

READING SHAKESPEARE IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS OWN TIME

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study Shakespeare in the context of his own age. Drawing on critical research in New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, I have attempted to show how the social practices of Elizabethan Age influence the plays. The prevalence of themes relating to politics and finances in the plays are a reflection of the contemporary social issues. I discuss how power and money are represented in Shakespeare's plays as well as the way the playwright himself dealt with these two forces. Shakespeare had to negotiate between the rules imposed upon him, by political power and economic necessity, and his desire for artistic autonomy, and this position is inscribed in his plays.

Shakespeare, according to Ben Jonson, "was not of an age, but for all time (143)"¹. The Shakespearean critic Jan Kott called him "Our contemporary" in the book by the same name². More recently Shakespeare has become the Man of the Millennium in a BBC poll³, winning over scientists and politicians. There has been a universalization of Shakespeare where he has become a site for an infinite variety of readings. Harold Bloom locates this worldliness of Shakespeare in his plays' surplus of riches because after every specific interpretation, "there is always a residuum, an excess left over"⁴ allowing different schools of criticism to appropriate Shakespeare for themselves. While Shakespeare's appeal to generations across time and space is a hallmark of his greatness, the universalization of Shakespeare often leads to neglect, if not outright distortion, of the historical specificity of his works. To put it simply, we often forget that he was an Elizabethan, a Renaissance man and in this paper I would like to

draw attention to the historical moment of the production of his plays. By reorienting critical attention to the context in which Shakespeare lived and wrote we can better understand the plays. I intend to examine the effect of politics and economics in shaping Shakespearean plays by drawing on research from practitioners of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism.

Historical approaches to Shakespeare, that is the practice of relating the plays to the "background" of sixteenth century, has been a traditional critical practice, mostly associated with E.M.W. Tillyard. But the early twentieth century historicist reading was a reductive one where the Elizabethan period was viewed as an ordered conservative world and Shakespeare merely a spokesman for the glories of the age. New historicism, however, has ruptured this placid stable reading and though this literary trend continues to focus on "history," the practitioners show history as fractured, subjective and above all textual. If history is not as cohesive and coherent as Tillyard had supposed then the historical representation must be in turn be unstable and partial. The situating of literary texts as a signifying practice, that is cultural practice of a particular historical context, has led to what Louis Montrose calls for "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."⁵ The aim is to locate a culture's literary practice in the context of the

¹ Ben Jonson, "In Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare" *l* 43,(1623) in Norton Anthology of Poetry, ed. Margaret Ferguson et al. London: W.W. Norton & Co.,1996) 309-311

² Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. London: Methuen & Co.1967.

³ "Bard is Millennium Man" January 1, 1999. <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/245752.stm> September 04, 2009.

⁴ Harold Bloom cited in S.C. Shershow "Shakespeare Beyond Shakespeare" in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow. London: Routledge, 2001: 247.

⁵ Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H.Aram Veveser. New York: Routledge, 1989:23.

larger material social processes, politics, economy, religion etc. The linkage between social institutions and texts is important because Shakespearean drama “shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped...begets that by which it is begotten”⁶.

Coming to Shakespeare’s age itself, it is important to recall that it was a time of change. It can be said that his plays took place in the beginning of early modernism. The Elizabethan age was marked by expansions in learning, geography and trade and it witnessed transformations in politics and religion. By the 1600 society had moved from feudalism to early modern society, new mercantile initiatives heralded the beginning of a capitalist economy and the break from the Catholic Church in the 1530s led to religious conflicts within England. Consequently there was great social flux. It was also during this period that nationalism developed and the idea of England as a nation state emerges. All these concerns are reflected in Shakespeare’s plays.

Not surprisingly Shakespeare felt the need to trace England’s history in his historical plays. Attention has usually been focused on the two tetralogies dramatizing the deposition of Richard II, the takeover by Bolingbroke who becomes King Henry IV, the ensuing civil war, the War of Roses, Richard III’s reign and finally the establishment of peace by the Tudor king Henry VII. Since the plays deal directly with the history of the reigning dynasty, readers have always tried to identify Shakespeare’s position on the ancestors of Elizabeth, the idea of kingship and political intrigues that occur in these plays. Tillyard was one of the first critics to impose upon the plays Shakespeare’s ideological doctrine. He read the plays against the background of the orthodox Tudor ideology and concluded that the playwright endorsed the ruling class Tudor propaganda or what Tillyard⁷ terms as the Tudor myth. The Tudor dynasty wanted to disseminate the idea that the civil war and political instability that plagued England for nearly a century was a direct consequence of the murder and overthrow of Richard II. The current prosperity and peace was a result of a strong ruler, Henry Tudor who had

defeated Richard III and united the rival dynasties of the Houses of Lancaster and York. Basically they wanted to argue that sedition was detrimental for society and that loyalty and support for the government was not only legally and socially correct but also religiously sanctioned. The Tudors rather cleverly exploited the religious sentiments of the subjects and linked politics with religion in the idea of divine rights of kings, the King as anointed by God and the notions of Divine Order and the Great Chain of Being. Tillyard argued that Shakespeare accepted and believed in the Elizabethan world-view. In *Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), Tillyard asserted that “The conception of world order was for the Elizabethans a principal matter”⁸. In his opinion, Shakespearean plays are overwhelmingly concerned with maintaining order rebellions, transgressions and chaos and condemning; and the history plays and the comedies always end with the restoration of order and status quo.

However, this reading of Tillyard cannot be sustained in the reading of the individual plays. Although Shakespeare used the framework of punishment and retribution, his attitude to dissidence and disobedience is not consistent⁹. Shakespeare’s ambivalence can be clearly discerned in his treatment of the king in *Richard II*. On the one hand, he evokes sympathy for Richard who is outmaneuvered and betrayed by his court. On the other hand, by exposing Richard’s weakness and faults Shakespeare is also showing the inefficiency and corruption of the king. The divestment scene, an ironic inverse of the ritual of consecration, gives the insidious suggestion that kingship is not created by divine providence but by human will. Bolingbroke emerges as a savior of England and he captures the throne with the support of key political figures. The ceremonies which surround the character of Richard do not contribute to his sanctity instead they become hollow gestures of pomp and rituals, reminding one of Popish rites in an anti-Catholic atmosphere.

The subversive reading of *Richard II* is supported by the fact that the play in question had earned a reputation among Elizabethan audiences as a

⁶Louis A. Montrose (1992) cited in Richard Wilson, “The Management of Mirth: Shakespeare via Bourdieu” in *Marxist Shakespeares*, 178.

⁷ E. M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944:320-321).

⁸Tillyard, *Elizabethan World Picture*, 1943. London: Penguin in association with Chatto and Windus, 1963:29.

⁹ Z..Alam “A Re-Reading of Shakespeare’s History Plays” in *The Dhaka University Studie*. 53 .2and 54.1,December 1996 and June 1997: 21-19.

politically charged play. Kott¹⁰ mentions that Queen Elizabeth did not allow *Richard II* to be performed. In 1601, supporters of the Earl of Essex paid Shakespeare's company to put on a special performance of the play the day before their attempted rebellion. They selected this play because like Richard, Queen Elizabeth lacked an heir, had imposed heavy taxation and was considered by some to be equally partial to favourites. Although the revolt failed and both Essex and his ally, Shakespeare's patron the Earl of Southampton, were tried, the Chamberlain's Men fortunately were not charged.¹¹ Even so, *Richard II* was not allowed to be performed by Queen Elizabeth. Kott explains the reasons behind this censorship:

To represent princes as tyrants was something hallowed by centuries of tradition. But the scene of a king's deposition, of a crown visibly torn of his head, was another matter. To show how a king by taking off his crown became an ordinary mortal, was something one could not permit...to depose a king meant to overthrow authority itself, to abolish all theology, to abolish metaphysics.¹²

The fact that Shakespeare even conceived of writing and staging a play about the removal of a monarch bears out Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist reading that Shakespeare toys with renegade politics. He finds that Shakespeare's strength lies in the way the plays suggest subversion and yet succeed in containing subversion. On the surface the plays endorse the Tudor Myth and a conservative ideology, but there are gaps in this monolithic conservatism where insurgency and transgression appear. Greenblatt maintains that "Even those literary texts that sought most ardently to speak for a monolithic power could be shown to be sites of institutional and ideological contestation¹³".

This is possible because of the very nature of the theatre in Elizabethan Age. Following the classical ideas on poetry and art, the theatre was accepted as a place of illusions, where reality is distorted and fable or imagination reigns. Secondly, the laws

regulating the theater also gave some leeway to the stage. As Greenblatt remarks, 'the theater is marked off from the 'outside world' and licensed to operate as a distinct domain, but its boundaries are remarkably permeable¹⁴.' Consequently, the theater could represent within limits the sacred and the profane, highly controversial issues such as outlawed Catholic practices, the exorcism in *Twelfth Night* or rather the pretended exorcism of Malvolio, show sympathy to Turks, Jews, demons, fairies etc. The Tudor monarchy allowed Shakespeare and other playwright a limited form of autonomy or liberty. One can find a parallel in *The Tempest*, a play that deals with Shakespeare's ideas on art. Richard Wilson (2001) contends that Prospero's release of Ariel is analogous to the freedom granted by the Elizabethan court to theaters. He quotes Kernan in explaining this similarity:

Nowhere does Renaissance art speak of its powers with more confidence than here, (*The Tempest*)...By releasing Ariel then, "Shakespeare claims a value for his theatrical art" beyond its service to the mighty, like Vasari (Kernan, 1995) . Yet that this enfranchisement occurs only with Prospero's consent, underlines the paradox that it is in the courts of princes that the autonomy of art is first conceived, and that even as Shakespeare writes, it is power which both licenses the literary field and renders it fraught with fragility and contradiction.¹⁵

Wilson's argument implies Shakespeare had more liberties than envisioned by Tillyard. In fact, Greenblatt's study of Shakespeare offers a similar view when he writes that "the theatre was given an unusually broad license to conduct its negotiations and exchanges with other discourses and practices."¹⁶ License or theatrical freedom is also evident in the suspension of sumptuary laws. The Elizabethan period had very strict laws pertaining to dress code; it was a class-based dress code to mark rigid boundaries between the classes. In theater, however, players were continually breaking these laws. Not only did the lower class actors wear the colour and dress of the nobility when they played the parts of princes, they actually showed female characters donning male attire to disguise themselves and break free from gender

¹⁰ Jan Kott, 291.

¹¹ Philip Edwards, *Shakespeare: a Writer's Progress*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986:19.

¹² Kott, *ibid*.

¹³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 reprint:3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*. 19.

¹⁵ Wilson 175.

¹⁶ Greenblatt 18-19.

boundary. Thus in the plays *Rosalind*, *Viola* and *Portia* put on male clothes without any impunity even after they have revealed their true identities.

So how was Shakespeare an Elizabethan if he did not support the Tudor Myth? Well as mentioned earlier this was an age of social mobility and Shakespeare had considerable autonomy. The idea of degree that Tillyard (1943) attributes to Shakespeare was founded on a medieval notion. The Great Chain of Being is a vision of the world organized in a fixed order with God at the top, then angels, men followed by women, animal, birds, fishes, (insects, trees, plants and stones). The Tudor authorities wanted to uphold this medieval order because it would be a way of justifying the monarchy and maintaining status quo. However, the social picture shows that society was not as rigid as the government wanted. Copernicus, Galileo and Francis Bacon had reoriented the world-view from a scientific point. Copernicus had proved that the earth circled the sun and not vice versa and this was known in England. There was also a small but radical group of thinkers, such as Montaigne, questioning traditional beliefs including the after-life. Scholars now accept that Shakespeare was abreast of these developments, and it has been said that Shakespeare was acquainted with the essays of the French intellectual.¹⁷

Meanwhile, geographical expansion had opened up new avenues of wealth and power, and a new merchant class was emerging. Individuals were no longer forced to remain in the social class they were born into, and a new class of upwardly mobile people came into being. One could easily argue that the Elizabethan Age probably witnessed the first yuppies of modern society. A case in point is Shakespeare himself. Biographical studies of Shakespeare attest that his father, John Shakespeare, was the son of a tenant farmer, who rose up the social ladder to become a glover and then attained considerable riches to buy a big house in Stratford. Unfortunately when his fortunes suffered, he fell behind his taxes; consequently, he was refused a coat of arms and he could not send his son William to university. The son William Shakespeare, luckily, by writing plays and investing in the theatre company Globe was able to recoup the family fortune and even move higher up

¹⁷Sean McEvoy, *Shakespeare: the Basics*. London: Routledge, 2000:34.

in society. He applied for a coat of arms and was granted the honour which enabled him to write “gentleman” after his name. He succeeded in buying the second biggest house in Stratford, New Place and he arranged what Germain Greer¹⁸ considers to be a very advantageous marriage for his daughter Susanna thanks to his new found wealth. These biographical details are indications of the importance of money in the playwright’s life and society. Shakespeare’s own negotiations with social conventions indicate that he was not limited by the concept of degree, and he knew how to exploit talent and opportunity for material advantages.

The importance of commerce in Shakespeare’s society can be seen in his plays as well. Walter Cohen remarks that the plays “register the rise of England’s international trade”¹⁹. Not only economics but also internationalism strikes a note in the plays which taken together possess a very global flavor. This is evident from the allusions to places, people and goods from other countries. Commercial interest, or greed for money to be blunt, had motivated the journeys of discoveries to the New World and to Asia. Shakespeare’s plays are peopled by an amazing number of black men and women, something that was rare in literary texts of the time. The mercantile voyages can be credited for the expansion of geographical knowledge in Europe of the 1600s and in England, at least, these trips brought into contact people of other races. The appearance of Moorish characters, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, and the Indian boy (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) in Shakespeare’s plays was a reflection of the social reality because a number of non-white people were living in London at that time. Some of them were there as merchants, ambassadors and others had been brought to be showcased as “exhibitions.”

One can find “the crucible for the genesis of many modern European institutions and practices”²⁰ in Shakespeare’s representations of racial difference and cross-cultural and inter-racial relationships.

¹⁸ Germain Greer, *Shakespeare’s Wife* London: Bloomsbury, 2008.

¹⁹ Walter Cohen, “The undiscovered country: Shakespeare and mercantile geography” in *Marxist Shakespeares*, 132.

²⁰ Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin “Introduction: Shakespeare and the post-colonial question” in *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin. London: Routledge, 1998:6.

However, we need to keep in mind that Shakespeare's concept of race differed from our perspective. Racism in contemporary terms implies discrimination based on skin colour, often simplified to white and coloured or non-white. In Shakespeare's world racism was more subtle and even more pervasive. The notion of the other went beyond skin colour to a broader definition of ethnicity where dialect and locale created many subdivisions even within the Caucasians or whites so that the Welsh, the Scot, the Italian and the French were all regarded as Other or foreign by the English. In *Merchant of Venice*, the Moor is not the only foreign suitor, the Italian and the Scot suitors are also treated as others. Then in *Henry V*, the French, the Irish, the Welsh and the Scots are treated as the alterity of the English self. Bartels²¹ goes as far as to say that racial inequity as we understand did not exist in Shakespeare's time. He argues that post-colonial readings often confine literary interpretations in an "ahistorical model of European domination and non-European subjection"²². While Bartel's view that racial inequity was absent is too idealistic or simplistic, he makes a useful point in drawing attention to the historical dimension of racism. Shakespeare displays varying treatments of the different racial others presented in his plays. There is a distinction between how the representatives of the New World are treated, such as Caliban, and those of the East such as Cleopatra. While the Moorish characters, Othello and the Prince of Morocco, are presented with sophistication and glory, Caliban of the new world is portrayed as savage.

For Shakespeare, the new geography was not defined by new races/others or new locales; it was as important for the new economy it generated as the racial encounters it introduced. The catalog of foreign goods mentioned in *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* and *Merry Wives of Windsor* is a reference to contemporary mercantile activity. Similarly in *The Winter's Tale* when the Clown lists all the luxury items: "Three pound of sugar, five pound of currants, rice", "saffron to colour the warden pies; mace;" "nutmegs seven; a race or two of ginger; four pound of prunes and as many of raisins o' th' sun"(4.3. 36-46)"²³ The products that he intends

buy after selling the wool from "fifteen hundred shorn" refer to the contemporary trading pattern of the English merchants and the goods they imported after selling raw material like wool. There was a great demand for spices in the Elizabethan age and so naturally these are prominent in the Clown's shopping list. Cohen points out that plays from 1590s focus on the process and agents of international trade²⁴. He mentions in this group *The Comedy of Errors* (1592), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593) and of course *The Merchant of Venice* (1596). These are plays dealing with the lives of merchants and their business problems. *The Merchant of Venice* is, in a way, a play about two ways of doing business – risking capital through ventures or hoarding capital and lending it at interest. The conflict between Antonio and Shylock then becomes not just religious enmity but business opposition. Antonio's money comes from trade, especially through commercial interests in foreign lands. He could not give Bassanio money at the beginning of the play because his ships were away at sea. As Shylock informs the audience: "he hath an argosy bound to Tripoli, another to Indies; I understand moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England—and other venture he hath, squand'ered abroad" (1.3.17-22).²⁵ On the other hand, Shylock's business does not support the new economic system. The Jew has money that could be profitably invested to expand global trade but he chooses to amass instead of distributing it. So Shylock is punished because his usury business is detrimental to the growth of capitalist economy. Cohen also discerns a mercantile connection in the play *Othello*. He mentions that the threat to Cyprus from the Turkish fleet²⁶ is an allusion to the war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, a war which helped England to re-enter and dominate Mediterranean trade. Cohen further explains: "Shakespeare relocates 'Cinthio's domestic drama within an international rivalry of great interest throughout Christendom, dramatizes a moment important to English merchants and monarch alike...".²⁷ The changed setting of the play is important because it draws attention to the commercial aspect of international politics and England's role in this new global

quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from this edition.

²⁴ Cohen 144.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 226.

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.1.

²⁷ Cohen 146.

²¹ Cited in *ibid.* 5.

²² Loomba and Orkin 6.

²³ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, in *William Shakespeare: the Complete Works*, reprint, ed Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1983) 395. All subsequent

business, a position secured by England's naval force.

The intrusion of the commercial world in Shakespeare's literary text is symptomatic of the tenuous relationship theater had to the real world. The theme of money was a reflection of the new commercialism of the age and simultaneously the theater's own economic position. The audience sustained the theater by paying the Company when they bought tickets. Shakespeare's rise in society was funded by this commercial venture. However, the audience and the playwright were not engaged in an ordinary financial transaction. Here money was not exchanged to obtain material objects or commodities, but something intangible and abstract. The transaction is complicated by the fact that the theater was both a commercial commodity as well as what Bourdieu²⁸ terms symbolic power and Greenblatt describes as the circulation of social energy. Bourdieu defines symbolic power as "a power of ... making people believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world itself, an almost magical power."²⁹ Similarly Greenblatt's idea of social energy is something immeasurable, and the indirect effect of an experience. He states that "it is associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder. In its aesthetic modes, social energy must have a minimal predictably—enough to make repetitions possible³⁰." Greenblatt's comments are very close to Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital as immaterial form of capital when he argues that representations enacted on stage are form of transferred social energy. Here "no cash payment is made, but the object acquired is not in the realm of things indifferent, and something is implicitly or explicitly given in return for it"³¹. Therefore, the theater is both a commercial as well as a cultural institution.

Like the theater, Shakespeare was also navigating between art and money, creating an ambivalent and contradictory relationship with money. On the one hand, Shakespeare was ostensibly dependent on

royal patronage. From his early career, he obtained the support of the nobility to further his literary ambition. The sonnets were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley. Since companies or theater groups were under the license of the monarch, Shakespeare's group also required royal patronage. Under Lord Hunsdon the group was the Chamberlain's Men and when James I ascended the throne they became the King's Men. The players were subject to censorship and to other orders such as closures by government decree. But if we look at the financial picture, we notice that the government patronage amounted to only 10% of his company's income.³² There is a dichotomy between the nominal aristocratic patron and the actual plebian audience who paid for the dramatic enterprise. Andrew Gurr³³ calls it the pretense of the noblesse oblige and the reality of a paying public.

Shakespeare needed to project the simulation of a nobleman in his enterprise. Wilson suggests that the noble patron directing the play, helping the players and offering a private noble house as stage was mostly a fiction that Shakespeare creates in his plays, notably *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. The reality was that he had to put up plays in public theaters for groundlings and ordinary citizens. But Shakespeare wanted to mask this fact, and he worked hard at glossing over the actual source of income for the theater to preserve the sanctity and mystery of art. He purposely led people to think that the aristocracy, rather than the lower classes, was funding his art and that he was not involved in the pettiness and grime of mercantile activity. Wilson, following Bourdieu, argues that Shakespeare turned to the aristocracy to distinguish his patron from the bourgeois and he also wished to free his art from the demands of the paying public, the groundlings. Wilson comments on Hamlet's direction to the Players as a moment when the "integrity of the artistic project will be contingent on the freedom from any 'pitiful ambition' to please 'the groundlings' that is a privilege of 'the judicious' (3.2.1-45)³⁴". He goes on to write: "Thus what Bourdieu calls 'The symbolic revolution through which artists free themselves from bourgeois demand by refusing any master except their art,' commences in the Shakespearean text as a strategy to exchange the

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans by G. Raymond and M. Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

²⁹ Ibid 170.

³⁰ Greenblatt 6.

³¹ Ibid. 10.

³² Wilson 164.

³³ Ibid. 164.

³⁴ Ibid, 167-168.

economic capital earned in the public playhouse for the cultural capital awarded by the princely patron.³⁵

Yet Shakespeare could not afford to alienate the bourgeois and the lower classes. The success of the theater depended on these people who ultimately financed the enterprise. Their support was garnered in two ways. The representation of merchants and even common people, the plebians, was probably an attempt to involve the spectators. In *Richard II*, for example, Shakespeare brings in the perspective of the ordinary man when he has the gardener comment on the political state. There are also the merchants in the comedies as noted by Cohen. A second strategy was to give the audience a form of cultural capital so that they gained something from the theater. Shakespeare projects the image of an aristocratic audience watching the play in a noble house so that the ordinary citizens can thereby become gentrified interlopers in a privileged world. To quote Montrose (1996) “the status of the popular audience is elevated in acknowledgement for the imaginative authority theater confers upon them...gentility is conferred upon those empowered to judge the play.. and in each play power to confer such gentility resides in the players themselves³⁶.” This was made possible by the unique quality of the theater which Greenblatt explains as:

The triumphant cunning of this theatre is to make its spectators forget that they are participating in a practical activity. Shakespeare’s theatre is powerful and effective precisely to the extent that the audience believes it to be nonuseful and hence nonpractical.³⁷

Shakespeare’s cultural capital continues to be a marketable currency. Denise Albanese in her essay “The Shakespeare film and the Americanization of culture” has documented the commercial success of recent film adaptations, namely Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* and Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet*³⁸. The plethora of films based on Shakespeare’s plays attest to the

continuing popularity of this high culture playwright in a society given to the celebration of popular culture. It is perhaps Shakespeare’s cunning use of popular culture in his own times that has sustained public interest in his works.

Looking back to Shakespeare’s own age, we notice that he was very successful in maneuvering between both the noble patrons and the paying public. He ensured that he was not limited by the either sponsor. Since he could circumvent the political will and dictates of the royal court he could introduce politically charged interpretations of history and commentaries on kingship. The freeing of the plays from one financial source also allows Shakespeare to present many ideas that were current during his times but often considered dangerous and radical. For instance, Shakespeare’s representation of sexual desire verges on the transgressive. This could be due to the fact that in a culture where gender is “teleologically male and insists upon a verifiable sign that confirms nature’s final cause finds its supreme literary expression in a transvestite theater...³⁹” Thus a number of Shakespearean plays show women adopting male disguise. This practice is usually rationalized as practical necessity in stagecraft where boys played the women’s roles. Shakespeare justifies the disguise by showing that women could only enter the power discourse by disguising their femininity so Portia has to dress as a man to defend Antonio. Then there lay the practical exigency of male actors not being able to sustain the illusion of female characters for long, thus boy actors resumed their male identity when delivering the important lines, for example Portia defending Antonio as a male lawyer or Rosalind educating Orlando as Ganymede. Greenblatt, however, suggests that the idea of knowing that the person under the woman’s clothing was a male would have been exciting for many of the audience, creating “delicious confusions⁴⁰”. He claims that “men love women precisely as representations, a love the original performances of these plays literalized in the person of the boy actor.⁴¹” Furthermore, there was also a genuine interest in studying transvestism, how one body could accommodate two genders and Greenblatt, in *Shakespearean Negotiations*(1980) gives an account of contemporary medical discourses dealing with this

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 172.

³⁷ Greenblatt 18.

³⁸ Denise Albanese “The Shakespeare film and the Americanization of culture in *Marxist Shakespeares*, 227-244.

³⁹ Ibid, 88.

⁴⁰ Greenblatt 93.

⁴¹ Ibid.93.

issue, among which Jacques Duval's book *On Hermaphrodites* was quite influential.

A study of Shakespeare in regard to his own culture shows us that he was not a rebel or a blasphemer like Marlowe but a dutiful servant improvising a part of his own within its orthodoxy⁴². If he appears to us as modern or postmodern for his sympathy for marginalized figures--- women, blacks and Jews and if he displays latent homosexuality or bisexuality it just shows that he belonged to an age that parallels ours. We need not as Loomba⁴³ writes "unhook the past from the present" and neither should we "valorize or erase" the difference. It may be well to remember that like us Shakespeare lived in an era of globalization and fluidity when economic, social identities as well as sexual identities were fluctuating and shifting forms.

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⁴² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 253.

⁴³ Loomba, ibid.