The Modernity of Shakespeare

by

Ismail Serageldin

with a foreword by

Wole Soyinka

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

Cairo University, Egypt

Center for the Global South,

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Foreword

Whenever themes intertwine in any work of art, it should not surprise us that, in the process of their unravelling, some strands are simply discarded while others assume a disproportionate girth and relevance. The influences in that selection, a kind of survival of the fittest, is what is often ignored, mostly because too close an examination may reveal uncomfortable motivations that lie outside the original work of art, and tell us more about the environment, history, politics, economic givens, culture, etc.—of selection and emphasis—than about the work itself, or the artist.

In any case, the notion of 'survival of the fittest' is in itself a presumption of objective appraisal. Is it 'fittest' as in muscularity and dominant genes or 'fittest' as being fit or unfit for the ear, comfortable to the conscience, what best fits into fashionable thinking, into the latest theories of society and human development? In short, is it the kind of 'fitness' that simply fits into a structure that leaves society at ease with itself or sharply challenges its complacencies.

Conscious, undoubtedly, of this pitfall in thematic unravelling, Ismail Serageldin has chosen to focus, in the main, on what he astutely discerns as uncomfortable threads in most (European) analyses of Shakespeare's plays: the themes of marginalization, and—to put it bluntly—racism. Focussing especially on two plays that illuminate this region of understated themes, he restores the focus of race and prejudice to

a rounded reading of the texts, and does justice to the English bard regarding his own position, much misunderstood, on these questions.

At the same time, Serageldin does not fall into the trap of what we have identified as 'exclusive thematism'. Is our Jewish moneylender indeed an archetypal formulation of the vindictive soul? Assuming that a case can be made for such a reading, the question most critics do not ask is: what turned Shylock into such an implacable missionary of vengeance? More pertinently, are there trails that have been carefully, and subtly laid in the working out of this drama—in the very language—to challenge such considerations in its reading—or theatrical presentation? Is the background of 'genteel' but bigoted Venetian mercantilism irrelevant? To position it directly, can Shylock be morally faulted in any absolutist terms, or could it be that we need to penetrate, and therefore address out of what circumstances, what history and experience a Shylock was born and, ultimately, what values of such societies demand our thorough scrutiny? Why should we presume to ignore these probabilities (among others) of a writer's intention? Only if we are uncomfortable with them!

Similarly, in *Othello*—but in a more complex way—Serageldin does not underplay the psychological theme of jealousy—this would be to deny Shakespeare his dimension of the astute observer of the playground (or battleground) of 'humours'. Our interlocutor however restores the claims of racial (and related) indictments to a central position in this drama that is often cited as evidence of the playwright's reac-

tionary attitudes towards race and—in these days of the rampaging mindlessness of 'political correctness'—even gender and class.

Othello is of course even more compelling within this structure of a delineation of authorial attitudes. Yes, our tragic hero may have indeed been prey to a jealous morbidity but, the real foundation of his tragedy, argues Serageldin, is that he was black, a doubly estranged outsider, one who was indeed excruciatingly conscious of this fact and was possessed of a futile (and fatal) ambition—to demonstrate his credentials to be, at the very least an 'honorary white'—my choice of expression, not Serageldin's, borrowed from apartheid South Africa which sought to overcome a *political* problem by creating this racial category for the Japanese.

The theme of the outsider—*sui generis*—sometimes subsumes even issues of colour, and this Serageldin elicits forcefully in his entire discourse, but—why not read the man himself? My task is not to repeat his arguments but (I suspect) simply to admit to a fascination with the insights that he brings to bear on familiar texts. I felt—just one more bit of self-indulgence—I felt, for example, especially gratified by his imaginative attention to the theme of Portia's 'betrothal' caskets, whose interpretations tend to concentrate on the symbolic, opening up the most bizarre readings. Our essayist here directs our attention to a much neglected area which proposes, and weaves a new thread of continuity within the overall tapestry of this play of multiple paradoxes—but now I really must leave Ismail Serageldin to address his readers directly.

The author of these lectures is an architect; it is clear however that he is truly possessed of what has come to be known in Western parlance as a 'Renaissance mind.' There is a quality in his writing, and interplay of ideas that combines a connoisseur's palate with the artist's palette (pun definitely intended!)—selective/eclectic, a temperament for the instant correlation of motifs between disciplines, and a felicitous sense of both linguistic and imagic coloring that seduces through ease of expression. And not for nothing does the expression 'archetectonic' feature in some analytical writings on music and literature—there is a temper of perception which recognizes in all works of art a spatial organization and interplay of themes—both physical and conceptual—that appears most evident (and are sometimes thought to be exclusive to) architecture.

My only regret therefore is that Ismail Serageldin has granted too much space to the various propositions of existing Shakespearean industry—and that word 'industry' is not really perjoratively employed. Obviously he cannot ignore them, but his readers, I am certain, would have wished to listen more to his own voice, which is as confidently persuasive as it is resonant. The last word will never be said on William Shakespeare. Ismail Serageldin has joined that special band for whom Shakespeare is a continuing marvel and rediscovery outside space, time and fashion.

Wole Soyinka
May 1998

Acknowledgments

This Monograph has quite a story. It started with my many discussions with academic friends who teach English literature, and are professional critics. Although I consider myself a lover of literature rather than a critic, I have read widely and have formed my own views about what I like and why. Thus, despite being only an amateur in the field, I have strong views, and can back them up with sufficient academic baggage to hold my own in such discussions.

I have always liked Shakespeare, finding in him a multi-layered complexity that speaks to us beyond the beauty of the words and the power of the poetry. My appreciation has been amplified by enjoying the theater and the films as well as re-reading the original material. It has been honed by reading criticism. A particular revelation to me was the presentation of Professor Kiernan Ryan in his *Shakespeare,* in the Harvester New Readings Series (1989). I consider his way of looking at the material to be at the heart of much of what I have to say. Indeed, his thoughts, ideas, and words permeate almost every page. I owe him enormous thanks and I have written to him to say so.

Indeed, the essay makes no particular claim to originality. The essence of good criticism, I believe, is to increase the enjoyment of the work of art, and this I hope I have done for those who attended the lecture and hopefully for those who will read this essay.

But, back to the origin of the monograph. At the end of one of these animated academic discussions, my good friend Professor Malak Hashem invited me to speak to her students. She thought that they would enjoy meeting someone who was not in the field, and yet showed such interest in the poetry and the plays of Shakespeare. She was convinced that my enthusiasm for Shakespeare was infectious. I agreed to speak to her class.

Professor Abdel Aziz Hammouda, then Chairman of the Department of English at Cairo University, on hearing that the Vice-President of the World Bank—an architect and engineer by original training and economist and development planner by later practice—would lecture on Shakespearean drama, decided to expand this way beyond Malak Hashem's class, and turned it into an open lecture for the whole department and the public. It was quite an event with television coverage and a very large attendance.

Professor Hammouda and I had never met before the lecture. He later admitted that he was rather curious about what I would say. But he expressed great admiration for the presentation and for the command of the material. He even invited me to teach a course on Shakespeare in his department. He also wrote a very laudatory piece in the largest Egyptian daily newspaper about the event. He pressed me to edit my lecture notes for publication as a monograph. I demurred, because of the effort of digging up all the appropriate attributions, references and bibliographic materials. He insisted, and here it is.

The draft was reviewed by two professors, and they approved it for publication. Encouraged by their positive comments, I showed it to Wole Soyinka, Africa's great poet, dramatist, and critic and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. This charismatic champion of universal values, is famously direct and outspoken in his views, on both politics and literature, and I was overjoyed when he said that he liked it. With some trepidation, I asked him if he would do me the honor of writing a foreword. To my delight, he agreed. I am most grateful for his encouragement and support, and most honored by his kind words in this foreword.

Wole Soyinka's foreword exceeded any expectations I dared to aspire to. He is very insightful in his focus on the aspects of the dramas that I tried to highlight, and most kind and generous in his praise. It is quite humbling to be so honored by someone that I admire so much, both as an artist and as a human being. So, from the bottom of my heart, my thanks to Wole Soyinka for his encouragement, and for including me in the company of those for whom Shakespeare transcends time, place, and fashion.

Finally, my thanks go to Cairo University for inviting me, to Professors Hashem and Hammouda who insisted that I follow up on the publication, and to Professor Mohamed Enani for arranging to publish it under the auspices of the University. My thanks also go to President Benjamin Ladner of American University and to Professor Clovis Maksoud, Director, Center for the Global South of American University, who agreed to cosponsor the publication with

Cairo University. That is most appropriate, for it is a monograph that presents the views of two citizens of the Global South on the universal appeal of the English bard. And, of course, thanks are due to Heather Imboden, who patiently did and redid the desktopping to give this monograph its final shape. Above all, my thanks to my wife, Nevine Madkour, who provided consistent support and encouragement even when it meant that I took a suitcase full of books on Shakespearean criticism to our vacation by the beach to finish all the references and footnotes for this monograph. I hope that she too thinks that the result is worth it.

Ismail Serageldin
Washington, DC
June 1998

I. Introduction: An Approach to Shakespeare

1. The Context of this Paper

It is indeed a privilege for me to address the department of English at Cairo University. I make no claims to any expertise on the topic at hand. Rather, I am a lover of literature who would like to share with you the enthusiasm that I feel for the works of Shakespeare, which continue to speak to us, generation after generation, throughout the countries and the cultures of the world. For Shakespeare, I believe, spoke profoundly to the human condition in the throes of its quest for fulfillment in a difficult societal context. A timeless quest, to which Shakespeare brings a special quality that I will qualify as truly "modern."[1]

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1. The term modernism has a specific meaning in standard literary criticism. It usually refers to the literary movement exemplified by the works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf and the lesser lights among disciples, contemporaries, and possible precursors. It is considered to have reached its heyday in the first half of this century, primarily in the years 1910–30. The Modern, or Modernist, approach was characterized by a break with linear narrative, the development of a plural vision, and a self-conscious position of the artist in relation to the infinite complexity of reality, where the medium of artistic expression is itself considered as part of the problem. See, inter alia, Peter Faulkner, *Modernism* (London: Methuen, 1977). Clearly, I do not refer to that kind of technical use of the term modern in my discussion, but I look to the broader meaning associated with contemporaneity and relevance to the present, as well as the beginnings of the questioning of self and society that is so characteristic of the modern but totally alien to the medieval tradition.

This reading of Shakespeare, as intrinsically modern, in the sense of being relevant to our contemporary condition, is well grounded in the text and the critical literature, from Jonson[2] to Drakakis,[3] as I shall endeavor to show. Much of what I will advance here is in line with Professor Kiernan Ryan's[4] superb reading of Shakespeare, and is not particularly original. But originality is not an objective in itself. The purpose of literary criticism, as I see it, is to shed light on the work of art in a way that enriches the reader's understanding and increases his or her enjoyment. This last characteristic is sorely lacking in much of the current Deconstructionist critical work that seems to erect intellectual structures for the sole purpose of dazzling a small circle of initiated critics—more on this later.

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2. Ben Jonson, despite his earlier cavillings, gave us the ultimate statement of this view in the immortal "He was not of an age, but for all Time" (in his poem prefixed to the 1623 *Folio of Shakespeare's Plays*).
3. John Drakakis has edited a number of important anthologies of Shakespearean criticism, and produced his own articulate views. He does not adhere to the views of Johnson but, nevertheless, grudgingly concedes that the bard continues to fascinate and to speak to many as "our contemporary." Drakakis ascribes this to the projection of our (or the critics') own values onto the texts. In the introduction to his anthology *Alternative Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) he makes his point forcefully: "In concrete historical terms Shakespeare can never be 'our contemporary' except by the strategy of appropriation, yet the protean values which subsequent generations of critics have discovered in the texts themselves can be demonstrated to be in large part the projection of their own applied values" (p. 24). Yet, whatever the mechanism, the texts do continue to lend themselves to this identification across the centuries, and that is the essence of our concern here.
4. See Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

This talk, however, is not about criticism, although we will address the text through a particular critical viewpoint. It is about Shakespeare and how powerfully he speaks to us today. I hope to communicate to you some of the enthusiasm and enchantment I find in the Bard's works. So, let's start by asking why study Shakespeare in this day of missiles and television?

2. The Pervasive Impact of Shakespeare

Most people readily acknowledge the importance of Shakespeare's drama and poetry,[5] but few are aware of the extent to which his work permeates our everyday language. In a particularly effective and exceptionally long sentence, Bernard Levin has captured how so many people who have never seen any of Shakespeare's plays or read any of his poetry are nevertheless familiar with sentences and phrases from them:

> If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me," you are quoting Shakespeare; if you

5. The great African dramatist and literary critic, Wole Soyinka, 1986 Nobel Laureate for Literature, pointed out the importance of Shakespeare while pillorying those among the Arabs who would appropriate Shakespeare by claiming that he was literally an Arab called "Shaikh Zubeir" (or variants thereof). As Soyinka says, "In the meantime, one acknowledges with gratitude the subjective relation of other poets and dramatists to the phenomenon of Shakespeare, for even the most esoteric of their claims leads one, invariably, to the productive source itself, and to the gratification of celebrating dramatic poetry anew." See Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 162.

claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise—why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then—to give the devil his due—if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me pack-

ing, if you wish I was dead as a doornail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then—by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts—it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.[6]

Shakespeare's language was exceptionally rich.[7] He used over 20,000 words and had no difficulty borrowing from other languages.[8] Indeed for one whose stylistic prowess is so daunting, there is ample evidence that Shakespeare used language with unself-conscious ease. For example, it was largely during his lifetime and shortly thereafter that the "eth" ending was replaced by the "es" ending, as in loves versus loveth.

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6. Bernard Levin, *Enthusiasms* (London: J. Cape, 1983), pp. 167–68.
7. Shakespearean language has also been the subject of endless study. The different works address different needs and audiences. Perhaps among the most relevant for our purposes here would be Norman Blake's *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), which not only introduces the modern reader to Elizabethan english, but also offers possible meanings to many constructions that appear ambiguous to contemporary readers. E. A. Abbott's *A Shakespearean Grammar* (1870; reprint, New York: Haskell House, 1972) also helps with the differences that time has brought in the usage and sentence structure. C. T. Onions' *A Shakespeare Glossary* (1911; updated, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) is also helpful with many words that are now obscure. John Houston's *Shakespearean Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) deals with stylistic choices.
8. See, inter alia, S. Schoenbaum, ed., *Shakespeare: His Life, His English, His Theater* (New York: Signet Classic, 1990), pp. 24–39, and Karl Julius Holzknecht, "Shakespeare's English," in *Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: American Book Company, 1950), pp.186–219.

Shakespeare did not take a stand on the issue, and tended to use both forms interchangeably with a marked shift in frequency of use towards the more modern "es" in the later works, as revealed by counts made chronologically over the life of the works.[9]

But this kind of arid scholasticism does not do justice to the unique felicity of expression that has made Shakespearean quotations such perennial favorites. Indeed a whole industry has been sustained by the edition of Shakespearian quotations. The first anthology devoted entirely to Shakespeare was William Dodd's *The Beauties of Shakespeare,* which first appeared in 1752. It has been reprinted many times since, the latest edition dates from 1936. There have been numerous other anthologies since, some of which have been given a particular thematic or political orientation—both in terms of the quotations selected to highlight the editors' position and in the commentary accompanying the selections. For example, see the 1843 edition of *Religious and Moral Sentences Culled from the Works of Shakespeare Compared with Sacred Passages Drawn from Holy Writ,* or the 1880 edition of *Shakespeare's Morals: Suggestive Selections,* and many other such efforts. But most of the anthologies have simply allowed readers to revel in the beauty of the language by collecting isolated snippets from the poetry and the plays, sometimes arranged thematically around such titles as love, ambition, or honor. Some of these collections have been for-

9. See S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare: His Life,* pp. 26–27.

mally titled proverbs, as was the case in the 1848 edition of *Shakespeare's Proverbs*. The pervasiveness of these anthologies attests to the continuing appeal of Shakespeare's words to a large audience to our day.

3. The Genius as Craftsman

Shakespeare was a poet and a dramatist. By his own yardstick, he expected to be judged by the quality of his long poems,[10] rather than by the sonnets or the plays. This is, however, the least important part of his legacy. The sonnets stand today as the most important example of his poetic mastery,[11] as do certain passages of his plays. Arguably, the sonnets include some of the greatest lines ever written in a concise and very disciplined format.[12]

For the plays, Shakespeare favored the iambic pentameter in blank verse (metered but unrhymed lines).[13] His technical work was judged by some of his contemporaries to have

10. See, inter alia, Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar, eds., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), and the classic George Wyndham, ed., *The Poems of Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1898).
11. There are countless editions of the sonnets, see, for example, Geoffrey M. Ridden, ed., *William Shakespeare Sonnets* (Essex, England: Longman York Press, 1982) and Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
12. See the outstanding study by Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).
13. The best account of Shakespeare's metrical practice is given in George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 75–90.

been sloppy in the amount of poetic license he allowed himself, and in his apparent lack of concern with the historical accuracy of some of the details in his plays. These are but quibbles in the face of a protean imagination that broke all the conventional molds and combined profound insight with a unique felicity of expression.

4. The Importance of Shakespeare's Plays

Indeed, so powerful are the Shakespearean creations that they not only dominate English literature and English studies,[14] but they have successfully transcended the bounds of culture.[15]

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14. In fact, some distinguished critics go completely overboard in their excessive claims for Shakespeare. G. Wilson Knight gets carried away by the "divine worth" of Shakespeare: "The soul-life of a Shakespearean play is indeed a thing of divine worth. Its perennial fire is as mysterious, as near and yet as far as that of the sun, and like the sun it burns while generations pass." [See G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; reprint, London: Methuen, 1964), p. 14; also cited in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 19.] This is still true in more subtle forms today, as in the case of Harold Bloom who places Shakespeare as the yardstick for the entire Western Canon as Bloom defined it. See Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994). See also the review of Bloom's book by Robert M. Adams in the *New York Review of Books* XLI, no. 19 (November 17, 1994), pp. 4–6.
15. Kenneth Muir noted that "the subtlety of his [Shakespeare's] characterization survives the process of translation, the transplanting into alien cultures, and the erosion of time." [From Kenneth Muir, *The Singularity of Shakespeare and Other Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1977), p. 136.] I would add that some of Shakespeare's dramatic structures also fit that description. The outstanding adaptation of *King Lear* into the Japanese film *Ran* by Akira Kurosawa bears witness to that observation.

Romeo and Juliet have become synonymous with love in almost every language. Our perception of historical figures is affected by Shakespeare's creations. Thus Anthony, is cast as a heroic figure through both *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, while Octavian (later known as Augustus) is cast as a villain in the latter play. It was a blow to the image of Augustus, from which it has never fully recovered in the public mind, not even after the rehabilitation undertaken by Robert Graves in his *I, Claudius* chronicles.

But perhaps his most powerful contribution was the creation of what I consider to be the first truly modern hero in literature: Hamlet.[16] For Hamlet is the first hero to question the system of values that expects him to behave in a certain way. The drama of Hamlet is incredibly more profound, and akin to the modern condition where the modern hero, or anti-hero, is torn between internal and external forces and is not just confronting the classical dramatic choices (loyalty versus honor, love versus duty). Therefore, to this writer, Hamlet is a pivotal figure of world literature, and an appropriate entry point to discussing the topic of this lecture, which focuses on the plays of Shakespeare, not his sonnets or his long poems.

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16. Hamlet is undeniably one of the most complex creations in literature, in whom successive generations can see their melancholy uncertainties mirrored. Oscar Wilde wrote: "In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet. If Hamlet has something of the definiteness of a work of art, he also has all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies." [From *The Critic as Artist*, cited in Alvin Redman, ed., *The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Dover Books, 1959), p. 84.]

5. Critical Readings of Shakespeare's Plays

The legacy of the Shakespearean plays has been the subject of much scholarly analysis over the centuries. There has been an evolving appreciation for the plays, that has seen preferences for some plays wax and wane[17] and different ideological colorings put on the whole corpus of works to suit particular attitudes among the critics or reviewers.[18] It is a measure of the importance of Shakespeare in the culture of English-speaking people that he serves as a legitimizing source for ideological positions for, or against, the status quo.[19]

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17. See, for example, the fortunes of *Macbeth* at the hands of different literary critics—from Dr. Johnson's 1751 comments in *The Rambler* to Marvin Rosenberg's 1978 *The Masks of Macbeth*—all chronicled by Richard Dutton in his *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Essex England: Longmans York Press, 1984), pp. 80–87.
18. See in particular Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985). See also Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays: A Marxist Approach* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986) and Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986.
19. In his excellent analysis of the use made of Caliban by the English establishment to demonize the Germans and to justify anti-German feelings during World War I, Terence Hawkes observed: "Shakespeare is a powerful ideological weapon, always available in periods of crisis, and used according to the exigencies of the time to resolve crucial areas of indeterminacy." (See Terence Hawkes, "Swisser-Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters," in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 43.)

Indeed, the criticism of Dr. Johnson[20] was probably the last in which a critic was able to relate to Shakespeare as a playwright and not as an exceptional figure with all the positive and negative attributes that such a position brings. Critics have then successively tended to define their position in relation to other critics as much as to the original text itself.[21] Shakespeare was called upon to buttress positions in ongoing debates, to justify this or that position,[22] rather than to allow a new generation of readers or theater-goers to enjoy the original work with new insight. Let us briefly review some of the more prominent schools of contemporary Shakespearean criticism, accepting that criticism has now become a "pluralist activity," as Drakakis termed it.[23]

5.1 The Classical Interpretations

A hard core of contemporary critics build upon the prevailing views from the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century to link Shakespearean tragedy to the

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20. See Samuel Johnson, "Preface to the plays of William Shakespeare" in W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969), pp. 57–98.
21. See Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
22. See, inter alia J. Howard and M. O'Connor, *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (London: Methuen, 1987).
23. "Criticism is now an openly pluralist activity, with proponents of particular positions contesting vigorously the intellectual space which [established critical practice] has occupied" (John Drakakis, introduction to *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 1).

Elizabethan world in which Shakespeare lived.[24] The powerful and influential work of Bradley[25] finds echoes in recent works such as those anthologized by Laurence Lerner[26] and Alfred Harbage.[27] Arguably, these and others represent what could be termed the orthodox criticism from which various currents of contemporary criticism have tried to differentiate themselves. Many of them have been influenced by the important work of E. M. W. Tillyard on Elizabethan times.[28] The essence of that view is that Shakespeare faithfully reflected the world view of his times, with exceptional talent and ability, but by focusing on essential human qualities, remains relevant to our time.

5.2 The Political Neo-Marxist School

Sharply divergent from the orthodox criticism, is the political interpretation of Shakespeare as a defender of the pre-

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24. It is difficult to define the full corpus of criticism that could be defined as classical or orthodox, but it is the conventional criticism anthologized in such works as Alfred Harbage, ed., *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) and Laurence Lerner, ed., *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963). In addition there are many play-specific criticisms that have been published and anthologized separately. See, for example, Frank Kermode, ed., *Shakespeare: King Lear: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1969).
25. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1920).
26. See Lerner, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*.
27. See Harbage, *Shakespeare: The Tragedies*.
28. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943; reprint, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1960).

vailing land-owning quasi-feudal society with its patriarchal outlook. This shorthand notation does not do justice to the multi-faceted aspects of the better examples of this line of criticism, but they all share the overall ideological prism through which the works are viewed. Examples of this criticism are found in Dollimore and Sinfield's 1985 anthology *Political Shakespeare,*[29] or in Elliott Krieger's *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies.*[30]

5.3 The New Historicists

This term, which is applicable to a school of criticism launched by Stephen Greenblatt,[31] refers to a tendency among those critics to lavish inordinate attention to each minute detail of social life in Shakespeare's time, with a view to asserting that Shakespeare was "not for all time, but of an age." The essence of that line of criticism sees Shakespeare as a willing or unwitting defender of the status-quo of his time. Jonathan Dollimore views *Measure for Measure* as a

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29. Dollimore and Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare.*
30. Elliot Krieger, *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979).
31. John Drakakis credits the start of the movement to the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See John Drakakis, ed., *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), p. 153. Greenblatt himself is the general editor of a series of critical studies, published under the heading *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics,* published by the University of California Press.

work where the status quo is recuperated in the comedic closure. Stephen Greenblatt has given us an excellent discussion of this viewpoint in his analysis of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*.[32]

5.4 *The Feminist Critique*

Shakespeare's work has also been grist for the mill of contemporary gender debates. As will be seen later in this discussion, I believe that Shakespeare was indeed sensitive to the role of women in society, but not in the way that much of the feminist critique would present him. The "patriarchal Bard" or the "seductive misogynist" are descriptions applied by feminist authors reviewing plays such as *King Lear* or *Measure for Measure*, where Shakespeare is seen as an advocate for maintaining the status quo of an oppressive patriarchal social order.[33] This, in spite of Shakespeare's evident tendencies to mix gender roles (disguised characters) and to give us exceptionally powerful heroines—such as Portia in the *Merchant of Venice*, about whom we will have more to say later. I should point out however, that there are many nuances in feminist criticism of Shakespeare, running the gamut of the works of

32. Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, Henry IV and Henry V," in Dollimore and Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare*.

33. See Kathleen McKluskie, "The Patriarchal Bard," in Dollimore and Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare*, p. 97.

Catherine Belsey[34] to Lisa Jardine[35] to many other authors.[36]

5.5 *Deconstructionists and Post-Structuralists*

Despite the tremendous talent and obvious erudition of many critics in this currently prominent school of criticism,[37] especially apparent in the work of Terry Eagleton,[38] this approach has many critics.[39] Personally, despite finding many intriguing aspects,[40] I am left with two general objections to

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34. See, inter alia, Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting sexual difference: Meaning and gender in the comedies," in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, pp. 166–90. See also her *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) and "Finding a place," in Drakakis, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 208–27.
35. See Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Sussex, England: Harvester Press, 1983).
36. See, inter alia, Marilyn French, "The late tragedies," and Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, madness and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," both in Drakakis, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 227–80. See also C. Lenz, G. Greene, and C. Neeley, eds., *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) and Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).
37. Cf. inter alia, G. Douglas Atkins and David M. Bergeron, eds., *Shakespeare and Deconstruction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988).
38. Terry Eagleton has a large body of work, almost all of it very interesting and intriguing. The best place to start, however, is probably his *William Shakespeare* (Oxford and New York: B. Blackwell, 1986).
39. See, inter alia, John M. Ellis, ed., *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).
40. See, inter alia, Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982) and Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

this kind of enterprise. First, it reduces the text, the work of art, from an inspiring and enriching experience to something remote and merely fodder for specialist discourse. The critics tend to draw little excerpts from the text to validate the different views they hold about different topics such as language, desire, law, money, and the body. Such deconstructionist works tend to be "brazenly non-historical"[41] and occasionally verge on becoming politicized semiotic exercises.[42] In some examples of trying to fit the Shakespearean work into the current mode of thinking, Elizabeth Freund, in her 1985 essay, made efforts to match Shakespearean wit to the wit of the deconstructionist enterprise.[43]

The second, and equally important objection, is that a play, in my judgement, must be seen in its entirety before one takes apart small passages for detailed analysis and discussion. This is particularly important when dealing with Shakespeare, precisely because so many passages in the plays are real gems, jewels that are known and studied for their intrinsic literary quality. It becomes all the more important not to lose sight of the entire dramatic structure of the play and the thrust of the argument, precisely because one can so easily be seduced by the felicity of expression of individual passages.

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41. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 8.
42. See Christopher Norris, "Post-structuralist Shakespeare: Text and ideology," in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*.
43. Elizabeth Freund "Ariachne's broken woof: The rhetoric of citation in Troilus and Cressida," in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985), cited in Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 112.

5.6 *Other Schools*

These are by no means the only schools of contemporary criticism of Shakespeare. The variations are almost endless, from the psychoanalytic[44] to the hagiographic. But it is not my purpose today to review all the various possible readings of Shakespeare, rather, I wanted to position the approach that I subscribe to within the context of contemporary criticism. This approach is what I might call the new reading, but doubtless others have other names for it and for its exponents.

6. The New Reading

Distinct from the previous five schools of criticism, is what may be called the new reading of Shakespeare, whose most prominent exponent is Kiernan Ryan. It is this way of looking at the text that I find most satisfying, and it is based on this approach that I will present my material today.

This criticism asks that the play be seen in its entirety, as well as analyzed in its constituent parts. It sets up certain criteria by which to address such questions, so that evaluating the play is not ". . . an arbitrary and unhistorical subjectivism, . . ."[45] but is subject to certain principles of textual and his-

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44. See, inter alia, Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn, *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
45. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 11.

torical validation. Specifically, we should ask about a play the four following questions:[46]

1. To what extent does the play successfully challenge the principles of social organization that governed Shakespeare's society or our own?
2. To what extent and by what precise means does the text confirm or reinforce such principles?
3. Conversely, is the work divided against itself, challenging and confirming at different levels, simultaneously and in a complex fashion, such principles of social organization as class and patriarchy?
4. If the play succeeds, wholly or partly, in putting in question such principles, does it also "point towards the possibility of more desirable ways of organizing human life and relationships"?[47] Are these relevant to our own time and place?

This approach has had its precursors, including Jan Kott's 1965 work *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*,[48] which offers a somewhat nihilistic view of Shakespeare, almost Beckettian one could argue. But the most complete exposition of these

46. These principles are generally appreciated by most people on common sense grounds, yet many of the ideological schools of criticism are found wanting when measured against the yardstick implicit in these four questions.
47. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 11.
48. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1967).

views is Ryan's 1989 work in the Harvester New Readings series,[49] on which much of what I have to say today is based.

6.1 *The Overall View*

As we shall see from the detailed discussion of specific examples later on, Shakespeare challenged social conventions of class, gender, honor, and race. He confronted us with the fundamental issue of being human, and that society, any society, does not have the right to deny these rights to any person.[50] It is this view that truly places the Shakespearean legacy as timeless, for all times and all places, in the same sense that all great art is truly timeless. It is also modern in the sense that it raises fundamental questions that have become particularly acute in the "modern" era (as defined in literary criticism) and more generally in the "contemporary" era, be it called "post-modern" or some other name. These fundamental questions are about the human condition, about men and women against society as it is, about men and

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49. Ryan, *Shakespeare*.

50. Clifford Geertz, in his outstanding works on culture, has contested the idea that there is such a thing as human nature independent of culture. ". . . there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. . . . Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally and more significantly, without culture, no men." [Clifford Geertz, "The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of Man," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 46–54, cited in Kiernan Ryan, ed., *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader* (London and New York: Arnold, 1996), p. 7.

women aspiring to be what they could be, and by so doing challenging the conventional status quo in the most profound fashion possible.[51]

It is a celebration of the human spirit, triumphant even when it is vanquished. It is also a probing, questioning inquiry into the intractable issues of the self and the other, the individual and the community, and the very purpose of life ("to be or not to be . . . "). The works of Shakespeare address these issues not as a pamphleteer or political activist would, but at a level of subtlety and ambiguity that engages us intellectually just as it moves us emotionally.

Why was Shakespeare able to do this? Beyond the unique gifts of an uncontestable genius, there were unique aspects to the time and place and the very medium he used—the theater—that made this possible. It is this grounding in the historical reality of the Shakespearean context that is the foundation for the credibility of the claim that the new reading advocated here is more than an ex post nonhistorical interpretation. Let us review the historical context that provided Shakespeare's genius with the opportunity to produce this timeless legacy.

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51. Alexander Pope reprised a theme well known throughout history, when he noted that the study of human characteristics is the most profound study possible, and that it will continue to engage people for all time.

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of mankind is man.

6.2 *The Historical Context*

The Uniqueness of the Times

The time of Shakespeare was an unusual time in the history of England. The schism with the church under Henry VIII, the rising influence of renaissance humanism, and the stirrings of rationalist discourse all contributed to an intellectual climate that favored bold and new directions in intellectual constructs and interpretations.[52] Shakespeare, while undeniably the greatest, was not the only writer of stature to leave his mark. Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, as well as some of Ben Jonson's works qualify as major milestones in the evolution of English letters.

The social and political climate also played a major role.[53] It was a time of change.[54] England was in the process of becoming a major European power. The feudal system was breaking down, but was only partially replaced by the system of bourgeois values that would consolidate their hold on English society only a century or so later.[55] The stirrings

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52. See, inter alia, Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).
53. There are many works on the subject, but see, inter alia, Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: A Social and Economic History of Britain, 1530–1780* (1967; reprint, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969).
54. See, inter alia, Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977).
55. See, inter alia, Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian culture and the structure of authority in Renaissance England* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 107–24 (also cited in Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p.114).

against monarchical power were not evident, but the links between sovereign and parliament were being redefined. The trading classes were acquiring increasing influence and prestige, even though the landed aristocracy remained by far the most important group both socially and politically. All in all these were times of transition from one dominant system to another, and thus they afforded men and women of talent and ability scope to break new ground as never before.[56]

The Uniqueness of the Medium

In addition to the nature of the sociopolitical climate of the times, one must not forget that the theater was itself a unique medium in which to work. The Elizabethan public theater, as an institution, was in the words of Walter Cohen ". . . a unique, precarious product of a brief historical moment . . . which supplied the crucial mediation between drama and society."[57] Why?

First, the playwrights and the actors were mostly of humble origins, but had received some education, in the case of the playwrights, a university education. They were mingling with the monarch and the nobles, indeed they were spon-

56. There are many works that document the character of the times from different facets. One unusual and exceptionally rich source is the tricentenary celebration edition of S. Lee and C. T. Onions, eds., *Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life and Manners of His Age* (London: Clarendon Press, 1916). More recent scholarship is plentiful, but few sources cover as much ground.

57. See Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), also cited in Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 31.

sored by them, but they remained, like vagabonds and peddlers, at the very bottom of the social ladder. In many countries, they were refused Christian burial. Thus, playwrights had a unique view of society, which transcended that of any single class, and were, in the words of Cohen, able to ". . . draw upon a pervasive and unique mixture of feudal, monarchical, humanist, bourgeois, and popular elements"[58] and interpret this in a vision that was not reducible to any single class outlook.

Secondly, the theater audience was very mixed.[59] The public theater attracted people from virtually every rank and class of society. These people intermingled during the plays, and since the plays were performed to mixed audiences, they had to speak to the broad array of perceptions and interests.

Thirdly, as pointed out by Michael Bristol, "the public playhouses were 'extra mural' and therefore exempted from the formal jurisdiction of the city authorities."[60] This made the public theater a place where people met outside of the bounds of formal convention, at times that were different from work or religious devotion, in an ambiguous situation where behavior that would elsewhere have been inadmissible was acceptable. It was, in short, a place where a certain license was expected and tolerated. This is supported by the vociferous manner in which the protectors of decorum,

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58. Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, p. 149.
59. See, inter alia, Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (1941; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).
60. See Bristol, *Carnival and Theater*, pp. 111–12.

moral rectitude and the social order of the day invariably railed against the public theater with all manners of virulent criticism.[61]

Thus, if you'll forgive the pun, the stage was set for the full blossoming of Shakespeare's genius. The preceding presentation was advanced to show that the new reading of Shakespeare proposed by Ryan and his colleagues and presented to you today is not disconnected from the historical reality of Shakespeare's time, far from it. But the historical elements are relevant only insofar as they demonstrate that the specific reading of the text is not contrary to the reality in which it was created. Beyond that, it is the text itself that is of interest, for it is the text that engages us intellectually and emotionally to this day.

So, enough of this arid scholarship, let Shakespeare's own voice be heard, expressing in his own inimitable words the full scope of his protean and subversive imagination. Listen to his modern voice, as he speaks to us through a reading of just two of his plays, which I have selected to review with you today: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*.

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61. See Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 34, and Bristol, *Carnival and Theater*, pp. 107, 113.

II. The Merchant of Venice

The orthodox view of this play is that it is a delightful romantic comedy, somewhat heavy handed in its depiction of Shylock as the villain.[62] Totally politically incorrect in today's climate, this view of Shylock has led many to condemn the play as anti-semitic. This view is simplistic at best, and misses the counter voice that runs through the play. Even Schoenbaum, erudite scholar and insightful critic that he is, still endorses that view although he recognizes the presence of that counter voice. Let me here follow in the path of Ryan[63] and listen to the counter voice, which runs throughout the play, and consistently sets us up for an uneasy, divided loyalty, which most readers or viewers feel but do not pin down or come to grips with.

The real reading of the play can be seen as the ideal of humanism set against a racist, sexist society. The racist line is more easily discernable, but the gender issue pervades the play. Let us run with the racist thread first.

The racist thread in the plot reaches its first dramatic and emotional peak in the powerful speech by Shylock, rebuking the Christians for their attitude against Jews. This most famous of pleas is the universal claim of any oppressed minority being persecuted for being something other than a mem-

62. For a brief overview of the major contemporary views see Martin Stephen and Philip Franks, *Studying Shakespeare* (Essex, England: Longman York Press, 1984), pp. 121–22.
63. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, pp. 14–24.

ber of the dominant persecuting group. It is as true of the Palestinians in the occupied territories or the Muslims in Bosnia or the Indians in Latin America, as it is for the Jews and non-German minorities who suffered under Nazism. It is based on the timeless and universal claim of a common humanity. In a time where the world seems to have lost its bearings and is redefining everything in terms of nationality or ethnicity, listen to Shakespeare's eloquent plea ringing in our ears with remarkable prescience:

> Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. . . . The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
>
> *(III.i.59–73)*

Look around you in the world today, and replace "Jew" and "Christian" with any oppressed and oppressor names and the timelessness of this plea comes through unimpaired.

But let us turn back to *The Merchant of Venice.* As Ryan observes:

> With this speech there erupts into the play the full, protesting force of an irresistible egalitarian vision, whose basis in the shared faculties and needs of our common physical nature implicitly indicts all forms of inhuman discrimination. The speech provokes a radical shift of emotional allegiance, from which our perception of the comedy's Christian protagonists never recovers. Through Shylock, "The Merchant" proceeds to broach within itself a counter-perspective which cracks the received readings wide open and transfigures our understanding of the play.[64]

Here I also agree with Ryan that the key line is "The villainy you teach me, I will execute." This is the definition of the rationale for Shylock's revenge. Indeed,

> Shylock's bloodthirsty cruelty is not simply the result of the Venetians' treatment of him, but the deliberate *mirror-image of their concealed real nature.* The revenge declares itself as a bitterly ironic parody of the Christians' own actual values, a calculated piercing of their unconsciously hypocritical facade.[65]

This line of argument does not stop here. It reaches its climax in the trial scene, where Shylock reminds the Christians

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64. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 17.
65. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 18.

that by their own law and their own principles he is doing no wrong, and in fact behaving exactly as they regularly do.[66] The request that he should give up his claim is one that they would routinely deny if made on behalf of one who is not of their number:

> You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
> Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,
> You use in abject and in slavish parts,
> Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
> "Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!
> Why sweat they under burthens?. . ."
> . . . You will answer,
> "The slaves are ours." So do I answer you:
> The pound of flesh which I demand of him
> Is dearly bought as mine, and I will have it.
> If you deny me, fie upon your law!
> *(IV.i90–101)*

How can one square this powerful voice with the traditional readings of a romantic comedy with Shylock as simple, unmitigated villain? As Ryan observes:

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66. Evans considers that Northrop Frye's view of the comic drive requires the overcoming of obstacles to integration and unity, obstacles represented by ". . . the triple hold of the bond, the law and Shylock's Judaic legalism . . ." (See Malcolm Evans, "Deconstructing Shakespeare's comedies," in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 80). Such a view is missing the dramatic power unleashed by the new reading.

> What the established criticism has always repressed here is Shylock's irrefutable demonstration that his "wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous" cruelty (IV.i.138) is the very foundation and institutionalized norm of this society, whose inhumanity is ratified as "justice" by its laws. The play as romantic comedy has nothing to say in reply that can compensate for this annihilating realization.[67]

Seen in this light the full dramatic power of the play comes vividly into focus. Shakespeare has engineered a dramatic situation where ". . . an apparently civilized form of society is unmasked as in fact premised on barbarity, on the ruthless priority of money-values over human values, of the rights of property over the most fundamental rights of men and women."[68] Stephen and Franks, as others in the mainstream of current criticism, also point out that ". . . the play examines the morality of money and it is critical of the Christians in the play, as well as of the Jew,"[69] but nowhere do they come close to the powerful condemnation that Ryan makes.

It is this internal contradiction, this powerful counter voice, that sets the real tension for the audience, that tears at their sympathies and keeps them from adopting the simplistic view of Shylock as the villain without redeeming qualities. Shakespeare also gives small reinforcing hints of this position through the comic interlude at Gobbo's first appear-

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67. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 19.
68. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 19.
69. See Stephen and Franks, *Studying Shakespeare*, p. 121.

ance (II.ii), and in other more subtle ways that link the race and the gender issues, as we shall see later.

Let us now address the gender issue. The real "hero" of the play is Portia. She is intelligent, witty, profound, and eloquent and she has a commanding presence. She saves Bassanio, but to do so she must disguise herself as a man.[70] Society would not accept her playing such a role as a woman, because it does not recognize her as the equal of the men, even though she is clearly their superior.

Indeed, Portia is the one who gives the most eloquent counterpoint to Shylock's plea, the mercy speech. It remains one of Shakespeare's most eloquent passages:

> The quality of mercy is not strained.
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
> it blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.
> 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes
> The throned monarch better than his crown.
> His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
> The attribute to awe and majesty,
> Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
> But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
> It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
> It is an attribute to God himself,

70. Portia's problems with being at the bar continued for most women lawyers. See, inter alia, Hedda Garza, *Barred from the Bar: A History of Women in the Legal Profession* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1996).

And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
(IV.i.181–94)

Note in passing that the basic thrust of the speech is itself a further indictment of the "civilised law" that Shylock appealed to, by requesting that "mercy seasons justice," implying that the civilized society's law lacked the necessary compassion.

Yet this same Portia, with all these innate abilities, is socially oppressed. She is deprived of any meaningful choice in running her own life:[71]

. . . O me, the word "choose"! I may
neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I
dislike; so is the will of the living daughter curbed
by the will of a dead father. . . .
(I.ii.22–5)

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71. The status of women before the law remains problematic to this day, where equality before the law is assumed to be achieved in all civilized societies. For a historical view of the legal status of women, see the Marygrove College series, *Into Her Own: The Status of Women from Ancient Times to the End Of the Middle Ages* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972); Maria L. Cioni, *Women and Law in Elizabethan England, With Particular Reference to the Court of Chancery* (New York: Garland, 1985); Mary Murray, *The Law of the Father?: Patriarchy in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Basil Edwin Lawrence, *History of the Laws Affecting the Property of Married Women in England* (Littleton, Colo.: Fred B. Rothman, 1986).

This same lady, who is so admirable in every way, is seen by Bassanio as a source of income and a means to clear his debts: "A lady richly left . . . " (I.i.161) and "To get clear of all the debts I owe . . . " (I.i.135).

We are given three additional twists that leave no doubt as to Shakespeare's intentions on the gender issue: the episodes of the caskets, the rings, and the finale. Let's reflect briefly about the significance of each of them.

The sequence of the caskets is essential in underlining the difference between appearance and reality. It does so with some of the most famous passages in the English language:

> All that glistens is not gold,
> Gilded tombs do worms enfold.
> *(II.vii.65–66)*

A theme that obviously runs through the play at several levels is the apparent "civilized" character of the Venetian laws, the apparent superiority of the male: "So may the outward shows be least themselves" (III.ii.73).

But the sequence of the caskets also goes further. Portia clearly is allegorically imprisoned by the structure of the patriarchal social order just as her image is imprisoned in the casket. Hear her anguish in the line, "I am locked in one of them" (II.ii.40).

The witty, liberated Portia whom we see when she is disguised as the lawyer Balthazar or when she is alone with her

maid, is not allowed to exist. Instead, she must be the obedient daughter and the submissive wife.

The sequence of the rings, however, introduces another twist. It lays down the foundations for the final twist in the play. For a very large part of the act the latent tension between the men and the women comes through in the badgering about the symbol of fidelity implied in the rings, with hints of sexual taunting thrown in. These comedic overtones should be seen as an echo to the more serious and plaintive passages where Portia speaks of her conditions as daughter and wife. The sequence of the rings also sets up the final and dramatic twist of the play, one that to my mind has not received adequate attention from the critics, with the notable exception of Ryan.

From the tension built up in the sequence of the rings, the finale is achieved with what amounts to a flashback to the beginning of the play when Antonio, the merchant, offers himself again as guarantor to heal the apparent rift. In fact, Shakespeare underlines the parallel triangular relationship being set up as Antonio says:

> I once did lend my body for his wealth,
> . . . I dare be bound again,
> My soul upon the forfeit, that our lord
> Will never more break faith advisedly.
> (V.i.249–53)

It is a flashback to the situation that set up the entire dramatic structure of the play, with Portia, the oppressed

woman, replacing Shylock, the oppressed Jew, in an identical triangular relationship with the same two people. This is no accident coming from the pen of so skillful a playwright as Shakespeare.

Such a construction is not a coincidence. Such lines are not written unintentionally. I invite you to see the work as more than a comedy. For if the *Merchant* is a comedy, it is like Chaplin's work in *Modern Times* or *The Idle Rich*, classic comedy with a sad social commentary about injustice, in which the laughter has an added dimension. It operates at multiple levels, which is why Chaplin's comedy stands out from much of the slapstick of the silent film era and succeeds in engaging many successive generations.[72]

Like all great art, *Merchant* operates at multiple levels and succeeds in engaging us intellectually as well as emotionally. It is the very ability of the work to be divided against itself in setting up tensions and loyalties that belie the simplistic linear reading of the play.

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72. See, inter alia, Leonard Maltin, *Great Movie Comedians: From Charlie Chaplin to Woody Allen* (New York: Harmony Books, 1982).

III. Moving to the Tragedies

What was found in this reading of a romantic comedy like *Merchant,* is found *a fortiriori,* in the tragedies. It is very much the highlighting of the potential for another reality, a more humane reality. It is in the denial of this potential reality that the codes and rules governing social behavior are called into question.

In Greek tragedy, the dramatic structure is like a clockwork mechanism, which, once wound up, will play out, with each character in the tragedy playing out a role that is sharply defined. The hero or heroine has no ability to transcend the limits of that role, even when he or she knows that it will lead to disaster. Now contrast this concept of the inevitable destiny being played out on a glorious scale, with drama. Here, the characters act in terms of their narrow self interest, from petty motives, and generally try to escape the responsibility inherent in their actions.

This contrast between tragedy and drama is highlighted by some modern authors such as Jean Anouilh, who reprises this theme in his masterful *Antigone.*[73]

Shakespearean tragedy, however, is different. It carries the concept further, by putting in the dock the entire code of behavior of society, questioning it,and inviting the audience—sometimes subtly, sometimes directly—to do the same.

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73. See Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1947), pp. 56–8.

In that sense, the tragedy of Shakespeare is truly modern, for it encapsulates what has become known as the modern condition that involves the alienation of the individual from society, and the pursuit of a more humane and a more liberated existence. It is defined by what Ryan has called "its organising awareness of alternative potentiality," its tension provided by:

> . . . the heartbreaking contradiction between what men and women want to be and could be, and what the particular social scenario into which they have been scripted by history cruelly condemns them to be, in spite of the superior selves and more satisfying lives struggling within them for realisation.[74]

74. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 50.

IV. Othello

Nowhere is this unique power of the Shakespearean tragedy more fully displayed, and yet more consistently ignored by the classical orthodox criticism, than in *Othello.*

Othello is explained by the orthodox reading as a play about how jealousy brings down the proud, yet flawed, Othello. Surprisingly, this view holds whether you take Bradley's view[75] of a noble Othello with a romanticized self-image confronting an Iago with superhuman cunning, or that of his scornful rival, Leavis,[76] who spends as much time pouring scorn on Bradley as he does presenting his own vision of *Othello,* placing the play squarely as Othello's "character in action." Likewise, when Christopher Norris[77] dissects the views of both Leavis and Bradley, as well as the psychoanalytic criticism of Othello, he still does not open up the vistas that the new reading provides. They all remain focused on the frailty of Othello's character (jealousy) and Iago's skill in teasing it out into the open. This is true, but so partial that it misses completely the driving, profound power of the play: racism! Yes, racism.

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75. See A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1961).
76. See F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic intellect and the noble hero: Or the sentimentalist's Othello" in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952).
77. See Christopher Norris, "Post-structuralist Shakespeare," pp. 47–66, especially pp. 58–65.

Othello, the Moor, was black. He married Desdemona, who was white. Iago's fanatical hatred is explained by the hatred of the racists for such a situation. This is a reading of the play that makes many people uncomfortable, but it is the key to properly interpreting the full portent of Shakespeare's words. This modern reading is effectively summarized by Ryan as follows:

> In loving and marrying each other, Othello and Desdemona instinctively act according to principles of racial equality and sexual freedom which are still not normative, still far from generally accepted and practiced even in our own day, let alone in Shakespeare's. As a result they find unleashed upon them, through Iago, the full irrational hostility of a society at whose foundations the mere fact of their relationship strikes.[78]

In casting the male protagonist as black, Shakespeare activates all the fantasms that have haunted white society about miscegenation to our day: the idea of the black man and the white woman. The double standards of contemporary society, *a fortiriori* in Shakespeare's time, do not hold the same anger against relations between a white man and a black woman, where the assumed dominant and submissive gender roles are matched in the racists minds with the desired racial roles. This was accepted as a standard behavior for male

78. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 51.

slaveowners up to the later nineteenth century, and is reflected in societal tolerance of the misbehavior of white males against black females well into this century.

But, as is usual with Shakespeare, this is not the only line of tension operating in the play, which inevitably functions at multiple levels. Shakespeare draws out a powerful argument for the profound alienation of Othello, who—despite arriving at his position by Venetian merit, which also requires him to deny himself—is still destroyed because of his race (and his erstwhile, if not continued, religion). I will come to this point later in discussing Othello's suicide. This aspect of *Othello* has been partially recognized by others who have read *Othello* as:

> . . . an enactment of the Fall . . . a psychomachia, with Iago as the bestial parts of man, and Othello as the higher. . . . The greatness of Othello lies, in the end, there—in the beautiful complexity with which it renders an individual instance of generic Pascalian man, repository of truth, sink of uncertainty and error.[79]

This view advances a complex reading of its own, but it does not address the issue of racism. Yet it is precisely the difference of Othello that makes him vulnerable. It is because he is culturally and racially alien that he is hated by Venetian

79. Frank Kermode in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1202.

society at large, not just Iago. This view is firmly grounded in the most direct reading of the text, Rodrigo refers to Othello "the thick lips" (I.i.66), for example.

The fear of miscegenation is graphically depicted in the opening scenes, where Iago rouses Barbantio with the news of the elopement of Othello and Desdemona:

> Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe.
> *(I.i.88–9)*

> . . . you'll have your daughter cover'd with a barbary horse,
> . . . your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.
> *(I.i.111–117)*

Clearly Shakespeare did not disguise his meanings in these lines. It is surprising that so much of the orthodox criticism passes over such passages with scant attention.[80]

But Shakespeare does not give us cardboard characters. Othello, though noble, is flawed. And Iago does bring him down through jealousy. This device, which has been the staple of the orthodox readings of *Othello,* is seen to be wanting in its lack of attention to the social context that motivates Iago's hatred for Othello.

But even that aspect of the racism expressed in Iago's hatred is only one facet of the racist theme. A much more sub-

tle one, and in my view a much more important one, is the problem of the alienation of Othello himself from both self and society. This point has been made by a number of contemporary critics, especially those of the psychoanalytic school such as Andre Green.[81] It is the lot of all migrants that have tried to integrate into a society that would not in its heart of hearts assimilate them, or accept them as equals, no matter what their achievements have been. By their actions to integrate that alien society they become collusive accomplices in their self-denial, and they know it, even if they cannot easily accept it.

This is not a fanciful reading of contemporary problems into a centuries old text. Not at all. In a supreme dramatic

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80. Note that the racism of the play is also there in many subtler points, well brought out in Alan Sinfield's "Cultural Materialism, Othello and the Politics of Plausibility," in Ryan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, pp. 61–82. [This extract is from Sinfield's *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 29–51.] On page 62, Sinfield points out how even the defenders of Othello, including Desdemona, who—acknowledging his blackness—says "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252). In other words, she saw beyond the negroid features to the quality of the man, but implicitly acknowledges that the features pose a problem to be overcome. The Duke also refers to this directly in telling Barbantio that "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I.iii.290), that goodness is therefore equated with fairness and evil with blackness. More subtle is the manner in which Othello himself plays on his exotic characteristics to try to win the Venetians with weird stories of his past, which would be implausible if told by a Venetian, but are acceptable and plausible when they come from a moor such as himself. (See the passages I.iii.129–45.)

81. See Andre Green, "Othello: A tragedy of conversion: Black Magic and White Magic" in Drakakis, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 316–52. See especially the section on "The Psycho-analyst and Othello," pp. 317–19.

achievement, grossly underrepresented in the critical literature, Shakespeare brings out the deeper cultural alienation at issue in the final suicide scene of *Othello*.

Here is the main character of the play about to commit suicide, turning to those around him, beseeching them to note his words carefully, and asking those responsible to report truthfully what has happened and why. Surely no speech could have been given a greater build-up by an author. And what does Othello say? He concludes with these six lines:

> Set you down this;
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once;
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
> I took by th'throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him—thus.
> *(V.ii.351–6)*

And at that point he stabs himself!

This passage, after the build-up given it by Shakespeare must be given special attention, and it repays that attention by giving what Ryan calls "an elliptically compressed definition and explanation of the whole tragedy of Othello." In the insightful words of Ryan:

> Othello presents himself both as the servant and instrument of the Venetian state *and* as the Turk, "the circumcised dog" whom Venice feels threatened by

> and whom it despises. He correctly perceives himself, in other words, to have been both the alien victim of Venetian society *and* the active though unwitting accomplice of its destruction of him. (emphasis in original)[82]

This duality in the roles of Othello, one the social role of the "Moor of Venice," and the other being the innate person who has had to destroy itself to play the role of Othello, comes out also in the peculiar reply that Othello, a few moments before killing himself, gives to Lodovico's question "where is this rash and most unfortunate man?" Othello answers: "thats he that was Othello; here I am" (V.ii.283–4). The rash and most unfortunate man is "Othello, the Moor of Venice," while the wretched man inside, about to end his life, having lost all he cared for, has been liberated from the duality and the falsehood and finally acknowledges the terrible truth of the lie he has lived, and he will tell it to those around him that they may record it and report it truthfully to those who were not present to hear his words.

This much richer and more profound dramatic content of Othello is much more satisfying than the simple and superficial interpretation of jealousy as the only line of argument in the play.

But that is not all. Again, Shakespeare interweaves additional themes that reinforce his overarching dramatic view

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82. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 57.

of the alternative, more humane reality that a loving Othello and Desdemona are denied by the social context in which they live and of which Iago is only the extreme manifestation and the dramatic instrument. This theme is the feminist theme of female oppression by the dominant patriarchal system of values.

The theme is given voice by Emilia's long speech to Desdemona in the final scene of act IV, dealing with the consequences of the inequality and injustice built into the marriage of their time:

> But I do think it is their husband's faults
> If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
> and pour our treasures into foreign laps;
> Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
> Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us
> Or scant our former having in despite:
> Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace
> Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them; they see, and smell
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have not we affections,
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Then let them use us well; else let them know,
The ills we do their ill instruct us so.
(IV.iii.86–103)

What an amazing echo of the voice of the victim in Shylock's famous speech in *Merchant*, especially the last line!

Perceived thus, the full richness of Othello's tragedy is bared before our eyes, and continues to challenge the racism and gender double standards that plague society today. It acknowledges the profound human frailties that jealousy can prey upon in all of us, but it also invites us to question the social context that would prevent people to behave in a natural and humane way and invites us to ask why it should be so. Can we not see an alternative reality where Othello and Desdemona could love each other and live without generating such furies of hatred as those embodied in Iago?

V. Conclusion: A Common Thread

This common thread of the oppressive capacities of the social order to destroy love, freedom, dignity, equality, and the human spirit is found throughout Shakespeare's work. It is found most directly in *Romeo and Juliet,* but it is also found in Hamlet's hesitation and in *Julius Caesar* where ambition looms large, in social terms, and destroys all who would pursue it. It is found in so many other ways, in so many other plays, and it is the essence of the modernity of Shakespeare and the continued relevance of his work to our very different times.

But Shakespeare does not always write about the problems that society places before people wanting to live life to the fullest that their humanity would allow. Indeed, he often weaves this thread into a different direction, showing us that the evil that we all carry inside of us is just as liable to destroy our human aspirations as the societal bounds that limit our abilities to reach fulfillment. It is this second aspect, the obstacles innate to the person, that also brings an important, additional dimension of modernity in the sense that I have been using the term. Indeed, much in the contemporary society in which we live is at risk from the excessive indulgence of the egotistical hedonistic self.[83] To this issue, other plays

83. Indeed it is the absence of boundaries that makes freedom meaningless. In an oft quoted phrase, lawyers and judges are often enjoined to "go forth into the world and fashion those wise constraints that make people free."

of Shakespeare speak with great force, showing this different slant on the common thread—the need for humans to be humans in the fullest sense of the word, and to achieve this despite the obstacles they face both from society and from themselves.

Indeed, for such times as ours, the particular message of *Macbeth* has special relevance. We need to be reminded of its basic theme that selfish egotism, shorn of any redeeming value, will destroy all that it touches.[84] *Macbeth* is encapsulated in this famous line:

> For mine own good
> All causes shall give way . . .
> *(III.iv.134–5)*

This is but a more elegant formulation of the commonly heard views in today's society: "Me first," "What's in it for me," "Look out for number one," or "Every man for himself," or the Egyptian colloquialism "that which you win with, play

84. I would be remiss if I gave the impression that this simple message is all there is to *Macbeth*, although I believe that distinguished critics, such as Kiernan Ryan, would accept the plays are incredibly rich, and can engender many readings. For example, Calderwood sees it as a challenge to the Aristotelian tenets of wholeness, completeness, and circumscribed magnitude. He also sees it as a comment on the role of violence in society and as an interesting counterpoint to *Hamlet*. See James L. Calderwood, *If It Were Done: Macbeth and Tragic Action* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). For a variety of views, see John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on Macbeth*, (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

with." It is the same loss of spiritual content and moral compass that was powerfully captured by the culture of greed in the 1980s. That culture that Oliver Stone captured in a memorable speech in his movie *Wall Street*, where the protagonist, played by Michael Douglas, seduces an audience of investors with his exposition of the idea that "greed is good."

Such a credo, Shakespeare shows us, results in nothingness and leaves one empty, shallow and wandering.

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow
> creeps at this petty pace from day to day to the last
> syllable of recorded time
> And all our yesterdays
> lighted fools the way to dusty death
> out, out brief candle. Life is but a walking shadow
> a poor player who frets and struts
> his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more
> 'Tis a tale told by an idiot
> full of sound and fury—signifying nothing.
> *(V.v.22–31)*

But this play too, has its multiplicity of layers and subplots. In a contemporary reading of the play, Susan Snyder in her essay "Macbeth, A Modern Perspective," effectively brings out the complexities inherent in the play, and concludes:

> Viewed through various lenses, then, the black and white of Macbeth may fade towards shades of gray.

> The play is an open system, offering some fixed markers with which to take one's basic bearings but also, in closer scrutiny, offering provocative questions and moral ambiguities.[85]

The view I have presented of Shakespeare and his subversive imagination is one that follows in a long tradition of distinguished readings of Shakespeare, stretching from Brecht to Ryan. It is the way to engage all progressive art, progressive in the sense that it intends to show us an alternative reality. In that fashion, we shall grasp . . .

> . . . the intrinsic means by which Shakespeare's drama exercises the power to realize what Brecht defined as the objective of all progressive art: to present the existing reality in such a way as to make it clear that it is not the only reality possible; that the way things have been until now is not the way they have to be; that other ways are desirable and imaginable, and that men and women have had and still have the power to make them real. It is Brecht too who points towards the importance of appropriating and actualizing this faculty of Shakespeare's plays in our reception of them today. For only by so doing can we ensure that, in rec-

85. See the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth*, edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), pp. 197–217, where Susan Snyder's essay is provided to round out the presentation.

ognizing the transience of the society in which the plays were written, we shall likewise comprehend the impermanence of our own, and look to the future with the hope which is inseparable from pleasure.[86]

86. Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 42.

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