College of Arts and Sciences

CUREJ - College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal

University of Pennsylvania *Year* 2005

Becoming a Monarch by Representing One: The Power of Role-play in Shakespeare's Elizabethan Plays

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12/16/2005

"Becoming a Monarch by Representing One: The Power of Role-play in Shakespeare's Elizabethan Plays."

In William Shakespeare's Elizabethan plays, role-play is capable of the highest form of empowerment for its players: possession of the monarchy. The ability of theatrics to empower, or even cause, a fictitious monarch resonated with Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience, whose own monarch, Queen Elizabeth, shamelessly embraced and exploited this ability. However, while virtually all of Shakespeare's plays possess the potential for role-play's ultimate empowerment, the extent to which his characters are able to achieve this potential varies. By examining the varying successes with which Shakespeare's characters attempt to use role-play as a means of gaining a monarchy, specifically in *I Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*, one may discover that the extent to which role-play is a form of empowerment in Shakespeare's plays is subject to constraints similar to those present in Elizabethan society.

In their article, "History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*", Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield argue that in *Henry V*, as is the case in many of Shakespeare's history plays, "power which, in actuality, was distributed unevenly across an unstable fraction of the hegemonic class is drawn into the person of the monarch: he becomes its sole source of expression."[1] The stability of a monarchy in a Shakespearean play depends on a convincing 'expression' of this power. As John Drakakis points out:

> the figure of the king is what Derrida, in another context, identifies as a ''central presence", responsible for the ordering, extending and multiplying of a range of signifiers. And it is precisely this presence 'which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute.'

[1] John Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 'History and Ideology: The Instance of Henry V', in Alternative Shakespeares (London: Routledge, 1986) pp. 210-232, p.225

Thus, one's success as a king is related to his ability to occupy a central presence which, according to Drakakis, is an "imaginary signification" of his authority.

In "Invisible Bullets", Stephen Greenblatt explains the particular resonance of Shakespeare's connection between power and performance with an Elizabethan audience. Queen Elizabeth, Greenblatt explains:

> [is] a ruler without a standing army, without a highly developed bureaucracy, without an extensive police force, a ruler whose power is constituted in theatrical celebrations of royal glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory.[2]

Greenblatt continues: "Royal power is manifested to its subjects as in a theatre, and the subjects are at once absorbed by the instructive, delightful, or terrible spectacles, and forbidden intervention or deep intimacy." As Greenblatt points out, Elizabeth was aware of the power of her theatrics, as she once said, "We princes...are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world."[3] Louis Montrose provides the proclamation by one of Elizabeth's contemporaries that:

> [Elizabeth] could not better tearme the citie of London at that time, than a stage wherin was shewed the wonderful spectacle, of a noble hearted princesse toward her most loving people, and the people's exceeding comfort in beholding so worthy a sovereign, and hearing so princelike a voice.[4]

Montrose cites this description as proof that "in the scope and quality of the Queen's own speech, action, and bearing toward the pageants' presenters and the populace at large, she heralded the new importance that her reign would give to the performativity of sovereignty."[5] By performing as an actor does and locating her "central presence" on a stage, Elizabeth ensures her elevation above her audience and her subjects.

One may see Shakespeare's application of Elizabeth's strategy in *I Henry IV*. Like

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[2] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Invisible Bullets,' in Shakespearean Negotiations (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp/ 284-311, p. 311.
[3] Greenblatt, p. 311.
[4] Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 27.
[5] Montrose, p 27.

Elizabeth, King Henry is aware of the power of performance. He attributes his usurpation of Richard II's throne to his ability to hold England as a captive audience. He tells Prince Henry:

> I stole all courtesy from heaven/ And dressed myself
> in such humility/ That I did pluck allegiance from men's
> hearts,/Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths/
> ...my state, / Seldom, but sumptuous, showed like
> a feast/ And won by rareness such solemnity.[6]

By specifying that he "dressed" himself in humility in order to win the crown, Henry implies that he was feigning a virtue that he did not necessarily possess, wearing it much as an actor would wear a costume on a stage. Henry, without any legitimate claim to the throne, was able to become a king simply by acting like one.

Because King Henry sees acting like a king and being a king as virtually interchangeable, he finds Prince Hal's lifestyle particularly worrisome. Hal, who spends his days associating with looters and heavy drinkers, fails to rehearse for his future role as king. Instead, King Henry associates Hal with Richard, who, Henry says, "ambled up and down/ With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits,/...Grew a companion to the common streets,/ Enfeoffed himself to popularity."[7] However, though Hal's company is similar to Richard's, his acting ability and his knowledge of its power, makes him more similar to his father.

Greenblatt points out Hal's awareness of his own acting ability, saying:

> Hal's characteristic activity is playing, or more precisely,
> theatrical improvisation--his parts include his father,
> Hotspur, Hotspur's wife, a thief in buckram, himself
> as prodigal and himself as penitent--and he fully
> understands his own behaviour throughout most of
> the play as a role that he is performing.[8]

Hal acknowledges the power of his role-play as he associates with the common men of whom is father disapproves. Just as his father once "dressed himself in [it]," by out-

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[6]William Shakespeare, *I Henry IV*, ed. by David Bevington (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) III.ii.59-69.
[7]*I Henry IV*, III.ii.60-69
[8] Greenblatt, p. 300.

drinking his company in a tavern, Hal "[sounds] the very bass string of humility." He celebrates the fact that, he is "so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during his life."[9] His ability to play the drinker's role assures that "when [he is] king of England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap." Hal sees his actions in a common tavern as a performance in itself, and he capitalizes on his performance in order to ensure his future empowerment.

Because, as Greenblatt specifies, Hal's activity is not just acting, but improvisation, his natural abilities reduce the necessity for him to act like a king before he becomes one. When Hal echoes his father's earlier proclamation to "henceforth rather be myself, / Mighty and to be feared,'[10] saying "I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord, / Be more myself,"[11] he is in fact promising to finally step into the ceremonious role of king.[12] Just like the role of a "loggerhead" or the wife of his rival, Hal's future role of king is one which he will be able to spontaneously perform once he is required. Hal proclaims to Poins:

> Yet herein will I imitate the sun, / Who doth permit
> the base contagious clouds/ To smother up his beauty
> from the world,/ That, when he please again to be
> himself, Being wanted he may be more wondered at/
> ...My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault, / Shall show
> more goodly and attract more eyes/ Than that which
> hath no foil to set it off.[13]

Just as the spectacle of his father's performance was increased by its rarity, so is Hal's increased by its surprise and spontaneity. Hal, by manipulating his theatrics down to the timing, guarantees himself an impressed audience and thus his power over them.

Hal's ability to accept and reject roles as he wishes reminds the audience, as Steven Mullaney points out, that Hal is:

> not a prodigal youth given over to vile participation but

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[9] *I Henry IV*, II.iv.5-17.
[10] *I Henry IV*, I.iii.5.
[11] *I Henry IV*, III.ii.93-94.
[12] As Greenblatt specifies, 'To be oneself here means to perform one's part in the scheme of power as opposed to one's natural disposition'.
[13] *I Henry IV*, I.ii.175-193.

> a prince who plays at prodigality, and means to translate his rather full performance into the profession of power... Hal's participation in the taverns represents a prodigality of a different order--the sign not of errant youth but of power, making a far from traditional passage through the margins and subcultures of its domains.[14]

Mullaney's specification that Hal is a prince playing at prodigality, not vice versa, and will eventually, as he claims, "Be more himself', is evident in his seemingly limitless list of possible roles. Because, "if the self is in a position to imagine itself in relation to roles it might play, even if it imagines there to be no limit to its role-playing, then it has already become something autonomous--the 'artful' free agents of a new dispensation,"[15] Hal's various roles, regardless of their individual respectability, collectively exist as a reminder of Hal's eventual destiny.

One may especially see this inherited power in the game which Hal plays with Francis, the young tavern apprentice. Hal exclaims at the length of Francis' indenture, saying "Five year! by'r Lady, a long lease for the clinking of/ pewter. But Francis, darest thou be so valiant as to play the/ coward with thy indenture and show it a fair pair of heels and run from it?" Hal's refutes his own playful suggestion of Francis' possible escape from his position forty lines later, saying, "Why then, your brown bastard is your only drink; for/ look you, Francis, your white canvas doublet will sully. In/ Barbary, sir, it cannot come to so much." Hal is incredulous at the inability of Francis to respond to any of his questions with much more than "Anon, anon, sir," disbelieving "That ever this fellow should have fewer words than a/ parrot, and yet the son of a woman!"[16] However, Francis' inability to speak more than the simple lines that Hal allows him is a reminder of his incapability of role-play. As Greenblatt points out, "If Francis takes the earlier suggestion, robs his master and runs away [thus adopting a new role], he will find a place for himself, as the play implies, as one of the 'revolted tapsters' in Falstaff's company, men as good as dead long before they march to their deaths as upholders of the crown."[17]

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[14] Stephen Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 82.
[15] Christopher Pye, *The Regal Phantasm: Shakespeare and the Politics of Spectacle* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.6.
[16] *I Henry IV*, II.IV 40-91.
[17] Greenblatt, 'Invisible Bullets', p. 298.

Francis reminds the audience that while role-play may bring power, few are originally powerful enough for role-play. Hence, "in this sense, for the Queen's common subjects, to go to the public playhouse to see a play was to undergo a marginal experience, it was to visit the interstices of the Elizabethan social and cognitive order."[18]

While Francis is entrapped in the single role which was written for him by his birth, Hal will eventually forget his various drunkard and loggerhead roles to take on the role which was written for him by his father. After successfully capturing the crown through his acting ability, much like a successful contemporary actor whose desire is to move behind the camera, King Henry is able to take on the additional roles of writer, producer, and director. Not only does his kingship naturally produced the future role of king for Prince Hal, as long as an undiscovered talent does not outperform him, King Henry also literally produces and directs representations of himself, tasks which cause Eileen Jorge Allman to call him "the most influential actor in the realm."[19] As Montrose points out, "When Hotspur remarks wryly during the final battle that 'the king hath many marching in his coats' he refers to the ploy of dressing King Henry's retinue like the King himself in order to confuse the rebels."[20] Henry controls his own representation to such an extent that he bestows it upon his subjects, the same "revolted tapsters" of Greenblatt's description, who "march to their deaths as upholders of the crown." Like Francis, these men must take whatever role is given to them, and by accepting the role of "upholding" King Henry's crown upon their heads, they save King Henry's life and lose their own.

Whether or not intentionally, Henry's direction and control of his own representation mirrors Queen Elizabeth's control of hers. In fact, the original performance of *I Henry IV* was subject to Elizabeth's restrictions, which Montrose explains:

> The licensing of players depended upon a tacit recognition that their impersonations were not fraudulent deceptions but were rather a circumscribed and fictive mode of role-playing, and that professional playing was not mere idleness but a

[18] Montrose, p. 34.
[19] Eileen Jorge Allman, *Player-King and Adversary: Two Faces of Play in* Shakespeare (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980, p.55.
[20] Montrose, p. 95.

> paradoxical form of labor...the Queen's restriction of license to players who "belonged" to trusted members of the aristocracy and were approved by the justices of the peace was also an attempt to assert royal authority, an authority both to allow and to limit the scope of her subjects' will to play.[21]

Elizabeth, a proud user of empowering role-play herself, made sure that she remained in control of any role-play which took place under her rule. As proven by the similarities between herself and Shakespeare's King Henry, every Elizabethan Shakespeare play contains a reflection of Queen Elizabeth, and because "the performativity of power is a mystery of state...the process of losing control over one's self-representation arouses palpable alarm."[22]

One can see the danger of losing control over one's self-representation in *Hamlet*'s "Mousetrap" scene. Up until this scene, one may see Claudius as a successfully usurping role-player. After murdering his brother, King Hamlet, Claudius immediately appropriates his role as husband to Gertrude and father to Hamlet,[23] and consequently is able to inherit King Hamlet's role as monarch. Even Prince Hamlet, despite his "refusal to participate in such a play,"[24] is forced to acknowledge "the success of the royal players, Claudius and Gertrude, who 'may smile, and smile, and be...villian[s]' (I.v.108)."[25]

However, while Claudius' shameless role-play of his dead brother helps bring him to his throne, his failure to credit that role-play's power, coupled with his failure to control the role-play of himself, helps bring him to his death. When Rosencratz informs Hamlet of the arrival of professional players in Elsinore, Hamlet replies, "He that plays the king shall be welcome."[26] Immediately, despite his disdain of Claudius' role-play, Hamlet not only welcomes the professional actors, but appoints himself as their

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[21] Montrose, p. 55.
[22] Montrose, p.82.
[23] However, Hamlet does not accept Claudius performance as his father, as his first lines of the play, 'A little more than kin, and less than kind' reject Claudius greeting, 'But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son' (I.2.64-65).
[24] Grace Tiffany specifies this refusal, saying 'Hamlet's "inky cloak"...is thus less a mourning habit than a sign of his...refusal to don the ceremonial garb worn by Gertrude, Claudius, and the rest of the court assembled to celebrate the illicit ritual of Gertrude's and Claudius' wedding.
[25] Grace Tiffany, 'Anti-Theatricalism and Revolutionary Desire in Hamlet (Or, The Play Without the Play)' in *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal*, ed. by James Andreas, Vol XV 1995, pp. 61-75, p.62.
[26] Hamlet, II.2.313.

playwright and director. Whispering aside to them he asks, "Dost thou hear me, old friend, can you/ play 'The Murder of Gonzago'?...You could, for a need,/ study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would/ set down and insert in't, could you not?"[27] Hamlet assigns the players the roles they are to play and instructs them how to play them, because, as Montrose points out:

> Theatrical performance was thought to have the capacity to effect moral changes in its audience--whether for better or for worse. Plays might inspire, instruct, reform, delight, terrify, sadden, entrap, corrupt, infect, or incite--in any case, they might do far more than pass the time.[28]

Hamlet subscribes to this belief saying, "I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play/ Have...been struck so to the soul that presently/They have proclaimed their malefactions,"[29] and thus, "he can think of no better means to reveal Claudius' guilt than to stage it: to try, despite the perverse uses of which drama is capable, to 'hold...the mirror up' to a degraded nature."[30] He says, "I'll have these players/ Play something like the murder of my father/ Before mine uncle...The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."[31]

Although up until this avowal, Claudius has been the one gaining his power from role-play, he proves ignorant of the danger in "The Mousetrap" which Hamlet sets for him. Instead, Claudius ignores role-play's "capacity to effect moral changes in its audience' and sees it as a way to 'pass the time." When Rosencratz informs Claudius of Hamlet's 'kind of joy to hear of [the play]," Claudius responds, "it doth much content me/ To hear him so inclined/...give him further edge/ And drive his purpose into these delights."[32] Montrose points out that "Claudius hopes that Hamlet's purpose will be vitiated in playing," an ignorance so apparent that lines later, Hamlet, saying "they do but jest, poison in jest,"[33] mocks the King's conviction that the drama is an innocuous pastime; he has a rather different notion of what it would mean to "drive his purpose into

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[27] *Hamlet* II 2. 520-525.
[28] Montrose, p. 50.
[29] *Hamlet,* II.ii.575-579.
[30] Tiffany, p.69.
[31] *Hamlet* II.ii.580-590.
[32] *Hamlet* III.i.18-28.
[33] *Hamlet* III.ii.225.

these delights."[34] Hamlet's notion is to drive his purpose by taking over Claudius' self-representation and thus, damage the power which Claudius has unjustly gained through his representation of King Hamlet.

Hamlet is successful in his attempt to "employ role-play to blast role-play"[35] to the extent that he catches the conscience of the king. Claudius can no longer look into the "mirror" which Hamlet holds up to him, and must flee from the audience. Only a scene later, he "proclaims the malefactions" of which he is guilty, crying that "above. / There is no shuffling, there the action lies/ In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled/To give in evidence.'[36] Claudius recognizes that, just as in Hamlet's play, he can not hide behind costumes or perform the role of his brother in order to veil the true representation of his nature. However, though Hamlet catches the king's conscience and receives the affirmation of his father's divulgences, by failing to fulfill his role in the revenge plot which his father wrote for him,[37] Hamlet is not able to fully wrestle from Claudius the power which he seeks, and thus both men are led to their tragic end by their failure to carefully capitalize on their role-play. Hamlet's death may be seen as a result of his failure to play the role of avenger, and Claudius death may be seen as the failure to protect the role of himself.

The tragic consequences of the Claudius' carelessness similarly may be seen in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Like *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* begins with what seems like an appropriation of a monarchy through skilful acting. In *Julius Caesar* the attempted feat is even more remarkable than in I Henry IV or Hamlet, because Caesar is able to use role-play not only to assume a present powerful institution, but create one where it did not previously exist. In his essay, "'Fashion it Thus': Julius Caesar and the Politics of Representation", Drakakis notes that, at the start of the play, "*Julius Caesar* contains no king." However, Caesar performs ceremonies, such as the "appropriation of the feast of Lupercal," which "position Caesar 'above the view of men' at the same time as they reinforce the social hierarchy by keeping 'us all in servile fearfulness.' Caesar creates the role of king, and he is inscribed in 'the process of 'ceremony' both as a producer and an

[34] Montrose, p.101.
[35] Tiffany, p.70.
[36] *Hamlet* III.iii.60-64.
[37] Allman.

actor."[38]

As Barbara J. Baines points out:

> the self-fashioning of Caesar...is presented essentially through the metaphors of play-making...Confronted by two very different audiences--one plebeian, the other aristocratic--Caesar creates two different images and roles for himself and thus two different dramas...Caesar and Antony play before the plebeians a mock coronation scene...apparently to dramatize the humility and humanity of Caesar and thus to assert a common, emphatic bond with the plebeians.[39]

Caesar's mock humility easily sways the crowd into offering him the crown not once, but three times, so enthusiastically supporting him that Casca claims, "if Caesar had stabbed their mothers they would have done no less [than worship him]."[40] However, unfortunately, Caesar's performances cause the opposite effect on his other aristocratic audience. Cassius is incredulous at Caesar's ability to create the possibility of kingship, saying, "When could they say till now, that talked of Rome/ That her wide walls encompassed but one man?...Now in the names of all the gods at once,/ Upon what meat does this our Caesar feed/ That he is grown so great?"[41] Despite his apparent disbelief, it is impossible for Cassius to be unaware that the 'meat' which feeds Caesar's power is his manipulative use of role-play.

Cassius' reminder to Brutus that "There was a Brutus once that would have brooked/ Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome/ As easily as a king,"[42] is remarkably similar to the grievances of those "officials as well as...some self-appointed guardians of the Elizabethan social and cognitive order," who believed, Montrose claims:

> [that] the imaginative license of theatrical experience was an abomination...[In 1582] Stephen Gosson declared the potential consequence of theatrical performances...to be no less than

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[38] Drakakis, p. 282.
[39] Barbara J. Baines, 'Political and Poetic Revisionism in Julius Caesar' in The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal, ed. by James Andreas, Volume X 1990, pp. 42-55.
[40] *Julius Caesar*, I.ii.274.
[41] *Julius Caesar* I.ii.149-157.
[42] *Julius Caesar* I.ii.160-162.

> the utter corruption of the social body and the destruction of the state:...'We are commanded by God to abide in the same calling wherin we were called...If privat men be suffered to forsake theire calling...proportion is so broke, unitie dissolved, harmony confounded, that the whole body must be dismembered and the prince or the heade cannot chuse but sicken.[43]

For Cassius and his fellow conspirators, Caesar, in his ceremonial refusal of a crown for his head, leaves them no choice but to "dismember the body." Brutus proclaims this inevitability as he says, "O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit, / And not dismember Caesar! But alas, Caesar must bleed for it."[44]

While Brutus, Cassius, and their fellow conspirators see assassination as the only means for eliminating the threatening power which Caesar has gained through his acting, they must accompany their assassination with role-play to prevent losing their own power as well. Brutus assigns his fellow conspirators their parts in order to stage their murder in the least incriminating performance. Brutus instructs them: "Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers,.../ This shall make/ Our purpose necessary, and not envious;/ Which so appearing to the common eyes,/We shall be called purgers, not murderers."[45] Just as Claudius and Gertrude "smile and smile" in their villainy, the conspirators "hide it in smiles and affability"..."Let not [their] looks put on [their] purposes;/ But bear it as [their] Roman actors do,/ With untired spirits and formal constancy."[46] Just as Claudius hides his murder of Hamlet beneath his wedding ceremony with Gertrude, the conspirators hide their murder of Ceasar beneath the ceremony of their "sacrifice".[47]

However, while they steal Caesar's power as they steal his life, they set themselves up for failure through ignorance reminiscent of Claudius'. Despite their preoccupation with making sure they do not lose the favor of their "audience", they allow Antony to steal the representation of themselves, and thus steal that favor. Brutus says, "And for Mark Antony, think not of him,/ For he can do no more than Caesar's arm/ When

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[43] Montrose, p.36.
[44] *Julius Caesar*, II.i.169-170.
[45] *Julius Caesar*, II.i.166-180.
[46] *Julius Caesar*, II.i.224-226.
[47] Baines specifies this, saying 'Brutus stages the deed as a ritual and ceremony of purification. The conspirators thus "bathe" and "wash" their hands and weapons to walk in procession to the marketplace.', p. 45.

Caesar's head is off."[48] However, as Baines points out, because they seek to define their actions simply through labeling themselves sacrificers and not butchers, a strategy which does not change any part of their action but the name of it, their representation is entirely dependent on language. This dependency threatens their self-representations, because "revisioning is not only possible but inevitable because of the non-referential, supplemental nature of language that finally calls all authority...into doubt."[49] Thus, "the disparity here between the bloody deed and the idealizing word...compels an appropriation by the superior playwright-player. Antony's skill enables him to rewrite Brutus' lofty scene of Rome's liberation."[50]

Antony changes the roles of the conspirators in his oration over Caesar's body from sacrificers back to butchers. Just as Hamlet used "The Mousetrap" to "[strike Claudius] to the soul," Antony uses Caesar's funeral to "stir men's blood" against the conspirators. Antony's superior role-play and his stronger awareness of its power to restore power make his efforts successful. Thus, as Baines aptly puts it, "through the authority of his word, Antony not only deconstructs the drama of the conspirators but revives the royal, god-like image and role of Caesar."[51] Though the conspirators' action is able to take away Caesar's life, their acting is unable to take away Caesar's power because Antony outperforms them.

The power struggles present in *I Henry IV*, *Hamlet,* and *Julius Caesar* allcontain the opportunity for ultimate empowerment through role-play. However, as their various successes and failures prove, the extent of their role play is limited by constraints which reflected their Elizabethan contexts. Like Elizabeth's subjects, characters like *I Henry IV*'s Francis, are unable fully empower themselves through role-play because they lack a necessary inherent power from birth. Like Elizabeth, who boasted of her acting ability and controlled her country's role-play down to the licensing of professional actors, Shakespeare's characters must both credit and control their own self-representation and its contribution to their power. Otherwise, as in Caesar's case, they might find themselves subject to attacks by resentful disdainers of theatrical empowerment, or as in Brutus or

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[48] *Julius Caesar*, II.i.179-181.
[49] Baines, p. 43.
[50] Baines, p. 46.
[51] Baines, p. 47.

Claudius' case, they might guiltily find their fraudulent politics exposed on stage and themselves defeated by a superior performer. Shakespeare, a subject of Elizabeth himself, held the fate and the power of his characters in his pen. Shakespeare used his pen to celebrate the power of role-play, but only to the extent that it did not offend the power of Queen Elizabeth.

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