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# Perspective and Morality in *Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors*, And *The Merchant of Venice*

It is important to keep in mind that, though Shakespeare presents his audience with a myriad of varying perspectives, there seems to be a consistent moral perspective that runs throughout the course of the play. The mental processes of the characters are what drive them to do certain deeds. What is interesting to note is the way in which Shakespeare, either positively or negatively, reinforces these particular perspectives. By placing the characters in a position where a greater sense of the truth is afforded to them, Shakespeare allows them the ability to look back on their actions as either right or wrong, according to this moral perspective. However, what we often find is that the evil characters do not acknowledge that there is a moral truth to be realized. Essentially, they are unable to escape their own perspective due to their own selfishness and greed. As a result, those characters who choose not to "see" beyond their own perspective will often perish. This elusive moral truth is such that the characters "move" around it, but do not actually realize it, or "see" it, until the end. Usually, the audience is conscious of it from the very beginning, either through the introductory speech in the play, or through their own personal sense of morality.

The first play under investigation is Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors,* a play in which we find a farcical take on conflicting perspectives. By definition, a farce is "a light, humorous play in which the plot depends upon a skillfully exploited situation rather than upon the development of character"[1]. While this definition is, perhaps, indicative of *The Comedy of Errors*, we find that the action of the play is a direct result of the way in which each of the characters thinks. What they think is what drives them to perform certain actions and therein lies the formula for plot. I would submit that the humorous action of the play is predominant. However, as we look into the nature of the action and realize that it stems from

conflicting perspectives, it seems as though an audience engages itself more intensely with the drama because it is able to identify itself with the characters on the grounds that, like the characters, the audience is a group of psychologically driven individuals, who also make choices based on their own mental criteria. The basis for identification, as I have suggested, comes from our sympathy towards those who choose some form of action based on what they think. For example, in Act 1, scene ii, we find that Antipholus of Syracuse has bid his attendant, Dromio, to take the thousand marks "to the Centaur, where we host" (I, ii, 9). Dromio of Syracuse exists and Dromio of Ephesus, his twin brother, who Antipholus of Syracuse does not exists, enters. Surprised, Antipholus asks, "What now? How chance thou art retrn'd so soon?" (I, ii, 42). Dromio of Ephesus, who has no idea what Antipholus is talking about, says, "Returned so soon? Rather approached too late" (I, ii, 43). After a bit of bantering back & forth, Antipholus becomes quite upset & asks:

> Now, as I am a Christian, answer me,
> In what safe place you have bestow'd my money,
> Or I shall break that merry sconce of yours
> That stands on tricks when I am undisposed.
> Where is the thousands marks thou hadst of me? (I, ii, 77-81).

They continue this type of bantering until Dromio, remarking Antipholus's agitation & fearing for his physical well-being, leaves.

As an audience, we find this type of discourse amusing & recognize that it engages us in the drama. However, closer examination reveals that the reason why it is so engaging is due to the fact that we can, not only recognize, but appreciate, the conflict between the two characters on the basis that they are individuals who act upon what they see & (mis)interpret in their minds (I say "mis"interpret because the characters are unaware of the whole truth, as of yet). The way in which these characters think is immediately recognizable to an audience as something that is common to every human being. One's perspective is inherently quite local, so it does not escape an audience's understanding. When Antipholus of Syracuse says:

> The villain is o'er-raught of all my money.
> They say this town is full of cozenage;
> As, nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,

> Dark-working witches that deform the body
> Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
> And many such-like liberties of sin (I, ii, 96-102),

he is actually making an ironic comment on the psychological consequences of one's perspective, which he calls "sin(s)". What he does not realize is that those whom he calls "villain", "nimble jugglers", "Dark-working witches", "Disguised cheaters", "prating mountebanks," are nothing of the kind. Judging from the conversation he has just had with Dromio of Ephesus, they are nothing more than individuals with their own, personal perspectives. Ultimately, he, himself, has fallen victim to his own "deceptive" perspective. Is certainly not a "villain". However, he appears as such to Antipholus of Syracuse.

As we move through the play, we find that there are more of these instances of conflict between one character's perspective & another's. In Act V, scene 1, Angelo accuses Antipholus of Syracuse of having denied the acceptance of the chain, which actually, Antipholus of Syracuse had done. Outraged, Antipholus of Syracuse says "Thou are a villain to impeach me thus/ I'll prove mine honour & mine honesty/ Against thee presently, if thou dar'st stand" (V, 1,29-31), & so, Draws his sword. Again, we find that when two characters, each of whom claim to know the truth, come together, Shakespeare is attempting to show how we often place too much faith in the immediate appearance of things, without stopping to consider that there might be some truth outside that which we immediately perceive.

At the end of the play, when the truth finally comes out that there are twin Antipholus's & twin Dromio's, all the confusion & angst that once separated them dissolves. The characters recognize that, though their perceptions were not entirely accurate, they were not entirely false. The characters have maintained their own piece of the truth, but due to circumstances beyond their control, were unable to connect with one another. Moreover, the characters could not see beyond their own frame of reference. It is important to not that Shakespeare does not radically condemn these characters for their inability to perceive the whole truth, which suggests that the blame does not lie entirely with the characters. The play is both a comment on the unreliable nature of appearances, as well as on man's susceptibility to the deception inherent in those appearances. Shakespeare is drawing our attention to the fact that we need to be

more attentive to the possibilities. On this point, I should like to comment on the general moral perspective with which Shakespeare seems to have written this play.

As I have suggested, Shakespeare, either positively or negatively, reinforces the particular perspectives of the characters by having them undergo a series of events that will lead either to a moment of enlightenment or death. In *The Comedy of Errors,* Shakespeare sheds a moral light on the play through the way in which the characters react to one another. For instance, in Act V, scene I, where Antipholus of Syracuse and Angelo draw their swords for battle, it seems that Shakespeare is pointing out the consequences of relying totally on our own perspective. Had either of these men taken the time to try & look beyond what they believed to be the truth, they might not have been so impetuous as to almost engage in battle. Indeed, such a battle would indicate that because both men were so concerned with asserting their own perspective over the other's, both had lost touch with a more morally appropriate type of behavior. Again, in Act 1, scene 11, where we find Antipholus of Syracuse & Dromio of Ephesus engaged in a heated conversation, Antipholus strikes Dromio because, ultimately, they are unable to see "eye to eye". While an audience may find this scene amusing, the fact that Antipholus strikes Dromio is indicative of a rather serious problem that comes about when one person is so caught up in his or her own perspective, that they fail to see the other's point of view. Of course, Shakespeare is not expanding this idea in the play to such a degree that it would take the humour away, but a sensibility to this moral dilemma is, I think, implied. Antipholus, here, acts immorally because he is quick to lash out at Dromio, who has done nothing more than speak from his point of view. It is my contention that a general, moral perspective is implied in the play through the interaction of the characters perspectives. Indeed Robert Laungbaum, in his essay "Character Versus Action in Shakespeare," writes:

> There has always been in drama a certain tension between the point of view of the character & the play's final meeting which assigns values to the points of view. And among the audience there has been a corresponding tension between the inclination to be interested in each character out of sheer curiosity, & the necessity to judge the characters morally. But the character has always given way in drama to general meaning [2].

Similarly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, we find the same type of 'doubleness' occurring through the interaction of the characters' perspectives. That is to say, by 'doubleness,' I mean the audience realizes both the character's individual perspective, as well as, a moral perspective, which we find that Shakespeare inserts via the results, or consequences, of the characters' actions. Again, in this play, we find that the characters are not functions of a highly integrated plot (though, the plot, it can accurately be stated, is highly developed), but rather, because they are functions of their own psychology, driven by their perceptions, that which are driven to do, on this play, constitutes plot. Furthermore, I would submit that the "general", moral perspective of the play is more apparent than it is in *The Comedy of Errors*.

In the first act, we find many references to perspective; moreover, how a particular character sees the would, which of course, sheds some light on the type of behavior these characters exhibit throughout the play. In Act 1, scene 1, Antonio says, "I hold the would but as the would, Gratiano? A stage where every man must play a part,/ And mine a sad one" (1,1,76-78). Gratiano, his friend, replies, "Let me play the fool:/ With mirth & laughter let old wrinkles come" (1,1,79-80). Antonio is shown here to be a victim, of sorts, & it is the role of victim that he both shares with others, & maintains himself throughout the play, until the end. Gratiano, we find, is the type of character who comforts & attempts to build the self-esteem of the major characters, & this conversation between the two is indicative of that. He is more of a supportive character. In an important comment, Basanio says:

> Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man In all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid two Bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, & When you have them they are not worth the search (1,1, 114-118).

While this comment by Bassanio is not yet significant, it speaks well for the type of character he is at the end of the play.

Throughout the play, there are instances where the characters question their points-of-view. This seems to suggest that *The Merchant of Venice* is more of an indictment of appearances and of the way we, on 'A stage where every man must play a part', take

things at face value, without considering the possibility of a truth outside our psychological framework. The characters in *The Merchant of Venice* are such that they seem to be able to say that they recognize this flaw in man, but, ultimately, wind up falling victim to the same flaw they were once so conscious of: our inability to recognize truth beyond the surface of things. In Bassanio's important speech in Act III, scene ii, he says:

> 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 test,
> Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
> There is no vice so simple but assumes
> Some mark of virtue on its outward parts (III, ii, 73-82).

Clearly, Bassanio is commenting of the falseness of appearances & how humans are quick to hear the "gracious voice", & see the 'fair ornament' as truth without looking beyond 'mark of virtue on its outward parts'. Indeed, the truth that is obscured is often 'damned error', or is marked by 'grossness'. What is interesting to note about this speech, while it gives some insight in Bassanio's perspective on appearances, is, also, a comment on how wealth, or 'fair ornament', further leads us into deception. This speech, then, becomes one in which Shakespeare is inserting a level of morality. Because we become so concerned with the accumulation of 'fair ornament', we lose sight of the more virtuous aspects of our lives such as love, caring, humility, etc. Ultimately, Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that when we place too much emphasis on material possessions, we fall victim to such things as greed and pride. This idea is clearly supported by the character by Shylock who is so full of a sense of pride and an overall selfishness, that he would sooner have a pound of Antonio's flesh than twenty times the amount of money that Antonio owed him. As I have suggested, when Shakespeare radically condemns those most possessed of this alienated perspective, unable to realize the truth, one of the main consequences for this behaviour is death and it is death that Shylock receives.

What becomes evident to a reader of these plays, is that in *The Comedy Errors*, the characters do not seem to be as 'in tune' with the moral aspect of deceptive appearances. While Antipholus, who says, 'They say this town is full of cozenage,/As nimble juggles that deceive the eye,/… And such like liberties of sin,' shows an awareness of the 'sin'-like deceptive nature of appearances, he does not seem to be as conscious of the negative repercussions of these appearances as Bassanio is. Bassanio, to whom Shakespeare has devoted an entire page-long speech, is more in-depth in his questioning of these appearances. The conflict between what is real and what is false it brought to the surface of *Merchant of Venice* in a more conscientious way. The characters deal more directly with it, rather than the characters in *The Comedy Errors*, who, for the most part, struggle against it.

This speech of Bassanio's runs parallel to Robert Langbaum's essay wherein he writes:

> It is significant, therefore, that in our time, when the effort of Shakespeare criticism has been to restore to the plays their Elizabethan ethos, the soliloquies have been alleged to be not characteristic and self-expressive at all, but just those moments when the speaker steps out of character to make an expository utterance, to speak not for his own particular perspective but for the general perspective of the play[3].

The fact that Bassanio *does* seem to 'step out of character,' by directly questioning the immediate appearance of things, suggests that Shakespeare, himself, is inserting what he perceives to be a greater sense of morality. Up until this part in the play, we do not find that Bassanio's character revolved around this dilemma between appearance and reality, so when Langbaum says these 'soliloquies' are not 'characteristic and self-expressive at all', we can safely make the assumption that Bassanio fits the bill.

In the final act of the play, we find Bassanio apologizing to Portia for having given away the ring she gave him. Bassanio begins to say, 'I swear to thee, even by thine own fair eyes,/Wherein I see myself…?'(V, I, 242-243), but is cut-off by Portia, who says:

> Mark you but that!
> In both my eyes he doubly sees himself,
> In each eye one. Swear by your double self,
> And there's an oath of credit (V, I, 242-247).

Bassanio replies to her, 'Pardon this fault, & by my soul I swear/ I never more will break an oath with thee' (V, I, 249-250). It seems rather ironic that *Portia* says 'Swear by your double self,' when it was she who appeared to be someone she was not in the scene where she acquitted Antonio. However, when Bassanio sees himself in Portia's eyes, he *is*, as Portio suggests, seeing a 'double self' because there are in a sense, two Bassanios: one, who knows the pitfalls & deceptive nature of 'fair ornaments,' & another who is quite deceived by the appearance of a 'Doctor of Laws,' who, in reality, is Portia. It is also ironic that when Portia tells Bassanio to swear by his double self, 'And there's an oath of credit,' it is, really, worth no credit at all because Bassanio says one thing & does the opposite. Bassanio, it seems, loses his credibility by this inconsistency between word & deed. Also, because he has broken his oath to Portia by giving away the ring, we do not whole-heartedly believe him when he says, 'I never more will break an oath with thee'. He has already proven himself susceptible to deceiving appearances, which casts an ironic doubt on the oath he now swears never to break. If we return to the passage in scene I, of Act I, where Bassanio accuses Gratiano of speaking 'an infinite deal of nothing' & that when one finds his reasons, 'they are not worth the search', it seems as though Bassanio becomes what he accuses Gratiano of. The whole speech Bassiano makes in Act III, scene ii, beginning with line 73, does not amount to much in terms of its establishing him as one who can guard himself against the deceptive tendencies of appearances. In the end, we find that Bassanio cannot say *and* do the right, moral thing because he has already proved himself inconsistent.

The characters in *The Comedy of Errors* struggle with the conflict between appearances & reality in such a way that none of them are able to recognize the truth until the end when Aegon explains it to them. However, this inability to look beyond their individual perspectives has led some of them to engage in immoral action. The characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, on the other hand, are more conscious of the struggle & tend to deal with it in a more direct fashion. Because the audience is (usually) comprised of individuals who 'see' from a particular perspective, the characters of Shakespeare's plays become more 'real', in a sense, given that they, like the audience, are driven to certain actions as a result of a particular way of perceiving the world. Accordingly, each character

represents a particular point of view that, when confronted with a conflicting perspective, sheds some insight into a more general, moral perspective, which Shakespeare seems to have been directing our attention towards. Indeed, because the characters represent psychological points of view, we, as an audience, are as Langbaum suggests, 'interested in each character out of sheer curiosity, & the necessity to judge the characters morally…character has always given way in drama to general meaning… The meaning is not the law which puts character in its place; the meaning *is* character in its unformulated being, in all its particularity'[4].

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[1]*Flexner, Stuart* (ed.) The Random House Dictionary of the English Language. 2nd Edition New York: Random House, Inc., 1987.- P.698.
[2]*Langbaum, Robert* 'Character Versus Action in Shakespeare' from 'Shakespeare Quarterly' 1957. – P.69.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.

*Shakespeare William* The Comedy Errors. London: Penguin Book Inc., 1972;
The Merchant of Venice. London: Penguin Book Inc., 1967.