ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare (1554-1616), English national poet and one of the most distinguished English literary playwrights produced his most well-known works between 1589 and 1613. He started his literary career as a comedy and chronicle writer, but he did not confine his literary genius with comedies and chronicles. He also produced very prestigious tragedies, tragi-comedies, romances and poems. His history plays deal mainly with the events from King John to Henry VIII. His main concern in the history plays was order, disorder, importance and continuity of monarch, in which he also emphasized the Englishness and advised on the destructive influences of civil wars and disobedience against the monarchs. The Wars of the Roses, in which the Houses of York and Lancaster fought on the monarch of England between 1455 and 1487, was an important historical event for the history plays. Henry Tudor defeats Richard III and succeeds to the throne as Henry VII. He achieves to unite the two families, marrying Elizabeth of York. Tudor dynasty ruled England and Wales until 1603. Shakespeare lived under the reign of Elizabeth I, who was the last monarch from Tudor dynasty. Shakespeare warns the audience against the dangers of civil wars and speaks well of the Tudor dynasties in his history plays, such as King John, Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV (Part I, II), Henry V, Henry VI (Part I, II, III), Richard III, Henry VIII. This plays were about the English history. In this study some important historical events before the Elizabethan period and how Shakespeare used such events in his plays have been discussed. The aim of this study is to stress on the historical consciousness in Shakespeare’s history plays.
STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to show how William Shakespeare tries to raise historical consciousness and indoctrinates the importance of order and degree and obedience to kingship in his history plays. He emphasises the importance of “divine rights of kingdom”, “passive obedience” and the maxim “the kings do no wrong” in these plays. He warns both the audience and the rulers against the destructive effects of disobedience which leads to chaos and civil war in the society.

The Wars of the Roses were a series of dynastic wars for the throne of England between the Houses of Lancaster and York. They were fought in several sporadic episodes between 1455 and 1487, although there was related fighting before and after this period. The thread of civil war and chaos continues throughout the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and King James I (1603-1625). After Henry VIII changed the ownership of the Church, his son Edward continued the changing the form of church service from Catholic form into Protestantism. After Edward’s death, Mary I inherited the throne, and the country considerably felt the danger of civil war. Confusion was added to confusion, because she drastically tried to re-establish Catholic faith in the country. She fought against the attacks by protestant rebels and those who refused to accept Catholicism were burnt at the stake. The conflicts between Catholicism and Protestantism continued during the reign of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I tried to reduce the harmful effects of these conflicts on peace and unity of the country and adopted a middle way in religious matters. She did not interfere in practices and beliefs of the Catholic people. She tried to avoid conflicts which would cause chaos in the country.

1588 was an important date for Elizabethan people. With this defeat of Spanish Armada in 1588, English nation gained confidence in itself, and patriotism and nationalism become influential. After the British victory, interests of Elizabethan people in history plays increased, and history plays became very popular during the Elizabethan period, since these plays thoroughly reflected nationalist and patriotic feelings in the county.

History plays focused on some subjects such as obedience to the monarch and the duties of monarchy. In history plays not only nationalistic and patriotic feelings but also obedience to kingship and the duties of monarchy in ruling the state were emphasised. There were great interest in history plays in Elizabethan period. Shakespeare kept up with the times and wrote about historical subjects. Shakespeare’s history plays involve historical events between 1377 and 1485. He deals with the reigns of King John, King Richard II, Henry V, Henry VI, Richard III and King Henry VIII in these plays.

Shakespeare made use of historical fact related in Holinshed’s work Chronicles. He did not only deal with the historical facts but also commented on the historical facts on behalf of monarchy. When he dealt with history he did not stick to the facts but mostly used imagination and fiction. Shakespeare tried to indoctrinate historical consciousness in his plays, Henry V and Henry VIII. He made use of some concepts in the Elizabethan Era and derived from Medieval period,
such as Great Chain of Beings, order, kingship, degree in order to give warning both the Elizabethan people and the monarchy against the dangers of civil war and chaos. That is why, Shakespeare’s main concern was to reflect the common sense, and he tried to do his best in order to warn both the rulers and the people against the dangers of chaos, disorder and civil war in his history plays.

Shakespeare’s age was one in which, there was general interest in history and the people were eager to be told about the past. The sixteenth century history plays were aimed to respond this demand from the public. Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare was aware of the danger and the destructive effect of a civil war. He used some historical facts from English history such as the Wars of the Roses in his plays. He also brought forward the idea of harmony, order and congruity in society and supported the hierarchical social structure. Shakespeare made use of this demand on behalf of the monarchy and order in society. These plays put the essence of the new historical view into popular form for the theatre-going public. History plays had been valued as a lesson for kings and the people, what to and what to avoid. As a result, Shakespeare showed how the misfortunes of society followed the sins of its rulers in his history plays and also emphasized on the sacredness of kingship, the wickedness of rebellion.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Chronicles, Order, Kingship, Ideology, Civil War

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’İN TARİH OYUNLARINDA TARİH BİLİNCİ

ÖZET

Shakespeare'in tarihsel olayları nasıl ele aldığı tartışılacaktır. Bu çalışmanın amacı Shakespeare'in tarihi oyunlarında tarihsel bilinç üzerinde durmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: William Shakespeare, Tarih Oyunları, Düzen, Krallık, İç Savaş

INTRODUCTION

Elizabethans’ world view had deep roots in the history and mainly based on mixture of ancient and classical writers, the Old and New Testaments, and the moral and religious values of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. “Great Chain of Being”, “order”, “degree” and “kingship” had importance in the formation of the philosophy of the life in the Elizabethan period and Shakespeare was familiar with these doctrines (Ribner, 1965: 12). “The Great Chain of Being” was one of these influential concepts which were inherited from Middle Ages. During the Elizabethan period it was believed that there was a spiritual order from God through archangels and angels, through kings, princes, nobles, merchants, peasants and workmen, through higher and lower animals, to the very plants and stones. Each had its proper place in the universe and was an essential link in this Great Chain of Being.

The Elizabethan believed that everything in the world had its natural way of working, and its natural place in the system of things. Before the creation of mankind and the world, there had been chaos – an actual physical state in which particles of matter were not linked to one another, and all things were in a permanent state of anarchic conflict and hostility. God then imposed his own will on matter, and formed the world out of chaos. As everything was created by God the whole universe was like a carefully linked and complex machine created and kept working by the one Being (Aksoy, 1986: 21). Therefore, order was important not only in the universe but also in society, because order was created, planned and executed by God. “Every part was related to every other part and served some function in a universal plan” (Ribner, 1969: 4).

On the other hand, degree was considered as the social equivalent of order. In Elizabethan society, it was believed that without degree society would disintegrate and civilisation would not be possible. “Social organisation had been constructed in a system of hierarchies. Every form of life was arranged in a scale beginning with the lowliest plant and extending through man and the angels up to God himself. Social organisations in the same way, began with the individual and extended in degrees of importance to the family, the state, the universal church, and finally to the kingdom of God himself” (Ribner, 1969: 4). Order is the basis of a civilisation. The well-being of an individual as well as of nations depended upon the maintenance of order and degree. The ignorance of the order in family relationship and in governmental affairs would bring chaos and destroy the harmony of all universes.

Another concept that the Elizabethan people supported was the belief that derived from the kings were appointed by God as representative. Man is not allowed to decide who shall be king under any circumstances, and this task is God’s alone. Hence obedience to kings was suggested even though they misused their power and ruled the country unjustly. Therefore the maxim “Kings do no wrong” protected the office or function of the kings against the courts of law and Parliament (Urgan, 1960: 126). The Tudor monarchs, from Henry VII to Elizabeth I, propagated another doctrine “passive obedience”, which meant that when a monarch’s rule seemed to be tyrannical and unjust, they should remember that kings are sent by God to rule the states. People should pray God to lead their king’s heart to better ways and forgive their sins which had brought the punishment of oppression, because passive obedience was always better than armed rebellion. Armed rebellion would divide a country into warring factions and offend God (Aksoy, 1986: 26).
Elizabethan people also believed the need of having a powerful monarch to establish and keep peace at home, so monarch was given many discussable divine rights. According to the concept of "divine rights of kings" God alone was responsible for the appointment of a person to kingship. The king held his office from God, and no from human beings. Since the monarch is the representative of God in the world, any attempt to usurp him/her was not merely a crime against human law, but it was a crime against God. The overthrow of the king from the throne was something to be decided only by God. The only thing that the people should do is to endure with reliance and patience and not to attempt to remove a King or revolt against him which is considered as a crime against the God (Uzmen, 1973: 9). Thus the result of this major sin and crime is civil war and English people bore in minds the detrimental effects of the civil wars, which devastated England for almost a hundred years. Discord in the heavens breeds discord on earth, and discord on earth is reflected in the heavens (Ribner, 1969: 12).

These concepts were very popular in the Elizabethan period, and Shakespeare adapted and made use of these concepts on behalf of monarchy. Considering the bloodshed and destruction caused by the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, and also the rebellions and conspiracies during the reign of Elizabeth I and James I, it is not surprising that Shakespeare mentions civil war with horror and fully accepts passive obedience in his plays (Aksoy, 1986: 26). He presented consistently the conception that State could survive only by loyalty, otherwise chaos would emerge and no-one would be in safe. Without loyalty there would be insoluble conflicts between father and son, as Shakespeare shows in a symbolical scene in Henry VI, Part 3. When disorder appears on one plane, it inevitably corrupts the others. In his tragedies he also praises the obedience to the kings in his tragedies. For example, “before the murder of Julius Caesar, unnatural phenomena appear on earth. When Macbeth kills Duncan, the state is corrupted by tyranny, and nature falls into discord as the sun is blotted out and the horses of the king turns against man... The turmoil in the world of King Lear appears in the disruption of family relations, in civil war and in violent storm as well as the madness of Lear himself” (Ribner, 1969: 13).

**History Plays in the Elizabethan Period**

There were not any remarkable history plays before the Elizabethan period. 1588 was an important date for the plays based on English history. These plays had increasing popularity following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 which the Catholic Phillip II of Spain, who had a claim to the English throne through Mary.

The defeat of the formidable Spanish Armada in 1588 contributed much to the growth of strong feelings of patriotism and nationalism in England. The nationalistic feelings were surging all over England, and Shakespeare voiced the public emotion proudly (Aksoy, 1986: 14). Some playwrights used this historical success in their plays to provoke nationalistic feelings (Uzmen, 1973: 92). They reflected the strong nationalistic feelings following the Protestant Reformation and the commercial wars with European countries (Wells, 2001: 203).

The history took its modern form in Tudor England and it dealt with the lives of secular heroes, mostly kings. John Bale’s Kynge Johan (1538) and Christopher Marlowe’s Edward II (1592) contributed significantly to the development of history plays. English playwrights used history play to create sense of national pride and patriotic feelings. According to Coleridge the aim of history is to introduce great heroes in history to the people and arouse respect for patriotism and social institutions which unite the public together. Obedience to social institutions and rulers are the two basic concepts which these plays propagate (Uzmen, 1973: 7). In a way the writers of history plays used historical facts in dramatic medium for historical propaganda in theatrical form for nationalist and patriotic purposes. The writers of historical plays drew their English historical materials from the sixteenth century chronicles and stressed the patriotism and nationalistic feeling.
of the times. These plays served as medium for stirring nationalistic and patriotic feeling in the
country and teaching English history to the uneducated population.

As for Shakespeare, he did not only concentrate on comedies and tragedies, he also wrote
some outstanding plays mainly based on the historical data. History plays, originally called
chronicles, flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century and declined soon after the death
of Elizabeth I in 1603 and popular during the Elizabethan Period. English history play developed as
a popular genre because there was demand for new plays for the public stage, and history plays
tried to meet the demands of the theatre-goers.

Shakespeare’s History Plays

History play was a popular dramatic form in the London theatres. Shakespeare conformed
to the fashion of the time and entered into the history play. He produced some history plays seven
of which are based upon the history of England. “Shakespeare, though not the inventor, was the
most prolific author of such historical dramas” (Backus, 1882: 93). In his history plays,
Shakespeare deals with the lives of the kings between 1377 and 1485 such King John, King
Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI, Richard III and King Henry VIII. All of these history
plays are based upon the fifteenth century England with the exception of King John and Henry
VIII, set respectively in the twelfth century and in the first half of the sixteenth century.
Shakespeare changed the actions and characters in his history plays, and he did not write them in a
chronological order, although he based his plays on real events in history. Of the English kings he
dealt with, Richard II ruled (1377-1399), Henry IV (1399-1413), Henry V (1413-1422), Henry VI
(1422-1461), Richard III (1483-1485). Shakespeare began with Henry VI and continued with
Richard III, Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V.

Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles (1587) was an invaluable source for poets and dramatists
at this time (Wells, 2001: 204). “Holinshed’s Chronicles furnished much of the material for them,
beginning with King John, and ending with Henry VIII. They are grand panoramas of national
 glory or national distress. Richard II, Richard III, the two unequalled dramas on the reign of
Henry IV and that chant of patriotic triumph, Henry V, illustrate his power in representing epochs in the
life of his nation” (Backus, 1882: 92).

Another source Shakespeare used to give him the records of events was Edward Halle’s
The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York (1548). Hale’s
admiration for the Tudor monarchy inspired him to compose this work, in which Henry Richmond
ends the cycle of bloodshed caused by the murders of Richard II and Henry VI. The Union’s
influence upon Shakespeare is most apparent in the Henry VI plays (Wells, 2001: 168). For
historical material Shakespeare also consulted Samuel Daniel’s The First Four Books of the Civil
Wars (1595), while his comic scenes draw broadly on the traditions of medieval mystery and
morality plays.

Henry V

In his history plays Shakespeare follows the general views of his time and tries to satisfy
the audience. That is why he produces history play in order to reflect the common sense and the
patriotic and nationalistic view in his time. Shakespeare is in harmony with common Elizabethan
views. “In his The Elizabethan World Picture (1943) and Shakespeare’s History Play (1944) E. M.
W. Tillyard argued that Shakespeare’s history plays represent a nationalist enterprise celebrating
the providential restoration of order following the accession of the first Tudor king to the English
throne in 1485” (Wells, 2001: 142). On the other hand, Henry V (probably written in 1599) is the
last of the plays known as “Henriad”, including Richard II and both parts of Henry IV. In this play,
Shakespeare deals with the rise of the House of Lancasters in history. The play tells the historical
events in Medieval England and it is filled with love of country and success of English army. In Henry V, like his other history plays, Shakespeare mingles fact with fiction. For example, although the real Henry V defeated the French army at the Battle of Agincourt, he did not actually take the French throne. Many characters in Henry V are based on real people, but the personalities and actions of these characters in the work are imaginative. “Shakespeare used his imagination bring to life the inner motivations and private conversations of historical figures that history books will simply never be able to capture” (Muse, 2015: 4). In Henry V, Shakespeare portrays the king and the war in more interesting way than they seem in history. The play is full of incredibly provocative moments for a leader. Henry has to deal with committing his country to go to war, and then he has to deal with the betrayal of one of his best friends. He has to execute a beloved old companion in the middle of a war in order to send the right message to the rest of his troops:

KING HENRY V

God quit you in his mercy! Hear your sentence.

You have conspired against our royal person,

Join’d with an enemy proclaim’d and from his coffers

Received the golden earnest of our death;

Wherein you would have sold your king to slaughter,

His princes and his peers to servitude,

His subjects to oppression and contempt

And his whole kingdom into desolation.

Touching our person seek we no revenge;

But we our kingdom's safety must so tender,

Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws

We do deliver you. Get you therefore hence,

Poor miserable wretches, to your death:

The taste whereof, God of his mercy give

You patience to endure, and true repentance

Of all your dear offences! Bear them hence (Shakespeare, Henry V, 1994: 630).

The young Prince Hal, the future king of England under the name of Henry V, becomes friendly with Sir John Falstaff, who has no sense of morality. Falstaff is certainly not a model of knighthood and the last person on earth with whom the heir to the throne should make friends. He is thief, a parasite and a lecher, and also a selfish and a braggart man, but he is amusing, witty and free from any feelings of responsibility except toward himself and the satisfaction of his physical needs. Before young prince Henry ascends the throne, he wastes time drinking with Falstaff. As soon as he comes to the throne, Henry, as a king, cannot have Falstaff as a friend. He can only allow him some money instead of giving him a position of high honour since he considers the affairs of England more important than his former friend. When Henry becomes King, he rejects his jolly old friend, Falstaff, as he represents the holiday mood and lack of responsibility. “It is true, too, that there is some evidence that in his gallery of English kings Shakespeare was seeking
to indicate, directly or indirectly, his view of the ideal king and that Henry V’s education as Prince Hal, his acquaintance with all strata of life and his final refusal of the opposite extremes of riot (Falstaff) and vainglory (Percy) to choose justice and true kingship) (Daiches, 1970: 250). In the play Shakespeare reminds the monarch his/her duties. He uses Falstaff and Prince Henry to express his ideas about the order and kingship. Falstaff represents misrule and anarchy in the society which Henry V has to govern. The ideal king cannot have anarchy at hand as he tries to govern. Prince Hall should reject Falstaff although Prince Hall enjoys his carefree way of life with him.

**Henry VIII**

There were political debates and upheavals during the Wars of the Roses, but the confusion did not stop after the wars. English people had to suffer many uncertainties and they were open to many internal and external threats. Henry VIII succeeded his father Henry VII in 1509. England under Henry VIII became a Protestant country, with the monarch instead of the Pope as the head of the English Church, but many still held to the Catholic faith. Protestant reformers were eager to spread Protestantism in England, but the fear of Catholic rebellion continued to be strong for a long time in the society. Henry VIII died in 1547 and was succeeded by his nine year old Edward.

The years following Henry’s death were full of religious disagreement and rebellions. Henry VIII had changed the ownership of the Church; Edward’s reign succeeded in changing the form of the church service from the Catholic form into the protestant one. Thus confusion was added to confusion when Edward died. For the next five years the new Queen Mary I (1516-58) daughter of Katherine of Aragon, tried to re-establish the Catholic faith in England. Queen Mary ordered many bloody persecutions to re-institute Catholicism. Mary had to fight against the attack by rebels and supporters of Protestantism. She died childless and succeeded in 1558 by her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth. When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne, she tried to return England a Protestant country, but during her queenship religious unrest did not come to an end. “The Elizabethans felt they were living in a world of full of uncertainties and open to all sorts of dangers. To counter this fear, they had a firm and fixed concept in order, which was both a belief and a need.” (Aksoy, 1986, p. 24) In the play some historical facts can be seen. For example in **Henry VIII** (1613) Shakespeare focuses on the instabilities of the royal court in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This play represents significant moment in English history, namely England’s religious break with Rome and the Catholic Church. In 1531, King Henry VIII, disappointed that his wife Catherine (spelled "Katharine" in this play) had borne him no male heirs, decides to divorce her. His advisors argue that the marriage is invalid, but the Pope rules against the divorce. Nevertheless Henry divorces his wife and marries Anne Boleyn (“Anne Bullen” in the play) in 1533. The Pope promptly excommunicates Henry. Henry then takes command of religion in England, declaring himself the head of the Church of England and seizing the wealth of the monasteries. The rest of Henry’s reign is beset by rebellions both small and large by groups who want to restore Catholicism. The actual event of the break with the Pope is not represented within this play, but we see Henry’s advisors discuss ways to negotiate a legal divorce. We even see Cardinal Wolsey urge the Pope to refuse the divorce. But the actual break is only alluded to. However in some parts of the play, Shakespeare uses his imagination in presenting the real facts. He also serves to contribute to the establishment of a powerful and stable monarchy. For example, in **Henry VIII**, archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer baptises Elizabeth and makes a speech about her future greatness. He says the infant holds great promise for England, and few now can imagine the great things she shall accomplish. She will know truth, she will be loved and feared, and she will be a great ruler. The king is amazed at the wonders of which Cranmer speaks. Cranmer goes on to announce that Elizabeth will bring happiness to England, and when she dies a virgin, the world will mourn her. Since Queen Elizabeth I died ten years before Shakespeare wrote this play, this praise cannot be accepted as a flattery. It can be accepted as an indication of the respect and admiration of
people respect and admiration for the queen in Elizabethan Period. Shakespeare’s aim is not to ingratiate himself with the Queen Elizabeth but to articulate the sincere feelings of the people in his time. The most important diplomacy of Elizabeth I’s grandfather Henry VII was to secure England from internal disorder and civil war that the country suffered in the previous periods.

CONCLUSION

During the Elizabethan period, there were some concepts derived from the Medieval period and adapted by William Shakespeare, like many of his contemporaries, such as “Great Chain of Being”, “order”, “degree”, and “kingship”. According to the concept of “Great Chain of Being”, it was believed that there was a spiritual order from God through higher and lower animals, to the very plants and stones. In every class of beings there was one dominant form: the lion among beasts, the eagles among birds, and the king among men (Ribner, 1969: 12). People esteemed highly the order and degree in society. They thought that “when disorder appears on one plane, it inevitably corrupts the others” (Ribner, 1969: 13). That is why, Shakespeare’s main concern was to reflect the common sense, and he tried to do his best in order to warn both the rulers and the people against the dangers of chaos, disorder and civil war in his history plays.

Shakespeare’s age was one in which, there was general interest in history and the people were eager to be told about the past. The sixteenth century history plays were aimed to respond this demand from the public. Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare was aware of the danger and the destructive effect of a civil war. He used some historical facts from English history such as the Wars of the Roses in his plays. He also brings forward the idea of harmony, order and congruity in society and supports the hierarchical social structure. Shakespeare made use of this demand on behalf of the monarchy and order in society. These plays put the essence of the new historical view into popular form for the theatre-going public. History plays had been valued as a lesson for kings and the people, what to and what to avoid. As a result, Shakespeare showed how the misfortunes of society followed the sins of its rulers in his history plays and also emphasized on the sacredness of kingship, the wickedness of rebellion.

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