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THE COMMITMENT OF SHAKESPEARE TO HIS AGE

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ABSTRACT

The assumption that Shakespeare was an impartial observer of his own age, the notion that his "drama is the mirror of life," appears to contradict the idea that Shakespeare at the same time presented a critical and evaluative exposition of the socio-political framework of his own age. In fact, Shakespeare's universality has a very concrete historical context. His work reflects both the new ideas of the Renaissance humanists, presented in juxtaposition to those of medieval theorists, as well as the popular tradition of social criticism inherited from earlier times. His description of the corruptions of his own society, generally voiced by the clown or members of the lower classes, is grounded on sound common sense and folk wisdom. The text includes proverbial lore and echoes of popular sayings woven into the fabric (such as the statements on 'lucre' serving as a side commentary on the values of Venetian society in *The Merchant of Venice*). At the same time, popular tradition and humanistic learning combine to provide an undertone of social and political criticism on issues such as the abuse of power, corruption and the futility of war. It may be said that it is this fusion of the broad vision of humanism with a deep sense of reality based on a full understanding of the popular social traditions of his own age that lies at the root of Shakespeare's power to transcend his time and to appeal to the future generations of the world.

The question as to whether Shakespeare professed or defended specific ideas or beliefs in his plays or whether he aimed at reflecting nature impartially as a mirror has been much debated. It is well known that Dr. Johnson found Shakespeare's greatness in his capacity to imitate life closely and emphasized the 'universality' of his characterization :

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His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.¹

According to Coleridge Shakespeare's personality cannot be seized in his work but remains aloof like that of a divine creator, "Shakspeare is the Spinozistic deity - an omnipresent creativeness... Shakspeare's poetry is characterless, that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakspeare..."² In his attitude to Shakespeare's presentation of politics, Coleridge tended to emphasize the personal or moral relations of Shakespeare's characters and to put the political or social implications into the background. He believed that Shakespeare dramatised "that kind of politics which is inwoven with human nature" and went on to explain,

In his treatment of this subject, wherever it occurs, Shakspeare is quite peculiar. In other writers we find the particular opinions of the individual; In Massinger it is rank republicanism; in Beaumont and Fletcher even *jure divino* principles are carried to excess: - but Shakspeare never promulgates any party tenets.³

A.C. Bradley gives expression to a similar idea when he says,

Shakespeare's impartiality makes us uncomfortable... And this is perhaps especially the case in the history plays, where we are always trying to turn him into a partisan. He shows us that Richard II was unworthy to be king, and we at once conclude that he thought Bolinbroke's usurpation justified, whereas he shows merely, what under the conditions was bound to exist, an inextricable tangle of right and wrong.⁴

Modern scholars and critics, however, are more interested in tracing parallels between Shakespeare's work and the actual political and social issues of his or even of our own day. The tendency is not only to "place" Shakespeare's plays within a social and historical framework but also to evaluate the writer's achievement in relation to the work of his predecessors and contemporaries. Beginning with Lily B. Campbell and E.M.W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's plays - particularly the Histories - were studied as repositories of Elizabethan platitudes on statecraft and politics, as well as an exposition or even at times a propagation of the historical and social theories of the Renaissance humanist thinkers. Significant contributions were made to the

1 Preface to *Shakespeare*, ed. N. Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism* (Oxford U.P., 1953), pp. 79-80.

2 Selections from *Table Talk* (1823-1834), ed. E. Schneider in Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York, London, 1966), p. 46. However, Coleridge noted that Shakespeare also possessed the power to combine his impersonality with a keen sense of the individuality of the characters he portrayed. See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (New York, 1958), section on "The Paradox of Shakespeare," pp. 240-49.

3 *The Tempest: Lectures*, ed. D. Nichol Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism*, p. 246.

4 "The Rejection of Falstaff," *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 255 quoted by L. C. Knights, *Public Voices: Literature and Politics with Special Reference to the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1971), p. 38.

field by outstanding scholars over the last twenty or thirty years—to name but a few, Irving Ribner, M.M. Reese, A.P. Rossler, Jan Kott, L.C. Knights, A.R. Humphreys, Eugene M. Waith, Robert Weimann.

The question of the relation of Shakespeare to his age, particularly of his "commitment" to a particular social or historical attitude is closely connected with the more general question of the relevance of literature to life and society. To the fact-obsessed and ideology-ridden mind of our own day, the presentation of an abstract and impartial 'universality' is far from satisfying, and therefore we tend, perhaps, to read our own problems or aspirations into Shakespeare's texts. On the other hand, the contemporary habit of looking for the political or moral gist in literature may also be interpreted as partly a reaction against the opinions of some romantic or Victorian writers who denounced the didactic element in literature.⁵ Keats is known to have said, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us,"⁶ and Yeats, writing in the same tradition though much later in the early XXth century, stated, "We have no gift to set the statesman right."⁷ As opposed to the notion of the artist as the uninvolved observer the present age has supported the theory of commitment to a cause or to an ideological stand in the arts in general and the theatre in particular.⁸ In his book on commitment in *Modern French Literature: Politics and Society in Péguy, Aragon and Sartre* (New York, 1967), M. Adereth explains the significance of commitment thus:

We know only too well that the province of art is not a so-called unchangeable human nature but a contemporary situation which has its own unique features; and that it is only through this highly original situation that one can express the lasting and universal emotions which give art its permanent appeal. The paradox that eternal issues have a temporal shell has ceased to be a paradox for our generation because life has repeatedly proved it in practice. To ignore the temporal shell is to deal with lifeless abstractions.

5 This was by no means universally held; note Wordsworth's opinion on the duty of the poet to serve mankind (cf. *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, 1801 edn., *The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets*, ed. C. Baker (New York, rev. edn., 1966), pp. 5-8, 13-19; and M. Arnold's view on the function of literature to give moral and cultural enlightenment in his book *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869, see for a discussion R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Penguin Books, 1963, pp. 120-136.

6 Quoted by K. Muir in "Didacticism in Shakespearean Comedy," *Review of National Literatures*, II, 2 (Fall, 1972), p. 51.

7 Quoted by L. C. Knights in *Public Voices: Literature and Politics with Special Reference to the Seventeenth Century* p. 11.

8 Op. cit., p. 16. The idea of commitment, propounded into a specific philosophical theory by J. Sartre in *Que'ce que la littérature?* (1948) and several other publications, is of course not the only critical concept currently held. The modern age perhaps even more than any earlier period in history has witnessed a proliferation of critical approaches, ranging from objective critical theories dealing with the text as end in itself to social-historical and Marxist approaches to literature where the text is seen as closely related to the environment that produces it. For an exposition of the Sartrian interpretation of commitment see Charles Altieri, "Jean-Paul Sartre: The Engaged Imagination," *The Quest for Imagination: Essays in Twentieth Century Aesthetic Criticism*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1971), pp. 167-89.

The object of this paper is to assess the measure of Shakespeare's involvement with "the temporal shell" and to relate it to the writer's overriding sense of the basic unity of mankind not only in weakness and sin but also in potential goodness and heroism.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare portrays the plight of the uninvolved bystander in the figure of 'Cinna the poet'. The furious masses who have been instigated by Antony to destroy the followers of Brutus come across the harmless poet; they confuse him with Cinna the Conspirator, and when he cries, "I am Cinna the poet," they mock him, "Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses" (III, iii, 33-34).⁹ It is interesting to note that in Sartre's novel, *Reprieve*, there is a similar situation where Gros Louis, a simple illiterate peasant, is caught in the rush of political events he cannot comprehend and is totally crushed by them.¹⁰

Though we cannot identify Shakespeare as the spokesman of a specific political or religious group or as the exponent of a particular moral and philosophical creed, yet we cannot assume him to be the uninvolved bystander; his plays reflect the whole spectrum of political, moral and social opinion current in the age. It is well known that the educational function of poetry was almost universally acclaimed in Renaissance England. Distinguished apologists such as Sir Philip Sidney¹¹ and Thomas Heywood¹² asserted the utility of literature and of drama in particular.

If drama in general had an expressly stated moral purpose, tragedy had an even a greater commitment to truth and reality. Ben Jonson in the Preface to *Sejanus* remarks that 'truth of argument' is a condition for discharging "the other offices of a tragic writer."¹³ In the Prologue to *Antonio's Revenge* (1600) John Marston warns the audience that his play is not meant to please those who wish to escape "From common sense of what men were, and are/Who would not know what men must be..."¹⁴

Shakespeare's own commitment to the real, to the actual historical situation of his own day becomes evident in his exposition of the political and social substratum of his age. In revealing the mainsprings of human action in his History plays, he is

⁹ All quotations from Shakespeare are from his *Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig (New York, 1966).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the novel see M. Adereth, pp. 15 f.

¹¹ "...as Virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so Poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman." (*Apologie for Poetry*, 1581, *English Critical Essays*, ed. E. D. Jones, London, 1952, p. 24.)

¹² In *An Apology for Actors* (1612), Thomas Heywood dwells on the use of the theatre for educating and guiding the prince, "...had Achilles never lived, Alexander had never conquered the whole world... Why should not the lives of these worthies presented in these our dayes, effect the like wonders in the Princes of our times, which can no way bee so exquisitely demonstrated, nor so lively portrayed as by action." (Quoted in D. Riggs, *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971, pp. 7 f.)

¹³ Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford and P. Simpson, Oxford, 1932, V. IV. See J. A. Bryant, Jr., "The Significance of Ben Jonson's First Requirement for Tragedy: 'Truth of Argument,'" *Studies in Philology*, XLIX (1952), 195-213; H. Hawkins, *Likeness of Truth in Elizabethan and Restoration Drama*, Oxford, 1972.

¹⁴ *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. G. K. Hunter, *Regents Renaissance Drama*, Lincoln, 1965. See C. Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth Century Drama* (London, 1950), ch. on "The Tragic Picture."

not less outspoken than Marlowe. There is an echo of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* in *Henry IV Part II*, where after the rebels have yielded to Prince John, deceived by his promise of forgiveness, John describes his victory in the words: "God, and not we, hath safely fought today" (IV. ii. 122). This recalls to mind, the closing lines of the *Jew of Malta*, where the Governor of Malta, Ferneze, outdoing the Jew and the Turks in policy and intrigue utters the words, "So march away, and let due praise be given / Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven" (V. v. 123-124).¹⁵

A more obvious connection is more customarily traced between *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. However, it may be of interest to note that both plays hark back to an earlier tradition of social criticism where 'lucre' is seen to be one of the dominant impulses that motivate human action. In *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (1584), most probably written by Robert Wilson, there is a dialogue between Love and Conscience where it is pointed out that everyone in the world is after gain.

For Lucar men come from Italy, Barbary, Turkey,
From Jury: nay the Pagan himselfe
Indaungers his bodie to gape for her pelfe.
They forsake mother, Prince, Cauntrey,
Religion, kisse and kinne,
Nay men care not what they forsake,
so Lady Lucar they winne.¹⁶

These lines contain an extended version of an early proverb "Everyone fastens where there is gain." In *The Jew of Malta*, Ferneze asks the Turkish 'Bashaw', who has come to exact the tribute due to the Turks, "What wind drives you thus unto Malta road?" and the Bashaw replies: "The wind that bloweth all the world besides, / Desire of gold" (III, v. 1-3). Although there is no specific allusion to the proverb in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, yet the theme of 'lucre' dominates the play. The beautiful and virtuous Portia is also renowned for her wealth, even her beauty is described in terms of gold and fortune:

... her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strong,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.¹⁷ (I. i. 169-172)

Venice, the city of 'trade and profit' is complemented by Belmont, the city of desired wealth and prosperity. Like Barabas, carried away by the zest of his malicious imagination, Shylock is outwitted by Christians who in the last resort, reveal themselves to possess more cunning and practical wisdom than their adversaries. At the

¹⁵ All quotations from Marlowe are from *The Complete Plays*, ed. I. Ribner, New York, 1963. A. R. Humphreys comments on the significance of the words of Prince John as a statement that "frankly assimilates God to the wiles of state." (*The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. A. R. Humphreys, Arden Shakespeare, Introd., p. li.)

¹⁶ J. S. Farmer, ed., *Tudor Facsimile Texts*, London, 1921, sig. A2v. See M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), G2.

¹⁷ See for connotations of 'the golden fleece' as symbol of fortune, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. J. R. Brown, Arden Edition, Introd., p. lv.

end of the play, further instigated by love of 'lucre', Shylock consents to become converted to Christianity, in order to keep at least one half of his fortune. The idea that desire of gain could make a man change his religion was not Shakespeare's alone. It was also expressed in a play written by Dekker where a character who disguises himself as a Turk to escape his creditors, finds the cause of his conversion to be :

That, for which manie their Religion,
Most men their Faith, all chaunge their honestie,
Profite, (that gilded god) **Commoditie**.¹⁸

(IV. i. 7-9)

In reflecting the common proverbial lore and folk wisdom of his age, Shakespeare kept within the mainstream of Tudor and Elizabethan drama. The use of the clown or members of the lower classes to give voice to social and political criticism was a characteristic of contemporary drama, one that had parallels in early English literature.¹⁹ The grave-digger's scene in *Hamlet*, the confrontation of Coriolanus and the plebeians²⁰ provide occasions for the expression of the sound common sense of the ordinary people, who see through the guiles or the self-deception of those placed in the higher ranks.

In the yard of the Inn at Rochester, in the First Part of *Henry IV*, when the Chamberlain informs Gadshill about the pilgrims whom Falstaff and his friends are planning to rob, Shakespeare introduces a discussion about robberies and other corruptions practiced by mighty subjects. Gadshill assures the Chamberlain that he robs in the company of persons who cannot be easily punished: "... with nobility and tranquillity, burgomasters and great oneyers, such as can hold in, such as will strike sooner than speak, and speak sooner than drink, and drink sooner than pray: and yet... they pray continually to their saint, the commonwealth; or, rather, not pray to her, but prey on her, for they ride up and down on her and make her their boots" (II. i. 84-91).

Crimes committed by the mighty could not be redressed; in fact, in a document of the fifteenth century there occurs an official complaint about those who robbed and plundered, wearing the 'livery' of a great lord, so that the wrongs they committed had to be suffered 'without remedy'.²¹ Although the reign of Elizabeth had brought peace and relative security to the country, yet the public had still cause to dread the greed and ambition of powerful lords, whose ranks had become broadened to include the new aristocracy fostered by the commercial and political development of Renaissance England.

Apart from supplying an undertone of social and political criticism, the views of ordinary people or of the clown could be used to stimulate a reassessment of certain assumptions: they could serve to strip the false allure of shallow idealism and

¹⁸ T. Dekker, *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It* (1612), *The Dramatic Works*, ed. F. Bowers, Cambridge, 1953-1961.

¹⁹ See R. Weimann, "The Soul of the Age: Towards a Historical Approach to Shakespeare," *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. A. Kettle, (New York, 1964), pp. 33-35.

²⁰ See T. Spencer, "Social Assent and Dissent in Shakespeare's Plays," *Review of National Literatures*, III, 2 (Fall 1972), pp. 29-32; 35-36.

²¹ J. Thorn, R. Lockyer and D. Smith, *A History of England*, (London, 1964), p. 201.

to destroy smug confidence in the values of a decadent feudal nobility. Chief among such assumptions were the heroism of war and the prestige of chivalric honour. It may be unjustifiable to interpret Falstaff's comments on 'honour' and on the lot of the common soldier as conclusive evidence for a definite stand against war or as defence of the sufferings of the ordinary soldier. However, there are other parallels in Shakespeare's plays that help one to detect an aversion to violence and oppression that may have influenced the dramatist's attitude to war and placed him on common footing with the mass of the ordinary people who were its victims. One may mention the countless diatribes against civil war that expose the sufferings of the people and the destruction of the products of the country.²²

The talk of the common soldiers in *Henry V* before the battle of Agincourt (IV. i. 133 ff), the King's speech before Harfleur (III. ii. 10 ff) all express grief at the destruction of human lives and values wrought by war. The effect is not only to give rise to questions about the validity of war but also to create an unresolved ambivalence in our response to the stature of 'the hero-king' himself.²³ The plea of Burgundy for peace contains a disquisition on the blessings of peace and the harms caused by war. Peace is the "Dear nurse of arts, plenties, and joyful births"; she is the patron of 'husbandry' and of civilization; even learning falls into decay during war:

The sciences that should become our country,
But grow like savages, -as soldiers will,
That nothing do but meditate on blood,-
To swearing and stern looks, diffus'd attire,
And everything that seems unnatural.

(V. v. 58-62)

This speech acquires an even deeper significance when placed within the framework of the humanistic writings of the age. Erasmus said: "Peace is the mother and nource of all good thynges. Warre sodaynly and at ones ouer throweth, destroyeth, and vtterly fordoth every thyng that is pleasant and fayre, and bryngeth in among men a monstre of alle mischeuous thynges."²⁴

The fusion of a deep sense of reality with the broad vision of humanism lies at the heart of Shakespeare's attitude to the problems and the assumptions of his age. His plays are full allusions to the common bond of humanity that unites men of all ranks and convictions: Lear in his passion, Richard at his downfall become aware of ties that link them to the lowly and the needy. Richard's words to his followers who remind him of his unique position as God's anointed king:

I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king?

(III. ii. 175-177)

have not only a humanistic but also a popular background. The words contain a poetic version of the proverb: "All men are made of the same metal."²⁵ In Hugh Latimer's

²² For example, 1 *Henry IV*, I. i. 1-18; and the mole-hill scene in 2 *Henry VI*, II. v.

²³ Cf. L. C. Knights, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, Biographical Series, London, 1962, pp. 41-46.

²⁴ *Belium Erasmi* (London, 1533), fol. 16v. The tract contains many parallels with the speech of Burgundy; see particularly fols. 16v-18.

Sermons (1552), we find the sentence, "For we have all one Father, which hath made us all of one metal on earth."²⁵ In **The Travells of The Three English Brothers** (1607), written by Day, Rowley and Wilkins, there is a rendering of the same idea in a speech by Anthony Sherley addressed to the 'Sophy':

All that makes up this earthly Edifice
By which we are cald men, is all alike,
Each may be the others Anatomie:
Our Nerves, our Arterles, our pipes of life,
The motives of our senses, all doe moove
As of one Axel tree; our shapes alike,
One worke-man made us all, and all offend
That maker; all tast of interdicted sinne.

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We live and die, suffer calamities,
Are underlings to sicknesse, fire, famine, sword,
We all are punisht by the same hand and rod,
Our sins are all alike, why not our God.

(Sigs B-Bv)

When seen in this context, Shylock's protest against the treatment he receives acquires a serious dimension that adds an ironical overtone to the comic effect: "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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?" (**The Merchant of Venice**, III, i. 62 ff).

The words of Ulysses in **Troilus and Cressida**, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin" (III. iii. 175) stresses the frailty of man and his ultimate mortality; in fact, the boundaries of brotherhood are expanded to include the whole creation in their scope. The assertion of the basic unity of mankind could be used not only to point to the shared weaknesses but also to the distinctive greatness of men.²⁷ Hamlet's famous lines on man as "the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals," Miranda's expression of joy at seeing men assembled together reflect an attitude that can be traced to popular wisdom, Christian thought and Renaissance humanism. This attitude also marks a trait in Shakespeare's work that has contributed to its universal appeal, despite the fact that at the same time it is firmly grounded in the particular social and cultural context of his own age. Indeed, to go back to Adereth's statement on the nature of commitment quoted at the beginning of this paper, it is perhaps the presentation of "eternal issues" within a "temporal shell" that gives Shakespeare's drama its unique interest and power both in his own time and in ours.

²⁵ Tilley, M501.

²⁶ Op. cit., ed. G. E. Corrie, 1844, 18, p. 343; quoted in Tilley, M501.

²⁷ In the words of a thirteenth century Turkish sufi poet: "Many are the wonders of the world/ But none so wonderful as man." Cf. **The Humanist Poetry of Yunus Emre**, trans. and introd. T. S. Halman, Publications of the R. C. D., No. 39, (Istanbul, n. d.), introd., p. 15.

SHAKESPEARE'İN ÇAĞINA TANIKLIĞI

ÖZET

William Shakespeare'in (1564-1616) çağının tarafsız bir gözlemcisi olup olmadığı asırlar boyunca tartışıl原因 bir konudur. Örneğin, ünlü yazar ve eleştirmen Dr. Johnson'a göre, eserleriyle doğaya bir ayna tutması onun büyüklüğünün sırrını oluşturur. Acaba Shakespeare'in oyunlarında toplumsal ve siyasal sorunlara doğrudan yer vermediği bir gerçek midir? Bu konuda devrimizin eleştirmenleri, belki de günümüzün değer yargılarının etkisi altında olacak, Shakespeare ile kendi toplumu arasında sıkı bir bağlantı kurma çabasına girmişlerdir. Eserlerinde, özellikle tarih piyeslerinde, Ortaçağ düşüncülerinin yanı sıra Rönesans tarihçi ve hümanistlerinin görüşlerine, örneğin Machiavelli gibi, yer verir, hatta hadiseleri oluşturan güçleri daha çok yeni tarih kavramlarının ışığında belirler.

Bundan da öteye, Ortaçağlardan gelen yerli toplumsal eleştirme geleneğine de yazılarında yer verir. Bu eleştiriler, piyeslerinde özellikle soytarlar ve halktan gelen kişilerin diliyle bize aktarılmıştır. Aynı zaman da, halkın gerçekçi sağduyusunun ifadesi olan atasözleri ve deyimler, piyeslerin şiirsel metninin içine kavram ve imge olarak işlenmiştir, örneğin Venedikli Tacir piyesinin önemli temalarından biri olan paraya düşkünlük motifinin metnin belirli yerlerinde atasözlerinden esinlenerek geliştirilmesi. Ayrıca, halk geleneği ve hümanist düşüncenin kaynaşması sonucu, bazı konuların ele alınmasında anlatımın daha da güç kazanması sağlanmıştır, örneğin yönetici güçlerce kuvvetin kötüye kullanılması, toplumdaki yolsuzluklar, harbin anlamsızlığı.

Sonuç olarak, bu iki düşünce kaynağının (halk geleneği ve hümanist bilim) Shakespeare'in yaşadığı devirde birleşmesi, onun insanı hem kişi olarak hem de toplum içinde derinlemesine ele almasında yardımcı olmuştur. Shakespeare'in gelecek çağ ve toplumları etkilemesindeki sırlardan biri de hümanist düşüncenin yücelttiği ve evrenselleştirdiği 'insan' kavramının gerçekçi bir ortamda ve çağının sorunlarıyla bütünleşmiş olarak canlandırılmasıdır denebilir.