

Christian Morals in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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ABSTRACT: Shakespeare, the most significant author of theatrical plays, a real innovator of English language, a model for his followers and for the European theatrical culture then and now, is also a master of symbols and metaphors and a promoter of the values of Christian morals and ethics; as this paper attempts to demonstrate.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare, Christian morals, religious values

Introduction

Sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious, the religious values of Shakespeare's world are based upon the Evangelic ethics, trying, in this way, to depict his world with all its light and all its darkness, a world where the fight between Good and Evil begins with each character, with each event and with each page.¹

Shakespeare presents a world in which Good and Light are always triumphant, even if, apparently, some of his plays have no happy-ending. The moral doesn't come just with the words, but also with the events that happen in his plays. A very important thing for Shakespeare's plays is to be able to see behind appearance, to clear up the key in which they were written.²

Every step you take in this wood of symbols and metaphors you can discover a new hidden path that take you to another meaning

and to another moral. You can meet here his characters that hold, together with the author, the narrative thread unfolding it little by little and revealing us a world governed by Providence where Evil, in spite of its apparent triumph, is limited and repressed. This fight goes on even in readers' minds who learn that they must do good and avoid evil, that Evil destroy people and destinies. This pedagogy must teach us to run away from all Evil traps.

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The richness of Christian symbols does not exclude the usage of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic symbols and myths. These are not the expression of a scars Christian feeling of the author, but a rich form of revealing soul-up-lifting truth and a huge cultural amplitude.³

The moral strain, which engulfs Shakespeare's characters involved in disastrous conflicts and passions, ends, after getting through purifying suffering. In this way, the darkness that falls down on people and the evil that feeds itself with their suffering, are only ment to stress that triumphal power of the light.⁴

All the great Shakespearean themes: love, power, wisdom are just means to make his plays talk about Good's victory on Evil, about the triumph of the spiritual world. Behind this Shakespearean world of human conflicts we can intuit another world which transforms every conflict, every human tension in echoes of a tremendous spiritual fight. It is a real apocalypse: the human plan is nothing but a reflection of the spiritual one. That is why, in plays like "*Hamlet*", "*Macbeth*", "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*", Shakespeare refers to the world of spirits.⁵

The role of this spiritual world in Shakespeare's plays is not either formal, or coloring, it is not trying to create a fairy tale atmosphere, but, on the contrary, this world is well anchored in reality emphasizing the tight relation between Man and Cosmos, between the spiritual and material world, better to say, a projection of spiritual conflicts on the material world. Shakespeare believes in the final victory of Good and Light, although, apparently, his characters are victims of human passions that pull them in the

middle of a tempest of conflicts. This thing becomes obvious if we notice that, in all Shakespearean works, Man is governed by superhuman powers.⁶

Shakespeare's heroes seem to be defeated by these extraordinary powers that dominate them, but this is just a part of his initiatory game: defeat or human decay emphasizes the fact that every man's victory on Evil is complete and ultimate only in a certain eschatological manner and only by divine power intervention.

*"Hamlet:
and for mine own poor part,
Look you, I'll go pray!"*⁷

Another proof of the spirituality that governs Shakespeare's plays is the fact that " *some characters retire in loneliness and meditation in order to rediscover Heaven's kindness (Jacques, The Duke from "Measure for Measure", Timon, Pericles), and other retire in temples (The mother in "The Comedy of Errors", Thaisa) or ask for the help of some friars (Silvia, Hero, Romeo and Juliet). In the same way we can find in his plays characters that embody spirituals like Cerimon or monarchs in "Much Ado about Nothing", "Romeo and Juliet", "Measure for Measure" or ask for the help of some pilgrimages ("All's Well That Ends Well) and of some oracles ("Winter's Tale"). And, of course, our enumeration is not complete. Even some damned characters, like Othello, turn their faces to Heavens when their dying time has come.*"⁸

A careful reading of Shakespeare's works reveals us the fact that the sacrifice motif is dominant in his thinking. Not just once, the sacrifice of his characters remind us about the suffering motif that endows humans with holiness and redemption. The tragic Shakespearean characters sacrifice their lives to destroy the Evil's spiral and triumph and to secure a better celestial world.⁹

*"Hamlet: Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all."*¹⁰

The justice of some Shakespeare's characters is the divine justice and mercy, and the lesson that it teaches is that only forgiveness

can really bring peace, divine mercy, complete reconciliation and harmony.

The sacred that comes out of the human sacrifice in Shakespeare's world make us dream about a new world, a world of peace and reconciliation, a world of justice and love. Shakespeare uses metaphors and allegories in order to let us discover the world that pulsates behind the text of his works, that is, a spiritual world which emphasis the material one and, that is why, symbol is nothing else but a bridge that ties the two universes, a way to understand the world in which we are living and whose materiality is just a garment for the world's complexity.¹¹

Evil influences the deeds of the Shakespearean characters not in an arbitrary, fatidic, and total manner, but only as a manifestation of a spiritual conflict in the material world.

Aaron: Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top,
Safe out of fortune's shot; and sits aloft,
Secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash;
Advanced above pale envy's threatening reach.
As when the golden sun salutes the morn,
And, having gilt the ocean with his beams,
Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach,
And overlooks the highest-peering hills;
So Tamora."¹²

Not just once Shakespeare's characters succeed in changing Evil's temptations into Good's triumphs.

"...behind these apocalyptical fights is not just a man, even a demonized one, are not the demons from another land, but, is the titanic force itself that dugs unceasingly, from the beginning, at the foundation of this divine creation."¹³

Like Dante's "*Divina Commedia*", every Shakespearean play is an initiatory journey from Hell to Heaven. We lost ourselves, together with the characters, in the forest of myths and symbols, descending and ascending the hill of sufferance, trying to solve soul's mysteries and searching eagerly for redemption, for peace, for God.

In "*Romeo and Juliet*" the hate between the two families throws the characters in Hell. As it was said in "*Hamlet*" we can say here too: "*something is rotten*" in Verona. The moral values are suffocated by the ardent wish of enrichment, the avidity sin being the main cause of all Evil that falls down on the Veronese society and leads the two lovers to the tragic end. "*The sin, the guilt is too at the level of daily existence*".¹⁴

"*Romeo and Juliet*" is not just the tragedy of an unfulfilled love, but is also the tragedy of the transforming and lost soul under the influence of one of the most vile desire: the desire of revenge. Under the guise of well intended actions and posing as the defender of the ethical principles, Romeo revenges his friend's death and throws into chaos his universe. The tumultuous human nature goes out of control when Christian ethics is nothing but a means to justify ones sinful acts and desires. Romeo, caught in the net of the tempestuous adolescent love for his beautiful Juliet, trespasses the borders of adoration going astray into insane veneration when he pictures his lover as a saint.

Extreme passions, lost temper, individualism and the moving off the real Christian values are depicted here by Shakespeare in a renaissance desire to build a pedagogy of spirit for those who have lost God's way and who became prisoners of their own ego. Leaving for a moment the noisy veronese streets with all their burning passions we enter Friar Lawrence's cell, the place where reason and Christian morals wait quietly for the right time to go outside and put an end to the Evil forces that possess people's minds and souls.

When the storm begins the friar tries, by advising the two lovers, to restore order, but he only prevents things from happening earlier. We can consider Romeo as the architect of his own tragic destiny; the other characters are just simple builders who work to complete his creation. God here is exiled by Romeo's tempestuous passion that dulls his mind and throws him into despair making him the prisoner of his own choices as in a lesson that the individualist and self-centered Renaissance man has to learn: He is nothing without God.¹⁵ On the other hand, Romeo's exile is his salvation. There he will not just escape the death penalty, but he will meet God again and that exiled God will set his soul free from Evil, will

bring him back to real life. But, this is not Romeo's option, and he chooses to sacrifice his life for a supreme cause, that is, not just for his salvation, but for the salvation of all that rotten veronese society inflicted by Evil.

Conclusion

Living in a Christian culture and using a Christian symbolism, Shakespeare let us enter a world of morals that we can either intuit in the subtext of his work, or in the good or evil actions of his characters. Even if one may consider his work an eminently literary creation, it is also a (historic) fresco of his time and a mirror of the morals of the Christian people of his epoch. We discover in these Shakespearean plays ideas as: sin, mistake, guilt, destiny, sacrifice, forgiveness, revenge, all perfectly tied to the morals of the Christian Church.

Shakespeare's tragedies show us that, in a world that calls itself Christian, when religiosity is something superficial and doesn't guide people's lives from inside, nothing can avoid the ruin and the catastrophe of the human self.

Using this world of tragedies, Shakespeare put our modern society on guard like in an echo that trespasses time's borders, stating that a world without God brings death, loneliness, failure and darkness. Shakespeare's comedies reveals us the same thing, but not by using directly catastrophic images that terrifies the readers, but by using laughter, comedy which was considered by the author still capable of transforming morals ("*Castigat ridendo mores*").

Everywhere in Shakespeare's works we can see or intuit God's presence; in the images that he creates, in the ethics he presents and in the conclusions that he imposes to us readers. And that is because Shakespeare belongs to an era when religion was prevailing although it was little by little changed in a private business. The Shakespearean literary creation reveals its value not just in the images it creates, but also by communicating us a system of moral values, showing us what man can become without God, without solid moral principles, a dehumanized being.

NOTES

- ¹ Dan Amedeo Lăzărescu, *Introducere* la W. SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet. Prince of Denmark* (Târgoviște: Pandora, 2006), 23.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Dan Amedeo Lăzărescu, *Introducere* la W. SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer night's dream* (Târgoviște: Pandora, 2006), 10.
- ⁴ F. Mihăescu, *Shakespeare și teatrul inițiativ, Studii și cercetări tradiționale* (București: Rosmarin, 1999), 268.
- ⁵ Dan Amedeo Lăzărescu, *Introducere* la W. SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet* (Târgoviște: Pandora, 2002), 25.
- ⁶ William SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer night's dream* (Târgoviște: Pandora, 2003), II, 2.
- ⁷ Ibid., *Hamlet. Prince of Denmark*, I, 5.
- ⁸ Mihăescu, 9.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet. Prince of Denmark*, V, 2.
- ¹¹ F. Mihăescu, *Hamlet. Prințul melancoliei* (București: Rosmarin, 1997), 191.
- ¹² William SHAKESPEARE, *Titus Andronicus* (Târgoviște: Pandora, 2002), II, 1.
- ¹³ F. Mihăescu, *Shakespeare și teatrul inițiativ*, 214.
- ¹⁴ F. Mihăescu, *Shakespeare și tragiile iubirii* (București: Rosmarin, 2000), 19.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.