

ABSTRACT

LOGAN LEE TAYLOR. "Life and Death, Loyalty and Treason in Shakespearean Tragedy."
(Under the direction of Professor Christopher Crosbie.)

In the four of Shakespeare's tragedies that focus around the death of a king or equivalent monarch,—Titus Andronicus, Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear—four notable characters survive the central conflict. These "survivor figures" are Lucius, Horatio, Macduff, and Kent, characters united by a set of central characteristics common to each of them: positions of servitude to the rightful monarch or authority figure, and fierce loyalty that remains unbroken throughout the course of the conflict. This project analyzes these survivors and what their survivorship implies thematically, while contextualizing this analysis by studying the political climate of Shakespeare's time, especially the punishments and laws surrounding treason and sedition. I argue that said political climate, and the fear of treason it inspires, is reflected within the playwright's decision to spare loyal characters from death. In this way, the aforementioned tragedies provide a literal manifestation of Elizabethan and Jacobean England's idea of the consequences of treason and of the rewards of loyalty. The laws of censorship and the punishments for treason acted as the society's method of associating treason with death. In Shakespeare's works, this association is made a physical inevitability: the disloyal bring about their own destruction, while the loyal survive and prevail through hardship. However, Shakespeare complicates this concept by binding the sovereigns as well as the subjects in a contract of reciprocal loyalty; betrayal at the pinnacle of society becomes as destructive as treason at the lower echelons. Further, although the "survivor figures" survive their respective conflicts, Shakespeare makes a point to ensure that they escape in a damaged state, evoking the idea that while a servant's loyalty is admirable and ideal, it is insufficient to protect him should his master not uphold the same loyalty, and vice versa.