

The Design of Benevolence in the Last Plays of Shakespeare

Dr. Mohammed Shahid Kamal

Assistant Professor, Khamis Community College, King Khalid University, K.S.A

Abstract

Benevolence is an act of kindness towards others. Shakespeare has tried to portray a benevolent view of life which comes to exist only after malevolent order is destroyed and benevolent order is restored. Contrary to the tragedies, central characters in the last plays are benevolent, their actions, their thoughts and objectives of their lives lead to the design of benevolence. There is a continuous tug of war between benevolence and malevolence and in this tug of war benevolence ultimately prevails.

Key words : Shakespeare, benevolence , malevolence , tug of war , last plays

INTRODUCTION

Benevolence is an expression of kindness , altruism and generosity towards others. To some theologians like Thomas Jay Oord¹, love is reciprocal. A loving person must, therefore be both benevolent and receive gifts from others. Also, Rob Harle in his article entitled “Was Shakespeare An Existential Wimp?” writes that Benevolent means, "to do good without thought of profit"². This implies selflessness in the person concerned. However, he thinks that there is no such thing as pure benevolence. There is always a self-interest involved, though unconscious, behind all human actions. This idea or theory was expounded by Hobbes³ in "*The Leviathan*", and as the discipline of Evolutionary Psychology matures, the idea becomes more compelling. The ideology of Christianity, underpinned by Platonism would argue strongly against it. How would people perform benevolent Christian acts of goodness if they believed there was no reward? The concept of reward goads one now and later as well.

BACKGROUND

Pericles, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, the last plays of Shakespeare, have certain common distinctive features. There is affinity with the earlier comedies and this helps us see the romances as a natural progression in the playwright's development⁴. The last plays mark a change in Shakespeare writing. E.M.W Tillyard sees these plays work out full tragic patterns with

¹ Wesleyan theologian and philosopher http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jay_Oord

² <http://www.robharle.com/pages/shakes.html>

³ <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-contents.html>

⁴ F.D. Hoeniger, ed. *Pericles*. London: Methuen, 1979.p. lxxi-lxxiv

the regeneration of a new order as well as the destruction of an old one. According to Tillyard, the romances of Shakespeare, which close the dramatist's career, and which follow the long series of tragedies, complete the pattern of a tragic view of life which the playwright wanted to present. Tragedy depicts, in general, the destruction of an established order, either through the collision of a human beings' will with the forces of destiny or through transgression of laws of nature, which the person either fails to perceive or having perceived fails to observe. But in any case the result is suffering and loss. This, however, is a limited view of the tragic pattern of life because the complete pattern includes some kind of reconciliation, some probability of reconstruction after deconstruction, or at least some recognition of tragic error, whereby a way to renewal of life is promised.⁵

These romances do have serious themes which definitely cast a deep shadow over the lighter, comic aspects of Shakespeare's plays. And despite all darkness and despair, the culmination of each Shakespearean romance is unequivocally happy. Quiller-Couch considers this 'by far the most important point of likeness' between the earlier and later plays. 'They' he says, 'all deal with human reconciliation'.⁶ Before Quiller-Couch, Dowden also expressed similar views that 'dissonance must be resolved into a harmony, clear and rapturous, or solemn and profound'.⁷ In fact, the earlier critic had seen it as just 'not a mere stage necessity, or a necessity of composition', but 'a moral necessity'.⁸ He thus attributed to Shakespeare some higher purpose in writing the romances. It was to show the ordering of a moral world. The heroes and heroines, earlier, controlled their destinies by their actions. The characters in the romances, however, are often at the mercy of gods. It is only divine or other supernatural aid that enables a character to attain harmony at the end.

BENEVOLENCE IN *PERICLES*

The other mundane aspects of the romances to which Hoeniger refers to are that not only the younger generation falls and are united but also the older generation actively involve and participate in the process of regeneration, whereas earlier the elders figured only forces of opposition. Hoeniger considers this a 'peculiar kind of double plot not to be found elsewhere in Shakespeare, and hardly anywhere in Elizabethan drama'.⁹ Here, parents and children are closely interwoven in the structural strand. Thus, the ultimate end of the last plays is benevolence, though, each play, begins with human malevolence, conflict, chaos and disorder. Antioch in *Pericles* is incestuous. Tharsus suffers due to natural calamities. And, in Pentapolis the big fish devours the little ones. Also, one suffers, if he or she cannot beg. Mytilene is reputed for flesh trade, and the governor as well as ordinary citizens attend customer betrothals. And, it is Mytilene who treats Marina as a commodity. Families also share the affliction with which each last play begins. Dear ones are separated though they are finally reunited. Reunion, divine benevolence is not visualized,

⁵ Shakespeare's Last Plays, p.20

⁶ Quiller-Couch, *Workmanship*, p.239

⁷ Dowden, p.403

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ Hoeniger, p.lxxii

The Design of Benevolence in the Last Plays of Shakespeare

even as a distinct possibility. Pericles loses his wife to the sea. His daughter too is lost and survives without his knowledge under the care of Cleon and Dionyza. Even the possibility of a meeting is barred by the intrusion of jealousy. Events just spin out of Pericles' control. Some supernatural power holds sway. Agony heightens when he discovers an epitaph bearing Marina's name. Pericles' suffering is memorable. Repentance is the only way out of this predicament. He is firm in his expiation. Thaisa too decides to confine herself to a temple at Ephesus. And even Marina seeks divine help. Then, miracles occur, because due to repentance, expiation and prayer there is divine intervention. The family of Pericles' is reunited. Cermion plays the role of a divine agent. People responsible for disorder are punished and Order is restored. Harmony and peace prevail over the universe. What is thus dramaturgically transacted is ultimately a perfect benevolent design.

BENEVOLENCE IN *CYMBELINE*

Cymbeline re-enacts almost a similar dramaturgic pattern. As it begins, it exhibits malevolent intentions, chaos and conflict. Two sons of the king are kidnapped by a courtier. Imogen, the king's only daughter rebels and marries Posthumous, a commoner. There is a possibility of war because the king has refused to pay tribute to the Romans. Cymbeline's queen is a wicked step-mother. Cloten is the evil step-son of the queen by an earlier husband. The queen wants Cloten to become king. Besides these events likely to cause disorder, there is Posthumus' suspicion of his wife Imogen regarding adultery and almost deputing Iachimo, a cynical villain to spy on Imogen to disprove the virgin which she professed to be. Posthumous suffers because of the sin of suspicion, and Imogen due to her dedication. Thereafter, follows repentance and after that divine intervention. The war leads to reunion for Imogen meets her lost prince brothers and so does Cymbeline, the king, his separated daughter and sons. Cloten is killed. Even Iachimo, the cynical Italian regrets and repents. Finally, a benevolent order sets in and peace and harmony are re-established, dramaturgically re-affirming the final design of an ultimately great and grand benevolence.

BENEVOLENCE IN *THE WINTER'S TALE*

In *The Winter's Tale* the main emphasis is on the sin of jealousy. Leontes, the jealous king suspects his wife of adultery. Polixenes, a childhood friend is the culprit. The sin of jealousy strikes at the sacred and long cherished friendship. Leontes believes that his wife Hermione and friend Polixenes are lovers. Polixenes escapes being poisoned. In retaliation Hermione is imprisoned. In jail a daughter is born to her. That adds to the complication. Leontes is furious and orders the child, Perdita to be left out in a desert, totally oblivious to a Delphos Oracle forbidding him to do so. Conflict and chaos, malevolent intentions are now at their pinnacle. All the universe gets involved. Leontes' suffering starts. He loses wife, son and daughter. Mamilus, his son was very dear to him. The sinful and misguided king repents. Hence it seems order will be restored. There is once again divine intervention. Perdita left in the desert was adopted by a shepherd. She was innocent and divinely inspired. At sixteen she meets Florizel, a prince. Leontes' repentance is followed by miracles. The dead Hermione is resurrected. Perdita, Leontes' real daughter is restored to him and he is overjoyed. He is also reconciled with his friend Polixenes. A perfect benevolent design is once more dramaturgically worked out and ends all conflict, chaos and evil.

BENEVOLENCE IN THE TEMPEST

The Tempest also begins with the malevolent acts of two brothers. Prospero commits the sin of negligence. As a result his dukedom is usurped. He is exiled along with his daughter, Miranda. However, he controls the sea with magical power. He gets two helping hands in the guise of Ariel and Caliban, though Caliban tries to kill him and rape his daughter. He suffers for sixteen years by being confined to the island away from his native land in complete isolation from the rest of the world. His suffering and guilt consciousness ultimately open the doors of benevolence. He also indulges in repentance. Finally, he is able to control his enemies with the help of magical and supernatural power and gets back his dukedom. He also gets a son-in-law as reward for his suffering. The sea that was rough earlier is now quiet. It pleases and soothes everybody. Once more order is restored and peace and harmony reflect a perfect benevolent design.

CONCLUSION

Thus, there is a tug of war between benevolence and malevolence throughout the last plays of Shakespeare. Every character, episode, and dialogue illustrates the idea of benevolence or vice-versa. Supernatural power is both benevolent and malevolent. If Pericles is a malevolent character Antiochus is his opposite. And opposed to benevolent Marina is Antiochus' incestuous daughter. If there is true love of a father in Simonides for his daughter and son-in-law, there is Antiochus who murders his would be son-in-law to continue an incestuous relationship with his daughter. If there is the generosity of Pericles in Tyre there is also the treachery of Cleon and Dionyza . If a tempest kills Thaisa, another one brings Pericles to Myteline to be reunited with his daughter. If the superstitious people float Thaisa's coffin in the sea, an intellectual Cerimon opens the coffin and restores her life. If divinity destroys Antiochus and his daughter, it also reunites two lost souls. If a daughter becomes the cause of the destruction of her father and herself, Marina also is responsible for the revival of herself and her father. There is suffering and also redemption, death is followed by resurrection. Brothel business flourishes like singing, dancing, sewing and cooking. A treacherous servant like Leonine has a counterpart like the truthful Helicanus. There are souls like Antiochus and his daughter, and Marina and her father. However, in this tussle between benevolence and malevolence in the last plays benevolence prevails.

The Design of Benevolence in the Last Plays of Shakespeare

Bibliography

1. Ansari, A. A. "Cymbeline: The Design of Harmony." *The Aligarh Journal of English Studies* 12 (1987): 9-26.
2. Beauregard, David N. "Human Malevolence and Providence in King Lear." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* Vol. 60 (2008): 199
3. Felperin, Howard. "Shakespeare's Miracle Play." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18.4 (Autumn 1967): 363-374.
4. Feuer, Lois. "Happy Families: Repentance and Restoration in 'The Tempest' and the Joseph Narrative." *Philological Quarterly* 76.3(1997):271
5. Hart, F. Elizabeth. " 'Great Is Diana' of Shakespeare's Ephesus". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43.2(2003):347
6. Helms, Lorraine. "The Saint in the Brothel: Or Eloquence Rewarded." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.3 (1990): 319-332.

The Design of Benevolence in the Last Plays of Shakespeare

7. Hunter, R. G. *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*. New York: Columbia UP, 1965
8. Kataoka, Akira. "Cymbeline: A Quest for Harmony." *Studies in English Language and Literature*
9. 25 (1985): 13-33
10. Kermode, Frank. *William Shakespeare: The Final Plays*. London: Longmans, Green, 1963
11. Knight, G. Wilson. *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays*. London: Methuen, 1948.
12. Leavis, F.R. 'The Criticism of Shakespeare's Late Plays: A Caveat', *Scrutiny*, X (April, 1942), 340.
13. Lim, Walter S. H. "Knowledge and Belief in *the Winter's Tale*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41.2(2001):317
14. Marx, Steven. *Kiss the Book: A Study of Shakespeare and the Bible*. Oxford University Press, 2000
15. Mcalindon, Tom "The Discourse of Prayer in the *Tempest*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 41, (2001)
16. Milward, Peter S. J. *Biblical Influences in Shakespeare's Great Tragedies*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987
17. Muir, Kenneth. *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine Ibsen*. Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1961.
18. Oakes, Edward T. "Dramatist of Forgiveness". *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. 144(2004):44
19. Parker, John. "The Dream of the Moving Statue", *Shakespeare Studies*. 36(2008):265
20. Shaheen, Naseeb. *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1999
21. Shakespeare, William. *Pericles*. Ed, F.D. Hoeniger. London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1969.
22. Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. 1943. Reprint. New York: Vintage Books, 1964.
23. Walsham, Alexandra. *Providence in Early Modern England*. Oxford. Oxford University, 1999