



SHAKESPEARE AND DEMOCRACY

Shakespeare ‘became increasingly democratic’, claims new study

Shakespeare’s treatment of politics moves gradually from the conventional attitudes of his time towards a more democratic concept of society, claims Gabriel Chanan in this new study. Taking the plays in their written order, he traces the shifting approach to five issues which would later become fundamental to democracy: accountability of rulers, gender equality, grievances of the common people, impartiality of justice, and justification of war.

Shakespeare is often seen as a defender of monarchy and traditional values, both by approving and disapproving critics. Others find signs of subversiveness towards the Tudor dictatorship he was living under. Chanan finds a deeper form of reflection which questions both the establishment and its critics. Shakespeare’s dramatic method is intuitively, intrinsically democratic in showing that there is no fixed right perception of reality, but that it must be managed by the interaction of opposites.

Chanan concludes that Shakespeare’s dramatisation of how societies hold together or break apart has fresh significance in an age when democracy faces new challenges at a global level. He sees democracy as still historically young, an incomplete global experiment, facing internal and external challenges and open to accusations of being misused to disguise exploitation. It needs continuing sustenance from Shakespeare’s critique of autocracy and models of open-ended thinking. Using abundant illustration from the plays, Chanan’s argument is accessible to those without specialist knowledge, yet throws new light on academic debates. “Even though Shakespeare could know nothing of modern democracy, he played a fundamental role in building the culture that underlies it,” says Chanan, a social policy researcher who has had a lifelong interest in Shakespeare.

“A pleasure to read... Chanan does a remarkable job of developing and defending his difficult thesis. *Shakespeare and Democracy* comes as a breath of fresh air in the unventilated atmosphere of contemporary Shakespearean scholarship. This is a book to stimulate a new interest in the old reader; it is a book to excite a first interest in the new reader.”

Christopher Mulvey, Emeritus Professor of English, University of Winchester

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