is given a theoretical perspective or formulation by Bakhtin in his theory of the Carnavalesque. Shakespeare makes a deft portrayal of this process of subversion and disruption in his depiction of the carnivalesque in *Twelfth Night*.

The image of dance is used in Joseph Summer's interpretation of *Twelfth Night* as a maskers' revel, in which characters move to the discovery of their real Identities through playing a series of roles deceiving themselves as often as each other. Mistaken identity, one of the commonest motifs in comic-plotting thus becomes in the play not merely a fortuitous device for complicating the action of the play but also a means of exposing the fantasies and secret desires harbored by those in the state of deception.

At the opening segments of the play Orion and Olivia are able to deceive themselves by accepting and imbibing within themselves the aristocratic ideas of the romantic lover and the grief-stricken lady as realities rather than mere ideas. And it is precisely because of this confusion that they are projected as comic characters.

Orsino while indulging himself in a 'surfeit' of the emotional appetite of love subjects himself under the illusion of being the ideal lover to the undeniable potential prospect of having his authority challenged and subverted. However, this potential source of threat is neatly averted by Shakespeare through his repeated emphasis on the situational advantage of the place-it is Illyria - the land of illusions and dreams and thus far removed from our world of everyday mundane practicality and logic.

But despite this constant reiteration by Shakespeare, there are embedded within the play itself potential sites of resistance that cannot be undermined or overruled -Olivia in her repeated refusals to accept Orsino's offer of marriage under the pretext of being in a state of mourning for her departed brother offers such a site of resistance and subversion. The situation is perhaps further complicated with the

entrance of Viola. She acts as a foil primarily for Olivia and indirectly for Orsino as well.

With Viola's disguised advent as Cesario and presentation of herself as Orsino's emissary of love, one of the most disturbing and willfully suppressed undercurrents of the play is brought to the fore - that of same sex love and perhaps even relationship. Antonio's impassioned friendship for Sebastian is one of those ardent attachments between young people of the same sex which Shakespeare frequently presents with his positive emphasis as exhibiting the loving and lovable qualities later expressed in love for the other sex.<sup>1</sup> Orsino's fascination with Cesario however is more complex - in the opening scene his restless sensibility can find no object - "naught enters there,.../ But falls into abetment .../even in a minute" (1.i.11-14).

As C.L. Barber states - "The delight he takes in Cesario's fresh youth and graceful responsiveness in conversation and in service, is one part of the spectrum of love for a woman or better, it is a range of feeling that is common to love for a youth and love for a woman". However the issue of same sex love and the strong probability of a potential relationship is more than hinted at in the Olivia-Viola/ Cesario interactions wherein Olivia is portrayed as being susceptible to Viola's Cesario's carriage and charms virtually from the outset. It is thus with Viola's presentation of herself on Olivia's doorstep that we begin to get an inkling of the fact that what Olivia really desires to do is love someone more suited to her temperament and that she is already bored with having to carry on with the ruse that she is in a state of mourning for her brother .

Sebastian's introduction emerges as a strategic move within the plot of the drama providing us with the assurance that all is and will be well. However it is also a tactical move multiplying the possibilities of exploitation and subversion of an ordered existence. It can thus be safely suggested that the issue of mistaken identity and errors of understanding besides being at the center of the superficial and hardly believable fabric of disguise and deceptions that activate the plot are also at the center of their rich psychological revelations that represent the important theme of the play and supply a believable kind of motivation. As M.C. Bradbrook expresses it -

they come together to create an interdependence of the natural and the artificial, the human and the literary<sup>2</sup> and therefore much as the masking's, deceptions and foolery may suggest, the celebrations of the traditional masks and Revels or even hint at the seriousness behind such religious holiday, they have been 'transferred into an entirely different idiom.

Thus, the ridiculous mistakes that control the plot are like Freudian slips which incite their superficial laughter and at the same time reveal subconscious patterns of human behavior.

Shakespeare combines with the theme of carnivalesque in *Measure for Measure* as well. But whereas in *Twelfth Night* the atmosphere of the carnivalesque had apparently been centered on the air of festivity and merry-making, in the later play the darker implications and undertones become obvious at a much earlier stage. The sense of topsy-turveydom, one of the defining features of the carnivalesque is generated by the sense of total chaos, confusion and inversion of ideas prevalent within the annals of the play. The title of the play itself shows that as G. Wilson Knight states –“The ethical standards of Gospels are rooted in the thought of Measure for Measure” and it is this tussle between what apparently seems to exist and what exists in actuality that leads towards an uncomfortable conflict of attitudes towards the central characters of the play and results in a potential subversion of the Republic.

J.W. Lever in an analysis of the play noted for its reasonableness<sup>4</sup> draws a comparison with Shakespeare's romantic comedies where disorders both in society and individual, especially those caused by the excess of sentiment and desire are resolved –“not only the problem of lovers but psychic tension or social usurpations or abuses found their resolution through the exercise of reason often in the form of an adjudication by the representatives of authority”. In *Measure for*

*Measure*, the same process occurs but in a more extreme degree-as Lever states-“Not only are the tensions and discords wrought up to an extreme pitch, threatening the dissolution of all human values, but a corresponding and extreme emphasis is laid upon the role of true authority whose intervention alone supplies the equipoise needed to counter the forces of negotiation”. Seen from this perspective then, unruly desire is seen to be extremely subversive and has to be countered

by true and 'supreme authority', 'age and wisdom' all of which qualities are possessed by the Duke. As such it seems that only with these virtues, this man can retrieve the state from anarchy.<sup>5</sup>

The main spring of action is of course the sexual instinct-prostitution and lechery are identified as the causes of crisis and yet we learn increasingly of a corruption that is more political than sexual-Claudio is condemned and sentenced 'for getting Madam Julietta with child'. Angelo the second in command to the Duke of Vienna and described by him as 'a man of stricture and firm abstinence' discovers the force of his suppressed human and sexual impulse when he meets Isabella, sister of Claudio, one of the main accused of the case. Not surprisingly, most of the lesser characters too seem to have no other fruitful occupation and few other topics of conversation other than sex. Angelo on the one hand and Mistress Overdone as her name suggests and her clients on the other represent the extreme ends of suppression and license. The figure of Claudio emerges as a representative of society of the times - though he knows that his sexual liaisons with Julietta can be seen as punishable if viewed in a strict light, he goes on to play the rules by the ear and risks not only his life but that of Julietta as well.

In a world where rules and codes of morality and ethics seem to have lost their meaning due to a misappropriation of application leading to a gradual inversion and later subversion of order, it is no surprise that the characters of the Duke and Isabella too should come under the scanner. Though the Duke seems to officially withdraw from the scene, leaving the affairs of the state to Angelo, in reality he disguises himself only to emerge as the medium of poetic justice towards the closing segments of the play. While this may satisfy the audience with element of suspense and surprise, it definitely makes us question the moral integrity of the Duke as he hands over to Angelo the tough job of enforcing the laws of his land which he had let slide for years. Also the sudden turnabout of Isabella from a prospective nun to someone who seems ready to get married and tied down by worldly bondages through matrimony makes us view her in a different light.

It can be safely said that the comic underworld of the play serves as a critical mirror in which we recognize the inverted structures and assumptions central to the play's serious action. But the element of

comedy is distorted and strained by the use of the grotesque such that the comedy's jovial, festive reconciling spirit cannot gain

Release and its exuberant energies remain destructive and dark, locked as they are in a struggle for survival, the central motif of the play.

Thus as Jonathan Dollimore would go on to state - "Whatever subversive identity the sexual offenders in this play possess is a construction put upon them by authority which wants to control them; moreover control is exercised through that construction". It is this all pervasive feeling of the sense of loss of ethical codes of conduct and morality that is portrayed by Shakespeare in his tragedies with greater intensities of darkness and a less optimistic perspective. A similar recurrence of the same ideas with regard to the subversion of societal laws and codes of moral and ethical conduct can be seen as being typified in *King Lear*.

In *King Lear* the subversion of the Republic and chaos and inversion of the state laws-both of the natural order and the order of the state is brought about by none other than Lear himself. The figure of the king signifies the embodiment of state power, sovereignty and unity that is competent enough to repel the forces of external aggression that threatens to destroy its stability and equanimity. Ironically, in here it is the king himself who singlehandedly destroys the geographical territory of his kingdom, driven to such an impetuosity of decision by the promptings of his egoistical self-love. As such, by the laws of nature and that of sovereignty, Lear cannot abdicate his position in family or state as if it were the public office of a later polity. As Francis Barker states:

Even without that signal blindness which permeates the play as a terrible instance of debility in the spectacular kingdom and whose first act is to misrecognize Cornelia and cast her rather than her sisters, in the role of rebellious daughter-subject, the king's original intention of a tripartite division of the realm and the family violates an essential coherence between them both. Its intentions threaten to disassemble authority relations fundamental to this patriarchal sovereignty, and to the very code it describes.

Thus, one might state that Lear precipitates his own tragedy by a foolish misjudgment- his fault is as such a fault of the mind and his purgatory therefore has to be a purgatory of the mind as well. Lear as such had trained himself to think that he can do no wrong and when he finds that he has committed an unpardonable error of judgments out of his selfish self-love, his only recourse seems to lie in madness. The resultant aspects thus seem to emerge as an extension of the absurd – Lear’s loving daughter Cornelia is struck off from his heart and it is as if as a consequence of it that he is shortly rendered old and inept as a grey haired old king, cutting a cruelly ridiculous figure before cold sanity of his unloving elder daughters.

From the start of the play itself the situation emerges as both pathetic and comic –Lear in the exposition makes an attempt to stage an interlude with himself in the coveted role of the chief actor in which he clings to the verbal expressions of love and resigns his scepter to a chorus of acclamations. It is this foolish, childish and yet at the same time touchingly human act of his that proves to be the fulcrum on which the course of the play turns –as Francis Barker eloquently summarizes:

Although disorder in the family in the state and in the faculties of the soul – and indeed in cosmic nature can act as metaphors for each other, their substantial interrelation is more profound than poetic artifice: they are all grounded at once in the same inner correspondence whose transgression risks the disarticulation of reality itself. It is with the same gesture of division that Lear fissures his kingdom, his family and his reason, for on this scene the state kinship and sense repeat and extend into each other without break.

The issue of subversion of hierarchical order and discipline of codes of conduct, of ethical and moral behavior of the Republic forms one of the major stays in Shakespeare’s plays, whether they be tragedies or comedies. While in the tragedies, the purported attempt at the subversion of the ordered mechanism of the state hierarchy, of the Republic is more obviously apparent, the same concept is underplayed and understated in the comedies. However, since the focus of the argument of this paper had been on the concept of the subversion of the

apparatuses supporting authority, it is apt and befitting to include the comedies of Shakespeare which embody within themselves potentially problematic sites of resistance that pose questions before the regimented order of rules, regulations and challenge the authority of the societal and patriarchal superstructure.

**Notes :**

1. The latest treatment of this motif can be seen in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1.iii) where it is as generously beautiful as the exquisite handling of it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
2. M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (1951) 228.
3. M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* 230.
4. *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Methuen, 1965).
5. For another kind of critic, sexuality in *Measure For Measure* continues to be seen as something deeply disruptive though now it is the individual psyche rather than the social order which is under threat. Thus for Marilyn French this is a play which "confronts directly Shakespeare's own most elemental fears"- hence its "sexual obsessiveness, mixed guilt, abhorrence". She writes further of "the hideous and repellant quality sex has throughout the play. It is, it remains, evil, filthy, disgusting, and diseased". (Shakespeare's *Division of Experience*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982. 195-197).

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