

## Struggle for Power in Macbeth and Lord of the Flies

Aydın GÖRMEZ\*

Şükran DAĞ\*\*

### Abstract

*When literature of all forms is examined with a general perspective, it can be clearly seen that most of them include the theme of power. Having a complicated and variable nature, power plays a big role in our lives and in literature as a reflection of real life. In this context William Shakespeare's plays may be regarded as the most typical representatives of power relations. One of the foremost plays examining power, Macbeth reveals the consequences of having an unjust authority and has many common points with William Golding's Lord of the Flies. Although they are different in style, both of them have characters who struggle greedily to own as much power as possible preparing their own calamities as well as those of other characters. The aim of this article is to make a comparison between these works written in different ages and to reveal how efficiently both authors use human being's thirst for power.*

**Key Words:** Macbeth, Lord of the Flies, Power, Struggle.

### Macbeth ve Lord of the Flies'ta Güç Mücadelesi

#### Özet

*Bütün türleriyle edebiyat, genel bir bakış açısıyla incelendiğinde çoğunun güç temasını içerdiği açık olarak görülebilir. Karmaşık ve değişken bir yapıya sahip olan güç, hayatımızda ve gerçek yaşamın bir yansıması olan edebiyatta önemli bir yere sahiptir. Bu bağlamda William Shakespeare'in oyunları güç ilişkilerinin en tipik temsilcileri olarak kabul edilebilirler. Güç temasını işleyen önde gelen oyunlardan olan Macbeth haksız yolla elde edilen gücün sonuçlarını sunmaktadır ve William Golding'in Yüzüklerin Efendisi yapıtı ile birçok ortak özelliğe sahiptir. Farklı yazım tarzlarına rağmen her iki eser, olabildiğince daha fazla güce sahip olmak amacıyla aç gözlülükle çabalayan ve kendilerinin yanı sıra diğer karakterlerin de felaketlerini hazırlayan karakterlere sahiptir. Bu makale, farklı zamanlarda yazılan bu eserler arasında karşılaştırma yapmak ve her iki yazarın insanoğlunun güce olan arzularını nasıl etkili bir biçimde kullandıklarını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Macbeth, Lord of the Flies, Güç, Mücadele.

\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, Van, Türkiye, aydingormez@hotmail.com

\*\* Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi, Bingöl Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Bingöl, Türkiye, dagsukran@hotmail.com

## Introduction

There is much to say on the term power or authority because they are influential in all parts of the world. People in a society are divided into groups according to the power they have in different ways. Because of its effect, the authors have always dealt with the matter since ancient times, and it is also a theme applied in English literature; from anonymous *Beowulf* which emphasizes physical power to such absurd plays as Harold Pinter's *One for the Road* representing the political power and the abuse of it. Shakespeare is also one of the representatives of the power struggle between characters because he is a master in dealing with power in his plays such as *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the last of which will be scrutinized, with this paper, in comparison with *Lord of the Flies* written as a response to World War II. Both works put emphasis on the characters' search for power and the way they handle it. *Lord of the Flies* is thought, by Kristin Olsen, to "explore some of the most intense urges and emotions in our repertoire: the desire for power, the fear of the unknown, the fear of other people, anger and jealousy."<sup>†</sup> Suggesting that it is the abuse of power that makes the characters in these works lose their control, Edmund Burke's quotation could be taken as the source of this argument: "The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse."<sup>‡</sup>

Having a complex nature, power has always been a controversial issue among sociologists and there are many works written on the subject. Power is assumed to involve both constraint and enablement. For Michel Foucault it is "a complex strategic situation in a particular society", and what is more, it "is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession."<sup>§</sup> What is shared by sociologists is that while activating our decisions or actions, power or authority exists in all relationships. Max Weber, for instance, defines it as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of other persons."<sup>\*\*</sup> What is certain from different definitions is that any relationship is based on a kind of power balance: temporary, permanent, just or unjust.

Another crucial point about power is that the way someone holds power may differ, and it can be taken by means of force, knowledge, expertise, material wealth or delegated authority. These are the reasons why some characters are chosen as leaders that have influence or authority over other characters. What seems to be common in *Macbeth* and *Lord of the Flies* is that both plays question whether power is given to a character due to his personal features in a just way or not. Later, the bad consequences follow one another, which justifies Abraham Lincoln in saying: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character,

<sup>†</sup> Kirstin Olsen. "Understanding Lord of the Flies: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents", Greenwood Press, 2000, p. 2.

<sup>‡</sup> Qtd. by Peter J. Stanlis (ed). "Burke, Edmund: Selected Writings and Speeches", Transaction Publishers New Brunswick, 2006, New Jersey, p. 363.

<sup>§</sup> Qtd. by Michael Blain. "The Sociology of Terrorism: Studies in Power, Subjection and Victimhood Ritual", Universal Publishers, 2009, Boca Raton, Florida, p. 15

<sup>\*\*</sup> Qtd. by Mehrdad Vahabi. "The Political Economy of Destructive Power", Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004, Cheltenham, p. 2.

give him power.”<sup>††</sup> Similarly, both of these works show the test of human being with their desire for power.

### Desire for Power

There always exist some special people in a group who have better characteristics and qualified enough to be a leader and naturally people choose them owing to their strength to protect or lead them. But when a rival who wants to get the position and is aware of his or her weakness, a conflict appears and s/he realizes that the only way that will carry him or her to authority is guilt or trick such as treachery, conspiracy and so on. Then some crucial problems occur, which lead to the catastrophic results. Simply that is the case with the troublesome characters both in *Hamlet* and *Lord of the Rings*.

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet seems to be an innocent character who is loyal to the king. However, his innocence is damaged the moment he is faced with three witches that prophesy his reign:

THIRD WITCH: Hail, Macbeth, who shall be king hereafter! [...]  
Your sons and grandsons shall  
Be kings, though you will not.  
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! (9-10)

Shakespeare’s hero begins to develop a burning desire for authority and power since he cannot stand the lure of ruling a country. Of course, Hamlet is not alone in making a demon out of himself but some other factors like three witches are at work. Lady Macbeth also has a powerful impact on Macbeth with her mocking and implications. In a sense, Macbeth feels that it is necessary to prove his “manly” qualities as his wife makes him believe that he must do much more if he desires might:

LADY MACBETH: When you dared to do it, you were a man.  
To be more than you were,  
You would be so much more the man.  
Come now—you have sworn to do it! (22)

On the other hand it might be wrong to say that witches and his wife make him commit crimes because they ascertain his secret desires that he confesses while he is about to kill King Duncan:

MACBETH: The Prince of Cumberland!  
That is an obstacle,  
On which I must fall down, or leap over—  
For it lies in my way. Stars, hide your fires!  
Let no light see my black and deep desires. (16)

<sup>††</sup> Davis, William Eric. “Peace and Prosperity in an Age of Incivility”, University Press of America, 2006, Maryland, p. 15.

The same conflict between King Duncan and Macbeth is seen between Ralph and Jack in *Lord of the Flies*, which reflects William Golding's "experience of the war, in his connection with Lord Cherwell's research into explosives, in the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, in the post-war revelations of the Holocaust and the horrors of Stalinist Russia."<sup>‡‡</sup> Jack tends to be a leader because of leading little choir boys before. When a group of children whose ages range from 6 to 14 have a plane crash and have to live on an island without any adolescent companions, the first thing they do is to choose a leader because the power relations or struggle reveals itself virtually everywhere on the island, which is reflected clearly throughout the novel. "These power relations are illustrated by symbols in the novel, which centre on two different power systems, a democratic system, with Ralph as the head, and a dictatorial system with Jack as the leader."<sup>§§</sup> Golding uses the conch shell as a symbol of power and when the boys are asked, they reply:

"Him with the shell."

"Ralph! Ralph!"

"Let him be chief with the trumpet-thing." (15)

But we cannot ignore the fact that Jack has a strong desire to be chief from the beginning until the end:

"Shut up," said Ralph absently. He lifted the conch. "Seems to me we ought to have a chief to decide things."

"A chief! A chief!"

"I ought to be chief," said Jack with simple arrogance, "because I'm chapter chorister and head boy. I can sing C sharp." (15)

Envyng the characters that have authority, both Macbeth and Jack start to become involved in a chain of crimes. When it comes to Jack, he seems to be eager to lead a group of hunters and to rule them fairly. "Ironically, he is the rule breaker who splits from the group, forces others to join him, and becomes more and more evil."<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

It seems that they have a Machiavellian understanding: any path to leading success is acceptable and you can do anything in order to be successful and powerful. It is a term originating from Niccolò Machiavelli and used to describe people who underestimate and deceive others in order to reach their personal goals. Machiavellianism was highly praised in

<sup>‡‡</sup> James R. Baker. "Golding and Huxley: The Fables of Demonic Possession," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46:3, 2000, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441940>, (AD. 10.12.2014), p. 315.

<sup>§§</sup> Björn Bruns. "The Symbolism of Power in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*" *Karlstad University, Engelska, C-uppsats*, 2008/20, p. 1. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:132457/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Harold Bloom. "Bloom's Guides: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*", Infobase Publishing, 2010, New York, p. 14.

Europe especially by writers such as Shakespeare and Marlowe. Shakespeare writes in *Henry VI* referring to Machiavelli:

GLOUCESTER: I can add colours to the chameleon,  
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.  
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown? (510)

Just as Macbeth kills King Duncan following his “vaulting ambition”, so Jack says that they do not need Ralph anymore and forms his own army, and both of them get rid of the biggest obstacle between them and their wishes. Jack takes the place of Ralph by turning everyone against him and becomes a leader; on the other hand, Macbeth becomes the king after the murder of King Duncan with the help of Lady Macbeth who encourages him when he still has some worries:

MACBETH: What if we should fail?  
LADY MACBETH: With enough courage, we'll not fail. (22)

The ambitious characters do not find it enough and begin to abuse their authority since they are in thought of making their positions permanent and preventing other people from taking the authority and they commit more crimes. Their second crime again involves murder and is very similar to each other in terms of morality. In Act III, Scene I Macbeth hires some people to kill Banquo, who was once very close to him, and Banquo's son Fleance because of his fear, as suggested by witches, that Banquo will be the ancestor of a row of kings. They succeed in murdering him, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth's murder of his friend is equivalent to Jack and his tribes' killing Simon who indeed has very similar characterization with Banquo. Both of them do what is morally right and become threat for the evil characters because they want to warn them against their sinful deeds. “Ironically, they have killed the one person who could have saved them from bestiality.”<sup>†††</sup> The reason why they are killed is that they are seen as obstacles in their way to ultimate power; like Banquo who suspects Macbeth and thinks that he is doing wrong, Simon wants to prevent Jack and his tribe from behaving like people of uncivilized societies. Drawing attention to the violence, Golding shows how cruel man can become while seeking power: “*Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!*”... At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws.” (136)

The fear of losing power makes the characters commit more crimes because of losing control. Macbeth decides to murder Macduff relying on what he has heard of the witches: “Beware Macduff. Beware the thane of Fife.” (57) Realizing that Macduff flees to England, he still wants to be sure that he will not take the throne in future:

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<sup>†††</sup> Hynes, Samuel. “Several Interpretations of *Lord of the Flies*.” Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 62.

MACBETH: I will surprise Macduff's castle and  
Give the edge of the sword to his wife,  
His babes, and all unlucky relatives who  
Might happen to be there.  
I will not boast about it like a fool.  
This deed I'll do before my anger cools. (60)

While Macbeth is determined to continue in doing wrongs, Jack in *Lord of the Flies* pushes to the limits. His humiliating Piggy, causing the death of Piggy and sacrificing a pig for the beast, torturing and punishing littluns (short form of little ones) and stealing the glasses are all outpouring of his inner voice craving for power. Piggy's glasses are very symbolic here; they represent the power, like the conch shell, since it is used to make fire. "The boy having the specs can therefore be considered as the lord of the fire on this island."<sup>†††</sup> Since having specs is seen equal to owing power, Jack is determined to possess it even if it means stealing. It would be wrong to say that Jack is the only boy who wishes to be the most powerful one for nearly all boys on the island, except for Simon, are after power. Roger, for instance, does not need Jack to make evil things to show his authority over others. Another boy, Henry sees tiny insects while he is walking:

This was fascinating to Henry. He poked about with a bit of stick...and tried to control the motions of the scavengers. He made little runnels that the tide filled and tried to crowd them with creatures. He became absorbed beyond mere happiness as he felt himself exercising control over living things. He talked to them, urging them, ordering them. Driven back by the tide, his footprints became bays in which they were trapped and gave him the illusion of mastery. (51)

It is clearly suggested that there is always a desire to be a leader, be a king, minister or any ruler and the label is not important. Controlling or ruling other people seems fascinating as it seems to Henry. Golding masterfully portrays how one feels happy and excited when he takes the control over other creatures, even if it is only a momentary control of little insects, which shows the wild and greedy beast ingrained within our nature.

## Conclusion

The theme of power is effectively handled in *Macbeth* and *Lord of the Flies*. The characters act with a sinful nature in order to get power. As mentioned above, power may be held via such different mediums as expertise, knowledge, persuasion or it may be gained by delegated authority, but when given to someone who is not thought to deserve it, then problem occurs and here force or coercion appears. Macbeth and Jack do anything in order to reach ultimate power. They murder anyone around they see as threat. Although the power relations in *Lord of the Flies* seem less important, Jack and his tribe try to become the only authority on the island by using violent methods.

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<sup>†††</sup> Bruns, Björn. "The Symbolism of Power in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*", p. 3.

Authors of both works make us aware of how dangerous the quest for power can become when it is sought outside the border of reason. The consequences of one's greed for power are emphasized in both works, so the quotation of historian Lord Acton which is taken from his letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton may apply for both of them: "Power tends to corrupt and power corrupts absolutely."<sup>§§§</sup> The evil characters resemble each other since their search for ultimate power might result not only in others' but also their own death as in Macbeth's case. Macbeth and his wife pay the price for their sinful deeds while in *Lord of the Flies* all the boys, except for Simon and Piggy, are rescued from island.

The reason why the struggle for power is widely used in literature is that it is a strong determinant in our lives, so is in characters'. The dimension of power the characters struggle for is not so much important. Both authors reveal that their characters who stand for demonic desire to have authority over others can do anything in order to reach the absolute power without considering the result of their actions. A desire for power could be seen a natural phenomenon but when it is triggered with ambition, it brings about catastrophic results.

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<sup>§§§</sup> Acton, John Dalberg. <http://www.acton.org/research/lord-acton-quote-archive>, (AD: 05.12.2014).

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