

“Anarchic Wills: The Individual and Political Authority in Shakespeare and Milton”

During the seventeenth century, at the height of England’s Crisis of Authority, Thomas Hobbes articulated a theory of government that offered a new solution to the problem of political legitimacy. Rather than justify authority on religious, legal, or even paternal bases, Hobbes said that subjects should obey an existing power structure simply because that entity holds power. According to Hobbes, subjects do not “flourish in a monarchy because one man has the right to rule them, but because they obey him” (Hobbes 222).

Hobbes’s direct dismissal of legal or ecclesiastical “rights” to govern in favor of an authority’s de facto power was a novel contribution to the burgeoning field of political philosophy. However, as my dissertation argues, de facto theories of government emerged half a century before Hobbes’s *Leviathan* on the stages of Elizabethan theater and in the pages of early modern literature.

To help guide readers through a slew of works that span some eighty years, I have utilized the term, “anarchic will.” Early modern literature is full of anarchic wills, individuals who recognize the shifting reality of political power and feel the existential dread of this shift. The anarchic will radically experiences the terrifying freedom, not of political liberty per se, but of the normative grounds for political obedience. A usurping king can still declare his divine right, but the real crisis of authority, the turbulence that generates the anarchic will, comes from the recognition that divine right, or any such rights to the throne, have no meaning. The anarchic will, therefore, threatens political order at its most basic level and in a way completely unlike traditional rebellions.

The first part of this dissertation explores the dramatic prefiguration of Hobbes’s political philosophy in a handful of Shakespeare’s plays. Chapter one, “Be rul’d by me:” Shakespeare’s *Henriad*,” uses the second tetralogy as a model for the diminishing role of de jure claims in the face of de facto realities. These plays show the paltry effectiveness of de jure “rights” to rule and they explore the ramifications of a political order where those cracks are exposed.

Chapter two, “Antic Dispositions: Shakespeare’s Tragedies,” reads *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* as mytho-political and studies the existential ramification of political liberation. By utilizing tragic protagonists, Shakespeare can investigate the psychological impact of de factoism on an individual.

The second part of this dissertation examines what happens when writers of imaginative literature *respond* Hobbes’s political philosophy of de factoism. To that end, chapter three, “*Paradise Lost*: Free to Fall in the Waste Wide Anarchie of Chaos,” reads *Paradise Lost* as a response to Hobbes’s theory and shows how a reading of Milton’s epic, with this focus, reveals a major unresolved problem for Milton’s poetic cosmos: the problem of chaos, “that anarch old.”