

SHAKESPEARE'S MARGINAL CHARACTERS: AN ALTERNATIVE TO DOMINANT TUDOR IDEOLOGY¹

This paper explores marginal characters in Shakespeare's plays that offer a valid alternative to the power-craving aspirations of their ideological authorities. Special attention in the research is paid to the role of the nameless murderers in *Richard III*, nameless servants in *King Lear* and soldier Williams in *Henry V*. The common denominator for these marginal characters is the fact that they willingly disobey their superiors' orders and unequivocally decide to follow the voice of conscience rather than the voice of authority. Shakespeare introduces marginal characters to point to the notion that rebellion against the dominant ideology has to start from the individual level in order to inspire a global act of resistance. It is our aim to prove that Shakespeare's genuine idea was to subvert and not glorify Tudor's Golden Age. The theoretical framework of the paper relies on the critical insights of Greenblatt, Eliot, Leggatt, Rudnytsky, Fernie, etc.

Key words: marginal characters, Tudor's Golden Age, subversion, glorification, alternative, resistance

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¹ The paper was presented at the scientific conference "Language, literature, alternatives", which was held in April 2021 at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš.

INTRODUCTION: OPTIMISM AND SKEPTICISM
OF THE RENAISSANCE MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND²

Pico della Mirandola, the author of the Latin oration, *On the Dignity of Man*, is considered to be one of the main spokesmen of the optimism of the Renaissance. It is a well-known fact that the Church claimed that his nine hundred theses were heretical. However, this did not stop Mirandola from an open, public declaration of his dangerous views, which contributed to his image of an independent individual, liberated from the constraints of mediaeval dogmas. In this particular oration, he proclaims his “unbounded faith in man’s creative potentials” (Kostić, 2014: 1), by depicting Adam as a creature different from the others God created. Namely, whereas other creatures were created from God’s storehouse of archetypes, man was a unique creation, free to choose his own nature. In other words, man, unlike other creatures, did not have to rely on a natural predisposition, but could create himself. This image of man has become a symbol of long-awaited freedom that reflects the optimism of the Renaissance movement. Mirandola’s liberated Adam is addressed in the following way:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world’s centre that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal or immortal, so that with freedom of choice and honour, as thou the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. (quoted in Davies, 1997: 95-96)

The last sentence of the quotation points to a profound warning that Mirandola, unlike other Renaissance thinkers, was well-aware of the following: man is a freethinking creature, with a capability to create

² The introduction section of the paper was adapted from the author’s book *The Faustian Motif in the Tragedies by Christopher Marlowe*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 1-3.

himself and thus achieve the status of higher living forms, but can also degenerate into lower forms of life in case of irresponsible conduct. This warning had usually been disregarded in the writings of the next century in which the emphasis was given to the topics of “the dignity and freedom of man, individualism, wide intellectual curiosity and a refusal to submit to the constraints of clerical orthodoxy” (Kostić, 2014: 2). However, Mirandola’s warning was most potently dramatised in Shakespeare’s plays. Furthermore, it can be said that this warning served as a direct inspiration for one of the most commonly quoted passages in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

I have of late, – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth, forgone all customs of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

(Shakespeare, 1981, 2, 1, 309–331)

The evident contrast between the two projections of man – a divine piece of work and sterile, corrupt creature Hamlet is utterly disgusted with – is dominant in this soliloquy. Kostić claims that a legitimate interpretation of this passage represents an indirect reply to Baltazare Castiglione’s *Courtier*. Namely, “for Castiglione the court represented the new secular setting for the cultivation of genuinely courteous or virtuous men. Unconscious of any irony he praised *sprezzatura* – a manner that has the appearance of ease and spontaneity but is in fact carefully calculated and studied – as the chief asset of the ideal courtier” (Kostić, 2014: 2). The revelation of truth behind appearances was a primary ideal for Shakespeare as an artist. Thus, in his vision *sprezzatura*, unlike to the one given by Castiglione, represents a calculated manner of survival with inevitable self-betrayal that ultimately leads to madness and death. Kostić further claims that “far from cultivating independent self-fashioned individuals, Renaissance courts produced ruthless tyrants and cringy hypocrites” (Kostić, 2014: 3). In the same vein, Greenblatt claims that these individuals belonged

to the new institutions which ensured that there should be less autonomy in self-fashioning in the 16th century than before:

If we say that there is a new stress on the executive power of the will, we must say that there is the most sustained and relentless assault upon the will; if we say that there is a new social mobility, we must say that there is a new assertion of power by both state and family to determine all movement within the society; if we say that there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological and psychological organisation, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives (Greenblatt, 1980: 1–2).

Greenblatt is just one of many of the 20th-century thinkers who perceive the Renaissance as “the threshold of human liberation but also of new forms of control” (Kostić, 2014: 3). Unfortunately, the atrocities of the last century and new millennium point to the notion that Mirandola’s promise of freedom “has ended up, paradoxically, in massive unfreedom for the enormous majority of people” (Kostić, 2014: 3).

ALTERNATIVE(S): BOND BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

Apart from being one of the most devoted followers and theoreticians of Shakespeare’s work, T.S. Eliot was the founder of the impersonal theory of poetry, in which he depicted the process of depersonalisation as absolutely necessary for the creative process. In other words, he perceives a proper artist as a catalyst, conveying impersonal artistic emotions through the unavoidable bonding between past and present. Thus, a proper artist, whom he profoundly recognised in Shakespeare, is one who does not live merely in the present but in the present moment of the past. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot insists on the idea that a proper artist should seek out analogies between the past and present; furthermore, s/he should develop a sort of consciousness of the past in order to comprehend the present:

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence [...] the timeless and temporal yoked together [...] the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past (Eliot, 1963: 34-35).

This is indirectly in line with Pico's warning about the constructive and destructive ways of using the long-awaited freedom at the beginning of the Renaissance period and Greenblatt's pessimistic perspective of the existence of valid alternatives to the dominant ideology. If we bear in mind that the Renaissance period is usually considered as a beginning of modernity, then Eliot's views about artists as being thoroughly aware of the repetitive historical cycles involving military, economic, and/or political conflicts, ultimately resulting in enormous bloodshed, are of great significance for the future prospects of not solely arts, but human civilisation in general.

Shakespeare was definitely aware of the importance of the past lessons and he conveyed their messages through his history plays. History play represents a typical Elizabethan genre, extremely prominent during the 1580s and 1590s. Though it was Marlowe and not Shakespeare who invented the genre, Shakespeare was the most responsible for establishing its conventions. The history play dramatises the events that are based on historical facts. Shakespeare's main sources for the depiction of historical facts were the two most popular history books in Elizabethan England: Hall's *The union of the two noble and illustrious families of Lancaster and York, being long in continual dissension for the crown of this noble realm* (1548) and Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587). Thus, the materials of the play were rather familiar to Shakespeare's original audience whereby the dramatist suggested different ways of interpreting given facts. To Shakespeare, the fact was regarded as a product of interpretation rather than a stable and fixed category, although he remained loyal to the essential nature of the materials. The author was therefore not primarily interested in the historical accuracy of events, he was basically adjusting the facts of history in order to emphasise the repetitive patterns or conflicts, so as to issue a valid warning for the future. As Rudnitsky suggests, this "means precisely that any interpretation of the past may be true if one thinks it so, and no point of view is allowed to contain or control all others" (Rudnitsky, 2004: 48).

Though there is a remarkable dose of patriotic elements conveying enormous pride in Tudor's reign, Shakespeare's history plays subject to scrutiny such ethical and political concepts as honour, justice, loyalty, obedience, the nation, rather than projecting simple patriotism. A famous example of the critical effect his plays have is Elizabeth I's statement, often quoted in contemporary history books. Namely, while watching the performance of *Richard II*, the Queen remarked: "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" (Kizelbach, 2014: 113) Obviously, being

a rather shrewd monarch, she was able to see pervading similarities between the problem of the king's deposition in the play and the rebellion of the Earl of Essex in Elizabethan England, as well as the fact of her incapacity to provide the country with an heir to the throne. This was the main reason for the prohibition of performing the scene of deposition in *Richard II* until the Queen's death. Thus, though history plays were mostly conceptualised to offer a tract for the Elizabethan period, they were also intended to have contemporary relevance by focusing on the analogies between the past and the present, both general and particular.

The view that, while reading a chronicle or a history play we can never evade the present moment, corresponds to the main credo of a recently rather influential literary critical school, presentism. In their preface to *Presentist Shakespeares* (2007), the major representatives of this critical stance, Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, dwelled on the subject of the inevitability of the past-present interconnection:

And if it's always and only the present that makes the past speak, it speaks always and only to – and about – ourselves. It follows that the first duty of a credible presentist criticism must be to acknowledge that the questions we ask of any literary text will inevitably be shaped by our own concerns, even when these include what we call 'the past'. The irony which that situation generates constitutes a fruitful, necessary and inescapable aspect of any text's being (Grady & Hawkes, 2007: 5).

MARGINAL CHARACTERS IN *RICHARD III*, *KING LEAR* AND *HENRY V*

The indispensability of the bond between past and present that Eliot, Grady and Hawkes refer to is most clearly brought to light in Jan Kott's view of Shakespeare as our contemporary (1990). In this book, Kott demonstrates the belief that Shakespeare directly addresses the contemporary world through timelessness and universality of the topics problematised in his plays. This idea is most potently depicted in *Richard III*. Shakespeare was able to detect identical destructive patterns repeated throughout the course of history. It does not come as a surprise that *Titus Andronicus* was written at the same time as *Richard III*: the playwright pointed to the similarities between the Roman Empire and Elizabethan England that are to serve as an important reminder for the future. In portraying Richard III as a deformed villain, Shakespeare

most obviously alluded to the idea that the deformity of the body reflects deformity of the mind, but also suggested that it can serve as a metaphor for a disordered world, torn apart by a destructive civil war. In a world in which there is no love and justice, Richard III opts for power. Thus, Richard becomes a proper embodiment of the Machiavellian hero, who does not care about moral scruples so long as he maintains power and obtains the English crown. On that immoral quest, he has to eliminate all the others who stand in his way: his own brother, his nephews (juvenile boys), his own flesh and blood. At first, it seems that there is no one who can resist the power-crazy machinations of a deluded tyrant. And though a proper opposition to Richard III comes by the end of the play depicted through the character of Henry Tudor, valid emblems of resistance to Richard III's ideology are to be found in two marginal figures, the characters of two unnamed murderers.

Shakespeare purposefully leaves these characters unnamed, and refers to them as the First and Second Murderer (Shakespeare, 2009, Act 1, Scene 4). They have a "warrant", an order to murder Clarence, Richard III's own brother who stands in the way to his royal succession. However, once engaged in the conversation about the proper way to commit the murder, the Second Murderer claims that he feels "certain dregs of conscience" that prevent him from performing the vicious deed. So, he contemplates the thought of leaving Clarence unharmed, whereas the First Murderer reminds him of the reward once "the deed is done". He proudly proclaims that his conscience lies in the Duke of Gloucester's purse. Obviously, the conflict that Shakespeare depicts here is the one between self-interest and ethical principles and the First Murderer resists "dregs of conscience" when he reminds himself of practical material considerations. The Second Murderer is seduced by the prize and eventually takes part in the murder, although he repents the deed and takes no reward for the performed act. This is a clear indicator that the voice of conscience, "a spirit that mutinies in a man's bosom" is much more potent than the voice of authority.

It is not surprising then that Pinter, nowadays called the Shakespeare of our age, used this scene from *Richard III* and wrote a play *Dumb Waiter*, making two contemporary hitmen the main characters of his modern version of Shakespeare's play. In presenting two loyal servants of the system who perform their criminal duties without raising unnecessary questions, Pinter presents Gus as a hitman who resists indoctrination, constantly complains about his position, and is filled with existential doubts. As such, Gus represents a potential rebel against the dominant ideology and is therefore murdered by his own

partner in crime, Ben. These two modern reincarnations of Shakespeare's murderers from *Richard III* point to the need for the final awakening from collective hypnosis and seeing through "the vast tapestry of lies" (Pinter, 2005: 1). Thus, Pinter puts into action the concepts of moral sensibility and conscience, words rarely employed these days, and urges for their acknowledgment and indispensability in/for modern culture.

Though *King Lear* is not categorised as a history play, it is based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's story about Lear, the legendary King of Britain, depicted in his 12th-century work *History of the Kings of Britain*. According to his genealogy of the British dynasty, Lear's reign would have occurred around the 8th century BC. Shakespeare's version of Monmouth's story of Lear thus definitely possesses all the main traits of his history plays.

The plot of the play revolves around King Lear who puts his three daughters to a love test in order to make a decision on how to divide the kingdom after he retreats. Simultaneously, we follow the subplot revolving around Gloucester and his treatment of his sons. Ultimately, the play speaks about the impact of destructive patriarchal authorities, precisely the way the fathers cripple their children. Without focusing more on the interpretation of the play, we would like to centre on the role of its marginal characters in order to illustrate the thesis of their subversive resistance to the voices of authority. The core scene of the play (Act 3, scene 7) is the one in which we witness the blinding of Gloucester. Goneril and Regan are led by an almost automatic instinct towards violence. This scene was later used by a modern playwright Edward Bond as a basis for his modern rewriting of the play. Ironically, the inhumanity of Goneril and Regan serves the purpose of the author's comment on the way children void of motherly affection are brought up: the pattern of behaviour seen on the part of their fathers is repeated over and over again and deeds of violence are performed for their own sake.

However, although it seems that no one can confront the expedience of power-crazy Goneril and Regan, Shakespeare offers an alternative to their system of values. Aside from Cordelia, Edgar, Kent and other honourable characters, they are presented through the characters of three unnamed servants who risk their lives in order to stop their lords from becoming allies to their deluded wives. Again, as is the case with the unnamed murderers from *Richard III*, the mere fact that they do not have concrete names serves the purpose of letting the

audience and readers know that literally anyone from the social pyramid, if willing, has to offer resistance to the madness of the powerful and mighty. The act of resistance has to start on an individual level so that it can impact the global subversion of the dominant ideology. Thus, the First Servant prevents his lord Cornwall to taint his soul with the blinding of Gloucester. The moment he speaks “Hold your hand my lord”, Regan takes a sword and murders him. The Second and Third Servants follow the old Earl, fetch flax and whites of eggs for his wounds and dispute on this vicious deed. The Third Servant generalises on violence: “If Regan live long/ and in the end, meet the old course of death/ women will all turn monsters” (Shakespeare, 1960, 3, 7, 115–116). These loyal servants show genuine concern for injustice and failure of the supposed institutions of justice in their society, which is the initial stage in nay-saying to authorities.

Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is a history play with the strongest element of patriotism displayed through the monologues of the Chorus present before every act of the play. For instance, the Chorus depicts England as a “model to inward greatness, like a little body with a mighty heart” (Shakespeare, 1959, 2, Prologue). And although the Chorus introduces the King and presents him as an ideal prince, doing exactly what a military leader should do, passing among his men in disguise before the decisive battles, he treats them all alike “brothers, friends and countrymen” (Shakespeare, 1959, 4, Prologue), Shakespeare creates a marginal character, the common soldier Williams, who scratches beneath appearances and exposes the hypocrisy of the beloved King. Soldier William has the function of revealing the subversive elements and wisdom of the common folk.

Allegedly, the King pleads for equality with common soldiers, he denies the existence of any sort of hierarchy and propagates universal brotherhood. However, he wears a mask when he is in contact with his soldiers, and there is also an obvious tone of snobbery pervading his comments that allude to the idea that kings are superior beings, on a different plane of existence from common people whose “gross brains” make them little better than animals (Shakespeare, 1959, 4, 1, 88). Though the unity of his fellow Englishmen is a dominant theme in Henry’s speeches before Harfleur and Agincourt, it also represents the acknowledgment of distinctions in rank and birth, whereby king Henry paradoxically both asserts and denies hierarchy. During the St. Crispin’s Day monologue, the King even goes a step further and declares that all who join him in battle will turn into gentlemen, sealed as one in the bond of brotherhood, united in blood (Shakespeare, 1959, 4, 3, 94–95). Soon,

after the battle at Agincourt (1415) and brutal killings of the prisoners of war, hierarchy is reestablished: only the names of princes, nobles, barons, lords are read as casualties, attentively arranged in descending order of rank, carefully kept distinct from common men whose names appear nowhere (Shakespeare, 1959, 4, 8).

Soldier Williams who engaged in a sort of quarrel with the King when he was wearing his mask and whom he promised a duel if they survive the battle at Agincourt, finds himself in a difficult situation: he is supposed to engage in a duel with the King which, according to the laws of England, would immediately be treated as an act of treason. The King offers him some money to forget about their incident. William's response to the King's solution is not at all subordinate: it is surly and unwilling to be treated patronisingly, "I will none of your money" (Shakespeare, 1959, 4, 8, 110). This is a lonely, marginalised voice in the play, offering utmost resistance to the dominant ideology of Henry V.

Thus, according to Dollimore and Sinfield, this play represents a variant of Greenblatt's containment thesis: "Though the play betrays inherent stability in the ideology it subserves, its fundamental aim is the legitimisation of warfare and the authoritarian state" (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985: 210). This point of view has been accepted by Fernie who exemplifies it by quoting certain newspaper excerpts:

Since the events of September 11, Bush has undergone a transformation as dramatic as anything in Shakespeare. Gravity, moral seriousness, stature, authority – all have descended upon him like a mantle. Prince Hal has become Henry V.

Now to be sure, he has not won his Agincourt, but he has set sail, and for that the country can be grateful. (Fernie, 2007: 99)

These newspaper headlines merely show that "the recourse of supporters of that war to Henry V just makes the resemblance of their 'War on Terror' to the terrorism it opposes more clear. With famine, sword and fire straining at his leash, Henry is exactly a figure and bringer of terror" (Fernie, 2007: 117).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The guiding idea of this article is that Shakespeare purposefully inserted certain marginal characters in his plays in order to present an important opposition to the power-craving aspirations of their ideological authorities. Thus, the role of the nameless servants in *King*

Lear, nameless murderers in *Richard III* and soldier Williams in *Henry V* are here particularly discussed. These marginal characters share a disobedient attitude towards their superiors. They do not follow the voice of authority, but the voice of conscience. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a profound personal loss that they eventually suffer as a consequence of individual actions, they remain faithful to initial personal resolutions. For Shakespeare, the rebellion against dominant ideology is a valid possibility and, as his marginal characters demonstrate, it has to start at the individual level in order to inspire a global act of resistance. This further indicates that Shakespeare aimed at subversion and not glorification of Tudor's Golden Age. As Leggatt claims, "we may suspect that behind all the pomp and grandeur, even the tragedy, there is an author playing tricks with us" (2005: 215).

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ŠEKSPIROVI MARGINALNI LIKOVI: ALTERNATIVA
DOMINANTNOJ IDEOLOGIJI DINASTIJE TJUDOR

Rezime

Rad se bavi istraživanjem uloge marginalnih likova u Šekspirovim dramama, koji pružaju validnu alternativu aspiracijama ka moći svojih ideoloških autoriteta. U uvodnom delu rada daje se širi istorijsko-kulturni kontekst renesansnog pokreta u elizabetanskoj Engleskoj, perioda u kome je Šekspir pisao svoje drame, a naročito se ističe dualni aspekt ovog pokreta i naglašavaju istovremeno njegove optimističke i skeptičke tendencije. U narednom delu rada govori se o Šekspirovom „istorijskom čulu”, konceptu koji je definisao Eliot, a koji se primenjuje u analizi Šekspirovih drama kroz isticanje neizbežnih podudarnih veza između istorije zapadne civilizacije i trenutka u kome je Šekspir stvarao svoja dela. Ovi teorijski uvidi primenjuju se u analizi funkcije bezimenih ubica u *Ričardu III*, bezimenih sluga u *Kralju Liru* i vojnika Viljamsa iz drame *Henri V*. Zajednički sadržitelj ovih marginalnih likova ogleda se u činjenici da se oni voljno suprotstavljaju naređenjima svojih pretpostavljenih i neizostavno odlučuju da slede glas sopstvene savesti, a ne glas autoriteta. Šekspir uvodi likove marginalaca u svoje drame kako bi pokazao da svaka pobuna protiv dominantne ideologije mora da započne na individualnom nivou kako bi uticala i inspirisala globalni čin otpora. Naša ideja jeste da pokažemo da se Šekspir zapravo zalagao za subverziju, a ne za glorifikaciju zlatnog doba Tjudora. Teorijski okvir rada zasniva se na kritičkim uvidima Grinblata, Eliota, Legata, Rudnitskog, Fernija i drugih.

Ključne riječi: marginalni likovi, Zlatno doba Tjudora, subverzija, glorifikacija, alternativa, otpor