



The Postmodern Shakespeare: An Overview of Postmodernism in Shakespearean Drama

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William Shakespeare is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and enduring figures in the literary world. His plays have been studied, adapted, and performed countless times over the centuries, and continue to captivate audiences today. However, as time has passed, the way in which we approach and interpret Shakespeare has changed, with postmodernism emerging as a prominent lens through which to view his works. In this essay, we will provide an overview of postmodernism in Shakespearean drama, exploring how this movement's focus on indeterminacy, relativism, and the collapse of binary opposites has influenced the interpretation and performance of Shakespeare's plays. Additionally, we will examine the enduring popularity of Shakespeare in the postmodern age, and how his works continue to be adapted and reimagined for contemporary audiences.

Shakespeare's works are not only irrelevant in the postmodern world, but are actually embraced by it. Noted critic Hugh Grady is of the view that, "we are now witnessing the emergence of a postmodernist Shakespeare through the development of critical paradigms which incorporate aspects of contemporary postmodernist aesthetics" (207). Although some of his plays may not align with postmodern ideologies in their original form, they are still relevant to a variety of discussions in the postmodern era. Postmodernism allows for a theorizing, deconstruction, and political and cultural criticism of Shakespeare's works, revealing undiscovered features that are relevant to the contemporary world.

A historical approach to aesthetics reveals mediation between the Renaissance and the postmodern era, which is not a dismissal of history but rather a representation or re-interpretation of it. Many social issues in Shakespeare's plays, such as *sexism*, *capitalism*, and *racism*, are still prevalent in today's global society. Shakespeare's plays teach us a

great deal about postmodern culture and reveal the struggles of the British people in the early 1600s and Americans in the late 1900s with these issues.

Race is one of the most important themes in postmodern literature, which also figures prominently in Shakespeare's plays such as 'Othello', 'The Tempest', 'Merchant of Venice' and 'Titus Andronicus'. In both 'Othello' and 'Merchant of Venice', non-whites and non-Christians are marginalized and subjected to outright racism. The use of racist terms to describe Othello, such as "the Moor," "the thick lips," "an old black ram," and "a Barbary horse," associates him with something less than human. In 'Merchant of Venice', Shylock is also subjected to racist slurs, being termed as a "misbeliever, cut throat hound," and Antonio even spits upon his Jewish gabardine.

Despite inheriting a society fraught with racial tensions and racial stereotypes that he sometimes uses in his plays, Shakespeare frequently challenges prevailing attitudes towards race. For example, in 'Othello', despite 'Moors' being perceived as barbarous and savage, he portrays the eponymous character as a refined and cultured general and aristocrat. Similarly, in 'The Merchant of Venice', Shylock's poignant plea for sympathy and understanding in his speech, 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' emphasizes his humanity and sameness with others. Shakespeare does not suggest that white characters are superior to those who face discrimination.

Shakespeare's works have faced criticism for their portrayal of women as being sexist, although it is possible to identify feminist themes within his plays despite the absence of the concept of feminism in his time. Throughout his works, issues of gender, sex roles, and patriarchy are recurring themes. While 'The Taming of the Shrew' is frequently criticized as being sexist, Shakespeare's female characters, including Cleopatra, Portia, Desdemona, and Lady Macbeth, are often depicted as strong and independent. In fact, Kate in 'The Taming of the Shrew' rejects the patriarchy's assigned role for her and refuses to be submissive. She is a very modern woman and perhaps one of the first 'women's libbers'.

Shakespeare lived during the rise of modern capitalism, and his plays reveal his interest in the economics of time. His Roman-history plays suggest that economic and political systems are not eternal but rather stages in societal development. Shakespeare's depiction of the decline of feudalism and the fall of Roman civilization raises the question of whether late capitalism will give way to socialism or barbarism, a new Renaissance, or a new Dark Age. His plays also critique capitalism by demonstrating the extent to which it can be applied to time. For example, in 'Henry IV', Hal acts as a temporal financier, investing time to redeem it at a high rate of return. In 'All's Well That Ends Well', Helena teaches the king that the value of time is qualitative, not quantitative, transcending capitalism's assumption that a small amount of joyful time cannot be more valuable than a longer period of despair.

Shakespeare's plays also contain themes of male bonding, female friendships, and homoeroticism that are important aspects of postmodern culture. Renaissance literature lacked male bonding because patriarchal society included an "obligatory homosexuality" built into male-dominated kinship systems (Sedwick, 3). However, in 'As You Like It', the relationship between Adam and Orlando hints at the possibility of something more than just a patriarchal structure of relationship, as Orlando eagerly takes Adam with him and Adam stubbornly insists on joining him.

In Shakespeare's time, the convention of a cross-dressed heroine was often used to represent same-sex attraction, and his plays feature many such characters. For example, in 'As You Like It', Celia and Rosalind's friendship is an example of the phenomenon of female friendship. Shannon observes that "The female friendship seems to appear in a specifically social form of female chastity which revises the characteristic masculinity of friendship rhetoric in the period" (658). The relationship between Celia and Rosalind appears exceptional to many characters in the play who describe their love as "dearer than the natural bond of sisters" (I, ii, 244). Celia's candid avowal that she "cannot live out of her [Rosalind's] company" (I, iii, 49) goes on to prove that the relationship they shared was much beyond that of friends.

Homoeroticism was a recurring theme in Shakespeare's writings, with evidence found not only in plays such as 'As You Like It' and 'Twelfth Night' but also in some of his sonnets. Celia's speech in 'As You Like It', for example, where she says "we still have slept together/Rose at an instant, learned, eat together/And went wherever we, like Juno's swans still we went coupled & inseparable," is considered by some scholars as emotionally and erotically compelling as anything spoken in heterosexual moments (Traub, 257). However, it is challenging to determine if a relationship depicted in Shakespeare's works is genuinely homoerotic or if it is the modern society's lens influencing our interpretation.

Shakespeare's plays, with their eclecticism and their often violent abuse of generic stabilities of Renaissance literature, can be regarded as postmodern even before postmodernism. Shakespeare borrowed freely from the conventions of the day but adapted them to suit his own needs. Many of Shakespeare's comedies, like 'All's Well That Ends Well' and 'Measure for Measure', have a complicated combination of tragedy and humor, defying the generic conventions of contemporary times. Clemens points out that Shakespeare consistently blended the two styles, as evidenced by 'Romeo and Juliet', which he describes as "perhaps the best example of the mixing of style" (63)."

Pastiche is a notable characteristic of postmodernism, which blends numerous references, allusions, copies, and modified versions of other texts to create a distinct narrative or comment on situations in postmodernity. Luhrmann's 'William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet' serves as an example of postmodern pastiche, documenting the elusive and

allusive strategies that bring authorship to life in two historical periods. By utilizing pastiche as a cinematic device, Luhrmann aims to pay tribute to Shakespeare by making him accessible to everyone from street sweepers to the Queen of England. Similarly, Terry Pratchett is recognized for his renowned pastiche, 'Wyrd Sisters,' inspired by the works of Shakespeare, particularly Macbeth and Hamlet.

Intertextuality is frequently regarded as "the hallmark of postmodernism... postmodernism and intertextuality are often used interchangeably" (Pfister, 209). However, intertextuality is far older than postmodernism, and most of its forms, such as imitation, parody, travesty, quotations, and allusions, have existed since antiquity. Renaissance literature and Shakespeare are famous for their intertextuality. Over the centuries, Shakespeare has been accused of plagiarism for using phrases, lines, and even whole poems without attribution. He has been charged with stealing plots from Boccaccio, Plutarch, Marlowe, and Green, among others. The line "Love is blind" (II,v,35) from 'Merchant Of Venice' was taken directly from Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales', and the title of 'All's Well That Ends Well' was borrowed from John Heywood's proverb "All's Well That Ends Well" Similarly, Shakespeare's famous description of Cleopatra on her royal barge in 'Antony & Cleopatra' is almost identical to a translation of Plutarch's 'Life of Mark Anton'.

The postmodernists question the separation between high and low culture and emphasize works that combine aspects of both. Shakespeare's plays are an example of popular culture, which has always been a mixture of high and low cultures. This blend is evident in Hamlet's speech, in which he juxtaposes the two levels of mankind in "the paragon of animals... yet what is this quintessence of dust" (II, ii, 321-31). Shakespeare introduced ghosts on stage and referred to popular cultural references in his plays to meet the demands of popular culture.

However, Shakespeare had a unique way of blending high and low culture, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary through his exceptional use of language. This is evident in Marcellus's famous speech, which combines elements of folk religion with poetic form: "Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes/Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,/The bird of dawning singeth all night long...So hallowed and so gracious is the time" (Hamlet, I, ii, 166-170).

In contrast, Shakespeare's plays suggest that randomness is merely an illusion, and everything is guided by Divine Justice. For instance, Macbeth believes that if he becomes king by chance, it is only because Providence has allowed it. Similarly, in 'Hamlet', chance events ultimately lead to retribution. While postmodernism embraces indeterminacy and relativism, Shakespeare's plays dramatize the indeterminacy of mankind with great accuracy.

Shakespeare's works illustrate the idea of relativism very well. In 'Hamlet', for example, the audience is left to ponder whether the protagonist is insane or simply pretending. Hamlet is not able to differentiate between what is real and what is not due to his madness. He confesses to his mother that what he sees may seem real, but he is uncertain about its truthfulness. This inability to distinguish between appearance and reality highlights the confusion and turmoil that Hamlet is experiencing, and his madness further complicates his perception of the world around him. Shakespeare's plays also suggest that appearance and reality have become indistinguishable in the moral universe.

The postmodernist philosophy advocates for the merging of binary oppositions into novel fusions. This idea is exemplified in 'The Winter's Tale', where Forizel praises love, and in 'Macbeth', where the witches prophesy a world where "Fair is foul and foul is fair." Instead of seeking meaning in a chaotic world, postmodern authors reject the possibility of meaning altogether. Famous lines in the Shakespeare canon, such as "To be or not to be" and "sound and fury signifying nothing," seem to convey the fragility and emptiness of life.

Shakespeare's relevance has not diminished in the postmodern age. On the contrary, his works continue to thrive in the form of Shakespearean troupes and festivals, stage productions, films, and even consumer objects. Shakespeare has become postmodern himself, a collection of found objects repurposed as art.

To conclude, postmodernism has breathed new life into Shakespearean drama, allowing audiences to view his works in a fresh and dynamic way. The postmodernist movement has helped to highlight the indeterminacy and relativism of truth that Shakespeare so often explores, while also emphasizing the collapse of binary oppositions and the rejection of the modernist quest for meaning. Despite the many challenges posed by postmodernism, Shakespeare's plays have continued to thrive and remain relevant, thanks to the ongoing efforts of Shakespearean troupes, festivals, and productions, as well as the reconstruction of the Globe theatre and the adaptation of his works in films and other media. Ultimately, the postmodern Shakespeare represents a powerful reminder of the enduring value of one of the greatest playwrights in human history.

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