

# Shakespeare 400 years on

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William Shakespeare 1564 - 1616

2016 is a year of many anniversaries. Easter 1916 we know about of course but it is also sixty years on from the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and the exposure of the crimes of Stalin by Khrushchev, from the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution, the centenary of the Battle of the Somme and it is the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Shakespeare.

So much has been written about Shakespeare that there's a reasonable case for never writing another word. That this vast literature includes much from a Marxist perspective beginning with Marx himself and ranging through Trotsky and Lukacs to Paul Siegel and Michael Rosen strengthens the argument for silence as does the circumstance that, due to other priorities, what follows is going to be written at speed and with no time for scholarship or a proper academic apparatus. (quotations, references, bibliography etc). Nevertheless it's the 400th anniversary and we should say something. My only other excuse is that having been an art historian rather than a literary specialist this gives a slightly different vantage point for a few, hopefully interesting, observa-

tions.

I want to suggest that it is useful to view Shakespeare in the context of two other giants of European culture – Michelangelo and Rembrandt. Let us begin by noting that in chronological terms Shakespeare stands almost exactly between the other two. Shakespeare was born in 1564, the year of Michelangelo's death, and died in 1616, just ten years after the birth of Rembrandt.

What unites these three immense figures is that they are products of the epoch that can be described as the birth of capitalism and which Engels referred to as, 'the greatest progressive revolution that mankind has so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants - giants in power of thought, passion, and character, in universality and learning' noting that, 'The men who founded the modern rule of the bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations'.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence the work of all of them expresses a huge expansion of the role of the individual and a great development of the human personality in society and art. Compare Michelangelo's *David* or his *Moses* with the frescoes of Giotto or the sculpture of Donatello; or the eighty self portraits of Rembrandt with portraits by Van Eyck or Holbein; above all compare the plays of Shakespeare with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the complexity of Hamlet with any character in literature of the previous thousand years.

What Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Rembrandt also share, perhaps surprisingly, is a tragic vision of life. It is as if they have some presentiment that this extraordinary new departure in human history, liberating and intoxicating as it is, is going to end in tears. On closer inspection, however, it is possible to discern more specific causes of their sadness, which in turn derive from the fact each is a product of a different phase in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Michelangelo represents an early phase.

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Engels, 'Introduction to *The Dialectics of Nature*,' <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/ch01.htm>

It was the Italian city states of Venice and Florence that led the way in the development of capitalism within an overarching feudal framework. But the Italian bourgeoisie failed to break through; its leading representatives, the Medici bankers, joined the aristocratic/ Catholic counterrevolution and in the early years of the sixteenth century the Italian national democratic revolution was thrown back (not to re-emerge till Mazzini and Garibaldi in the 19th Century). It was experiencing this process that transformed Michelangelo's outlook from the optimistic humanism of *David* and *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Ceiling to the horror of *The Last Judgement* on the Sistine Altar Wall and the sorrow of his late *Piétas*.<sup>2</sup>

Rembrandt comes from a later phase after the first successful bourgeois revolution, (the Dutch Revolt) and after the establishment of the first bourgeois state in the Dutch Republic. Rembrandt benefits from the economic and social progress this brings – it makes the Dutch Republic, temporarily, the most prosperous, liberal and advanced society in Europe. But he also reacts intuitively (he has no political critique) against the cold economic rationalism of the new capitalist order and identifies more and more in his work with its victims: the beggars, the poor, the Jews and other outsiders.<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare is an intermediate figure. He emerges in the period preceding the English Revolution of 1642 when the contradictions in English society are starting to come to a head. The bourgeoisie, to which Shakespeare is affiliated, is advancing and the feudal aristocracy is declining, with the balance between the two being held by the 'absolute' monarchies of Elizabeth I and James I. Shakespeare's world view is correspondingly complex – far too complex to be properly reviewed here. However, I want to highlight two features of it which I think are of particular interest to socialists and Marxists.

The first is his attitude to money. According to Marx, 'Shakespeare excellently

depicts the real nature of *money*'. In the section on 'Money' in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* Marx quotes extensively from *Timon of Athens*

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

And...

O thou sweet king-killer, and dear divorce  
'Twixt natural son and sire!  
thou bright defiler  
Of Hymen's purest bed! thou valiant Mars!  
Thou ever young, fresh, loved and delicate wooer,

Whose blush doth thaw the consecrated snow  
That lies on Dian's lap! Thou visible God! Etc...<sup>4</sup>

Shakespeare, says Marx,

stresses especially two properties of money:

<sup>2</sup>This is a compressed version of the argument presented in John Molyneux 'Michelangelo and Human Emancipation' in *International Socialism Journal*, 128, <http://isj.org.uk/michelangelo-and-human-emancipation/>

<sup>3</sup>See John Molyneux, *Rembrandt and Revolution* Red Words, London 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow 1967, pp.127-8. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm>

1. It is the visible divinity — the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things: impossibilities are soldered together by it.

2. It is the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations. The distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities — the divine power of money — lies in its character as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature. Money is the **alienated** ability of mankind.<sup>5</sup>

And just as Marx can use Shakespeare to analyse the power of money so Marx can be used to sum up the essence of world depicted in *Timon of Athens*.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.<sup>6</sup>

Shakespeare's hostility to money and money grubbing is not confined to *Timon of Athens*. It is also the theme of *The Merchant of Venice*. This fact has largely been obscured by the controversy about the play's alleged anti-semitism, but whether or not Shylock is an anti-semitic stereotype, he is a money lender and the judgment of Portia

is not only a condemnation of Shylock but also of the logic of money lending, of usury.

As regards Shakespeare's understanding of, and hostility to, money, it is necessary to understand that money was then 'an issue' in the way that it has seldom been since. This was because although money as such had been around for millennia, the rule of money, its all pervasive domination of society, was something new, arriving hand in hand with the development of capitalism and its key characteristic, generalized commodity production, and therefore a matter of debate (in a way that it was not in later ages which took it for granted.) Luther and others made corruption and especially the buying and selling of indulgences a central feature of their critique of the Church. At the same time John Calvin, the key 'ideologist' of the Dutch Revolution, wrote an article arguing specifically that usury was NOT a sin<sup>7</sup>. The Catholic Church's condemnation of usury was rooted in its feudal opposition to capitalism and the need to keep bankers, money lenders, and aspirant bourgeois in their place.

Second, and more important, is Shakespeare's attitude to power. If Shakespeare understands but despises the power of money his distaste for power — political power — is even more intense and pervasive. All his history plays focus on the struggle for power. *Richard II*, which is a story of plotting and counter-plotting, shows the human weaknesses that make a man unfit to be king. *Richard III* is about a man who kills, and kills and kills again, including children, to gain and retain power until he himself is killed. *Macbeth* is about a man (and a woman) who kills and kills and kills again, including a child, to gain and retain power until he is 'in blood stepp'd in so far...returning were as tedious as go'er'. *Hamlet* is about a man who fails to gain power and loses his life because he is not capable of ruthless cold blooded murder. Prince Hal's transformation into the man of power, King Henry V, involves the repudiation of, and crushing of his own feelings

<sup>5</sup>As above p.129

<sup>6</sup>Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels *The Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>7</sup>Richard H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, New York 1927: p. 95.

for, Falstaff. *Coriolanus* deals with the arrogance of aristocratic power; *King Lear* with a man who wants to have it both ways – to divest himself of the responsibility and burdens of power but still be treated with the respect due to a king; but who also through his downfall and descent into madness somehow regains his humanity. Above all, *Antony and Cleopatra* depicts the radical contradiction between the logic of power and the logic of love.

Shakespeare's heroes, including his tragic heroes, are people of passion – Lear, Othello. Coriolanus, Antony, Romeo etc – and often they are betrayed by their passions. His victors, those who end up holding the reigns of power – Malcolm, Fortinbras, Bolingbroke, Octavius – are not his heroes. They are secondary figures who pass quietly through the main action – like the 'grey blur' Stalin through the Russian Revolution - to pick up the crown amid the carnage. They are men of 'cold calculation' with ice in their veins. Psychologically they are closest to his outright villains like Iago, Goneril, Regan and Edmund.

The roots of this focus on the anti-human ruthlessness of power in the historical period are not hard to discern. English history over the preceding centuries had been a more or less continuous inter and intra-familial armed struggle for power which in so far as it had achieved a temporary equilibrium had done so on the basis of severe violence. Elizabethan England was to all in-

tents and purposes a police state.

In the most influential book on Shakespeare of the 1960s *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, the Polish critic Jan Kott pointed to the parallel between this and his experience of Stalinism 'Kott is undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes ... that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night' wrote the great theatre director, Peter Brook, in his Introduction to *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*.

It appears that the notion of Shakespeare as our contemporary is no longer in fashion in academic circles. No matter. Four hundred years on in the world of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs, the IMF and the ECB the themes of money and power can hardly be said to have lost their relevance.

One of the functions of serious art is to assist us in the understanding, concrete and intimate rather than theoretical understanding, of our social relations, that is our relations with our fellow human beings. The greatest of those who wrote (and painted and sculpted) at the moment of capitalism's birth saw the social relations characteristic of the system with fresh and critical eyes as opposed to taking them for granted as so many later artists and thinkers have done. And this is one reason why they – and above all Shakespeare – still have so much to say to us today.