

THE POLITICS OF POWER AND PARODY: SHAKESPEARE'S PORTER AS A SUBALTERN VOICE

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's Macbeth has been extensively analyzed through various critical lenses, yet the significance of the Porter's speech remains an area of continued debate. This paper examines how the Porter functions as a subaltern voice in Macbeth, subverting the traditional power hierarchy within the play. Employing a postcolonial framework, particularly the theories of Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study highlights how Shakespeare empowers the Porter—a seemingly marginal character—to critique the ruling elite. By engaging in grotesque realism, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Porter's speech challenges the legitimacy of power, offering an ironic commentary on Macbeth's tragic downfall. The study further contextualizes the speech within Shakespeare's broader moral and theatrical strategies, arguing that the Porter is more than mere comic relief; rather, he embodies an alternative narrative that resists hegemonic structures. Through a close reading of the Porter's monologue, this paper contends that Shakespeare strategically employs parody to elevate the subaltern voice, positioning the Porter as a crucial figure in the play's commentary on power, morality, and authority.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Macbeth; Porter's Speech; Subaltern; Postcolonial Criticism; Power Hierarchy; Parody; Grotesque Realism; Antonio Gramsci; Gayatri Spivak; Mikhail Bakhtin.

Literature is essentially a combination of theory and praxis—theoretical interpretations impact our comprehension of texts, while narratives provide the basis upon which theories are constructed. Every piece of literature is imbued with theoretical ideas, just as literary theories sometimes start with textual analysis. This connection is what makes research in literature always changing. Through text analysis, identification of underlying themes, and application of theoretical frameworks to expose deeper meanings, literary critics become very essential in this process. Great works of literature at once naturally reflect, confront, and sometimes even predict these critical ideas.

Talking about William Shakespeare one discovers that his writings form a cradle of literary theory. Almost no theoretical school of thinking exists that would not apply to his plays. His works cover a wide range of human experience: psychological, political, existential, linguistic, sociological. Shakespeare's plays are a treasure store for academics in many fields as every scene, sentence, and interaction in them has purpose. Declaring that Shakespeare's writings a birthplace for literary theories provides insights into Marxist thinking, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism, structuralism, deconstruction, and existentialism among others would not be hyperbole.

Shakespeare's writings are deep, although some critics have tried to undermine particular portions by challenging their validity or artistic integrity. But such criticisms usually result from an underestimating of Shakespeare's intellectual range. Any effort to discredit or challenge the veracity of sections in his writings reveals the critic's limited awareness of Shakespeare's unmatched genius. Shakespeare is the greatest complete literary master of all time as his works appeal to every imaginable human feeling, social issue, and psychological struggle.

From this vantage point, I concentrate on one of Shakespeare's most fascinating but often underrated passages: the Porter's speech in Macbeth. For millennia academics have been fascinated by this fleeting humorous respite in an otherwise sad and sombre drama. Although at first look the Porter's monologue seems insignificant, it is really a vital link between the murder of Duncan and the disclosure of Macbeth's guilt. Shakespeare deftly uses dark humour, sarcasm, and double entendre in this passage to accentuate the themes of dishonesty, power, and moral degradation in the play.

Frederick B. Tromly appropriately notes in an essay in *Shakespeare Quarterly* that: "A century of almost uniform analysis has overturned Coleridge's rejection of the Porter and triumphantly reinstated him to the play. Though the integrity of the Porter scene cannot be disputed now, its exact importance is as yet unknown. The remark of Tromly offers a suitable beginning for this conversation. While he investigates the scene from a different critical perspective, It is worthwhile to expand his case by examining the Porter's speech as a subversive critique on power, authority, and social hierarchy within Macbeth. Shakespeare's deliberate arrangement of the Porter's lines guarantees that this apparently little figure performs a significantly more significant function than just comedic relief. Close reading of the speech reveals Shakespeare's more active participation in political satire, class strife, and the fragility of human morality—themes as pertinent now as they were in the Elizabethan period.

Shakespeare has become synonymous to English literature and perhaps is amongst the very few who have transcended the boundaries of time and place. He has been and still is the cynosure of the eyes of critics and at the onset of any theory perhaps he is the first one to go under the critical scanner. And thus his name was also dragged in under the umbrella of postcolonial theory for promoting the culture and construction of the imperial discourse and its legitimization. The postcolonial analysis of *The Tempest* is it's excellent example I to propose to understand the playwright through postcolonial theory but from a different angle, not as standing on the side of the superior civilised dresses but as being a part of the inferior working classes of the subalterns buy analysing the speech of the Porter in the play Macbeth.

Postcolonialism aims to study what Aimé Césaire calls the 'relations of domination and submission.' it is a study of the structures of Deepak power relations between the colonizers and the colonised and it seeks to dismantle the oppositional, colonial binaries of the centre and the margin, the self and the other, the elite and the subaltern. Sub altern, broadly speaking, is a person of inferior rank and is the term adopted by Gramsci to refer to the classes in the society subjected

to the hegemony of the ruling class. They may include workers, peasants and other such groups. By this definition the porter qualifies to be a subaltern. As stated earlier the Bard has been blamed for promoting the colonial culture in his plays. He instead has tried to subvert the established world order of hierarchy through the Porter. It is the elite around who the plot rivals but it is the subaltern who stands above him in just as smaller roll of a speech of 20 lines.

Act 2 scene 3 in Macbeth opens with a knocking at the South entry of Inverness, the castle of Macbeth. The Porter thinks himself to be the Porter of the hell gate and imagines giving entry 2 a farmer who hangs himself in the expectation of plenty. The second entrant is an equivocator who for his equivocation is inhale. Next comes in English tailor who is in hell for stealing out of a French hose. suddenly he finds the place too cold for hell and decides not to devel Porter any further. He ends his devil-portering with desire of having let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire.

The porter represents the subaltern group and very interestingly addressers such professionals who belong to the same category as him. The significance of the porter scene has been commented upon variously by various critics. Some see him as providing comic relief and others consider it as a brilliant theatrical device for giving time to Macbeth for changing his bloodied attire and washing off blood from his hands. And some even have taken the credit of writing the speech of the porter away from Shakespeare and attributed it to some other author. De Quincy considers its significance in reflecting "back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity". The speech does give a comic relief, it does provide time to Macbeth for a change, it does give an awfulness to the murderer and it may appear very unlike a Shakespearean speech but then isn't it where the genius of Shakespeare lie? Creating dialogues according to the status of the speaker. But this is not all as there is a different angle to the speech. The speech is a Shakespearean strategy of siding with the subaltern, the downtrodden. The porter subverts the postcolonial binary of the ruler and the ruled, the elite and the subaltern, the speaker and the listener. He towers above Macbeth, the hero and significantly comments on him becoming the speaker, the elite and the ruler of the situation.

The porter first admits the farmer to hell who hanged himself in the expectation of plenty. Shakespeare contrasts him with Macbeth who kills King Duncan, his king and his relative, breaking Duncan's trust, in the expectations of plenty leaving it to the audience to decide which is a bigger crime. In this instance the playwright makes the ruled upon comment on the ruler. Let us go back to the scene just after the murder of Duncan and just before the porter scene. Macbeth says "Methought I heard a voice 'sleep no more' Macbeth doth murder sleep' and further he adds ' Glamis hath murdered sleep and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more!' And I add, Macbeth like a ghost shall wander through the hell alike inverness all his life because he has committed a suicide by murdering his own sleep and what for? In expectation of plenty. He was not satisfied with what he had achieved and in expectation of the throne he commits this crime. Another reference to the suicide is in the soliloquy of Macbeth where he says "this even handed justice commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice to our lips.

Next comes the equivocator who has a reference in the trial of Father Garnet in the gun powder plot but it is a fit commentary on Macbeth as well. The equivocation of Macbeth is obvious in his speeches at many occasions. In act 2 scene 3 he says “ Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived liv’d a blessed time; for from this instant, there’s nothing serious in mortality; all is but toys; renown and grace is dead; the wine of life is drawn and the mere lees is left to brag of” and to this Bradley comments “ It is meant to deceive but it utters at the same time his profoundest feeling”. They are not his profoundest feelings because it was after much deliberations Macbeth commits the crime. What Bradley says can be true of a hot-blooded murder, not for a cold-blooded thought-over one. Shakespeare makes the Porter his own mouth-piece to comment upon Macbeth, the hero, thus elevating the stature of the Porter, the other-wise a subaltern entity in the play.

Last comes the tailor who is in hell because he stole “out of a French”. Now let us again refer to what Macbeth says when Ross announces Macbeth’s becoming the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth replies “The thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me in borrowed robes?” Here robe is a metaphor for the title. Interestingly, later in the play Macbeth by evil means steals the robe ie, the title of the ‘King’ from Duncan. Here again Shakespeare’s through the Porter criticises the devilish act of Macbeth thus making him the authoritative voice to which we should all heed to. The porter addresses professionals who belong to the subaltern class. This strategy provides him opportunity to speak about their crimes that were not so awful and thus highlighting in contrast the severe crimes that Macbeth has committed. His short speech gives a very deep meaning to the whole plot of the play by analysing the true character of Macbeth in just a few lines.

Unfortunately, the speech of the porter has been given away as the mental failings of a drunk thus questioning the genius of the Bard in including this speech in the play. What critics forget is that despite being drunk he is very much aware of himself and his surroundings. The porter knows where he is who he is. The “if” in “if a man were a porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key” is a proof of it. He wishfully abandons devil-portering saying that he will devil porter it no further and that he had thought to have let in some of all profession that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire, again a belittling remark on Macbeth. A person who is imagining any situation would know he is imagining only if he is conscious and mentally alert. J B Harcourt accepts the conscious efforts of Shakespeare in referring to the three professions in porter’s speech. He states “The porter’s three examples were chosen, not at random, but precisely because of their relevance to the dramatic situation. So it would be utterly disrespectful to question the porter’s speech in any concern. As far as its authenticity is concerned I would bring in Coleridge here who pointed out that Shakespeare never introduced the comic except when it may react on the tragedy by harmonious contrast. It was intentional on the part of the bard to bring in the porter at a critical juncture and establish his supremacy. Shakespeare was undoubtedly a master craftsman and his intentions cannot be questioned upon. His creative genius would not have allowed him to make an uneducated porter speak and speak in such a powerful language, if it had no significance at all, surely not as a comic intervention in the mid of serious action. David Crystal states “ From Shakespeare we learn how it is possible to explore and exploit the resources of a language in original ways, displaying its range and variety in the service of the poetic imagination. In his best

writing we see how to make a language work so that it conveys the effects we want it to. Above all, Shakespeare shows us how to dare to do things with language”.

The bard empowers the subaltern to stand on an elevated platform and comment authoritatively on the character central to the play. Even if we go by some who consider porter as a comical character then also I would say what Marcia McDonald says about Bottom in *The Midsummer Night's Dream* by Marcia McDonald. She says “ Bottom’s theatrical power-his power to create a laughing community out of the various individuals comprising the audience-offers a challenge to the primacy of Theseus’ power derived from social rank and its consequent privileges of interpretation”. This is an apt remark on the porter as well. This can be well understood by Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism, who claimed that this “genre was typified by works of renaissance literature...and importantly the plays of Shakespeare”. He further states that such works are “expressions of carnival” because during carnival “social hierarchy was not only suspended but inverted” Bakhtin argued that “grotesque realism not only topples social hierarchies but also insists on the common creatureliness of all human beings. This, in the comical behaviour and speech of a subaltern, Shakespeare is trying to topple the hierarchy present in the play. No doubt he is siding with the subaltern.

Another fact that we do not and should not forget is the morality of Shakespeare. Martin Sherlock, a late eighteenth century writer presents Shakespeare as the model of moral writing. “As seen by Sherlock’s praise of Shakespeare ‘instruction’ remains an important consideration although couched in somewhat different terms” The bard needed a mouth to outpour his moral messages in his plays and the porter is the chosen one in *Macbeth*. It is through his speech that Shakespeare extends warning to all those who choose to go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire. Shakespeare’s making a subaltern his mouth-piece is again a pointer to his dramatic strategies and a deep understanding of the human psyche. He exploits the elitist’s sense of non-identification with the marginalised class. So where could he find a better broadcaster of his views if not a subaltern? For him “fair is foul and foul is fair” a subversive statement in itself which can be understood as elite is subaltern and the subaltern is elite. The porter is not a silenced voice, Shakespeare sees to it. The porter speaks and speaks the truth. So can the subaltern speak? Yes he can, in the plays of Shakespeare and when the Shakespearean subaltern gives a speech we all stand and listen.

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