

Marxism (most of the material on this page taken directly from *The Encyclopedia Britannica*: “Marxism”) a body of doctrine developed by Karl Marx and, to a lesser extent, by Friedrich Engels in the mid-19th century. It originally consisted of three related ideas: a philosophical view of man, a theory of history, and an economic and political program. There is also Marxism as it has been understood and practiced by the various socialist movements, particularly before 1914. Then there is Soviet Marxism as worked out by Lenin and modified by Stalin, which under the name of Marxism-Leninism became the doctrine of the communist parties set up after the Russian Revolution. Offshoots of this include Marxism as interpreted by the anti-Stalinist Leon Trotsky and his followers, Mao Zedong's (Mao Tse-tung's) Chinese variant of Marxism-Leninism, and various Third World Marxisms. There are also the post-World War II nondogmatic Marxisms that have modified Marx's thought with borrowings from modern philosophies, principally from those of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger but also from Sigmund Freud and others.

A very oversimplified but perhaps useful view of Marxism is that the elite (bourgeoisie) prosper on the backs of the worker (the rich get richer while the poor get poorer) and that instead a system should be set up where each person receives compensation according to his need and gives back to the state (society) according to his ability. In such a world – the purpose of art must be (according to Marxist ideology to promote proletarian revolution).

Marxism & Art

Many attempts have been made to develop a specifically Marxist aesthetics, one that would incorporate the Marxian theory of history and class consciousness and the critique of bourgeois ideology, so as to generate principles of analysis and evaluation and show the place of art in the theory and practice of revolution. Art, then in Marxist Theory, is indissolubly linked to labour, of which it is the complementary opposite. “Art for Art’s sake” cannot exist in a Marxist World. An art of play will be the “free” art of the revolution, of mankind returned to social harmony, but only because play and labour will then be reunited and transcended. In place of their opposition will be a harmonious whole in which art is continuous with labour.

An Introduction to Marxism and Shakespeare by John Walsh (<http://bookstove.com/classics/critics-of-shakespeare-the-marxist-approach/>)

Although Marxist concepts in literary criticism are not as popular as they once were, they are still frequently used in trying to understand Shakespeare and his genius better and so it is worthwhile to try to understand what they are and what they mean. Marxism was named after Karl Marx who, himself, was very fond of the work of Shakespeare and often quoted from it out of pleasure at the language and dramatic structure or to make a political point. Marxism, to simplify it somewhat and to ignore the many developments in the thought in subsequent years, rests upon the understanding that the world and the society depends fundamentally upon economic factors. Within the world of capitalist economics, a struggle is taking place between different social classes, which include peasants, the proletariat (industrial workers), the bourgeoisie (middle classes who benefit from the capitalist system without consciously supporting or assisting it) and capital-owners (who do consciously support and assist it). Marx believed that this struggle of the classes would inevitably lead to the victory of the proletariat and the defeat of capitalism, since capitalism ‘contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction’ which we can see by the various economic recessions and crashes.

Critics who take a Marxist viewpoint, therefore, look to see how Shakespeare was able to draw upon these ideas in his work and whether he was, so to speak, on the right side (i.e. the proletariat rather than the capital-owners). In this vein, therefore, Marxist critics of Shakespeare look at plays with revolutions or outbreaks of rebelliousness such as the first part of *Henry VI* and *Julius Caesar* and consider the reason for these events and the ways they are suppressed. They look at struggles between the high and mighty (for example in *Coriolanus* or *Macbeth*) as struggles for power by capitalists who only exist as viable members of society through suppression of the working classes. Repression takes place through Repressive State Apparatus (e.g. the use of force by police and army) and through Ideological State Apparatus (e.g. religion, worship of kings, education). Additionally, romances between characters are analysed in terms of their reliance upon economic factors rather than emotional factors such as love. Miranda in *The Tempest*, for example, falls in love with the first man she sees who is not her father or the monstrous Caliban – could such love have a meaningful human factor or is it a representation of Miranda’s desire to escape from a society dominated by her father and keen to take anyone as a husband for the sake of economic freedom? Similarly, the romance between the eponymous *Henry V* and the French princess may be considered as, instead of a tender romance between young lovers, a means by which the ruling classes reproduce power systems in the next generation by which they can continue to rule in the same way that they have done in the past.

Marxist critics will not that, coming several centuries before Marx was in fact born, it is hardly to be expected that Shakespeare would be able to elucidate all the complexities of the class struggle without access to Marxist thought. Consequently, this helps explain the other parts of the plays and poetry that do not work well with Marxist analysis.

from *Shakespeare: A Marxist Interpretation* by Aleksandr A. Smirnov

In *Twelfth Night*, the last of the "romantic" comedies, Shakespeare again takes up the theme of love. At the same time, he treats the problem more openly than ever.

Two types of love are graphically contrasted. The play opens with the Duke, Orsino, languishing for the cruel beauty, the Countess Olivia; he seeks consolation in solitude and in melancholy song. He sends a messenger to Olivia, charging him to describe his love for her with all possible eloquence Shakespeare gently ridicules this "doomed" love, so typical of the feudal aristocracy, a love which leaves one completely unmoved. As a contrast, Shakespeare depicts the vital and realistic love of Viola for Orsino. Her love, which forms the basis of the play, calls forth the warmest sympathy. Similarly vital and unaffected is Olivia's passion for Sebastian. All her aristocratic reserve is forgotten, she abandons herself to the violence of her feeling. Orsino, on the other hand, remains a waxen figure, an elegant marionette in the aristocratic style, even after he is forced by circumstances to capitulate and to marry Viola. Yet he is a lover of music, like most humanists; he is magnanimous and kind. Although Shakespeare is careful not to caricature or slander him, he exposes him as a slave of aristocratic etiquette, thus destroying any sympathy one might have for him. Viola, on the other hand, is one of Shakespeare's most attractive women. Her moral firmness and initiative, combined with her feminine tenderness, her unswerving honesty in fulfilling obligations, endow her with that true humanist harmony which Shakespeare considered to be the highest expression of dignity.

The comedy also contains a group of characters who present a problem of the utmost social significance, expressed in a more pedestrian form than the love theme. They are Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, and Sir Andrew Ague-cheek, his friend and imitator. In Shakespeare's time the title Sir was applied to a specific caste of the nobility—the knights. With the exception of the chronicles, which, because of their themes, necessitate the presence of many noblemen, Shakespeare seldom uses this title in his comedies of manners. It is usually indicative of a swaggering or licentious person. Falstaff and the priest Hugh Evans, the bombastic and stupid pedant, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, are knights, but not Fenton, who is a positive character. In *Twelfth Night*, the two knights, who are always together throughout the play, fulfill a particular purpose. They represent the aristocratic parasite, feudal in nature. Their parasitism is greater than is indicated. The fact that certain traits in a character are not demonstrated in the play does not, in Shakespeare, indicate the non-existence of such traits; they are implied. This is an important aspect of Shakespeare's art, as of all the humanist art of the Renaissance. The commercial activities of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, and of the semi-bourgeois Page and Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are not revealed in the plays. Their speeches and conduct permit us, in fact compel us, to assume the existence of such activities. The parasitism of both Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, on the other hand, is shown with painstaking care.

There exists, however, a basic difference between these two characters. Sir Andrew is despicable; Sir Toby is amusing and almost sympathetic. In contradistinction to the overbearing Sir Andrew, full of illusions about his dignity as a member of the nobility, Sir Toby is well aware of his own worthlessness, and deliberately reveals it. Shakespeare ironically rewards this degenerate noble for his honesty and wit by allowing him, a knight, to marry Maria, his niece's plebeian servant.

There is another interesting parallel. To retrieve his fortunes, Sir Andrew woos a rich bride, as Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*. While Petruchio's desire to retrieve his fortune by a wealthy marriage arises from a daring, enterprising, and progressive spirit, Sir Andrew's stems from a petty nobleman's attempt to cling to life. These are two perfect illustrations from Shakespeare of the fact that no evaluation of a situation or character can be made without considering the period and the social environment, as well as the personality of the character.

The "lower" plane, always so important with Shakespeare, is represented by the pert Maria, the clever Clown, Fabian, and Malvolio. They do not carry on any independent action, except for the jest played on Malvolio, but serve as a rational background for the main plot. Their presence lends it a healthy and concrete reality. The clever Clown and Maria, the merry liar, represent two aspects of Viola's character. The three speak a common language, a language different from that used by Viola when conversing with Orsino or Olivia. Malvolio is in sharp contrast to the other members of the group. It has been suggested that he, like Shylock, was intended as a caricature of the Puritans. This is possible. The portrait, however, is too indistinct. Essentially, Malvolio's function is to be the Duke's double on the "lower" plane. This is indicated, not so much by his attachment to Olivia as by his stilted and tedious punctiliousness. Surrounded by his magnificent court, Orsino is convincingly brilliant. Malvolio is only distasteful and ridiculous. Orsino's oratorical and musical propensities represent the aristocracy's unsuccessful attempt to appropriate humanist culture. The ascetic pedantry of the plebeian Malvolio is inimical to humanism.