

Original Paper

A Study on the Ethics in Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract

From Shakespeare's eulogy to kindness, his views on life and death, his eulogy to love, his interpretation of forgiveness and his views on marriage in his plays, we can detect the ethics in Shakespeare's plays, which are intrinsically linked to Christian ethics. Christian ethics play an extremely important role in Shakespeare's plays. They are the core elements that shape characters' behaviors, drive plot conflicts, and explore the essence of human nature and morality, rather than mere religious preaching—elevating the works to a depth of thought far beyond ordinary dramas. Christian ethics serve as implicit guidelines for Shakespeare's characters when making choices.

Keywords

Shakespeare's plays, ethical viewpoint, Christian ethics

1. Introduction

As the curtain of the Globe Theatre slowly rose in Elizabethan London, Shakespeare's plays crossed the English Channel, stirring eternal echoes in the long river of time. Now it has formed a spiritual resonance transcending time and space in humanity's in-depth exploration of human nature, destiny, and society.

During the Elizabethan era when Shakespeare lived, Christian ethics still profoundly influenced society after the Reformation. Shakespeare integrated this background into his plays: not only did he reflect the spiritual world of people at that time (such as reverence for God and the afterlife), but also, through propositions related to religious ethics (how to face sin, whether to forgive others), he made his works transcend their era, touch on universal moral dilemmas of humanity, and still resonate with audiences today—forming the extraordinary code of Shakespeare's drama.

In terms of dramatic functions, Shakespeare's plays undertake the mission of reflecting reality and criticizing society—serving as mirrors and consciences of their times. Both touch on the core

contradictions of society through dramatic conflicts, realizing the function of conveying moral principles through art. This concern for reality is the key to its ability to transcend eras. Shakespeare did not shy away from the darkness of society or the ugliness of human nature; instead, he used drama as a weapon to arouse people's pursuit of justice, conscience, and humanity. This spirit of engaging with reality is a common trait of all great works of art. In terms of aesthetic pursuits, Shakespeare's plays emphasize the twists and turns of the plot and the authenticity of emotions, reflecting unique cultural perspectives on "human ways of existence".

Shakespeare's characters are inward-looking explorers, allowing us to see the depth of human nature. Shakespeare "did not write plays as vehicles for his own ideas. Rather he developed a theater of dialectical conflict, in which idea is pitted against idea and from their friction a deeper understanding of the issues emerges" (Greer, 2007, p. 23). When we revisit Shakespeare's plays today in the 21st century, we find that these works still hold strong practical significance. Shakespeare's plays are shared treasures of human civilization and reveal the common laws and unique charm of human dramatic art, worthy of our treasure, research, and inheritance.

2. Shakespeare's Eulogy to Kindness

The Merchant of Venice emphasizes the importance of kindness. Even small acts of kindness can generate immense power. Just as Portia says, "How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 688). These words are in stark contrast to the words spoken by Macbeth upon hearing of his wife's death: "Out, out, brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 371).

A life without good deeds is meaningless, and a life like Macbeth's and his wife's, because of their evil deeds, is not only meaningless, but also leads to a tragic ending, for what goes around comes around.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's insistence on the "pound of flesh" contract stands in contrast to the forgiveness and benevolence of Antonio's side; this is essentially a collision between justice and fraternity in religious ethics, deepening the exploration of good and evil in human nature.

3. Shakespeare's Views on Life and Death

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius because he fears that if Claudius is praying when killed, his soul will ascend to heaven; this hesitation stems precisely from his religious and ethical struggle between soul redemption and the justice of revenge.

Macbeth is an abyss-like writing of human nature cognition. This play deconstructs the good-evil dualism through the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth's ambition-conscience game reveals the fragility of human nature in the face of the desire for extreme power. His transformation from hero to tyrant

reveals that it is hard for a person who no longer believes in the God to resist the evil temptation. Views on life and death in Shakespearean plays also involve the disenchantment of power, such as the chain reaction of “regicide and usurpation” in *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, driven by ambition and desire, Macbeth kills King Duncan to pursue power. This act violates moral and ethical norms, plunging him into endless pain and fear.

MACBETH: One cried, “God bless us!” and “Amen” the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman’s hands.
Listening their fear, I could not say “Amen”,
When they did say, “God bless us!”

—*Macbeth*, Act II, scene ii

Shakespeare implies through these words of Macbeth that at this time Macbeth has been controlled by the devil, his connection with God has been severed, regicide has become a reality, and everything is irreparable.

In fact, he has long been aware that once he takes this step, there would be a terrible retribution waiting for him. However, the temptation of the witches, the instigation of his wife, and the lack of effort to resist evil desires ultimately lead to his desires expanding and taking the upper hand, crushing his remaining conscience and reason, and causing him to deviate from his connection with God.

MACBETH: If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘were well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all-here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’ld jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught return
To plague the inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. He’s here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against

The deep damnation of his taking-off,
And pity, like a naked newborn babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.

—Macbeth, Act I, scene vii

Macbeth is filled with contradictions and struggles: he wants to escape the condemnation of his conscience but cannot give up his pursuit of power. When he even wants to give up murdering King Duncan, his wife Lady Macbeth instigates him to take this step with provocative words. In order to fulfill her desire to have her husband Macbeth usurp the throne by killing King Duncan, Lady Macbeth even hopes that the devil would attach her body and merge with it, allowing the formless bloodthirsty devil to appear and take shape through her body, hoping to use the power of the devil to fulfill her desire to kill King Duncan:

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, your murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, "Hold, hold!"

—Macbeth, Act I, scene v

Through these words, it can also be seen that Shakespeare has a very clear understanding of the nature, characteristics, and behavioral manifestations of the devil.

Macbeth falls into the ontological dilemma of ambition, which becomes an ideological illusion driving him to self-destruction. Macbeth's tragedy goes beyond moral judgment to reach the abyss of existentialism: the witches' prophecy activates ambition from potential desire to real action; Macbeth's monologue of "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time" (*Macbeth*, Act V, scene v) exposes the existential fear of meaningless repetition. The emptiness of Macbeth and his wife confirms Lacan's theory of subjective splitting, revealing the existential emptiness after the satisfaction of desire. We can clearly see the emptiness from the following monologue of Lady Macbeth:

LADY MACBETH Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

—*Macbeth*, Act III, scene ii

Macbeth's personality has both an ambitious and power-hungry side, and a side of unextinguished conscience and inner struggle. After murdering King Duncan, he falls into deep remorse and fear.

LADYM How now, my lord? Why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard. What's done is done.

MACBETH We have scotched the snake, not killed it.
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.
But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further.

—*Macbeth*, Act III, scene ii

In *Macbeth*, Macbeth's empty desire and his going against religious ethics are the roots of the tragedy. He craves power and kills innocent people to seize the throne, yet his conscience plunges him into deep remorse and fear.

Macbeth's life-and-death choice reveals the weaknesses of human nature and the swelling of desire; to satisfy his ambition, he is willing to sacrifice his soul and morality.

How to make the right life choices in the face of evil temptations and desire for power is the main topic of this play. Macbeth and his wife make wrong choices that go against their conscience and the teachings of the Bible, causing tragedies in their lives. Macbeth's tragedy confirms that human beings require external ethical constraints and inner religious constraints.

In *King Lear*, when dividing his kingdom among his three daughters, Lear allocates land based on the degree of their flattery. King Lear equates flattery (such as the eldest daughter Goneril's "I love you more than words can wield the matter") with true emotion, neglecting the virtue. And he passes his power to his eldest daughter Goneril and his second daughter Regan, both of whom gain his kingdom and power through flattery, yet they are heartless and without virtue.

His youngest daughter Cordelia is disinherited because she refuses to indulge in flattery. Later, Lear is abused by his eldest and second daughters and exiled to the wilderness. In this process, Lear experiences a huge drop from the peak of power to having nothing, and his inner world undergoes profound changes. He begins to reflect on his actions, recognizing his own folly and mistakes:

LEAR Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words! They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie — I am not ague-proof.

—*King Lear*, Act IV, scene vi

His power is stripped away. Not taking virtue as a criterion for judgment and transferring the power to those who are heartless and without virtue can be said to be the root of his tragedy.

When Cordelia, who has been stripped of her inheritance rights and married into France, learns that King Lear has been abused by his eldest daughter Goneril and second daughter Regan, Cordelia leads the French army to try to seek justice for King Lear, but is defeated and captured. The following is a conversation between Cordelia and King Lear after she is captured:

CORDELIA: We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incurred the worst.
For thee, oppress'd king, am I cast down;
Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
LEAR: No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too —
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out —
And take upon 's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

—*King Lear*, Act V, scene iii

Lear's life-and-death choice embodies reflection on human nature and self-redemption; after suffering, he finally understands the value of true love and family affection.

4. Shakespeare's Eulogy to Love

"The course of true love never did run smooth" (Shakespeare, 2002:665). True love is like a shooting star, emitting brilliant and dazzling light, but fleeting. Shakespeare expresses his views on true love through Lysander's conversation with Hermia about it:

LYSANDER Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness, did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up;
So quick bright things come to confusion.

HERMIA If then true lovers have ever crossed,
It stands as an edict in destiny.
Then let us teach our trial patience,
Because it is a customary cross,
As due to love as thoughts and dreams and sighs.
Wishes and tears, poor Fancy's followers.

— *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act I, scene i

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the classic balcony dialogue between Romeo and Juliet expresses their passionate pursuit of love and fearlessness toward life and death.

ROMEO Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops —

JULIET O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

ROMEO What shall I swear by?

JULIET Do not swear at all;
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.

— *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, scene ii

These lines, full of romanticism, showcase the beauty and power of love. The dramatic conflict arising from the age-old feud between the two families contrasts sharply with Romeo and Juliet's love. Their love, set against the backdrop of family hatred, becomes more tragic. Through this conflict, Shakespeare praises love and human nature, criticizes hatred and violence, and embodies the pursuit of beautiful emotions and yearning for peace in life-and-death ethics.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, although the two protagonists' love transcends family hatred, it is still influenced by Christian marital ethics and views on life and death. Their choice to prove the purity of their love through martyrdom implies a religious yearning for the union of souls.

5. Shakespeare's Interpretation of Forgiveness

In *Measure for Measure*, after Angelo's hypocrisy is exposed, the duke rebuilds moral order through forgiveness rather than punishment, reflecting the criticism of legal rigidity.

Teachings about forgiveness are an important part in the Holy Bible. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus explicitly binds God's forgiveness to human acts of forgiveness: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses". In St. Luke 17:3-4, Jesus requires his disciples to continue forgiving even if the others trespass against them seven times and then repent seven times in a day: "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." In St. Matthew 18:21-22, Jesus responded to Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness with the phrase seventy times seven, emphasizing that believers should emulate the infinite mercy of the Father and go beyond the limitations of the Jewish tradition of "seven times":

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” Jesus prayed for the persecutors on the cross (St. Luke 23:34), setting the ultimate example of forgiveness: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots”.

6. Shakespeare's Views on Marriage

Katherina's final speech in *The Taming of the Shrew* advocating women should obey their husbands is actually a creative reconstruction of “husbandly authority”:

My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
But now I see our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot:
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready; may it do him ease.

—*The Taming of the Shrew*, Act V, scene ii

Katherine's obedience is an active choice after resistance. In Ephesians 5:22-25 of The Holy Bible, we can see such doctrines: Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord, For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it (The Holy Bible, 1959:188). Women who are gentle and considerate, rather than rude and aggressive, can bring happiness to their families and themselves. The viewpoint that Shakespeare really wants to express in this play is actually consistent with the viewpoint of the Bible.

In Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*, which explores self-awareness, sincerity and respect in the relationship between the sexes, Don John lies, slanders, and gives false testimony, maliciously slandering Miss Hero and tarnishing her reputation for chastity, almost leading to Miss Hero's suicide. In the end, Don John is punished for his wrongdoing.

7. Conclusion

Shakespeare's character portrayal, story symbolism, and lines in his plays all reflect his contemplation on various major life issues, showcasing his ethical views based on the ethics and morals in the

Christian Bible. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's plays can play an important role in guiding the behavior of the world to some extent. Studying the ethical perspective of Shakespeare's plays is of great significance.

Through comedy, Shakespeare achieves literature's ultimate aim of being "sweet and useful" proposed by Horace (Bressler, 2007, p. 22). Through tragedy, he discloses the tragic consequences resulted from murder, killing, envy, greed for power, maliciousness, deceit, selfishness, and so on, and probes into human weaknesses.

Through the form of drama, the audience can gain lessons unconsciously, realizing the truth that good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil. From Shakespeare's plays, the audience can realize what true love is, how to get along well in marriage to achieve happiness, and how to live a meaningful life. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's plays can lay a foundation for the audience to make the right choices at critical moments in life.

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