

## Book Review

# Shakespeare and Social Theory: The Play of Great Ideas

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At the heart of Bradd Shore's book *Shakespeare and Social Theory* lies a question of why, after four centuries, Shakespeare still *matters*. Scholarship attendant to this query continues unabated, each 'take' on the drama (and poetry) attempting to broadly reappraise the plays and sonnets, to revisit existing debates, and interpret the narratives, rhythms, form, and 'ideology' of Shakespeare's words within diverse discourses of modernity. Terry Eagleton challenged us in the 1960s to 'deepen our own understanding' of industrial society via Shakespeare's work (1967: 11) and, by 1985, Dollimore and Sinfield's 'political' Shakespeare partially delivered a developmental discourse that Raymond Williams argued was an overdue sociology of the literature/text and drama that diminished extant, stubborn orthodoxy in Shakespeare studies and turned instead to a search for that elusive 'something' that exists beyond conservative modes of narrow classification (1994 [1985]: 282). Such compatibility continues to exist, linking contemporary literary criticism with social commentary that enables a vividness of insight that itself simultaneously induces further 'theory' and critique. In our times Shakespeare's work is channelled through notable intersectional blending: race, sexuality, gender, personal biography/identity, emotions and affect, and power – the latter two being particularly apposite in this uncertain age (Craik and Pollard, 2013; Greenblatt, 2019). Shore contributes by providing his reader with a sophisticated entrée to explore the existence of that 'something' spoken of by Williams but, as Morris Weitz (1975: 29) cautioned, philosophy of literature can resemble a search for something *that isn't really there* whereas the conveyance of philosophy *in* literature exposes truth without detriment of the text (1975: 29). Shore's approach is an efficacious example of the latter in being a volume that is dedicated to exploring Shakespeare via what may be considered *constructive distortions* and *exposures of partially-concealed narratives* of the 'social', embodying history, emotion, sexuality, politics, and reason that serve to drive the reader toward an appreciation of the complexity and timeless elegance of Shakespeare's works.

Ostensibly, this book is divided into a variety of close readings of a chosen set of works. To commence, Shore states early that the volume is not concerned with the problematics of philosophy *per se* but, instead, is aimed at connecting inherent dramaturgy of theatre with changing times, creating a 'holographic' way of seeing Shakespeare's 'ethnographic' observations on the structure of society, social change, social and cultural reproduction, and the omnipresent intrigue at the top of his society that results in the empowerment of an audience. Shakespeare, says Shore, was 'the participant observer of his world' (54), creating a form of reportage of fluid social transformations familiar to his audience while partially concealed in the functional entertainment of popular theatre for the masses. To expand these ends, Shore proceeds to utilise close readings of a handful of the plays – *Hamlet* in particular, along with *A Winter's Tale*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear* but not, somewhat surprisingly, *Macbeth* – and succeeds in isolating core dynamics that are, naturally enough, of interest

to the attendant sociologist. We engage with otherwise ‘traditional’ themes of power, love, family, age, vanity and so on that resonate with audiences, connecting text, reader, and viewer seamlessly via an ‘externality of script and stagecraft’ that is ‘wedded to emotional realism [...] a marriage of script and feeling’ (176). The metaphor – and its uses – are explicit and powerful, later suggesting that a writer who uses this approach well ‘has a powerful tool for playing with a reader’s inner life’ (222). Maybe this is the thrust of the book? Shakespeare’s ability to incorporate his audience, to solicit empathy and anxiety, sympathy and hope is central here in understanding the *sociological* as both, to borrow from Abrams (1971), a mirror and a lamp reflecting and illuminating social life and conscience, reflections of the machinations of the outer world and the elements of what it is to be human in the Shakespearean text. Indeed, throughout the work, Shore is careful to combine this ‘human’ element of the author and text with discussion of reception and of historical strictures and, while not advocating Harold Bloom’s quasi-abstract conclusion regarding Shakespeare as the ‘original psychologist’ (1999: 714), he is determined to continue to invoke the essence of observation of the dynamics of society both as body politic and the personal-political. The distinction, perhaps, is that Shakespeare (like Pepys) survives and dominates as a record of a time period; whether this qualifies as proto-social theory is moot. For instance, one is quickly aware of an apparent lack of distinction between ‘social’ and ‘sociological’ and, to further such confusion, whether the *anthropological* is the driver of the ‘social theory’ utilised as a primary foundation of discussion. While sociologists pop up in discussion occasionally, one is often left considering such utility as a technique for continuity rather than insight, the dominant style and approach settling in quickly as resembling (erudite) literary criticism rather than a sociological close reading. While the dramaturgical, phenomenological, and structural are utilised to decent effect in argument, one is left continually yearning for greater integration of modern social theory and, if possible, some progressive sociological analysis that separates itself from the anthropological and the vicissitudes of literary form.

However, despite such doubts as to the distinct cogency of its intended impact, this is a scholarly, informative, and thought-provoking contribution to the wider academic Shakespearean canon. *Shakespeare and Social Theory* appears, paradoxically, a book searching for a *solid motif* but is perhaps best enjoyed – and understood – via the deliberative and analytical segmentation of its subject matter and as representative of a critical appraisal of themes and their diachronic and synchronic value. When this is achieved, Shore’s book relaxes and the argument disentangles itself from an otherwise multifarious combination of criticism, anthropology, and social commentary. This is, simply, a fine book of literary criticism; it does not comfortably integrate itself into the sociology of literature – or literary sociology – tradition but, in that way, it succeeds and thrives. In essence, the theoretical thrust of the book is arguably summarised succinctly by the author in his closing paragraph; the ‘subjunctive space’ that Shakespeare creates (or, that field of thinking, of imagining, of opening up and seeing somehow beyond the normative narrative of the play itself) is where the essence of the writing and, perhaps, the reception of performance, lies. To borrow from Giddens (1984), the *social theory* here is merely the dualism of meaning, a two-way dialogue of time, space, drama, observation and anthropology on one hand and the reception of audience on the other. In other words, Shakespeare embodies the essence of the ‘double hermeneutic’ of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage and beyond.

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