

Shakespeare creates Modernity, and Modernity creates Shakespeare

Shakespeare's plays are written on the edge of premodernity and modernity, and they refer to certain topics that were significant in Shakespeare's time and cultural context. Famous examples for those topics would be the role of the Jews within (European) society, general Christian values, Protestant ideas, thoughts on monarchy, questions regarding economy, etc. But there seems to be a timeless and universal significance within his plays.

How else can we explain the fact that his plays, as well as Shakespeare himself, had and still have a huge effect on audiences, poets, critics, philosophers, and playwrights around the world and throughout the centuries, such as Austen, Joyce, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Goethe, Schiller, Brecht, and Beckett? In many cases, influences like that led to significant literary and theatrical adaptations. Shakespeare's work seems to have coined the consciousness of Western culture like no other playwright's work. In that sense, his plays are "alive" since they seem to have altered and have been seen from many different perspectives over the centuries. 'Every age creates its own Shakespeare' as Marjorie Garber, a famous English professor at Harvard University, said in her numerous lectures on the "Bard of Avon".

What is it that strikes us as modern and post-modern Shakespeare readers? Among his numerous interesting characters, there is Shylock, an actual minor part in *The Merchant of Venice*, whose confrontation with anti-Semitism gets in our focus today, a time past the Nazi-terror that culminated in the Holocaust and that generated new perspectives along with new interesting interpretations of the play. There is Hamlet, whose ruminations and hesitations seem to be a mirror held up to self-reflective modern people knowingly dealing with something called 'consciousness', including all the questions that arise from it, and whose soliloquies certainly helped to develop the famous 'stream of consciousness' in narrative literature. There is Lear, whose egotism and foolish judgement led to existential philosophical questions and general questions in terms of 'being', evoked by the play's key term which is 'nothing'.

I cannot think of any other author who is able to offer so many different and time-transcending reading options up to the very present. As a highly quotable author, often used by politicians to intensify the effect of their speeches, Shakespeare, like no other author, was able to establish so many expressions that have been developed to famous quotes for us today such as 'to be or not to be', 'well roared, lion', or proverbial expressions like 'Hamlet without the prince',

meaning something impossible to imagine. All of them are valid and adequate until the very present, and they will be so presumably far into the future as well. It is the permanent aspects of the human condition that influenced and challenged our modern, Western consciousness as well as our post-modern perspectives on life itself on a dialectic basis.

Despite all the differences between Shakespeare's time and ours, the Elizabethan age was a time of transformation in regards of an increasing population and an enhanced economy system that might be the common denominator with our modern times of similar significant changes and transformations.

It is the general questions of mankind with its universal and timeless character that are inherent in Shakespeare's plays and that are able to establish a relationship between his times and ours. Therefore, indeed Shakespeare creates modernity, and modernity creates Shakespeare.