

Shakespeare and the Bible -- Taking the Characterization in The Merchant of Venice as an Example

Runyu Wang

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, 2 Bei Nong Street, Beijing 100096, China

*E-mail: wry@ncepu.edu.cn

Abstract

As early as the beginning of the last century, Shakespeare's works were introduced to China, and the related study also rose. However, it was not until the 1990s that domestic study of the relationship between Shakespeare's creation and the Bible has begun. This paper takes the characterization in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as an example to analyze the thoughts of the Bible such as fraternity, tolerance and loyalty permeated in this work.

Key words: Shakespeare; the Bible; *The Merchant of Venice*

DOI: 10.7176/JLLL/102-08

Publication date: July 30th 2024

1.Introduction

1.1 Shakespeare and the Bible

As we all know, the Bible is a classic of Christianity and a bright pearl in the world literature treasure house. It is the most widely circulated and influential literary masterpiece in the world, especially in Europe and America. Frye (1989) once called the Bible "one of the sources of Literary Symbols". He asserted that "due to the rich archetypal content of the Bible, reading the Bible is a necessary prerequisite for a comprehensive understanding of literature".

Many literary giants in the modern West were deeply influenced by the Bible and drew inspiration from it. Shakespeare is one of them. He was born in a Christian family in the middle ages which was described as "only one ideology exists, that is, religion and theology." by Engels (2009) since his childhood, Shakespeare has enriched his imagination under the influence of the Bible, the book of prayer and the proverbs. "The religious rites, early prayer, late prayer, baptism and Eucharist in the Holy Trinity Church - all scenes of worship are left in Shakespeare's memory and echoed in his plays" (Tong, 1982).

Many archetypes in the Bible are shown in Shakespeare's works. In view of his familiarity with the Bible, his Christian cultural background, and the literary tradition that western literature regards the Bible as one of its sources, we have reason to say that this is the result of the influence of the Bible. The British scholar Burgess (1994) once pointed out that "Shakespeare drew so much from the Bible that it can even be said that there would be no Shakespeare's works without the Bible." Helen Gardner (1989), a British contemporary critic, also regarded Shakespeare's tragedies as "Christian tragedies", believing that the mysteries revealed in his works "were all generated from Christian concepts and expressions, and some of its most representative characteristics are all related to the religious feelings and understanding of Christianity". However, in the study of Shakespeare, people tend to pay more attention to the relationship between Shakespeare's creation and humanism, and rarely study the relationship between Shakespeare and Christianity. The reason may be that more attention is often paid to the inheritance of humanism to ancient Greek and Roman culture and its opposition to the Christian Church in the middle ages, while the connection and inheritance between humanism and Christian culture are ignored. Therefore, this study intends to use the Bible as the basis for Christian spirit and explore its connection with Shakespeare's work *The Merchant of Venice*.

1.2 *The Bible* and *The Merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare's plays not only have the strong spirit of opposing feudal shackles, striving for personality liberation and social progress shared by the advanced literature at that time, but also run through the writer's unique spirit of mercy, forgiveness and fraternity. This spirit comes not only from the tradition of ancient Greek and Roman literature, but also from the Christian Classic Bible. The Bible abounds with proverbs and

admonitions about mercy, forgiveness and fraternity. It tells people that with love, all faults and hatred can be resolved, “Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins” (1900). Only with love, people can live in happiness, and it is love that links everything perfectly and harmoniously. The Epistle to the Galatians says, “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (1900). This is particularly prominent in the New Testament. Of course, the Old Testament also talks about forgiveness and love but it only who believe in God can be forgive. Therefore, these thoughts will undoubtedly have a profound and lasting impact on Shakespeare as a true Christian. In fact, mercy, forgiveness and fraternity have always been the themes of Shakespeare’s plays which constitute the distinctive characteristics.

When it comes to the Shakespeare’s plays, we can naturally transition to his representative work *The Merchant of Venice* which is full of humanistic thoughts, and further explore the similarity between the spirit displayed in the play and the Bible. This study aims to go deeper into the religious themes, characters, and profound connection with the Bible in *The Merchant of Venice*.

2. The embodiment of the spirit of the Bible in *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice can be regarded as a masterpiece of comedy that embodies the spirit of kindness, forgiveness, and fraternity. The whole drama revolves around the theme of love and friendship between characters in it, and is filled with praise for sincere love. This viewpoint can be confirmed by the characters he creates in the play.

2.1 Analysis of Antonio

Antonio, a Venetian merchant, is an ideal figure in Shakespeare’s humanistic thoughts. Shakespeare praised Antonio through the tone of the characters in the play, saying that “The dearest friend to me, the kindest man, the best condition’d and unwearied spirit in doing courtesies; and one in whom the ancient Roman honour more appears than any that draws breath in Italy” (Shakespeare 2001). However, we must also note that Antonio in the play appears as a Christian, and his thoughts and behaviors are also in line with the Christian spirit. He acted in accordance with the teaching of the Bible. He was kind and generous. He lent money to others only to solve people’s difficulties but not for profit. He shouldered debts for his friends and adhered to his faith in the court, showing the virtue of death without complaint that Jesus Christ had shown. It can be seen that Antonio is not only an ideal figure in line with the principles of humanism, but also an ideal Christian image. In Shakespeare’s mind, the spirit of ancient Rome and the virtues advocated by Christianity are combined to embody the humanistic ideal, while Antonio is mostly modeled on the ideal Christian.

2.2 Analysis of Portia

Portia is another ideal figure full of humanistic thoughts created by Shakespeare in the play and the image of new women in the Renaissance. Similarly, this character also has the feature of an ideal Christian. Especially in the second half of the script, this feature is very distinct. When Portia came to the court disguised as a man, she first persuaded Shylock with the spirit of Christian. That speech about compassion and justice was like an excellent sermon:

“The quality of mercy is not strain’d;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
.....
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice” (Shakespeare 2001).

These words made Portia, dressed in a black lawyer’s suit, quite like a priest who earnestly and kindly urged people to worship God. When Shylock was adjudicated, Portia still did not forget her compassionate Christian spirits and asked the Duke and Antonio to be lenient to Shylock when implementing the harsh laws of Venice.

When Shakespeare portrayed Portia, he also carefully designed the romantic love story of Portia’s three boxes of choosing her husband. The story has deep meaning and can be regarded as a fable. The three boxes of gold, silver and lead are symbols. They are testers for the spiritual realm of the selectors, which can test their different life pursuits. The box is engraved with such different words and sentences:

“Golden casket -- ‘Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.’”

“Silver casket -- ‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.’”

“Lead casket -- ‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath’”(Shakespeare 2001).

That is to say, the purpose of those who choose the golden box is to satisfy their personal desires from love; Though the person who chose the silver box did not make any unreasonable plans he still wanted to get something through love. These two choices have different forms but there is no essential difference, because they both regard the purpose of love as acquisition. Only the choice of lead box is different. People who chose it regard love as dedication: ready to sacrifice everything for their lovers. Shakespeare tells us through the play that only such a person can truly understand love, and his love can match with Portia. Bassanio’s love for Portia is a kind of pure love, similar to the Christian love for the Virgin Mary, who only knows dedication but does not know how to seek. So he chose the lead box. This choice shows his lofty spiritual realm. Thus, in Shakespeare’s works, the affection between Portia and Bassanio is not only the warm and heartfelt love for each other, but also the idealized feelings of the virgin of Christians who offer each other. This kind of affection is clearly defined in the Bible: "Let love be without simulation Abhor that which is evil; Clear to that which is good" (1900). It means that the purest and most noble love is sincere and cannot be mixed with any falsehood which echos Shakespeare’s inner standards of love.

2.3 Analysis of Shylock

From the perspective of the whole play, Shylock, as a Jewish usurer, has always stood on the opposite side of Antonio. The contradiction between Antonio and Shylock constitutes the main line of the dramatic conflict in the whole play. Antonio is a Christian, while Shylock is a Jew. Antonio’s disgust with Shylock and Shylock’s revenge on Antonio are all manifestations of religious contradictions. In Scene 3 of the first act of the play, Shylock’s first aside explained his hatred for Antonio and their contradiction which is actually related to their religious stance: ◦

“I hate him for he is a Christian;

But more for that in low simplicity

He lends out money gratis, and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

If I can catch him once upon the hip,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (Shakespeare 2001).

It can be seen that Shylock retaliates against Antonio, not only for Antonio’s bullying and insulting, but also for removing obstacles in business, so that he can get windfall profits at will.

By comparing the different outlooks on life and attitudes of the two religions, Shakespeare linked Shylock’s greed, stinginess and cruelty with Judaism, and combined the humanistic ideal with Christian Antonio’s kindness, generosity and fraternity, which undoubtedly shows Shakespeare’s Christian position. Shakespeare’s wish is to use love to dissolve hatred and prejudice in order to achieve the goal of universal harmony. However, he also saw that the hatred between Antonio and Shylock was not so easy to resolve, and people with a strong sense of revenge like Shylock would not easily change their nature. In a court play, it was written that Shylock was not moved by the public’s admonition and Bassanio’s triple compensation. Such a stony heart cannot be dissolved by the power of love. So how to solve this contradiction? Shakespeare introduced two clues, Jessica and Lancelot, in the play to demonstrate another way of resolving conflicts with Jews. Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, although Jewish, fell in love with Christian Lorenzo and ultimately decided to flee her family, convert to Christianity to pursue a new life. Lancelot was a servant of Shylock, not Jewish but living in a Jewish family. After being mistreated, he decided to flee and seek refuge with Christians. Both of them chose to leave, symbolizing that the way out for the Jewish situation was through conversion or abandonment. For Shylock, Shakespeare forced him to convert to Christianity through compulsory judgment as a condition to avoid the death penalty. Overall, Shakespeare explored the issue of Jewish outlet through these characters and plots.

The creation of Shylock also embodies Shakespeare’s spirit of Christian fraternity which can be seen in the Bible:“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (1900). “Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation”(1900). As the embodiment of greed, cruelty, revenge and other bad human nature, Shylock was cast with disgust by Shakespeare, but did not be shaped as a devil but a living man. He has his own experience and

inner feelings. He lived according to his beliefs and ways, but was unfairly treated in society. He saw that Christians hit slaves and hated pagans which were the same as him. Why should he be bullied when their actions were recognized by the society. In *The Merchant of Venice*, we can see that Shylock accused Christians more than once to defend his behavior. His words are well grounded and sharp. The description itself shows Shakespeare's Christian philanthropy. In his view, Jews are also human beings. They have the right to live and also demand equality. Therefore, discrimination and bullying are unjustifiable and wrong. Shylock's argument is full of the writer's opinions and feelings, which makes these paragraphs particularly wonderful and persuasive, which makes people hate Shylock in racial discrimination and religious prejudice and have much sympathy.

3. Conclusion

Shakespeare created vivid characters in *The Merchant of Venice* which have the characteristics of humanistic thought, but also show the feelings of Christians. Antonio, who possessed noble morals, was a product of Shakespeare's combination of ancient Roman and Christian virtues. Portia, a new female representative with humanistic characteristics of the Renaissance era, who pursues pure love, also possesses the spirit revered in the Bible. The unforgivable villain, the Jewish Shylock, is actually a negative example of Shakespeare highlighting the spirit of Christianity. All these analysis show the influence of the ideas in the Bible on Shakespeare and his work.

References

- Beaugard, D, (2000). *Shakespeare and the Bible*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bloomfield, J, (2020). *Spectral Authority: The Presence of Shakespeare in Biblical Scholarship*. Christianity Literature, 69(2), pp73-196.
- Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, (2012). *Selected Works of Marx and Engels Vol.* Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Grant, P (2019). The Bible and *The Merchant of Venice*: Hermeneutics, Ideology, and Displaced Persons. *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 16(3), pp247-262.
- Groves, B (2014). The Bible in Shakespeare. *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 65(4), pp927-928.
- Helen Gardner (1989). *Religion and literature*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- Lewalski, B K, (2019). Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*. DOI:10.2307/2866826.
- Tong, Qingsheng, (1982). On the Religious Prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, (04), pp89-91.
- Unknown, (1900). *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha*. London: The Syndics of The Cambridge University Press.
- William, Shakespeare, (2001). *The Merchant of Venice*. Beijing: China International Broadcasting Press.
- Zhu, Weizhi, (2010). *Christianity and Literature*. Changchun: Jilin Publishing Group Co.
- Zhu, Wen, (1992). *Shakespeare Dictionary*. Hefei: Anhui Literature&Art Publishing House.