

Reading Shakespeare Cross-Culturally: An Islamic Approach

By Muna Al-Alwan¹

Just as Dante was a gift of Heaven to medieval Christianity, so Shakespeare is a gift of Heaven to all of Mankind, for every creed, in every age. ... Shakespeare was a gift to the increasingly secularized closing centuries of this cycle of time, that is, to the seventeenth century onward, and to no period more than to the present.

(Martin Lings, *The Sacred Art of Shakespeare*, 12)

The universe has in fact been stamped with God's signature;
and that's how the works of Shakespeare were born.

(G. Wilson Knight, 239)

These epigraphs show the tremendous significance of Shakespeare's spiritual legacy in this troubled world of ours, where "the rupture between heaven and earth"² has never been so extreme amidst the clamor of materialism, cynicism, and violence.

Dr. Martin Lings, British writer, perennialist, Shakespearean scholar and poet, gives his assessment of the purpose of great art, which, "as it enchants us, also brings us closer to knowing the Divine." Such art he calls "sacred art," "a Divine Grace which can make easy what is difficult. Its function—and that is the supreme function of art—is to precipitate in the soul a victory for sainthood." (19) "If it be asked," he says, "whether we have the right to place any of Shakespeare's plays ...

¹ The author would like to thank the editor of *Sacred Web* for his useful comments that helped improve the quality of this study.

² This phrase belongs to Seyyed Hossein Nasr as quoted by Harry Oldmeadow in "Tradition Betrayed: The False Prophets of Modernity," Sacred Web Conference, 2006.

in the category of sacred art, a powerful plea for *yes* is implicit in the fact that the central theme of these plays is not merely religion ... but the very essence of religion.”(13)

It is this aspect of Shakespeare, his spirituality and its universal appeal, that is the theme of my study, which is intended to challenge the postmodern schools of literary criticism and their disregard of the metaphysical and universal dimensions of Shakespeare’s works. Stephen Greenblatt and his fellow New Historicists try to insert works of literature, like Shakespeare’s plays, back into the historical contexts from whence they came. They look at them as the product of the social politics of the time. In this sense, Shakespeare’s plays are seen as nothing more than a reflection of a particular culture and a particular social and political context. New schools of literary criticism have appeared to challenge New Historicism and the literary theory of the 1970s and 1980s. “Presentism,” “a deliberate strategy of interpreting texts in relation to current affairs, has emerged to challenge the dominant fashion of reading Shakespeare historically ... in favour of embracing its true historicity as something irreversibly changing in time.” In this sense, “Presentism” presents Shakespeare as he is, stressing his “presence in the present.” (Ernie 187)³

My long experience of teaching the Bard in Middle-eastern classes proves not only his long-enduring presence but also his universal appeal in different cultures and times. This is how the idea of my topic originated. My students and I felt quite at home in Shakespeare’s spiritual world when we discussed his religious and ethical values. In our discussions we were always reminded of verses from the Qur’an or from the *hadiths*. It was evident how the students opened up to Shakespeare, and their intimidation and fear of encountering this giant disappeared as they shared his moral and spiritual vision of life.

For many years I thought of writing about this aspect of Shakespeare in relation to Islam. I thought of the subject in terms of a dialogue between Islam and the West, a dialogue urgently needed in the current climate of suspicion, fear and rejection of the other.

When I first started thinking of this project, I thought of it as a study of biblical allusions in Shakespeare’s works and their counterparts

³ See also John D. Cox’s “Shakespeare: New Criticism, New Historicism, and the Christian Story” in *Shakespeare and the Christian Tradition*, ed. E. Beatrice Batson (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), pp. 44-49.

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