

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Shakespeare

LEADERSHIP

JULIUS CAESAR; HENRY VI, PT I; PT. 2; PT 3; RICHARD II; RICHARD III

Shakespeare anatomizes many aspects of power—political, sexual, social—and none more than the dogfights for governance and political upmanship in the still forming English state. The early dramas of the *Henriad* center around the fifteenth century state-formative conflicts among the great aristocratic families. The houses of Lancaster and York were asserting themselves in and around the directionless leadership of Henry VI, and power was up for grabs. Richard II and III take us through the halls of the mind of the would be leader, of a King convinced of his godly mandate (Richard II) and another (Richard III) diabolically intent on snatching and holding power by whatever means. In the case of Julius Caesar, Shakespeare seems to find and admire a charismatic power, which compels men and armies, and can only be stopped by violent intervention.

JULIUS CAESAR The key event in the play is the conspiracy, of a few prominent Roman senators, against the returning military hero, Julius Caesar. The conspirators, led by Cassius and Brutus, fear that Caesar will impose his absolute authority on Rome, and that there is need for immediate action, to arrest his movement. Julius Caesar was a powerful and effective general, whose relation to the growing polity of Rome was tense; did he wish to protect the city from barbarian forces, or did he long to take control of the city? The conspirators who acted against him believed Caesar bore the earmarks of a dictator, and wanted to take no chances on his ultimate exercise of power.

HENRY VI PART 1 This early play concerns the consolidation of a modern state, out of the decline of Feudalism, and the way that development emerges from the power --struggles, among themselves, of the most prominent families in the national power structure—Plantagenets, Somersets, Mortimers. It is out of the bickering of the leading representatives, of these families, that the King of England gains parity with the King of France, as an international player, and the power of the British nation learns to flex its muscles—on land and increasingly at sea.

HENRY VI. PART II A power vacuum is created around the weak figure of Henry VI, who is increasingly at the mercy of such families as those of Lancashire, York, and Somerset—the configuration changes as centers of wealth and military muscle shift. Jack Cade's rebellion raises its head as the new voice of populism in the nation, and monarchy's control weakens. Henry is widely scorned as too weak to govern.

HENRY VI, PART III The discord among rival power centers, and the weakness of the King usher in a period, in the last years of Henry's reign, when confusion and violence have given way to outright power wars. The play before us is rich in reported battlefield scenes—four on stage—and with any amount of reported violence. We get a close look at political faithlessness, the torture of York by Clifford, the stabbing murder of York's son, the outright murder of King Henry in the Tower. The power centers have given way to outright civil chaos.

RICHARD II In his extensive colloquies (Act IV) Richard muses deeply over the plausibility of the higher than secular presence of the King. It was the thought of Richard's time, and the issue that absorbed him, that God, through the Catholic Church, was himself the ultimate anointer of the Christian King. From this state of affairs flowed the great and unimpugnable power of the King, and Richard was deeply interested in the relevance of this issue to his own case.

RICHARD III Richard is ambitious, ruthless, and boisterously self-aware, inviting the audience, yes indeed, to observe his misshapen body, and haphazard dressing. This invitation is heightened by the bold manner in which he turns to the audience, from the stage, and calls their attention to what they are seeing. Richard displays himself as grotesque—so much stress on the hump in his back, and on his shortness—and refers often to that condition. The power evil of the character is manifestly represented by his physical deformity, which in turn reinforces his self-mocking mindset.