

## William Shakespeare: A Marxist before Marx

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### Abstract

The paper aims to identify Marxist elements in Shakespearean plays to determine whether Shakespeare could be considered a 'Marxist' before Karl Marx himself developed his theories and ideologies. Shakespeare's plays have become subjects of historicism, psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist studies, among others, which were not in practice during his time. The subject matter related to these theories had been inherent in the plays even before the theories themselves began to evolve. Critical theories, such as Marxism, were hardly invoked in exploring his works. Therefore, the study was inquisitive about whether Marxist elements remained in his plays, even though they had been written before Marx was born. To conduct a holistic and comprehensive analysis, the study examines *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*, employing textual, document, and content analysis. As a theoretical framework, elements from Marx's "A Communist Manifesto" have been adopted. Overall findings of the study include that William Shakespeare conceptualized the economic hierarchy, division of labor, desire to revolt, and so on, which can be identified as Marxist elements, though the theory of Marxism appeared two centuries later.

**Keywords:** *Shakespeare, Economic Hierarchy, Marxism, Communist Manifesto.*

### 1. Introduction

*Shakespeare was a Marxist long before Marx*  
- Ryan, 2001, p. 230

The enduring legacy of William Shakespeare extends not only to his masterful storytelling and poetic brilliance but also to the universal themes that resonate with audiences across time and space. Shakespeare's works have been subject to a myriad of interpretations, ranging from psychoanalytical readings to feminist criticisms and even postcolonial deconstructions, i.e., approaches that emerged

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long after his time. Each of these fields of academic research has been developed over centuries and decades after the Elizabethan era, thus illustrating the intellectual depth and multifaceted paradigms of Shakespeare's works.

The paper attempts to explore a singular dimension of Shakespeare's universality and versatility by traversing Marxist elements embedded in his narrative and character dynamics. Traditional critical analyses on William Shakespeare tended to revolve around the attempts to identify theoretical elements, such as Marxist, within Shakespearean plays. The current research also adopts a similar approach, but the agenda is reversed. The aim is not to identify Shakespeare as a Marxist, but to exemplify how Karl Marx was influenced by Shakespearean thought. At the very core of Marxist theory is the critique of economic structures, power imbalances, and the resulting class struggles. While Karl Marx formalized these concepts in the 19th century, it is intriguing to consider whether Shakespeare's depiction of economic hierarchies, division of labour, and social discontent anticipated Marxist thought. By examining *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*, this paper explores how Shakespeare's portrayal of class dynamics and revolutionary impulses aligns with Marxist principles. Therefore, by incorporating Marxist theory in the analysis of Shakespeare's plays, the paper aims to identify proto-Marxist sensibilities that predate Marx's theories by more than two centuries.

## 2. Problem Statement

Shakespeare's picture of human civilisation is profound and global, transcending geographical and chronological borders, and has long been the focus of much scholarly interest. Shakespeare's extraordinary ability to anticipate philosophical and ideological frameworks long before they were explicitly articulated is a significant factor in the ongoing study. Among these, Marxist theory is particularly noteworthy as a critical lens that may be used to explain many facets of class conflict, power relationships, and socioeconomic systems in Shakespeare's plays.

Although Shakespeare has been extensively studied from various theoretical angles, there remains an apparent lack of thorough Marxist interpretations of his plays. Studies that now employ Marxist criticism often concentrate on a limited number of texts and lack systematic, genre-wide comparisons. Furthermore, some plays, such as *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*, receive significantly less attention in Marxist readings than others, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Measure for Measure*.

By performing a systematic Marxist analysis of four Shakespearean plays across various genres—two historical tragedies (*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*), a

comedy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), and a tragicomedy (*The Tempest*) — this study aims to close this gap. The study aims to demonstrate how Shakespeare conveys proto-Marxist concerns through his dramatic storylines and character constructions by examining the functions of themes such as class conflict, labour, ideology, and power within these writings. The central hypothesis of this study is that the plays incorporate Marxist elements, demonstrating Shakespeare's ability to reflect on and critique socio-political realities in ways that prefigure Marxist ideas.

### 3. Literature Review

One of the most significant contributions to studying Shakespeare through a proto-Marxist lens is made by Smith (2020). The researcher identified many allusions to William Shakespeare in much of Karl Marx's work, ranging from his seminal texts, including *Capital* (1867) and the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). The author begins by highlighting how Shakespeare studies were a more prominent element in Karl Marx's early education, claiming that "Marx learnt Shakespeare's line on foot and in motion" (Smith, 2020, p.68). It has also been claimed that Marx "quoted from or alluded to Shakespeare nearly 200 times in his writings" (Smith, 2020, p. 68). This identification lays the foundation for proto-Marxist analyses. Although the researcher does not provide specific quotes that Marx incorporated in his texts, it has nonetheless been claimed that the plays *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and many others were deeply influenced by the communist theorist.

Similarly, in another criticism, Smith (2022) examines how Shakespeare's writings significantly influenced Marx's rhetorical and intellectual framework. The study illustrates how Marx regularly referenced, referred to, and used Shakespearean vocabulary and imagery in his writings through in-depth intertextual and interlingual close readings. Under the guidance of his mentor and future father-in-law, Ludwig von Westphalen, whose literary academy placed a strong emphasis on Shakespearean studies, Marx was first exposed to Shakespeare as a young boy. This early immersion had a profound impact on Marx's early essays, love letters, and journalistic pursuits. Marx's use of Shakespeare remained a consistent intellectual tool as his philosophy changed from Romanticism to Left Hegelianism and finally to Communism. Shakespearean allusions appear in his mature writings, such as *Das Kapital*, where he employs them to establish political analogies, ground his criticisms, and portray politics as a performative act. The study argues that Marx developed a conceptual framework for expressing his revolutionary critique of capitalism, drawing on Shakespeare's dramatic devices, particularly inversion, dialectics, and

character archetypes. Marx and his family also demonstrated their unwavering devotion to the Bard by enthusiastically participating in the 19th-century resurgence of Shakespearean research and theatre in London. The study challenges conventional ideas about the role of literature in shaping political theory by demonstrating Shakespeare's profound influence on Marxist philosophy. It implies that literature, especially Shakespeare's writing, was crucial in shaping the intellectual and historical frameworks that would ultimately inform Marxism.

Roy (2024) examined nine Shakespearean plays and explored the elements of Marxism that made Shakespeare a Marxist before Marx. He also mentioned that Marx had been an erudite reader of Shakespeare since his boyhood. As such, he developed his theories, having ideas from Shakespeare's plays.

In his in-depth examination of Marxist Shakespeare criticism, John Drakakis (2005) offers a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the relationship between Marxist theory and Shakespeare's plays. By examining themes of social class and power dynamics, Drakakis (2005) demonstrates how Shakespeare's plays address issues essential to Marxist thought, including economic inequality and hierarchical power structures. According to the analysis, Shakespeare is a playwright whose works question the social and economic systems of his time. The research work emphasises the importance of Shakespeare's portrayal of class and labour by contending that his plays predict theoretical difficulties later defined by Karl Marx. Understanding how Shakespeare's plays mirror Marxist critiques of worker alienation and class division requires this contribution.

David Hawkes (2004) used both Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to analyse how class antagonism, power struggles, and revolutionary aspirations are shown in *Julius Caesar*. One of the main concerns of Marxist critique is the continuous conflict between opposing socioeconomic forces, which Shakespeare dramatises. Hawkes (2004) highlights the conflicts that exist between the dispossessed people and the ruling class. In his analysis of the division of labour and the socioeconomic factors that underlie political upheaval, *Julius Caesar* questions authority and looks at the human cost of ambition. The author also pointed out that the economic conditions of the late Roman Republic "display one very remarkable similarity with those... in which Shakespeare wrote" (Hawkes, 2004, p. 208). This method is essential to understanding how Shakespeare reflects and confronts the socioeconomic institutions of his period because it provides a framework for examining the play's engagement with rebellion and class dynamics within the context of Marxist ideology.

In their introduction to *Marxist Shakespeares*, Howard and Shershow (2001) provide a comprehensive overview of the approaches and scope of Marxist Shakespeare critique. This groundbreaking study not only traces the evolution of Marxism as a paradigm for literary interpretation but also examines how key Marxist concerns, such as class conflict, economic disparity, and the ideological underpinnings of power structures, are subtly hinted at throughout Shakespeare's plays. By situating Shakespeare within the broader framework of Marxist criticism, Howard and Shershow (2001) offer a critical framework for understanding how his works address socio-economic themes that align with Marxist views. The relationship between literary production and historical materialism is emphasised in the introduction, which demonstrates how Shakespeare's plays both reflect and critique the material conditions of his day. Placing Shakespeare's plays within the socioeconomic framework of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, when the capitalist system was beginning to take shape, necessitates this perspective. Both as a theoretical framework and as a historical perspective, Howard and Shershow (2001) highlight how Marxism offers a means of exposing the subtle critiques of class and power that permeate Shakespeare's writings.

Paolucci's (1977) research, on the other hand, focuses on the economic aspects of Shakespearean plays, especially from a Hegelian-Marxist perspective. The study places special emphasis on the role that money plays in various aspects. Although the study was mainly centred around Hegelian ideologies, the findings suggest the scope for further Marxist analyses. Ryan (2001), on a different note, aimed to do an isolated Marxist analysis of a singular play by Shakespeare. In other words, he examined the play *Measure for Measure* from a Marxist perspective, making links between Shakespeare's portrayal of social inequity, morality, and justice. This claim that Shakespeare foreshadows Marxist concepts in the play, concerning the conflicts between the ruling class and the working poor, is crucial since it suggests that there is scope for labelling Shakespeare as "a Marxist long before Marx" (Ryan, 2001, p. 230). Thus, Ryan's (2001) work can be employed to support the claim that Shakespeare's plays offer a Marxist analysis of social institutions. This established link, identified by Ryan (2001), significantly helped lay down the foundation for Marxist interpretations, and thus his critique has been cited and alluded to by many other authors studying the interrelation between Shakespeare and Marx.

Smirnov's early Marxist reading of Shakespeare offers a fundamental perspective on how social injustice and class conflict are reflected in the dramatist's works. Thus, the claim that Shakespeare's plays can be interpreted as a critique of the capitalist and feudal systems can be supported by this article. The examination of

labour relations and power dynamics in Shakespearean works will benefit from Smirnov's Marxist perspective. Finally, Weimann (1977) highlights the materialist examination of social relations in his discussion of the application of Marxist methodology to Shakespeare's plays. The author applied Marxist theory to Shakespeare's examination of class, power, and revolt. Therefore, Weimann's (1977) study offers a framework for examining Shakespeare's plays' historical and social settings, considering class conflicts. Together, these articles and prior research contend that Shakespeare's plays, which are frequently regarded as artefacts of the feudal era, provide critiques of class differences, labour relations, and societal institutions that foreshadow Marxist concepts. This not only suggests that there is adequate scope for Marxist analysis but also helps to highlight the existing gaps in research.

Therefore, it can be seen that many critics have incorporated a Marxist lens in the analysis of William Shakespeare's plays and also attempted to identify Shakespeare's direct literary influence on Marx. However, with that being said, a significant gap in research remains. Firstly, there seems to be a lack of papers that have taken a systematic and point-to-point approach to Marxist analysis. In other words, specific focus on the elements of class hierarchy, division of labour, and revolutionary vision, which are key elements of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, is relatively rare to come across. Secondly, many researchers have focused on individual plays in their analysis. A holistic approach that incorporates multiple plays from three different genres — historical tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy — has yet to be taken. Thirdly, a proper, conclusive Marxist analysis of any of the four selected plays is relatively rare. And finally, there are very few, if there are any, papers that have attempted to prove that Shakespeare's ideologies predated Marxism. These are the significant gaps in research that the study aims to address.

#### **4. Research Objectives**

The general objective of this research is to examine whether Shakespeare's works reflect Marxist ideologies prior to the formal development of Marxism by Karl Marx. The specific objectives define the particular goals that the present study seeks to achieve, and these are:

- i. To identify Marxist elements in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*.
- ii. To identify William Shakespeare as a pseudo-Marxist.

## 5. Research Methodology

The research employs a qualitative method of textual, content, and document analysis in order to yield the findings. An exploratory approach is also adopted, as the study aims to explore Marxist elements in William Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*. The theoretical approach incorporated in the text is Marxism, primarily focusing on the elements of economic hierarchy, division of labour, and the desire for revolution. The primary sources of data were William Shakespeare's plays *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*, while the secondary sources of data were articles, journals, previous research, websites, and other relevant documents, such as the critical analyses by Smrinov, Smith, Ryan, and so forth.

## 6. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Marxist theory, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), is a framework designed to comprehend and scrutinise social structures, economic systems, and historical development, with a specific focus on the conflicts arising from economic inequality. Central elements of Marxist theory are therefore the concepts of class hierarchy, division of labour, and the Marxist vision of mass revolution against oppressive systems. Marx, therefore, proclaims - "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (Marx and Engels 14).

Marx and Engels (1848) observed that society is divided into distinct social classes based on their relationship to the means of production, i.e., land, tools, factories, and other forms of property. The two main classes are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The authors note:

*By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of means of production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live* (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 14)

In other words, the bourgeoisie refers to the capitalist class, i.e., these are those who own and control the means of production. Their wealth and power are derived from the profits they extract from the labour of the working class. The primary goal of this class is to maximise profit. As a result, they exploit workers by paying them less than what their labour is worth. Their control over the means of production thus allowed them to retain political and economic power. Historically, Marx observed that the bourgeoisie played a revolutionary role in overthrowing feudal systems and driving industrial and technological progress;

however, they had begun to resist change and had evolved into an oppressive force. The proletariat, on the other hand, refers to the working class, i.e., those who do not own the means of production and must sell their labour in order to survive. Their work thus creates wealth for the bourgeoisie, although they are only offered a fraction of the value of their labour. The proletariat is systematically oppressed, exploited, and marginalised under capitalism since their interests are directly opposed to those of the bourgeoisie. Thus, there is a significant level of inequality in society, specifically in the form of a class hierarchy.

The second most significant element of Marxist theory is the division of labour. Marx observed the division of labour as a historical phenomenon that shaped economic systems and social relations. This essentially refers to the specialisation of work to maximise productivity in the capitalist system. Unlike the diversified roles in pre-capitalist societies, labour under capitalism is segmented into repetitive tasks, which simultaneously lead to the enhancement of efficiency but also the alienation of workers. They are thus deprived of creative fulfilment, disconnected from the product of their work, and reduced to dehumanised machines. This structure further reinforces class inequality, and the workers are only able to attain limited skills that cannot be utilised elsewhere, and thus they are stuck in a repetitive, exploitative cycle.

Finally, Marx advocated for a mass revolution. According to both Marx and Engels, the inherent contradictions and inequalities within capitalism create conditions for its own demise. As the bourgeoisie seeks to maximise their profits, the conditions of the proletariat worsen, leading to drastic levels of exploitation, poverty, and financial insecurity; the class struggle is intensified. Over time, Marx believes that the proletariat will become aware of its shared interests and collective power; this class consciousness is believed to inspire solidarity and resistance. Thus, Marx envisions that the proletariat would organise to overthrow the capitalist system through revolution, establishing a classless and stateless society, i.e., a communist society. Marx viewed this desire to revolt not as a matter of individual grievance but as a historical inevitability driven by the unequal hierarchical material conditions.

Thus, to examine how William Shakespeare's plays foreshadow important Marxist issues, this study employs Marxist theory as its primary analytical framework. This places Shakespeare in the role of a pseudo-Marxist, an early thinker who dramatised the dynamics of class conflict centuries before Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels formally theorised them. The examination methodically looks into how Shakespeare's works portray the points elaborated above, i.e. class hierarchy, the division of labour, and the underlying drive for mass

revolution, drawing on *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). First, the plays will be analysed for their depiction of socioeconomic division and conflicts between the governing elite and the disenfranchised ordinary people, which reflects the Marxist division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Second, early criticisms of alienation and exploitation will be revealed through an examination of the division of labour in the plays, namely, how characters are restricted and defined by their roles in feudal or proto-capitalist economies. To reconcile Shakespeare's dramatic imagination with Marx's concept of historical materialism and the inevitability of class insurrection, the research ultimately examines revolutionary undercurrents, i.e., moments where oppressed populations express dissent or attempt resistance. By closely examining *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*, the study aims to demonstrate that Shakespeare, despite writing before the Industrial Revolution, anticipated class tensions and structural inequality that predate Marx's theories, supporting his designation as a precursor to Marx.

## **7. Analysis and Discussion**

As mentioned before, to prove Shakespeare's Marxist ideologies, it is essential to identify the main elements of Marxist theory within these works. To ensure a holistic approach to this analysis, four plays from three genres have been selected, i.e., two historical tragedies (*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*), a comedy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), and a tragicomedy (*The Tempest*). By identifying elements of class hierarchy, division of labour, and revolutionary vision, the research will aim to prove that Shakespeare was a Marxist long before Karl Marx himself.

### **7.1 Class Hierarchy in Shakespeare's Plays**

#### **7.1.1 Power Imbalance in *Julius Caesar***

Class hierarchy is a significant element throughout *Julius Caesar*. Upon closer examination, three ways in which a class hierarchy can be identified are evident. The first perspective is that of Julius Caesar and the senators, including Brutus, Cassius, Casca, and Decius. The second is the state's governance and the plebeians. Finally, the third is the masters (Caesar, Brutus, etc.) and their slaves (Messala and Pindarus).

Julius Caesar and the senators, Brutus, Cassius, Casca, and Decius, represent the ruling class and the aristocracy. This group is equivalent to the bourgeoisie, who hold the state's political and economic power, according to a Marxist interpretation. They set the course of Rome's governance and have power over the populace. The senators' anxiety over Caesar ascending to the throne reflects the bourgeoisie's internal strife, which is driven by individual goals and a desire

to maintain control of the government as a whole. Brutus and Cassius plot against Caesar to keep one person from gaining absolute power and endangering the aristocracy's shared domination, not because they care about the plebeians, i.e., "let Caesar seat him sure, for we will shake him, or worse days endure" (Shakespeare, 1998, p.91). Here in this monologue by Cassius, the 'worse days' are for him and the other senators since they don't want to be under Caesar's command. A defining feature of Marxist class theory is the ruling class's self-preserving nature, which is illustrated by this battle within the elite.

According to Marxist thought, the proletariat could be considered to have been represented by the plebeians, or common citizens. They do the work that keeps the state running, but they have little autonomy or political influence. In the play, they are frequently portrayed as a pliable and manipulable mass, which emphasises their subservient position within the class system. Their immediate loyalty to Brutus following his assassination and to Antony following his funeral oration, for example, highlights their reliance on the elite for direction and leadership, i.e., this Caesar was a tyrant... Peace, let us hear what Antony can say" (Shakespeare, 1998, p.132). Because the interests of the proletariat are subjected to the disputes and aspirations of the ruling class, this dynamic reveals the proletariat's estrangement and lack of class consciousness. Antony's use of their rage to exact revenge for Caesar's passing is a prime example of how the ruling class uses the working class to further their agendas and maintain class oppression.

The most overt instance of exploitation in the class system is shown in the interactions between the slaves (such as Messala and Pindarus) and their owners (Caesar, Brutus, and Cassius). Similar to the most alienated workers in Marxist theory, slaves in the Roman system were at the bottom of society, performing labour without autonomy or compensation. Despite their small parts in the play, they highlight their lack of agency and serve as instruments for their masters. For example, the master's ultimate control over the slave's life is demonstrated when Cassius orders Pindarus to kill him in a time of despair, i.e., "come hither... Now be a freeman, and with this sword, that ran through Caesar's bowels, search this bosom" (Shakespeare 164). The tremendous dehumanisation that comes with slavery, which Marx saw as an extreme form of class exploitation, is reflected in this total rule.

### ***7.1.2 Power and Servitude in A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Class hierarchy is likewise depicted in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both in the human world and in the fairy magical world. The hierarchical system of human

civilisation, where authority is wielded over subordinates and power is concentrated at the top, is reflected in and critiqued by the fairy realm. The relationships between Oberon, Titania, Puck, and the other fairies serve as an example of class division, labour exploitation, and the maintenance of hierarchy as viewed through the prism of Marxist theory.

In this supernatural system, Titania and Oberon, the fairy world's rulers, stand in for the bourgeoisie or aristocracy. They have complete control over both their territory and their subordinates. The personal goals and disputes that are frequently observed within the ruling class are exemplified by their argument over the changeling boy. Titania and Oberon both want authority over the infant, but not because they genuinely need it; rather, they want to satisfy their egos and establish their dominion. In Act 2, Scene 1, we can see this scene where Puck notes:

*A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king; she never had so sweet a changeling: and jealous Oberon would have the child*  
(Shakespeare, 2013, p. 28).

This power struggle mirrors the self-interest of the ruling class in human civilisation, showing how rivalry for control fuels strife even among the elite. In the fairy hierarchy, Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow) has a special midway ground. Puck is entrusted with fulfilling his master's orders as Oberon's dependable servant, including seducing Titania and controlling the Athenian lovers. Marx's idea of the petty bourgeoisie, i.e., people who work for the ruling class while having little power of their own, is consistent with Puck's position. Even though Puck is more independent than the other fairies, Oberon nevertheless uses him in his plots. His mischief may appear autonomous, but in the end, it is subject to his master's decision, illustrating how middlemen in a hierarchy uphold the dominance structure.

The proletariat is represented by the general fairies, who carry out mundane and frequently unseen tasks to keep the fairy world running well. Serving Titania is their primary responsibility in the play, particularly when she is enchanted and taking care of Bottom. The unequal distribution of status and power in their culture is emphasised by the fairies' devotion to Titania, i.e., “come, wait upon him; lead him to be my bower” (Shakespeare 65). Even though they are ethereal, they carry out routine duties like caring for Titania and blindly obeying commands. Their alienation, a state Marx recognised as essential to the exploitation of the working class, is highlighted by their lack of personality and agency.

### ***7.1.3 Social and Political Inequality in Coriolanus***

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, although often overlooked in academic discussions, is one of his most overtly political plays, providing a scathing indictment of power struggles, class stratification, and the conflicts between the governing class and the general populace. With patricians (aristocrats) and plebeians (commoners) engaged in a never-ending struggle for representation, government, and economic rights, the play depicts the strict stratification of Roman society. Particularly in its emphasis on class conflict, the function of ideology in preserving power, and the use of violence as an instrument of oppression, this dynamic is highly compatible with Marxist theory.

The main character of *Coriolanus*, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, is a prime example of the patrician class's contempt for the plebeians. His disdain for the lower classes is a reflection of the superior ideology upheld by the ruling class to defend its power. The common people are weak, uninformed, and unworthy of political agency, according to Coriolanus. For example, he utters, "What's the matter, you dissentious rogues?" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 8). By associating the plebeians with illness, Coriolanus dehumanises them in this instance. His use of language is a Marxist critique of the intellectual frameworks that uphold class oppression and a metaphor for the ruling class's view that the lower classes are a disruptive force in society. Furthermore, Coriolanus believes that the plebeians are naturally erratic and incapable of rational government: "You cry against the noble senate, who, (under the gods) keep you in awe, which else would feed on one another? What's their seeking?" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 9). This claim represents the aristocratic rationale for their domination, which holds that the ordinary people will devolve into anarchy if left to their own devices. Speaking in a Marxist sense, this is consistent with the bourgeois ideology that views the ruling class as the essential social stabilisers.

Furthermore, a class struggle opens the play as the famine-stricken plebeians demand the right to have tribunes to advocate for their interests. They acknowledge the economic injustice imposed by the ruling class and aim to use political power to offset it, which is essentially a Marxist argument, i.e., "the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 3). A key concept in Marxist critique, economic exploitation, is understood by the plebeians in this context. Like Marx's understanding of surplus value and exploitation under capitalism, they recognise that the aristocracy's

wealth is derived from the misery of the masses. However, in the end, their attempt to gain representation by electing tribunes (Brutus and Sicinius) proves to be ineffective. Despite gaining some political consciousness, i.e., the notion that the working class can be tricked into endorsing oppressive institutions.

#### ***7.1.4 Dominance and Oppression in The Tempest***

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare explores the theme of class hierarchy through the relationships between Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban, embodying power dynamics that reflect issues of social class, servitude, and control. The bourgeoisie, or ruling class, can be represented by Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, who took control of the island after oppressing Caliban. Even though he no longer holds a governmental title, he nevertheless has complete control over his territory. Ariel, on the other hand, acts as a symbol of oppression, representing the lower classes' exploited labour. Although not physically enslaved like Caliban, Ariel is placed in a dependent situation and has his freedom postponed due to his allegiance to Prospero. The exploitation of the working class, who are denied autonomy and only promised freedom in the far future, is mirrored in Ariel's labour, which includes controlling the stranded crew and manipulating them with magical feats. Prospero's will limit Ariel's magical powers, illustrating how even influential people can be oppressed within the larger context of class. Prospero stole Caliban's land and forced him into slavery, making him a symbol of the colonised indigenous person. He is frequently seen as a representation of the downtrodden, dispossessed lower class, standing for people who are subjected to colonial oppression, marginalisation, and dehumanisation. Resentment characterizes Caliban's relationship with Prospero, and his attempts to overthrow Prospero's authority represent colonised peoples' struggles against imperial power.

### ***7.2 Division of Labour in Shakespeare's Plays***

#### ***7.2.1 Limited Agency in Julius Caesar***

Shakespeare presents a Marxist interpretation of the division of labour in *Julius Caesar*, in which particular characters are given particular, frequently constrained functions that represent their socioeconomic class and the power structures of Roman society. In addition to upholding social order, this separation draws attention to the system's intrinsic exploitation and inequity.

Both slaves, Messala and Pindarus, are significant representations of the lower classes whose work is controlled by the elite but have somewhat different social positions. Messala is Brutus's confidant and soldier who fights beside him against Mark Antony and Octavius's army. Because he contributes to military planning and communication, Messala is given a slightly larger degree of trust and

responsibility; however, his role remains essentially one of subordination. He is devoted to Brutus, and the higher-ranking characters' orders control every aspect of his work. Despite his participation in significant military operations, he remains subservient. He only plays a minor, supporting role in the larger political conflict due to his social standing as a servant of the ruling class. In contrast, Pindarus is a more overt illustration of the subservient follower. He plays an entirely submissive role and is Cassius' slave. Pindarus serves as a tool for Cassius's goals, and his labour, such as bringing the news of Titinius's death to Cassius, ultimately results in Cassius's terrible demise. The way that Pindarus serves as a tool in his master's political battles defines his job and emphasises the Marxist concept of alienation. In the broader political framework, he is not given any agency, and Cassius's will determines his actions and even his freedom, i.e., "now be a free man" (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 164).

Though they do not contribute strategically or intellectually, the plebeians' duty is linked to public activity and physical labour. They act as a group but lack a clear plan and an awareness of the broader political implications in the well-known scene where they resolve to murder the conspirators following Antony's speech. Instead of being active participants in determining their fate, they are viewed as an instrument for action. The Marxist belief that the proletariat is frequently excluded from the political process and exploited by the ruling class for their purposes is reflected in the plebeians' lack of political power. Although the plebeians' work is valuable, the upper levels of authority control and exploit it, whether it is through their support of Caesar or their involvement in mob violence.

### ***7.2.2 Divided Servitude in A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Likewise, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a division of labour where individuals are assigned specialised tasks can also be found. Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, is portrayed as a key player in the fairy hierarchy, with a position that is comparatively higher than that of the other fairies. Puck is entrusted with significant and challenging tasks as Oberon's dependable servant, including seducing Titania into falling in love with Bottom and controlling the Athenian lovers. In addition to carrying out routine duties, Puck's job is to carry out Oberon's strategic objectives and serve as an instrument of his will, i.e., "I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes" (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 38). This emphasises Puck's special status as a more competent worker in the fairy realm, where he is assigned important jobs requiring judgement, wit, and intelligence. However, Puck's work is still done to serve the objectives of the higher authority and is still subject to Oberon's will. As Oberon's servant, Puck's agency and authority are constrained, illustrating the Marxist concept of

alienation. Like how competent labourers or the "petty bourgeoisie" frequently serve the goals of the ruling class despite their autonomy or ability, Puck's acts appear to be independent. However, in the end, they serve the interests of his master.

Carrying other fairies in the play, Mustard-seed, Moth, Cobweb, and Peace-blossom stand in for the lower echelons of the fairy hierarchy in contrast to Puck. Even though they are still magical, their duties are far less important and more commonplace than Puck's crucial part in Oberon's schemes. When Titania is enchanted, these fairies take care of her needs, such as keeping Bottom company and taking care of her surroundings. The majority of their work consists of monotonous, servant-like tasks, which further solidify their position as the fairy world's oppressed people.

These fairies' inferior status is highlighted by the fact that their main responsibilities are to tend to Bottom, a mortal who has been turned into an ass. They are told to swoon over Bottom in spite of his grotesque appearance, which makes their encounters with him fairly humorous. This can be seen as a metaphor for the alienated labour of the working class, which frequently consists of duties that are necessary to preserve the comfort and prestige of those in higher positions but have little to no intrinsic worth to the workers themselves.

### **7.2.3 Rulers and Labourers in Coriolanus**

In *Coriolanus*, the patricians oversee politics and military matters, while the plebeians are primarily involved in agricultural work, especially grain production. The plebeians, who are starving as a result of food shortages, mutiny in the play's opening scene, but the ruling elite hoards grain and will not distribute it equitably. The plebeians can be seen to voice their complaints: "The leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 3). This claim emphasises a central Marxist criticism of the division of labour: the elite, who do not directly contribute to production, accumulate riches and power while those who carry out the necessary labour (creating food) suffer from deprivation. Similar to Marx's theory of surplus value, which posits that the ruling class appropriates the wealth created by the working class, the plebeians recognise that their exploitation is a fundamental component of Rome's economic system. The patrician belief that workers are less valuable is exposed when Coriolanus, speaking for the aristocratic warrior class, rejects the plebeians' demands. This disdain towards the common people is a result of the aristocracy's conviction that they are naturally fit for leadership and that the working class is incapable of political reasoning. Such ideological explanations for class

distinction are criticised by Marxist theory, which contends that they uphold the power of the ruling class.

#### ***7.2.4 Forced Submission in The Tempest***

A similar dynamic is also evident in *The Tempest*. Prospero's servant spirit, Ariel, represents a more cognitive and calculated kind of work. Ariel is entrusted with executing intricate schemes, including controlling the shipwrecked characters and planning the sequence of events that culminate in the reconciliation. A clear example of Ariel's submission to Prospero can be found in Act 1, Scene 2, where Prospero asks, "Hast thou, spirit, performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?" (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 111-12) to which Ariel replies, "to every article" (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 112). Although Ariel works as a servant, their work is not manual or demeaning. Instead, Ariel utilises supernatural abilities, particularly in the areas of illusion, control, and persuasion, to achieve Prospero's objectives. One could consider Ariel's labour to be that of the "skilled servant," i.e., a more privileged worker who, although still servile, carries out tasks requiring intelligence, ingenuity, and tact. The overlooked manual labourer Caliban, in sharp contrast to Ariel, stands in for the proletariat, or working class, which endures the most gruelling and physically taxing kind of work. Prospero enslaves Caliban and has him do manual labour, including maintaining the island and gathering firewood. Caliban is not assigned any strategic or intellectual tasks like Ariel is. His work is entirely manual and physical, reflecting the kind of labour typically performed by the exploited working class under a capitalist economy.

### ***7.3 Marx's Revolutionary Vision***

#### ***7.3.1 Usurpation in Julius Caesar***

The senators' assassination of Caesar in *Julius Caesar* is a reflection of the Marxist notion that inequality breeds tension, which in turn breeds unrest. The ruling elite, represented by the senators, views Caesar's rise to power as a threat to the existing political system. Caesar's increasing power upends the class system, which worries the elite, as they believe his concentration of power threatens their privilege. To maintain the status quo and avert the possible revolt of the oppressed, this tension feeds the plot to assassinate him.

However, revolt persists long after Caesar's death. Once oppressed, the plebeians are moved by Antony's speech and rise in rebellion, showing how the working class can overthrow the ruling class when disparity becomes too great. According to Marxist theory, inequality breeds conflict and revolution, whether as a result of the activities of the oppressed or the ruling class, and the senators' struggle to preserve their power ultimately speeds up the breakdown of the current system.

### 7.3.2 *Desire for Agency in A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Marxist concepts of alienation and class consciousness are in line with Puck's self-awareness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which shows a faint wish to go beyond his position as Oberon's servant. Even while Puck takes pleasure in his mischievous activities, he is nevertheless subject to Oberon's control and acts in a way that ultimately serves his master's wishes. His reflective moments, such as when he admits the effects of his acts, imply a desire for greater independence. Though it is constantly limited by his servitude, Puck's occasional manipulation of events and delight in chaos reveal a desire for independence. Class consciousness is hinted at by this understanding of his subordinate function, in which he acknowledges his place yet is powerless to overcome the constraints placed on him by the hierarchical structure. The conflict between self-awareness and the incapacity to escape the class system is thus delicately explored by Puck's character.

### 7.3.3 *Revolutionary Spirit in Coriolanus*

According to Marxist theory, economic oppression, in which the ruling class exploits the proletariat's labour while depriving them of material necessities, is a common cause of revolutions. Class warfare is depicted directly in the play's opening scene, as famine-stricken plebeians demand grain from the aristocrats, who hoard food supplies and reject fair distribution. The injustice based on class is expressed by one citizen who utters, *Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price.* (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 3) This outcry expresses a wider discontent with structural oppression than just hunger. Like in Marx's theory of surplus value, where the bourgeoisie controls production and withholds resources to maintain power, the plebeians realise that their suffering is not unintentional but rather purposefully imposed by the ruling class. The revolutionary impulse, i.e., a wish to take charge of their own means of subsistence, is reflected in their first call to arms.

It is essential to note that while Marx associated the revolutionary spirit with the oppressed proletariat, such spirits are often diminished due to the power imbalance and a lack of unity. This, too, has been reflected in the play. Ultimately, *Coriolanus* portrays a failed revolution in which the plebeians' aspirations for change are thwarted by their own internal divisions and elite manipulation. By calling for representation and banishing Coriolanus, they temporarily exercise power, but they do not end the oppressive systems. Instead of driving a genuine proletariat rebellion, the tribunes appropriate the plebeians' fight for their ends.

### 7.3.4 Longing for Freedom in *The Tempest*

Although they react differently to their oppression, Caliban and Ariel both exhibit aspects of class consciousness in *The Tempest*. Caliban regularly communicates his rage and dissatisfaction, particularly through his cries for revolt, and his quest for freedom is firmly anchored in a feeling of injustice, i.e., “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is that I know how to curse” (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 121). Caliban expresses a clear yearning for rebellion; he yearns to depose Prospero and take back his independence. He feels insulted and humiliated, which feeds his anger at Prospero and reflects Marxist concepts of alienation and exploitation. Since Caliban considers himself a victim of colonial tyranny, his violent desire to overthrow the unjust monarch may be seen as a manifestation of his class struggle.

Ariel, meanwhile, has a more nuanced yearning for independence. Ariel, a spirit obligated to Prospero, longs for freedom but is not as obviously enraged as Caliban. Ariel's servitude consists more of carrying out magical duties and planning events at Prospero's direction than it does of actual physical labour. Ariel's rebellion, in contrast to Caliban's, is motivated by a desire to be freed from Prospero's rule rather than using violence. Ariel repeatedly begs Prospero for his freedom, demonstrating his desire for freedom, and his slavery creates a sense of psychological and emotional alienation. Ariel's need for independence is indicative of a more internalised version of class consciousness, in which the need for independence manifests itself in more subdued ways, i.e., *remember I have done thee worthy service, told thee no lies, made no mistakings... thou did promise to bate me a full year* (Shakespeare, 2014, 114).

Ariel's more subdued desire for freedom and Caliban's overt violence together symbolise two distinct reactions to oppression. However, the play's examination of class consciousness and the yearning for freedom from an oppressive power are evident in both characters.

## 8. Significance and Conclusion

The significance of the research findings is multifaceted and nuanced. By identifying Marxist elements within the plays of William Shakespeare, it highlights the timelessness, versatility, and ingeniousness of Shakespeare. Marxism was developed in the 1900s, while Shakespeare belongs to the 1600s; this proves his ideological intelligence and clearly illustrates why he is still academically studied to this date. The findings also suggest that Shakespeare's plays can be studied in the contemporary era to understand the social dynamics of an economic society, as these plays have been proven to reflect issues of class hierarchy, division of labour, and class consciousness. Finally, the study implies

that there is scope for further research. Several critics, including Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, among others, have further developed Karl Marx's theories. Their theories can also be applied to Shakespeare's plays. Furthermore, Shakespeare wrote around 38 plays; each of these plays can also be studied through a Marxist lens. Additionally, since Marxism has been applied to Shakespeare's plays, it suggests that other theories, such as feminism, postcolonialism, and psychoanalysis, which were developed after the Elizabethan era, could also be applied to his works.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Shakespeare did indeed reflect Marxist ideologies around two centuries before Marx did, which makes him a Marxist before Marx himself. This proclamation has been substantiated through a Marxist analysis of four of his plays, which span three different genres: *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* (historical tragedies), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (comedy), and *The Tempest* (tragicomedy). Each of these plays reflected the Marxist ideas of class hierarchy, division of labour, and a revolutionary vision. The power imbalances between the senators and the plebeians in *Julius Caesar*, the servitude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the overt power imbalance in *Coriolanus*, and the forced oppression in *The Tempest* depict the Marxist idea of class hierarchy. Furthermore, it can be seen that those in subordinate positions in all four of the plays have specialised duties that align with the idea of the division of labour in a capitalist/materialist society. Finally, the characters' desire to transcend their subordinate roles, as seen in the usurpation of Julius Caesar, Puck's self-awareness, the revolution of common citizens, and Ariel and Caliban's longing for freedom, denotes Marx's hypothesis that the proletariat will revolt to create a classless society. Finally, we can conclude that Shakespeare's ideas predate Marx's.

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