

A Probe into the Root of Shakespeare's Greatness

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's plays criticize evil and praise truth and goodness, embodying the Christian doctrine that good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil. After removing the story content, Shakespeare's plays actually constitute a book called 'Code of Conduct for Human Behavior'. Shakespeare's dramas have extraordinary artistic charm and great social function. As Goethe says, "Shakespeare makes the world completely transparent for us; he does not write for the eye." Shakespeare's dramas embody Aristotle's theory of purification and conform to the standards of sublimity proposed by Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Through the form of drama, Shakespeare vividly interprets such important doctrines as the behavioral norms set for humanity in the Bible.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; greatness; dramas; the Bible

1 Shakespeare's Views on Drama and His Influence

In *Hamlet* Act III Scene II, Shakespeare expresses his views on what drama should be like through Hamlet's words:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.145)

In *Hamlet* Act III Scene II, Shakespeare severely reprimands the overacting that he often witnesses on the stage. He writes:

O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. (Shakespeare, 2009, p.145)

When speaking of the influence of Shakespeare, Goethe says, "I don't remember that any book or person or event in my life ever made so great an impression upon me as the plays of Shakespeare." In *Literary Criticism, an essay written in 1771*, Goethe expresses his great appreciation of Shakespeare: "The first page I read made me a slave to Shakespeare for life. And when I finished reading the first drama, I stood there like a man blind from birth...I realized and felt intensely that my life was infinitely expanded". Goethe regards Shakespeare as "one of the greatest poets", thinking that "Shakespeare makes the world completely transparent for us; he does not write for the eye." Shakespeare's works have extraordinary artistic charm. Just as Ben Jonson said: He was not for an age, but for all time!

2 Building the Cornerstone of Civilization according to the Bible

Shakespeare uses his works to tell the world the behavioral norms set by heaven for humanity. After removing the story content, Shakespeare's dramas can actually constitute a book called *Code of Conduct for Human Behavior*. Shakespeare vividly portrays the standards of human behavior that the Bible intends to convey, using a series of thought-provoking and vivid stories to illustrate the important standards set for humanity in a thick Bible. Just like the Three Kingdoms period in China interprets the concept of justice, just like Yue Fei's life story interprets the concept of loyalty, Shakespeare's dramas embody various standards of beautiful human nature, defining them in the form of dramatic stories. Shakespeare's dramas show mankind what if the standards set for humanity cannot be achieved, and what if they are achieved, thus awakening humanity to comply.

2.1 The Harm of Suspicion

In *The Winter's Tale*, suspicion and jealousy transform King Leontes of Sicily from the most reliable and caring husband, from a warm and sincere friend, to a cold and inhumane monster. His queen warmly welcomes his childhood friend, the honest and generous Bohemian king Polyhyneas, as he instructs, but is met with unfounded suspicion from him. He insists that his queen is disloyal to him. He orders his minister Camillo to poison Polyhyneas, but Camillo refuses to follow the order and instead helps him escape back to his own country. Then Leontes imprisons his wife and orders Antigonus, husband of the queen's maid Paulina, to abandon the queen's newborn daughter. Fortunately, Patitan is rescued and raised by a shepherd. He even conducts a public trial of his wife in front of all the ministers and nobles, and his actions lead to the death of his son Demetrius in grief and humiliation. Although he suddenly regrets and eventually reunites with his wife and daughter, and reconciles with the Bohemian king, his suspicion has caused irreparable losses.

Othello is one of the four greatest tragedies of William Shakespeare. In *Othello*, Othello kills his noble, beautiful, and holy wife due to suspicion, and the extreme sadness is shocking. As a result, people's hearts are purified. *Othello* is in line with Aristotle's theory of tragedy. In *Poetics*, the first important work on literary criticism, Aristotle proposes his definition of tragedy: An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play. And in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity, and fear effecting the power of purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle, 2008, p. 19) Through watching this tragedy, the audience would seriously consider the terrifying and harmful effects of jealousy, thus gaining enlightenment. And it makes people ponder what a perfect personality should be like: that is neither extreme arrogance nor extreme inferiority. Othello's arrogance comes from his outstanding military achievements, and his inferiority complex stems from his black identity being discriminated against in the social context at that time. His imperfect personality undoubtedly affects him. Othello wanders between the poles of arrogance and inferiority, never forming a perfect personality, which leads to his mistakenly believing in villains and not being able to confront his wife face-to-face, resulting in his tragedy.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus also participates in the killing of his best friend Caesar due to suspicion of Caesar's dictatorship. In the end, both his wife and he himself commit suicide. Without doubt, suicide is what he deserves.

In *Cymbeline*, under Iachimo's instigation, the male protagonist also suspects his chaste wife Imogen of betraying the love between them and even takes action to try to kill her. Fortunately, the tragedy doesn't happen.

Through these dramas, Shakespeare makes the audience aware of the great harm of suspicion in a subtle manner. These dramas, in turn, emphasize the importance of mutual trust in marital relationship.

2.2 What Is Chastity and Virtue

In *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, Marina is a character who, in adversity, not only relies on her own strength, wisdom and unwavering faith in Christ, but also strives to use her pure goodness and wisdom to educate the world with Christian doctrine. In Shakespeare's works, Marina is a holy fairy. Pericles has ever provided relief during the famine, so he entrusts the governor of Tarsus, Cleon, and his wife Dionysia to take care of his daughter Marina. Marina grows up to be knowledgeable and perfect, but this arouses the jealousy of Dionysia. So, Dionysia tries to murder Marina. Some pirates save Marina, take her to Mitylene, and sell her for a slave. Yet Marina remains chaste and strives to use her pure goodness and wisdom to educate others with Christian doctrine.

Queen Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* is also such a virtuous, strong, tolerant, and extremely resilient perfect woman. Queen Hermione is virtuous and serene, and her words and actions always adhere to the etiquette norms of a queen. However, she is met with unfounded suspicion from her husband. In the pain caused by misunderstanding, jealousy and suspicion, Hermione endures unbearable pain and waits silently for 16 years before she is able to reunite with her husband and daughter.

2.3 What Is the Correct View of Money

Timon is a nobleman in Athens, very wealthy and generous, spending his wealth on banquets and supporting various friends. Yet when he finds himself unable to make ends meet and in debt, and when he seeks for help, his self-proclaimed good friends are all ungrateful and turn against him like demons. No one is willing to lend him money or lend him a helping hand. Timon feels extremely disappointed and leaves Athens, the city he hates, and the hypocritical humans, and comes to live in forest. He curses in his heart that this detestable city's houses would collapse, and even prays to God to wipe out all the old, young, women, and children in the city. Timon harbors extreme hatred towards humans, believing that even the cruelest beasts in the forest are far more merciful than humans. To distinguish himself from humans, Timon is naked, keeping company with animals. When he discovers a large pile of gold in the forest, he feels an inexplicable anger, for he is tired of the hypocritical world. He says: "Gold! yellow, glittering gold, precious gold! ... Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair, wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant." (Shakespeare, 1966, p. 810) He gives all the gold to Athenian captain Alcibiades, who rebels against the Athenian senators, and asks him to distribute it to the soldiers. He only demands that the captain lead his troops to exterminate the Athenians and turn the city of Athens to ashes. When Athens suffers greatly, the Athenian senators remember wise and brave Timon and wants him to save Athens, promising him with supreme power and a large amount of money. However, Timon refuses. With great hatred, Timon leaves the world he despises.

In *Timon of Athens*, the belief that human nature is inherently good and the act of distributing all of his wealth to others indiscriminately lead to Timon's disappointment and discouragement towards human nature. In fact, according to Christian doctrine, human blessings are also predetermined, and it is against the will of heaven to indiscriminately distribute property to those who do not deserve it. This not only fosters the greed and unjust thoughts of those without virtue, but also undermines the arrangement of heaven for those without virtue to reflect on themselves and strive to accumulate blessings. According to the Bible, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, ...nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's." (*Exodus* 20:17) And in the Bible, we can also see such admonishments: "...if any would not work, neither should he eat." (2 *Thessalonians* 3:10) "...not greedy of filthy lucre; ...not covetous." (1 *Timothy* 3:3) "...for the labourer is worthy of his hire." (*St. Luke* 10:7)

2.4 What Is Pure Love

The pure and unwavering love between Romeo and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* has taught young people a good lesson.

In the ancient city of Verona, the Montague and Capulet families often fight fiercely with each other and become enemies.

At a masquerade ball held in the family of Capulet, Romeo, who comes from the Montague family, and Juliet, the daughter of the Capulet family, fall in love with each other at first sight. However, upon learning that their lover is from their family's long-standing feud, they feel uneasy.

Romeo sneaks into Capulet's garden and hears Juliet's expressing her love for him. Romeo can't help but respond to her. They pour out their love for each other and decide to secretly get married. Friar Laurence secretly holds a wedding ceremony for them.

Juliet's cousin Tybalt provokes Romeo on the street and stabs Romeo's friend Mercutio to death. Romeo, in anger, stabs Tybalt. Romeo is sentenced to exile. With the assistance of Friar Laurence, Romeo seeks refuge in Mantua.

The Capulet family doesn't know that Juliet has secretly married Romeo, so they plan to arrange for Juliet to marry Paris. In despair, Juliet asks Friar Laurence for help. The Friar suggests that Juliet pretend to agree to the marriage and gives her a kind of potion to drink before the wedding, so as to create the phenomenon of fake death and get by. Meanwhile, Romeo can go to the cemetery to find her and take her away.

However, due to the delay of the messenger, the Friar's letter is not delivered to Romeo. Upon learning of Juliet's death, Romeo, in despair, purchases a deadly poison and rushes back to Verona overnight. Amidst misunderstandings and conflicts, Romeo kills Paris at the Capulet family cemetery. Beside Juliet, Romeo commits suicide by taking poison. Juliet wakes up to find Romeo dead, so she stabs a dagger into her chest. Seeing all of this, everyone who witnesses this feels sad. Hearing the story of Romeo and Juliet and learning the lessons of this tragedy, the Capulet family and the Montague family discard their hatred and reconcile.

The love between Romeo and Julia transcends life and death, money and fame, and the bonds of family hatred. It is pure and loyal. Their love deeply moves people in the world and purify their hearts. The drama *Romeo and Juliet* tells people what true love is and makes people have a clear understanding of it. Although not listed among Shakespeare's four great tragedies, it is undoubtedly an extraordinary tragedy. And it also conforms to Aristotle's theory of tragedy and has a great power of purification.

2.5 What Is a True Hero Like

Under Shakespeare's writing, a true hero is like Julius Caesar in *Julius Caesar*. But Caesar is also imperfect. Although he is good to the Roman people, his ruthlessness towards the barbarians also brings him retribution: his daughter dies in childbirth, and he himself is stabbed to death.

In *Julius Caesar*, we can read many praises of Caesar. After Caesar's being assassinated, we can learn many of his achievements from Antony's speech, and we can feel the Romans' reverence for Caesar from their angry reactions towards those assassins. Even Brutus participates in his murder. This greatly frustrates Caesar. We can see this from the descriptive words of Antony in Scene II of Act III:

Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd;
And as he plucked his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar follow'd it,
As rushing out of doors to be resolv'd
If Brutus so unkindly knock'd, or no;

For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel:

Judge, O you gods! How dearly Caesar lov'd him! (Shakespeare, 1966, p.835)

2.6 What Is the Devil

The drama *Richard III* documents Richard's bloody massacre. During the process of usurping and consolidating the throne, he kills many people, such as Prince Edward, Henry VI, Duke of Clarence, two little princes, Rivers, Gray, Fugen and Buckingham. Richard III, who combines deception, instigation, hypocrisy, killing, spreading rumors, impiety, deceit, betrayal, persecution, debauchery, temptation, malice, and greed, is such a devilish image.

In the Bible, we can see such admonishments: "Thou shalt not kill." (*Exodus* 20:13) "And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death." (*Leviticus* 24:17) "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." (*Genesis* 9:6) Richard III's killing brings him retribution, and he ultimately fails on the battlefield and is killed.

By portraying Richard III as a vivid artistic figure, Shakespeare presents a devilish image without any human nature to the audience, thus making people deeply aware of the existence of evil on earth and its enormous harm to humanity. At the same time, through the ending of Richard's failure, people's understanding of the Christian worldview that good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil has been strengthened, and it has had a stunning artistic effect. (Wang, 2010, p.107)

2.7 Pure Love Cannot Be Defiled

Cymbeline, one of the dramas written at the end of Shakespeare's literary career, is "a fresh, enchanting play that mixes sadness, humor, near tragedy, fantasy, and poetry" (Dommermuth-Costa, 2006, p.90). The reunion of separated man and wife becomes the backbone of the comic plot of this drama. In *Cymbeline*, Posthumus and Imogen, the English princess, get married out of true love. Due to Imogen's stepmother's persecution, Posthumus has to leave for Rome and the two have to temporarily separate. In Rome, Posthumus makes a bet with a Brute named Iachimo about his wife's loyalty and agrees to let him seduce her. No matter how Iachimo tempts her, she remains unmoved and remains loyal to her husband. Iachimo sneaks into her boudoir through despicable means, steals Imogen's bracelet and records the decoration of her boudoir and her own characteristics as evidence of his successful seduction of Imogen.

The way in which Posthumus makes a bet on his wife's being able to withstand temptation with Iachimo in *Cymbeline* is quite wrong, and as a result, he suffers a series of pains. No matter what the purpose is, a person should not do such a thing as finding someone to seduce his own wife and verify her loyalty. This is disrespectful to his wife and a desecration of pure love. Human nature is fragile, and betting on it can bring unpredictable consequences. The male protagonist in this drama has added many unnecessary setbacks to his life by doing so, not only almost causing his wife to lose her life, but also plunging himself into despair and unwillingness to live in the world again. Although the misunderstanding between Posthumus and Imogen is eventually clarified and they are reunited, I believe he would never make a bet with others on his beloved wife's loyalty again. The audience in the world will also receive beneficial teachings from this.

2.8 Interpreting the Concept of Karma and Retribution in the Bible

Shakespeare's plays criticize evil and praise truth and goodness, embodying the Christian doctrine that good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil.

In *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, Antiochus and the princess suffer retribution due to incest and are unable to escape the punishment of heaven. And because of his kindness, Pericles gets the

protection of the gods and gets reunited with his wife and daughter:

In Antiochus and his daughter you have heard
 Of monstrous lust the due and just reward:
 In Pericles, his queen, and daughter, seen---
 Although assail'd with fortune fierce and keen---
 Virtue preserv'd from fell destruction's blast,
 Led on by heaven, and crown'd with joy at last.
 In Helicanus may you well descry
 A figure of truth, of faith, of loyalty.
 In reverend Cerimon there well appears
 The worth that learned charity aye wears.
 For wicked Cleon and his wife, when fame
 Had spread their cursed deed, and honour'd name
 Of Pericles, to rage the city turn,
 That him and his they in his palace burn:
 The gods for murder seemed so content
 To punish them; although not done, but meant. (Shakespeare, 1966, p.1072)

Although King Lear in *King Lear* ultimately realizes his faults, he still has to experience various pains and repay his previous mistakes. His tragedy is also related to his previous coldness.

Macbeth's regicide ultimately leads to his own tragedy. These are all in line with the Christian doctrine that good is rewarded with good and evil with evil.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Sherlock pays the price for his malice that he insists on causing Antonio to die. According to the Bible, "If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury." (*Exodus 22:25*) Sherlock not only practices usury to make huge profits, but also attempts to take Antonio's life. And although Antonio also lends money to others, he doesn't charge interest. His lending money to others is just for the purpose of helping them get through difficult times. While criticizing Sherlock's greed and cruelty, Shakespeare praises Antonio's selfless dedication to his friends, for whom he is even willing to sacrifice his life. Through the artistic image of Antonio in this play, Shakespeare also interprets what a true friend is.

The cruel regicide who usurps the throne in *Hamlet* is ultimately avenged by Hamlet's assassination.

In *Richard III*, historical facts are used to verify the Christian doctrine that good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil, which plays an important role in educating people and conveying the will of God. Many characters in *Richard III* suffer from misfortunes due to their unwillingness to save or standing idly by (like Hastings and others), or their murder (like Richard), or their betrayal (like Clarence), or their assistance in tyranny (like Buckingham), or their inability to resist the temptation of the devil Richard (like Lady Anne), which is in line with Christian doctrine.

In *Cymbeline*, Cymbeline suffers the pain of two biological sons being stolen and his daughter running away from home due to a lack of justice. In the end, he makes up for the mistake and then the whole family is able to reunite.

In *The Holy Bible*, we can see such doctrines: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (*ST. Matthew 7:12*) "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him." (*Ecclesiastes 10:8*) "And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (*Deuteronomy, 19:21*).

3 Great Social Functions of Shakespeare's Works

"Shakespeare was not a propagandist; he did not write plays as vehicles for his own ideas. Rather he developed a theatre 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)

It can be seen that Shakespeare's plays depict the conflict between good and evil in the human world, condemning evil and praising truth and goodness, helping people to recognize truth and evil through drama, thus purifying the soul. From this, it can be seen that Shakespeare's dramatic creations inherit Aristotle's theory of purification, using the art of drama as a tool to strive to reveal the truth of the objective world, and to express things with universality and truth. Longinus contends that the author must possess a great mind and a great soul, the work itself must be composed of dignified and elevated diction while simultaneously disposing the reader to high thoughts, and the reaction of a learned audience in large part determines the value or worth of any given work. He thinks that all readers are innately able to recognize the sublime, for "Nature has appointed us to be no base or ignoble animals...for she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we." (Bressler, 2007, p.22) Shakespeare's works conform to the proposition put forward by Longinus in *On the Sublime*.

4 Conclusion

From the foregoing illustrations, we can see that Shakespeare's plays reflect nature, allowing people to compare themselves and acquire beneficial experience, thus purifying the soul. Through the form of drama, Shakespeare vividly interprets such important doctrines as the behavioral norms set for humanity in the Bible. In fact, Shakespeare is the spokesperson for Heaven. Shakespeare has fulfilled the mission entrusted by Heaven, thus he is naturally great. Shakespeare is in line with the will of Heaven, thus he is surely great.

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