



RESEARCH PAPER

William Alexander's Monarchic Tragedies: A Tool of Advice

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Received: February 03, 2022	The paper explores how literature and especially the drama can be used as a tool of advice. Apparently, William Alexander's Monarchic Tragedies are based on the stories of ancient historical figures but actually, the plays serve as oblique commentaries on the contemporary socio-historical and political conditions of the period. Through these plays, the playwright has advised the then rulers to learn a lesson from the tragic stories of the ancient historical figures like Croesus, Darius, Julius Caesar and Alexander the great and rule their states prudently and judiciously. The paper is a unique study in the sense as it analyses and evaluates the playwright's personal events and circumstances that shaped and constructed his personality and in return helped him create the plays. Written in the Senecan tradition, the plays serve as instructional material for the princes and kings how to focus on significant internal and external state issues while expanding the territory at the same time.
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Introduction

This study investigates the dramas of William Alexander which usually fall under the genre of new-classical tragedies. This study offers a critical view of Alexander's *Monarchic Tragedies* particularly *Croesus* and *Darius*. It is based on critical and thematic analysis of his plays and more attention has been paid to the inter-textual affinities, themes, art of characterization and style of Alexander. While analyzing the plays, various classical authorities such as Seneca, Niccolo Machiavelli, and many others have been taken into consideration to interrogate the practical utility, and number of theories with novel perspective. The first part of the work comprises Alexander's biographical incidents, his achievements whereas the other sections of this study dwell on the critical analysis of the plays which has been substantiated with textual references and scholarly evidence wherever it is required.

The study also investigates such issues as the dramatization of key historical events, the representation of exemplary figures like Alexander, Darius, Croesus, the

plight of an individual in a tyrannical society, and the references to the topical events such as the accession of James I. Alexander's plays are didactic in tone and comment on the transience of human life and futility of human efforts. As Alexander expresses it in his drama *Darius*:

What are we but a puff of breath

Who live assured of nothing but death (39-40) and then:

World's glory is but like a flower,

Which both is bloom'd and blasted in an hour (59-60).

Literature Review

William Alexander, the Earl of Stirling (c.1567) was a poet, a politician, a courtier, and an active member of Scottish colonization. He was born in Stirling, Scotland and belonged to an aristocratic family. His family background and terms gave him access to the court and particularly to James who later on became the king of united England and Scotland. His acquaintance with King James helped him gain many material and political benefits. During his life, he got many titles of honor and worked on key posts such as Gentleman Usher to Prince Charles, master of Requests of Scotland, member on the Scottish Privy Council, Viscount and Earl of Stirling, Lord Alexander of Tullibody, Earl of Dovan, Secretary of State for Scotland, Keeper of the Signet and Commissioner of Exchequer due to his political relations. Though in his capacity as Secretary of State for Scotland, Alexander did his best to establish the Scottish plantation, known as Nova Scotia, yet his efforts met with failure due to his little incentives offered for the emigrants. Finally, the idea of Nova Scotia settlement totally collapsed when most of the area of Nova Scotia was handed over to France according to a treaty of 1632 between England and France. Later on, Alexander played pivotal role in the politics of England by "uniting of two nations under one king" (McGrail, 1940, p.x). As a writer, Alexander got popularity due to his collection of poems *Aurora*, *First Fancies of Author's Youth* (1640). Most of the poems written in this work are in sonnet form and have been addressed to a fictional lady. His other works include *The Monarchicke Tragedies* (1604), *Paraenesis to the Prince* (1604) and *Doomes-day* (1614, 1637).

Alexander's *Doomes-day* portrays the picture of the Day of Judgment when all creatures appear in front of God. The work obviously reflects Alexander's religious belief in the hereafter, the Day of Judgment and the immortality of human soul. In this context, it forms inter-textuality with the works of the French poet, Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas. Alexander's work is mainly poetic in form, particularly in rhymed couplets. *The Monarchicke Tragedies* consist of four plays that deal with the stories of four great monarchs of the ancient times: Croesus, King of Lydia, Darius, king of Persia, Alexander, King of Macedonia and Caesar, King of Rome. Like *Parcenesis to the Prince Henry*, *The Monarchicke Tragedies* also deal with the theme of the right form of government and counsels to the rulers how they can wield their authority properly. Alexander's tragedies are considered new classical tragedies due to the influence of great Roman tragedian, Seneca on his plays. He has created these tragedies in Senecan tradition and, that is why, they are also dubbed as "Senecan tragedies" (Dent, 1950, p. 73) or "Senecan closet dramas" (Waller, 1977, p. 512). Because of his good terms with

King James, Alexander facilitated James in composing and preparing *The Psalms*. During the span of 1621 to 1633, William Alexander got a meteoric fame and honor. He was graced with knighthood in 1621, while in 1626, he was appointed as Secretary of State for Scotland. In 1630, he was honored as Viscount Canada and, in 1633, Earl of Stirling. Alexander's work can be categorized into three broad themes: love, religion and politics. Despite the creation of his poems and plays, Alexander fails to fall under the category of mainstream writers of the period. Most of his critics dub him as one of "the minor poets" and "forgotten writers" (Hughes, 1932, p.79). While talking about the role and significance of *The Monarchicke Tragedies*, T. S. Eliot (1963) comments that Alexander's plays are "more important in the history of the Union (between Scotland and England) than in the history of drama" (p. 44). Eliot's comments are insightful and throw light on Alexander's role in the English politics of the period. That is why, D. J. Cadman (2016) argues that "Alexander remains more well known for his political career as a member of King James VI and I's court, especially for his part in Scotland's empire building campaign in Nova Scotia for which he earned the title Viscount Canada" (p.158).

The current study reveals how his plays register his counsels for King James I (1566-1625). It focuses on his famous plays such as *The Tragedy of Croesus* and *The Tragedy of Darius*. Most of his work was published in between 1603-1607. All of the four tragedies are closet dramas which refer to the fact that these plays were basically meant for reading. Particularly, these plays were written as counsels for the rulers of the period and may be considered as advice dramas. As Kirsten Sandrock (2017) argues that these plays were "partly devised as counsels for James VI and I (1566-1625) on foreign politics". (p.1). Alexander tries to guide and influence the opinion of the rulers of the period through these plays. His plays portray the stories of great heroes, historical figures, who waste their states, "ending up with famous ruins of extended states" (Sandrock, 2017, p. 3). However, Alexander seems to admire and appreciate King James and offers him real examples through his plays. He advises how the rulers should avoid the pitfalls that characterized the monarchs of the past and consequently led to their catastrophes. That is why, his plays reflect the impression of the literary works created in the favor of English Empire.

Material and Methods

The researchers have analyzed William Alexander's all tragedies that published under the title of *The Monarchicke Tragedies*. The descriptive analysis method has been employed that falls under the category of qualitative research. *The Tragedy of Darius* was published in the year 1603 by Robert Waldegrave in the beautiful hilly capital with the grassy-green gardens of Scotland, Edinburgh. This play was combined with the new play, *The Tragedy of Croesus*, and published together with the name of *Monarchicke Tragedies*. Few years later, two more plays with the name of *The Alexandrian Tragedy* and *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* were incorporated in the *Monarchicke Tragedies*. A glance on *The Monarchicke Tragedies* reveals that the stories of Croesus, King of Lydia (595–c.47 BC), Darius, King of Persia (380–30 BC), Alexander the Great, King of Macedon (356–23 BC), and the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) depict the stories of the ancient emperors who established their fame and popularity due to their good governance. Nevertheless, their lack of control and discipline caused not only the ruin of their states but also their own fall. These aspects clearly demonstrate that Alexander's plays embody the political and moral aspects in

them. In this way, Alexander seems to warn the rulers of his time that they must learn to control their vain ambitions.

Result and Discussion

Literary works have close relation with the socio-historical conditions of the period. They shape them and vice versa. One thing that is significant with reference to William Alexander is that he personally favored the idea of expanding territories by establishing new colonies. In this case, his work *Encouragement to Colonies* (1625) is noteworthy since it promotes the idea of material benefits that a ruler can have through establishment of more and more colonies. He also created his *Monarchick Tragedies* in the same context. Though, he created all of the four plays included in it many years ago before *Encouragement to Colonies*. These plays played an important role in the imperial designs of Britain. They have explicit colonial motif since the playwright counsels King James for geographical expansion. As Kirsten Sandrock (2017) rightly argues that the plays “comment upon the design of territorial expansion” (p. 2). The plays reveal how Britain was learning to expand her territory without blemishing her reputation and material loss. Like his contemporary writers and philosophers, Alexander also counsels the kings of the period to follow a moderate and judicious path. The playwright represents the regimes of the four classical rulers whose states prospered but declined due to their overambitious policies of expansionism. Alexander’s counsel is: Croesus, Darius, Caesar and Alexander were rash and irresponsible rulers in the sense that they jeopardized their thriving states due to their desires of expansion. King James should learn a lesson from them and expand England wisely, moderately and judiciously. It is believed that King James liked Alexander’s political counsels. That is why, King James gave him a royal charter of a territory that is known as Nova Scotia (Sandrock, 2017, p. 4)

There is no doubt that Alexander’s *Monarchicke Tragedies* deal with the motif of conquests, invasions and empire-building. Alexander’s plays register a close connection between the theories of historical empire building and his later imperial designs. The reading of these plays depicts that Alexander created his plays related to the classical and early modern imperial theories with a view to building new empires. One idea that seems to recur in William Alexander’s plays is: how splendid and glorious empires like the great empires of the past can be built without jeopardizing the state and nation (Sandrock, 2017, pp. 2-10). If the ruler expands his territory, it must not involve the problems like ethicality, morality, racism, religion and caste. Alexander and his contemporary writers were deeply influenced by their readings of the classical writers and classical models of kingship. They were in search of a model of expansion that should be based on respect and honor and not on the greed of material objects. For this purpose, they studied the classical authors, particularly such as Sallust (86 BC–circa AD 34), Tacitus (circa 58–120), and Cicero (106BC– 43 BC). Their exploration revealed to them that there was a close link between the expansion of the Roman Empire and the ensuing corruption in the realm. It meant that the foreign invasions and expanding the empire on the part of Rome was just the result of the satisfaction of vanities and the greed of the emperors that led to corruption among the kings and the kings’ men. All of Alexander’s dramas address the situations such as violence, cruelty, immorality and injustice were noticeable in the areas that became the part of the empire during the expansion of empires. In other words, Alexander, through his plays, attempts to seek out the appropriate answer related to the expansion of empires without corruption.

Alexander's play *Croesus* investigates the motives that made Croesus invade Persia with a view to expanding his empire. Croesus, the King of Lydia, was ruling peacefully in his state but then the overambitious thought to "raigne" one day "where famous Ninus raign'd" (IV.ii.1844) came to his mind and he waged a war against Persia. The playwright calls this war an "unnecessary journey against the Persians" (Kastner & Charlton, 1929, p. 235) and rightly expresses how Croesus "tempt[ed] forbidden things" to "soare too high with Natures wings" (I. ii. 2077-8) and, consequently, lost everything. All these references foretell Croesus' fall that resulted from his own pride and ambitions. Through the story of Croesus, Alexander presents a stance to James: how just due to the greed for expanding his empire an emperor jeopardizes his empire. As Alexander says: "What hath he gain'd, but what another lost? / And once his losse may make another rich" (I. 57-60). This idea of greed reveals how the early modern writers and philosophers were obsessed with the idea of expanding empire through moderation and wisdom. The echoes of this policy of moderation may be heard in King James' work *The Basilicon Doron* (1599). In this work, the King admonishes his son Henry "that wise moderation..., shall as a Queene, command all the affections & passions of your minde" (p. 137). Similarly, the play clearly advises that in the project of colonial expansion the king should give preference to his state and nation over his imperial desires.

Alexander's play *The Alexandaraean Tragedy* argues that expansion of an empire is, no doubt, a profitable project but it may ruin a state. Alexander, the Great, expands his empire by conquering new lands and new states. Nevertheless, he fails to manage the conquered states properly due to bad governance. He becomes proud of his achievements as the playwright tells in the Argument of the play that he is puffed up "with the delights of extraordinary prosperity" (Argument,5-6). Consequently, his pride and lack of proper control over the newly acquired states prompt his downfall. The lines spoken by the Ghost of Alexander the Great right in the beginning of the play not only reveal the futility of the emperors' imperial plans but also the meaninglessness of all human ambitions since death is a great leveler and man's ultimate destiny is the grave:

For some few foots of Earth to be a grave,

Which meane men get, and great men get no more (1.75-6).

Similarly, Julius Caesar in the *Tragedy of Julius Caesar* expands the Roman Empire by defeating the Gaules. In this way, he wins a great name in the world because of his courage and bravery. However, the victory turns his head. He is "so drunke with a delight of Soveraignty" that he craves more and more authority and is subsequently killed by his own senators. The chorus at the end of the play teaches a lesson:

Then whil'st his minde and fortune swell'd most high,

Hath beene constrain'd the last distresse to trie (3191-2).

All of the plays included in *The Monarchick Tragedies* have a thematic link since they emphasize the idea that an emperor should exercise self-control. He must not be over-ambitious and ruled by the lust for material objects. Expansion of an empire may be lucrative but the emperor should not go to the extent where he endangers his own

state. Stewart Mottram's (2013) observation in this case is significant who argues that "two discourses of empire . . . were in circulation at the early Stuart court, the one emphasizing Britain's peaceful Augustanism, the other its "strength of empire" under James" (p.182). Alexander's *Monarchicke Tragedies* contain both these circulating discourses of the period. The socio-historical conditions of early modern English period indicate that King James expanded Britain by uniting Scotland and England despite the hardships. Thus, Alexander imparts the message to the King that territorial expansion must be done along with the safety and security of the empire. Alexander's plays present the ancient locations such as Lydia, Persia, Macedonia and Rome. There is intertextuality in his plays which are included in *The Monarchicke Tragedies* and *Parcenesis to Prince Henry* (1604). As Alexander talks about the great monarchs of the past in the lines:

No, study like someone thy selfe to render,

Who to the height of glory hath been rais'd;

So *Scipio, Cyrus, Caesar, Alexander,*

And that great Prince chos'd him whom *Homer* prais'd,

Or make (as which is recent, and best knowne)

Thy fathers life a pattenne for thine owne (Kastner & Charlton, 1929, 11.83-88).

The above lines show how Alexander uses the ancient rulers and locations as a main theme in all of his plays. Alexander's theme also has intertextuality with Machiavelli's *The Prince* where Machiavelli (1988) narrates the qualities of a prince as he learns from his mistakes during the war.

It is in this context, Cadman (2016) observes that Alexander's tragedies reflect two patterns: "one, the Machiavellian idea that the prince should follow exemplary historical predecessors and the other is based upon a view of historical continuity" (p. 208). In addition to the incorporation of historical events in his plays, Alexander also uses his plays to interrogate the analysis of worthiness of the great classical characters such as Julius Caesar and Alexander. This analysis comprises their affairs, appropriateness, and characters. Alexander's second play *Darius* published in 1603 is another example that shows analysis of the classical characters. In his play *Croesus*, Alexander provides a full story in dramatized way. The story starts with the visit of philosopher Solon to King Darius.

Croesus, the King of Lydia, sends for Solon, the philosopher famous for his wisdom, to seek his advice. On his arrival in the court, Croesus tries to impress Solon with his wealth and grandeur but all these things have no worth for Solon. On his arrival in Croesus' court, he criticizes the ambitions of power and wealth in the words: "I scorne fortune, and was ever free / From that dead wealth, depending on her power" (1.77-78). Though Croesus tries to prove the otherwise through the show of his pomp and treasure yet all in vain. Solon retorts:

I saw but sencelesse heapes of melting things;

A waving wealth, expos'd to many windes:

This but the body serving to decore,
As foolish owners it, it th' owners spends,
Where mindes more circumspect seek better store
Of wealth from danger free that never ends (2.1.317-22).

Solon decides his best to advise Croesus, the "world-bewitched man" who believes "his gold his God, the earth his heaven" (ibid. pp. 167-168) but Croesus' lust for material objects is uncontrollable. For this purpose, Solon uses plain words instead of flattering him like his "poys' nous sycophants" (11, 11,483). But this disappoints and infuriates Croesus and, he calls Solon "a Mouse" (11, 1, 434). Then, there is a long discussion between Solon and Aesop over the issue of flattery. Both philosophers condemn flattery and emphasize the ruler's responsibility to make judicious decisions for his state. Flattery, power, Pride, wealth and lust of worldly objects finally ruin the rulers and their states. If rulers keep on enjoying worldly pleasures and do not control themselves, finally they suffer badly. This is what happens with Croesus. Solon warns Croesus but Croesus ignores his warning. Consequently, Croesus faces many disasters including the death of his son. These disasters were foreseen by the King in his dreams.

Croesus sees in his dream that his beloved son, Attis will die because of some accident. It happens so and Attis is killed by Adrastus. Croesus repents that his pride caused Attis' death. Sandanis, Croesus' counsellor, advises Croesus to come out his prolonged mourning over the death of his son and pay attention to the affairs of his state. During this discussion, Croesus informs that he is going to attack Persia to secure more grandeur and glory. Sandanis warns him not to underestimate the Persian forces since this adventure can be harmful for his own empire as well. Meanwhile, a messenger brings the report that Cyrus has attacked Lydia before the attack of Croesus. During this invasion, Cyrus gets victory and Croesus is made captive. At the end of the play, Croesus, the captive king, laments his overambitious attitude and pride because of which he rejected Solon's advice. He utters that his fall may be a lesson for other rulers who forget that all material objects like power, pride and glory are transitory and ephemeral:

Loe ! I who late did thunder from a Throne,
Am now a wretch whom every one disdaines,
My treasure, honour, state, and freedome gone;
No kinde of comfort, no, nor hope remaines,
And after me, let none whom greatnesse shrouds,
Trust tumid titles, nor ostentive shows (5.2. 273-78).

The chorus also affirms that no man may be considered happy until his death. Happiness lies in contentment, resignation and observance of the divine laws.

Croesus suffers because he hatefully ignores Solon's advice. Alexander portrays his characters' obsession with the lust of material objects. In this way, the play indirectly alludes to King James who was also obsessed with the lust of material objects. Particularly, he fancied the idea of ruling England throughout his life. Similarly, Croesus' favoritism and liking of flattery also are comments on the Kings of that times. Solon's rhetoric question "Should I his poys'nous Sycophants resemble, / Whose silken words their Sovereigne doe o'rethrow" (2.2.483-4)? is another indirect reference that comments how favoritism and flattery were pervasive in Jacobean court.

Croesus' obsession with wealth and luxury ultimately cause his downfall. His passionate love of 'forrest for wilde beasts' where he 'Oft spend[s] the day in sport' also alludes to King James' interest in hunting. According to Hadfield (2005), hunting was the favorite and official sport of King James' court and it was considered an activity of dignity and of a great symbolic significance. The reference of hunting goes back to the activity of Atis, a successor to Croesus who was famous for his hunting. As Alexander expresses it in the words: "What glory give those titles unto me, / Which by succession fall, not by desert" (3.2.1151-2)? All these references indicate how Alexander's plays are rooted in the socio-historical conditions of the period and at the same time show historical continuity.

Alexander represents his models of ancient emperors as the victims of avarice, pride and sensual desires. Alexander's *Darius* depicts the story of a Persian emperor who is an arrogant and a haughty person. He boasts "I scorne to grant a greater man than I" (1. 48). His pride makes him think that he is "the king of kings and kinsman of the Gods" (1. 16-17). While considering himself as a mighty monarch, he demands a tribute from Philip, the King of Macedonia and calls Philip's son, Alexander as "his servant" and "a mad boy" (ibid, 18). Subsequently, his pride causes his fall and the loss of everything that he possessed and enjoyed earlier. Darius' mother, wife and daughter are made captives who are given great respect by Alexander despite their status of war captives. Darius offers a huge pile of gold, more than the gold of Macedonia, as a ransom to Alexander who rejects the offer. In the end, it is transpired that the two traitors of Darius, Bessus and Nabarzanes, kill Darius with their darts in a chariot.

Darius falls due to his arrogance and overambitious attitude. In addition to it, the playwright also comments that the kings who are easily seduced by their courtiers' flattery ultimately perish. Like his other plays, Alexander's political advice is that a ruler should never indulge in pride. A ruler should not allow flatterers to dominate him and make him unwise decisions since flattery is more dangerous than any rival king:

Moe Kings in chambers fall by flatteries charms,

Then in the field by th'adversaries Armes (1. 231-32).

Darius shows clemency in treating with Bessus and Nabarzanes, the two traitors, despite the fear expressed by Patron, Darius' Greek Captain, who informs Darius that

They faine repentance onely for the forme.

Till everything be for the fact prepar'd.

The clouds are gathering which do boast a storme,

And they ere night, minde to invade your guard(4.2.1479-82).

It is this leniency towards his known enemies that ultimately takes the toll of his life. This incident also has political allusion and shows a great similarity between Darius' and King James' belief that king is a divinely ordained figure and hence a God in the eyes of his subjects. In the play, Darius spares Bessus and Nabarzanes because he believes in the sincerity and loyalty of his subjects- the view that subjects consider their king as god. Similarly, King James is also reported to exercise clemency towards conspirators and his political enemies at the court. That is why Cadman (2016) comments that "The potential consequences of the folly of allowing such an outlook to leave one open to conspiracies by one's subjects is dramatized by the fate of Darius" (p. 164).

Throughout these plays, Alexander gives moral lessons to the rulers and his readers about the transience of the worldly objects and pleasures. Man suffers and falls because of his own deeds: "The cause of all comes from ourself no doubt" (4.1. 1485). Nevertheless, the moral is conveyed through the political that makes his plays prominently political and historical in nature. For an instance, in each of his play, Alexander conveys the moral that Kings earn their ruin due to their pride and vanities. They cannot control their ambitions and, consequently, their lust for material objects leads to disaster. Such treatment of the historical material makes Alexander's message effective and authentic since whatever he is saying has been extracted from history.

Conclusion

William Alexander created his *Monarchick Tragedies* in the context of religious and political conditions of early modern English period, particularly the reign of King James. Because of explicit didactic element in the plays, his dramas are usually considered advice literature. By dramatizing the stories of four great emperors of the classical period, Alexander shows how they built and expanded their empires and achieved unparalleled glory and grandeur in the world. Nevertheless, their conquests turned their heads and, they failed to exercise moderation and wisdom in their affairs. Finally, their lack of control not only led to their own catastrophe but also the fall of their empires. Thus, Alexander admonishes the rulers of the period not to give up the path of moderation and wisdom since the safety and security of the whole empire and nation depends upon their decisions.

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