



Radical Doubts: Power, Order and Subjectivity in *Macbeth* and Popular Cultures

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My dissertation wants to analyse the ways in which the social and political conditions created in Britain by the rise of Thatcherism in the early eighties have partially reshaped the very perception of national culture; however, the object of this research is not the abstract *idea* of culture, but the most important and worldwide recognisable single cultural asset of the British heritage, i.e. William Shakespeare, whose works – and persona – have undoubtedly become a symbol for Britishness itself. This work hence aims to scrutinize part of radical responses from the different British intellectual and cultural environments that – with different scopes and methods – have found through the Bard a way to express their voice against the political, economic and



social *tsunami* caused by the three terms of Margaret Thatcher's office as prime minister (1979-1990).

The analysis revolves around two different – but not distant – domains which have been influenced by such growing political awareness: first, the highly-institutionalised tradition of Shakespearean criticism, which in Britain during the early eighties developed into the politicized, radical form of Cultural Materialism, a branch of Cultural Studies. CM aimed to recuperate the plays' material conditions, to suppress the idea of Shakespeare as a carrier of essentialist, immutable meanings, and to draw particular attention to issues of power, authority and marginality (see Dollimore 1994: 2–3). In order to show the main points raised by a Cultural-Materialist analysis, the well-known tragedy of *Macbeth* (circa 1606) has been chosen as a case study, "one of the best examples of a play with topical references and political implications" (Camati 2008: 341).

The second domain concerns contemporary mass culture, and in particular the appropriation and reuse of Shakespeare by three works from the lowest – in terms of common consideration – forms of popular culture, i.e. the comic books *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd 1989) and *The Sandman* (Gaiman 1989), and the BBC trilogy series *House of Cards* (Seed 1990). These three works, all created between the eighties and the following decade, have in different ways absorbed and re-interpreted the Bard to blend his immense cultural status with the historical and political conditions in which they were conceived. Once again, the tools of Cultural Studies have proven particularly useful in analysing such forms of artistic and literary production, thanks to the discipline's particular attention towards issues of mechanism of power, forms of mass communication (see Pagetti and Palusci 2004: 16), and also the exploration of popular literature (114).

The choice of *V for Vendetta*, *The Sandman* and *House of Cards* as popular-culture specimens is far from being casual: besides a strong linkage with the historical and cultural background of the eighties, and a certain socio-political awareness, these three works share the same geographical belonging, being all created and produced by British authors; in addition, they were all critically acclaimed and commercially successful – the *HoC* trilogy won several BAFTA TV Awards, while *The Sandman* was the first and only comic book to earn in 1991 the World's Fantasy Award; lastly, and more importantly, these works appropriate several Shakespearean elements in the most disparate ways, from subtle suggestions to direct quotations of his most famous plays. In particular, they all share a preference for *Macbeth*, which has thus become a useful tool to probe how certain motifs and themes have been re-employed almost four hundred years later and in wholly different media. As Cavecchi (1998: 16) points out, *Macbeth's* brevity, the small amount of characters, and the (apparent) plot straightforwardness make the play particularly adaptable to modern means and sensibility.



Starting from such assumption, it can be easily understood that the first goal set for this work was to demonstrate how mainstream comic books and TV series, two media heavily suffering from the material conditions (i.e. restrictions) of production, have been able to open a productive dialogue with the Bard's immense cultural heritage, and to turn his plays into "a site of cultural struggle and change" (Sinfield 1994: 155) with unpredictable, radical and anti-establishment outcomes. The re-use of Shakespearean nuances has also been a starting point for further considerations, which maybe deviate from the original premises but which definitely help to have a better understanding of the works under consideration, always keeping in mind the militant approach of Cultural Materialism. Such approach, as hinted before, mainly focuses upon questions of, for instance, power, subjectivity, marginality and femininity.

The dissertation was conceived in the wake of a personal feeling of dissatisfaction about the traditional and traditionalist Shakespearean criticism upon rewritings and appropriations, concerning in particular television and comic books. In fact, many works written on the subject somehow lack a critical edge and tend to reduce the analysis of the Shakespearean presence within a continuum of *closeness-distance* between the source text and target text. Moreover, these works fail to consider the appropriation as part of a larger system of signification established by the target text, which is surely informed by other literary, historical influences and by the material conditions of creation. In other words, what I wanted to do was not to consider Shakespeare as unique touchstone, but rather as a permeable and permeating element which should not be extrapolated from the rest of the system, which is therefore to be considered in its integrity, as long as it remains possible.

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