

Power Politics in Shakespeare

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Abstract

This paper intends to explain Shakespeare's concept of the monarchical power as having taken three inter-dependent approaches. In the first approach, the king is viewed as an absolutist, which is being backed by the concept of the king's demi-god authority prevalent at the time, which Claudio reckons with in Measure for Measure: "Thus can the demi-god, Authority, / Make us pay down for our offence by weight / The words of heaven" (1.3.120-2)[†]. Richard II and King Lear, particularly in the earlier phases of the respective plays, are a good example of this kind. The second approach brings the kings down from their divinely-protected pedestal to the secular level of statecraft, where the kings act both like heroes and villains, where their politics of survival, their machinations to sustain power, their maneuverings to outface their opponents, their faking of religion, their dissembling and shamming to win the subjects' hearts, and the paired method of accommodation and elimination, all become visible. Iconic images of this group coming from the great usurper kings of Shakespeare: Richard III, Henry IV, Claudius and Macbeth. The third approach consists in Shakespeare's attempt at humanizing the kings, so that the power held by the king seems to be benefitting the commonwealth, as King Lear realizes in the storm scenes, or Prospero in rescinding his magical power and owning Caliban ("This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (The Tempest, 5.1.276-7)). In explaining the third approach, the critical term suitable for which is what Dollimore (1990) refers to as "the essentialist humanism," the paper establishes that for Shakespeare, as Johnson suggested a long time ago in refuting the allegations of Voltaire, that the king and the beggar could both be described on equational terms, borne out by such lines as Hamlet's: "Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table," and, "That's the end" (4.4.23-5). But, there is a fourth approach: Shakespeare seems to agree that essentialist humanism cannot be the final thing for a king to serve. The king is a mixture of multifaceted dimensions which overlap and interact, and the plays thrive on this fluid texture of the monarchical characters.

Shakespeare was much intrigued by the history of the Plantagenet Kings, particularly the later Plantagenets—from Edward III to Richard III (1322-1485).

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Out of various sources, he used Edward Hall's history entitled, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), commonly known as *Hall's Chronicle* and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) to build up his dramatic material out of history. Tillyard (1964) suggests in his book, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944) that Shakespeare exploited the dramatic potential inherent in the description of characters by Hall and depended on Holinshed for factual accuracy, and on Polydore Vergil, who wrote an influential history of England, entitled *Anglica Historia* (1534), to uphold the Tudor Myth (p.7-10)

These medieval kings ruled England from the fourteenth century to the later part of the fifteenth century. The royal families got involved in internecine struggle after the death of Edward III, when the rule of primogeniture, that is, the power going downward to the eldest son, being activated, allowed his grandson, Richard II, to become the king only at the age of nine. Richard's father, Edward or the Black Prince, had died in 1376, one year before his father Edward III died in 1377.

Richard II, who ruled England for twenty-two years, from 1377-1399, was temperamental, both courageous and cowering at the same time. Mabillard (n.d.), in her essay, "Representations of Kingship and Power in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy" draws on Machiavelli to say that a medieval king had to have two qualifications. He had to be anointed, that is, he had to be a rightful king, and had to have the ability to administer. Richard II was an anointed king, and thereby the Machiavellian first condition was fulfilled by him nearly one hundred years before Machiavelli would advocate it. However, he did not have the ability to administer. He invited hell by forcefully confiscating his mighty uncle John of Gaunt's property, and banishing his eldest son, Henry Bolingbroke from England for six years. Confiscating the property of subjects by a king was also judged by Machiavelli as the worst form of crime. Apart from this, Richard II failed in another Machiavellian condition which stated that the king had to be popular. Henry Bolingbroke, on the other hand, knew the tact of winning the hearts of the people in general and seducing the mighty.

Thus with the support of Northumberland and his family, he landed back at Ravenspurn (Ravenspurgh in Shakespeare), a coastal town in North England, before the first year of his banishment was finished. Richard II was waging a war in Ireland at the time while Bolingbroke marched southward to London to

reclaim his father's property. But that is only apparently. Beneath the surface, as historical evidence proves, he aimed higher, to dethrone the king and usurp the throne.

Richard and Bolingbroke's quarrel over the crown later on in the time of Henry VI (reign: 1422-1461, and 1470-71) developed into a full-scale civil war between the Yorkist family and the Lancastrian family, commonly known in English history as the Wars of the Roses, and interestingly enough Shakespeare wrote his first tetralogy (*Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3 and Richard III*) on the later kings and the second tetralogy (*Richard II, King Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2, and King Henry V*) on the earlier kings.

This chronological reversal however is important for judging Shakespeare's proclivity for treating the theme of usurpation, as Greenblatt (2007), in his essay, "Shakespeare and the Uses of Power," points out, for its dramatic potentiality. His interest in the theme of the usurpation of a king is first worked out in *Richard II* (1594) and the *Henry IV* plays Part 1 in 1597 and Part 2 in the following year, in which the case of usurpation issues from rivalry between cousins. Subsequently these two plays are followed by a certain number of plays that have usurpation as the theme. *Julius Caesar* (1599) is about the violent removal of a state leader, and in *As You Like It* (1600) and *Hamlet* (1601) the act of usurpation is further given a twist by showing it as having been caused from sibling rivalry. *King Lear* (1605) can be considered as the portrayal of a king who lets himself be usurped by his children. In *Macbeth* (1606) and *The Tempest* (1611) Shakespeare again treats the theme of usurpation as being caused by sibling rivalry.

In *Richard II* Shakespeare intensifies the theme of usurpation by dramatizing the conflicting natures of the King and his challenger. Richard II is portrayed as a believer in the absolute authority of the king as an anointed figure. The king was the vice-regent on earth for God, so he was invulnerable, and, therefore, he could be despotic, needing no support of the people to stay on the throne. In Shakespeare's time, Queen Elizabeth's invulnerability was much hyped through official sermons like *Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* which was mandatorily read in the churches in all Sunday congregations. But like our bowler Mustafizurii, Shakespeare was a deceptive cutter, who enjoyed sabotaging the received notions through his plays. So he challenges the concept of the demigod authority of the king by putting Richard II to a test of self-realization.

First, Shakespeare breaks down the scaffolding of religious attributes attached to the divine conception of kingship. Richard II, anticipating the Macbeths, but unlike them, uses the image of the ocean water to refer to the invulnerability of the anointed king: "Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off from an anointed king" (3.2.54-55). As his deposition becomes imminent he recognizes the inevitability of the violation of the demi-God authority when an act of usurpation is executed: "For well we know no hand of blood and bone/Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre,/Unless he do profane, steal, or usurp" (3.3.79-81). But then refusing to see that the divine protection is futile to seek, he still insists on the idea that God will punish a usurper: "Yet know, my master, God omnipotent,/Is mustering in his clouds, on your behalf,/Armies of pestilence . . ." (3.3.85-87). While Richard II is embracing the 'anointed king' theory in the face of danger as a protective shield, Bolingbroke—falsely, though--suffers from a guilty conscience for his act of usurpation. Unknown to himself, this suffering tantamount to faking. In *Henry IV, Part I*, he wants to make amends by undertaking a holy journey to Jerusalem, but that never occurs. Expiation he cannot make as much as Claudius in *Hamlet* cannot either, who says, "May one be pardon'd and retain th'offense?" (3.3.56)

The "anointed king" concept is thus sabotaged by Shakespeare, as Greenblatt (1988) effectively shows, when religion is used to serve the king's political interests. In his essay, "Invisible Bullets," he discusses *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays and says that Prince Hal, that is, Henry V gives divine justification (in Greenblatt (1988) term, 'explanation') for the death of twenty thousand French men at the Battle of Agincourt. Prince Hal is quoted by Greenblatt (1988): "And be it death proclaimed though our host/To boast of this, or take that praise from God / Which is his only" (4.8.114-16), and then comments: "By such an edict God's responsibility for the slaughter of the French is enforced, and with it is assured at least the glow of divine approval over the entire enterprise, from the complex genealogical claims to the execution of traitors, the invasion of France, the threats leveled against civilians, the massacre of the prisoners" (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, 60).

Thus, while Richard II keeps the matter of the divine at an abstract level, both Bolingbroke and his son sabotage the ideological abstractions by transforming them into transactional entities.

The second disillusionment effected by Shakespeare is that the absolutist power of the king is delimited by a borderline which mere mortal beings cannot cross.

We refer to a snatch of dialogue between Gaunt and Richard II, where the King assures his uncle that he will live for many more years. Gaunt answers that the King might shorten his life but cannot add one single minute to the time allocated to him by God: "But not a minute, king, that thou canst give:/Shorten my days thou canst with sullen sorrow,/And pluck nights from me, but not lend a morrow; . . ." (1.3.226-27). In a similar way, but in a different context, the power of the temporal authority is again projected as delimited. When Othello's suspicion is aroused by Iago, the latter says he'll still not divulge what is making him suspect Desdemona. When Othello insists, Iago says Othello cannot extricate the secret out of him unless he offers it: "Good my lord, pardon me; / Though I am bound to every act of duty, / I am not bound to that all slaves are free to. / Utter my thoughts" (3.3.134-36).

The third sabotaging aspect about the king's anointed body is the item of popularity. Like faking religion, popularity can also be modeled on fake love for the people, as Bolingbroke does by ambling, dissembling and shamming. Richard II is much amazed at Bolingbroke's growing popularity: "How he did seem to dive into their hearts/With humble and familiar courtesy . . . /Wooping poor craftsmen with craft of smiles" (1.4.25-26, 28). By saying this Richard II actually confesses to his own incompetence, because he fails to understand that Bolingbroke has all through honed the "craft of smiles" to become popular which ultimately enables him to wrest power from his cousin.

What at the same time is not actually perceived by Richard II is that the act of usurpation must be realized through deception and dissembling. A usurper needs to deceive in order to survive, as Greenblatt (1980; 2005) quotes Machiavelli as having said that the prince must be "a great feigner and dissembler" (*Self-fashioning*, 14). In fact Hamlet's famous utterance, "Seems, madam? . . . I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76) will rather seem unwarranted as for the king to keep a public face seeming seems to be in order. When Iago is trying to convince Roderigo that Cassio is underneath a lecher, he says, ". . . a knave very voluble; no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection" (2.1.225-28). That is, Cassio's suavity consists in seeming—and that is a quality Iago would confess to himself in private, but would project as a fault to Roderigo.

We can assume that the Machiavellian interpretation of popularity is rather a

tactful requirement than a genuine virtue of the heart. Antony does it perfectly, when he shifts the mob's allegiance from Brutus to the dead Caesar by his great oratorical speech, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" (3.1), which he invests with all tropes of persuasion.

However, in so far Shakespeare is handling popularity he concedes to Machiavelli only partly, in portraying Bolingbroke, for example, but in other cases he looks to popularity with ambiguity: it is both a powerful attribute and an unreliable entity. In *Hamlet*, King Claudius explains to Laertes that one of the reasons why he took no action against Hamlet for his murder of Polonius is his popularity: "the great love the general gender bear him" (4.7.19)—and the other reason is his mother's excessive fondness for him: "The Queen his mother/ Lives almost by his looks . . ." (4.7.1112). Even Laertes poses a threat to Claudius as he is followed by the "rabble" (4.5.102), who calls him their king: "Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,/Laertes shall be king, Laertes King" (4.5.108).

But Shakespeare in his Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* respectively, viewed the popular support as fickle and unstable. Hamlet also makes snide remarks about people's change of heart: "for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little" (2.2.359-62).

Holderness (2000) in his book, *Shakespeare: the Histories* says that the success of the kingship depended on the balanced amalgamation between vertical paradigm and horizontal paradigm (78). Richard II's notion of kingship comes from the vertical design of the hierarchy of the universe, much campaigned by Tillyard (1964) in his masterpiece, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942) by the concept of the Great Chain of Being, whereas Prince Bolingbroke tactfully follows the horizontal design by which he becomes the man of the moment. A broken-hearted Richard II is made to realize the democratic ethics with which the horizontal plane is imbued.

In his speech, telling "sad stories of the death of kings" (3.2.144-77), Richard II refers to "the hollow crown" (3.2.160), where "Death keeps his court" (3.2.162), and how "this flesh which walls about our life" (3.2.169) can be bored through "with a little pin" (3.2.169). Then the famous king and-common men equation, anticipating Hamlet's king-and-beggar equivalence, occurs to him:

For you have but mistook me all this while.
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends—subjected thus,
 How can you say to me, I am a king? (3.2.174-77)

Hamlet, having killed Polonius mistaking him for the King, tersely replies on enquiry regarding Polonius's dead body, that "the fat king" and "the lean beggars" (4.3.23-4) are two dishes served to the same table, to the same band of eaters—here the worms. Hamlet pushes the theme further and in the graveyard scene as he contemplates Yorick's skull, he says, "I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest . . ." (5.1.182ff). Now being dead, Yorick cannot even mock at the grinning of his own skull. Echoing Richard II's speech quoted above, Hamlet continues that the great Alexander or Caesar have all "returneth to dust" (5.1.208). But the death-the-leveler concept or the king-beggar equation cannot be the final argument to speak about the political efficacies of a king. His is, as Guildenstern says to Claudius, "many many bodies" who, as Rosencrantz strengthens the mode of flattery, "live and feed upon your Majesty" (3.4.10), and "The cress of majesty/Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw/What's near it with it" (3.4.15-17).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's amplification of the micro-cosmic existence of the king into the body-politic, that is, within the framework of the state, veers away from Richard II's submissive feelings and also from Lear's presumptuousness in the early phase of the play. Lear's sufferings caused by his presumptuousness can be seen as fitting with the design of the Morality Play that the king must be reeducated in the ways of the world to become a better king. As a king, Lear should have taken care of all his subjects, which he had not. So, in the storm scenes, watching the afflicted Tom o' Bedlam, his superior feelings are roused, and he kneels in submission wondering how these "houseless heads" and "unfed sides" can endure such inclement weather: "O, I have ta'en/Too little care of this" (3.4.32-3).

But Hamlet's king-beggar equation, Lear's feeling chastised by the look at poverty, or Richard II's confessing at the time of submission that it is difficult for him to extricate himself from the divine prerogatives: "I hardly yet have learn'd /To insinuate, flatter, bow, and bend my knee" (4.1.16465), do not, however, cancel out the validity of the question, why should a king want to hold onto the crown, when he knows that a king is as much or as little as the

beggar? *Richard II* again provides us the basis to see how deeply Shakespeare does probe this question. The decline and fall of Richard II caught the imagination of the subsequent English monarchs and the people as well, as much as the life and death of Nawab Sirajuddowlaⁱⁱⁱ has been haunting our imagination since long. Shakespeare's monarch in real life, Queen Elizabeth, on occasions of despair used to liken herself to Richard II, and though Shakespeare composed the play in 1595, and the first quarto text was published in 1597, the deposition scene (4.1) was not allowed to be staged until 1608. In fact, the Earl of Essex is reported to have given Shakespeare's company 40 pounds to stage *Richard II* on the eve of his aborted coup in 1601.

The Deposition Scene (4.1) in the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) 2013 production, available on YouTube, dramatizes the significance or lack of significance of the crown from diametrically opposite angles. The actor playing Richard II, David Tennant, in a flowing silky white robe and on bare feet offers Bolingbroke (Nigel Lindsay) the crown: "Here, cousin, seize the crown" (4.1.181). But the moment Bolingbroke stretches his hand and holds it, Richard presents a tug-of-war like scenario, which symbolically casts a long shadow into the history of England, bringing about the Wars of the Roses: "On this side my hand, and on that side thine" (4.1.183). Then in a stunning move, by the mere flick of his hand, the actor turns the crown upside down to make it look like a well: "Now is this golden crown like a deep well" (4.1.184). The deep well, Richard says, is used with two buckets, one up and one down. The figure of the buckets is thus denoting the rise and fall in one's fortune. The one down under water is him, full of tears, and the one up is Bolingbroke, shorn of cares, and thus—with a mild irony attached—"The emptier ever dancing in the air" (4.1.186). In this video clip, Bolingbroke looks totally baffled not knowing how to react to the offer.

So, in a desperate tone, he cries out: "Are you contented to resign the crown?" (4.1.200), to which Richard's reply is: "Ay, no; no, ay: for I must nothing be" (4.1.201). Derek Jacobi, with Jon Finch in a 1978 film, acts out these lines with such pathos—choking voice mixed with a sense of remiss—that both demonstrates Bolingbroke's (Finch's) hesitant manner and Richard's rueful acquiescence to the fact that he must resign: "I must nothing be" (4.1.201).

The deep well imagery of the crown with two buckets anticipates Lear's predicament in a similar manner. Richard II is dethroned by Bolingbroke, but

King Lear allows himself to be dethroned. Having distributed his kingdom between his two elder daughters on the basis of their professions of love for him and banished the youngest one for her defiance (in his judgment), Lear looks forward to resting his old bones in the years to come with his elder daughters. And, in his daydreaming, he gleefully ignores the Fool's foreboding, who tries to make him see that by surrendering his entitlement to the kingdom, he has split it like an egg with the substance spilled away and he in possession merely of two empty shells. Then more pithily the Fool compares the two shells with the bald crown of the head as well as with the regal golden crown of the king: "Thou had little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away" (1.4.155-56).

The Fool's comparison between the "bald crown" and the "golden one" helps to develop another idea about Shakespeare's understanding of the power of the king. If Richard's equational speech or Hamlet's death-the-leveler notion seem to make us feel that Shakespeare merely looked at the power of the king symbolized through the crown as a contingency that had better be dispensed with rather than held onto, we will misjudge his attitude altogether. The crown is merely an object of contingency not because all kings will have the same fate as beggars, but because kings have to know the politics of holding onto it, whether legally inherited, or usurped.

Here Shakespeare comes in direct confrontation with another Machiavellian doctrine, which is that a bad but efficient king is better than a good but inefficient king for the kingdom. Henry IV, that is, Prince Bolingbroke, fits with the concept perfectly. He has not fulfilled, as we said earlier, one of the criteria set by Machiavelli for a king to be. He is not anointed, but a usurper. Should a usurper be licensed to rule whatever he may be in terms of competence? Unlike Machiavelli, Shakespeare would rather protest that the public image and the private image of the king must be in conformity with each other. If his outer self is good, his inner self must be so. Shakespeare used pretension or falsehood, deception or dissembling for its dramatic potentiality, but it cannot be concluded that he wanted a Claudius or a Macbeth to go unpunished.

Shakespeare has never written a moral play, but a moral palimpsest exists throughout the structures of his plays. In his essay, "Shakespeare and the Uses of Power," Greenblatt (2007) mentions a visit to the Clinton White House joining a party of poets. Clinton in his speech said that he knew nothing about

poetry but as a child in school he had to memorize many lines from the play, *Macbeth*. When Greenblatt (2007) told the President that Macbeth was “an immensely ambitious man who feels compelled to do things that he knows are politically and morally disastrous,” Clinton retorted by saying that he thought Macbeth was “someone whose immense ambition has an ethically inadequate object.”^{iv}

Ends do not justify the means for Shakespeare unless the means have “an ethically [adequate] object.” So the usurpers in their turn suffer. Nobody does realize the vacuity in being a usurper than Macbeth. The witches predicted that it is Banquo’s children that will succeed the throne, and Macbeth, who beforehand never thought of continuing his reign through his children, is now repenting the fact that he has no son to succeed him:

Upon my head they plac’d a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. (3.1.60-3)

For a usurper what is left is a fruitless crown, accompanied by sleeplessness: “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” says Henry IV (*Henry IV, Part II*, 3.1.31), and Macbeth says to Lady Macbeth, referring to his insomnia: “O! full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife” (3.3.36). Besides the burden of carrying a barren sceptre lacking in legality, Macbeth suffers from an added worry: his being left with “an unlineal hand.” The point is a moral one regarding greed, which is unending and multipliable. Macbeth before the act of regicide wanted just to be the king; now he wants to prolong his kingship through successors. Besides, the sense of ethical inadequacy in Macbeth is further deepened by his realization that the court of law does exist in the human world to deal out justice: “We still have judgment here; . . . / . . . this even-handed Justice/Commends th’ ingredience of our poison’d chalice/To our own lips” (1.7.8, 10-12).

When King Henry IV becomes worried about the lifestyle of the young prince Hal, he admonishes him by citing an example of what it meant to be an incompetent king. The example is King Richard II, “The skipping King, he ambled up and down,/With shallow jesters, and rash bavin wits” (*H IV 1*, 3.2.60-61). However, in his own turn Henry IV finds it difficult to sustain his crime of usurpation, as the allies who supported him when he dethroned

Richard II, raise a rebellion against him. The young Hotspur, Northumberland's son is enraged with the King over the issue of prisoners for ransom. He charges his father and uncle whether it was "To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,/And plant this thorn, this canker Bolingbroke?" (1.3.173-74), that they tolerated "this king of smiles, this Bolingbroke" (1.3.243), this "candy deal of courtesy" (1.3.247), "This fawning greyhound" (1.3.248). Richard's image as "The skipping King" and that of Bolingbroke as the "candy deal of courtesy" are akin in nature, but yet they show the difference between one's natural habit and another's assumed habit.

Shakespeare seems to agree on the point that assumed habit would be preferable to natural habit, if it is without malice. From this premise Prince Hal's soliloquy in *Henry IV* can be thought of as defining the role of the king. Explaining his present wayward life--a source of much concern for his father--he likens himself to the sun that allows "the base contagious clouds" (*H IV, Part 1*, 1.2.193) to cover it only for it to shine more brightly later. Prince Hall, likewise, considers his present association with Falstaff and his drunk peers, as a "reformation" (*H IV, Part 1*, 1.2.208), that will teach him about "the very basestrings of humility" (*H IV, Part 1*, 2.4.6), so that afterwards he will emerge as a knowledgeable king about the ways of the world.

For a king—a Shakespearean king particularly--that much of 'reformation' is to be allowed.

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Endnotes:

- i "His adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of criticks, who form their judgments upon narrower principles. Dennis and Rhymer think his Romans not sufficiently Roman; and Voltaire censures his kings as not completely royal. Dennis is offended, that Menenius, a senator of Rome, should play the buffoon; and Voltaire perhaps thinks decency violated when the Danish Usurper is represented as a drunkard. But Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions super induced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men. He knew that Rome, like every other city, had men of all dispositions; and wanting a buffoon, he went into the senate-house for that which the senate-house would certainly have afforded him. He was inclined to shew an usurper and a murderer not only odious but despicable, he therefore added drunkenness to his other qualities, knowing that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings. These are the petty cavils of petty minds; a poet overlooks the casual distinction of country and condition, as a painter, satisfied with the figure, neglects the drapery."
- ii Mustafizur Rahman is an emerging cricketing talent from Bangladesh. He is a pace bowler, who bowls with an insidious swing on either side of the batsman.
- iii Nawab Sirajuddowla was the last independent suzerain of the united Bengal, who was defeated at the decisive Battle of Plessey in 1757 by the East India Company forces under Robert Clive. Sirajuddowla, who was brutally killed after the defeat, since then has become a popular figure in the folk lore of Bengal. The victory at the Plessey paved the way for the British Empire to subjugate India.
- iv (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/04/12/shakespeare-and-the-uses-of-power/>).