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Literature and Popularity: Shakespeare as a Mediator between the ‘Class’ and the ‘Mass’

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Abstract

Shakespeare has enjoyed immense popularity and recognition among ‘elite’ critics like Ben Jonson in his own time, and Dr Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, T S Eliot among others, till Harold Bloom in the 21st century, not to mention the enormous body of film adaptations, translations, music adaptations and various other mass-media through which he still dominates the ‘popular culture’. This is the reason why his case becomes a curious one as far as literature and popularity are concerned. The new century has brought a whole host of new technological artefacts within hand’s reach of all but the poorest denizens of the city street – the cell phone, the iPad, and attendant applications that help us navigate the city and connect and network cyber and physical spaces. These technologies are creating new cultures, material and aesthetic, cyber and physical space-making of new kinds that do not simply alter older traditions but transmogrify them into new shapes and flows. This paper aims at studying how we define the popular aspect of literature. How have erudite and popular cultures been studied in the 20th and 21st centuries? Where does Shakespeare stand in the debate?

Keywords: Literature, Popular, Class, Mass, Civilization, Modernity, Popular Culture

Matthew Arnold’s definition of ‘culture’ as the civilized and superior binary opposite of ‘anarchy’ in *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869 is in itself quite popular. Raymond Williams, one of the prominent cultural critics in English in the 20th century, broadly referred to culture as “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”, “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group”, which manifests itself through “works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” and “texts and practices whose principal function is to signify.” (Storey 1-2) In this sense, literature, among other forms of art, is a manifestation of culture. ‘Popular Literature’, therefore, can be viewed as a

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constituent of ‘popular culture’. If that be so, it may not be wrong to derive the definition of ‘popularity’ in literature from that of popular culture. Three of the meanings suggested by Williams of the term ‘popular’, which can be applied to popular literature, are: “well-liked by many people; inferior kinds of work; works deliberately setting out to win favour with the people.” (Storey 5)

Segurado lists several ideas linked to different conceptions of ‘popular’ which can be applicable to literature: “community, shared values, democratic participation, accessibility, and fun” as well as “the mass-produced commodity”, the “greatest common divisor”, “the reductive or the simplified, or the shoddy, the coarse, and the meretricious” (14). Popular literature can be seen as the opposite side of erudite or high culture which is associated with pure and noble literature (but then, one has to define what pure and noble are) connected to elite values; or as the traditional expressions (through paintings, dance, music, objects, clothes, etc) and values of the lower classes.

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Even when the idea of popular literature in its broader sense is not new to English literature – Sophocles and Euripides were popular in their own time; medieval English romances, mystery and miracle plays, Shakespeare, Restoration playwrights, periodical writers, Romantic poets, novel as a newly emerging genre – all these were popular in their own time. However, the term as it is used today, refers to the proliferation of written works circulated and disseminated widely after industrialization in the West in the 20th century. As a consequence of industrialization and urbanization in Britain and in capitalist America in particular, the employer-employee relations changed, residential separation of classes was produced and class-divide became sharper. With the advent of electronic media, and now social media, the Arnoldian notions of literature as the ‘finest’ and the ‘best’ are being challenged and literary texts are viewed as a mass-produced commodity.¹ Such popular literature may be characterized in the following ways:

- i. The opposite of ‘high’ or noble literature i.e. the literature that is left when one has decided what is ‘standard’ literature. It is, thus, “a residual category” (Storey 5) and therefore considered inferior, meant for those who cannot understand ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’. However, the notion of what is ‘high’ literature is itself debatable.

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- ii. Popular literature is mass-produced and commercial. While elitist literature might be an individual act of creation aimed towards an aesthetic response from a trained reader, the former derives its meaning ‘from the people’ i.e. the primary focus is its readers.
- iii. It is often called ‘literature of the masses’. Those who term it so believe that the readers of popular literature are “a mass of non-discriminating consumers... with brain-numbing passivity”. (Storey 8) However, scholars like John Fiske and Simon Frith present statistics that question such a notion.²

According to Lanier, popular culture “bears the traces of the contemporary society’s struggles between subordination and domination” (50). This quite Marxist view is also found in John Fiske, who is against the idea that ‘the people’ are just a passive uncritical mass at the mercy of cultural industry and that ‘popular’ art is simply debased material for ‘cultural dopes’. He suggests we see ‘the people’ “as a multiple and constantly changing concept, a huge variety of social groups accommodating themselves with, or opposing themselves to, the dominant value system in a variety of ways [...] in a dialectic relationship with the dominant classes” (*Television Culture* 310). This is applicable to the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular literature’.

The postmodern way of looking at popular literature is that postmodernism no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture. Thus, there is a blurring of the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘commercial’ literature, as articulated by critics like Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, who, in the wake of increasing simulacra and hyperreality, raise a pertinent question regarding popular literature: ‘What is being sold? Book or Product?’³

Literature and Popularity: The Case of Shakespeare

It has to be understood at the very onset of the argument that no distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘polished’ literature existed during the time of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Also the fact that remains equally true is that he has enjoyed immense popularity and recognition among ‘elite’ critics like Ben Jonson in his own time, and Dr Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, T S Eliot among others, till Harold Bloom in the 21st century, not to mention the enormous body of film adaptations, translations, music adaptations and various other mass-media through which he still dominates the ‘popular culture’. This is the reason why his case becomes a curious one.

According to Domen, the elevation of Shakespeare’s works to a literary status started with the publication of the First Folio in 1623, which was “bound in expensive material, calfskin, at £1 each, a fortune, considering that a skilled man could make £4 a year... and the earliest known owners include three earls, two bishops, a lord, and an admiral.” (21) He was institutionally made a part of ‘high’ literature by introducing his works in the academic curriculum in the 19th century. In those days, there were family editions of Shakespeare through which “he became an agent of bourgeois socialization and regulation.” (23)

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By converting the play into a written text, there is exclusion between the educated and uneducated. The 'audience' of the written text was no longer the mixed, unruly audience sharing an ephemeral artistic experience together, but the introspect individual reader, isolated in fancy drawing rooms, in his own separate environment. Converting the performative text to print removed Shakespeare from a social space where immediate, irrational bodily pleasures [...] political and social fractiousness held sway. [... now he] could be engaged rationally and dispassionately, experienced within a domestic space. [...it] allowed Shakespeare to be [...] separated from association with the unruly elements of popular culture. (Lanier 30)

Lanier also mentions the use of Shakespeare as an instrument of enculturation through the university, as it became central to the development of English as a discipline in the latter half of the 19th century: "Already established as an English 'classic', Shakespeare had the requisite depth and complexity to replace Latin and Greek classics in higher education" (39).

However, what separates Shakespeare from other writers is that he was not concerned with merit or how his work was viewed through the high cultural lens; he was concerned with the experience of his audience as a whole. He saw to it that his works "appealed to the lowest common denominator and played to its audience's appetite for sensation, infantile fantasy, or middlebrow prejudice rather than challenging its sensibility or engaging its intellect." (Lanier) Shakespeare knew that the only way for his diverse audience (from the "groundlings", who weren't very rich, to those who paid far more to sit in the "Gentlemen's rooms" or the "Lords' room" where seats were costing twelve times as much as the groundlings paid) was to focus on what was common between them, between all humans i.e. emotions like love, guilt, betrayal and greed.

Shakespeare borrowed plots from known materials, employed many techniques to ensure that his diverse audience enjoyed his plays. He included scenes of violence and fight, included crude jokes and puns, and traversed genres along with the inter-mingling of comedy and tragedy that his predecessors had never done. In short, "Shakespeare presented both sides of the cultural divide with a contradiction they negotiated in different ways." (Lanier) Shakespeare's heterogeneous cultural presence, how the 'people' are more a shifting group of allegiances than a rigid category of dopes or revolutionaries, and how popular theatre is a site of tension and negotiation between perceptions, interests and values within the society as a whole. Popular culture exploits Shakespeare for cultural authority and to create meanings through interplay between cultural systems and institutions. Holding a special status with a double life, Shakespeare is recognizable to highbrow and lowbrow audiences (though not in the same ways), and serves important iconic functions in both canonical and popular culture. And popular culture is a powerful cultural mechanism through which that recognition (and misrecognition) is sustained. (Lanier 18)

Because of Shakespeare's flexible status, of the fluidity of shifting categories, and of the possibilities of reinvention, appropriation and adaptation, my position towards the

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concepts of culture, the popular, and their connection with Shakespeare is one that does not regard these relationships on the basis of levels, superiority, evaluation and categorisation of cultural expressions as 'good' or 'bad'. High or erudite culture will be used corresponding to a sum of discourses based on academic criteria, literacy, formal higher education, privileged financial means, and therefore as belonging to a minority, generally holder of economic, social and political power. Popular culture will refer to other than formal sources of knowledge, including traditional practices, folklore, customs and oral transmission of memory, to communal values and essentially shared practices, as well as to a site of identification and vindication of identities.

Conclusion

In the 21st century with the advent of new miniaturised technologies, the ways of looking at life and literature are changing because literature is served through diverse media. For a student of literature, the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' literature seem less important today. As Cawelti puts it: "Conventions (Conventional literature) help maintain a culture's stability while Inventions (New/Popular literature) help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world." (2) However, popular writers, instead of competing or resisting the canon, will have to make themselves more appealing and enduring to stand the test of time. This can be done only by producing works that are close to life and polysemic enough to contain multiple readings and meanings.

References

1. For further reading, refer to "Culture and Anarchy" (1860) by Matthew Arnold and "Culture and Society" (1983) by Raymond Williams.
2. For further reading on Friske and Frith, refer to: FISKER, John, *Television Culture*. London: Routledge, 1987.
3. For further reading, Jameson, Fredric. *The cultural turn: Selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1998*. Verso, 1998.

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