

STAGING THE FAILURE OF AUTHORITARIAN POWER IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Miss Ardeelah Charong¹, Harist Al-Rasyid Simanungkalit^{2*}

¹Thamayitya Mulniti School, Pattaya, Yala, Thailand

²Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Corresponding author: haristalrasyid22@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines William Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays as sustained critiques of authoritarian rule. The study employs a qualitative method grounded in New Historicism, which situates literary texts within the power relations and cultural practices of their time. Focusing on elements of theatrical performance, the physical and symbolic space of the court, and the decay of language, the analysis shows how these features reveal the fragility of absolute power. Close readings of *King Lear* and *Macbeth* uncover a recurring "political grammar," which constitutes a set of dramatic patterns that lay bare the split between a ruler's ceremonial persona and his private disintegration. The breakdown of royal authority is traced through the misuse of speech, the isolation of the sovereign, and the spectacle of public rituals that no longer command belief. The findings indicate that these plays operate as dramatic manifestos, systematically exposing the mechanisms of coercion, deception, and emotional manipulation that underpin autocratic governance. Shakespeare's stage becomes a laboratory where the mechanics of power are dissected for the audience to witness, revealing the inherent vulnerabilities in any system of one-person rule.

Keywords: *authoritarianism, New Historicism, political grammar, tragedy, William Shakespeare*

1. Introduction

The royal courts in William Shakespeare's tragedies and historical dramas serve as stages for a constant and anxious performance. In plays like *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, authority is not a fixed condition but a fragile act that requires the right words, the right setting, and the right audience. This study examines those acts directly. It looks at the public rituals of rule, the walls of the castle, and the slow corruption of clear language to show how the illusion of absolute power begins to crumble. The analysis uses the framework of New Historicism to read the plays as records of a specific cultural pressure, a deep worry about the limits of a single ruler's control.

The focus rests on a pattern that this study calls a "political grammar." This pattern exists in the gap between the face the king shows the world and the private decay he suffers behind closed doors. When *King Lear* divides his land with a map or when *Macbeth* speaks to a ghost no one else can see, the machinery of power is exposed. Shakespeare's language charts this collapse by moving from grand oaths and metaphors of order toward images of storms, blood, and empty words. The article presents these dramas as direct manifestos for

the stage. They are examinations of the ways coercion and manipulation operate, showing how authority often relies on spectacle and fear to keep the man and the office from falling apart.

2. Literature Review

The study of power in Shakespeare's plays has a long and active history in literary criticism. Early modern scholarship often treated the plays as mirrors of Elizabethan and Jacobean political theory. These readings emphasized the doctrine of divine right and the natural order of the kingdom. The ruler's authority was seen as a reflection of a larger cosmic and social hierarchy.

New Historicism changed this approach. Stephen Greenblatt's work, particularly in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) and *Tyrant* (2018), argued that Shakespeare's dramas do not simply endorse royal authority. They show the circulation of social energy between the stage and the state. Greenblatt examined how the theater participates in the same strategies of control and subversion that operate in the court. His analysis opened a path for reading the plays as responses to specific political anxieties of the period.

Later critics built on this foundation. David Scott Kastan in *Shakespeare after Theory* (1999) addressed the tension between history and text. He questioned how much of the political content belongs to the playwright and how much belongs to the audience's interpretation. Leonard Tennenhouse in *Power on Display* (1986) focused on the theatrical nature of sovereignty. He showed that political authority in Shakespeare often depends on visual spectacle and public ceremony. The ruler must appear powerful before a watching crowd.

Other scholars turned to the language of the plays. Rebecca Lemon examined treason and sovereignty in *Macbeth* within the context of Jacobean legal culture. Emma Smith studied the specific vocabulary and rhetorical patterns in the play, showing how language shapes the audience's understanding of the main characters' mind. Neil Parvini reconsidered historicist approaches to the history plays, arguing for a middle ground between old historicism and post-structuralism.

The court setting has also received attention. Stephen Orgel wrote about the material conditions of the early modern stage and the problems of authentic performance. Debora Shuger explored the sacred and political theologies in Shakespeare's England, placing the plays within a broader religious and legal discourse. The collection edited by H. Aram Veeser provided a foundational overview of New Historicist methods.

These studies offer valuable insights into separate aspects of power. Some focus on the king's public image. Others examine linguistic ambiguity or the spatial dynamics of the castle. However, few works connect these elements into a single diagnostic pattern. The existing literature tends to treat performance, setting, and language as distinct categories of analysis. This separation leaves a gap in understanding how these dimensions work together to expose the failure of authority.

The present manuscript addresses this gap. It introduces the concept of a political grammar that operates across all three areas. This grammar is defined as the recurring structure of tension between the ruler's public mask and his private deterioration. The analysis shows that performance, the court setting, and linguistic corruption are not separate features. They are interdependent tools that Shakespeare uses to reveal the fragile machinery of coercion and manipulation.

The novelty of this study lies in its unified framework. It reads *King Lear* and *Macbeth* as dramatic manifestos that place the breakdown of authority directly on the stage for the audience to observe. The focus is not on moral lessons about ambition or pride. The focus is on the practical mechanics of rule and the moment when those mechanics fail. This approach offers a clear difference from earlier works. It combines close textual reading with a comprehensive view of how the theater exposes the vulnerability beneath the crown. The result is a contribution that builds on New Historicist foundations while offering a specific and cohesive model for analyzing authoritarian power in Shakespearean drama.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative research design. The qualitative approach is appropriate for analysing dramatic texts and their cultural meanings. The focus is on interpreting language, performance cues, and spatial descriptions within the plays. The goal is to identify recurring patterns in how authoritarian power is presented and undermined on the stage.

The research follows a systematic procedure. The procedure consists of four main steps. The first step is the selection of primary texts. The plays *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are chosen as the primary sources. These two plays contain clear examples of rulers who lose control over their court, their language, and their mental state. The selection is also based on the historical context. Both plays were written during a period of political uncertainty in England. This context makes them suitable documents for examining anxieties about absolute rule.

The second step is the close reading of the selected texts. Close reading involves a detailed examination of the dialogue, stage directions, and character interactions. The reading is guided by the framework of New Historicism. This framework treats the plays as cultural documents that engage with the political tensions of their time. The close reading focuses on three visible elements. These elements are performance, the court setting, and linguistic corruption. Each element is examined separately and then in combination.

The third step is the coding of textual evidence. Coding is a technique for organizing observations into categories. The coding process follows a simple structure. Table 1 shows the coding categories and the types of evidence collected for each category.

Table 1. Coding Categories for Textual Analysis

Category	Type of Evidence
Performance	Scenes where a ruler must display authority before an audience. Examples include the opening division of the kingdom in <i>King Lear</i> and the banquet scene in <i>Macbeth</i> .
Court Setting	Descriptions of indoor spaces such as castles, halls, and chambers. Evidence includes shifts in the function of these spaces from safety to entrapment.
Linguistic Corruption	Broken oaths, contradictory statements, and metaphors that lose coherence. Evidence includes repetitions of the word "nothing" and images of ill-fitting garments.

The coding is applied to each act of both plays. The observations are recorded in a research log. This log contains line references, character names, and brief notes on the function of each passage. The coding allows the researcher to track the development of the political grammar across the entire dramatic structure.

The fourth step is the synthesis of findings. The coded evidence is grouped into patterns. The patterns are then interpreted in relation to the concept of authoritarian power. The interpretation focuses on the gap between the ruler's public performance and his private condition. This gap is defined as the political grammar of the plays. The synthesis also compares the two plays to identify common features and differences.

Data acquisition relies on published editions of the plays. The edition used for *King Lear* is the Arden Shakespeare edition edited by R.A. Foakes. The edition used for *Macbeth* is the Cambridge University Press edition edited by A.R. Braunmuller. These editions are chosen for their scholarly reliability and comprehensive annotations. The annotations provide historical and textual information that supports the analysis.

The validation of the findings is achieved through triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of evidence to confirm a pattern. In this study, the evidence is drawn from dialogue, stage directions, and historical context. The findings are also compared with the existing scholarship on Shakespeare and early modern politics. This comparison ensures that the interpretation is grounded in the established body of knowledge.

The research procedure can be summarized in a linear sequence. The following list describes the chronological order of the study.

1. Selection of primary texts (*King Lear* and *Macbeth*).
2. Review of relevant historical and critical literature.
3. Close reading of the selected plays with attention to performance, setting, and language.
4. Coding of textual evidence into the three categories.
5. Analysis of coded evidence to identify recurring patterns.
6. Synthesis of findings into the concept of a political grammar.
7. Interpretation of the findings in relation to authoritarian power.
8. Comparison with existing scholarship to validate the conclusions.

This procedure is consistent with the standards of qualitative literary research. The method allows for a systematic examination of the texts while remaining open to the interpretive nature of the material. The steps are repeatable and transparent. Other researchers could apply the same coding categories to other Shakespearean plays or to plays from other periods. The method thus provides a clear and structured approach to analyzing the dramatic presentation of political authority.

References that support this methodological approach include Greenblatt's work on New Historicism and the circulation of social energy. Kastan's discussion of text and history provides a justification for treating plays as cultural documents. Orgel's research on performance conditions offers a framework for analyzing stage directions and theatrical conventions. Parvini's reconsideration of historicist methods supports the combined focus on textual detail and historical context. These references provide the scientific grounding for the chosen method and ensure that the explanation is accepted within the academic community.

4. Result and Discussion

The analysis of *King Lear* and *Macbeth* produces a set of consistent findings about the structure of authoritarian power. The findings are organized around three interconnected elements. These elements are performance, the court setting, and linguistic corruption. Each element contributes to a larger pattern. This pattern is defined as a political grammar. The political grammar describes the tension between the ruler's public image and his private deterioration. The discussion interprets each finding and explains its significance for understanding Shakespeare's critique of absolute authority.

4.1 The Performance of Authority

The first finding concerns the role of public performance in maintaining rule. In both plays, the ruler must display strength and composure before an audience. The display is not optional. It is the primary mechanism through which obedience is secured. The opening scene of *King Lear* provides a clear example. The division of the kingdom depends entirely on verbal declarations of love. Lear requires his daughters to speak their loyalty in inflated terms. The map is presented as a reward for effective speech. When Cordelia refuses to perform this ritual, the entire structure of inheritance collapses. The performance fails because the words do not match the expected form.

In *Macbeth*, the banquet scene offers a similar demonstration. Macbeth must appear composed and in control before his nobles. The appearance of Banquo's ghost disrupts this performance. The ghost is invisible to the other characters but visible to the audience. Macbeth's reaction exposes his private guilt. His public authority shatters because he can no longer maintain the required composure. The nobles observe his breakdown and can no longer pretend to see a stable ruler. The performance becomes a spectacle of failure.

The discussion of these findings points to a central argument. Authority in these plays rests on a fragile set of gestures and speeches. The ruler is not inherently powerful. He is powerful only as long as he can perform power convincingly. When the performance breaks down, the system of obedience begins to crumble. This observation contradicts the idea that kingship is based on divine or natural right. Shakespeare presents it as a theatrical construct. The stage becomes a space where the machinery of rule is exposed. The audience sees that the throne is supported by words that can be spoken or refused. The act of ruling is reduced to a role that can be played badly.

4.2 The Court as a Confining Space

The second finding relates to the physical setting of the plays. The court functions as a closed and oppressive space. The walls of the castle contain the performances of authority. They also amplify the sounds of betrayal and fear. In *King Lear*, Gloucester's castle and Lear's palace are depicted as places where truth is hidden. Characters who speak honestly are punished or expelled. The heath and the wilderness appear as alternatives to the court. However, these spaces do not provide safety. They offer only madness and storm. The natural world exposes the raw nerves that the court's ceremony was designed to hide.

In *Macbeth*, Dunsinane Castle becomes a prison. The king and his wife are trapped inside their own fortress. The walls that should protect them become the boundaries of their paranoia. The murders committed within the castle contaminate the space. The setting shifts from a place of political order to a place of psychological entrapment. The movement of characters toward the castle and away from it reinforces this pattern. Escape is not possible. The court follows the characters wherever they go.

The discussion interprets this finding as a critique of the court's function. The court is not a neutral container for political activity. It is an active participant in the corruption of authority. The walls create an environment where deception is necessary and honesty is dangerous. The ruler becomes isolated within this environment. His advisors and servants speak only what he wants to hear. The isolation increases his vulnerability. When the court fails to contain the truth, the truth erupts in violent and chaotic forms. Shakespeare places this breakdown center stage. The audience witnesses the collapse of the physical and social order that supports the throne.

4.3 Linguistic Corruption

The third finding concerns the decay of language. Words of honor and duty lose their meaning. They become tools of disguise and manipulation. In *King Lear*, the word "nothing" recurs throughout the play. Cordelia says "nothing" to her father. Lear repeats the word in his madness. The repetition strips the stage of all pretense. The language of the court becomes hollow. Oaths are broken. Promises are vague. The metaphors that once described order and hierarchy dissolve into chaos.

In *Macbeth*, the dialogue contains many images of ill-fitting garments and borrowed robes. These images suggest that the characters are wearing roles that do not belong to them. Macbeth speaks of his "borrowed robes" early in the play. This language anticipates his later failure to fill the role of king. The words become disconnected from their referents. The title of thane and the title of king are spoken, but they no longer carry any stable meaning. The linguistic corruption mirrors the psychological decline of the central figures. Lear's encroaching senility and Macbeth's insomnia and hallucinations are reflected in their speech. The private pathology bleeds into public view.

The discussion emphasizes the significance of this linguistic pattern. The corruption of language is not a secondary feature of the plays. It is a primary mechanism for exposing the failure of authority. The ruler controls his kingdom through words. He issues commands, takes oaths, and declares laws. When the words lose their power, the kingdom loses its cohesion. The plays show that language is not a transparent medium of communication. It is a tool of power that can be broken or corrupted. Shakespeare places this breakdown directly in the dialogue. The audience hears the emptiness behind the grand speeches. The connection between the royal title and the failing human body is made visible through the words that are spoken and the words that are left unsaid.

4.4 The Political Grammar of Authoritarian Failure

The three elements of performance, setting, and language combine into a unified pattern. This pattern is the political grammar of the plays. The grammar operates through a consistent structure. The ruler maintains a public mask. The mask is supported by ceremonial acts, confined spaces, and stable language. The private condition of the ruler deteriorates under the pressure of maintaining the mask. This deterioration eventually breaks through the public performance. The breakdown occurs in the presence of an audience. The audience sees the man beneath the crown.

The discussion of this pattern leads to a broader conclusion about Shakespeare's dramatic purpose. The plays function as manifestos for the stage. They do not offer moral lessons about ambition or pride. They offer a practical examination of how power works and how it fails. The tools of coercion and manipulation are exposed in real time. The audience understands that the ruler is made of the same fragile material as everyone else. The enduring relevance of these works lies in this direct exposure.

The findings also confirm the novelty of this study. Previous scholarship has examined performance, setting, and language as separate categories. This analysis connects them into a single diagnostic framework. The framework shows that Shakespeare's dramas are active interventions in the political discourse of their time. They are not passive mirrors of Jacobean politics. They are critical examinations that use the unique tools of the theater to reveal the vulnerability beneath the crown.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *King Lear* and *Macbeth* produces a clear conclusion about the nature of authoritarian power in Shakespearean drama. The plays demonstrate that absolute rule depends on a fragile combination of public performance, controlled spaces, and stable language. The ruler must perform strength before an audience. The court must provide walls that contain and conceal. The language must hold oaths and declarations in place. When any of these elements fails, the entire structure of authority collapses into confusion and violence.

The findings reveal a recurring pattern. This pattern is defined as a political grammar. The grammar operates through the tension between the ruler's public image and his private deterioration. The public image is maintained through ceremony and spectacle. The private deterioration is caused by the pressure of maintaining that image. The breakdown occurs openly on the stage. The audience witnesses the moment when the mask slips and the human vulnerability beneath the crown becomes visible.

The plays function as dramatic manifestos. They expose the mechanisms of coercion and manipulation that support authoritarian rule. The exposure is not hidden in subtext. It is placed directly in the dialogue, the stage directions, and the spatial arrangements of the court. Shakespeare does not offer a solution to the problem of power. He offers a clear and unflinching view of its inner workings. The audience understands that the ruler is made of the same fragile material as every other person. This understanding is the central achievement of the dramas.

The prospect of further development lies in applying the political grammar framework to other Shakespearean plays. The history plays, such as *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, contain similar patterns of performance and linguistic decay. These plays also feature rulers who struggle to maintain authority in the face of rebellion and personal weakness. An extended analysis could determine whether the same grammar operates across the entire Shakespearean canon. The framework could also be applied to early modern drama by other playwrights. The works of Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd contain rulers and ambitious figures who experience similar breakdowns. A comparative study could show whether the political grammar is specific to Shakespeare or characteristic of a broader theatrical tradition.

The research results also have application prospects beyond literary studies. The pattern of authoritarian failure described in this analysis is relevant to contemporary political discourse. Modern leaders often rely on public performance and controlled language to maintain authority. The gap between the public image and the private condition remains a source of instability. The analysis of Shakespeare's plays offers a diagnostic tool for understanding these dynamics. The tool highlights the importance of transparency and the dangers of isolating leaders from honest feedback.

Further studies could examine the role of the audience in the political grammar. The audience in the playhouse watches the ruler perform. The audience in the drama, such as the nobles in *Macbeth*'s banquet scene, also watches. The relationship between these two audiences could be explored in more detail. The question of how spectatorship contributes to the maintenance or subversion of authority is a promising area for future research.

Another direction for further study is the gendered dimension of authoritarian failure. The plays feature female characters who wield power or influence. Lady *Macbeth* and *Goneril* are central to the breakdown of authority in their respective plays. Their roles in the political grammar have not been fully examined. Future research could investigate how gender complicates the pattern of public performance and private deterioration.

The conclusion of this study is that Shakespeare's tragedies and historical dramas provide a lasting examination of authoritarian power. The examination is grounded in the

specific conditions of the early modern stage. It also speaks to universal questions about the relationship between the person and the office. The political grammar identified in this analysis offers a clear and systematic way to understand these questions. The framework is open to extension and refinement through further research.

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