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## Portrayal of Villains in Shakespeare's Plays: "The Merchant of Venice" and "King Lear"

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### Abstract

The conflict between good and evil forms an integral part of Shakespeare's drama. This part dramatizes Shakespeare's general attitude towards human nature. Unlike Aristotle, Shakespeare gives precedence to the characters over their actions. He aims to explore the dark nature of human beings and unlock the mystery that engulfs them. Consequently, he traces the seed of evil in human nature in order to find an interpretation for his character's actions and relationships. The present study explores Shakespeare's attitude towards the element of evil in "The Merchant of Venice" and "King Lear". This endeavor will help explain many unsettled issues in Shakespeare's drama. Among these issues are Shakespeare's general attitude towards the woman and his views of wit and evil. In other words, the study attempts to answer questions of whether Shakespeare sees the woman as inherently evil or not and whether he refers to evil as a kind of wit or something malignant.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Villains, "The Merchant of Venice", "King Lear"

Of the many splendid literary works on "good" and "evil", Shakespeare's plays may be considered masterpieces. Perhaps their universal themes and penetrating insights into the psyche of human beings place them very close to the heart of many people and "exceptionally [reflect] Shakespeare's variety of powers; full of grace and grandeur" as Moez Marrouchi has beautifully put it (142). Still, they are often celebrated by readers as an authorial voice, penetrating the heart of human beings and articulating the decay of its darkness. "Good" and "evil" loom large in a good number of plays written by Shakespeare. Maybe their contrary visions of life and the significance of their connection posed puzzling questions about humans' experience, which Shakespeare himself sought to explore. Imagining the genesis of these plays, it is clearly evident that the central characters, for example, are used to portray Shakespeare's main ideas. This paper, therefore, aims at shedding some light on the way villains are depicted in *The Merchant*

of *Venice* and *King Lear* so that readers of the plays can find their expectations and will discover the rationale for those characters being portrayed as villains.

Shakespeare is often celebrated as "describing adequately the conflict within the will between the better and the worse." (Sharp, 2017) He realized that two driving forces constitute the human psyche. These forces are "evil" and "good". Their diametrical opposition lies at the heart of his vision, not only of theme and character but of life itself. Its significance, however, dramatizes his keen observation of life's contradictions. These contradictions create a state of harmony because they supplement each other. Acting on the noted critic Walter Allen's advice, *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear* are the "scene and expression of two opposed principles which seek to devour each other, yet ultimately compose a harmony." (Allen, 1954). The central characters, for example, celebrate antithetical traits that, for some critics, one aspect of their nature virtually eclipses the other.<sup>(1)</sup> Shylock, for example, has been called both a victim and a traitor, or villain. He is not only the central character of the play but its tragic hero, who leaves the stage, and the play, under his power. Shakespeare's awareness of these contradictions gives him credit for being objective and true in the way he depicts his characters.

*The Merchant of Venice* has long been considered the most problematic of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, (Xiao, 1996). Maybe the dark presence of Shylock has caused critical unease for the play; perhaps the play itself is mired in money, which is one reason why evil appears so vividly in the play. Viki K. Janik explains this strange yoking of contradictions when he writes:

*The Merchant of Venice* embodies, and encourages, a multiple of contradictions. It has been the most popular comedy written by William Shakespeare....As a corollary, Shylock, the most famous character in all Shakespeare's comedies, is arguably the most troubling. (Viki, 2003)

To put it more succinctly, Shakespeare has successfully combined two opposing worlds of romance and commerce in the play. "Money and love," Allen Mendenhall sums up, "are inextricably linked in *The Merchant of Venice* but not necessarily in a manner that privileges the latter over the former" (Younkins, 82). Both worlds are presented in Shylock's character, who appears to be the most "troubling" character of the play. This strange yoking of seeming opposites dramatizes Shakespeare's attitude towards Shylock and poses a puzzling question: why does Shakespeare present his Jewish character, Shylock as a villain? Does he simply seek to condemn the Jews and articulate the decay of their civilization? Or in other words, is he anti-Semitic? Definitely, Shakespeare does not merely present Shylock as a villain of the play, but he also presents him as a human being. Shakespeare's description of Jews is to some extent different from that of his contemporaries. They often describe the Jews as the worst of all people. Admittedly, Shakespeare should be credited for being objective and even-handed in his description of Shylock. For example, he depicts his villain sometimes as one who has human traits. The following description of Shylock, therefore, illustrates Shakespeare's attitude towards his villain and dramatizes his vision of the universe:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands? Organs, dimensions,  
senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food,....subject to  
the same disease,.... Warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and  
summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If  
you tickle us, do we not laugh?( *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.59-65).

This physical description of Shylock makes one sympathize with him, as much did Shakespeare himself. "Shylock was portrayed as a victim of a racism which was denounced by Shakespeare, a victim even in his villainy, both sympathetic and tragic" (Weinmann, 5).

Shakespeare's attitudes towards Shylock and the Christians in his play as well as his underlying intentions are unclear. Shylock is a villain in the eyes of the characters of the play, but it is not clear how Shakespeare has seen him. This insecurity is a consequence of the fact that, as the critic Cohen puts it, "Shylock is too complex and contradictory to fit any sixteenth-century English stereotype."( Lyon,1988) .Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock with highly human traits and understandable feelings suggests that he was aware that the Jews were not merely carriers of evil but human creatures with human strengths and weaknesses. Although he humanizes his character, he is the villain of the play. Shylock, on the one hand, has shown too much humanity to be written off as the mere devil. On the other hand, Christians have shown too much love of the world to be considered as the mere holders of good. This diametrical contradiction suggests Shakespeare's attitudes towards the Jews and the Christians and dramatizes his vision of life itself.

A good number of scholars and critics have been reflecting on Shakespeare's attitude towards Shylock. They have established, therefore, different theories. <sup>(2)</sup> Some have suggested that Shakespeare wrote his play as a plea for the tolerance of religious differences (Mahood,2003). Others have emphasized the fact that Shakespeare identifies with Shylock, and therefore has humanized his economic realism. The most convincing opinion, however, is suggested by scholars who see Shakespeare as celebrating justice and mercy rather than usury and cruelty, which are the major characteristics of *The Merchant of Venice's* villain. In the light of these theories, it is quite difficult to determine what Shakespeare thought when he wrote his play. <sup>(3)</sup>

The unifying theme of *The Merchant of Venice* lies in its searching examination of "bonds".<sup>(4)</sup> The importance of the "bond theme" has been noted before in the play, particularly concerning Shylock's "merry bond" with Antonio. Avraham Oz rightly assumes,"[t]here are in Shakespeare several acts and situations that may be referred to as archetypes of modern terrorism (Oz ,1995). Shylock," he suggests, "provides some solid reasons for his unyielding insistence on his bond. Perhaps they have nothing to do with ideology but with, as scholars have put it, 'ancient grudge'."( Spiro,2010)

"If one regards Shylock as evil," James Bulman writes convincingly, "then of course [his defeat in the trial scene] must seem good"-. He goes further as suggesting that "[t]he devil is exorcised, the Jew turns Christian. Yet Shakespeare endows Shylock with enough integrity to complicate our response to his defeat." Readers can argue forever about what

Shakespeare thought when he wrote his play, but the only things they do know is that his creative imagination was exploratory and interrogative, and his drama questions different angles of vision. <sup>(5)</sup>

Some critics have found in the ruthless opportunism of Shylock a very compelling dramatic picture. Their conclusion too is full of motifs that describe this cruelty as a hostile force. It is not surprising, then, to find Shakespeare identify his sense of loss with the panic state of Shylock. <sup>(6)</sup> For example, Kenneth Gross describes this image in modern physical terms and presents Shylock as an atomic bomb. He assumes:

Shylock has an atomic quality, compact yet explosive. His power lies in an emerging isolation of purpose and person- what he will call his "bond"- and in his refusal to be answerable to the ordinary terms of law or reason, at the same time as he makes the law his own. It relies also on an idiosyncratic eloquence which has its darkly comical as well as its tragic aspect. (Gross, 2006)

One can hardly escape an association with Shylock as far as the importance of the "bond theme" is concerned. For him, it is the ignition that activates the shell against Antonio. Gross, on the other hand, has failed to grasp the general framework of the play. Perhaps he did not trace the historical trajectory of the story; maybe he failed to understand the full significance of the story he learns of from Shakespeare. Whatever it is, the result was that he made Shylock appear as an alter-ego who parallels Shakespeare's experience as he negates it. The following quotation illustrates his failure to grasp the play. He concludes unconvincingly:

Who is Shylock? Shylock is Shakespeare. Shylock is Shakespeare and Shakespeare is Shylock. He is not Antonio's double but Shakespeare's double his brother and other, a piece of deep dissimulation joined with a startling kind of exposure. (Ibid)

It is interesting, therefore, to point to the misunderstandings spotted by Gross concerning his abortive attempts to understand Shakespeare. Perhaps he based his assumption on the idea that both Shakespeare's and Shylock's names have a similar feel on the tongue and in the air. In other words, they both begin with the unvoiced sibilant "sh". The idea that runs counter to this assumption, however, is further developed by the fact that Shakespeare himself was believed to be anti-Semite and therefore it is partially incorrect that Shylock is his double. Had Gross grasped Shakespeare's attitude towards Shylock, for example, he would never have drawn such a foregone conclusion. Evidently, he failed in his experience of reading Shakespeare.

In *King Lear*, among many other plays, evil has a different dimension altogether, as many critics have argued. In effect, Shakespeare captured the spirit of the time dominated by social and political issues. Among those concerns were the question of woman's authority and its negative influence, as the present writer claims, on the literary scene in the

sixteenth-century English drama. The situation was fraught with anxieties that women would take the lead in the following centuries and become the masters of their society. Certainly, *King Lear* had a remarkable success as it provides a brilliant picture of all those circumstances and evidently showed that Shakespeare succeeded in his experience of reading those issues.

The question of woman's craving for power in *King Lear*, however, poses a puzzling matter of whether Shakespeare was himself inclined to be a misogynist, and simply wrote his play autobiographically? However, the present writer (who has not himself read all the plays written by Shakespeare) finds it very interesting to explore woman's place in Shakespeare's world. Admittedly, there have been several books and articles published on Shakespeare which can be a good source for investigating his attitude towards women. These sources, however, cannot be merely used as a substitute for the plays themselves. Familiarity with the original plays will help to evaluate the reliability of these sources.

In her book *Fantasies of Female Evil: the Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Plays*, Cristina Leon Alfar claims that Lear's eldest daughters are relegated to the margin. They are the product, she thinks, of their creator's misogyny. "[t]heir evil is assumed and attributed," she sums up, "to archetypal dimensions of the characters or the misogyny of their creator." (Alfar, 2003). She tries to find a rationale for this situation. Perhaps the period in which Shakespeare wrote his play, as mentioned before, was fraught with anxieties about rebellious women, or maybe he simply overlooked their ambition. The word "ambition", however, has a negative connotation because it involves the ability to rise at the expense of others. In fact, the historical evidence offered and Shakespeare's depiction of Cordelia, unlike Goneril and Regan undermine the current idea that Shakespeare is anti-feminist or a misogynist.

The word "misogyny", on the contrary, generates a hostile attitude towards culture and triggers bitter debates against its roots. Feminist writers, however, argue that "it [misogyny] is everywhere, unabashed in its articulation and so over-determined in its cultural roots." (Callaghan, 2000). Dymphna Callaghan, for example, quotes Mullanney as saying that "misogyny presents an interpretive embarrassment." This description of late sixteenth-century English culture, Callaghan explains is "likely to ring true readers of current feminist/historicist Shakespearean criticism." (Ibid) · Hence, *King Lear* has often been seen as "reflecting a transition from an old, medieval order to a new, Renaissance one." Shakespeare's representation of women, in general, originates in both Christian and secular traditions. Perhaps his intellectual background may have contributed a great deal to the shape of his drama. Some of the common characteristics attributed to feminine gender in sixteenth-century England derive from Aristotelian definitions expressed in "scientific commentaries."

The evil, that Goneril and Regan come to embody, results from their dynamic lust for domination and power. Cordelia's integrity, on the other hand, is attributed to her abiding and redemptive love. This diametrical opposition of characters dramatizes Shakespeare's keen awareness of life's contradictions and makes one wonder what, beyond this crossroad, has brought them together. Evil characters like Goneril and Regan are dynamic, but good ones like Cordelia are static. This strange yoking of seeming opposites

illustrates Shakespeare's attitude towards "good" and "evil". Cordelia's philosophic calm and her acceptance of defeat, for example, reflect her static character. In contrast, Goneril and Regan experience varying amounts of change over the course of the play. Their true colors, to use Piotr Sadowski's words, are revealed gradually. It is very easy, therefore, for the audience and readers already familiar with Lear's "evil daughters" to see their hypocrisy in the opening scene.

Goneril and Regan are negatively depicted as familiar "virago" types, but Cordelia is more complex, a character who presents a figure of archetypal "Virgo" goodness. Both "Virgo" and "Virago", then, categorize women in relatively positive patriarchal senses. Both types, Catherine S. Cox suggests, seek to recuperate a woman's place in god's creation: the "Virgo" by valorizing specific aspects of the feminine, the "Virago" by negating femininity itself (Cox,1988). Feminist writers move uneasily between the two concepts. They seek to eliminate the problematic issues associated with gender in the play. According to Catherine Cox, the following quotation explains her attitude towards gender in the play:

We find reflected in these texts [King Lear] as well the ambivalent attitudes towards "Virgo" and "Virago" types found in theological tradition: the virago qualities of the heroine, while valorized, are frequently misunderstood by those exposed to them, often provoking, at least indirectly, martyrdom for the otherwise laudably virginal heroine. And yet these very qualities-for example, assertiveness, courage , self-respect-are used concurrently to define female villains, whose manifest distortions of proper gender identity prove problematic oreven disastrous for the heroine. (Cox,1988).

In the light of this quotation, the two sisters' "manifest distortions of proper gender identity" suggests Shakespeare's portrayal of female villains as ruthless men in women's bodies and, perhaps, it is one way of representing the dynamic aspect of their character and behavior, which is one reason why they have been often described as dynamic villains.

It is not always possible to determine, however, what Shakespeare meant, or thought when he portrayed someone as a villain. Sometimes he may refer to someone, who is a villain, as a "wit", or may want to criticize and condemn him for being problematic and troubling in the play. In his article on "wit", professor Abdel-Rahman Shaheen cogently argues that "wit" is often used by writers to "draw various portraits of their virtuous and vicious characters." (Shaheen,1975). Consequently, the concept of "wit" poses another puzzling question concerning whether Lear's daughters are witty, or simply referred to as mere wicked characters? Definitely, the dark aspect of those characters is revealed gradually, and, as has been demonstrated earlier in this study, it is not difficult for the audience and readers already familiar with Lear's wicked daughters to expect to see their hypocrisy in the opening scene. The flowery rhetoric of their speech, as many critics argue, "needs not necessarily be interpreted instantly as blatant flattery, but rather as typical verbal excess of official courtly address." (Ibid). Evidently their eloquence failed to win over the audience and readers, even though it did for the king.

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## FOOTNOTES

- (1) The key figures, Shylock and Antonio, are drawn in sharp contrast to one another. Yet their opposition creates harmony and unity in the play. The aura of harmony and unity that surround their characters is remarkable given the conflict between good and evil.
- (2) The critic R. Girard has maintained the idea that Shakespeare sent out signals in the play which show that he condemns the "general scapegoating of Shylock." From this view, Girard asserts that the play is characterized by irony, and Shakespeare did not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence.
- (3) Some critics have maintained that Shakespeare himself was a "shrewd businessman"; therefore, it is quite likely that he had a "lurking sympathy" with Shylock.
- (4) According to Jan Lawson Hinely, his book *Bond Priorities*, there are three kinds of bond which bring people together: the natural bonds of blood and service which make society possible, the emotional bonds of love and friendship which make society endurable, and the unnatural monetary bonds of the world of trade which, linking together persons who share no other human ties, can gain such hold that they smother and destroy all the rest. It is the third type of bond which is of great importance in *The Merchant of Venice*.
- (5) Perhaps the universality that Shakespeare's plays have acquired originates in his comprehensive knowledge about human nature.
- (6) Shylock's name has become a synonym for "loan shark", and as a verb "to shylock" means to lend money at exorbitant rates.

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