



Shakespeare beyond the Boundaries

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Shakespeare is such a person that can be either loved or hated but cannot be ignored or treated indifferently. He is an androgynous and timeless shape-changer who is impossible to pin down. He can be placed in 'the time now' as well as in 'the time in flux'. He has become a significant point of reference for the history of English language as well as the world literature. He is the bard rigorously researched in order to find out how his works permeate aspects of popular culture and everyday life far beyond his genre and his era. Each generation across the globe finds him to be its contemporary. Every movement, approach, theory, -ism, principle, criticism or school that has come into existence after the bard invariably refers to his literature.

It is said that 'Winners do not do different things; they do the things differently.' Shakespeare borrowed ideas from classics, foreign literature, popular sources, folk traditions, street pamphlets and sermons. But the colour and shape he gave to the borrowed material is unique. He draws a kaleidoscopic picture of life. He never repeats himself. He reveals a different face to different cultures and different people at different times. Shakespeare also appeals to people whose historical knowledge of the reigns of Elizabeth and James is thin to non-existent. Due to his timeless and spaceless appeal, he has become a tool for cultural integration creating an opportunity to share a cultural identity and bring the wider community together.

This paper seeks to explore the grounds on which the eternal appeal of Shakespeare is laid.

(1) Astonishing Stories

Shakespeare was one of the great story-tellers that the world has ever known and human beings love stories instinctively. His immeasurable fame relies greatly on his art of story-telling. He picked up the classics and modified them weaving in extra

subplots and developing characterization. He adapted them for the expectations of his audiences and converted them into palatable stories. For example: *King Lear* has a fully-developed sub-plot. The main plot deals with the misfortunes of Lear and the sub-plot deals with the misfortunes of Gloucester. *The Tempest* has two sub-plots: the fools and their plan and the lover-affair.

He told every kind of story – comedy (*The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*), tragedy (*Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*), history and adventure (*Henry* plays), melodrama (*Much Ado about Nothing*), love stories (*Romeo and Juliet*) and fairy tales (*All's Well That Ends Well*). He told them in such a manner that they have transcended time and culture and become immortal.

Carina Jaramillo writes: "... Shakespeare's complex characterizations have brought forth a new type of storytelling in which characters' choices drive plots forward. As a result, journeys in his plays are dynamic and his characters undergo a significant amount of change while on them. ... His genre-bending work contributed to brand-new experiences of both storytelling and theater."¹

(2) Vibrant Characters

Shakespeare's characters seem to have lives that transcend the age and stage. He has created highly individualized characters representing the whole humanity. Even his minor characters are categorically distinct from each other having unique traits and specific roles to play. His characters are profoundly human in both their strengths and frailties. They plead, cajole, reason, threaten and debate like normal human beings. Their moral inconsistencies make them more real. He has conjured characters apparently out of nowhere giving a local habitation and a name to airy nothing. For example: Ariel in *The Tempest*.

Gill Stoker notes: "Shakespeare's characters fall in love, and out of it, take a dislike to each other, betray each other, misunderstand each other, argue, fight and kill each other, are angry, sad, happy, jealous, envious, distrustful, untrustworthy, deceptive, magnanimous, forgiving... – experiencing practically every human emotion you can think of, and every human situation."²

His existential vision of human frailty is evident. His characters are real and fallible irrespective of their social positions. Though they are kings, queens, noblemen and women, they display human emotions and are capable of making mistakes. Each of them has a flaw and suffers because of the same: Macbeth comes to grief because of ambition; Hamlet struggles with his indecisiveness.

Amanda Mabillard writes, "Shakespeare invented his share of stock characters, but his truly great characters – particularly his tragic heroes – are unequalled in literature,

dwarfing even the sublime creations of the Greek tragedians. Shakespeare's great characters have remained popular because of their complexity..."³

By creating compelling, powerful and influential female characters, he gave voice to the marginalized. He was quite forward-thinking for his time in that matter because women were not even allowed to perform on stage during those days. But his female characters have vital roles to play in his dramas. A few of them are the intelligent Viola, the villainous Lady Macbeth, the shrewish Katherine and the wise Portia.

Brett Gamboa observes, "Shakespeare's men and women are both archetypal and still so modern partly because, like no others before them, they grapple with inner conflicts. Soliloquies and dialogue become not only sources of information for the audience but also lead to action; in other words, whereas the plots of earlier plays depended on what the characters *did*, Shakespeare's plays seemed to progress and develop because of what the characters *thought*."⁴

(3) Essential Themes

His plays revolve around timeless themes such as love (*Romeo and Juliet*), friendship (*The Merchant of Venice*), honour (*Henry IV*), jealousy (*Othello*) and revenge (*Titus Andronicus*). Gill Stoker writes, "Also, the social issues of Shakespeare's day which feature in the plays – class division, racism, sexuality, intolerance, the role and status of women, crime, war, death, disease – are still the burning issues in today's dysfunctional global society."⁵ His themes appeal equally to classes and masses – rich and poor, learned and illiterate, men and women – all irrespective of caste and creed. His works are full of practical wisdom and philosophical truth.

(4) Stagecraft

Shakespeare happily accepted the limitations of his stage and made a virtue of necessity.

(i) The stage did not have the facility of drop curtain. A scene began with the entry of the actors and ended with their exit. The stage had to be cleared, in full view of the audience, before next scene could take place.

Shakespeare made provision for it in the dialogues of the play. Every crisis was followed by an anti-climax. Again, no time was required for changing the scene. The action could be more rapid and swift than that of a modern play. Therefore he wove more incidents and stories in the form of sub-plots leading to the complexity of thought.

(ii) The stage did not have the facility of movable scenery too. In order to overcome the barrier, Shakespeare used abundance of vivid and poetic descriptions and emotional rhetoric.

(iii) His use of groundlings is noteworthy. Carina Jaramillo rightly observes, "...the experience of Shakespeare's plays in the theater took a populist turn. Audience members engaged with the events taking place on stage, becoming vocal and often raucous. At times, it may have been difficult to determine which individuals were audience members and which were part of a performing troupe."⁶

He used groundlings and masque (*The Tempest*) to make his drama popular with commoners. He used soliloquies (tragedies), combination of the tragic and the comic (*Hamlet*), serious and humorous (*Henry IV*) to attract the intellectuals. His use of noise, costumes, music and songs in comedies imparted beauty to his plays.

(5) Spirit of Experimentation

Experimental aptitude leads to doing something new and breaking the set rules or conventions. Shakespeare did so in the following manner:

- Contrary to the tradition, Shakespearean plays were written not only for the class but also for the masses.
- Violation of the unity of place – frequent change of scenes. E.g. *Antony and Cleopatra* has 42 scenes laid all over the Roman world.
- Combination of the tragic and the comic – the grave-diggers in *Hamlet*, the clown in *Othello* and the drunken porter in *Macbeth*; serious main plot and comic sub-plot in *Henry IV*
- Status of the fools and the clowns – elevating to the level of a philosopher and a critic to the extent that they become the voice the conscience. He humanized, refined and ennobled them. E.g. Falstaff in *Henry IV*
- Supernatural elements – the integral part of the drama intensifying the dramatic effect and influencing the action. E.g. witches in *Macbeth*, Ariel in *The Tempest*, ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* and fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare experimented with words, phrases, genre, stagecraft, blank verse and rhyme scheme. He demonstrated high degree of courage in coining words, framing phrases, using striking metaphors, mingling genres, introducing blank verse, creating rhyme scheme for sonnets and employing soliloquies for imparting psychological depth to his plays. The confidence and guts with which he tried out new things in his literature inspire the future generations for doing the same.

(6) Innovative Use of Language

Shakespeare's literature represents the pinnacle of the English language. He has shown an unsurpassed command over the language by making it richer and more vibrant. The extraordinary language proficiency with which he has created his marvellous literature has not been rivalled or replicated since his death. Many of the common expressions now thought to be clichés are his creations. He articulates

everyday situations in such a manner that those expressions are often used as quotes, proverbs or sayings.

Ashlee Jenson notes: “Another sign of a truly paramount writer is one who finds even the entire existing vocabulary of his language limiting to his creative consciousness; Shakespeare often did, and so on occasion created his own form of grammar and vocabulary, much of which has since become common use.”⁷

Examples of his famous words and phrases: in a pickle and fair play (*The Tempest*), a wild goose chase (*Romeo and Juliet*), the green-eyed monster (*Othello*), gossip (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), the be-all and end-all (*Macbeth*), a heart of gold (*Henry V*)

(7) Variety of Humour

His humour is varied, multi-dimensional and all pervasive. It is usually objective, impartial, compassionate, refined and noble. Occasionally, it is ironical, farcical, satiric, grim and morbid. His comedy and romance plays have the first type of humour and tragedy and history plays have the second type of humour. Some examples are – Romantic comedy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It*), comedy of manners (*Love's Labour's Lost, or Much Ado About Nothing*), farce (*Comedy of Errors, or The Taming of the Shrew*), sarcasm (Lancelot Gobbo – *The Merchant of Venice*), pun (deer and dear in *Comedy of Errors*), funny names (Sir Toby Belch – the drunkard in *Twelfth Night*; Sir Owen Mar-TeX – a country clergyman inclined to misinterpret the Bible in *As You Like It*, a group of sergeants and country soldiers named Fang, Snare, Moldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble in *Henry IV*).

(8) Adaptability of the Plays

Shakespeare was a great appropriator who can easily be appropriated according to the need of the hour. His plays have adaptability which allows them to be endlessly reinterpreted. This gives his plays a kind of inkblot property – one can see in them whatever one wants. It is this inherent flexibility of the plays that has made them such hearty and hardy travellers over time and space.

He has kept his plays open and vague by not giving any apparent stage directions. His stage directions are embedded in the dialogue. The words the characters speak provide an abundance of evidence about actions. This is the evidence editors use for adding stage directions. Many of his plays are set in abstract places with plots that apply to many cultures. Some others are set in a highly anachronistic past. For example – the island in *The Tempest*, the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* and the shores of Illyria in *Twelfth Night*. The lack of clear stage directions and ambiguous settings make his plays highly flexible. They are easily adapted to different settings.

His plays are designed to be reinvented. They are intended to be edited to suit the audience and the editor. This gives modern editors more liberty to trim them to suit

the needs of the interpretation. Revisions are made easy by the nature of the plays. Will Gompertz notes, “It was he who set the precedent that his dramatic works were ripe for customisation. Go ahead, was his implicit invitation to all future writers, actors, and directors, pimp my plays – cut, paste, adapt, and reinterpret.”⁸

His plays are actor-and-director-friendly as they give full liberty of interpretation and enactment to directors and actors respectively. His greatly convincing three-dimensional characters can be morphed in numerous ways as they are very hospitable to actors. Numerous movies based on Shakespearean plays provide sufficient evidence for the same.

(9) Panorama of the Human Experience

Shakespeare was expert in deciphering human emotions and reading human mind. He was an extremely gifted observer of the human conditions which never change from time to time or place to place despite all the differences in knowledge, culture and priorities.

Amanda Mabillard observes, “Shakespeare’s ability to summarize the range of human emotions in simple yet profoundly eloquent verse is perhaps the greatest reason for his enduring popularity. If you cannot find words to express how you feel about love or music or growing older, Shakespeare can speak for you. No author in the Western world has penned more beloved passages.”⁹

Romeo, Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear – all of his characters seem to have anticipated and expressed our own emotional experiences better than we could as we are often heartsick, jealous, over ambitious, indecisive or disappointed by ingratitude. The beauty of his talent lies in the resourcefulness with which he created the portraits of human emotions like love, power, greed, discrimination, hatred and despair. He could attract both courtiers and peasants to the theatres because the truths of humanity do not depend on wealth or status.

Marcus Geduld writes: “To me, Shakespeare is highly relevant, maybe the most relevant of all writers, because he can express nearly every idea, emotion, mood, and sensation I have--using words way more expressive and sensual than I could ever come up with myself. If he's writing about anger, love, regret, or joy, he makes me *feel* those things when I read his words or hear them spoken.”¹⁰

(10) Secular Humanism

In an age preoccupied with religion, Shakespeare’s literature is remarkably secular in subject matter and outlook. Religion is rarely a major force or motivation in the lives of the Shakespearean characters. They make moral choices for human rather than religious reasons. They reap the human and social consequences of their bad actions

in the form of various earthly punishments. Dominic Dromgoole wrote in The Guardian (13/07/05):

“ ... Each age re-imagines Shakespeare to suit the pressure of its own moment. He suits now as well as ever. Yet he does not only match this age, in which religion has mumbo-jumboed its way back into muscular authority. He also offers a desperately needed alternative. For many he is now a non-religious icon, a secular saint. The Complete Works comprises an imagined world of stories, insights, rituals and beauties, more varied, more complex and more true to the nuttiness of our present world, than the streamlining or simplifications of any religious texts. It is governed not by the reductions of moral certainty, nor by the delusions of spiritual redemption, but by a sensibility that is confused, yet full of mischief and kindness. A sensibility that is happy to be human rather than straining to be better than human. ...He celebrated all the world, not the section he favoured. We keep going back to him – now more than ever – because we know that his spirit of inclusion, his love for everything, is our last best hope.”¹¹

(11) Vision of Life

He presented a realistic vision of life by holding mirror to the self and the society. He objectively and keenly observed life revealing both its bright and dark sides. He was not biased towards the evils of society. On the contrary, he accepted the co-existence of white and black colours and even the gray shades of life. He loved the life as it was and presented the same. He was not a weeping philosopher in search of an opportunity for moralizing.

He was very well aware of the fact that human beings have to struggle against some mysterious, powerful, evil forces lurking beyond the world of senses. His characters often become helpless in the hands of some malignant power driving them to their doom.

However, he showed innate faith in human values and human character. Though his characters have various personal flaws, they are not diminished from their human status. For example: Othello and Macbeth are wrong-doers but are not thoroughly disgusting. This is noted in Coles Notes on *Othello*:

“He (Shakespeare) accepted the current belief in the possibility of human fiendishness, which he developed into terrible malignancy; and yet it is an open question whether he ever goes so far as to rob his villains of their human status. He found elements of tragedy in weakness, inefficiency, and defect of character as well as in positive tragic guilt. He made full use of the tragic backgrounds of life which appear in accident, untoward birth, and inescapable fate; but he never abandoned his faith in the human will, which is always allowed to play a part. He frequently lifts his defeated characters to a point where they may be said to defeat defeat.”¹²

(12) Delineation of Psychological Conflict

He encoded the human psyche in a highly comprehensible manner. He could explore the inner most recesses of human mind and reveal the psychological struggle thereby bringing depth to his characterization. He could lay bare the very soul of his characters. He could identify the secret sources of impulse and passion out of which the issues of life arise. He showed absolute command over the complexities of thought and emotion that lead to action. Scheming minds were common in the contemporary plays. But the minds undergoing heart-breaking conflict were the result of Shakespeare's mature art.

The delineation of the psychological conflict is best exemplified in the soliloquies of his tragedies. It is very natural for a human being to undergo spiritual and psychological anguish after a sinful act. Shakespeare beautifully shows this inner turmoil of his characters. Even the wrong-doers face mental disturbance. The inner voice of conscience is clearly heard. For example – Lady Macbeth is continuously haunted by the shadows of her misdeeds.

He revealed one more problem area of human character – access of virtue. He clearly believed and demonstrated that it would lead to downfall too. For example – King Lear suffers as he easily trusts.

(13) Leadership Values

Shakespeare dealt with the human dilemmas of leadership in a better and more effective way than any other management course. He showed how leaders interact, recognize threats, build consensus and alliances, leverage power and strike up coalitions.

An article placed on IEDP website reads: “From Henry V to Titus Andronicus, Richard III to Anthony and Cleopatra, Hamlet to Macbeth – Shakespeare dissected and mapped the psyches of some of the most complex, dynamic, and fascinating leaders that history and literature have given us. Research from some of the world's top business schools shows how these highly sophisticated maps of leadership that Shakespeare plotted – can be orientated on contemporary challenges – and help today's leaders navigate to success.”¹³

Shakespeare's leaders are often great story-tellers themselves. They give numerous examples of the art of persuasion, negotiation and crisis management. They deliver truly energizing motivational speech. Many of the fatal flaws of his most famous protagonists are the same befalling leaders across the working world. Similarly the charisma, wit, strength of mind, diplomacy and compassion which help them succeed in Shakespeare's plays can be the same virtues which make up a great leader today. One of the most exploited plays in this area is *Henry IV*.

(14) Treatment of History

He dealt with the English history. He displayed a remarkable fidelity to facts and faithfully brought out the spirit of the age. He presented a panorama of English monarchy with all its royal splendour, virtue and vices. He kept away from personal prejudices.

His history plays are relevant as they show the kind of dirty politics we find today in different nations: selfishness, treachery, disloyalty, indifference to the common interest, cunningness, violence, blood-shed, faithlessness, cruelty, betrayal, incompetence, broken oaths, endangered relationships etc. E.g. *King John* – carnival of treachery; *Richard III* – cunningness, violence; *Richard II* – disloyalty. With an unfaltering hand, he exposed the consequences of weakness, error and crime. The weak, inefficient or hardened criminals are inevitably punished. The evil, though in the position of a king, is penalized.

The themes of his history plays relate to the materialistic issues of failure and success in achieving practical ends. There is no place for elevated thoughts and psychological suffering. Only action matters.

(15) Popular Belief

He demonstrated popular faith of the time in superstitions and supernatural elements. His dramatic talent helped raise the status of popular theatre permitting it to be admired by intellectuals as well as by those seeking pure entertainment.

Shakespeare's works survived through the Darwinian principle of adaptation. The key concept of the Darwinian theory of evolution is the survival of the fittest. Species survive according to their capacity to adapt and evolve according to environmental circumstances. The quality that makes a really successful and enduring cultural artifact is its capacity to change in response to new circumstances. Shakespeare's plays have achieved this principle more fully than any other work of the human imagination.

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