Abstract

Although many critics have claimed that Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of mercy in *The Tempest, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Measure for Measure* presents an exposition of Christian doctrines and principles, my paper contends that this line of argument oversimplifies Shakespeare's highly nuanced relationship with Christian doctrine. Conducting close reading of scenes centered upon mercy and reconciliation, my paper illustrates that these strikingly different Shakespearean plays offer three distinctive representations of the impact of mercy upon human relationships. The character of Prospero in *The Tempest,* for example, reveals the power of mercy to free and transform the individual and even restore human relationships. In *Measure for Measure,* Isabella and Angelo reveal that it is important for all individuals, both the virtuous and the sinful, to be prepared to grant mercy to one another. Finally, my paper examines critical controversy surrounding the character of Shylock and the theme of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice.* With consideration to the historical context of Elizabethan England, my paper addresses how Shylock's rejection of the "quality of mercy" is inextricably connected to Elizabethan misconceptions about Judaism. Moreover, Shylock reveals that the rejection of the quality of mercy destroys both the individual and human relationships. Ultimately, by tracing the theme of mercy throughout *The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure,* and *The Tempest,* my paper offers insight into the intricate visions of human relationships in Shakespeare's plays.

Virtue vs. Vengeance: Examining the "Quality of Mercy" and Human Relationships in *The Tempest, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Measure for Measure*

By Kristen Proehl

"Merciful heaven,
Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphrous bolt
Split'st the unwedgeable oak
Than the soft myrtle.."
— Isabella, *Measure for Measure*

The virtuous and tranformative power of mercy emerges as a critical theme in three strikingly different Shakespearean plays: *The Tempest, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Measure for Measure.* Literary critics frequently disagree over the extent to which Christian ideology informs Shakespeare's depiction of mercy. Some argue that Shakespeare's development of the theme of mercy presents a "kind of

dramatic exposition of Christian doctrines and principles."[1] This argument profoundly oversimplifies Shakespeare's intricate development of the theme of mercy in a variety of his works. Northrop Frye, on the other hand, provides a more appropriately nuanced interpretation of Shakespeare's relationship to Christian doctrine when he asserts that "Shakespeare uses conceptions taken from the ideology of his time incidentally, and that we always have to look at the structure of what he is telling us."[2] To expand upon Frye's claim, I will contend that the "structure" of what Shakespeare "tells us" about mercy in *The Merchant of Venice, The Tempest,* and *Measure for Measure* are three distinctive messages concerning the impact of the "quality of mercy" upon the individual and human relationships. In *The Tempest,* for example, the "quality of mercy" frees and transforms the individual and even has the power to restore human relationships. *Measure for Measure* explores an individual's rejection of the "quality of mercy" and conveys that all individuals (that is, both the virtuous and sinful) must prepare themselves to be merciful. Finally, the character of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* illustrates that the rejection of the "quality of mercy" destroys both the individual and human relationships.

The opening scenes of *The Tempest* establish Prospero's rejection of the "quality of mercy," as he vengefully torments Alonso and his followers with the illusion of a tempest. In contrast to her father's lack of mercy, Miranda despairs at the image of Alonso's ship in the "wild waters" and laments, "O I have suffered with / Those that I saw suffer! A brave vessel, / Who had no doubt some noble creature in her, / Dashed all to pieces" (1.2.5 –8). Although Prospero is initially devoid of mercy for his brother, he makes a stunning transformation throughout the course of the play, progressing from a compulsion for vengeance to a deeper understanding of the virtuous nature of mercy. Prospero's internal transformation profoundly alters human relationships within the play.

Prospero's discussions with Ariel play an integral role in his progression from virtue to vengeance. As Ariel watches Prospero use his magic to torment those who have wronged him, he declares, "Your charm so strongly works 'em / That if you now beheld them, your affections / Would become tender" (5.1.17 –19). Ariel's comments compel Prospero to evaluate his own desire for vengeance and guide him to a deeper comprehension of his own humanity. Ariel's sympathy for Alonso and his followers surprises and deeply moves Prospero. Specifically, Ariel's compassion prompts Prospero to wonder, "shall not myself, / One of their kind, that relish all as sharply / Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?" (5.1.21 –6). His compassion even compels Prospero to grant mercy to individuals who have wronged him, as he confesses, "I am struck to th'quick, / my nobler reason 'gainst my fury / Do I take part. The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.28 –30).

On another level, however, Prospero's decision to pardon those who have wronged him emerges from his realization that it is dishonorable to vengefully punish individuals who are penitent. For example, after reflecting upon his treatment of Alonso and his courtiers, he concludes, "They being penitent, / The

sole drift of my purpose doth extend not a frown further" (5.1.28 –31). Alonso displays penitence for sins he has committed against Prospero, when he declares, "Th'affliction of my mind ammends, with which / I fear madness held me. . . . Thy dukedom I resign, and do entreat / Thou pardon me my wrongs" (5.1.115 –28). Similarly, Caliban exhibits his penitence when he assures Prospero, "I'll be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace" (5.1.292). Prospero's progression from vengeance to mercy protects and restores the human relationships within the play. His decision to pardon Alonso and Gonzalo, for example, facilitates Ferdinand's and Miranda's joyful union. Prospero's internal transformation, therefore, is essential to creating the atmosphere of harmony and wonder at the conclusion of the play.

Close analysis of the scenes in which Prospero grants mercy to those who have wronged him reveals the complexity of the message that *The Tempest* communicates about the "quality of mercy." For example, when Prospero pardons those who have wronged him, his words often simultaneously imply that he has neither accepted nor forgotten the sins that they have committed against him. That is, Prospero's words suggest it is not necessary to forget someone's misdeeds in order to pardon them. As Prospero grants mercy to his brother Alonso, for example, he simultaneously reminds him of his wrongful behavior when he declares, "You, brother mine, that entertained ambition, / Expelled remorse with nature, who, with Sebastian...would have killed your king; I do forgive thee, / Unnatural as thou art (5.1.75). Similarly, when Prospero pardons Caliban, he articulates a hope that he will seize the opportunity to reform himself: "As you look / To have my pardon, trim it handsomely" (5.1.291 –3). Prospero's act of mercy also evidently transforms Caliban and Alonso, for Alonso willingly resigns his dukedom, and Caliban even vows to be "wise hereafter / And seek for grace" (5.1.293).

In *The Tempest*, messages about freedom are intricately intertwined with messages about mercy. Once Prospero pardons those who have wronged him, he resolves to grant Ariel his freedom. The act of granting mercy to others is personally freeing for Prospero because it releases him from his compulsion for vengeance and dependence upon magic. In this sense, Prospero's transformation reflects Portia's claim that the "quality of mercy" is "twice blest; / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (4.1.186 –7). Specifically, the act of granting mercy "blesses" Prospero because it is personally liberating and restores his relationships with others. Even in the final lines of the play, themes of mercy and freedom are intertwined. After granting mercy to those who have wronged him, Prospero confesses that he is in need of mercy himself. Shifting his attention to the audience, he requests, "As you from crimes would pardoned be / Let your indulgence set you free" (5.1.337–38). Thus, he beseeches audience members to free him by granting him mercy.

Rather than illustrating the positive consequences of the act of bestowing mercy, *Measure for Measure* centers upon the negative repercussions of Angelo's refusal to grant mercy to the penitent Claudio. Indeed, Angelo's rejection of mercy emerges as the primary source of conflict in the play. Like *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure* examines the impact of mercy upon

human relationships. However, the final scenes of *Measure for Measure* convey the play's distinctive message about the "quality of mercy." The conclusion of the play underscores the concept that all individuals, both the virtuous and the villainous, must be prepared to bestow mercy upon others. Although the play centers upon Angelo's irrational refusal to pardon Claudio, the focus of the final scenes of the play shifts to Isabella. The Duke tests Isabella's capacity to be merciful when he forces her to decide whether Angelo should be pardoned. He pretends to be as devoted to the law as Angelo, refuses to temper the law with mercy and declares that the "very mercy of the law cries out / Most audible, even from his proper tongue 'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death'" (5.1.399–401). By convincing Isabella that Angelo will be executed for Claudio's death, the Duke tricks Isabella into believing that she will have to intervene to save his life. Just as Ariel reminds Prospero of the virtue of mercy, Mariana's pleas compel Isabella to pardon Angelo. "Sweet Isabel, take my part; /" Mariana implores, "Lend me your knees, and all my life to come / I'll lend you all my life to do you service" (5.1.423–5). Ultimately, Isabella does choose to grant Angelo mercy, as she requests that the Duke treat Angelo as though he were still alive. She even confesses a belief that a "due sincerity governed his deeds" until he met her (5.1.438). The conclusion of the play thus reinforces the concept that even virtuous individuals must be prepared to be merciful.

The theme of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* has generated a great deal of critical controversy. In part, this controversy has emerged from the relationship between the play's message about mercy and Elizabethan attitudes about Judaism. Many literary critics contend that Shakespeare's representation of Shylock (as a vengeful money-lender who refuses to pardon Angelo) is a critique of Judaism. The historical context of the play (and, specifically, an understanding of Elizabethan attitudes about Judaism) offers insight into these critical debates. Widespread anti-Semitism in Elizabethan times generated many misconceptions about Judaism itself. As literary critic Charles Cowdon Clarke once remarked, "Shakespeare lived in an age when the general feelings towards the sect in which Shylock was born and educated in could scarcely be called a prejudice, . . . it was a rancor, a horror, venting itself in injustice and violence."[3] Anti-Semitism contributed to what Northrop Frye calls a very "skewed notion" of Judaism in Elizabethan England, as Shylock's rejection of mercy, his "clinging to the bond literal law . . . was the general accepted view of Judaism in England at the time."[4] With this in mind, critics often contend that Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock as an unmerciful money-lender merely reinforces the misconception about Judaism that plagued the Elizabethan era. On the other hand, many critics reject this historical interpretation and call attention to the unmerciful Christian villains in other Shakespearean plays, such as Angelo of *Measure for Measure.* Furthermore, like *The Tempest* and *Measure for Measure, The Merchant of Venice* conveys a message about the impact of mercy on individual and human relationships. By the conclusion of the play, Shylock has lost everything he values as a result of his rejection of the "quality of mercy." He destroys his relationship with

his daughter, loses his fortune and even his personal dignity when forced to adopt a religion that he loathes. With all this in mind, the character of Shylock illustrates how the rejection of the "quality of mercy" negatively impacts both the individual and human relationships.

Even with all this in mind, however, Shylock's rejection of the "quality of mercy" appears inextricably connected to Elizabethan misconceptions about Judaism. Many Elizabethan audience members, for example, would have assumed that Old Testament law (which they associated with Judaism) did not have the spiritual power to "make people virtuous or even better" and could "only define the lawbreaker."[5] As Northrop Frye explains, Elizabethans believed that "under the 'law' man is already a criminal, condemned by his disobedience to God, so if God weren't inclined to mercy, charity, and equity, as well as justice, nobody would go to heaven."[6] Shakespeare's Christian audience members distinguished themselves from Old Testament beliefs by establishing their own conviction that God's mercy was essential to their salvation. Because they sought God's mercy themselves, they logically reasoned that they should be prepared to grant mercy to one another. This historical context offers insight into Isabella's rather desperate words to Angelo, as she declares, "could great men thunder / As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet . . . For every pelting officer / would use his heaven for thunder, nothing but thunder" (2.2.113 –15). As Isabella endeavors to persuade Angelo to pardon her brother, she reminds him that the "heavens" grant mercy to mortals and refrain from punishing individuals for every offense. Similarly, when Portia speaks to Shylock about "the quality of mercy" she reminds him that the "heavens" bestow mercy upon mortals and that God's mercy is crucial to salvation itself. Specifically, she tells him that mercy "droppeth as the rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath," is an "attribute to God himself" and reminds him that "in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation" (4.1.183 –193).

In *The Genius of Shakespeare,* Jonathan Bate refers to William Hazlit's conception of the "striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind: an 'open-mindedness' and 'capacity to see both sides of a question and empathize equally with all.'"[7] Shakespeare's development of the theme of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure,* and *The Tempest* presents compelling evidence of these characteristics. Shakespeare displays his literary "open-mindedness" and "capacity to see both sides of a question" by exploring the impact of mercy on all different kinds of human relationships. Shakespeare illustrates a capacity to "empathize equally with all" when even unmerciful characters like Angelo and Shylock evoke the sympathies of audience members. In a larger sense, therefore, the development of the theme of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure,* and *The Tempest* offers insight into Shakespeare's complex, highly nuanced understanding of human relationships.

Notes

1. Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare,* ed. Robert Sandler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 143.

2. Frye, 142.

3. Harold Bloom, *Major Literary Characters: Shylock* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991), 18.

4. Frye, 142.

5. Frye, 142.

6. Frye, 142.

7. Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), 330.

Kristen Proehl recently received her bachelors degree in English literature from the University of Puget Sound. She is now in the M.A./Ph.D. program in American studies at the College of William and Mary and plans to study nineteenth and twentieth century American literature.