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APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY AND THE ACCOMPANYING EVIL IN THE FOUR MAJOR SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES ANALYZED THROUGH MACHIAVELLIAN LENS

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Abstract: This paper aim is to determine how far Machiavellian principles have shaped the action of the leading characters in the analyzed plays. It analyzes four major Shakespearean tragedies as being representative of the theme of appearance versus reality. This theme is closely associated with the Machiavellian notion of virtù, or possessing a "flexible disposition", in other words being able to change your behavior from bad to good and vice versa according to circumstances in order for a man of power to achieve "great things". This paper argues that although the analyzed characters follow to a various degree Machiavelli`s precept, all of them fail. Shakespeare it seems, intentionally or unintentionally follows the Biblical message that God punishes the wicked.

Key words: *appearance, reality, evil, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, punishment.*

Introduction

"Everybody sees what you seem to be, few can touch what you are "(Machiavelli, p.285, The Prince.2008)

"But a prince must know how to whitewash (colorare) these attributes perfectly, to be a liar (simulatore) and a hypocrite (dissimulatore)" (Machiavelli, p.281, The Prince. 2008)

According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "The term that best captures Machiavelli's vision of the requirements of power politics is virtù. While the Italian word would normally be translated into English as "virtue", and would ordinarily convey the conventional connotation of moral goodness, Machiavelli obviously means something very different when he refers to the virtù of the prince. In particular, Machiavelli employs the concept of virtù to refer to the range of personal qualities that the prince will find it necessary to acquire in order to "maintain his

state" and to "achieve great things", the two standard markers of power for him. This makes it brutally clear there can be no equivalence between the conventional virtues and Machiavellian virtù. Machiavelli's sense of what it is to be a person of virtù can thus be summarized by his recommendation that the prince above all else must possess a "flexible disposition". That ruler is best suited for office, on Machiavelli's account, which is capable of varying her/his conduct from good to evil and back again "as fortune and circumstances dictate" (Nederman and Bogiaris, 2018).

Niccolò Machiavelli, like Shakespeare, wrote his works during the Renaissance. According to Allesandra Petrina, Lord Morley, "urged Thomas Cromwell to read both this book and the *The Prince*, adding a short description of both, and noting how the *The Prince* in particular was 'surely a good thing for your Lordship and for our Sovereign Lord in Council" (2009, p.14). Petrina cites L. Arnold Weissberger who had noted that "Thanks to the efforts of Gabriel Harvey, Machiavelli's works were first introduced to English writers at the University of Cambridge in 1573" (2000, p.14). K.R. Bartlett states "Morley's recommendation of Machiavelli to Cromwell … offered, in an oblique way, a confirmation of the need for princes occasionally to break their words, as Henry had done with the rebels [of the Pilgrimage of Grace], and a pledge of loyalty to Cromwell's policies and the Henrician reform, despite Morley's own conservative position in matters of religion" (2000, p.77).

John Leslie is attributed the paternity of another instance of writings defending Queen Mary, in which the word 'Machiavellian' takes a more pointed political meaning. He states:

And that is it, that I cal a Machiauellian State & Regiment: where Religion is put behind in the second & last place: where ye civil Policie, I meane, is preferred before it, & not limited by any rules of Religion, but ye Religion framed to serue ye time & policy; wher both by word & example of ye Rulers, ye ruled are taught with euery change of Prince to change also the face of their faith and Religion: where, in apparence and shew only, a Religion is pretended, now one, now an other, they force not greatly which, so that at hart there be none at al: where neither by hope nor feare of ought after this life, men are restrained from any maner vice, nor moued to any vertue what so ever: but where it is free to slaunder, to belie, to forswear, to accuse, to corrupt, to oppresse, to robbe, to inuade, to depose, to imprison, to murther, and to commit euery other outrage, never so barbarous (that promiseth to aduaunce the present Policie in hand) without scruple, feare, or conscience of hel or heauen, of God, or Diuel: and where no restraint, nor allurement is left in the hart of man, to bridle him from euil, nor to inuite him to good: but for vaine fame only & feare of lay lawes, that reache no further then to this body and life: that cal I properly a MachiauellianState and Gouernance.

(Leslie, 1572, pp. a5.r–a5.v.)

As has been noted, this is far from the invectives in which 'Machiavelli' is simply used as another name for the devil, synonymous with cruelty and craft. For

Machiavelli "religion is just a device for princes to keep their populations in awe and so promote civil obedience" (Egan, 2007, p.72). The Elizabethans associated Machiavelli with Satan, due to the fact that in that period the church claimed that the nature of political power is divine, as opposed to Machiavelli`s assertion that it was human.

According to Watson (1976) one of the first Machiavellian characters in Elizabethan England literature was Barabas from Christopher Marlowe`s *The Jew of Malta* written in 1589/1590.

Body

This paper analyzes some villains of the "four principal tragedies" (Hazlitt, 2009, p.21) as living in the previously described Machiavellian state (e.g., "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" *(Hamlet*, Act I, scene iv, line 90), "Foul is fair, fair is foul" (M*acbeth*, I. I. 13), "I know our country disposition well. /In Venice they do let God see the pranks /They dare not show their husbands" (*Othello*, III.3. 201-202), "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land" (*King Lear*, I. ii. 17) etc., through the prism of the Machiavellian virtù (flexible disposition) and the association of Machiavelli with the catchphrase "the exercise of bad faith in political affairs" (Skinner, 1981, p.1)" as the leading principles of the characters in accordance with these Machiavellian precepts, namely that it is not important for the ruler/character to be virtuous but that it is only important that he appears to be so. Shakespeare was probably acquainted with Machiavelli`s works, a view supported by Skinner) as he gives similar attributes to Richard III in Henry VI Part III who, in his speech on getting the crown, relies on the Machiavellian precept that the end justifies the means. Richard in *Henry VI Part III* literally follows Machiavelli`s advice for a king to be a hypocrite (*dissimulatore*), adjusting his behavior, talk and looks to a particular situation, taking advantage of people`s weaknesses, triggering discords and taking advantage of the chaos he created. For example, Richard proclaims:

I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,/ And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart,/ And wet my cheeks with artificial tears/, And frame my face to all occasions./ I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;/ I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;/ I'll play the orator as well as Nestor, /Deceive more slily than Ulysses could,/ And, like a Sinon, take another Troy./ I can add colors to the chameleon,/ Change shapes with Proteus for advantages/ And set the murderous Machiavel to school." (III.ii.182-193)

One of the major themes in these plays is the presence of appearance vs reality. This paper is concerned with this theme with regard to the major villainous characters in the plays, with the exception of Hamlet till he turns into a villain in scene V and The Ghost. The other analyzed characters are the villains of the plays: King Claudius in *Hamlet*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Regan, Goneril and Edmund in *King Lear* and Iago in *Othello*. To reiterate with the exception of Hamlet who

seeks revenge and who isn`t really a villain till the last scene and the Ghost (who is either Hamlet`s father from a Catholic purgatory or diabolic agent from a Protestant perspective), the other characters are villains. With the exception of the Ghost who clearly states his goal: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther" (I. v. 25), the other characters assume various roles to hide their real intentions. For example, Hamlet decides that to achieve his goal he will act, in other words be a hypocrite, as if he is mad:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on),
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumb'red thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As 'Well, well, we know,' or 'We could, an if we would,'
Or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be, an if they might,'
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me- this is not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you.
(I.v. 169-180)

King Claudius also after he kills his brother also named Hamlet, marries his wife, pretends that he is innocent and in grief and that he wants Hamlet to stay, although he later tries to arrange Hamlet`s death, an example of Machiavellian virtù, simulation and dissimulation. The contrasts are visible in Act I, scene II and IV.

And we beseech you (Hamlet), bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son. (I. ii.115-117)
Claudius intention is visible in the lines that follow:
As my great power thereof may give thee sense,
Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red
After the Danish sword, and thy free awe
Pays homage to us,- thou mayst not coldly set
Our sovereign process, which imports at full,
By letters congruing to that effect,
The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England; (IV. iii.61 -67)

The Ghost in Hamlet is presented as an apparition and thus an appearance, but an appearance that serves to reveal realities, as he reveals the murderer.

In *Macbeth* the theme of appearance vs reality is also widely present. From the outset the witches (by definition women) are presented as having beards, a male feature. They look like men but are in fact woman. Furthermore, their words" Fair

is foul, and foul is fair" foreshadow the shifting of appearance and reality and the transformation of good into bad and vice versa in the play. Some examples where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exploit this theme is in the lines that follow. In an aside, resolved to kill King Duncan Macbeth states: "Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires" (I. iv. 58-59). Lady Macbeth gives counsel to her husband how to kill Macbeth: "look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (I.v.63-64).

Macbeth further expresses his intention to hide his true intentions and reality: "False face must hide what false hearth doth know" (I.vii.82). After Duncan arrives at Macbeth`s castle, Lady Macbeth lies, and thus is *simulatore* by pretending that nothing she or her husband can do will match Duncan`s generosity:

All our service
In every point twice done and then done double
Were poor and single business to contend
Against those honours deep and broad wherewith
Your majesty loads our house: for those of old,
And the late dignities heap'd up to them,
We rest your hermits. (I.vi.15-21)

Furthermore, Macbeth tells Banquo that he and his wife couldn`t entertain the king as they would have liked: "Being unprepared, Our will became the servant to defect, Which else should have wrought" (II.1.18-20). Although Macbeth thinks about the witches, he says to Banquo that "I think not of them" (II.1.22), although this is clearly not the case. After Macbeth kills King Duncan and is visited by Macduff, and when is asked by the latter is the king awake, Macbeth although he has just killed him says "Not yet" (II.3.45). In his resolution to kill Banquo, Macbeth further emphasizes his masked appearance:

Let your remembrance apply to Banquo;
Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue:
Unsafe the while, that we
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams,
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are.
Lady Macbeth. You must leave this.
Macbeth. O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
Thou know'st that Banquo, and his Fleance, lives. (III.ii.30-38)

In *King Lear* also the theme of appearance vs reality is an essential both in the main plot and the in the subplot. In the main plot, King Lear wrongly believes the flattering words of his daughters Regan and Goneril, instead of believing the virtuous and honest Cordelia. The contrast between Regan and Goneril flattering

words and their evil deed is best seen in Act 1 scene 1 and Act 2 scene 4, an example of Machiavellian virtù.

Goneril:
Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour; (I.i.55-58)
Regan is just as obsequious:
Regan. Sir, I am made
Of the selfsame metal that my sister is,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys
Which the most precious square of sense possesses,
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear Highness' love. (I.i.69-76)
In Act II. Scene V, Lear's daughters show their real faces:
Regan's reaction is cruel:
Regan: Why not, my lord? If then they chanc'd to slack ye,
We could control them. If you will come to me
(For now I spy a danger), I entreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty. To no more
Will I give place or notice. (lines 240-244)
Goneril`s reaction is even harsher:
Hear, me, my lord.
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?
I dare avouch it, sir. What, fifty followers?
Is it not well? What should you need of more?
Yea, or so many, sith that both charge and danger
Speak 'gainst so great a number? How in one house
Should many people, under two commands,
Hold amity? 'Tis hard; almost impossible. (lines 255-264)

In the subplot Edmund, again following the precepts of Machiavelli exploits his father and half-brother by hiding his real intentions, disguises his inclination and plays the hypocrite. After he successfully implicates the true heir and half-brother of wanting to usurp the throne of their father the Earl of Gloucester, Edmund says to Edgar:

I do serve you in this business.
[Exit Edgar.]
And then proceeds by mocking their inability to grasp his real intentions:
A credulous father! and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy! I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit;
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit. Exit. (Act I,ii, 175-180)

In *Othello* the theme of appearance vs. reality is also present. For example, Othello is deceived by appearances and words believing that Iago is honest. Iago, openly admits that "I am not what I am" (I.i.69), which further emphasizes his diabolical nature as this phrase is opposite to God`s words to Moses "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). According to Raatzsch (2009), Iago refuses to accept reality i.e., being subordinate to Othello, and only acknowledges Othello`s supremacy as an appearance and uses all means to demonstrate that the master is the one who can "keep his own heart to himself" (p.24). It seems as if Iago, in his plan to destroy Othello follows the Machiavellian principle that "People are fickle by nature; it is easy to persuade them of something, but it is hard to fix that persuasion in them" (*The Prince, p. 149.*). Using guile through the whole play Iago forces Othello to blindly believe him, the latter calling Iago four times "Honest Iago" and ten times honest to describe him.

Concluding remarks

Although the analyzed characters veer between reality and appearance and use Machiavelli`s virtù or (flexible disposition), neither of them completes fully his goal and ends his life in a tragic way. Hamlet completes his revenge but is killed; King Claudius becomes king but is punished and killed. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, likewise become king and queen, but out of remorse Lady Macbeth commits suicide and Macbeth is killed. In *King Lear*, Regan is poisoned by Goneril. Goneril like Macbeth commits suicide; Edmund is mortally wounded by his half-brother Edgar and dies. In *Othello*, Iago causes Othello to smother the innocent Desdemona but is imprisoned after killing his wife. From the way the four analyzed tragedies ended and the actions of the characters one can conclude that Shakespeare didn't believe in Machiavellian virtù as being a blessing for the person, but rather a curse. Shakespeare could have left the evil characters unharmed, but is seems that he followed the pattern put forward in the Bible, namely that God, punishes wickedness. One proverb from the *Old Testament* is enough to encapsulate the message from the Bible. Proverb 11:5 from the *Old Testament* states: "the righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way: but the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness."

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