

**Unit: 26: Political Shakespeare**

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Shakespeare was not away from politics. Shakespeare was not a radical writer. Still, he was in political trouble for staging *Richard II* on the eve of Essex Rebellion in 1601. He could have lost his head. His plays are widely used for political purposes. His plays were commissioned to contain people through pro-Tudor discourses. The Earl of Essex's friends commissioned his play to subtly turn people against Elizabeth and for Essex. Shakespeare himself was a part of the royal team of James's reign as part of 'The King's Men'. Shakespeare's name was the first in the royal order. Shakespeare's fellow dramatists were also politically active Ben Jonson was a soldier and was arrested twice for political reasons and once for a murder. Christopher Marlowe a spy and was killed in a fight.

In this unit, we will look at these five topics:

1. Politics in Shakespeare's time
2. Shakespeare's politics
3. Reflection of politics in Shakespeare's works
4. Political use of Shakespeare
5. Political Shakespeare

**Politics in Shakespeare's times**

Contemporary politics seems to have influenced Shakespeare and many Elizabethan political events are reflected in Shakespeare. His History plays are about politics itself. Tragedies exclude characters who challenge the traditional political value system. Comedy happens when individuals and the community mutually accept each other's values, and Romances show a mutual reconciliation where both parties shift from their respective positions.

His political views of were determined by the political reality of the Elizabethan England. The Elizabethan struggle for the survival of the fittest is best reflected in the Tudor monarchs who are the inheritors of the extinct Lancastrian claim of victory in the War of the Roses, against the House of York.

Religious division and sharp social class division characterized England. His works mirror Anglo-Saxon cultural memory, Roman Ideals, and immediate political history of England. For example, his *Hamlet* is an Anglo Saxon story from Scandinavia, has a ghost from purgatory which is part of Catholic belief, a Protestant university which reflects the religious establishment of the time, an armoured duel to resolve differences as part of Roman chivalry, and political ambassadors of Elizabethan England.

Some of the political events that shaped Shakespeare's times were

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| 1536    | the impact of the formation of the Anglican Church by Henry VIII,           |
| 1562-98 | Catholic-Hughnotes religious war in France, killing about 3 million people, |
| 1569    | the Catholic attempt to replace Elizabeth I with Mary of Scots,             |
| 1570    | the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth by Pope Pius V,                      |
| 1571    | the opening of Royal Exchange in London,                                    |
| 1583    | England Signing Commercial Treaty with the Ottoman Empire,                  |
| 1588    | the defeat of the Spanish Armada by Francis Drake,                          |

- 1592 the bubonic Plague,
- 1603 the death of Queen Elizabeth,
- 1603 James IV of Scotland becoming King of England,
- 1604 London Treaty ending the Anglo-Spanish War, and
- 1608 Foundation of Jamestown, at Virginia as the First British colony in North America.

In *Shakespearean Politics* (1965) Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa portray Shakespeare as a profoundly political Renaissance dramatist whose plays address serious moral and political questions. They analyze the political morality of the Christian/Jew question in *The Merchant of Venice*, the theme of cosmopolitanism and political community in *Othello*, the limits of politics in *King Lear*, and the morality of the pagan hero in *Julius Caesar*. Some sundry observations in his plays give the contemporary attitude towards politics:

- 1593: Woe to that land that's governed by a child. (*3Ric.* 2.3.11)
- 1599: Let me have men about me that are fat;  
Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights;  
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;  
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.. (*JC* 1.2.194)
- 1599: for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the  
gentler gamester is the soonest winner. (*5Hen.* 3.6.46)
- 1600: There is a law in each well-order'd nation  
To curb those raging appetites that are  
Most disobedient and refractory. (*Tro.*2.2.182)
- 1601: a politician, ...  
one that would circumvent God (*Ham.*5.1.84).
- 1601: Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (*Ham.* 1.4.90)
- 1605: Get thee glass eyes;  
And like a scurvy politician, seem  
To see the things thou dost not. (*Lear* 4.6.175)
- 1605: I begin to find an idle and fond bondage  
in the oppression of aged tyranny; who sways, not  
as it hath power, but as it is suffered.. (*Lear* 1.2.28)
- 1607: Faith, there had been many great men that have  
flattered the people, who ne'er loved them. (*Cor.* 2.2.4)
- 1611: I would with such perfection govern, sir,  
To excel the golden age. (*Tmp* 2.1.141)

Whether Shakespeare was trapped in the ideological horizons of his time, or whether the New Historicists read too much politics in him remains unresolved. Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare: The Biography*, and James Shapiro's *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* try to analyse the political fault lines of Shakespeare's England with reference to his plays. His works mirror the political movements of his age, but treating him as a passive painter of the Elizabethan political picture is also equally reductive. His political reflections come to us veneered under a layers of comedy and philosophy. So, it is difficult to assess his political philosophy.

His history plays dealt with major past events and were staged under the watchful eyes of the monarchy. His interpretations often ignore, suppress and even distort facts to serve the cause of the political establishment of the day. His history plays and Roman plays are explicitly political propaganda material. Political reverberations of the English victory over the Spanish Armada, the Irish rebellion, Elizabeth's death without heir, the ascension of James I etc. get reflected in Shakespeare, and he sees them in his own ways. During Elizabeth's reign his plays popularized the Tudor interpretation of the War of Roses and painted the Tudor nemesis Richard III blacker and evil. James's patronage to the King's Men which coopted Shakespeare into the Carolingian propaganda mechanism resulted in Shakespeare's re-interpretation of the Scottish king Macbeth and Queen Gertrude shows. However, after the initial euphoria, he gradually turns away from overtly political interpretations into Romances and then to a rather early retirement.

Shakespeare's ideal king was Henry V. his transformation from the radical prince Hal to the ideal king, is the essence of a true politician. Henry's first speech to his old friend Falstaff shows this change:

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.  
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!  
I have long dreamed of such a kind of man,  
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,  
But being wake I do despise my dream.  
Presume not now I am the thing I was.

Religion was entangled with politics in the Renaissance England. The old political and social order based on church was dying. It continued the interplay between religion and politics in the Roman Empire where kings were gods and in the Holy Roman Empire Catholic priesthood became inseparable from political power until the sixteenth-century. This was so until the spirit of Protestantism and Reformation swept across Europe. In England, Henry VIII wrested powers from the Catholic Church after directly challenging it and declared himself the head of the Anglican Church. In his person, the king and the priest became one as he took control of the Church in England and the kingdom. His personal reason was that the Catholic Church refused to grant him divorce from Catherine of Anjou so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, who later became Elizabeth's mother. The Church could not do that because Catherine was the sister of Frederick, the King of Prussia and the Holy Roman Emperor.

Queen Elizabeth was assertive against the Catholics while Shakespeare's family is speculated to have been Catholic. William Arden, the second cousin of Shakespeare's mother Mary was executed on 30 December 1583 for plotting against Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare refers to the Gunpowder Plot which was a conspiracy to blow away the British Parliament on 5 Nov. 1605 (*Mac* 2.3.12; *Sonnet* 124:7). Its chief architect was Robert Catesby, a distant relative of Shakespeare.

### **Shakespeare's politics**

Some of Shakespeare's expressions on politics and politicians articulate the contemporary opinion. He calls politicians 'vile' (4*Hen*1: 1.2.241), and 'scurvy' (*Lear* (4.6.143).

Shakespeare's history plays deal with political issues directly. The Roman plays — *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus* — take up political themes like republic / monarchy. The major tragedies like *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* also look at issues like legitimacy of the rule, usurpation, tyranny, war and defence. They are influenced by the major political events of his time which raised concern about the question what makes a good ruler by addressing issues like war / peace,

religion / politics, legitimacy / illegitimacy etc. As the Tudors discouraged political activities that challenged monarchy, political commentaries were made obliquely and theatres were used for political propaganda.

A major concern in Shakespeare's history plays is civil war. 'Civil' refers to the social bond of the *civis* (Lat., 'citizens'). The War of the Roses which did not involve the public was a power struggle between two aristocratic families. Shakespeare cleverly interprets it as a civil war to make citizens stakeholders and makes them responsible to defend *res publica*, the public good. The same logic was used in *The Rape of Lucrece* to defend the expulsion of the Tarquins. It is a theme of Ovid's *Fasti* and Livy's *History of Rome*. Coriolanus defends the Republic against the Tarquins (Cor. 2.2.103-17) and Brutus (*JC* 2.1.53-55) is made conscious his duty towards the republic, as he recalls his forefather Junius Brutus's defense of the republic, fighting Coriolanus when he became despotic.

*Henry VI* portrays the revolt of the Earl of Northumberland. The aristocratic feud in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is mentioned in the original title: *Henry VI Part Two: The Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*. The contention was known as the War of the Roses<sup>i</sup>. The Tudor monarchy, glorifies its regime by painting Tudor monarchy as the saviour of the nation which was plummeting into a national disaster because of "the War of the Roses". The Tudor chronicler Edward Hall's propagandist *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548) presents Henry VIII as the descendent of both John of Gaunt of Lancaster and Edmund of Langley of York. Hall begins by connecting the family feud between York and Lancaster with the ancient Roman civil war: "for who abhor if not to express the heinous facts committed in Rome by the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey by whose discord the bright glory of the triumphant Rome was eclipsed and shadowed."

Shakespeare's History Plays can be seen as ideological assertions against civil war, based on the Roman Republic and justify Tudor politics. His treatment of the civil war in *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar* reflects Lucan's commentary on the Roman civil war. He recognizes the "civil wounds plough'd up with neighbours' sword" (2*R* 1.3), "civil butchery" (4*Hen*1: 1.1) "kingdom, sick with civil blows!" (4*Hen*2: 4.5), "civil broils" (6*Hen*1: 1.1), "civil wars" (5*Hen*: 5.2). He recognizes how "Civil dissension is a viperous worm / That gnaws the bowels of the commonwealth" (6*Hen*1: 3.1) and how "civil broil" helps enemies (6*Hen*2: 4.8). Henry passes on his crown to York asking him to "take an oath to cease this civil war" (6*Hen*3: 1.1.196-97).

Elizabethans generally 'voiced' their choice in public to choose one from many, and when it became a tight contest, they counted 'polls' which meant head. In *Coriolanus*, election was a tight one. It is found in the inquiry "have you a catalogue of all the voices that we have procured set down by the poll?" (3.3.9) It suggests a very closely-run election by counting of heads. The word 'voice' appears 35 times in *Coriolanus* suggesting its importance in the play<sup>ii</sup>. The Roman practice of deciding through 'voice' continued in Elizabethan England. 'Polling' ensured that Rome remained a republic, and it is still practiced in modern democracies.

Shakespeare was a prosperous middleclass gentleman who retired into his village with a coat of arms. Some of his characters do sympathize with unconventional political views. Shakespeare was not directly involved in politics; but all of his sponsors were.

Did *Coriolanus* debate the idea that a state needs strong and dictatorial leadership? The question is whether this was the view of Shakespeare or his sponsors. England was troubled by the question about the returning soldiers when the Queen's favourite Robert Devereaux, the Earl of Essex (1566-1601)

returned after his Irish conquest in April 1599. He returned to London and attempted a *coup d'état*. Shakespeare refers to it.

Were now the general of our gracious empress  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit,  
To welcome him. (5 *Hen.* Prol. 30-34)

Essex's march ended in a fiasco. The Queen banished him. Later, he plotted to depose Elizabeth and replace her with James IV of Scotland. His friends commissioned Shakespeare's troupe to stage *Richard II* at The Globe on 6 February 1601. That was the day before the rebellion, probably to remind the citizens of the precedent of Henry IV deposing Richard II who, like Elizabeth, had abdicated many powers. The public did not support it and the march failed. Essex, a friend of Shakespeare's patron Southampton, was arrested and executed. A week after Essex's execution, a sermon at St. Paul's churchyard compared Essex with Coriolanus, the victorious Roman general who planned to become a king of Rome, but was thwarted by the defender of Roman republic. Shakespeare dramatizes the story in *Julius Caesar* 1599 when Essex was in Ireland, and in *Coriolanus* (1607).

### **Reflection of politics in Shakespeare's works**

We know very little about Shakespeare's politics. As a master craftsman, this serious political thinker who knew his Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, makes his characters speak and holds back his opinion. After all, he lived in the dangerous political conditions. One may, however, deduce that political themes such as the need to maintain hierarchy, need to reign power, rightful monarchy, ideal ruler, perils of ambition, and unreliability of the crowd are repeated in Shakespeare. He highlights the qualities like steadfastness, responsibility, valour, sense of justice, astute observation, and common touch as a good leader's characteristics. Learning from *Hamlet*, we might add scepticism to our list of good qualities. He finds fault with like cruelty, ambition, which violates established order, pseudo-democratic referendum from crowds by demagogues, ungoverned power,

Many people regard Shakespeare as a political philosopher. His plays reflect on the activities associated with the governance of a state. Shakespeare's view of human nature is based on his understanding that governments fashion the way of life of its subjects and therefore any understanding of the human condition requires an understanding of the context. The assumption that social and historical circumstances influence the production of art and literature is taken seriously in contemporary scholarship.

His reflections on the political conditions of his times mirror the political thought of his period. For example, even as the plebeian clamour for grain in *Coriolanus* reflect the Midlands insurrection of 1607, Coriolanus himself reflect the Ciceronian idea of governance. The insurrection which threatened the interests of the landholders like Shakespeare, also becomes an opportunity for Shakespeare to give the political thought that governed England, and Europe in general.

Shakespeare's history plays are about the English kings of the past. These plays which have much political content and political reasons address obvious political questions. When King Richard hands his crown over to Bolingbroke, saying "You may my glories and my state depose but not my griefs; still am I king of those" (2 *Rich.* 4.1.200-203), he was not speaking about private care. Bolingbroke, as King Henry IV, realizes how personal and official merge when he says, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a

crown" (4 *Hen* 2. 3.1.31). His son Hal, who is later becomes 'the Ideal King of England' insists on common humanity and equates king with ordinary man: "I think the King is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me. The element shows to him as it doth to me. All his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man." (5 *Hen*. 4.1.105). It seems that the more popular a king is the more he identifies with the commoner, as Henry V identifies with his soldiers at Agincourt:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.  
For he today who sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile (*Hen* 5.)

This hypocrisy of the exigency of power becomes clear when Angelo asserts his power saying: "We must not make a scarecrow of the law, setting it up to fear the birds of prey, and let it keep one shape till custom make it their perch and not their terror" (*MM*. 2.1.1-4). Brutus reflects on Caesar's effort to crown himself, giving voice to common man: "Th' abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power." (*JC*. 2.1.19-20). Lear's banishment of Kent who did not "dread to speak when power to flattery bows" .... and "when majesty falls to folly" (*Lear*. 1.1.164-167) shows how Elizabethans were wary of the danger involved in speaking truth to power.

The Elizabethans who idolized Roman Republic, were wary any forms of government other than monarchy. Even Gonzalo of *The Tempest* wants to be the king of his utopian republic. Regicide forms the main discourse in *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Hamlet*. In *Julius Caesar* Brutus kills Caesar to preserve the Republic. When Bolingbroke forces the king to abdicate, the Bishop of Carlisle warns:

And if you crown him, let me prophesy:  
The blood of English shall manure the ground,  
And future ages groan for this foul act;  
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,  
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars  
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound. (1 *Hen* 4. 4.1.125-132)

If politics is about increasing the command of power, then all Shakespeare plays deal with power struggle and realpolitik. His minor characters and marginal groups critique the state's ideological apparatuses which naturalize oppression. In the conflict that ensues, dominant ideologies maintain and strengthen prevailing power relations. For example, the statutes passed during the reign of Elizabeth's father Henry VIII in 1534 had calling the ruler a tyrant treasonous and punishable by death, affirming divine rights of monarchy. However, some Shakespeare characters are seen wondering at the ideological mechanism of the state to ensure the willing suspension of the collective will and the social complicity of the people in celebrating such adverse notions and practices. Look at the following lines:

- This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,  
was once thought honest. (*Mac*. 4.3)
- I do oppose  
my patience to his fury, and am arm'd  
to suffer, with a quietness of spirit,  
The very tyranny and rage of his. (*MV* 4.1)
- I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways, not  
as it hath power, but as it is suffered. (*Lear* 1.2)

- I would with such perfection govern, sir,  
T'excel the golden age. (*Temp.* 2.1)

Shakespeare uses non-English characters to voice the concerns contemporary of the Elizabethan Englishmen. The scepticism of 'dangerous' Jack Cade, 'ridiculous' Malvolio, and 'malcontent' Jacques de Boys voice but the Elizabethan voices of dissent itself.

It is obvious that political questions will be raised in plays like *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* since they deal with unwilling subjugation to power. It is also found in plays like *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Apparently, Shakespeare discusses power, politics and their implications for the stakeholders.

### Political use of Shakespeare

The Windsor Castle library has a copy of Shakespeare used by King Charles I (1600–49), who was assassinated. During his imprisonment at Carisbrooke Castle (1647–48), Charles could choose books from the royal library. During this time, he seems to have read the *Comedies, Histories and Tragedies, published according to the true originall copies*. It contains his manuscript notes. Commenting on this, in his *Eikonoklastes* Milton noted that Shakespeare was Charles's "closest-companion of his solitudes". Another puritan pamphleteer John Cook wished if Charles had instead "studied Scripture half so much ... as Shakespeare"!

Shakespeare is used for political purposes across the world. His titles, phrases, quotations, allusions, plays and adaptations are widely used in political commentaries and for political purposes. They are used in original, translated and adapted forms. Modern adaptations make him contemporarily significant despite their localized and ahistorical re-readings as they comment on political scenarios: "You too Brutus" (*JC* 3.2.77), "Let Rome in Tiber melt" (*Ant.* 1.1.34), "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Ham.* 1.4.), "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." (*2 Hen* 4. 3.1.31) etc. His Roman plays *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, which are deeply political are used as political commentaries. *Julius Caesar* is a favourite because of its popularity and the political philosophy it preaches. Orson Welles' *Julius Caesar* (1937) omits large parts of the original making Caesar a fascist dictator and Brutus liberal failure. A localised historical play like *Henry V* was made into an anti-militarist discourse in the background of the Vietnam War.

Cuebec, a Canadian province demanding independence from both the English and French colonizers since the 1960s, adapted Shakespeare's plays not in English or French but in a French dialect *Jouval*. Demanding independence, the playwright Robert Gurik wrote *Hamlet, Prince of Quebec* (1968) and he decisively adapted the original and called out, "To be or not to be independent" (*Être ou ne pas être libre*) was their question.

Tom Lanoy's Flemish adaptation of Richard II and Richard III as *Ten Oorlog* (1997) uses Shakespeare's depiction of English civil war to portray the moral and political chaos of Belgium then caught in child abuse and political anxieties following the death of Baudouin of Belgium. It also plays with language using archaic Dutch, broken French and American Hiphop language, best seen from Richard III's

Gimme a break!  
Spreek niet dooren and show me some respect!  
You're talking here to God's numero uno.

Hamlet is a favourite Shakespeare play for political commentators in the Arab world. Arab Its subtle discourse on political dispossession is preferred over *Macbeth*, which is more direct. *Hamlet* helps Arab playwrights to circumvent censorship and explore issues raised by political and social moments without having to risk themselves in the Middle East political climate. Politicised adaptations of *Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Macbeth* are also popular in Arabic. An internationally acclaimed *Romeo and Juliet* (1994) jointly-produced by theatres in Ramallah and Jerusalem re-interpreted the Arab world politics by portraying a Palestinian Romeo and an Israeli Juliet. Another Syrian *Romeo and Juliet* was staged on Skype between a refugee camp in Jordan and players in Homs, Syria.

*The Tempest* has been the most anti-colonial favourite play and has been rendered into diverse formats. Originally, it was performed at the court of King James I, more as a Jacobean court masque as part of wedding festivities and had little political content. However, it became the most potent political too for postcolonial nations. While the Englishmen might read nationalist spirit in the Henriad, the colonised nations might find postcolonial discourses in *The Tempest* more appealing. The political import of Caliban's response to a supercilious Miranda who wants gratitude for taking up the 'white man's burden' of educating Caliban when he did not know his own meaning is significant.

You taught me language, and my profit on 't  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language! (*Tmp.* 1.2.437-439)

While discussing *Coriolanus* long before the allegations against US president Donald Trump's Russian connection surfaced, Greenblatt observed, "It is as if the leader of a political party long identified with hatred of Russia — forever saber-rattling and accusing the rival politicians of treason — should secretly make his way to Moscow and offer his services to the Kremlin." It makes any Shakespeare reader interject, "Oh! my prophetic soul" (*Ham.*1.5.46).

Shakespeare was banned for political reasons. The Tsarist Russia banned incendiary plays like *Macbeth* and *Richard III*; Poland banned *Antony and Cleopatra* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Nazi Germany banned Shakespeare's historical plays, but interpreted *Hamlet* into a narrative of Germany and used the *Merchant of Venice* to aid its anti-Jewish propaganda; Mao's cultural revolution banned Shakespeare in China from 1966-77 for not promoting the state ideology. In 2006 Thailand banned the film *Shakespeare Must Die* saying that its *Macbeth* resembled a Thai leader. Its frustrated director wondered, "Cambodians watching it thinks it is Hun Sen. Libyans watching it think it is Gaddafi".

Shakespeare was banned also for moral reasons. In the US, prisons have banned Shakespeare from its library for promoting homosexuality and so did many US schools *The Twelfth Night*, and for its antisemitism *The Merchant of Venice*. A certain English physician bowdlerized' Shakespeare to produce *Family Shakespeare* appropriate for women and children (1807-18), English King James I banned *Macbeth* for 5 years for its witches and incantations. The British banned *King Lear* from 1810 till 1820 in deference to the mentally ill King George III.

Political thinkers like Karl Marx quotes *Timon of Athens* and thinks that "Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money":

"Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, Gods, I am no idle votarist! ... Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair, wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant. ... Why, this Will lug your priests and servants from your sides, Pluck stout men's pillows from below



their heads: This yellow slave Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed; Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves And give them title, knee and approbation With senators on the bench...etc. ('Money' in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844)

### Politics in translated Shakespeare

Shakespeare translations also have political implications. Plain translations appear at the early points of contact between two literatures. Abridgement, adaptation, appropriation and subversion happen at various stages in the relationship between the two. There is a tendency for translators to localize Shakespeare when he is introduced into a foreign language. It does so by localizing the names of characters, places and things, using local proverbs, local literary idioms, songs, literary flourish, in order to remove the foreignness of the play. Later this gives way to more faithful reproductions and gradually they mature into the formulation of their own discourses on the subject.

In many languages Shakespeare got translated more faithfully after the World War-I when the colonial forces were weakening and the demand for self-governance was on the rise. It was as if to prove that the local language is good enough to contain Shakespeare's grand thoughts. That is, to contain 'the best' of the western world. These faithful translations emphasized the showcasing of the literary merit of the local language. Proving local languages as capable receptacles of Shakespeare's 'great' thoughts was a subtle way of telling occupying forces of the ability of the speakers of those languages to become independent. This was in addition to the Caliban motif of "learning a language to curse".

*Hamlet* is a favorite in Arab political discourses. Gregori Kozintsev's *Gamlet* (1964), born out of the Soviet and East European political interpretations, influenced Arab Shakespeare discourses in translation considerably. Rafat al Duwayri's *Shaksbir Malikan (Shakespeare Rex)*, (1975) critiqued President Anwer Sadat's 'open door' policy. The Syrian writer Mamduh Adwan's *Hamlet Yastaykiz Muta'akhiran (Hamlet Wakes Up Late)*, (1976) laments the failure of nationalism. The Iraqi playwright Sami Abdel Hamid's *Hamlet Arabian* (1973) narrates the failure of the foreign-educated to stop crime and corruption at home. It also hints at the succession drama in Qatar dynasty of the time. In a similar vein, Jawad al Assadi's *Insu Hamlit (Forget Hamlet)*, (1994) eloquently parodies the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Sulayman al-Bassam's *Richard III: an Arab Tragedy* (2007) was the Royal Shakespeare Company's first Arabic play. In 2017, an Arab news agency,

*Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, (Jerusalem) published "The Taming of Trump and his Appeasement" comparing Petruchio's taming of Katherine with how world leaders have treated US President Donald Trump, known for reckless populist policies" (Source: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=755314>).

Shakespeare continues to be an interpretive lens on contemporary politics. In 2015, a Syrian Romeo and Juliet was staged on Skype between a refugee camp in Jordan and players in Homs, Syria.

Autocratic regimes like Turkish, Arab and Persian governments either opposed Shakespeare or supported him with censorship. He reached the Arab world through English or French versions as a high culture product and it was subverted by locals who got familiar with Shakespeare's language. They used it as a literary language to "negotiate their own future, shake off their own cramps, and expand their own performative styles" (Loomba 1998:163). Despite the attempts of many regimes to appropriate him by giving institutional support, Arabs subaltern discourses use Shakespeare.

The Arabs have a particular fondness for *Hamlet*, which does not have obvious political content like *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, or *Antony And Cleopatra*. They interpret it as an allegory on the Arab political tyranny and Hamlet as a fighter for justice. The recent *Al Hamlet Summit* is an example. Iran's Reza

Shah Pahlavi (1941-79) did not permit staging of Shakespeare plays which staged the murder of monarchs, although it had many translations of *Hamlet* (10), *Romeo and Juliet* (8), *Othello* (7), *Macbeth* (6), *Julius Caesar* (3) as they. After the Iranian revolution (1979) it actually became worse. Because of the regime's opposition to Western art and culture, only fewer Shakespeare plays were translated.

Ahamad Shawki's *Masra' Kliyubatra* (1927) makes a nationalistic heroine out of Cleopatra by speaking against the British occupation of Egypt. We also see how the future Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser played the title character in a nationalist portrayal of *Julius Caesar* (1935) at the height of British occupation of Egypt. In public imagination Julius Caesar was someone who defeated the British. Ali Ahmad Bakathir's adaptation of the *Merchant of Venice* as *Shayluk al Jadid (A New Shylock)*, (1945) presented it as a political allegory on the threat of Zionism.

The political shapes our consciousness. Shakespeare's thoughts on the Greco-Roman concept of 'regime' (Greek: *politeia*) reflects his Elizabethan political consciousness. Black Death and plague were the great social levellers that time when the poor struggled with poverty and the nobles struggled for royal favour for survival. There was also a general fear of political disorder arising out of civil unrest, coup and war.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Scott coined this term in his novel *Anne of Geierstein* (1829) to refer to the contentions between the houses of York and Lancaster, based on an imaginary scene in Shakespeare (*6Hen1. 2.4*) in which representatives of these rival households pluck red and white roses in the garden to join a side.

<sup>ii</sup> Cor. 2.2.111; 2.3.1, 11, 12, 40, 43, 48, 50, 52, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 75, 94, 97, 107, 108, 108, 110, 114, 122, 126, 149; 3.1.30, 34, 103, 120; 3.3.9, 44; 4.6.136, 143.