

Shakespeare and Plato: The Graeco-Roman Plays

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Abstract:

Shakespeare was a remarkable genius not only of his age, but also for all time. The Shakespearean presence in India is older and more complex than in any other country in east. Shakespeare did much to distance himself from his original sources and make his own literary works essentially distinct. His Roman plays, especially The Rape of Lucrece, Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra and Titus Andronicus follow a general Platonic paradigm while exercising tropically. All five works however share Plato's views in the Republic of the ideal state sliding first into democracy, division within ruling class and so into factionalism, rebellion, mob-rule and tyranny. The public theory is accompanied in Plato by the more personal one in which the passion overtakes reason and so divide and make the soul feeble. The classical philosopher Plato discusses five types of regimes in his famous work, The Republic. He discusses about democracy or republic in the form of a Socratic dialogue concerning the definition of justice and the order and character in just city state and the just man. The meaning of justice here is the rule on the people without any harm to anyone and equal rights to everyone. Shakespeare gives his plays a distinct Elizabethan coloring. In other words as similar to Plato, Shakespeare wants to say through his works that welfare of people or Republic is the big issue than anything else.

Key words: Shakespeare, India, Roman plays, Plato, Republic, tyranny.

Mode of Understanding Characters:

We see in these works a third Shakespearean tetralogy with Titus as a kind of summarizing or gist. Lucrece, Caesar and Titus share a concern with the Elizabethan succession and its divisiveness and insecurity. Coriolanus and Antony speaks to issue a Stuart absolutism and excess. Shakespeare has given us a series of complex characters through psychology, inner struggle and repression. We can see the trend of fiction which express the central idea of the work whether it a fictional tragedy or scientific expression. Shakespeare expresses through the title of a tragedy which is named after protagonist's name and the same is followed in heroic dramas. Plato settled a path of Greek ideology of individual that a fair mind dwells in a fair body where state is always justice and is never dismissed. It reappears under the same name or different and finally proceeds according to the principle of reward and punishment in another life. Great writing is formed around inner patterns. Shakespeare disperses his rich offering through language and stories which taken as a whole, relate a coherent philosophy. If we look upon the historical play on the Roman general whose conquest, disposition and death, fascinated the English of Elizabethan days. In the play, *Julius Caesar* has just returned from a victorious battle over his rival Pompey to meet a conspiracy with his trusted friend – Brutus, as a principal participant. In spite of the prophetic warning on the ides of March, and the entreaties of his wife Calpurnia, he stubbornly elects to go to the capital as an expression of his courage and careless disdain for fear. There he is assassinated by the conspirators. The heroes of all the four plays like in most other traditional tragic works are not mere characters and individuals, but representative symbols of an entire cultural entity. In *Julius Caesar*, the fall of the hero after the treacherous stab from his friend Brutus is described as a communal fall thus:

*Oh! what a fall was there, my country men,
Then I, and you all of us fell down.*

Contrasts and Comparison:

Shakespeare has in addition given us a series of thorough studies of very complex personalities. *King Richard the Third* shows a thoroughbred psychopath; in *Macbeth* we see inner struggle, fission and repression; *Timon of Athens* develops a characterization which avoids any hint of simple-minded preaching on the part of the author. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was an attempt to piece together some events in Scottish and English history. There had actually been a Macbeth, who lived in the 11th century Scotland. His name with those of Macduff, Duncan and Malcolm are prominent in the old books on Scottish history. Shakespeare must have picked some bits from the *Chronicle of England, Scotland and Ireland*, written by Raphael Holinshed. Although he does not follow the trend of Holinshed's story, he however taps the murder of a Scottish king from there, 'and the circumstances of this murder are taken over by Shakespeare to support his history of the murder of Duncan'. The play had been written to meet the interest of James Ist of Scotland, who had been crowned King of England and who was the owner of the theatre company Shakespeare belonged. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth upon whom that period in history is named, dramatic interest especially in universities and schools, shifted from classical plays to productions based on the history of native England and contemporary works from Italy. His plays were therefore true Elizabethan expositions – free from terms of classicism, the dramatic restrictions of the medieval age and the noose – tightening rules of neo – classicism. Elizabethan theatre was not a theatre of strict rules. Shakespeare therefore felt no guilt when he 'abused distance' by jumping from one location to another (within the same play), and when he created differences in time of action up to months and even years.

There may be some use in such general descriptions, but they can hardly be said to express the design of the writer. The truth is not that we may as well speak of many designs as of one; nor need anything be excluded from the plan of a great work to which the mind is naturally led by the association of ideas, and which does not interfere with the general purpose. To Plato himself, the inquiry "what was the intention of the writer," or "what was the principal argument of the Republic" would have been hardly intelligible, and therefore had better be at once dismissed. The sum is an understandable world. Actions receive meaning in that some arrangements are better than others, even though happy solutions are rare, and all are sooner or later cancelled by death. There is inner consistency and meaning in Shakespeare's plays. The tragedies sharpen the conflicts. The women are victims rather than leaders as in the comedies; both sexes have their fates decided by their own conduct, even unto death. How Shakespeare himself felt the difference between the two main periods of his life we do not know. The historical dramas of the first twelve years have their action fixed by outer events; while the comedies turn the foolishness of the world upside-down with a smile, with no attempt on the part of the author to penetrate the characters he creates. Shakespeare utilizes language and logic in Plato's way. Much of the function of the fools is to provide a running analysis of the closely related meanings of words or of future consequences of actions, both of which their masters may have overlooked. The clearest example is the fool in *King Lear*, exposing old Lear's short-sightedness which makes him a fool and not a king. A lot of the fun in the comedies has the same basis, the interludes in the serious plays likewise.

Conclusion:

By analyzing various views and clues we safely come to the conclusion that Shakespeare is really pioneer playwright of all ages. Generally, Shakespeare represented an era free from

rules and traditions. It should be noted that Plato wrote almost all his plays for the sake of welfare of society and ruling class. He therefore had to conform to the rules as the success of the playwright of the period was dependent on the effect of the work on the society. There was a Greco – Roman classical period with set literary traditions, in order to set the scene for the Elizabethans, had the freedom to conform with, discard, revise and revitalize. The primacy is therefore not that of which age is greater but how well the artists in the ages have developed their creative endowments. Plato and Shakespeare have exhibited great mastery of their arts, and in the process, made their ages prime discourses in dramatic circles. The dramatic genre went through various changes and revisions until Shakespeare uplifted it to a stage no other dramatist had ever done. It could therefore be rightly said that while Plato laid a best foundation for the dramatic arts, Shakespeare built the edifice, taking the imitative arts to its highest peak.