Classical Drama

Semester 6, G 2

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Why Shakespeare?

More than 400 years after the death of the English bard, Shakespeare is still read, performed, analyzed and adapted all over the world. No other author has known such a fame and reputation. Critics have always provided different answers to this eternal temporality, filmmakers have always succeeded to find in Shakespeare‘s work a resonance with their time, and professors of Shakespeare have also found in Shakespeare the proper material to evoke human concerns.

In her book *Why Shakespeare*, Catherine Belsey (2007) provides us with a series of insightful thoughts about the universal pertinence of Shakespeare. She argues that “Shakespeare is part and parcel of English speaking culture, and not only high culture. In Britain now, phrases from the plays are still current, woven into the fabric of everyday life four hundred years after they were spoken on the early modern stage”(p. 1). Indeed phrases like “Neither a borrower nor a lender” (Hamlet), “Brave new world” (The Tempest), “Break the ice” (The Taming of the Shrew) to cite but few are commonly used on a global level though few know their Shakespearean origin.

In 2005 the BBC rewrote Shakespeare. Preserving the names but very few of the words, four new plays took Shakespeare’s titles and relocated them to our own era. All over the world his work was performed in local contexts and translated into local languages.

To justify the eternal contemporaneity of Shakespeare, The Victorian critics had an answer. “Shakespeare was a genius; his plays depicted human nature in universal situations; and he inscribed timeless truths in immortal poetry”( p. 3). Later on this approach was challenged by critics who would not take ‘human nature’ as a solid and reliable argument.

Other critics claim that we bring to Shakespeare the meaning we want to impose on him. We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values. In other words the plays and poems composed by Shakespeare are open and fluid enough to allow us see ourselves there as if we are looking at a magic ball.

We may, therefore, wonder whether there is still an authentic Shakespeare if his work is lost in the jungle of interpretations and speculations produced all along these centuries of readings.“If the plays can be invested with such different meanings, we have no access, purists urge, to Shakespeare, but only to what has been made of Shakespeare; there are no texts, they insist, only readings. The playwright whose meanings are reducible to existing interpretations is the Shakespeare who no longer transmits visible light, but is lost in the black hole of his own reputation” (p. 6).

I argue that Shakespeare experienced The Death of the Author that Roland Barthes pronounced in his famous article (la mort de l’auteur, 1967). The death of Shakespeare is not only the physical death that every human being has to endure but the symbolic and cultural death of a voice and the birth of many other voices of his readers, interpreters and producers. Every new reading enriches and revisits the original text by adding a new and fresh outlook. The plays could be seen from different angles according to contexts and situations. Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice can never be interpreted by a Jewish reader without evoking anti-Semitism. Othello can never be read by a black person without referring to slavery and racism. The Taming of the Shrew can never be read by a woman without bitterly thinking of misogyny and gender bias. In short, the open ended nature of Shakespeare’s text renders him a contemporary writer.

Jan Kott in the 1970s coined a very pertinent formula to qualify Shakespeare by titling his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. “Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see”(p.5). If the Victorian critics saw in him a genius who painted the human nature in a very intelligent way, it is because the Victorians believed that humans are all the same sharing the identical thoughts and drives. Today, this essentialist view of humanity is challenged by modern discoveries in cultural studies, anthropology and sociology. We are contextual beings and our thoughts and values are perspectival and relative. The way Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet is seen by readers in peaceful countries today is different from the way Syrians in a state of war will see it now. For the Syrians this play is not about love and separation but about the tragedy of the Syrian people divided in a military conflict where victims are not young lovers but the whole nation. Equally, the way an Arab emigrant living in Europe today will read Shakespeare’s Othello as the tragedy not only of a black more but as that of the religious and cultural other who is not fully accepted in the western society dominated by Eurocentric thoughts ( For more details read my article Shakespeare’s Othello and the Challenges of Multicultural Society).

In short, if we read or teach Shakespeare today all over the world it is because his work has the unique quality of addressing fundamental issues and thoughts that humans have always been concerned with. The questions of love, jealousy, ambition, hate, racism, genocide, gender, colonialism, among other, are still part of our daily life. When we read Shakespeare we grow intellectually; we become more sensitive to human predicaments and condition. A true lover of Shakespeare can never hate or humiliate others simply because you learn how to become a delicate Human Being.

Students are requested to read and watch Othello. It is the play that we will study in this exceptional context.

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