



Afflatus Creations

Vol. 1, No. 3

Page 95-101

WAS SHAKESPEARE AN EXISTENTIAL WIMP?

Robert Maddox-Harle © 1998 & 2024

In this paper I discuss the way in which Shakespeare explores the implications of such human traits as lust, greed and envy. The acts of violence we perpetrate upon ourselves and one another indicate that there may be no guarantees of benevolent human action. I will look at "*Measure for Measure*" and "*The Merchant of Venice*", these two plays seem to me to address the problem of benevolent human action at a more complex level than many of Shakespeare's other plays.

Before discussing the plays in detail it is necessary to briefly define what we mean by benevolent human action. Benevolent means, "to do good without thought of profit". This implies selflessness in the one being benevolent. It is my belief that there is no such thing as, purely, benevolent human action. There is always a self-interest motive, generally unconscious, behind all human actions. This idea, as theory, was expounded by Hobbes in "*The Leviathan*", and as the discipline of Evolutionary Psychology matures, the idea becomes more and more compelling (see works by E.O Wilson, J. Diamond, D. Dennett and R. Dawkins).

The ideology of Christianity, underpinned by Platonism (eternal "Form of the Good"), would argue strongly against this position. However, I wonder how many people would perform benevolent Christian acts of goodness if they believed there was no reward. The reward of course is *survival* of the individual, either immediate or for eternity (everlasting life).

In both the plays under discussion Shakespeare devised closures which seem to indicate that there *is* a guarantee of benevolent human action. "*Measure for Measure*" ends with the various couples getting together "nicely". "*The Merchant of Venice*" ends with justice *seeming* to be done, and the couples getting together, again in Mills and Boon style. I would charge Shakespeare with being an "existential wimp", no less a genius for this though. Calling these *saccharine* sweet closures, comic, only

gives my claim more validity. Shakespeare juxtaposes comic and tragic action to give the audience, and perhaps himself, some emotional relief when the going gets too heavy. For me, all is not well that ends well. Life experiences and history show us, if we have the fortitude to look honestly, that life rarely ends as Shakespeare would like us to believe.

Sartre and Brecht, like Shakespeare, explore greed, manipulation, survival and such but do not let us leave the theatre with a “nice, warm, fuzzy feeling”, they force us to leave with the blood on *our* hands. This does not make for vastly popular theatre though, perhaps Shakespeare's genius was, that by giving the audience a happy or justified ending, he ensured the continuing popularity of his works.

It is argued that myths and fairy-tales allow us to venture into chthonian realms and experience vicariously the dangers that threaten our survival. Similarly Shakespeare's plays, like the myths he used as source material, allow us to experience these human *sins*(?) that are latent in us all. When we leave the theatre, Shakespeare wants us to do so feeling that our sins may be forgiven and that we subliminally accept the puerile, subservience required of us by a Christian monarchy that is his underlying ideology.

It is important for this discussion to understand Shakespeare's ideology, because traits such as, greed, pride and so on which are considered simply aspects of human character from an Eastern perspective, are sins from a Christian perspective. As Nosworthy points out St. Luke's Gospel 6.36-42. is present in a number of Shakespeare's plays and is the main source for “*Measure for Measure*” (Nosworthy 1969. p.25-26).

In “*Measure for Measure*” two characters, Isabella and Angelo, stand out as being the most *sinful* and who also have the greatest opportunity of being benevolent. The Duke's pride prevents him from being a good leader so to retain his good image with the Vendettas he entrusts Angelo with absolute power. Angelo is to rid the city of fornication and selects Claudio to make an example of. Angelo's adherence to the letter of the law. This makes his later crimes even more abhorrent. He is not only overcome by lust for Isabella: he commits the same crime for which he has condemned Claudio; he is willing to kill a man if his lust is not satisfied; he is willing to “deflower” a virgin attached to a religious order; and he attempts to satisfy his lust by coercion, as Trigg mentions this would legally be rape (Trigg. 1990. p.73). At no time does Angelo

show benevolence towards Claudio nor to Isabella, whom he purports to love (after meeting her for a few minutes).

Through the swapping tricks, Mariana for Isabella and a pirate's head for Claudio's, some of Angelo's crimes in the end were not really committed. However, when Angelo confessed his sins, "But let my trial be mine own confession/ Immediate sentence, then, and sequent death" he did not know of these tricks. So in intent and thought, and I would add in the eyes of God, he committed them all. So Shakespeare, echoing Christ, forgives Angelo and expects his audience to do the same. This play would be a travesty for a Muslim or a Jew as both these faiths require, not a confession but, "an eye for an eye...".

Isabella's actions are somewhat more complex than Angelo's. Her refusal to yield to Angelo's demands, on religious chastity grounds, has been the subject of much debate. As Nosworthy shows, she really did not have a choice, mere physical death is a trifle compared to eternal damnation (Nosworthy 1969. pp.30-31). This argument holds only if Isabella is absolutely devoted to the "Order of Saint Clare", which as we find out in the final scene, to our horror, she is not. Isabella drops her self-obsessed "holier than thou" chastity routine, backs out of her marriage to Christ to marry the Duke, allowing her own brother to die. Because it suited her self-interest, at the time, shows that there really are no guarantees of benevolent human action. Similarly, Isabella is subjected to Claudio's self-interest and greed when he cares not for his sister's dilemma but only for his own life.

Isabella pleads for Angelo's life by insisting that, "His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,/And must be buried but as an intent/That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects,/Intents but merely thoughts". This, coming from a supposedly religious novice is bizarre, impure thoughts are "as subjects" in Christ's (God's) eyes. Further, Isabella helped the Duke set-up Angelo for her supposed own rape, on the very weak grounds that Mariana was already betrothed to Angelo. Fie, Fie, Isabella is an evil self-serving character!

Shakespeare cleverly explores the way lust, greed and pride interact and drive humans to act in hypo-critical, self-serving and non benevolent ways. However, having exposed these human *sins* he then contradicts existential reality's non-benevolence with the incongruous, over benevolence of the play's closure. Even though Shakespeare had to be mindful of heresy both in regard to the Church and the

Monarchy this play could have ended very differently. The final scene at best weakened his exposé of lust and greed and at worst rendered it ineffectual.

Turning now to "*The Merchant of Venice*" we find two similarities. Both plays have nice, respectable endings and both use a rather weak scheme to turn the plot around: condoning the fornication with Mariana because she was already Angelo's; and the legal point of law regarding the "pound of flesh". For me "*The Merchant of Venice*" is one of Shakespeare's most enjoyable plays but more importantly, I believe it is a literary work of great significance. This play deals with a fundamental issue that underpins the last two thousand years of Western civilisation, that is, the antagonism between Jew and Gentile. This conflict between the Old Law and the new is far more complex than that of a dispossessed people and a difference about religion.

Shakespeare had no knowledge of what would happen in the twentieth century regarding the Holocaust; as Code notes there were very few Jews in England in the sixteenth century and Shakespeare probably never met one (Code. 1990. p.27). This makes Shakespeare's ability to tap into and explore human character all the more profound, though not necessarily desirable. Not having personal connections with a particular group of people nor individuals within the group is the perfect prerequisite for upholding a received stereotypical image.

Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock not only continues the Jew stereotype but helps **recreate** it for future generations. As the dominant plot of the play it is a vehicle for Christian propaganda. In "*Measure for Measure*" Christian ideology is rather subtle and covert, emphasising the gentle side of Christianity, meekness and loving your enemy. In "*The Merchant of Venice*" the blatant hypocrisy of Christianity is overtly evident. The hypocrisy involves on the one hand, forgiving your enemy, on the other, killing or punishing them if they transgress or will not accept Christianity's doctrines.

In this play Shakespeare explores hatred, pride and mercy specifically. Although the Princes of Morocco and Aragon lust after Portia it is a very controlled, proper lust. When they fail to solve the casket riddle they just leave without a fuss. Portia is the dignified, *correct* lady, exhibiting none of the strumpet like lust of Cleopatra nor the manipulative lust of Angelo. Portia's romantic subplot enables Shakespeare to focus on the intransigent non benevolence of Shylock.

Gratiano virtually pleads with Shylock to show mercy, "Can no prayers pierce thee?" And The Duke, "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?" The Duke, Bassanio, Antonio and Gratiano seem to represent all the good things of Christianity.

However, the hypocritical Shakespeare shows Shylock absolutely no mercy nor benevolence. Shylock is made a scapegoat upon which the “squeaky clean”, both psychologically and physically, Christians may vent their collectively suppressed hatred.

Shylock is no less hateful though, throughout the play at every opportunity he expresses his hatred for Christians, “I hate him for he is a Christian”, “...but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you”. When Warren Mitchell in the BBC production of the play says these lines, they take on an added vitriolic power and hatred that chills the audience to the bone.

Power issues are not overtly prominent in this play, the control of Portia's future by the father's casket test and even Jessica's oppression by Shylock are minor issues. The major covert business of Shakespeare is to strip Shylock of all power, to make him physically (financially) powerless and to psychologically obliterate his Jewishness. In the court scene as part of Shylock's sentence, Antonio insists that, “He presently (instantly) become a Christian”. Forcing a person, by law, to adopt a religious belief contrary to their wishes is itself a most heinous crime.

When Portia, as a male, says: “The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh.’/ Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh /But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed/One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods/Are by the laws of Venice confiscate”.

Shylock is further psychologically defeated. Because Shylock's whole “merciless Business” is based on his professed but obviously insincere adherence to the letter of the law. After he realises he is beaten, he says he will accept the offer of thrice the amount due, after refusal of this, he then says, he will be content with the principal only. This grasping at any payment shows Shylock to be motivated by greed, not simply adherence to the law.

The final annihilation of Shylock is when half the money is directed by Antonio to Jessica and Lorenzo. This finalises the loss of power of father over daughter which started when Jessica left home (with Shylock's jewels).

After the minor subplot, of giving away then regaining the betrothal rings, everyone pairs off and all are happy. All except the “evil” Jew who has been persecuted by Christian hypocrisy. Whether Shylock's actions are right or wrong is

not really the issue, the play portrays him as an evil sinner and shows him none of the benevolence that "*Measure for Measure*" bestows on Angelo, Claudio or Juliet.

"*The Merchant of Venice*" highlights a further Christian dichotomy between homosexuality/transvestism and "proper" heterosexual betrothal and marriage. As Jardine explains, boys played the female roles in all Elizabethan theatre (Jardine, 1983. p.9). This is not unusual in itself as this practice is widespread in India, Asia and Japan. However, the "friendship" between Bassanio and Antonio is a little too perfect for me. Antonio is smitten by Bassanio and will do anything for him, include die if necessary. This is perhaps the only instance in the main part of the plays where a degree of benevolence is guaranteed, however, Antonio is only benevolent to Bassanio because he loves him.

Bassanio gives "the learned doctor" Portia's ring for saving Antonio, then when he later recovers the ring and learns Portia was the "androgynous" doctor he says, "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow./When I am absent then be with my wife". This latter part of the last scene is riddled with *high camp* sexual innuendo and double entendre mixed with sexual power games. As Paglia insists, "Every gesture of love is an assertion of power. There is no selflessness or self-sacrifice, only refinement of domination" (Paglia, 1990. p.274). Although these two plays have none of the bloody, murderous action of Hamlet and Macbeth, they explore the more subtle ways greed, lust and hatred drive humans to action. The closures of both plays lull us into believing that we can rely on human benevolence, even though this theatrical licence denies existential reality and contradicts the main action of the plays.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy. A study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom.* 1959. Princeton University Press. New Jersey.
- Code, T. *The Merchant of Venice.* in, *Myth and Ideology.* Unit C. *Shakespearean Mythmaking.* Deakin University, 1990. Victoria.
- Jardine, L. *Female roles and Elizabethan eroticism. Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare.* 1983. Harvester Press. Sussex/NJ.
- Krieger, E. *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies.* 1979. Macmillan Press, London.
- Myth and Ideology. Unit C. Shakespearean Mythmaking.* Reader. 1990. Deakin University, Victoria.
- Merchant of Venice.* BBC TV Shakespeare. BBC Enterprises.

Nosworthy, J.M. in, *Measure for Measure*. Shakespeare, W. 1969. Penguin, London.

Paglia, C. *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. Penguin, 1990. London.

Shakespeare, W. *Measure for Measure*. 1969. Penguin, London.

Shakespeare, W. *The Merchant of Venice*. 1963. Signet/Penguin, London.

Shakespeare, *Mythology and Psychology*. Audio tape. 1998. Deakin University, Victoria.

Shell, M. *Money, Language and Thought*. 1982. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Trigg, S. *Fair Exchange in Measure for Measure* in, *Myth and Ideology*. Unit C. Shakespearean Mythmaking. Deakin University, 1990. Victoria.