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EGL 346 Shakespeare II

Laughed at My Losses, Mocked at My Gains: Expanding Comedic Boundaries in *The Merchant of Venice* Through Devaluing the Individual

Over the course of *The* *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare expands the boundaries of

comedy through continually lessening the value of the individual in tragic equations between money, flesh, and the sanctity of love. The meaning of comedy in Shakespeare’s works has been frequently characterized by defining traits within the narrative, such as approaching marriage as symbolic of the achievement of happiness, humorous portrayals of deception, and subverted gender roles (Mullan). However, these themes all contain notions of tragedy hidden within the nature of the characters and plot even as the play approaches verifiably happy endings where misunderstandings are resolved, marriages proceed, and each character consummates their role as a protagonist or antagonist without the presence of death. According to Fujimura, “there are three "worlds" presented in the play, each in its own mode; and these can be summed up as the world of Bassanio-Portia, the world of Antonio, and the world of Shylock. The first is romantic in its mode and non-realistic, the second is realistic, and the third is ironic...There is no one main action, and it seems a critical error to set up the casket or the bond story as the central action. Rather it is through the dramatic interaction and contrast among the modes of action that the total meaning of the play emerges” (499). The plot involving Bassanio and Portia’s marriage is classified as the highest mode of romance, Antonio handling the implications of his economic bond evokes a realistic commoner, and Shylock is shown as an ironic hero for his absurd bondage and frustration with the laws of Venice (Fujimura 500). Additionally, the marginalization of women and the Jewish in Renaissance society delineate the conflicts Portia and Shylock face and greatly separate each from the thinking and experiences of the dominant majority (Oldrieve, 87). Despite the diversity of *The Merchant of Venice*’s plots, the nature of each is ultimately unified through the recurring theme of decreasing the value of the human being with more serious subject material than is typically expected of a comedy. The hypocrisies and dishonest intentions of human individuals are shown through careful selections of poetic language, as each line frequently subverts ideas presented within previous scenes. The physical value manifested in three marriage caskets symbolize an individual’s romantic pursuit as a less sacred and a more practical than economic action. Later, exchanges of rings lessens the sanctity of several individuals involved in marriages through betrayal, dramatic irony and disguise. Antonio’s persecution at the whims of Shylock results in an ultimate equation of human flesh as endowed with less value than animal flesh. As such, the value of the individual consistently decreases throughout the play, suggesting that *The Merchant of Venice* expands the boundaries of comedy with more grievous implications about human nature.

In conventional Shakespearean comedies, marriage holds great symbolism for the pursuit of happiness and redemption, and is usually present in multiple forms (Mullan). While *The Merchant of Venice* contains several marriages, such as the notable pairing between Portia, a wealthy noblewoman, and Bassanio, a high-ranking suitor, more serious themes occur when it becomes apparent that their marriage is rife with deception and misunderstandings as to one another’s true character. Mullan states “deception would not be amusing if we could not feel confident that it will provide a happy resolution” in Shakespeare’s comedies, and as such the play remains within the genre of comedy due to Portia and Bassanio’s successful marriage after many trials and breaches of trust. However, scenes such as suitors’ selection of caskets crafted from gold, silver, and lead for Portia’s hand in marriage convey ironic symbolism that diminish and critique the institution of marriage as far departed from its supposed economic and emotional value. Upon unearthing the golden casket, the suitor Morocco exclaims “O hell!...A carrion Death...All that glitters is not gold” (2.7.63-66), suggesting a price extracted from him that is the equivalent of death as the result of being denied as Portia’s suitor. The idea of corruption and the deception of appearances is furthered in Bassanio’s pursuit of Portia, which succeeds yet necessitates a cynical understanding of the bondage of marriage:

BASSANIO.So may the outward shows be least themselves:

The world is still deceived with ornament.

In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,

But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,

Obscures the show of evil? In religion,

What damned error, but some sober brow

Will bless it and approve it with a text,

Hiding the grossness with fair ornament? (3.2.75-82)

By disfavoring the genuinity of gold as a representation of marriage, Shakespeare suggests that an understanding of the less ostentatious weight of lead, demonstrative of the serious duties of marriage, outweigh the charming aspects of appearance that mirror the entertaining nature of comedy. Bassanio’s selection of the lead casket, winning marriage to Portia, represents the climax of the plot involving Portia’s suitors, yet comedy is lacking in the language of the moment. The vision of the world as commented on by Bassanio is “deceived with ornament,” law is “tainted and corrupt, and religion contains “damned error,” to the extent where any comedic traits within the concept of deception are overtaken by immense tragedy. The “fair ornament” of the golden and silver caskets hide unfortunate fates for the rejected suitors, and Bassanio’s mentions of law and religion foreshadow the later conflicts in the play involving Shylock operating within the bounds of the laws of Venice and antisemitism. Without the happy resolution of marriage, Portia’s other suitors experience narratives more reminiscent of tragedy than comedy. Even Bassanio’s good character and discernment are challenged in later scenes, as when he addresses Portia: “I was a braggart. When I told you my state was nothing, I should then have told you that I was worse than nothing; for, indeed, I have engaged myself to a dear friend, engaged my friend to his mere enemy, to feed my means” (3.2.264-269). The price of Portia’s marriage to Bassanio is suggested to be Antonio’s life, which Bassanio has recklessly bound to Shylock for the loan necessary for his pursuit of Portia in return for a pound of flesh from Antonio. Despite being the victorious suitor, Bassanio has been reduced to “worse than nothing,” devalued due to his moral transgressions of asking his dear friend Antonio for a loan which results in Antonio binding his life to Shylock’s loan. With “all his ventures fail’d” (3.2.273) referring to his belief that all of Antonio’s ships full of wealth which he meant to use to pay back Shylock’s loan have been shipwrecked, the situation emerges out of no fault of his own, imbuing Bassanio’s pursuit of Portia with extensive tragedy. As such, Shakespeare expands the boundaries of comedy by illustrating the more tragic aspects of deception, complicating the happiness of romantic pursuit with rejection, duplicitous character, and grave misfortune diminishing the value of the individual.

The comedy of marriage continues to be subverted with elements of tragedy through the exchange of several rings symbolic of the loyalty and sanctity of the individuals involved in marriage. The first mention of a ring as the subject of economic and emotional value is through Shylock’s daughter Jessica, upon exchanging Shylock’s marriage ring for a monkey alongside spending a fortune of money in a single night. Shylock reacts with emotional pain and anger to this news:“Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats at a sitting! ...Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.101-112). Shylock’s daughter has betrayed her father’s wealth and the Jewish religion of her birth to pursue a Christian for marriage and convert, and the symbolism of squandering the marriage ring along with typical currency indicates the completeness of her betrayal. Marriage, typically an indicator of Shakespeare’s comedies, is subverted -- the depth of happiness that a marriage bond brings can also lead to anguish and tragedy to the same extent when individuals leave or forsake its value. Both Jewish individuals and women are marginalized groups, discriminated against legally and economically in Venice to the extent where “women were the property of their fathers, and Jews the property of their rulers” (Oldrieve, 87). As a member of both, Jessica’s behavior reflects notions of Jews and women being associated with the flesh instead of the spirit, and with aggressive and sexual impulses (Oldrieve, 87). Wealth becomes less valuable and symbols of love such as Shylock’s ring vanish easily as Jessica recklessly pursues independence, tragically increasing Shylock’s desire for vengeance. Later, Portia and Nerissa allow their husbands to travel to Venice for Shylock and Antonio’s trial under the condition they do not part with their wedding rings. By disguising themselves as the Duke and a law clerk, they rescue Antonio from the laws of Venice and Shylock’s vengeance, punishing Shylock by stripping him of his wealth and forcing him to convert to Christianity. The genre of comedy allows all lives to be saved, even Antonio’s ships, which have been found after a misunderstanding in communication. Portia and Nerissa in disguise insist on their wedding rings as payment, and their husbands Bassanio and Gratiano grant their wishes. However, the tragic implications are clear in how their husbands have betrayed their marriage bonds for male friendship, and “Men count more than women” (Oldrieve 99). Portia and Nerissa do reprimand their husbands for giving away their rings in a comedic scene, and Gratiano ends the play with “while I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring” indicating a lesson learned. However, the implausible nature of their gender deceit and transformation into a powerful doctor and clerk during a time of widespread marginalization of women implies a tragic perspective on human nature. Outside the boundaries of comedic conventions, the actions of men favoring men would otherwise lock women out of both power and the intimacy of marriage. Shakespeare allows a comedic interpretation of this situation when Portia remarks “For, by this ring, the doctor lay with me...There you shall find that Portia was the doctor, Nerissa there her clerk” (5.1.275-286), suggesting that the only option available to disenfranchised and betrayed women is to sleep with oneself under a gender disguise. However, the idea of marriage to women being betrayed by men due to a greater valuation of men in society holds tragic notions such as a lack of loyalty in marriage and the oppression of women, devaluing female love and devotion as well as their worth. As such, Shakespeare expands the boundaries of comedy by introducing ominous ideas about human nature that result in the devaluation and betrayal of women and the sanctity of marriage, even if many conflicts are resolved at the end of the play.

Comedy gains another tragic aspect in the form of antisemitism in *The Merchant*

*of Venice* as detailed selections of language equating human value to animals illustrate Shylock’s reasoning, enhanced by the severity of the oppression visited upon him. The interpretation of Shylock as a sympathetic character increases the tragedy of his fate, and as such expands the Shakespearean comedy genre to a greater extent than a more rudimentary categorization of Shylock as an antagonist deserving of his comeuppance. One of the first convincing defenses of Shylock as a sympathetic character was by William Hazlitt in 1817, who described the standard theatrical tradition as originating from anti-Semitic myths, presenting Shylock as deformed and relentlessly hateful (Riga, 113-114). A modern understanding of the effects of prejudice based on history has justified harsher portrayals of Shylock’s character, where “Social injustice and the resulting cruelty...not only marginalize victims, but can also distort their personalities, with resentment, hatred, and violence seething below the surface. The tragic figure does not have to be sympathetic in the sense of pleasant or agreeable” (Riga, 115). Shylock is far from pleasant in moments such as when he remarks upon meeting the titular merchant of Venice, Antonio, with whom he is about to loan money, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.37). However, Shylock’s vitriol is easily matched by the discrimination against the Jewish which he describes thusly: “sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, and spit upon my Jewish gaberdine...should I not say 'hath a dog money? is it possible a cur can lend three thousand ducats?'” (1.3.110-122).The presence of such extreme racial prejudice within the play suggests the darker material present in tragi-comedy, a genre thought to be Shakespeare’s creation and usually applicable to later works, though the earlier play *The Merchant of Venice* can also be considered outside the boundaries of the typical notion of comedy as a genre (Mullan). The successful marriages and comic misunderstandings within The Merchant of Venice coincide beside scenes of hatred and passages revealing the psyche of the play’s supposed villain, which diminish the value of the human being. As such, The Merchant of Venice is considered part of a group deemed ‘problem plays’ at the end of the 19th century, a term contested by critics yet indicative of Shakespeare’s evolution in comedy (Mullan). The insults experienced by Shylock from Antonio prior to the start of the play equate his value to that of a dog and a cur, and a lifetime of antisemitism is returned tenfold in a later monologue: “A pound of man's flesh taken from a man is not so estimable, profitable neither, as flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (1.3.66-68). The value of farm animal flesh is now greater than that of humans according to Shylock, a philosophy originating from the virulence and corrupting nature of antisemitism. Just as Shylock has been called a dog and a cur by Christians, he magnifies the hatred and returns it to the Christian Antonio with an idea that is both economic reality and dehumanization. As Shylock deceives Bassanio and Antonio with his guise of friendship, he cleverly undercuts the value of human flesh to make it appear as if it would be merely a slight exchange for his loan compared to the consumables of cattle, goats, and lamb. However, the price of a pound of Antonio’s flesh that Shylock wishes to enact in exchange for an unpaid loan is immense physical suffering to Antonio, an enhanced version of the oppression Shylock has felt. Shylock has been equated with a cut-throat dog by Christians, and increases the dehumanization in defining Antonio’s flesh as even lesser than that of farm animals. Furthermore, the inclusion of themes such as slavery evoke tragedy as the absurdity of the premise is overshadowed by dehumanizing concepts in scenes such as Shylock’s insistence on his pound of flesh:

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

You have among you many a purchased slave,

Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,

You use in abject and in slavish parts,

Because you bought them...

The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,

Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.

If you deny me, fie upon your law!

There is no force in the decrees of Venice.

I stand for judgment: answer; shall I have it? (4.1.90-104)

By using the tradition of slavery and the laws of Venice to defend his insistence on Antonio’s flesh, Shylock defines the universe of The Merchant of Venice as a setting where the human body is inherently deficient in value and freedom. As such, Shylock’s demand is justified as “doing no wrong” (4.1.90) when Venice’s legal system already permits humans to be owned as property, similar to the condition of animals. The nature of the oppressive social and legal systems in Venice manifests in tragic dehumanization of the individual. Though Shylock is outwitted by Portia and ends the play without possession of Antonio’s flesh, his own tragic fate includes not death, but losing half of his fortune to the state, the other half to his daughter’s Christian husband, and a forced conversion to Christianity. Shylock’s economic value is used to support the system which oppresses him and upholds slavery, leaving him powerless. While the defeated antagonist is a consistent theme in comedy with its emphasis on marriage and happy resolutions, the modern understanding of Shylock’s actions as warped by intense discrimination casts his fate as tragic. By observing Shylock’s truthful interpretations of Venice’s dehumanizing systems, which enact more prejudicial power over more individuals than he may ever obtain, in his relatively simple, personal revenge, the social and economic norms of the world in *The Merchant of Venice* become unusually tragic for a comedy.

The definition of Shakespearean comedy expands throughout *The Merchant of Venice* as the play introduces tragic material in its devaluation of human worth within and outside traditional concepts of romantic pursuit, marriage, and happy resolutions. A diverse array of plots portray the tragic concepts present within many groups in Venetian society, from Portia’s suitors being reduced of personal character upon confronted with deception and grave misfortune, to betrayal within marriage and family with the physical exchange of rings reducing the value of love and women. Shylock’s pursuit of vengeance within systems enforcing widespread antisemitism and oppression of marginalized groups demonstrates the core of tragedy within the play’s comedic structure. Modern knowledge on the corrupting nature of discrimination and an emphasis on Shylock’s reasoning defines him as a tragic figure instead of an antagonist deserving of powerlessness. Unifying diverse characters and themes, language choices within the play consistently illustrate tragic equations between human individuals and the monetary worth of physical objects, animals, and flesh, particularly when individuals are considered of lesser value. The frequently serious idea of worthlessness in social, romantic, and economic forms subverts comedic structures of marriage with tragic ideas about human nature such as deception and oppression that permeate the world of the play. As such, *The Merchant of Venice* is an example of comedy expanded beyond the genre’s confines, inviting acceptance of the tragic theme of individual and systematic dehumanization as a distinction of Shakespeare’s liminal comedic canon.

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