

## How far is Shakespeare Relevant to Modern Times?

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### ABSTRACT

Critics for ages have talked about the 'immortality' of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's handling of basic human themes has changed little from age to age. At times we are encouraged to look at the similarities that existed between Shakespeare's time and our very own. Being contemporary however doesn't mean to bring down everything to the present; nor does it mean to so loftily elevate the past that the present has no importance. The fact that Shakespeare's plays are performed more widely around the world than those of any other dramatist, alive or dead is a proof of how close he is to our times. His 'universality' has overcome the barriers of language, race, creed, custom as well as time.

### KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; Literary Canon; Contemporary relevance.

### INTRODUCTION

Is Shakespeare relevant today? Such a question often crosses our mind as we read the plays written by the great playwright. However we know very well that Shakespeare's plays continue to be performed even today, not just in English-speaking countries, but in translation in very many languages across the world. The fact that Shakespeare's plays are performed more widely around the world than those of any other dramatist, alive or dead is a proof of his timelessness. There are innumerable situations in Shakespeare's plays that can never change from century to century, from country to country, despite differences in knowledge, culture custom and society. In Shakespeare we experience practically every human emotion and condition. Shakespeare's characters fall in love and out of it, betray each other, misunderstand, argue, deceive, fight and kill each other; they are at times angry, grieved, ecstatic, envious,

untrustworthy, deceptive, magnanimous and forgiving... they possess character traits common to human situations in every age. Even the social issues of Shakespeare's time which feature in his plays - class division, racism, sexuality, intolerance, the position of women, crime, war, death, disease - are still some of the burning issues in today's world.

Shakespeare's plays embody human emotions that haven't changed or have changed very little with time. Do we not find a striking similarity between King Lear and all those plays and novels written today about sons and daughters trying to get rid of their fathers by putting them into old age homes? Can we not find a depiction of racist intolerance in *The Merchant of Venice* that continues to pain us even now? Man actually doesn't seem to change much with time nor does man's nature. The problems remain the same for every age, but in different forms. The thrust area of this paper is to find out if reading

Shakespeare can still be considered relevant to modern times.

### **BRECHT ON SHAKESPEARE**

Shakespeare has become a contemporary to our changing times and these times have changed our perception of Shakespeare. Brecht in *Kleines Organon für das Theatre (A Short Organum for the Theatre)* (1949), wrote thus: *'The theatre should always be mindful of the needs of its time. .... Time! The time to be contemporary, the time to start the dialogue, the understanding, the time of Shakespeare and the time of reading Shakespeare, our time, your time, Shakespeare's time!'* Brecht points out that it is war time and Fortinbras is about to wage war against Poland. It is for the first time in Shakespeare that Poland is mentioned and we hardly bother to talk about Poland when discussing Hamlet. But for Brecht in 1949, Poland deserves special mention connected with the time of Hamlet and his writings on Hamlet. Brecht wrote: *'Overcome by the warrior-like example of Fortinbras, Hamlet turns back and with a piece of barbaric butchery, slaughters his uncle, his mother and himself, leaving Denmark to the Norwegians.'* *'Leaving Denmark to the Norwegians'* - that was Brecht's interpretation of Hamlet after the Second World War - leaving territory to occupation and to a different king. Martin Esslin, a theatre critic and author analysed Brecht by pointing out how Brecht did not want to convince the audience that the conditions shown in *Pericles* and *Hamlet* are the same as today's. Brecht in fact wanted to show that **Othello** is not embodying the natural male jealousy when he strangles Desdemona, but that he represents the seventeenth-century idea that women are the properties of their husbands.

### **SHAKESPEARE PRESENTED TODAY**

To discuss how Shakespeare transcends the boundaries of time and

space let us take a look at *Ariane Mnouchkine's* Japanese production of Shakespeare's plays which have included big Japanese dolls and Samurais in them. This is however vastly different from *Kurosawa's* films on Shakespeare. Shakespeare for Kurosawa is terror, the terror in *King Lear*; Lear for Kurosawa is timeless but contemporary.

I remember reading an article on Shakespeare being enacted in a festival in a beautiful beach resort on the Mediterranean. In this particular theatre production of Hamlet, Claudius's court was dressed in modern costumes resembling very much like the people from the beach. Enacting, a Shakespearean play in modern costume, does not imply that it is taking place in England. In fact it is an attempt to find a contemporary connection so that the substance of the play is brought home to the audience. It is not possible to confine his plays to any particular epoch, culture or region.

To claim that Shakespeare's plays is quite relevant to modern times be dangerous. A shocking example given by a Shakespearean critic is the way in which the Nazis used *The Merchant of Venice* to stir up hatred against the Jews. Shylock was presented as a man isolated from society, insulted and injured, loathed by all. In fact, *The Merchant of Venice* has played a very unwelcome role in the sentiments against Jewish people. While Shakespeare portrayed the nasty Jew for his audience he did not however forget to equip Shylock with a psychological depth that no other character in the play has. The trial in *The Merchant of Venice* is portrayed as a merciless and shameless parody of justice by a fake lawyer. From the point of view of homo-sexuality, Shakespeare is once again contemporary. Hans Meyer the German literary critic in his writings has described how Antonio is homo-erotically tied to Bassanio in the play.

## **UNDERSTANDING THEMES OF FEMINITY AND MARRIAGE**

Let us now take a look at the Elizabethan marriage customs and Shakespeare's treatment of women that constitute a major barrier to the contemporary understanding of his work. *The Taming of the Shrew* has been presented as good marriage guidance and probably satisfies a typical male chauvinist. There are many passages in Shakespeare in which submission of women in marriage is praised together with qualities such as obedience, gentle voice and a reluctance to protest. 'Her voice was ever soft,' said Lear over the dead body of his daughter Cordelia, 'Gentle and low – an excellent thing in woman.' But Cordelia is someone who answers back and so does Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

The question therefore remains how far can the present day woman find herself in Shakespeare's plays? We not only need to understand his plays, we need to see how the text connects with life outside the theatre. Can the women of today relate to his plays and see their lives in the midst of situations he presents? Men have superiority over woman in his plays. The female characters are portrayed as powerless to influence the outcome of events; they are presented more as types than characters. Shakespeare's heroines are like kaleidoscopes - they are all different from one another with their own characteristic qualities, skills, flaws and failures. Shakespeare wants to give his heroines a leading part only when they dress up as men as in the cases of Portia, Viola and Rosalind. He wanted to prove that only when they dress as men can women behave in a rational intelligent manner (as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*). Shakespeare was probably the first to perceive a characteristic masculine trait in every woman and in this respect he was close to Freud and three hundred years or so ahead of his time. In *Hamlet* Gertrude has to marry another king,

Claudius, who is the stronger man. Again Bianca, as soon as she gets the ring on her finger in *The Taming of the Shrew* says to Lucentio, - 'More fool you for betting on me!' That's what happens in the play. Men bet on woman, and in Shakespeare we find the cynical pattern of a society which while protecting women actually batters them to pieces. Has the position of women actually improved in our society from Shakespeare's time?

Women are idealized in Shakespeare they still are in our contemporary society. We must not forget that the world is dominated by power, money and men. If we analyse further, we will find that the shrewishness of Kate, in *The Taming of the Shrew* is not part of her nature. She is smart and intelligent enough and thus wears the mask of a shrew to protect herself from the domination of the external world. With that shell around her, she can be very strong. When Petruchio the crazy man comes in her life, she falls in love with him. That's the beginning of her tragedy and her shell crumbles.

In one of her most practical speeches Lady Macbeth denounces her female organs saying: 'Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here!' The fact that it is a woman, who is denouncing her own nature, makes her image all the more powerful. We find all the characters in Macbeth subscribe to sexual stereotypes. When Lady Macbeth says, 'Are you a man?' her image as to how a man should behave is different from Macbeth's. When Macduff hears the news of the death of his wife and family, Malcolm says to him, 'Dispute it like a man!' and he replies, 'I shall do so, but I must also feel it like a man.'

## **SHAKESPEARE & THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Many words and phrases from Shakespeare's plays and sonnets have become iconic catch phrases of today. Many of the clichés, proverbs, and idioms

that we use in contemporary speech have their origin in Shakespeare. So, if we hear someone as being 'in a pickle', or waiting 'with bated breath', or going on 'a wild goose chase', we must not forget that we owe all of these to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively. Such expressions such as 'It's Greek to me', 'more sinned against than sinning', 'a fool's paradise' or *vanished into thin air*, all have their origin in Shakespeare. Moreover, as we refer to jealousy as "the green-eyed monster," we quote Othello's arch villain, Iago. "The be-all and end-all" is uttered by Macbeth as he murderously contemplates King Duncan, and "fair play" falls from Miranda's lips in *The Tempest*. With Shakespeare's invention of commonly used expressions and phrases, his creation of new words, he was able to affect the modern English language in a way that no person ever has.

### **MULTIPLE VIEWS**

There is one very strong point that needs to be stressed upon in our reading of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays provide a kind of multi-focal view point and one can look at the plays as they were written, one can treat them as a historical pieces or expressions of continuing human emotions. In whichever way Shakespeare is produced, then or now, the plays touch the chords in the hearts of the audience irrespective of time or age. The audience can relate their own experiences in the context of the work that the great artist has provided for them. They need to recognize that their experiences are not entirely

personal to themselves but are shared by a broad section of humanity through ages.

### **CONCLUSION**

Shakespeare may not be our contemporary in the sense of being topical, but he certainly is contemporary to our inner behavioural patterns and through his writings he has shown us how society moves, how allies are betrayed out of fear and weaknesses, how for example, conspiracy (as in *Julius Caesar*) takes its course partly through slander and partly through correct statements. Shakespeare's knowledge and understanding of the world is different from ours. His world view is related to the moral order which breathes through his plays. If his moral order is essentially different from our own, we might be limiting the meaning of his plays by only looking for topical connections. Again if we really want to actualize Shakespeare as if he is living now, we would lose the historical distance contained in his plays. And if our approach is too historical we would end up with a Shakespearean theatre very rhetorical based on beautiful, ornamental words. The best option is therefore to find a style and maintain a fair balance between the original 'historic' Shakespeare and our interpretation of what we call 'contemporary' Shakespeare. We must not forget that Shakespeare's plays continue to entertain people, sometimes as authentic historical performances, at times as modern interpretation on stage and in countless film and TV adaptations all over the world.

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