

Research Article

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Political Commentary in Early Modern Drama: Theatrical Subversion and State Power

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Abstract

Early modern drama served as a powerful medium for political commentary, allowing playwrights to navigate the constraints of censorship while critiquing governance, power structures, and social hierarchies. This study examines how dramatists such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson embedded political discourse within their works, using historical allegory, satire, and symbolic representations to reflect or challenge contemporary political ideologies. Plays like *Richard II*, *Edward II*, and *Sejanus His Fall* illustrate how theater functioned as a space for both subversion and reinforcement of state power.

This research relies on close reading and historical contextualization to assess how these playwrights engaged with kingship, tyranny, rebellion, and political legitimacy. Drawing from New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, this examination will argue the existence of deep connections between drama and the intellectual life of politics in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Moreover, it assesses the censorship and patronage of the more powerful as a means of willfully handed dramatic expression in order to render how playwrights sought to politically misguide boundaries.

The findings of this study will contribute to early modern literary scholarship by reassessing the role of drama in shaping political consciousness and public discourse. By exploring the intersection of theater and politics, this research aims to offer new perspectives on how playwrights used the stage as a site for political engagement, resistance, and commentary. Ultimately, this study underscores the enduring relevance of early modern drama in understanding the dynamics of power and authority in literary and historical contexts.

Keywords: Early Modern Drama, Political Commentary, Theatrical Subversion, Censorship, Monarchy, Rebellion, Allegory, Satire, Power, Sovereignty, Resistance, Patronage, Governance

1. Introduction

The early modern period (approximately 1500–1700) was a time of profound political transformation, marked by shifts in monarchical power, religious conflicts, colonial expansion, and emerging democratic ideals. Literature, especially drama which shaped the public's perception and involvement in politics, very much captured the spirit of the time. Playwriting during this period was more than just a business. It was a means of cultural expression through which political issues could be addressed—sometimes subtly and at other times, quite openly. With the great power consolidation under the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, volatility concerning order,

rebellion, and succession posed significant challenges. So, too, did the divided rule in England after the English Civil Wars. Such matters were critical for dramatists since authority, legitimacy, and resistance became fundamentally contestable structures and relations.

Political issues were dealt with in many ways in early modern drama. In addition to addressing the nature of the monarchy, Shakespeare in *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, dramatized the consequences of revolutions. *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe captured the growing evils of the court circles and the gallant

weakness of the monarch. Other writers, like Jonson, used satire in telling the actual story, even in *Sejanus His Fall*, where his fiction skillfully disguised the present leaders. Even comedies, such as Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, contained biting political satire, using humor and metaphor to comment on issues like international diplomacy and corruption.

Political drama differs from any other form of drama in that it depends on classical and historical sources. Playwrights were able to check contemporary rulers and policies in their plays without directly breaking the censorship laws and this was achieved by placing their works into distant settings, or the past. This was needed due to the Master of the Revels, who vetted masques and plays for politically sensitive content. But though these restrictions made it difficult for people to express their grievances, the theater served as a powerful tool for political dialogue for the elite and popular audiences which in turn brought change to their lives.

Early modern England is considered an era when drama started playing a political role and this can be illustrated by New Historicism and Cultural Materialism approaches. Critics like Stephen Greenblatt of the New Historicist school note that one cannot discuss literature without linking it to its history and sociology because these texts have specific context and they are born, nourished, and raised within a socio-political sphere to which they will write. Cultural Materialism literature has an opposing and radical side, claiming that the bounds of ideology set by the ruling class are constantly under attack from drama which allows defiance. This work aims to address the use of early modern plays through the views of these approaches to political problems.

Furthermore, this study will explore how political drama functioned within the broader framework of patronage and censorship. Playwrights often relied on noble or royal patrons for financial and legal protection, which could both enable and constrain their political commentary. For instance, Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men), performed under the patronage of powerful figures like Henry Carey and, later, King James I. Such affiliations could afford a degree of protection but also required careful navigation of political sensitivities.

This study is also going to look into the reception of political drama in the early modern period. The existence of politically themed plays indicates that there was public engagement during the period and they interpreted performances in a manner that impacted their stance towards governance, rebellion, and justice. The Globe and Blackfriars theaters were showcases that provided the public with the visualization of the political conflicts and explained the impacts of oppression, moral decay, and uprising.

Trying to understand how early modern playwrights incorporated politics into their plays, this research seeks to analyze the interplay between drama and the formation of political consciousness and culture. This will help us better understand how literature serves as a vehicle of political activism that captures and shapes the context within which it was produced. Amidst heightened state restrictions

towards free speech, early modern drama illustrates the capacity of art to resist, recline, and discuss the realm of politics.

2. Literature Review

The politics and the drama relations in modern literature, as in the case of most other subjects of this period, have been the center of attention for scholars. They have described how playwrights concealed political criticism through allegory, satire, and other forms within their works as a means of escaping censorship and political persecution. The greatest part of the studies concentrates on the manners in which dramatists dealt with the balance of power in authority, religious strife, and growing national identity phenomena and responded to monarchical control. Scholars have claimed that multifarious struggles and conflicts happening in the mid-modern period were often justified in the realm of arts by claiming the use of the stage as a means of entertainment when, in the real sense, it provided the platform to oppose politics masked as art.

There may be quite several studies that have looked into the relationship between drama and politics. However, there still exists some level of uncertainty about the ways through which the playwright was able to steer the public's thinking and concern. Other studies point out that the patrons possess a great deal of control over the political dimension in which they underline the patron's support and loyalty which is politically active. There has been almost no attention to the practices of political remarks by minor-known playwrights or the politically unmarked regional production performed outside London purported to have received.

By examining both well-known and obscure plays, this study aims to illuminate underexplored dimensions of political discourse in early modern drama. The research will contribute to the existing body of work by expanding the scope beyond canonical playwrights and considering diverse theatrical traditions. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of how drama functioned as a medium for political expression, shaping and reflecting contemporary debates.

3. Methodology

This research employs a multi-faceted approach to analyze political commentary in early modern drama, integrating close reading, historical contextualization, and theoretical frameworks to uncover how playwrights engaged with contemporary power structures. A close reading and textual analysis will be conducted on key plays, including *Richard II*, *Edward II*, and *Sejanus His Fall*. The texts are chosen based on their overt and covert political content enabling an analysis of how the playwrights used allegory, symbolism, and historical references within their political limits. Special emphasis will be paid to the dialogues, personas, and plots that deal with issues of sovereignty, governance, and political legitimacy.

To provide textual explanation, the research will add historical contextualization by analyzing these plays in the context of political and ideological processes in early modern England with

particular reference to the Tudor and early Stuart succession crises, religious wars, and factional court politics. Royal proclamations, pamphlets, and legal documents will serve as the archival sources which will, in some way, tell how the audiences at the time would have understood the plays' political references.

The study will use New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, and Political Theory as its analytical lenses to guide its claims. New Historicism will help to understand the interrelation between the text and the socio-political power relations, while Cultural Materialism will point out those elements of power struggles among the dominant and the subordinate groups in the society that are manifested in the theatrical performance. Moreover, Political Theory, particularly the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and some modern theorists, will help examine how these plays deal with power, rule, and defiance.

By integrating these methodologies, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how early modern drama functioned as a medium of political discourse, revealing the complex ways playwrights navigated and influenced the political landscape of their time.

- **Political Commentary in Shakespeare's Historical Plays**

Shakespeare's historical plays offer a detailed analysis of power, sovereignty, and legitimacy. In *Richard II*, King Richard's anxiety about the divine right of kings is uncomfortably portrayed in his deposition by Henry Bolingbroke. The famous deposition scene of the play –

*"With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state..." (Richard II, Act 4, Scene 1)*

– shows how fragile monarchy is and the devastating effects of usurpation. Richard's lamentation reveals the precariousness of a ruler bestowed with the divine right of kings, only to be politically overpowered. The play's setting, written in the Elizabethan period, captures the struggle over royal power and the bloodiness that ensues when royal power sustains a rebellion.

Shakespeare touches on concerns of succession in *Hamlet*, most notably regarding the authority of Claudius's rule:

*"The time is out of joint—O cursed spite,
That I ever was born to set it right!" (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5)*

In this regard, *Hamlet's* lament is a celebration of nature's ordering principle in which there was no place for a usurper like Claudius. What is interesting here is that Claudius's usurpation resonates with anxiety about the stability of rule during the Elizabethan period. In the entire narrative, Shakespeare delves into the moral questions that come with political authority as observers can notice the struggle in *Hamlet* to avenge his father's death and the ghost declaring that Denmark is rotten because of regicide.

The manner in which power is acquired illegitimately and its consequences are harshly critiqued in *Macbeth*. *Macbeth's* overweening ambition brings in tyranny and disorder, which posess *Macbeth* as seen in the distressed soliloquy:

"I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, But only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, And falls on the other." (Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 7)

The play stands as a reminder to those too politically ambitious and do not possess the correct authority. *Macbeth's* irrational jealousy alongside his descent into madness after murdering Duncan, reflects the chaos that follows when one does an overthrow. In pursuing power, ruler Lady *Macbeth's* desire to actively "unsex me here" (Act 1, scene 5), take on roles that are natural to them while Jacobean order tends to disorder under a wrongful monarch.

Shakespeare also analyzes the loyalty, betrayal, and their perception in public on *Julius Caesar* where with Brutus, deeper within there lies a debate of whether rebellion is justified or not:

"Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more." (Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 2)

Brutus' reasoning for killing Caesar is bound to raise significant issues regarding conceit, obligation, and the ethics of power in governance. The exploration of rhetoric especially in the famous funeral speech given by Mark Antony—

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears: I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." (Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 2)

— reveal how sentiment and politics merge under the hand of a great manipulator. The ethics of persuasion and oratory goes hand in hand with the reign which seems to be central in Shakespeare's treatise showcasing the instability of power.

In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Shakespeare portrays the contrast between the rightful but struggling King Henry IV and the young Prince Hal, whose transformation from a wayward youth to a responsible ruler serves as a commentary on the ideal qualities of a king. The tension between honor and realpolitik is evident in Hotspur's valor versus Prince Hal's strategic patience:

"The better part of valour is discretion." (Henry IV, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 4)

This claim is also evident during the time when Prince Hal was becoming Henry V. His speech before the Battle of Agincourt demonstrates the advantage of practical, cunning, and flexible leadership for political security:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . ." (Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3)

"The speech not only showcases Shakespearian rhetoric but also encapsulates the ethos of an inspirational leader, further suggesting that the lucidity of a position of power is built through personal merit and the quality to inspire obedience."

These transitions reflect the period's political concerns on the balance of the sturdy and Tudor family rule rather than shifting to smooth and steady governance. While showing power struggles through drama, William portrays the continuous problems of control, validity, and the aftermaths of political power. In his mythological and historical plays, William warns against the evils of authoritative rule and glorifies the worthy principles of kingly power.

- **Christopher Marlowe's Subversive Politics**

Christopher Marlowe's plays are deeply engaged with the nature of power and authority, frequently presenting protagonists who challenge established hierarchies and disrupt traditional structures of governance. His creations examine unchallenged power, scrutinize the validity of dynasty rule, and analyze the aftermath of ambition free from traditional ethical limitations. In the same breath, he analyzes modern-day political philosophies through the characters of Edward II and Tamburlaine where he proposes a radical doctrine of power, unlike anything that was previously offered, which stemmed from the ideas of humanism during the Renaissance period.

Marlowe uses Edward II to illustrate the demise of a man who is far too engaged in relationships and deeply neglects the business of governance. His stronger favoritism for Piers Gaveston as well as Hugh Despenser encapsulates the wrath of the great nobility who ultimately causes the deposition and violent death of Edward. This story exposes fears of monarchy and power wrestling that also characterized the fearful politics of the time, especially the dangerously inequitable favoritism and favoritism. When thinking of this period, it is essential to remember England's dilemma regarding royal power due to the lack of heirs following Elizabeth I's rule and the mere presence of factional courts. The tale warns us, through the life of Edward, of the danger posed by unbridled power which ultimately leads to personal indulgences, void of official duties. Edward's reign also serves to emphasize the conflict between the monarchy and the governing aristocracy.

Marlowe's subversive political commentary is also evident in Tamburlaine the Great, which challenges traditional notions of kingship and governance. Unlike Edward II, Tamburlaine is not born into royalty but rises to power through sheer ambition and military prowess. His ascent defies the established order, emphasizing merit over hereditary privilege.

While doing so, Marlowe entered into the debate of Renaissance humanists that contested the legitimacy of perpetuated dominance and advocated power based on merit. Tamburlaine rejects established authority structures and continues to conquer in the most brutal ways possible. This presents an alternate model of rulership: one that is based on sheer willpower and cunningness and does not require an aristocratic family tree. His ambition is tyrannical and morally lacking, serving as a critique of extreme, unfettered autonomy. His excessive cruelty—exemplified in his treatment of defeated rulers and his merciless expansionism—describes how deeply and unforgivingly he terrorizes the world

around him. This goes to show that while monarchy has its flaws, totalitarian rule is much worse.

Marlowe's works thus disturbed the balance and posed the question: Is something truly wrong with the complex monopoly on power and rule? In his narratives, power is represented fundamentally by succumbing/transforming 'to' Marlowe, masking the latent 'power' of William II, or ruling the titular tyrant lord Tamburlaine. It is wrong to glorify rebellion or monarchy in simple terms - in doing so the deep political anchors act surface and with these anchors comes authority. It was during the Renaissance that comments on the part of the human in history became the essence of the ruling and social construction.

Ultimately, Marlowe's subversive politics challenge the stability of the status quo, making his works not only reflections of Elizabethan anxieties but also enduring explorations of authority, ambition, and governance. Through his nuanced portrayals of rulers and revolutionaries, Marlowe presents a vision of power that is at once seductive and perilous, demonstrating the complexities and contradictions inherent in the exercise of political authority.

- **Ben Jonson's Satirical Critiques of Corruption**

Ben Jonson's Sejanus His Fall offers a blunt view of political corruption using the Roman court of Tiberius and Jacobean court politics in unison. In the play, Sejanus is an ambitious character who wins power through deceit and pays for it dearly in the end. His downfall serves as a warning to those with political power. The power politics is vividly narrated by Jonson in the words of Sejanus himself as he goes:

"The ground that I am built on, he that leans.

Upon my elbow, calls me his supporter;

Means his supporter should be mine."

Sejanus formulated the exact strategy towards power so that through his emissions, the micropolitics of international relations were complete. These lines capture his hold on power, the fragile nature of political doorstep relations, and the betrayal that accompanies ambition along the other way. It is a critique not just for Sejanus, but the entire corrupt system encompassing him.

The Alchemist functions on the same level as a critique of Jacobean England and mocks the social climbing and base self-interest that lay underneath through a clear lack of moral principles. It is a world built upon deceit, successfully capitalized on by Face, the character that acts as a facile con man assuming multiple disguises to hoodwink naive captives. Rejecting in equal measure the claim for intellectual seriousness, in one of the most brutally derisive spectacles, the archetype of the hoax of an alchemist, Subtle, who exploits the unfounded expectations of his followers, sells immeasurable promises of golds of richness.

*"I'll show you a book where you shall see the very spirit of gold
His veins, his arteries, and his sinews."*

Here, Jonson mocks the irrational belief in quick wealth and the unscrupulous figures who exploit human greed. The play ultimately serves as a critique of those who seek advancement through dishonest means, exposing the fragility of social structures built on deception.

Jonson's works, through their sharp wit and biting satire, highlight the ethical and moral dilemmas of political and social structures, using humor and irony to critique the mechanisms of power.

- **Censorship and Hidden Dissent in Early Modern Drama**

Dramatists of the early modern period in England had to face intense censorship from the Master of the Revels. Because of this, they had to place political commentary in an allegory, metaphor, or even historical narrative. To dramatists, avoiding negative comments about the monarchy or the state was simple. They just utilized classical references, fictionalized accounts, and history which allowed them the freedom to discuss issues of contemporary relevance without getting into trouble.

Lear in *King Lear* sets an example of how to negotiate with censorship. In this play, Lear represents those in power and the consequences of tyranny. His descent into madness and the convoluted reasoning behind it serve as a perfect example of the consequences of unchecked authority. Sure, Lear's tragedy can be interpreted as a warning towards an absolutist rule, but the period of ancient Britain allows a comforting layer of separation for Shakespeare to avoid imprisonment from the royal community. Socio Political injustice is famous in conjunction with the abuse of power during the constant increase of control by the monarchy and Gloucester's lament captures the stream of thoughts perfectly.

*"In the fleshment of this dread exploit,
A father's life shall pay for his fault!
Have I the tongue to doom my brother's death,
And shall that tongue give pardon to a slave?"*

These lines emphasize the hypocrisy of justice under tyranny, where the privileged escape punishment while the powerless suffer disproportionately. By setting the play in a mythical past, Shakespeare could explore such critiques without directly challenging contemporary rulers like James I, whose belief in the divine right of kings left little room for questioning monarchical authority.

Similarly, *Henry VI, Part 2* presents Jack Cade's rebellion as both a populist uprising and a cautionary tale about the dangers of unrestrained mob rule. Cade, a leader who promises social and economic equality, initially appears as a champion of the common people, yet his movement quickly descends into chaos and violence. His rhetoric, appealing to the grievances of the lower classes, reflects real anxieties about class struggle in Tudor and Stuart England:

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

This famous line, spoken by Cade's followers, reveals a deep resentment toward legal institutions and the elite who control them. While the play does not explicitly endorse Cade's rebellion, it presents the fears of the ruling class—namely, that commoners, if given too much power, would overturn the existing social order. At the same time, Shakespeare subtly critiques the aristocracy's failure to address the grievances that fuel such uprisings, suggesting that social unrest is not merely the product of rabble-rousers but of systemic inequities.

Beyond Shakespeare, other playwrights similarly engaged in veiled political dissent. Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* drew dangerous parallels between the corruption of the Roman court under Tiberius and the favoritism and factionalism of the Jacobean court. While ostensibly a classical tragedy, the play's themes of political manipulation and paranoia resonated with contemporary audiences who recognized the thinly veiled allusions to figures within their government. The play's original performance led to Jonson being questioned by authorities, a testament to how even indirect criticism could provoke suspicion.

Much like others, Christopher Marlowe circumvented censorship through storytelling. In *Edward II*, he depicts the decline and fall of a monarch due to personal favoritism and self-indulgent excess. Marlowe's portrayal of Edward's relationships with his favorites, Gaveston and later Spencer, while excessive, could also be read as a commentary on court corruption and favoritism during the late years of Queen Elizabeth's rule. The brutal ending of the play, where Edward is overthrown and murdered, poses troubling complications surrounding the concepts of regicide and the reasons for which one may justify such a deed—notably a politically charged tension for the era of kings who were increasingly worried about insurrection and assassination.

In these and many other examples, early modern dramatists wrote and staged freely knowing well they were safe from repression. Through the employment of historical satire, classical references, and poetry, these authors made their voices heard safely and effectively. In doing so, they proved that even under heavy censorship, literature remained a means to challenge power and call for change while leaving behind a legacy of resistance.

- **Commoners and Rebellion: The Representation of the Lower Classes**

The common folk's role in political conflict has been a point of concern for the early modern drama. Playwrights like Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson, presented violent episodes of the common people regarding them as sympathetic and destructive. As for any other depiction, there are many social issues within a single society that need to be addressed, these represent a deeper concern regarding power and rule, legitimacy, and governance.

Perhaps the most intense depiction of a riotous common rebellion is in Jack Cade's rebellion depicted in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*,

Part 2. Cade is a historical character known for leading the large-scale rebellion in 1450 against corrupt bureaucrats and economic difficulty. In Stratford's version, Cade is simultaneously a person representing convulsion of violence and revolution, and a mere lunatic. He does respond through revolutionary means but they are in a way too extreme. He effectively motivates the lower class with his simplistic promise to destroy the existing aristocracy. The lower class cries out for hate, especially at those with prestige, and Cade delivers by claiming,

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!"
(Henry VI, Part 2, Act 4, Scene 2)

This exclamation, often quoted in discussions of legal criticism, reflects deeper anxieties about the power of law as an instrument of the ruling class. Lawyers, as representatives of the legal and political order, symbolize the barriers that prevent commoners from attaining justice. By calling for their destruction, Cade articulates a radical vision of a society where traditional hierarchies are dismantled—yet, at the same time, his movement quickly devolves into chaos, undermining its legitimacy.

Shakespeare crafts Cade as both a champion of the people and a demagogue whose ambitions lead to tyranny. His proclamations, though aimed at liberating the lower classes, reveal an unrealistic and dangerously simplistic vision of governance. He absurdly claims royal lineage, declaring:

*"My father was a Mortimer—
My mother a Plantagenet!"*
(Henry VI, Part 2, Act 4, Scene 2)

By fabricating noble ancestry, Cade paradoxically relies on the very structures he seeks to overthrow, reinforcing the idea that legitimate rule must be derived from bloodlines rather than popular support. His downfall comes when his own followers, realizing the futility of his rebellion, betray him. This portrayal aligns with aristocratic fears that populist uprisings, though inspired by genuine grievances, ultimately lead to anarchy rather than meaningful reform.

Shakespeare doesn't ignore the issues that come from revolting. Cade's rebellion criticizes both the mob's activism and the governing authority's indifference to massive suffering. This implies that the social chaos is a result of the rot and unequal distribution of wealth. In light of these implications, the drama becomes a piece of instruction for both extremes- it gives a warning the rulers concede to the governed and the governed do not follow foolish governance with no accountability.

Other modern dramatists also considered the part the lower classes take in a revolt, other than Shakespeare. In Christopher Marlowe's Edward II, there are battles of the upper classes, but also the lower classes are becoming more and more angry. Edward's II repose has an appealing quality because the alienation of both his courtiers and his subjects has become an appealing quality that in the end, those who are in power are at some point dispensed with.

Ben Jonson probes the lives of the commoners and critiques their unscrupulous and ingenious ways in his satirical comedies like Bartholomew Fair. Jonson's depiction of rebellion is more humorous in approach and serves as a critique of both upper class and lower-class ignorance without Shakespearean dramatization. Jonson utilizes comedy to display that every class suffers from decay and immorality.

Modern drama has these various representations because it demonstrates its ability to shift between domination and defiance. While playwrights enforced the order of everything, there is an acknowledgment that real social turbulence was due to real issues, and the discussion offered by the ruling elites still catered to the common folk. These plays highlighted the conflict between the commoners and the people in charge, thus enabling the audience to grapple with pertinent questions about power, justice, and the violence that can erupt at any given time.

• The Role of Theater in Shaping Political Consciousness

The early modern theater was more than just a source of entertainment—it was a powerful medium for political engagement. During a time when openly opposing the rulers and state policies was a tad risky, playwrights sidestepped these issues by subtly commenting on governance and reflecting the public's anxieties about power. The increasing demand for tragic and historical dramas tells us that people understood the significance of politics in the plays. The theater not only entertained audiences but also helped in the discourses on governance and statecraft by dramatizing issues of legitimacy, tyranny, and rebellion.

• Theater as a Political Arena

Beginning from the late 16th to early 17th century, Europe experienced political unrest characterized by religious disputes, familial wars, and conflicts over monarchy rule. During the English Renaissance, these matters could be dealt with in a fictionalized yet impactful manner on stage. Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson wrote about history, but they talked about power, justice, and corruption in a contemporary way, which is why their plays stand the test of time.

Due to the censorship laws and supervision by the Master of the Revels, criticism towards the governmental monarchy was not acceptable. These restrictions were overridden by playwrights who used historical parallels, metaphors, and even allegory. The politically aware audiences were able to understand these hidden messages making theaters instrumental in shaping political consciousness.

• Dramatizing Tyranny and the Abuse of Power

One of the most enduring themes in early modern drama is the depiction of tyranny and the consequences of absolute rule. Shakespeare's tragedies, in particular, serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked power.

Macbeth, for instance, explores the corrupting influence of ambition and the instability that follows illegitimate rule. Macbeth's

rise to power through regicide and his subsequent descent into paranoia reflect anxieties about monarchy and governance. His reign, characterized by fear and oppression, ultimately collapses, reinforcing the idea that tyrannical rule is unsustainable.

His realization—

"I am in blood

Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

(Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 4)

—illustrates the self-destructive nature of tyranny. Shakespeare's audience, living under the rule of the Stuart monarchy, would have understood this as a commentary on the dangers of absolute power and the moral consequences of political ambition.

Similarly, Richard III presents a ruler who manipulates, deceives, and murders his way to the throne. His infamous monologue—

"Conscience is but a word that cowards use,

Devised at first to keep the strong in awe."

(Richard III, Act 5, Scene 3)

—reveals a Machiavellian approach to power, one that prioritizes ambition over morality. The play warns against rulers who disregard ethical governance, reinforcing the importance of legitimate leadership.

- **The Question of Legitimacy and the Divine Right of Kings**

In the modern era, however, monarchs had to deal with reproach concerning their rulers and the so-called "divine" right of kings. Kings, such as James I, claimed to be sanctified by God and said that they were responsible to no earthly authority apart from Him. These notions were often challenged by theater, which depicted monarchs as inexplicably losing their entitlement to govern because of their utter incapacity, corruption, or injustice.

When it comes to Shakespeare, Lear's tragedy challenges our taken for granted the responsibilities of a ruler and the consequences that proceed from their actions, including the failure to govern wisely. Failing to consider all aspects would lead to a disaggregated kingdom and rampant civil war. His pain-filled cry gives rise to the question unsupported supremacy of monarchs:

"I am a man

More sinned against than sinning."

(King Lear, Act 3, Scene 2)

The suggestiveness of the play compels its audience to wonder not just accept automatically, that what determines a ruler's right to rule is not sheer divine sanction, but a disposition to govern the people justly.

Marlowe's Edward II also attacks the ineptitude of monarchy. Unlike other rulers, Edward focuses more on his male friends than on the state's business. This preference results in his eventual displacement and horrid execution. The play questions the boundaries (if any) of royal dominion, and what reasons exist for insurgency. These representations must have been profoundly

painful to Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences who were witnessing the fighting over power and succession.

- **Rebellion and Popular Uprising in Drama**

Early modern drama frequently depicted rebellion as both a threat and a response to oppression. While many play caution against the dangers of mob rule, they also acknowledge the grievances that drive popular uprisings.

Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part 2 provides a striking depiction of rebellion through the character of Jack Cade, who leads a populist revolt against the ruling elite. His famous declaration—

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!"

(Henry VI, Part 2, Act 4, Scene 2)

—expresses widespread frustration with legal and governmental corruption. While Cade is ultimately portrayed as a demagogue whose movement descends into anarchy, the play does not ignore the legitimate concerns of the commoners. It reflects the period's anxieties about social unrest while subtly critiquing the ruling class's failure to address the needs of the people.

Similarly, Ben Jonson's Sejanus His Fall examines the dangers of political manipulation and the instability of authoritarian rule. The play, which draws parallels between the corruption of the Roman court and Jacobean politics, was so politically sensitive that Jonson was questioned by authorities after its performance. This incident underscores the extent to which theater was recognized as a powerful force in shaping political thought.

- **Theater as a Medium for Political Reflection**

Moreover, early modern playwrights continued to address political issues, despite censorship, because they knew that theater could change public opinion. Political concepts were far more immediate and emotionally stimulating in the form of drama than in written workings or speeches. Audiences fascinated with the power struggles, betrayals, and downfalls that were a part of the spectacle, started to ponder about governance and their own place in the political system. The Audience was greatly politically motivated.

Beyond that, performing theater for the public brought people from all walks of life together which built an environment in which the audience could gather and engage in the theater. People attending the Globe, from the gallery level down to the cheap standing-room area of the Globe's pit, could appreciate and participate in those issues that somehow affected them.

Theatres of the early modern epoch were not solely venues for entertainment but served as platforms for civic discussion and critique. With the use of historical parallels, tragic stories, and satire, playwrights crafted the ideological discourse surrounding authority, legitimation, and revolt. Dramatic content was within the grasp of censors, yet the imagination of playwrights was unrestricted when it came to the examination of deeper political themes. As such, early modern drama epitomizes the concept that politics and art are so deeply interwoven and politics takes center stage when it comes to political imagination.

- **Political Manipulation and the Performance of Power in Early Modern Drama**

From a political perspective, early modern drama frequently examined the wielding of authority — how rulers maintain power using powerful visuals, lies, and public perception. The politics of England during William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe's times saw the two dramatizing the leaders portraying leadership. It was revealed that power is not just commanded; it is acted. In these plays, there is an assertion of zealot legitimacy, control, and masking of weaknesses through manipulation and calculated phony shows of dominance. These phenomena correspond to wider fear consisting of governance, and legitimacy, and often fake characteristics of power.

- **Theatricality in Rulership: Richard III's Political Deception**

Shakespeare depicts Richard III as one sole character who, more than any other, demonstrates the dramatic aspect of power. From the outset, Richard sees himself as a grand puppeteer, spinning lies to control the throne. He understands that image-making is critical and goes to great lengths to create a false alter ego. In a striking moment of self-awareness, Richard proclaims:

*"And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With odd old ends stol'n forth of holy writ,
And seem a saint when most I play the devil."*
(Richard III, Act 1, Scene 3)

Primordial in his authority, Richard bluntly accepts that this authority is a performance. With the mantle of religion and virtue, he can bamboozle the whole population into believing that he is a saint while he is orchestrating his climb to power.

With his ostentatious humility and trust in how political theatre is how rulers sculpt their animations to manipulate legitimacy.

Yet, Richard's success as a performer of power is ultimately his downfall. As his deceit unravels, his control over his narrative weakens, leading to his demise. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard III serves as both an exploration of political cunning and a warning about the fragility of a rule built on deception.

- **Macbeth: The Paranoia of Performance**

Unlike Richard III, who constructed his image with the intention of manipulating other people, Macbeth looks at the issue of control from a different angle. Treachery marks Macbeth's rise to the throne, step by step, and rule is sustained through fear, paranoia, and authoritarian rule. He becomes a dominating, insane, selfish man at the expense of a once noble warrior.

Later in the play, Macbeth realizes that he must resort to duplicitous tactics.

"False face must hide what the false heart doth know."
(Macbeth, Act I, Scene VII)

His words encapsulate his internal illusions along with covering his actions and power. Macbeth must present himself as a just ruler while he is filled with guilt and ambition on the inside. The big banquet scene in Act III, where he attempts to play the part of a stable monarch in power, sets him up to fail as he's haunted by Banquo's ghost; later on, he tries to just ignore the truth which is, at this point, he knows beyond any doubt that he died. The failure of this performance goes on to signify the beginning of his fateful demise, losing all subjects and allies because the facade has cracked.

Lady Macbeth, too, understands the importance of political performance. She instructs her husband:

*"Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't."*
(Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5)

This manipulation of outward appearance is essential for maintaining power, yet the effort proves unsustainable. Macbeth's increasing paranoia causes him to lose control of his carefully constructed image, leading to reckless decisions that ultimately ensure his destruction. Shakespeare suggests that power sustained through illusion and fear is inherently unstable, revealing the dangers of governance based on performance rather than legitimacy.

- **The Spectacle of Power: Henry IV and Falstaff's Theatricality**

Alongside the tragedies in Richard III and Macbeth, Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1 captures the political spectacle of leadership in the evolution of Prince Hal from a reckless teenager to a king. As a leader, he understands that he has to make a brand of himself or else be branded for him, and so he opts for it freely, permitting himself to be understood as a rogue who then changes his behavior for the greater good. He justifies his actions in the following words:

*"Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wondered at."*
(Henry IV, Part 1, Act 1, Scene 2)

This approach to governing and ruling does not blend with Falstaff whose flamboyance has a different intention as opposed to euphemism. In fact, his theatricality suggests that he bends styles, using rich wit and ridiculousness to manage aspects of politics. His mockery of what he calls 'honor' and distorted perception of reality exemplifies the true form of power. But after Hal takes the British sovereign as Henry V, he parts with Falstaff which marks the transition from dramatic vice to one of state affairs.

- **Marlowe's Tamburlaine: The Grand Performance of Conquest**

Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great offers a stunning portrayal of spectacle in power. From a lowly shepherd, Tamburlaine has heartlessly transitioned into a ruler and is known as a world

conqueror. To prove his supremacy, he employs a hallmark of dramatic displays. His bold speeches are perfectly accentuated by merciless shows of strength intimidating his foes and instilling fear-driven loyalty among his subjugates. He proclaims:

*"Is it not passing brave to be a king,
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?"*
(*Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1, Act 3, Scene 3*)

Tamburlaine's reign is defined by the spectacle—whether through the display of conquered kings pulling his chariot or his public executions of those who defy him. Marlowe suggests that power relies on theatricality, but unlike Shakespeare's tragic rulers, Tamburlaine never faces the consequences of his performance. His ability to continually dominate and reinvent his image allows him to maintain authority, presenting an alternative vision of power rooted in unrelenting force rather than moral legitimacy.

- **The Political Stage: Reflections on Governance and Deception**

The performative nature of power in early modern drama reflects contemporary anxieties about governance, particularly in an age where rulers relied on public perception to maintain control. In a time when Elizabeth I and James I carefully curated their royal images through elaborate ceremonies, portraits, and speeches, the theater provided a space to explore both the necessity and dangers of political performance.

Plays like *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Henry IV*, and *Tamburlaine* illustrate that rulers must not only govern but also act the part of a ruler. Those who master the art of performance—such as Prince Hal—secure their rule, while those whose façades crumble—like *Macbeth*—face inevitable downfall. This ongoing tension between appearance and reality continues to shape political thought, highlighting the enduring relevance of early modern drama in understanding the mechanics of power.

Early modern drama reveals that power is not merely about holding office or commanding armies; it is a carefully constructed performance that requires manipulation, spectacle, and self-awareness. From *Richard III*'s deceitful theatrics to *Macbeth*'s desperate attempts to maintain his crumbling rule, these plays expose the fragile nature of authority when built on illusion rather than substance. As audiences watched these rulers rise and fall, they were prompted to question the authenticity of their own leaders, making the theater not just a form of entertainment but a crucial arena for political reflection.

- **Women and Political Agency in Early Modern Drama**

While early modern politics were overwhelmingly male-dominated, drama frequently depicted women as crucial political figures, whether through direct rule, manipulation, or behind-the-scenes influence. Playwrights such as William Shakespeare and John Webster challenged contemporary gender norms by presenting female characters who exerted significant political agency, often in ways that defied societal expectations. These portrayals not only provided a critique of patriarchal power

structures but also highlighted the anxieties surrounding women's influence in governance.

- **Queen Gertrude: Ambiguity and Female Complicity in *Hamlet***

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude occupies a politically precarious position as the mother of the rightful heir and the wife of the usurper king. Her rapid marriage to Claudius raises suspicions about her complicity in King Hamlet's death, though the text remains ambiguous about her level of involvement. Hamlet himself expresses deep distrust toward her:

"Frailty, thy name is woman!"
(*Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2*)

This line reflects not only Hamlet's personal disillusionment with his mother but also broader early modern anxieties about female agency. Gertrude's role is largely defined by her relationships with men—first as King Hamlet's wife, then as Claudius's queen, and finally as Hamlet's mother. However, her death—accidentally poisoned by the very drink intended for her son—suggests that her influence, whether intentional or passive, plays a crucial role in the court's political unraveling. Shakespeare thus presents Gertrude as a figure whose agency is limited by the structures of patriarchal power, yet whose actions (or inactions) have significant consequences.

- **Lady Macbeth: Subverting Gender Roles for Political Power**

Perhaps the most infamous example of a woman exerting political agency in Shakespearean drama is Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*. She actively challenges traditional gender norms by rejecting the perceived weakness of femininity and urging her husband to commit regicide:

*"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty."*
(*Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5*)

Lady Macbeth recognizes that societal expectations of female gentleness and passivity would prevent her from seizing power directly, so she assumes a traditionally masculine role—strategizing, manipulating, and emboldening Macbeth to act. Her political ambition is ultimately her downfall, as guilt and psychological torment lead to her tragic end. However, her influence on Macbeth's rise to power underscores the ways in which women in early modern drama could wield political authority, even if it was through unconventional or subversive means.

- **The Duchess of Malfi: Defying Patriarchal Constraints**

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* offers one of the most striking depictions of female political agency in early modern drama. Unlike Gertrude and Lady Macbeth, the Duchess is a ruler in her own right. She defies the expectations imposed upon her by her male relatives, choosing to remarry for love rather than political advantage. Her assertion of independence is evident when

she declares:

"I am Duchess of Malfi still."

(The Duchess of Malfi, Act 4, Scene 2)

Even as she faces imprisonment and death at the hands of her corrupt brothers, the Duchess retains a sense of dignity and power. Unlike many early modern female characters whose political influence is tied to their relationships with men, the Duchess actively makes decisions that shape her fate. Webster's portrayal challenges contemporary notions of female subservience, presenting a woman who asserts her autonomy despite the violent retribution she faces.

• **Women's Political Agency: Influence Behind the Throne**

In many early modern plays, women exert influence not through direct rule but through manipulation, persuasion, and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. Characters like Volumnia in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* demonstrate how maternal authority could shape political outcomes. Volumnia's ability to control her son, the warrior-politician Coriolanus, is evident when she persuades him to spare Rome from destruction:

"Thou shalt no sooner

March to assault thy country than to tread—

Trust to't, thou shalt not—on thy mother's womb."

(Coriolanus, Act 5, Scene 3)

Here, Volumnia's maternal plea succeeds where military force fails, highlighting the power women could wield within domestic and political spheres. Similarly, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* navigates the complexities of political power through charm, intelligence, and strategic alliances, demonstrating that female agency in early modern drama was not confined to traditional governance but extended to influence and diplomacy.

4. Conclusion

Early modern drama was more than mere entertainment; it served as a vital medium for political discourse, reflecting and shaping contemporary understandings of power, governance, and resistance. Playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Webster used historical allegories, satire, and character-driven narratives to critique monarchy, authority, and social order. Whether through the Machiavellian manipulations of Richard III, the tragic downfall of Edward II, the satirical critique of corruption in *Sejanus His Fall*, or the representation of rebellion in *Henry VI, Part 2*, these plays provided audiences with insights into the mechanisms of power and its vulnerabilities.

Concurrently, the theater served as a venue for the fusion and dissemination of apprehensions regarding political unrest, rigidity in gender roles, and unequal class structures. The agency and rebellion of the lower-class women in governance, the dramatic spectacle of power, and the rule of women reveal a case of how drama dealt with the important issues of contemporary society. Through captivating stories riddled with political involvement, playwrights circumvented censorship whilst nurturing the public and managing to embed arms of political awareness.

In the end, public theaters in the early modern period were not only imitating the politics around them, but transforming the unformulated public opinion by getting people to think about the need for authority and governance, its corruption, and the existence of opposition to the rule. In an age where explicit critique of politics was dangerous, the stage became a powerful site to comment on and interrogate power relations and had consequences for the understanding of political power both in history and today.

➤ **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

- **Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research.
- **Research involving human participants and/or animals:** This study does not involve human participants or animals.
- **Informed consent:** Not applicable, as no human participants were involved in this research.

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