

Politics and Romance in Shakespeare's Four Great Tragedies

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*Dedicated to I.A. & R.O. Usongo:
Exemplary parents*

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CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXTUALISING SHAKESPEARE

From time immemorial, humankind has always striven to improve on his or her lot. Human beings are hardly contented with what they have, so they are constantly on the move, struggling to change their situations either for better or worse. The tendency in humans to always search for new ventures shows that humankind is a complex being with a strong desire for adventure. As a result of the enthusiasm manifested by humans towards change, there is the idea that even if people were provided with the basic needs of life such as food, shelter, health, and clothing, it would still be difficult to persuade them to part with the urge for adventure. The strong desire to know more and to acquire more is vindication of the fact that humans are rarely contented with what they already possess. There are times when some people, in an attempt to ameliorate their condition, inadvertently undertake tasks that ironically culminate in their downfall. At other times, some people embrace certain actions that greatly improve on their status.

Bearing in mind the different human impulses that activate action, we can say, a priori, that humans hardly understand their true conditions; neither do they value the little in their possession till it is taken away from them. This seemingly inordinate passion in some people to acquire more things or to initiate change in status can be termed ambition. If we take our minds to the Garden of Eden in the Bible, it is clearly demonstrated that Adam's downfall, and consequently that of humankind, was the result of an ambitious impulse. Adam, through the prompting of Eve, almost like the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, had wanted to arrogate to himself the status of God. Unfortunately, his action ended up as a boomerang, resulting in the deterioration of his condition.

John Reynolds, in his collection of histories—*The Triumphs of God's Revenge, Against the Crying, and Execrable Sinne of Murther* (1639) — that dwells on passions that lead human beings to evil, admits that

we shall finde that Ambition, Revenge, and Murther, have ever proved fallall crimes to their undertakers: for they are vices which so eclipse our judgements, and darken our understandings, as we shall not onely see with

griefe, but finde with repentance, that they will bring us shame for glory, affliction for content, and misery for felicity.¹

According to Reynolds, it is generally unprofitable to nurture and sustain feelings of revenge, criminality, or immoderate ambition because of the danger inherent in them. This perception certainly describes Shakespeare's characters. The political and romantic impulses of his protagonists can lead them to skip the natural order of things. Their desires can be so intense that the protagonists can embrace evil, which entails the use of any means, usually foul, to accomplish them. Among some of the things pushing these characters to be ambitious can be cravings for honours, wealth, love, power, and influence. The temptation for these attributes can militate in favour of evil, which A.C. Bradley argues "exhibits itself everywhere as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death. It isolates, disunites, and tends to annihilate not only its opposite but itself."²

Political and romantic ambition in the characters can sometimes be initiated by their actions or by circumstances apparently beyond their control. The latter situation is seemingly the case of Macbeth, who is unable to resist the temptations of the witches and Lady Macbeth. However, some characters do not need external motivation, as they ignore goodness or virtue in their bids to achieve set goals. Claudius, Edmund, and Iago fall under this category. In Shakespearean tragedy, it is often the negative side of political and romantic ambition that seems to interest the protagonists. However, there is nothing morally wrong with being ambitious. Unfortunately, a problem arises when, as in the case of Shakespearean tragedy, ambition coheres with ruthlessness, evil, and impatience, resulting in death, destruction, and chaos.

Aside from Shakespeare's drama, history is replete with instances of individuals driven by their passions. For example, Germany's primordial role in the events leading to World War II was in line with Adolf Hitler's extreme ambition to dominate the entire universe. Also, the numerous military coups that the African continent has witnessed since the 1960s—Gnassingbe Eyadema (1935-2005) of Togo, Macias Nguema (1924-1979) of Equatorial Guinea, and Idi Amin Dada (1925-2003) of Uganda—the period when most of the countries became independent, cannot be divorced from the inordinate desires of military officers to wield power. In like manner, the continuous clinging to power by certain leaders, particularly in Africa, cannot be dissociated from the burning ambition to exert authority, even against the wishes of the majority.

The Bible itself reminds us about excessive ambition through the character of Nebuchadnezzar, who thought that he was the most powerful

king and decided to put Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in a furnace because they refused to worship the god Baal. Nebuchadnezzar was, of course, punished by God to live in a jungle for seven years.

In *Doctor Faustus*, a play by Christopher Marlowe, Faustus sets out to live eternally and be able to raise the dead to life. He also wants to be a demi-god through the practice of magic. Below is a summary of Faustus's excessive desires:

Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
 Resolve me of all ambiguities,
 Perform what desperate enterprise I will?
 I'll have them fly to India for gold,
 Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
 And search all corners of the new-found world
 For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.
 I'll have them read me strange philosophy
 And tell the secrets of all foreign kings.
 I'll have them wall all Germany with brass
 And make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg.
 I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,
 Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad.
 I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,
 And chase the Prince of Parma from our land,
 And reign sole king of all the province.³

Faustus's desires are definitely extreme, and one can only imagine how soon he will overreach himself. With the assistance of Mephostophilis, he is able to perform several magical feats: they disguise as cardinals and secure the release of Bruno. Faustus turns invisible and causes consternation in the banquet by snatching the Pope's dainty, meat, glass of wine, and punches him. Before the German emperor, Faustus conjures images of the late Alexander and his wife; he makes horns grow on the head of the skeptical Benvolio, makes them disappear, and appear again when Benvolio waylays him.

When the moment of reckoning comes, and Faustus is supposed to surrender his soul to the devil, he is full of remorse and questions why he signed such a cruel bond with Lucifer. He overreaches himself during twenty-four years, yet he is unwilling to face the reality of his situation that entails eternal damnation. He is reluctant to accept the truth that since he has abjured and blasphemed God, he must be ready to sacrifice his soul to Satan. Mephostophilis aptly sums up Faustus's situation in this memorable line: "Fools that will laugh on earth must weep in hell" (5.2.98). This statement is vindication of the fact that Faustus has

throughout been living a vain life in spite of the magic for which he is famed. He had flirted with the devil, taking him for a friend and the result is damnation for Faustus. His unfettered ambition ruined him.

Marlowe also explores the issue of ambition in other plays. For example, in *The Jew of Malta*, Barabbas, the wealthy Jew, outsmarts himself. Although he has a bone of contention with the Christians of Malta for hating and exploiting his Jewish brothers, Barabbas plans to eliminate all his enemies. First, he plots the deaths of the two Christian friars seeking to marry his daughter. Second, when his daughter turns Christian, he strangles her. Barabbas also kills a monk and poisons an entire nunnery. His ambition to dominate the politics of Malta makes him greedy as a pike, cruel as a cat, and artful as a wilderness of monkeys, culminating in his downfall.⁴

In addition to the great tragedies, political ambition is also Shakespeare's major concern in his history plays: *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and the Roman play, *Julius Caesar*. The history plays are generally regarded as Tudor propaganda, aimed at warning English people about the dangers of civil war. These works also indicate how the playwright grapples with the issue of Machiavellianism, as well as questions attempts to challenge established authority. In *Richard II*, for example, Richard's reign is marked by brutality and fear. He is so ruthless that he invokes the powers of nature to destroy his adversaries:

Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies,
And when they from thy bosom pluck a flower
Guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder
Whose double tongue may with a mortal touch
Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies.⁵

In the above speech, Richard underscores the sovereignty of the king by invoking the destruction of forces that stand in the way of monarchical authority, which is assumed to be beyond reproach from the ruled.

Richard II's counterpart, Richard III, prays for the death of King Edward in order to have the world entirely for him to bustle in. When Anne accuses him of killing her husband, he callously responds that he helped in sending the late king's soul to heaven. When she retorts that Richard's crimes make him fit for hell, he foregrounds his romantic craving by stating that he is fit for her bed. Richard adds that he was driven into killing King Edward because of the beauty of Anne, to whom he wants to present a better husband in himself. He also convinces Anne to accept a ring from him as a token of his love.

Like Macbeth, Richard has his thugs, the murderers, whom he assigns to eliminate his opponents. His order for the execution of Clarence, whom he says is well spoken of, reminds us about Banquo's nobility of character that casts a shadow over Macbeth. Immediately after Richard is crowned king, he sets out to murder his rivals, notably Young Edward who is the rightful heir. Moreover, at the order of Richard, Dighton and Forrest are killed. According to Queen Margaret, Richard's atrocities portray him as a grand tyrant of the world. He also persuades Queen Elizabeth to hand over her daughter to him in order to satisfy his romantic drives.

In a sense, both Richard III and Macbeth are soldiers and usurpers who become kings through treason and murder. Perfidy, violence, and tyranny are common to both of them. Richard is utterly destitute of sentiments, as he is insensitive to the piety of the king, the innocence of babies, and the bond of marriage. His actions are not occasional, but spring from a savageness of nature as he appears to take delight in crimes. While Macbeth's ambition results essentially from vanity which is flattered and satisfied by the splendour of a throne, Richard's is founded on his ruling passion for power.⁶ Richard feels no remorse for his deeds and does not fear discovery of his evil. He needs no one to prompt his evil but wades through a series of crimes to the height of his ambition from the ungovernable violence of his temper and delight in mischief. Blood to him is a pastime. He can be seen as a pragmatist, a determined villain who is wholly consumed by his selfish goals, regardless of whether he hurts other people as he pursues his dreams.

In the words of L.C. Knight, *Julius Caesar* is a powerful study of one of the sources of illusion in public life; particularly, it is a study of the distortion of a complex actuality by an abstracting, simplifying habit of mind, working in the interests, not of life, but of "reasons of state."⁷ Thus, Cassius convinces Brutus into believing that in killing Caesar, they are saving republican ideals of freedom and democracy whereas selfish political motives underlie their action to eliminate Caesar. Brutus, on his part, is deluded in his attempt to make the political world independent of that of the living:

O that we then could come by Caesar's spirit
And not dismember Caesar! But (alas)
Caesar must bleed for it. And gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully.
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.⁸

Brutus is reminded by Cassius of the former's ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, who drove the tyrannical Tarquin from Rome and helped to establish the first republic. However, Brutus is conscious of Caesar's love for him and his own love to Caesar, but he justifies the assassination of Caesar in the following words to the Roman people: "not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved/ Rome more" (3.2.21-22). His motives for joining the conspiracy are essentially pure. He is even against the swearing of an oath of allegiance among the conspirators because this would "stain/ The even virtue of our enterprise" (2.1.131-32). He also protests against the planned killing of Antony on the grounds that this would turn what he perceives as a ritual sacrifice into bloody butchery.

Unfortunately for the conspirators, when Caesar is killed, they appear to lose control of events. The undoing of the conspirators is essentially Brutus's lack of political hindsight or precisely his impeccable reputation that is void of personal ambition. He misjudges the political scene by sparing the life of Antony and underestimating Antony's rhetorical skills in allowing him to address the mob during Caesar's funeral. Perhaps the political ambition of the conspirators would have been achieved had Antony been barred from speaking to the masses. In addition, the conspirators might not have been killed had Brutus not insisted on marching to Philippi. However, they are caught up by the law of Karma; they are destroyed because of their selfish political motives that do not win approval within Rome.

The essential question that interests us is the basis of political and romantic ambition: are the characters aggrieved or slighted for one reason or the other and, consequently, nurse ambitious tendencies? Or, are the characters inherently ambitious and are ready to employ any means in order to realise their goals? In this study, it would seem that political power devolves into romantic power. Generally, once the characters have achieved their political objectives, they set out to consolidate their romance. And romance is displayed in the way that some of the actions of the characters are influenced, or even dictated by their loved ones, or those whose love is sought. The common denominator between politics and romance is power, which implies the ability to influence, through mainly persuasion and flattery, the beliefs, emotions, and behaviours of others. Power can be classified, according to John French and Bertram Raven, under five main categories, namely, coercive power (the use of threats and punishments); reward power (using rewards to influence compliance); legitimate power (authority); expert power (possessing specialist knowledge and skills); and referent power (personal power or charisma and this emanates from the high regard in which a person is held). Even though

French's and Raven's analysis of power is social, it can also be political. Shakespeare's protagonists manifest, in varying degrees, some of these facets of power.

Whatever conclusions that may arrive at regarding power, it is important to note that its political and romantic ramifications can hardly be predicted. These drives are like a current of wind which, once in motion, is difficult to control or estimate its spread. Political and romantic ambition can rarely remain prosperous or victorious throughout. Those who project it are often destroyed in due process. The principle of causality fully operates within this realm. For example, Faustus pays for his magical feats with his life; Barabbas dies in a trap that he designed for his benefactor; Edmund is justifiably killed by Edgar; Iago is exposed as a villain, and he looks forward to a long incarceration or even execution; Brutus and Cassius commit suicide; Claudius is killed by Hamlet; and Macbeth is decapitated by Macduff while Lady Macbeth takes away her own life. In all these cases, justice and divine retribution reign supreme.

Elizabethan and Jacobean England

Elizabethan and Jacobean England generally paid particular attention to certain beliefs. For instance, the concept of the Chain of Being, which was conceptualised by the quattrocento Neo-Platonists of Italy, was still upheld in the 16th-century, although scientists like Galileo, through the telescope, disproved the concept of a Ptolemaic universe. According to the Chain of Being, the world was conceived of, by philosophers and scientists, in the form of a chain that connected humans with God. It was also held that all created things were closely linked and arranged in a uniform pattern to reflect a defined hierarchy that was thought of in the semblance of a chain, hence the appellation the Great Chain of Being. According to E.M.W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, there were six main links or classes in the chain of creation. At the top of this ladder was found God, the source of everything. Beneath him was the class of angels who were divided into other groups, namely, Seraphs, Cherubs, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. In this regard, the highest form of an angel was a Seraph, and the lowest was a real angel. The third class comprised humans, where the Emperor or King lorded over his subjects. The fourth class was made up of animals while the fifth class grouped flowers and plants, all of which constituted the vegetative class. At the bottom of the chain was found the inanimate class that embodied things which had mere

existence, without life and sensitivity. Here could be found rocks, minerals, liquids, and metals.

Indeed, the concept of the Chain of Being was accepted by many educated people, although the rise of Francis Bacon's new science in the 16th and 17th -centuries was in reaction against this philosophy. Bacon's scientific method was designed to investigate fundamental premises through inductive inference. It implied a return to source material in order to draw conclusions. Therefore, Bacon insisted on observation as fundamental to constructing scientific theory. He argued that what the sciences required was "a form of induction which takes experience apart and analyses it, and forms necessary conclusions on the basis of appropriate exclusions and rejections."⁹ According to Arthur O. Lovejoy, the Chain of Being, as regards its continuity and completeness, was "a perfect example of an absolutely rigid and static scheme of things"¹⁰ in that it represented more the Middle Ages rather than the Renaissance, the "dark ages" when the Catholic Church controlled all cultural beliefs. Commenting on the metaphor of the Chain of Being, Tillyard says that it

served to express the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unflinching order, and its ultimate unity. The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another: there could be no gap.¹¹

The Elizabethans, Tillyard continues, looked at the world at this time as being in a special order, kept rigorously by God. In the human world, the King or ruler was superior to all other subjects. This hierarchy was understood and accepted by the common people. It was generally believed that if one of the links in the Great Chain were destroyed, then the system was bound to fail. This belief made the King central on earth and he was seen as the direct representative of God on earth, and answerable only to God alone, although the Catholic Church placed the Pope above the King. Earlier on, precisely before the reign of Elizabeth I, Henry VIII had attempted to remove the Pope from the Chain. Through the common laws of 1529 and the first Act of Supremacy (1534), Henry curbed pluralism and absenteeism on the part of clerics, as well as established his control over the English Church. He also made himself head of the English Church in place of the Pope and introduced parliamentary legislation on ecclesiastical matters. Henry exerted considerable influence on the church by bestowing the title of vicar-general on Thomas Cromwell to run church affairs on the King's behalf.¹² The behaviour of the King reflects the

appropriation of the spiritual metaphor for political propaganda.

Any disruption to the established order of creation, as stipulated in the Elizabethan line of thought, was believed to be able to provoke disorder and its repercussions could be felt widely. Shakespeare seems to observe this ethical code in the great tragedies. In *Macbeth*, for instance, the murder of King Duncan generates disorder. The disorder is noted in Lenox's description of the night in which Duncan is killed:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
 Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
 Lamentings heard i'th'air, strange screams of death,
 And prophesying with accents terrible
 Of dire combustion and confused events,
 New hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird
 Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
 Was feverous and did shake.¹³

In the eyes of an average Elizabethan, these happenings meant that order was disrupted and chaos was dictating the pace of events. Therefore, people needed to be obedient and respectful to their rulers in order to ensure peace and stability.

Indeed, some critics like James Daly in "The Idea of Absolute Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century England" argue that the ideology of divine right did not confer absolutism on kings, but rather placed them within the spectrum of the Great Chain of Being, advising leaders to be humanists in their rule. In this regard, Richard Hooker, in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, envisions divine authority as natural, rational, and necessary for the fulfilment of basic human needs. However, the King is also subject to the law, which was defined as natural and divine. According to Harold Nicolson in *Kings, Courts and Monarchy*, emperors and kings felt obliged to strengthen their claims to supremacy or independence by invoking the idea of the supernatural as enshrined in kingship.¹⁴

In a display of Elizabethan concern with order, there have been speculations about the involvement of Shakespeare with threats of rebellion in Elizabeth's reign, fuelled by controversy over the revision of *Richard II*. In this regard, David M. Bergeron disapproves the idea that Shakespeare had to revise his play in order to avoid staging the deposition scene before Elizabeth. Bergeron argues that the charge of political censorship of the play is unfounded, without credible evidence.¹⁵ For his part, Kristian Smidt, in *Unconformities in Shakespeare's History Plays*, avers that *Richard II* underwent various phases of conception and it is

possible that Shakespeare may have only added the deposition scene at a date after Elizabeth watched a performance of the play, although this suggestion is questionable on the grounds that the play followed the Tudor myth behind the histories commissioned by Elizabeth at the time. These various speculations seem to underscore the political appropriation of divine laws by monarchs to maintain power.

Elizabeth's successor, James I, also took up ideas of respect for the monarchy and its sovereignty over everybody, including the church. As a result, in *The Political Works of James I*, he addressed the British parliament in 1609 thus:

Kings are iustly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine power vpon earth: For if you wil consider the Attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a King. God hath power to create, or destroy, make, or vnmake at his pleasure, to giue life, or send death, to iudge all and to be iudged nor accomptable to none: To raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soule and body due. And the like power haue Kings.¹⁶

The above speech shows James's concern with asserting his authority within his kingdom, reminding his subjects of the sanctity of the monarch. Moreover, John Neville Figgis holds that, being of Scottish origin, James sought a legitimist principle for how to secure himself on the English throne and to stop the dominance of theology in politics and issues of spirituality.¹⁷

From a different perspective, the Elizabethan conception of the universe was generally philosophical. It was believed that the universe was made up of a number of concentric spheres, the outermost inhabited by God while the innermost harboured the moon and the earth. It was also held that everything in the created world, human beings inclusive, was made up of four elements: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire that stood for melancholy, phlegm, blood, and choler respectively.¹⁸ This view of the universe was also, as mentioned earlier, a reflection of the Ptolemaic system. Claudius Ptolemy (c. AD 90-c. 168), a Greek astronomer who spent most of his life in Alexandria, Egypt, argued that the earth was the centre of the universe because "it has the ratio of a point to the sphere of the fixed stars; and it has no motion from place to place."¹⁹ His geocentric theory was challenged by later scientists partly on the grounds that if the earth were the centre of the universe, then the stars ought to be different in brightness because they would not be equidistant from the earth.

Among those who criticised the Ptolemaic system were scholars such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). The former, a Polish astronomer, proposed a heliocentric theory that rejected

the idea of the earth being central in the universe. Instead, according to him, the earth was spherical and revolved around the sun. Unfortunately, Copernicus's theory did not gain much publicity because it was at odds with Catholic theology that placed the earth at the centre of the solar system. For his part, Galileo, the Italian astronomer and physicist, used a telescope to observe the universe. From his findings, Galileo supported the heliocentric theory of Copernicus that stressed the idea that the planets, including the earth, revolved around the sun, which was fixed.

Other embodiments of the belief system in Elizabethan England include the arts of Astrology, Alchemy or Medicine, which were thought to affect human behaviour or character. According to Tillyard, human beings born under different planets were assumed to have specific conditions of the body and the mind. For instance, those born under Jupiter tended to be fair, handsome, honest, and generous; those given birth under Mars were likely to be tall and thin, and given to revenge, rebellion, and anger; the planet Saturn accounted for prudence and the pursuit of knowledge, but humans conceived under its evil aspect were generally ugly, slow, and melancholic; Mercury made some people wise, eloquent, and subtle; Venus was thought to make its offspring fair, graceful, voluptuous, and interested in music and singing; and those born under the sign of the Sun were cheerful, truthful, handsome, and religious. The moon was believed to govern the humours of the body and influence the brain. These astrological descriptions had to do with theories about an imbalance in the "humours" of the blood.

Influenced by ideas from Classical times, some Elizabethans and Jacobeans held that other planets were directly affected by the position of the moon, which was seen as the major agent of change in the 'sublunary' world. At whatever stage of life, the stars were thought to be continuously influencing human behaviour. Thus, change or mutability ruled the world beneath the moon. Such change was conceived in the form of the Wheel of Fortune, derived from Greek mythology and the goddess Fortuna, and was used by some dramatists of this period to represent the changing fortunes of their tragic heroes. As a result, the human mind is perceived as a victim of external circumstances which impinge on behaviour. According to Cumberland Clark in *Shakespeare and Science*, Shakespeare tends to associate certain aspects of the mind with nature. For example, anger, worry, or fear is represented by a storm, hurricane, thunder, or lightning. Evil and criminal acts often take place in the night.²⁰ This leads Lily Campbell to conclude in *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* that Shakespeare is primarily concerned with passion rather than action; she also indicates that Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth, for example, are made by Shakespeare to

express their grief, jealousy, wrath, and fear, respectively, through their interactions with supernatural agencies.

A careful study of Shakespearean tragedy reveals that the plays seem to follow a clearly defined pattern. The first impression one gets from them is that there seems to be a supernatural element rousing the characters into action. This leaves the spectator with the feeling that the action appears to have been elaborately outlined and the protagonists simply pursue the line of action already delineated. The point that I am making here is that there is an apparent sense of inevitability which drives the heroes and heroines towards their destiny and the events towards their conclusion. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet* validate this proposition. Each of these plays was influenced by the dominant ideology of Elizabethan and Jacobean England—the doctrine of the divine right of the kings, which stipulated that a subject should neither contest nor usurp the power of the king. The king exercised absolute and incontestable powers. As pointed out earlier, any attempt at usurpation was seen as high treason and an attempt to introduce disharmony to the Great Chain of Being.

An important feature of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* is that the evil characters therein suffer from greed. John Milton aptly remarks in *Paradise Lost* that though you take from a covetous man all his treasure, he has yet one jewel left: you cannot deprive him of his covetousness. Similarly, Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Monk's Tale* forewarns humankind against the temptation of trusting too much in fortune or materialism because this can bring about the downfall of whoever trusts in it:

In Tragic Manner I will now lament
 The griefs of those who stood in high degree
 And fell at last with no expedient
 To bring them out of their adversity.
 For sure it is, if Fortune wills to flee,
 No man may stay her course or keep his hold;
 Let no one trust a blind prosperity.
 Be warned by these examples, true and old.²¹

In the preface to his book, *The Theatre of God's Judgements*, Thomas Beard affirms that punishment follows sin as a shadow doth the body. He insists on the intervention of God in the affairs of human beings, dismissing the notion of chance and reaffirming that the punishment of people is according to their demerits. Beard records God's judgements and analyses them on the basis of sins committed: blasphemy, murder,

adultery, and others. In this regard, the evil characters in Shakespeare's drama who endorse the idea of *radix malorum est cupidus*, or greed being the greatest evil pay for their deeds in one way or the other.

Unlike the case of Shakespeare's sonnets where lovers overcome emotional hurdles to achieve more passionate love, this is hardly the situation in the tragedies. In the universe of Shakespearean tragedy, Norman Rabkin argues, in "On *Macbeth*," that human behaviour is governed by unknown forces from within and without. Put differently, Shakespeare was not only concerned with what happens to humans but he was equally preoccupied with what happens in the human mind. As a result, Shakespeare's tragic characters undergo experiences that challenge their integrity, as reflected in the actions of Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear. Rabkin also sees the influence of the metaphysical in the tragedies and this, he states, makes the future of the characters highly unpredictable. He avers that if we may learn from Shakespeare's redactors that the unconscious figures more in Shakespeare's elaboration of character, we must also learn that the ultimate ineffability of human motivation is a reflection of meaning in Shakespearean tragedy.²²

Much has been written and continues to be published on the works of Shakespeare. Scholars have explored his biography in an attempt to amply document the life of this prodigious artist whose artistic impact on the world appears unrivalled. Criticism abounds on his characters, themes, imagery, and language: from A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, F.R. Leavis's *The Common Pursuit* to J.R. Brown's *Shakespeare's Dramatic Style*.

Although the analysis of political and romantic motives of Shakespeare's major characters is not pioneering, having been undertaken by critics such as L.C. Knight in *Some Shakespearean Themes*, issues of politics and romance surrounding the actions of the protagonists have hardly been examined congruently and recognised as a common feature in the great tragedies. My focus on the political and romantic motifs in these plays is not so much because of the palpating and captivating nature of these themes, but because these issues have not been given sufficient critical attention. Themes in Shakespearean tragedy have often been analysed in a particular manner: either a critic identifies a theme in order to ground his or her explanation of the behavioural patterns of some of the characters, or he or she isolates the themes as recurrent issues that preoccupy Shakespeare. This critical approach is embraced by critics such as Irving Ribner in *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* and Robert Ornstein in *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*. The present investigation shifts from this traditional perspective by examining the political and romantic forces

in the great tragedies as intersecting, and as tempting sirens that lure the protagonists to their destruction. Together, political and romantic motives constitute the excessive ambition of Shakespeare's main characters in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*. And political and romantic motifs, as shall be demonstrated in the discussion, are interrelated; they feed into each other and underlie the actions of the protagonists.

The choice of political and romantic concerns as the focal point of this book is not accidental. We are living in a capricious world; a world that is continuously being plunged into evil; a world that can be traumatising and frustrating; a world in which survival implies that people have to be cautious in their endeavours because of the trappings of life. Consequently, one needs to be careful with the numerous people masquerading as friends because, among them, there can be vicious persons who surreptitiously plot against one's life. This was the misfortune of Lear, Othello, and Duncan, for example, who unwittingly gave handshakes to leopards and received fatal embraces in return. Hence, their experiences appear to caution us to be vigilant in our interactions with other people because humans can be generous in spirit, as well as malicious.

Lear, Duncan, and Othello, for example, are all unsuspecting and generous men who take people at face value. As King of Britain, Lear naively takes the decision to share out his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, in proportion to the love that each professes to him. His ignorance drives him into sending away the honest Cordelia while trusting in the diabolical Goneril and Regan. Unfortunately for him, these dog-hearted daughters plot against him. Similarly, Gloucester falls prey to the machinations of Edmund, and the latter convinces the former to confide in him (Edmund) while discrediting the virtuous Edgar. Gloucester's subsequent blinding and peripatetic lifestyle are sanctioned by Edmund. For his part, Duncan, King of Scotland, treats his subjects fairly. So benevolent is the king that when he notices the tremendous service to the kingdom by Macbeth, who gallantly overcomes Macdonwald and the rebellious Norwegians, he does not hesitate to pay him tribute. He promotes him to Thane of Cawdor, but the latter betrays Duncan's trust, egged on by his politically ambitious wife, Lady Macbeth, the witches, and his own ambition of becoming king.

Granted that Shakespeare also explores politics in the history plays, the decision to analyse the political and romantic motives of the leading characters in the Four Great Tragedies is partly influenced by the fact that these tragedies possess certain qualities that appear lacking in other plays of Shakespeare. The history plays dramatise generations of medieval power struggles, recreating historical events such as the Hundred Years

War and the War of Roses between the Houses of York and Lancaster. Although based on medieval England, the plays also shed light on Elizabethan and Jacobean society in terms of, for example, social setup and politics.

This present investigation cannot do full justice to the range of issues raised in the history plays and the great tragedies simultaneously, hence my decision to limit the analysis to the tragedies not because the histories are lacking in motifs, but mainly because the former category of plays appear more balanced and dramatically engaging than the latter. In other words, unlike the case of the great tragedies that are more cosmopolitan in conception, the history plays appear particularised, written especially to honour specific historical figures. On the ideological level, while the history plays seem to gesture towards monarchical authority or the inability to successfully rebel against political institutions, the great tragedies, even though grounded in the concept of the divine right of kings, indicate possibilities, albeit short-lived, of revolting against the status quo.

Moreover, as Sir Ifor Evans asserts in *A Short History of English Literature*, each of the great tragedies portrays some important figure caught in a difficult situation as a result of a weakness in his or her nature. The destiny of the state seems to depend entirely on his or her line of action. Evans further says that each of the plays is so beautifully constructed that it is capable of appealing and sustaining the interest of different people from various walks of life and who equally have different levels of intelligence.²³ To paraphrase Bradley who takes a pessimistic view of the plays, the great tragedies trace the path of catastrophe and despair. Edward Dowden, in *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*, is philosophical in his remarks that the great tragedies deal with the workings of passion and thought, humour and pathos, severity and tenderness, and knowledge and guess. Above all, the great tragedies, by virtue of the actions of the characters depicted, evoke several emotions in the audience such as attraction, disgust, fear, pity, and horror.

As hinted earlier, the study of political and romantic forces behind the actions of most of Shakespeare's major characters in the Four Great Tragedies is not unprecedented in literary criticism. Several critics have discussed issues of politics and romance in varied ways. For example, in *Shakespeare*, Walter Raleigh points out that it is untrue to state that character is destiny in Shakespeare's tragedies. Such a supposition, Raleigh argues, would downplay the individual will of the characters that are culpable of initiating action. For instance, Othello is not initially a jealous man but he is carried off his feet and blinded by the passion of

love. In like manner, Macbeth is not a murderous politician but he is a person that allows himself to be carried away by events. Lear's misfortune is considerably the result of his peevish and exacting nature. All along, Raleigh insists that the heroes are presented with a choice: Macbeth has to wrestle with his ambition and reputation; Coriolanus has to choose between political power and love; and Brutus has to make a decision between his political hopes and the private ties of humanity.

William Hazlitt, in "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays," draws a contrast between Macbeth and Richard III. Hazlitt points out that while Richard wades through his crimes to the height of his political ambition because of the ungovernable violence of his temper and reckless love of mischief, Macbeth, from time to time, is troubled by his conscience.

Within an analytical frame, A.C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, reproaches not only the heroes for the consequences of their actions but also subscribes to the view that external forces share part of the blame. Another central concern of Bradley is that the protagonists are morally responsible for their deeds; otherwise, they would fail to qualify as tragic heroes. In this regard, Macbeth, Claudius, and Iago shoulder the responsibility for their overbearing ambition.

In *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, first series, Harley Granville-Barker identifies major shortcomings in the tragic heroes that engender their ruin. According to him, Othello suffers from sexual jealousy which, once given rein, is a passion difficult to suppress. He further establishes a link between Othello and Julius Caesar, remarking that Caesar's undoing is due to his obsession with a feeling of invulnerability while Othello is too trusting.

John F. Danby, in *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear*, identifies the political operative parts of human beings as power and curious cunning. Quoting Hobbes who detects the principal cause of quarrel in human nature to be competition, diffidence, and glory—the impulse to acquire, to provide for one's security, and to extend one's prestige—Danby sees these as applicable to Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. The sisters plot each other's death and that of their husbands in order to enjoy the love of Edmund. Unknown to both ambitious sisters, Edmund intends to use their romantic desires to further his political scheme. Thus, it is noted that the division of the kingdom by Lear, the exile of Kent, the banishment of Lear, and the invasion of Britain by France are all politically motivated events.

On the question of moral responsibility, Lily Campbell, in *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, attributes the downfall of Shakespeare's tragic heroes to tragic flaws such as manifestations of extremes of grief, jealousy, wrath, or

fear. By this token, the heroes are depicted as victims of their own actions. Each of the heroes is vulnerable to a particular weakness which drives him towards destruction. Macbeth, for instance, is said to suffer from vaulting ambition and the fear of insecurity; Othello is a victim of sexual jealousy; Lear manifests excessive wrath; and *Hamlet* is portrayed as a tragedy of grief.

Clifford Leech, in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, asserts that the tragic picture of the universe makes allowance for a limited free will. Even though humans cannot determine the pattern of events, they are usually responsible for the initiation of evil. Leech insists that humans exercise control over their thoughts, as evidenced in Hamlet's deferment of the decision to murder Claudius. However, Leech admits that at certain times, it seems as if Shakespeare preordains a pattern of events for his characters. According to Leech, the use of supernatural devices in *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, for example, persuades one into believing that the characters had no alternatives. This implies that the tragic heroes are constantly faced with the disturbing choice of individual responsibility with no satisfactory line of action. Such a scenario, he argues, is typical of Macbeth.

In the same critical trajectory of Campbell, Laurence Lerner, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, identifies major shortcomings of the heroes that are instrumental to their fall. For example, Hamlet's tragedy is explained in terms of his being the victim of an Oedipus complex while Macbeth is primarily to blame for his excessive ambition.

In their book, *Studying Shakespeare*, Martin Stephen and Philip Franks tersely postulate that even though the tragic heroes have certain weaknesses that propel their downfall, there is no denying the fact that external forces directly or indirectly spur the characters into action. A case in point is Macbeth.

Judging from the above discussion, it is evident that there has been limited critical focus on the political and romantic impulses of Shakespeare's major characters. This critical neglect translates into the fact that the tragic effects of the political and romantic drives of the characters have not been adequately explored. As a result, I set out to examine the strong desire for change manifested by the major characters in Shakespeare's Four Great Tragedies. The supposition is that the actions of the central characters in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* have strong political and romantic underpinnings. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Claudius, Iago, King Lear, Edmund, Goneril, and Regan suffer from political and romantic ambition. It will be edifying for us to retrace the forces militating in favour of the political and romantic drives of these

characters and assess the scope and consequences of their ambition.

One of the aims of this discussion will be to re-examine certain conclusions on the characters that have been arrived at by critics. For instance, Bradley's contention that Lear's insanity is unrelated to the tragic conflict in the play shall be revisited. Similarly, Norman Rabkin's affirmation that Shakespeare denies Macbeth even a single line that indicates ambition as the springboard for Macbeth's action shall be reargued. In the case of *Othello*, I shall fathom the character of Iago and reassess S.T. Coleridge's categorical statement that Iago's action is motiveless. My intention is not to justify Iago's scheming. However, in trying to understand the cause of his action, there is a better chance of comprehending his character. Concerning *Macbeth*, I shall debate the suggestion whether Macbeth had nursed ambitious tendencies prior to his encounter with the witches. With regard to *Hamlet*, Claudius's crime of murdering Old Hamlet, wedding the late king's wife, and usurping the Danish throne that legitimately belongs to Hamlet will be useful in demonstrating how cruel the streak of political ambition can be in human nature.

It is also my endeavour to carry out a comparative analysis of the ambitious characters with the view to determining whether or not their actions follow a defined pattern. An attempt will be made to answer questions such as what constitutes the difference between one ambitious character and another, why the one succeeds in his or her objective while the other fails, and the legacy of these characters. Moreover, I intend to examine the actions of Shakespeare's characters against the backdrop of the concept of the divine right of kings and the Machiavellian ideology. However, this study does not intend to focus on a justification of the actions of the politically and romantically ambitious characters. In deciding to analyse the characters in the light of the dominant precepts of the time, there is a better chance of assessing the implications of their deeds. And talking about their actions, the identification of a dominant ambitious trait in a character does not preclude the existence of other impulses.

As I analyse the actions of Shakespeare's protagonists in the Four Great Tragedies, I intend to loosely employ New Historicism and Cultural Materialism as a theoretical foundation for my argument. As a critical theory, New Historicism can be traced to 1980, the year in which Stephen Greenblatt published his influential book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, wherein he affirms that "the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power."²⁴ Although it can be argued that New Historicism

has its antecedents in Stephen Orgel's *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (1975) in which he submits that the reigns of James I and Charles I witnessed the incorporation of the theatre as a political weapon in the interest of the monarch, practitioners of New Historicism generally engage in the practice of "reading literature in relation to history, society and politics."²⁵

On the other hand, Cultural Materialism, the British equivalent of New Historicism, seeks to examine how texts reflect or challenge an ideological position. In other words, this approach looks at how a text relates to the specific institutions of cultural production. History, in this sense, embraces politics, ideology, power, authority, and subversion. British cultural materialists perceive texts as offering resistance to authority. John Brannigan situates the distinction between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in these telling words:

New historicists typically examine the functions and representations of power, and focus on the ways in which power contains any potential subversion. Cultural materialists, to the contrary, look for ways in which defiance, subversion, dissidence, resistance, all forms of political opposition, are articulated, represented and performed. If new historicists aim to describe the operation of power in the past, cultural materialists set out to explore the historical and the contemporary possibilities for subversion.²⁶

Put differently, New Historicism appears to refute the option of successful subversion or change, whereas Cultural Materialism seems to be more open to a plurality of interpretations within a text, intimating also the possibility of change.

Though New Historicism is a convincing theoretical tool, its major pitfall seems to be the assumption that literary works are often true representations of the world view of society. This supposition is hotly contested by historians who see literary works as slices of the history or culture they seek to reflect. Another questionable stance of New Historicism is the tendency to treat all texts as susceptible to ideological manipulation, which may not necessarily be the case. Such a critical position can be totalising as it seeks to interpret literature essentially as avenues of power in the interest of the politically strong, allowing little room for subversion or contestation by the less powerful or privileged.

By the time that we conclude this study, certain illuminating conclusions would have been arrived at. Concerning Iago, what whets his political ambition is the overriding pride with which he seems obsessed. Furthermore, the credulity of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio, all of whom hold Iago in high esteem, works strongly to the latter's advantage.

One success in his schemes pushes him to attempt another, resulting in the expedition of his vicious endeavours. With Macbeth, it is his love for Lady Macbeth and the prophecy of the witches that embolden him. Of course, he is also galvanised into action by his “vaulting ambition” to wear the crown of a king. In order to achieve this, he naively welcomes the prophecy of the witches even though he is not in the line of inheritance. However, Duncan’s public nomination of Malcolm as heir provokes a murderous impulse in Macbeth and strengthens his resolve to eliminate Malcolm, who is now seen as an obstacle to the throne. As D.A. Traversi argues, Macbeth sets out to destroy what he recognises as the source of all the benefits which flow from his person to those who surround him.²⁷

In *Hamlet*, Claudius’s ambition is invigorated by his suspicion of Hamlet plotting against his life. As a result, Claudius clings more to the crown and Gertrude, the fruits of mischief. Likewise, Hamlet’s delay in taking revenge on Claudius is explained by his doubt of the ghost and his philosophical bent of mind. After all, Hamlet’s misgivings on the ghost were also shared by some Elizabethans. According to the ‘Papists,’ adherents to the Pope, ghosts were spirits of departed people languishing in purgatory. In another domain, Ophelia’s death is linked to her forsaken love for Hamlet while the success of Fortinbras’s political ambition is attributed to his ability to strike a balance between passion and reason, an endeavour that rips apart Hamlet’s mind.

Edmund’s political ambition blossoms partially because of the virtues of Edgar that appear to cast a shadow over him. Perhaps Edmund’s nefarious schemes can partly be explained by his embrace, like Iago, of evil. About the fate of Goneril and Regan, it is generally greed, the desire to grasp all, which drives them towards destruction. Both of them are mistrustful and die because of their mistrust of each other.

This study would appear incomplete without a focus on the impact of political and romantic ambition in terms of what moral lessons can be learned from it. Before elaborating on the moral significance of the great tragedies, in particular, and Shakespearean drama, in general, it is important to reconsider some of the discordant views stated by some critics about the moral outlook of Shakespeare’s drama.

In *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), Samuel Johnson opines that Shakespeare sacrifices virtue to convenience and appears to write without any moral purpose. For his part, Bernard McElroy, in *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies*, argues with regard to the plays that statements, moral conclusions, and tragic formulae are not implied and that “Shakespeare’s emphasis is invariably upon the problem rather than the solution, and the substance of his tragedy is not the outcome of the struggle, but the struggle