The Fragility of Public Service: A Study of *Richard II* & *Measure for Measure*

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Shakespeare’s plays provide abiding case studies and stories that track the realities of powerful actors wrestling to achieve power, ambition and goals. I believe that the plays provide insight into the day-to-day realities of living political life. This paper will use the insights from several plays and sonnets to examine the power and limits of the ideal of public service that modern public life relies upon.

I will examine the moral construction of the ideal of public service and its assumptions about human beings and the institutions. The paper will explore attributes of human beings that Shakespeare highlights in his plays and sonnets. These attributes challenge humans and institutions that try to sustain through the ideal of public service.

The primary sources will be The Tragedy of Richard II and Measure for Measure. Both plays identify serious themes that pervade Shakespeare’s corpus and both are among his most taxonomic plays where characters incarnate issues and positions.\(^i\) The Sonnets isolate with pellucid acumen the range of emotions and ambitions that suffuse human life. The paper will draw upon the Sonnets to help map this range of emotions that the plays illustrate in active unfolding.

This paper examines how a sustainable ideal of public service depends upon the dynamics of human beings. I will assume that human nature does have substantive referents (Pinker, 2002, 2007; Damascio, 1997). I will also assume that not only science but also texts and stories can illuminate the constancy of certain attributes of human nature. In particular literature has the capacity to engrave knowledge by uniting the cognitive and emotional dimensions of comprehension (Pinker, 2007). Story telling has the ability to claim attention, engrave knowledge with cognitive and emotional power and provide a forum to expand reflection and possibilities of understanding (Boyd, 2009; Dissanayake, 1988).\(^i\) Engaging stories engage human minds at multiple levels and permit persons to learn new details and insights about
life and themselves and transform their understandings of the world and possibility. Stories also augment people’s theories of mind that enable them to understand other people and actions. In a sense modern political science with agency theory possess its own model of human nature that explains more than a few pathologies of public service aspirations and institutions. I want to suggest that the model itself is far too limited, underestimates the capacity of culture and humans to sustain institutional commitments even against the postulated imperatives of self-interest (March 1989, Parsons 2005)

I explore Shakespeare’s observations about the qualities of persons involved in politics and the tensions that arise between Shakespeare’s models of action and the demands that public service places upon individuals. This examination looks at the attributes of humanity that Shakespeare identifies as challenging a public service ethics. The study examines the dynamics of power and institutions that dominate politics and complicate dedication to a public service ideal. Shakespeare identifies a range of temptations and distortions of the moral ideal of public service that human nature introduces. Finally I discuss several implications of Shakespeare’s insights for the ideal of public service.

I. The Ideal of Public Service

The modern ideal of public service builds on two premises: first, a conception of the public and what the public is owed; second, a notion of service to focus dedication. A person enters service to a person, entity or ideal, and the service disciplines their judgment and action on behalf of those they serve. The emergence of the idea of a public merged with the tradition of the public good in the 17th century with the emergence of an engaged citizenry.

This public service ideal drew on an older and deeper tradition of the common good which embodied moral aspirations, official obligations and legitimizing principles that stipulated that good rulers should act in the interests of all persons, citizens or orders of the society. As mobilized publics grew self conscious through battle and education, they demanded government recognize and embody this ideal.
The moral and political ideal of public service insists that individuals put aside their local or individual identifications and interests to act on behalf of all who qualified as members of the regime. It wed the notion of service with the obligation to act with disinterest. The ideal required an internal culture of what Max Weber would call a “vocation” where people entrusted with power over others guaranteed by promise to exercise their authority to benefit all members of the public (Weber, 1947). The key lay in the persons’ moral capacity to put aside their local identifications, self-interests, prejudices and preferences in order to “serve” members of society. This provided surety that individuals internalized a moral character to perform these. Governments inculcated cultures and created accountability structures to ensure that the individuals performed well.

Sustained service depends upon individuals who demonstrate consistent character and judgment over time. The virtues needed by public servants transposed those associated with good kingship or rule such as those adumbrated by Malcolm in Macbeth, “justice, Verity, Temp’rance, stableness...Perseverance, Mercy...Patience, Courage, Fortitude” (4.3.11-14). The need for these virtues has not diminished, and modern public service ideals continue to adumbrate requirements of virtue (Cooper, 1990; Frederickson, 2005).

The modern society depends upon public service to accomplish a huge range of vital services with competence, reliability, frugality and fairness. These people enable functions as simple as filing and as complex as war fighting to be done day in and day out in face of the friction of normal life (Frederickson, 2005; Cox, 2009; Thompson, 1987; Cooper, 1990).

The ideal of public service demands much of human beings. It requires public servants to exercise immense self-control; to make promises and live up to them; to truthfully be accountable; to master the competences and skills of their task; to exercise self-constraint and not use their office for personal or familial gain; to spend the money entrusted with them frugally; to restrain irrationality in judgment;
to frame their judgments and act in light of the standards of their position. In most cases these standards would be embodied in laws, rules and regulations.

Public service also depends upon institutions imbued with cultural norms, rituals, symbols that reinforce and support the values and judgment public servants deploy (March, 1987; Schein, 2004; Wilson, 1989). The ideal relies upon institutions, culture and accountability to sustain it. Shakespeare poses the question can the ideal be sustained over time.

II. The Challenges of Human Nature

Shakespeare’s account of human nature poses serious challenges to the ideals of public service. The ideal, itself, is now so pervasive across modern regimes that the definition of corruption highlights its lack. The standard definitions of corruptions highlight how state officials use power to extort resources in exchange for service or use of state office to augment personal or clan coffers. The corruption can extend deeper where it distorts the capacity for loyalty to principles and institutions beyond one’s own interests and desire.

A. Passions and Reason

Shakespeare begins innocuously enough. His Sonnets call attention to the imperious role of passion in human life. Love, the archetype of human emotion, stands as a motivator that quickly grows into madness “in pursuit and possession.” Emotions simply overwhelm limited human reason for “reason is past care” (129; 147). Emotions unleash “perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,” and this is only love! Passions ground and inform valuations and provide strong spurs to action.

Shakespeare’s ruthless Ulysses justifies himself because passion drives humans as a “universal wolf” where “power into will and will into appetite.” Without order life becomes “universal prey” (Troilus & Cressida 1.3.120-24). The passions dominate against the vain pretensions of the mind, as Portia points out in the Merchant of Venice, “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree (1.2.17-18). These passions lie within all humans as the Duke in Measure for
Measure remarks, “O, what man may within him hide, though angel on the outward side (3.2.264-5). Power exacerbates passion’s dominance of the mind. The Duke wonders about the impact of his delegation of power to the meticulous Angelo, “Hence we shall if power change purpose what our seemers be” (1.3.53-4). In rebuffing Angelo’s later abuse of power Isabella points out how few understand their own passions. In Angelo’s case “Man, proud man, dress’d in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d” (2.2.118-120).

Any emotion can mutate into madness. Madness in its Renaissance sense overwhelms the mind and reason. Passions dominate humans, and reason becomes subservient to passion’s ends. This means human reason seldom stands against the insistent desire of passion and often becomes a mere tool to the passionate desire for status, achievement, and glory. Passion spawns “fears to hopes and hopes to fears” and dominates human motivation as a “madding fever.” (Sonnet, 19)

Politics is shot through with powerful passions. The stakes are high for everyone, and emotions ground their evaluation of the stakes. In Shakespeare’s world several passions govern political life: ambition, glory, honor, fear. His world vibrates with strong passionate actors obsessed with seizing power and advantage. Macbeth, Richard III, Henry V, Claudius, to name but a few, all reveal the road chosen by Bolingbroke in Richard II to become Henry IV. He succeeded to power “by paths and indirect crooked ways snatched with boisterous hands.” They seize the power, office and honor they value (2HenryIV, 4.5.183-4, 190-1, 218).

Passions do not just delineate interests and calculation. As emotions they trigger and amplify action and ground evaluations. Passions code knowledge, anchor motivation, enable memory and distort calculated assessment of interests as well as the priority attached to them. Humans build dikes against the waves of passion and canals to channel its energy, most powerfully through the use of oaths to bind and focus. But desire and passion overwhelm oaths easily. A person may be “foresworn” and “have sworn deep oaths” only to find desire motivates breaking and perjuring
themselves despite “all my vows are oaths” of “love,” “truth,” or “constancy” (Sonnet, 152).

B. Ambition & Oaths

The “bloody spur” of ambition augments political passion. Shakespeare paints a transitional world from a medieval hereditary order and place to a more restless uncertain world of strivers (Shoenbuam, 2004; Kernan, 1995). Power and place must be earned and defended, not just inherited and held.

The desire to better one’s self or position generates a restless unstable world. The instability is compounded because so many others jostle for position, and no one ever remains secure. Achievement in a disordered world of ambition resembles Disraeli’s’ climbing to the top of the greasy pole or trying to succeed in a game of king of the mountain.

The end result of ambition intensifying every passion is a world of fear and shifting coalitions where the elements that stabilize relations such as oaths, position, and loyalty corrode. Trust and loyalty, the social cement of the medieval world, leach from relations. Consolidating power requires neutralizing one’s friends and allies as much as enemies. Macbeth, Richard III or Bolingbroke as Henry IV all must eliminate their friends or face revolutions from those who helped them to power. Bolingbroke ensures that “all friends” are neutered, sent off to the Holy Lands or killed. No friends can be trusted in this world, so “I cut them off—get them to the Holy Land” (2Henry IV 4.5.204-12). Bolingbroke’s entire reign as Henry IV is wracked by revolts of his former supporters.

The dilemma facing political actors and regimes is how to stabilize and legitimate rule once it is acquired. Shakespeare’s world etches this dilemma because so many of the rulers are usurpers or come from compromised lineage. The regimes are pervaded by dissimulation, hiding and the creation of networks of spies and informants (Hunt 2002). The world of politics seethes not just with betrayal but the fear of candor and speaking the truth that reaches its apogee in Richard III with
“tongueless blocks” and no one speaks “treason” (Hunt 2002; Worden, 2004; Morris, 1965).

Ambition like the pervasive canker in the rose imagery of the Sonnets grows in even the best of humans. The “loathsome canker lives in the sweetest buds” (35). The greatest danger lurks when the best become consumed by ambition. The greatest of the thanes, Macbeth, gives in to temptation; the most talented of the lords, Bolingbroke, gives in to temptation. The combination of talent, ambition and energy gnaw away the ideals and values of leaders until they struggle for power alone, then fight to substantiate that power for their successors (Worden, 2004; Spiekerman, 2001).

In this world, motives like glory and honor and greed run rampant. But ambition’s most potent concoction brews when it mixes with vengeance. In a world of shifting alliances, strong groups and individuals obsessed with honor, the ability to “pay back” for an injury becomes a mortal necessity. If a person is perceived as too weak to protect their interests or exact a serious cost through vengeance, they become prey.

The tactical need for vengeance, however, soon can be overwhelmed by enduring chains of vengeance exacted through reciprocal attacks such as the War of Roses unleashes. Given the dangers, to take on vengeance against a regime easily slides into the need to unseat the individual to prevent official vengeance. Hamlet, in his own way, destroys Claudius; Bolingbroke accumulates debts to repay Richard II for the death of his uncle Gloucester, his exile and finally the seizing of his father Gaunt’s lands. These combine into powerful motives to return not just to restore his patrimony, but also ultimately to seize the crown for his own.

Besides the need to protect oneself in a tit for tat political world, vengeance flows from the powerful demands of honor to restore esteem in light of insult; from the demands of family obligation to restore and protect the family name and patrimony when one of the family is hurt; to protect the future of the family from depredation; finally to assert one’s own power to deter future depredations on oneself.
Vengeance permeates Shakespeare’s world. Individuals have long, very long, memories to restore honor, balance of debt, and preserve reputation to discourage future assault. The power of ambition and vengeance aggravate the uncertainty and frailty of political alliances and accomplishments. It also means that oaths can often divide a person.

Bolingbroke’s father Gaunt cannot bring himself to act against Richard II either for the murder of his brother Gloucester or for the exile of his son Bolingbroke. Goaded by Gloucester’s widow, he responds “God’s is the quarrel for God’s substitute...Let heaven rage for I may never lift an angry arm against his minister” (1.1.37-42). The Duke York, the second most powerful Lord in England, Gloucester’s and Gaunt’s last brother, ends in blithering paralysis when he cannot act to save Richard II from Bolingbroke’s invasion and usurpation. After Richard seizes Gaunt’s property with no show of respect for loyal Gaunt’s death, York mutters “How long shall I be patient? Ah, how long shall tender duty make me suffer wrong (1.2.163-185;).

Richard’s actions appall York. This bares the cross-braces of loyalty. Loyalty to the regime may be torn by loyalty to family, and this paralyzes the Duke of York when he could tip the balance to protect Richard II from Bolingbroke’s attack. York cannot act split between the loyalty to throne and loyalty to family and desire to see justice done (2.2.110-116). York laments “disorderly affairs” are thrust into his hands.

Both are my kinsmen.
Th’one is my sovereign whom both my oath
And duty bids defend; the other again
Is my kinsmen, whom the king hath wronged
Whom conscience and my kindred bids to right

York, for all his power, ends a “neuter” that accedes to Bolingbroke’s coup without ever agreeing to it (2.3.152-161). In the end York bolts to support Bolingbroke even as he wrings his hands at the magnitude of injustice being done by Bolingbroke in overthrowing God’s anointed representative. The oaths that anchor public service
and regime loyalty are fraught with their own complexity and crosscurrents that provide no real stability.

C. Time and Fragility

The corrosive impact of time saturates Shakespeare’s political world. Nothing endures and “old men forget.” Time marches implacable with its “scythe to mow” and “its waves make to the shore” endlessly eroding and changing so human “minutes hasten to their end” (Sonnet, 60). Monuments of stone and brass will not escape the unremitting costs of time. In the end “gilded monuments” end as “unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time” and “wasteful war shall statues overturned.” “War’s quick fire, shall burn the living record of your memory” (Sonnet, 55). Even the greatest Renaissance political achievement the state falls to time. Shakespeare sees both “the interchange of state, Or state itself confounded to decay.” The world witnesses “towers I see down razed” and even “brass eternal slave to mortal rage” (Sonnet, 64). What nature does not overrun, human ambition, enmity and conquest destroy.

“Rocks impregnable” and “gates of steel so strong” all decay and die (Sonnets, 65). The fearful presence of death and fragility of all accomplishment compel humans to seek what they can in the short time they live. This hovering presence impregnates political life with an urgency and vulnerability that never end.

Religion may or may not offer eternal life, but the time on earth provides a very limited stage and very limited time to achieve. Death exists as an ever-present reality. Too early death haunts play after play. The entire Henry VI cycle depends upon the untimely death of Henry V leaving his naïve, pious and young son at the mercy of powerful Lancaster and York lords. Time’s “scythe” “mows” humans and society alike. (Sonnets, 50). ”Devouring time“ pursues everyone. It amplifies urgency but also creates a counterpoint so that Falstaff can attack honor because it brings premature death and provides nothing needed to survive, “Can honour set a leg?...Or take away the grief of a wound?...Who hath it? He that died Wednesday” (1HenryIV, 5.1.131-140). In Macbeth the prophecy and urgency of limited time spur Macbeth
and his wife on in their grisly acts of usurpation for the time is propitious and right. The press of time and mortality hurries and intensifies the motives of ambitious actors in the plays.

Life’s fragility is compounded in the state. When the state withers or fails, the order disintegrates. Failed states and disorder loom over all Shakespeare actors. Lear’s fate portrays it best. Abandoning the crown, King Lear hands it on to unworthy children who despoil the country and exile all who are noble. Lear finds himself on a weathered, storm blown heath. In a “world turned upside down” the land is wild and chaotic without order and festering with wanton death and no place for haven. The boundary lands of legitimacy and government and ritual and ceremony hold the wildness at bay. The legitimate and ordered state provide arenas for the passion, ambition and politics to play out without destroying the social and political world (Heineman, 2009).

Like beauty which “sweetest things turn sourest,” life can only be “to itself it only life and die” (Sonnets 94). Not only time’s relentless press and death’s finality, but the entire world remains fragile. Especially in politics, “at a frown their glory die.” A great warrior of a thousand victories can be “from the book of honour quite razed” at a whim.

Politics and life possess an exquisite vulnerability to fall. Public honor is fragile and easily lost, and no one should boast given how quickly it can all disappear (Sonnet 25). Richard II sees this all when he realizes that Bolingbroke has prepared and launched his attack while Richard is separated from his army in Ireland, his Welsh supporters waiver, his friends prove incompetent. Richard knows “I wasted time and now doth time waste me” (Richard II, 5.5.49).

Shakespeare’s political reality portrays a labyrinthine, remorseless, unsentimental, dangerous and ego-centered world that lurks throughout his canon. (Schoenbaum, 2004; Worden, 2006). This world is fraught with dissimulation and spies and thwarted, unrealized and sometimes unaware ambition with lurking desires and long, very long, memories. Moral reason seldom stands a chance.
III. The Fragility of Public Service

In Shakespeare’s world the royal regime, the King, incarnates public service. The “the king and state never sleep” Service and sacrifice anchor the obligations to provide clear eyed and calculated judgment to protect the state from its enemies (Henry V 4.1.228-291; 2Henry IV, 4.4.58-66; Wells, 98-100; Spiekerman, 118-120). Macbeth actually distills the source of devotion and commitment needed by the regime and its minions, “service,” “loyalty”, “duty,” “love,” “honor” when he articulates what is owed the “throne” and the state (Macbeth, 1.4.14-35; Wells, 161-184).

The combination of passion, urgency, fragility of state, ambition, fear and the uncertainty of all allies corrode the assumptions that buttress public service in persons and institutions. For this reason a regime must build a symbolic, ceremonial and cultural structure that serves as an antidote to untrammeled passions. The creation of legitimacy and institutions that inspire emotional loyalty becomes a primary mechanism for any regime to counter the power of emotions to overwhelm oaths but also harness emotional loyalty of the people.

A robust concept of public service builds upon the self-control of individuals. It centers upon the capacity of individual to take an oath. The oath guides their decision-making and controls their ability to put aside passions that tempt them or disrupt their judgment on behalf of the common or public good (Rohr, 1989; Thompson, 1987; Cooper, 1990). The key lies in the capacity of the individual to deploy cognitive reasoning and judgment supported by emotional commitment. This combination enables persons to clarify obligations and resist internal and external emotional and cognitive blandishments to set aside the oath bound commitments.

Public service also builds upon a culture that supports an individual’s oath bound duty. The culture arises from the support of norms reinforced by ritual, law, ceremony and institutional incentives. This culture is sustained by reliable
structures of accountability where individuals are called to account for the quality of their judgment and actions.

Public service and stable states depend upon ritual, symbol and ceremony to establish legitimacy in a deeper emotional way and evoke a strong loyalty among subjects and citizens. These give institutions durability independent of the individual. They provide resilience to help institutions fend off the tendency to violent conflict. The conflicts can be guided into battles bound and linked to the rituals whether they be jousts, elections, debates in parliaments rather than the violent gathering and clash of armies in civil war or rebellion.

_Richard II_ lays bare how culture, symbol and ritual are not enough. The political regime and kingship possess frail but great cultural resources. They alone, however, cannot hold out alone against the restless ambitious leaders of Shakespeare’s world.

Richard narrows his circle of advisors and intimates to a small faction. This both excluded and angered others, just as Henry VI inadvertently inflamed the Yorkists by his casual identification with the Lancaster line. The advisors warp into “flatterers” the greatest threat to any regime. If sound advice is subverted, the King not only makes bad decisions without full knowledge of their consequences, but the regime is exposed to the charge that it no longer rules for the common good but only the interests of faction who give bad advice. “The King is not himself, but basely led. By flatterers; and what they will inform merely in hate ‘gainst any of us all, That will the King severely prosecute “Gainst us, our lives, our children and our heirs.” (2.1.241-45). The rise of flatters and loss of sound advice and service exposes the regime to bad decisions and loss of legitimacy.

Following bad advice couples with financial profligacy and leaves Richard II with no money to pursue a war against Irish rebels. Upon the death of Gaunt, he seizes the lands that rightfully belong to the exiled Bolingbroke, and he uses the money to finance the realm’s defense. In doing this, he shatters the brittle struts that brace his regime. York remonstrates with Richard reminding him that these rash actions urged by sycophants will threaten the edifice of this authority. He warns that Gaunt
possesses “an heir a well-deserving son.” If Richard “take Hereford rights away, and take from Time his charters and his customary rights: let not tomorrow then ensure today; be not thyself, for how art thou a king but by fair sequence and succession” (2.1.187-209).

Richard II’s ill thought decision to confiscate Bolingbroke’s patrimony threatens the very principle of “fair sequence and succession” that his kingly rule depends upon. Every noble will now fear for his own property and the fate of his family line. “You pluck a thousand dangers on your head, you lose a thousand well-disposed hearts” (2.1.195-209). Richard needs the money because he has wasted his funds on ritual and clothes and fashions and his own coterie. To fund a war against Irish rebels, his lack of frugality betrays him and his ill advised “letters patent” squeeze nobles into simmering hostility. Richard lays the political and moral foundations for a rebellion. The cumulative stresses to legitimacy and interest and finance and even principle of succession lead to the point where oaths and promises fail to rein in ambition and fear (Wells, 124-5).

Richard not only attacks interests, but hands Bolingbroke a cause, a moral justification to restore his unjustly commandeered patrimony and rally others to his side. Richard helps Bolingbroke align interest with justice as a rally call. In the critical realm of meaning that sustains his regime, Richard II provides a “just cause” to Bolingbroke that cuts at his own patterns of legitimacy. At this point public service and its symbolic and ritual foundations shatter. Richard has violated all its moral foundations with his profligacy, favoritism, incompetence, injustice and violence to others.

The further fragility of public service regimes is demonstrated by how easily Bolingbroke stages his coup with all the trappings of legitimacy. Bolingbroke remains scrupulous in his subservience to Richard kneeling before the king in supplication even as he prepares to take the throne (3.3.187-190). Richard constantly proves his own unfitness to grapple with politics and implodes before Bolingbroke offering him the crown (3.3.121-130; 143-175).Taking the crown,
Bolingbroke claims the pious myth he mocked before, “In God’s name I ascend” (4.1.108-114).

The panoply of legitimacy is scrupulously observed as Richard II hands over his crown before Parliament. Bolingbroke takes scepter and crown, rides Richard’s own horse and seeks a true coronation in the Cathedral gathering surrounded by prelates and nobles. Shakespeare emphasizes how any political actor can appropriate the sustainers of legitimacy—ceremony and ritual.

In play after play, the acquiescence of the Lords and people is startling. Northumberland, Bolingbroke’s most powerful supporter, denies Richard II’s title before Richard gives it up and kneels before the usurper. Yet the moment of Bolingbroke’s ascension he proclaims Henry “sacred state” (5.6.6).

Prior to claiming the kingship, Bolingbroke rejected the glamour of divine right kingship and rips the veil of legitimacy aside to reveal that the regime depends upon power. Yet a month after Richard II’s repudiation, Henry IV was claiming his own special relation to God. His son Henry V travels full circle as the son of a usurper who claims the “rebellion is a sin against God” (Henry V 2.2.141-2). The trappings of legitimacy, so vital to buttress the regime and sustain public service, turn out to be gossamer veils to be plucked and borne by those who steal power, then legitimize themselves.

Shakespeare remembers what history re-affirms endlessly, people, weak and strong, accommodate power and force. Legitimacy and regimes and liberty can be easily lost because of this supine de fault. In the end York, knowing full well the moral cost of Bolingbroke’s wrenching control of the realm, speaks of “the great Bolingbroke.” York proclaims “All tongues cried, ‘God save, thee, Bolingbroke.” Later “Jesu preserve thee! Welcome Bolingbroke!” (5.2.7-17). The transfer seems complete.

Shakespeare constantly demonstrates that the array of culture and legitimacy for the state and service needs competence and nurturing. Incompetent and ineffective leaders can dissipate immense advantages. At the end of Richard II “the king stands
generally condemned” and has squandered the regime’s legitimacy among all sectors of society. Tradition, law, ritual, ceremony cannot withstand Richard’s self absorbed venality, self-indulgent expenditures and self-absorption with his own fantasy of rule. While Bolingbroke’s “apprehension” of the facts of power and strength on the ground rule, Richard II conjures up toads, spiders, clouds, angels, and stones to defend his office and crown (3.2.26). The deluded noble defender of divine right Bishop Carlisle assures him “heaven” will defend him (3.2.27-33).

But the splendor and majesty fail as supports when faced with Bolingbroke’s politics and power. Aumerle, the son of York, brutally points out Bolingbroke “grows strong and great in substance and power” (3.2.35). The office of the “deputy elected by the Lord” falls quickly and easily before Bolingbroke’s “hard bright steel and hearts harder than steel” (3.2.56-62; 3.2.111). The religious and theoretical foundations of rule mean little, when not nurtured, against raw power and strong-minded calculation as the Henry VI trilogy, Richard III and Richard II expose.

IV. The Internal Temptations of Public Service

Shakespeare’s distrust goes deeper. Even when the foundations of public service feel secure, the public service ideal reveals serious limits. He remembers the canker that lies in every rose, even sweet smelling beauty. This canker makes it difficult to expect the arrangements and persons of public servants to hold out alone against the wiles of the human soul and desire.

*Measure for Measure* begins when the Duke of Vienna flees his official responsibility to escape his office. He has grown weary of the “public face” of the office. He worries that he has been too lenient and his rule gave the people too much freedom and not enough limits “for we bid this be done when evil deeds have their permissive pass, and not the punishment” (1.3.34-54). In his place he appoints someone who might cure the city of the moral laxness and license that the Duke’s leniency permitted (Jensen, 2006).
The problem revealed in Measure for Measure illustrates how even when the scaffolding of public service is well built, the internal wood can rot. The Duke muses the state needs someone to restore moral order and rectitude, someone of unimpeachable morals and iron will to serve the public good.

He replaces himself with a pure public servant. He chooses Angelo a minor nobleman of superb repute, a man “of stricture and firm abstinence.” (1.3.11-13). The Duke delegates all, “your scope is as mine own” (1.1.64-5). The delegation is critical because it transfers government as service to Angelo; it posits him and the regime as a “demi-god” with full “terror” of the Duke (1.2.112). The role of terror and fear looms large in any regime but has been hidden by the Duke’s leniency, now it must be restored (Lever, lxv-lxvii; Cohen 1993).

To the morally weakened lower orders Angelo is known as a person who will “follow close the rigor of the statute” and “whose blood is snow broth” and “never feels wanton strings and motions of sense” (1.4.56-67). Angelo welcomes the test of his rectitude and commitment anxious to be the spur to address “drowsy and neglected law” (1.2.156-60). As the Duke infers, Angelo will not let law become a mere “scarecrow” where custom makes law a “perch, and not their terror.” When warned by the wiser but ineffective counselor Escalus to beware of overreaching and remember his own humanity, Angelo dismisses him, “tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, Another thing to fall” (2.1.17-31). Angelo embodies a rigorous moral precision committed to the rule of law, disinterested application of force and fair rule.

Angelo demands perfection in duty and adherence to the law of himself, his subordinates and of the citizens of Vienna. With his iron self-discipline, commitment to law and the regime, Angelo exemplifies the attributes that can counter so many of Shakespeare’s ambitious ego driven men of passion, ambition, and power for whom oath becomes a means to an end, not a commitment. When his provost balks at undue enforcement that requires death to fornicators and adulterers he snaps, “Do your office, or give up your place” (2.2.6-16).
In a crucial move, however, Shakespeare illustrates why moral rigor has its own limits. When the beautiful and talented Isabella begs Angelo to spare her brother, Claudio from death. Claudio had gotten his affianced with child, and Angelo refuses any mercy. More to the point, he sees himself and public servants as embodiments of the law. In an age-old moral defense of troubling actions by public servants, he proclaims, “It is the law, not I, condemn your brother” (2.2.80-2).

Angelo reawakens the slumbering law and begins to clear out the brothels and loose corruption that now infects the city because of the Duke’s leniency. In fact, he consciously does not resort to mercy at this stage because he needs examples to reestablish terror and respect for the law (2.2.90-9, 100-105; Spiekerman, 2001; Jenson, 2006).

At this point Shakespeare introduces two twists to the problem with honest and stringent public service. First, Angelo’s purity may breed injustice with its legalistic precision and unwillingness to weigh mercy and frailty into his decisions. As the Duke reminds him later, “He who the sword of heaven shall bear should be as holy as severe” (3.2.245-55-67). This idealism of public service grows into a form of pride and legalism that undermines the deeper intent of law to create justice, not just order, to respond to dignity not just conformity. Public service ethics can become overweening and dehumanizing. A service ethics can hide humans from their responsibility by enabling them to proclaim themselves as the “voice of recorded law” (Cohen, 1993). They subordinate or unite their judgment with the proclamation law and institutional imperatives.

Second, Angelo reveals the tangled world of human desire and commitment. Despite Isabella’s pride and unwavering dedication to her bother, he discovers the canker in his soul. He desires Isabella. Despite “urine” that “is congealed ice” he wants her (3.2.106). Angelo is stunned not only by desire but it’s source, not wanton, but “can it be that modesty may move betray our sentences more than woman’s lightness?” More troubling for Angelo and human plans, “Dost thou desire her for these things that make her good?” (2.2.172-6, 180-3).
With the same absolute surety that informed his merciless enforcement of law, Angelo turns on Isabella to propose that if she surrenders to him, he will spare her brother from death. He urges her that to “give her body to such sweet uncleanness” is no sin since he would be compelling it (2.4.50-650). He ends his forced blackmail and seduction by swearing “on my honour” that “I love you” (2.4.140-7). While he struggles with his own conscience, Angelo relentlessly pursues his end glossing desire with law and authority. Yet he can deceive himself so that he still believes he possesses honor to swear upon as he uses law to satisfy lust. He demonstrates the resolute ability of an individual of iron control and conviction to transmute conviction into desire glossed by reason and law.

When Isabella resists and threatens to reveal his demands, in time-honored fashion, he informs her that his reputation will protect him and no one will believe her (2.4.150-8). In trial he asserts the same bald-faced strength of his reputation to cower claims (4.4.20-25). When he believes Isabella has surrendered by substituting Angelo’s betrayed love in the seduction bed, he still orders Claudio killed. In his supreme moral confidence, even his sins and lust are absolved by enforcing the order of the law with death (5.1.99-106).¹

The terrible irony is that Angelo as inheritor of the Duke’s legitimacy embodies the succession, stature and stability of office. Yet he yields to passion and desire to “sin by loving virtue” (2.2.180-3). Only the Duke’s stealth surveillance counters this virtuous abuse of power and resolves the play in a convoluted and unsatisfactory way.

V. Conclusion: Public Service With a Twist

The ideal of public service with its institutional array is incredibly fragile in a world inhabited by the passion driven, mortality obsessed, and vulnerable realists of Shakespeare’s world. Yet the concept of public service ethic should not be abandoned, but it must be strengthened. A viable ideal of public service can respond to Shakespeare’s skepticism in three different ways.
Integrity and virtue are not enough

Shakespeare makes a case that integrity, virtue and a world of oaths and service alone will not stand over time. A theory of public service needs to incorporate a robust notion of prudence, political competence and calculation to deal with inevitable tensions and corrosions of political life. Public servants need the moral warrant to exercise craft to gain and deploy power. Their ideal should expand to impose the active obligation to build its own base to address the challenges to the public good. Richard II illustrated the bankruptcy of naïve virtue unleavened by prudence, and he leaves the kingdom and office naked by his actions. By the time Bolingbroke arrives Richard has alienated his entire support and power base and cannot rally support to defend the kingdom. “The nobles are fled, the commons are cold” he learns from his sycophant friends (Richard II, 2.2.88). Reflecting on his own naïve and toothless virtue, The Duke of Vienna must plot to overthrow his viceroy’s corruption and concludes that “Virtue is bold and goodness never fearful” (MM, 3.2.207-8). This articulates an alternative to the passive even naïve virtue that fells many of Shakespeare’s “moral” protagonists.

To sustain itself as bulwarks of a constitution against the winds and storms that Lear or Richard II expose when they undermine legitimacy, public servants need to be prepared to face a world dominated by power and ruthless actors. Public service actors need to develop competences and values the craft and skill of realists. The Sonnets allude to the need for individuals “unmoved, cold and to temptation slow” who can think amid the chaos with mind and heart as “still as stone” (Sonnet 94). The Duke of Vienna concludes upon his return that he must deploy “craft against vice” and deploy a more realistic approach to governing that does not surrender his ideals (Jenson, 2006).

The Importance of Accountability and Renewal

Not only must a structure and theory of public service be able to engage the realists and power demands, but it must also attend to its own internal temptations such as Angelo demonstrated in Measure for Measure. No public institutions can be trusted
to realists or zealots, yet both will be attracted and needed by public service. So institutions must be enmeshed in a web of accountability. No single process or structure will achieve this, but as Bolingbroke illustrated with his own “courtship of the common people,” public service should be complemented by consistent requirements for being called to accountability and transparency. Human nature simply cannot be left alone with power and position, even ones enjoined by virtue and idealism (*Richard II*, 20-37).

Accountability requires that legitimacy be earned daily and reinforced by justice and effort. It can be demanded or structured in many ways, but the regime needs to develop avenues to expose and assess public actions. Even relatively stable orders can be destroyed easily as demonstrated by Richard II when he fritters away the kingdom’s social and political capital. He narrows his circle to a group of incompetent “friends that flatter him.” Shakespeare is exquisitely sensitive to the importance but also the limits of ritual and ceremony in public life. Only incessant accountability will force people and institutions to renew their legitimacy daily by actions and re-earn legitimacy with effectiveness. Openness and accountability place this demand upon public service.

The temptations of power and responsibility and the corrosive impact of exercising power over time meet another insight of Shakespeare, “We are all frail” (*Measure for Measure*, 2.4.121). This means even the best will grapple with their own cankers. Virtue, oath and commitment, even buttressed by culture, will not be sufficient to hold in check the capacity of public servants and public service institutions to unleash immense harm. Their own cultures can hide the nature of their actions and burnish desire with law (Adams and Balfour, 2009).

Acknowledge and engage conflict

A political order fails for Shakespeare when it breaks apart into rebellion, civil conflict or civil war. Hobbes’ terror of civil war remains as urgent today as ever in history. At the end of Richard II’s rule and the usurpation of Bolingbroke, Bishop Carlisle correctly prophecies what such repressed illegitimate conflict will wreck,
“the heinous, black, obscene deed” and will haunt England for generations as it does. "The blood of English shall manure the ground, And future ages groan for this foul act...Disorder, horror, fear and mutiny Shall here inhabit, and this land be called The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls.” (4.1.138-146). Later he reminds everyone that all “The woe's to come. The children yet unborn shall feel this day as sharp to them as thorn” before he is lead off to jail (4.1.322-3).

Conflict remains endemic in human existence. For Shakespeare human passions both ignite and intensify discord. Any resolution almost inevitably plants seeds for the next conflict. The never-ending cycle of conflict, passion, interest, position and honor mean that a public service ethic must accept and understand that public servants must engage, adapt and channel conflict. Attempts at utopia or ending conflicts or suppressing them can never succeed and only harness latent passions that will erupt later. Obviously maintaining police and civil order remain fundamental functions of public service, but simple relentless repression will undermine Shakespeare's state.

This bolsters the point that public service ethics requires prudence as a counterpoint to vice and an ability to build cultures that permit individuals to exercise the complicated craft of keep power, exercising force, watching enemies and dealing with crime and war without turning into the vices that they fight. Without being seduced by the means they must use to deploy craft against vice (Jenson, 120-125; Worden, 37-40). Individual public servants need a capacity for “doubleness” in their actions and self-reflection (Measure for Measure, 3.1.253-9).

This doubleness accepts not only conflict in society but in oneself. “We are all frail” and all wrestle with cankers in the soul (Measure for Measure 2.4.121). Knowing how people and structures of class and conflict will always create restless people and restless conflicts, public service and its institutions need to be more supple about engaging conflict and not just suppressing it. Living with paradox in one's life and one's society settles
Shakespeare reminds us that given human nature, not human frailty, but the boisterous energetic and proud human nature, integrity, virtue, ceremony and ritual are not enough for public service. A democratic regime's public service needs transparency, multiple accountability means and active politics to create support for them. The public service model cannot endure human frailty with robust accountability to match the cultural support for virtue informed by prudence.

1 Shakespeare consistently utilizes his plays and poetry to present positions presented by or embodied by characters. Unlike his contemporaries such as Marlowe or Jonson he makes it very difficult to discover exactly what his own preferred positions are. His stories unfold as dramas of ideas, the word made flesh. He possesses the power to give nuanced and weighted expression to the many sides of issues, which give the plays their luminescent ability to illustrate, abiding dilemmas and problems that humans face. The incarnate the complex realities not just of life but of living (Wells, 2009; Morris, 1986; Worden, 2004).

2 Human beings, except for practitioners of “Theory,” have known for generations that literature has the capacity to reveal insights about human nature facing local challenges. People read for pleasure but also for the reflective practice of learning and discerning insights about being a human being. More recently cognitive science has reinforced common sense about the power of story and art to educate humans about their nature and reality. Not only has the consistency of neural and physiological aspects been clearly revealed. More interesting it is now clear that emotions are central to access, remember, recall and deploy knowledge. As interesting, visualization or knowledge in the mind impacts human learning and memory as powerfully as actually physical experience. Science has re-established the reality of consistent human nature across culture, the vital import of emotions and story telling in learning and insight. In some of the more intriguing insights cognitive scientists attempt to figure out the evolutionary role of story and art in focusing and anchoring knowledge, evincing a form of human emotional and cognitive play that can prepare for life and expanding human possibility and creative innovation (Boyd, 2009; LeDoux, 1998; Pinker, 1995, 1997; Damascio, 2000; Lakoff, 1980, 2003)

Bibliography


