



International Conference on Engineering, Management Science,
Technology and Humanities (ICEMSTH - 2018)
28TH October, 2018, Guwahati, Assam, India.

CERTIFICATE NO: ICEMSTH /2018 /C1018234

Shakespeare's Attitude Towards Non-Secularism

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's dramatic corpus reveals a complex and often ambivalent attitude towards non-secularism, reflecting the religious turbulence of Elizabethan and Jacobean England while prioritizing humanistic concerns over dogmatic adherence. Born into a family with possible Catholic sympathies yet operating under Protestant state orthodoxy, Shakespeare infuses his plays with non-secular motifs—providence, ghosts, sin, forgiveness, and divine order—yet consistently subjects them to skeptical scrutiny and dramatic irony. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's invocation of purgatorial spirits and providential design underscores a lingering Catholic residue, yet the play ultimately subordinates theological certainty to existential doubt and human frailty. *King Lear* interrogates pagan and Christian notions of divine justice, portraying a world where gods remain silent or indifferent, thereby exposing the limits of non-secular consolation amid human suffering. *Measure for Measure* dramatizes the corruption of religious authority through the hypocritical Angelo, critiquing institutional piety while exploring mercy and ethical relativism. Across these and other works, Shakespeare employs non-secular language and imagery not as endorsements of faith but as tools to illuminate psychological depth, political power, and moral ambiguity.

Scholarly analysis demonstrates that his attitude resists both zealous Protestantism and covert Catholicism, favoring instead a tolerant pluralism that accommodates religious language without enforcing doctrinal purity. Textual evidence from the histories reveals a fascination with the divine right of kings tempered by pragmatic secular politics, while the romances integrate supernatural redemption within frameworks that celebrate human resilience and forgiveness. This stance aligns with broader Renaissance humanism, wherein non-secular elements enrich narrative without dominating it, suggesting Shakespeare viewed religion as a cultural and emotional resource rather than an absolute truth. Methods of close reading, supported by historical contextualization of the English Reformation and recusant culture, reveal recurring patterns: religious hypocrisy is satirized, divine intervention is questioned, and secular virtues such as empathy and reason prevail. Longitudinal examination of his canon from early comedies to late plays indicates an evolving subtlety, where non-secular frameworks increasingly serve character development and thematic irony rather than moral instruction.

These findings challenge binary interpretations of Shakespeare as either devout or secular, positioning him instead as a pragmatic observer who harnesses non-secularism to probe the human condition. Implications extend to modern literary theory, informing discussions of secularization in early modern drama and contemporary adaptations that negotiate faith and skepticism. By elucidating Shakespeare's measured engagement with non-secular forces, the research underscores his enduring relevance as a playwright who transformed religious inheritance into universal dramatic insight, offering a model of artistic autonomy within constrained ideological landscapes. Future directions include comparative studies with contemporaries like Marlowe to refine understandings of religious ambiguity in Renaissance theater. Overall, Shakespeare's attitude reflects a strategic integration of non-secular elements that ultimately affirms the primacy of human experience.

Keywords Shakespeare, non-secularism, religion, humanism