



University of Peshawar

Available on Gale & affiliated international databases



Journal of
**Humanities &
Social Sciences**

JHSS XXIII, No. 2, 2015 (August)

Mercy a Virtue of Consciousness in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Humaira Aslam

Jinnah College for Women, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

Antonio is a Christian merchant, who in spite of his hatred for the Jew Shylock asks him to lend him money. Shylock reminds him of how he curses the Jews and yet he asks for his money. To this, Antonio replies that he should give the money out of hatred and not love and that he was ready to return it with interest. Here Antonio shows his relentless pride and power. Unfortunately, he suffers a loss in his business and is unable to pay back the money. Now it is Shylock's turn to be merciless.

Keywords: Mercy, consciousness, humility, race, anti-Semitism, compassion

Introduction

The paper is a study of how both the characters i.e. Antonio and Shylock show their age long hatred for each other. Antonio in his pride curses the Jew and yet asks him to lend him money to remind him of his helplessness racially. For a moment it seems as if Shylock deserves our sympathies, however as the play develops and we see how Shylock intends to take revenge from the long humiliation that he and his race have had to go through at the hands of the Christians, it becomes clear that both of them stand on the same level and lack consciousness. Therefore, both are unable to show mercy. This becomes clear from Portia's speech towards the end, which reveals that both characters have to meditate on their thought and actions and accept the other with his shortcomings, before their racism is corrected.

The primary characteristic of Shylock is revengefulness; but a closer insight discloses a thousand other qualities, whose mutual play and varying intensity go to compose the complex being that Shakespeare has drawn.¹

Human beings anywhere and everywhere possess certain universal qualities irrespective of whatever race or religion they profess. Mercy, faith, justice, love, hatred and many more such characteristics are present in the human psyche, and arise when circumstances are created for them. Man consciously creates these circumstances due to his own complexes² and weaknesses. Sometimes it may be the result of a century's long prejudice that is transferred to us from generation to generation. As such, man refuses to accept any change and carries on the bias of his ancestors blindly. Therefore, we witness Antonio's anti-Semitism. It is only a conscious man who can see through the weak points of others, as he realizes them in himself; he knows that all human beings have flaws and are liable to make errors. As such only, can he move towards individuation.³

Similarly, Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* is apparently portrayed as an epitome of Christian virtue and sacrifice concerning his friend Bassanio. However, a close view reveals that he is so, because Bassanio belongs to his own race and religion, and above all has been a friend throughout. When the same Antonio encounters Shylock the Jew, he becomes the complete opposite of that. Thus, this aspect of his personality reveals the inherent selfishness in their friendship. According to Rosenshield as quoted by Scott Weiss:

Antonio seems highly irrational in his eagerness to die in order to keep Bassanio's love, it helps to make the case that Antonio's power, influence and sense of security, particularly with regard to his friendship with Bassanio are based more in his money than in his Christian faith. In fact there seems to be a codependent aspect of this relationship that has kept Bassanio rolling in money and made Antonio to feel loved.⁴

This attitude in Antonio is a proof of the fact that he completely lacks consciousness⁵ and is rather doing all the good that he claims to possess because of his own ulterior motives of feeling loved and wanted. The question here is that if Antonio has his own intentions in carrying out this friendship, then, why the *other* should be denied this right. Therefore, Shylock, when he refuses to show Antonio any mercy has his own motives. Thus, both the characters are persona possessed. Shylock makes it clear, that not only he but also the entire Jewish race has suffered long at the hands of Christians, and he shows his revulsion thus:

I hate him for he is a Christian, ...
If I catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him....

Cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him.⁶

This similarity in Antonio and Shylocks behaviour, if studied in Jungian terms reveals that, the quality of mercy lacked in both. Therefore, both were unconscious of their conscious behaviour, adhering to the *persona* they represent in their conscious mode. Hence, in the beginning of the play, Antonio is depicted in a grave and pessimistic mood thus while referring to his sadness he says, "...I have much ado to know myself" (Act I Sc I, 192). This "myself" refers to his inner consciousness; which with a little thought and meditation he could have achieved, but shuns for more mundane reasons.

Before going into whether Antonio deserved mercy, we should endeavour to see his arrogance in the beginning of the play towards the Jew. When Antonio asks Shylock to lend him money, which he says he will pay back, and Shylock reminds him of his insulting behaviour and his spitting on his "Jewish gabardine", Antonio haughtily replies:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou will lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends...
But lend it rather to thine enemy
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty. (Act I Sc III, 196).

This sense of superiority on the part of Antonio is a vivid sign of a man living his life superficially, one who has completely locked out any communication with the unconscious, rather he over looks it. He therefore, never once entertains the idea of loss in business or of the *other*, namely Shylock, having an upper hand in the bond that he intended to sign. His reaction towards the Jew is so vehement, because he himself does not belong to the minority class. Whereas Shylock's reaction is more like a plea, and then insistence for justice, as he belongs to the marginalized class. This on Shylock's part, too, is inwardly an act of revengefulness, rather than consciousness, because the moment he is defeated by Portia in the guise of a lawyer, he is then, himself, unable to face justice; something that he craved so strongly with regard to his adversary. Thus in a split second says, "[g]ive me my principal, and let me go" (Act IV Sc I, 212).

Antonio and his supporters try their level best to convince the Jew, but they try to mould his decision with worldly gains. What they fail to realize is that now that he legally has an upper hand; that hatred within him that was dormant for years will pour forth with greater strength. Both, in the trial scene expect the other to be

merciful, when it lacks in their own demeanour. Antonio lacks consciousness to such an extent, that he puts aside his vanity and even refers to the Jew as, “[h]ear me yet, good Shylock”. Even the Duke betrays his partiality and request Shylock as follows:

Thou’lt show thy mercy and remorse so strange
 Than is thy strange apparent cruelty; ...
 Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
 But touched with human gentleness and love,
 Forgive a moiety of the principal;
 Glancing an eye of pity on his losses, ...
 We all expect a gentle answer, Jew. (Act IV Sc I, 209).

Here, the lack of reason in his request is obvious, just because Antonio is a well-known merchant in the state, the Duke uses his position to help him. The question that can be asked here is would the Duke have done the same for Shylock? It is evident that both these characters are living a superficial life based on their immediate desires and gains. They have no connection with their unconscious mind, or else, they would have seen the lack of mercy in themselves and should have realized that whatever is befalling them is the consequences of their own behaviour that is turning in on them. On the other hand, Shylock is equally the same, when he is cornered and there is no option left to him, he is ready to withdraw from his claim and accepts the penalty, by showing his willingness to become a Christian and giving his remaining property to his daughter after his death. It is this contact with the *other* that serves as an eye opener for them. Thus, both Antonio and Shylock learn the hard way and their attitude tones down.

The *other* in the form of the society also brings about a realization in both these characters. Antonio who is so sure of himself and his friends, sees for himself that in spite of the friendship and love that both Bassanio and the Duke bear him, they remain unable to save his life for the laws of the state are such which Antonio himself admits:

... but since he stands obdurate
 And that no lawful means can carry me
 Out of his envy’s reach, I do oppose
 My patience to his fury, and am arm’d
 To suffer with the quietness of spirit
 The very tyranny and rage of his. (Act IV Sc I,209).

As far as Shylock is concerned, he also realizes after his humiliation, the hatred prevalent in the society for him and his tribe, which demands a low profile from him. It also makes it clear to him that the only way to do away with hatred is

patience and mercy, which his impatience has failed to achieve. The society's voice is seen in Gratiano's comments against him. Thus, when his life is spared, Gratiano says:

O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog!
And for thy life let justice be accused.
Thou almost makest me waver in my faith (Act IV Sc I, 210).

Moreover, even when he admits to fulfil the penalty, even then the society does not seem to accept him, and again Gratiano remarks:

In christening shalt thou have two god-fathers:
Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more
To bring thee to the gallows, not the font. (Act IV Sc I, 213).

In the end, it is Portia's thought provoking speech in the court, regarding mercy that serves to bring both Antonio and Shylock face to face with the unconscious mind. Portia in the persona of a doctor of law is able to rise above her own faults, and present mercy as a virtue, which is a compliment of a conscious heart, rather than possessed by any race or religion. Though she is addressing the Jew while talking, yet, it makes the point evident that it was lacking in both Antonio and Shylock. Though it is not openly proclaimed in Antonio's case, it subtly is hinted at. For when she says:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes (Act IV Sc I, 211).

In these lines the words, "[u]pon a place beneath" do not refer to any specific race or religion, rather the emphasis is on a compassionate and understanding heart, irrespective of geographical bounds. As such, it is a reference to the consciousness of man, of which at that moment both Antonio and Shylock are devoid. Further, within the course of the speech she says:

... consider this,
That in the course of justice, none of us
should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. (Act IV Sc I, 211).

Here, the line "we do pray for mercy" shows it to be all-inclusive, not only meaning Antonio and Shylock but all the society and on an even larger scale all

humanity. Therefore, consciously verifying that both the characters lack mercy for they crave it but cannot render it.

Thus, both Antonio and Shylock after this brief encounter with the unconscious mind come to the realization, that the ups and downs that they have gone through in life, is due to their own shortcoming. The impact of this conditioning is visible in how both these characters are toned down, with very little or no mentioning of them towards the end of the play.

Towards the end in the Belmont scene when Portia and Nerissa are returning homewards, Portia referring to the effect of good deeds says it has far reaching consequences to which Nerissa replies “[w]hen the moon shone we did not see the candle” (Act V Sc. I, 214). Thereby meaning that when we try to integrate the element of the unconscious mind with our conscious life; that come in the form of her speech in the court, and learn from it, then specific persons and limited views are not significant; rather goodness and virtue in general is to be advocated. Who benefits more and who less is irrelevant here, as both parties lack consciousness, i.e. mercy that could have saved them, and thus have to depend on a third for survival.

Thus, mercy and forgiveness is what a conscious man can render. If something is hated for the self, how can it be advocated for the *other*. A person can only be merciful when the difference between the *self* and the *other* diminishes. The play ends on a note whether such experiences in life can bring about betterment in our life, and put us on the path of individuation.

Notes

- ¹ William Shakespeare, Born Stratford-upon-Avon 1564, died Stratford 1616 . Retrieved from <http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/shakespeare032.html> (This bibliography quoted was originally published in *The Outlines of literature: English and American*. Truman J Backus. New York: Sheldon and company, 1897.pp 90-102). Retrieved on 08/03/2009.
- ² The idea of a complex advocates that personality is multi-faceted. A person has many selves. Jung believes that they behave like independent beings, he also believes that there is no difference in the principles of a fragmentary personality and a splinter psyche. A complex constitutes a collection of images and ideas that clusters around the core of one or more archetype having the same emotional tone. Jung calls the complex a '*via regia* to the unconscious' and the architect of dreams. Hence, dreams and other symbolic representations are closely related to complexes. According to Jung this concept allow to link the personal and archetypal components of an individual's experiences. Without this concept it would be difficult to define how experiences are

built up and psychological life would be a series of fragmented incidents. The fact that it has an archetypal aspect, the Ego also has an ego-complex, a personalized history of a person's development of consciousness and self-awareness. The ego-complex when related to other complexes brings about a conflict. Then there is a risk of the complex splitting of and the personality being dominated by it. A complex can over-whelm the ego as in psychosis, or it may identify with the complex as in inflation and possession. Complexes are a natural phenomenon which can be positive or negative. If the ego can establish a viable relationship with the complex, then the personality is variegated.

- ³ Individuation is the most significant of Jung's contribution to the theories of personality development. As such, it is interwoven with others i.e., Self, Ego, Archetype and the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements. A simple way of expressing the relationship of the important concepts is, ego to integration, which is social adaptation. The self for individuation is reaching self-experience and realization, while consciousness is increased by analysing the defences, e.g., projection of the shadow. The process of individuation is a circumambulation of the self as the centre of the personality, which with this becomes unified. Thus, the person becomes conscious in what respect he or she is a unique human being as well as no more than a common man or woman. The aim of individuation is nothing less than to free the self of the false wrappings of the persona and the suggestive power of the archetypes.
- ⁴ Scott Weiss. Cross Examining Antonio: Shakespeares Christian Merchant on Trial Again received from <http://www.csus.edu/org/litjml/weisscritical.htm> Received on 02/09/2008. The article is a publication of the Sac State English Department called Calaveras Station Library Journal, 2004.
- ⁵ According to Jung, consciousness is a pre-condition for humanity as well as for becoming an individual. By consciousness, he refers to the psychic contents of the ego, insofar as the relation is perceived by the ego. It is the function of activity which maintains the relation of psychic contents to the ego. As a working concept consciousness has been applied and lead to misunderstanding as well. Perception in this sense is not the result of intellectualization and cannot be achieved by the mind alone. It is the result of a psychic process, which contradicts a thought process. Jung also equated consciousness with awareness, intuition and apperception stressing the function of reflection in its achievement. Attainment of consciousness would appear to be the result of recognition, reflection upon the retention of psychic experience, enabling the individual to combine it with what he has learned, to feel its relevance emotionally and to sense its meaning for his life. Jung believed the natural mind is undifferentiated while the conscious mind is capable of discrimination. Therefore, consciousness begins with control of instincts, enabling man to adept in an orderly way. However, adaptation and control of natural behaviour has its dangers leading to one-sided consciousness, which asserts itself from the recesses of the shadow. Nevertheless, consciousness cannot be dispensed with. This would lead to an inundation by unconscious forces undermining or

obliterating the civilized ego. Thus, discrimination is necessary for conscious mind if it is to be aware of things, and be able to separate opposites, for in nature opposites merge with one another. Therefore, we reach the conclusion that the most individual thing about man is his consciousness; based on the supposition that individuation is a psychic necessity.

- ⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.195. All subsequent references are to this edition followed by page number.

References

- Alderman, Janet. (2008) *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berger, Hardy Jr. (2013) *A Fury in the Words: Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare's Venice*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Clark, W.H and Wright, W. Aldis (Ed.) *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. The Programmed Classics (publisher) vol 1.
- Grebanier, Bernard. (1962). *The Truth about Shylock*. New York: Random House.
- Halio, Jay L. Ed. (1994). *The Merchant of Venice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halio, Jay L. (2000) *Understanding The Merchant of Venice. A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents* West port, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Sinsheimer, Hermann (1963). *Shylock: The History of a Character* New York: Benjamin Bloom.
- Weiss, Scott (2004). "Cross Examining Antonio: Shakespeare's Christian Merchant on Trial Again" Retrieved from <http://www.csus.edu/org/litjrnl/weisscritical.htm> on 02/09/2008. The article is a publication of the Sac State English Department called Calaveras Station Library Journal.
- Whitmont, Edward C (1969) *The Symbolic Quest Basic Concepts of analytical Psychology* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.