



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.3. 2024 (July-Sept)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON HOW SHAKESPEARE'S REPERTOIRE  
OF PLAYS HIGHLIGHTED THE HISTORICAL PERIOD OF THAT TIME  
AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.3.135](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.3.135)



Article information

Article Received:27/08/2024  
Article Accepted:23/09/2024  
Published online:29/09/2024

ABSTRACT

The paper researches in detail the different themes that Shakespeare wrote during his lifetime. It analyses the historical influence of that time, questioning the decisions made by various rulers. This depicts his independent thinking and shows how he did not come under the influence of any monarch. Shakespeare also touches upon the love triangles that are depicted in his various plays. He is relevant today due to the fact that he writes about universal human experiences and feelings that will never be restricted to any time period. An attempt would be made to understand the manner in which Shakespeare's plays took into account the environment of that time. This would be researched in terms of the time period in which they were written as well as the issues plaguing the society of that time. Did his plays understand the plight of the common man? Were they critical of the State? These and other such questions would be attempted to be answered in the course of the paper.

**Key Words:** Shakespeare's plays, Monarchy, Renowned English Poet, Pre-eminent Dramatist, Argumentative, European Theatre, Innovation in Characterisation, Repertory Theatre, Mental Energy.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare, a renowned English poet, playwright, and actor was born in 1554 in Stratford-Upon-Avon. It is believed that his name was derived from the old English words "Schakken" (to brandish) and "Speer" (spear). This referred to an argumentative person and one who is also confrontational, which is exactly what his plays depict. William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the history of the English Language and the world's preeminent dramatist. He transformed European theatre by expanding expectations about what would be accomplished through innovation in characterisation, plot, language, and genre.

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Shakespeare started in London between 1585 and 1592 as an actor, writer and a part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. It was later changed to the King's Men. It is documented that he retired at the age of forty-nine to Stratford where he died 3 years later.

Shakespeare occupies a unique position in English literature. There have been other poets such as Homer, Charles Dickens and Tolstoy who have had universal acclaim across all national barriers, but no writer's living reputations can compare to that of Shakespeare. His plays were written in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century for a small repertory theatre and even today are performed and read more often and, in more countries, than ever before. The prophecy with respect to him as stated by one of his contemporaries, Ben Johnson, was that "Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time."

It is extremely difficult and audacious to attempt to define his greatness with respect to the number of plays that were enacted. However, it is important to understand the gift which enabled him to create imaginative visions of feelings of sadness or pity along with comedy. These fill the mind of the audience not only for the duration of the play but tend to linger on for a long period of time. He was a writer of great intellect, rapidity, perceptiveness, and poetic powers. The most engaging quality of the playwright was the manner in which he applied all of the above, not to remote subjects, but, to human beings, taking into account their complete range of emotions and conflicts.

Shakespeare was extremely clever with words and images along with his mental energy, which, when applied to human situations found extremely convincing and imaginatively stimulating expressions. His energies involved the vivid state of human beings who commanded sympathy and invited wholesale participation in his plays. Due to this, his plays have survived translation into other languages and culture which are far removed from Elizabethan England, which is where his plays were written, set and enacted.

From 1594 he was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players which had the best actor, the best theatre, and the best dramatist (Shakespeare) which resulted in the company prospering. He then became a full-time professional man of his own theatre and was intimately concerned with the financial success of his plays. In 20 years, he wrote more than a million words of poetic drama of the highest quality. With the money he earned he continued to buy property and dressed in royal livery as member of the King's men in the coronation of King James the first in 1604.

## 2. Background

Between 1590 and 1613, in a span of 23 years, Shakespeare wrote at least 38 plays and collaborated on several more. His real name has been recorded as 'Gulielmus Shakespeare' at his baptism in 1564, which is the Latin word for William. He started writing plays because he realised, he had the potential to be a great playwright. He enjoyed theatre and realised that he could also act in them. All his plays attracted a lot of interest and people thronged to see his plays in the 16th century.

The verse form he uses is blank verse which contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favoured by Shakespeare is the *iambic pentameter*. This is defined as a ten-syllable line arranged in five metrical feet (iambes) each of which consist of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, with an accent on every other syllable, beginning with the second one. A classic example of this rhythm is the opening line of William Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18': "*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? shall I com-PARE thee TO a SUMmer's DAY?*" This is like a heartbeat with one soft beat and one strong beat repeated five times. A sonnet is a poem of 14 lines that reflects upon a single issue or idea. It usually takes a turn, called a 'volta' about 8 lines into the poem, and then resolves it in the end. Shakespeare loved iambic pentameter because it sounds very close to natural, heartfelt speech but still has the structure of formal poetry. It is a form of someone saying something important.

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William Shakespeare is the father of English drama, he wrote 18 comedies, 10 tragedies, and 10 histories. He wrote for modern theatre and manipulated the Elizabethan stage with great resourcefulness and ingenuity. Most of his known work was between 1589 and 1613 where his earlier plays were mainly comedies and histories. The tragic plays which include 'Hamlet', 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth' were written till 1608.

### 3. Understanding the Different Genres of Shakespeare's Plays

The different genres in Shakespeare's plays can be divided as indicated above into:

#### 3.1. Tragedies

Shakespeare wrote tragedies throughout his career starting with *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The five great tragedies were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* include murders that changed the course of the story. Shakespeare's audience expected a play to be one of the three types: a comedy, a history play, or a tragedy which is characterised by death and disaster. These plays come under the genre of tragedies, but they also touch the historical aspects of his time. These historical plays are based on real figures which might have actually been tragic in reality. The Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Cleopatra*, are based on historical figures but as their sources were foreign and ancient, they are classified as tragedies rather than histories. Shakespeare's romances, also at times known as tragi-comic plays, were written late in his career and published originally as either tragedy or comedy. Tragedies of these eras trace their philosophical essence back to the Senecan tragedy (Boas, Frederick-S. (1910)), grounded in nobles who have a tragic flaw or commit a grave error which leads to their reversal of fortune.

*Revenge Tragedy* is another increasingly popular genre in this age, example: *Hamlet*. Plays of this age were secular in contrast to the religious morality plays which by the time that *Hamlet* was enacted had been outlawed by Elizabeth 1. Shakespeare's plays, depending on the time that he wrote them, did definitely differentiate between English renaissance tragedy and the classics. The inspiration was the use and popularity of violence and murder on stage.

#### 3.2. Comedies

Comedy is the genre with the most titles and these works tend to be the shortest and are usually tales of love and have a happy ending. His 17 comedies include *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing*.

These plays are full of fun, irony, and dazzling wordplay. They also depict disguises and mistaken identities, convoluted plots that are difficult to follow, and very contrived endings. Shakespeare uses jokes and puns. The same dialogue can depict two different situations, he uses the play of words to indicate these situations very cleverly. Shakespeare's comedies start off with an innocent misunderstanding or a weird situation and will ultimately end happily with no one having died at the end of the story. The rudimentary way of distinguishing between Shakespearean tragedy or comedy is whether the play ends in death or marriage.

#### 3.3. Histories

Shakespeare wrote 10 plays that cover English history from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the 1399 to 1485 period in particular. They are plays which dramatize stories from the past. Each historical play is named after and focuses on the reigning monarch of the period, for example some of them are:

- 1) King John
- 2) Henry the fifth
- 3) Richard the third
- 4) Henry the eighth

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They dramatized five generations of medieval power struggle; they also depict the hundred-year war which Britain had with France from Henry the fifth to Joan of Arc and the Wars of Roses between York and Lancaster.

### 3.4. Problem Plays

These plays avoid the traditional trappings of both comedy and tragedy and are sometimes cited as early precursor of tragic drama. The term was coined by a critic F. S. Boas, in Shakespeare's and his predecessors (1896). Example: *All's well that ends well*, *Troilus and Cressida*. These were plays enacted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to deal with controversial social issues in a realistic manner to expose social ills and to stimulate thought and discussion on the part of the audience.

### 5) Extent to which the situation of the country was portrayed in his plays and their effect on society

A large number of Shakespeare's plays were set in times of medieval English history. They dramatized the 100-year war with France. This was written and depicted with the Henry Tetralogy, "Richard II," "Richard II," and "King John." Most of these feature the same characters at different ages. Ten of Shakespeare's plays are classified as histories, covering the reigns of some of England's monarchs from King John to Henry VIII. Shakespeare lived from 1567 to 1616. Scholars and historians often refer to him being a part of the Elizabethan Era. This period of English History was during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, which lasted from 1558 to 1603 and was a part of the larger Tudor period. In England and Wales, the Tudor period occurred between 1485 and 1603. It coincides with the dynasty of the house of Tudor in England which began with the reign of Henry VII. During this time England was economically healthier, more expansive, and more optimistic under the Tudors.

In the early 1590s Shakespeare wrote Henry VI, parts I to III and Richard III. In the late 1590s he wrote what could be 'prequels' including Richard II, Henry IV, part I and II and Henry V. All of these plays are tied together by the figure of Prince Hal who eventually became Henry V.

#### 4.1. Prince Hal (Henry V)

Prince Hal is the standard term used in literary criticism to refer to Shakespeare's portrayal of the young Henry V of England as a prince before his accession to the throne. Hal becomes Henry V when his father wakes up to find his son trying on his crown. The dying king is angry at first but is reconciled with his son being king before he dies. A mature Hal accepts the crown as King Henry V and turns his attention to a war with France.

He proves to be a wise, capable, and responsible king winning over a great victory over the French at Agincourt.

#### 4.2. Henry VI, Part I

This is the sequel to four history plays the others being Henry VI, Part II, Henry VI, Part III and Richard III. These were 'Tetralogy' treating the 'Wars of the Roses' between the houses of Lancaster and York.

Shakespeare brought into focus the character of Sir John Falstaff. He is a fictional character who appears in three plays by William Shakespeare and is eulogized in a fourth. His significance as a fully developed character is primarily formed in the plays Henry IV, Part 1 and 2 where he is a companion to Prince Hal. He is also featured as the buffoonish suitor of two married women in the "Merry Wives of Windsor." Though primarily a comic figure he embodies a depth which is common to Shakespeare's major characters. A fat, vain and boastful knight living on stolen or borrowed money, leading Prince Hal into trouble and is ultimately repudiated after Hal becomes King. The word "Falstaffian" has entered the English language meaning corpulent, jolly, and debauched.

### 4.3. King John (1199 – 1216)

He became the king in 1199 and ruled till 1216, being the last of the Angevins to rule England and was brother to the previous king, Richard the Lionheart. During his time land was lost to the French and England was thrust into a civil war. Shakespeare's play King John, which was written in the mid-1590s, focuses on the battles with France and the question over who the rightful heir to the throne was. He did not sign the document 'Magna Carta (a document that limits the King's power)' Shakespeare did not touch upon this document as in Elizabethan England, the sovereigns divine right to rule was absolute, so showing a monarch losing power to his subjects would have been too provocative to put on stage. He did change the end where Shakespeare indicated that he was poisoned to death though history indicates that he might have died of dysentery.

### 4.4. Shakespeare as a political bystander

A large number of Shakespeare's plays were political, he did not lecture, he allowed his characters to speak. In all his analyses six themes emerge:

- The importance of order. Renaissance Europe was a place of creativity and uncertainty, the influence of the church was dying but the new order had not given birth. Political ideas were still expressed in religious language, life was precarious, the poor risked starvation, the rich risked losing favour of the king. The greatest wish for all was for order. This is reflected in Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet', where Hamlet's father settled territorial disputes by single combat in full armour; Claudius sends ambassadors (innovation in the Elizabethan world).

In Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida* to the Greek council of war, there is a sense of authority and hierarchy which is essential for the wellbeing of society. Social hierarchy is important for a sense of order and the working of society. The order is through a system of mutual obligations reinforced by ceremony. Without social order, conflict would be universal.

- The perils of regicide. Here Shakespeare emphasizes on monarchy which he thinks is the natural form of governance. Men look instinctively for a king, for example, when Brutus killed Caesar, he tells the crowd that he did it to preserve the public and they respond by calling for him to be made Caesar. When order is restored, it occurs due to the arrival of a new ruler. This happens in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, etc.

If the order is monarchical then deposing or killing the king is the worst of all the crimes. Regicide brings civil war which is the worst for society. Foreign wars may be glorious but civil war leads to instability. If regicide is held at such a low standard so is abdication, for example, King Lear who divides his kingdom; the Duke in *Measure for Measure* who hands his responsibilities to a deputy.

- The qualities of the King. In the monarchic order the king is all important and these kings might be weak, violent, good administrators, etc. Shakespeare's picture of a good king is direct and honest indicating that one must be polite to the king but neither afraid of him nor servile. The king is just and treats his subjects with respect. An example of this is Caesar and Hamlet, though Hamlet never became a king.
- The dangers of ambition. *Hamlet* is striking in its absence of ambition which is a negative quality in Shakespeare's plays. Macbeth falls because of his overriding ambition; Caesar's supposed ambition is the justification of his murder.
- The volatility of crowds. Shakespeare's London was a city of 200,000 people mostly poor and uneducated. Crowds were fearful. With no police and no media except word-of-mouth crowds could fall prey to rumours and become dangerous. The nobility protected themselves with armed

guards, the rest were left to the mercy of the crowds. This was seen in Henry VI, Part II. Most of Shakespeare's plays were about high society, palaces, princes, and kings.

- The risks of ungoverned power. The wars in Shakespeare's plays are civil wars. The first point of *Troilus and Cressida* is that a world without order, is a world of pure power and power without limit is self-destructive as is the appetite for ambition without limit. Examples of this include Hitler, Mussolini (during World War 2), Putin, Xi (2024). The other betrayal is that of honour.

## 5. Shakespeare's relevance in today's world.

Shakespeare's themes are timeless and so are his works which are universal and relatable. His plays are based on his view of life as a whole and not just reflections of his own life within the confines of his own times. His plays present people and situations that are recognizable even today. The characters in his plays have an emotional reality that transcends time, and his plays depict familiar experiences ranging from family squabbles to falling in love to war. Even after 400 years we are still grappling with the issues that plagued Shakespeare's vivacious characters: love, loss, racism, betrayal, greed, envy, remorse. Themes of various plays such as Hamlet's anguish, Ophelia's distress, the enduring love between Romeo and Juliet make it more interesting for all people.

Not only did Shakespeare teach us about ourselves and humanity, but he also invented about 1700 words which are still used in everyday English. He often changed nouns into verbs, verbs into adjectives, connecting words together and came up with original ones. The way he segregated the various themes of his plays indicates a mindset that is sensitive to its surroundings as well as the ability to place a human in such a type of situation.

## 6. Conclusion

Shakespeare is not only read in its original English language, but it has been translated into various regional languages. They have also been converted into screen plays for very successful movies in local languages, for example: 'Maqbool' in Hindi cinema was based on Shakespeare's Macbeth. This has happened not only in India but also in a large number of countries around the world, and the reason they are adapted is because the plots, the themes, are all relevant in today's world.

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