

HONOUR

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Alex Butcher
Winchester College

Honour has always dominated our thinking, dictating the way we act throughout history. It is hardly surprising therefore, that in his far reaching portrayals of human nature, Shakespeare has frequently dwelled upon honour. Viewed from afar, honour, and the pursuit of honour, can seem to be a positive part of human nature, often heralded in similar terms to courage – as a source of virtue. But Shakespeare's dramas show a different side to honour and its pursuit, revealing it to be a cause of suffering and evil. By examining the ways in which honour affects Shakespeare's characters, drawing out their worst features whilst making them selfish, inconsiderate and open to manipulation, as well as by looking at the link between honour and bloodshed, this will essay will conclude that by obscuring reason and establishing its own moral framework, honour can be highly destructive.

Honour frequently exaggerates the worst traits in Shakespeare's characters, making them more emotionally unstable. This development is perfectly captured in Henry IV part i's Harry Hotspur. From the outset he is described as being hot headed and violent, with his own father saying: "Why what a wasp stung and impatient fool/art thou." Yet at the start of the play Hotspur is able to go somewhat towards suppressing these flaws by diverting them into a successful military career, surpassing in royal estimation even the king's own son. Yet when confronted by a demand from the king which he deems dishonourable to accept, it immediately provokes Hotspur's aggressive streak to the point that he can think of nothing else but tormenting the royal household: "All studies here I solemnly defy, Save how to gall and pinch this Bolingbroke. And that same sword-and-buckler Prince of Wales." Rather than complementing his virtues (bravery and strength), Hotspur's sense of honour exaggerates his failings, wasting talents that could have been put to the services of the nation as he becomes consumed by his desire for revenge. This gradually sets him on path to self-destruction, a journey that ends with his death at the battle of Shrewsbury (a battle which he provoked.) It is clear that in the case of this character, attempting to pursue an 'honourable' course of action did him no favours, but bound him to a series of decisions that would only trouble him.

In Hotspur's demise Shakespeare is able to expose two further dangers of a strict code of honour. First it is rigid, forcing people to make unreasonable decisions that do not necessarily benefit them in order not to be humiliated by failing to appear honourable. Secondly honour displaces self-awareness. In his quest for revenge Hotspur gives himself a task that can only end in warfare and with his or somebody else's destruction. Desperately pursuing honour erodes Hotspur's ability to weigh up the costs and benefits of his actions, restricting his already limited capacity for reason. Such reason – the ability to judge an action to be foolish – was essential in a society where mistakes often led to bloodshed. In both of these faults, honour is shown to be a dangerous construct, dragging a talented man to a wasteful end by making him lose sight of himself. Hotspur's pursuit of honour does not endear him to posterity, but vilifies him in its eyes.

Alongside exaggerating one's flaws and diminishing self-awareness, Shakespeare shows that honour can blind us to the concerns of others. This side to the pursuit of honour is revealed in Othello. The fear that the prospect of being dishonoured by cuckolding provokes in Othello is captured in his vicious exclamation about Desdemona: "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me?" It is obvious from the brutality of this threat that Othello prides his honour above considerations for morality or the wellbeing of others, a selfish attitude realised when he unthinkingly murders his wife. That a distinguished and respected man never stops to question why he is acting in a destructive way or what it might mean to his victim shows the dangerous power of honour over the human mind. In establishing its own moral framework that places its own redemption as the overarching goal, honour leaves no place for the consideration of others. Because she risks undermining his honour, Othello's wife becomes little more than an obstacle that must be removed if he is to redeem himself. In the tragic scene of Desdemona's death, Shakespeare shows us how dangerous this thought process – provoked by considerations of honour – can become. When one considers that this effect could no doubt come to be combined with

the faults encouraged in Hotspur by the pursuit of honour, chiefly the exaggeration of his pre-existing flaws and a lack of self-consideration, it is obvious that the pursuit of honour can come to be very dangerous indeed.

This combination can indeed be found in Julius Caesar's Brutus. By closely tying his own honour to that of Rome and its ancient system of government, Brutus has to fear the disruptive rise of Caesar: "I do fear the people/ choose Caesar for their king." This threat to his sense of honour immediately worsens Brutus's self absorption and indecision at the cost of his care for other men, a development captured in his own comment: "Than that poor Brutus, with himself at war / Forgets the shows of love to other men." Furthermore the pursuit of honour recalibrates Brutus's moral code until he becomes convinced that his course of action is for the general good. That this course of action involves the cold-blooded murder of a formerly close and forgiving friend is of no significance to him. Thus we see a previously noble man abandon morality and driven into the clutches of his worst character flaws by honour. The consistency in the negative effects of the pursuit of honour on Shakespeare's characters is remarkable.

Brutus's story introduces another danger of trying to be honourable: it exposes us to the trickery and manipulation of others. Honour is sought not just for its intrinsic value, but also for the pleasure of being deemed honourable by others. This allows other people to dictate to us what we must do to appear honourable, opening us up to being manipulated as we strive for their recognition. Through his desire to appear as an honourable Roman citizen, Brutus is exposed to manipulation by Cassius, who tells him that if they continue to follow Caesar they will come "To find ourselves dishonourable graves." In this warning Cassius clearly invokes being recognised as honourable by others, for the dead can pay no heed to how honourable is their grave. Cassius is thus able to manipulate Brutus into a series of events that will ultimately lead to the latter's ruin by manipulating his sensibilities about honour, demonstrating one more that the pursuit and awareness of honour can provoke highly undesirable consequences.

If the conspiracy to kill Caesar ends up provoking a war, it is not the first time that honour goes hand in hand with violence in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare wrote at a time when ancient codes of chivalry were only just starting to die out and his history plays are set in a period when chivalric practices were well established. Central to these was the belief that honour was won or lost on the battlefield. This spirit is present in Henry V. The English King deems the calculated French insult of a basket of tennis balls so offensive to his honour that he feels obligated to wage war in order to avoid being humiliated: "We will, in France, by God's grace, play a set / Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard." In the humorous nature of Henry's vocal reply we see the triviality of the insult he has received, but his physical response, rooted in a desire to make up lost pride, is brutal and bloodthirsty. Here the pursuit of honour magnifies the innocuous out of all proportion, showing us just how dangerous it is when one deems the pursuit of honour to take precedence above all else. When this risk is placed in the context of a militaristic and chivalric society, the link between honour and bloodshed becomes unavoidable. It is a link we see time and time again in Henry, Hotspur, Brutus and Othello. Above all the other faults it encourages in Shakespeare's characters, striving for honour receives its harshest indictment in its repeated link with violence and war.

Pursuing honour harms you. This much can be read into Shakespeare's plays. By provoking his characters' worst flaws, by making them selfish and neglectful of others, by opening one up to manipulation, by provoking people to violence, honour makes people lose sight of rationality and morality. In encouraging actions that rational people would never normally make, honour establishes its own moral code that makes all 'honourable' actions moral actions. But when we see that 'honourable' actions involve stabbings, wife killing and waging war, we realize that an honourable action is seldom a moral one, but instead is often highly damaging to all.