

## POETIC JUSTICE IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Professor Hazim Mahmood Ismail

### Abstract

Unfortunately many atrocities in our world go unpunished, and many good people are punished for no reason whatsoever. This is because we often fail to maintain justice. But justice must be done one way or another. God is just and He expects us to do justice in the world we are living in. If we cannot do justice for one reason or another, poets and writers can. But where and how? If not in reality, they do it in the world they create in their works.

The aim of this paper is to show where and how poets and writers do justice in their own world and in their own way. Four major characters have been chosen from four Shakespearean tragedies for this purpose. These characters are: Richard III, Iago, Macbeth, and Claudius. All these four characters are Shakespeare's most intriguing and plausible villains. They represent blind ambition. They do everything they can in order to serve their wicked purposes. But in the end justice takes its course and they get the punishment they deserve.

## Introduction

Unfortunately many atrocities in our world go unpunished, and many good people are punished for no reason whatsoever. This is because we often fail to maintain justice. But justice must be done one way or another. God is just and He expects us to do justice in the world we are living in. Shelly in his Defense of Poetry elevates the position of the poet higher than anyone had claimed. He says: "Poets are the institutors of law, and the founders of a civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life." If we cannot do justice for one reason or another, poets and writers can. But where? If not in reality, they do it in the world they create in their works. In etymology the Greek word for "poet" is maker or creator. Poetry has thus the power of creating or making things. Others such as historians, scientists, artists, and craftsmen so heavily depend on nature they merely become actors and players of the rules set forth by nature. Only the poet is not tied down to facts: only the poet is free from these bonds and restrictions. This freedom which, the poet enjoys is due to his power of imagination. The poet does not imitate nature; he creates another one. Only on this soil the poet or writer achieves justice in the world he creates. This kind of justice is called "Poetic Justice." Take any novel, play or poem and watch how the dramatist or writer complicates the action and finally the wicked are punished according to the crime they have committed. The good people are rewarded again according to their bravery, honesty, or integrity. This deliberate planning and justification of a work of art in accordance with the rules of logic and ethics makes art superior to nature.

## Good and Evil

Good is that which is beneficial. Evil is that which is morally bad or wrong, or that which causes harm, pain, or misery. In theology the problem of evil arises if it is accepted that evil exists in a universe governed by a Supreme Being who is both good and omnipotent.

The problem of evil has been a central concern of philosophers and of all the major religions. Some of the solutions proposed have rested on a denial either of the existence of evil or of the omnipotence of God. In Hindu teaching, for instance, evil has no real existence, being part of the illusory world of phenomena. In the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism and the related ancient Middle Eastern sect known as Manichaeism, evil is attributed to the existence of evil deity, against whom the good deity must struggle.

As Christian theology began to emerge in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the problem of evil became particularly challenging because Christianity was committed to the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent God but at the same time acknowledged the real existence of evil. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Augustine formulated the solution that has had the greatest influence on subsequent Christian thinkers. As a young man, Augustine had accepted the dualistic theology of Manichaeism. The later influence of Neoplatonism prepared him for his conversion to Christianity and his theological reconciliation of the Christian belief in a benevolent God, the creator of everything that exists, with the pervasive presence of evil in the world. According to Augustine, evil has not been created by God whose creation is entirely good. Evil is the privation, or absence, of good, as darkness is the absence of light. It is

possible, however, for something created good to diminish in goodness, to become corrupted, and evil has crept in when creatures endowed with free will-angels, such lesser spirits as demons, and human beings – turn away from higher, or more complete, goods and choose lesser, partial ones. Furthermore, according to Augustine, what at first appears to be evil may be understood as good in the context of eternity. From God's eternal perspective, everything is good.

The unprecedented scale of the wars and persecutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century undermined the secular belief in inevitable progress and confronted philosophers and theologians once again with the problem of evil. In particular, the question of whether extreme suffering can ever be theologically justified has been raised with regard to the Holocaust. Some have speculated about the absence of God; others have recalled the idea in the Book of Job of the mysteriousness of God's ways. The problem of evil has thus returned as a major concern of contemporary theology.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, in his Theodicy (1710), defended the justice of God in spite of the existence of evil. For him, God is almighty only in that he is able to do that which is logically possible. Certain factors may each be independently possible but mutually incompatible, and, because God created the world under these limitations, the created world is indeed the best of all possible worlds. God almighty is just. God therefore, is concerned with reconciling the goodness and His justice with the observable facts of evil and suffering in the world.

This paper illustrates how poetic justice is done in Shakespeare's plays, Richard III, Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet.

From these four plays four major characters have been selected for this purpose namely, Richard III, Iago, Macbeth, and Claudius. All these four characters are Shakespeare's most intriguing and plausible villains. They represent blind ambition. They do everything they can in order to serve their wicked purposes. But in the end justice takes its course and they get punished.

### **Poetic Justice**

Poetic Justice, in literature, is an outcome in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, usually in a manner peculiarly or ironically appropriate. The term was coined by the English literary critic **Thomas Rymer** in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was believed that a work of literature should uphold moral principles and instruct the reader in correct moral behaviour.

### **Rymer: Thomas**

Thomas Rymer was born in 1643 near Northallerton, Yorkshire, England and died in December, 14, 1713, London.

Thomas Rymer was an English literary critic who introduced into England the principles of French formalist Neoclassical criticism. As historiographer royal, he also compiled a collection of treaties of considerable value to the medievalist.

Rymer left the University of Cambridge without taking a degree and began to study law at Gray's Inn, London. Although called to the bar in 1673, he almost immediately turned his attention to literary criticism. He translated Rene Rapin's Reflexions sur la poetique d'Aristote as Reflections on Aristotle's treatise of Poesie, in 1674. He required that dramatic action be probable and reasonable, that it instruct by moral precept and example, and that characters behave either as idealized types or as

average representatives of their class. In 1678 he wrote The Tragedies of the Last Age, in which he criticized plays by the Jacobean dramatists Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher for not adhering to the principles of classical tragedy.

In 1693 he published A Short View of Tragedy, in which his Neoclassicism was at its narrowest (and in which he criticized Shakespeare's Othello as a ...Bloody farce, without salt or savour. In A Short View, Rymer rejected all modern drama and advocated a return to the Greek tragedy of Aeschylus. Rymer's influence was considerable during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but he was ridiculed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Babington Macaulay called him the worst critic that ever lived.

In 1692 Rymer was appointed historiographer royal, and, when William III's government decided to publish for the first time copies of all past treaties entered into by England, Rymer was appointed editor of the project. The first volume was published in 1704. The 15<sup>th</sup> volume appeared in 1713, the year of Rymer's death. His successor brought out a further five volumes. Despite its deficiencies, the work, whose short title is *Foedera* (Treaties) is a considerable and valuable achievement.

### **Machiavellianism (Villainy)**

Machiavellianism relates to Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Machiavelli was an Italian writer, born in Florence, son of a lawyer. He held high offices in the city till the return of the Medici, 1512. Il Principe (The Prince), which maintains the absolute supremacy of the ruler, was very influential in Europe for two centuries. The Elizabethans identified its author's name with the blackest villainy.

Machiavellianism suggests the principles of conduct laid down by Machiavelli, characterized by cunning, duplicity, or bad faith. The political theory of Machiavelli suggests that the view that politics is moral and that any means however unscrupulous can justifiably be used in achieving political power. Shakespeare's four characters that are mentioned in this paper are villains but, as Shakespeare said, the character of Richard III is the blackest villain.

### **The Character of Richard III**

Richard III is a play that embodies more than one theme. Shakespeare succeeded in depicting good and evil, crime and punishment, Machiavellianism, villainy, and God's divine vengeance. All these themes have been skillfully dealt with depending almost on one character namely, Richard III.

In Richard III, Shakespeare portrays Richard III as a ruthless tyrant. Shakespeare takes the details of this story from a history published by Sir Thomas More in Henry VII's reign to justify the killing of such a monster, Richard III. Richard's deeds were so horrible that the country invented all sorts of rumours about him and it was these that More adopted in favour of his sovereign. Richard's one idea is to succeed Edward IV as king. Edward IV is about to die and leave the throne to his son Edward, Prince of Wales, who is only 12 years old. He is the rightful heir and next to him is his younger brother named Richard, 9 years old. Next in line is George, Duke of Clarence, and Richard of Gloucester comes fourth. Richard III succeeds in killing them all. He unlawfully mounts the throne and becomes the king.

In a tremendous battle the armies of Richmond and Richard III met on Bosworth Field. There, on the night before the encounter, all the ghosts of Richard's victims appeared to him in his sleep and prophesied his defeat. At the same time they foretold the coming victory and success of the Earl of Richmond.

These predictions held true, for the next day Richard, fighting desperately, was slain in battle by Richmond, after crying out the offer of his ill-gotten kingdom for a horse, his own having been killed under him.

### **The Moral Theme of Richard III, (justice):**

It is God who rules in such a moral order as Shakespeare here depicts. The justice is that of an eye for an eye, a Prince of Wales for a Prince of Wales. Prayers that are offered as curses by those with hatred in their hearts are answered by a divine justice without pity.

Thus Shakespeare pictured the dominating sins of the play as perjury and murder, sins against the moral order. He portrayed and analyzed the passion of ambition that caused Richard III to sin and the passion of fear that at the same time punished him for his sins and forced him to wade still further in blood. Shakespeare, in this play, shows God's revenge exacted through the agency of the evil Richard, who was nevertheless held to account for his evil-doing.

### **The Character of Iago**

Iago is the villain of Shakespeare's tragedy Othello. An intelligent and quick-witted ensign serving under Othello, Iago ostensibly acts out of resentment of Othello's promotion of



Cassio ahead of him, though his evil nature quickly becomes evident. Feigning honesty, friendship, and loyalty, he plants in Othello's mind doubts about Desdemona's fidelity. In the midst of his subtle game to bring down Othello, he warns with great irony that is missed by Othello, "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy."

Iago is one of Shakespeare's most intriguing and plausible villains. He frequently takes the audience into his confidence, a device that encourages close observation of his consummate skill as he manipulates his prey and watches his deceptions wreak havoc. He is a complex character.

### **The plot:**

The plot of Othello is set in motion when Othello, a heroic Moorish general in the service of Venice, appoints Cassio and not Iago as his chief lieutenant. Jealous of Othello's success and envious of Cassio, Iago plots Othello's downfall by falsely implicating Othello's wife, Desdemona, and Cassio in a love affair. With the unwitting aid of Emilia, his wife, and the willing help of Roderigo, a fellow malcontent, Iago carries out his plan. In brief, Desdemona cannot produce a handkerchief once given her by Othello; thanks to Iago's machinations, it is later found among Cassio's possessions. Overcome with jealousy, Othello kills Desdemona. When he learns, too late, that his wife is blameless, he kills Iago and asks to be remembered as one who "loved not wisely but too well," and kills himself.

It is clear that Iago is unquestionably evil, a character who represents a spirit of negation, wishing to destroy love, virtue, trust and harmony and to turn them to their opposites. The cynical materialistic outlook, which he expresses in his

speeches to Roderigo, to Desdemona and to Cassio after the brawl, stands in distinct contrast to the loving perception of spiritual values in Desdemona. It is not, however, that Iago does not believe in virtue or in love, rather that he wishes to destroy them because he does not possess them, and herein lies another contrast, between his self-concern and Desdemona's selflessness. So too the implicit prurience of his references to sex stands in direct contrast to Desdemona's purity, as his deviousness contrasts with her honesty.

Desdemona and Iago function as representatives of goodness and evil. The fact that Desdemona's purity stands in direct contrast to Iago's prurient sexual imagination, does not mean that Desdemona lacks sexual feelings or that the sexual dimension is lacking in her relationship with Othello; indeed, his jealousy is surely dependent upon its existence and on Desdemona as a passionate woman. In Othello, Shakespeare suggests human possibilities for achieving ideals of love and harmony and shows them undermined by equally credible human impulses of envy, mockery and negation in the character of Iago. Iago's plain speaking and his bluff manner are attractive, and it is not hard to believe that these qualities have earned him the name of "honest Iago" and gained him the trust of every character in the play. But Iago is not, though he sometimes seems so, the ordinary soldier, the common man, frank and without pretensions his plain speaking easily slides into reductive cynicism. Love, to Iago, is "merely a lust of the blood and permission of the will" (I.3.335-336). So Iago must destroy the happiness that he is incapable of experiencing. He represents, on the stage, the malicious and destructive envy that exists in society (in any society), the dangerous

combination of a limited and reductive mental clarity with an incapacity for joy.

Justice in Othello is certainly not overlooked. In the end Iago is unmasked and his false honesty is revealed. So he gets the punishment he deserves. Othello kills Iago.

### **The Character of Macbeth**

Macbeth is a general in King Duncan's army who is spurred on by the prophecy of the Weird Sisters and his own ambition (and that of Lady Macbeth) to change the course of Scotland's succession in Shakespeare's Macbeth. At the outset of the play, Macbeth is a braved, trusted, and respected soldier. He is undone by his inability to hold his own moral ground, his constant need to feel secure, and his overwhelming need (essentially) to prove his manhood to his wife. Despite feeling horror at Macbeth's unconscionable acts, the audience is moved by his self-awareness, uneasiness, and haunted spirit and to some extent must sympathize with Macbeth during the downward spiraling of events. Haunted by his acts and unforeseeable future, he meditates on the probable personal toll: "Methought I heard a voice cry Sleep no more!", "The ultimate hopelessness of his position becomes clear to him at last, and he spells this out in two poignant speeches in Act V, "I have lived long enough" and "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

### **The Plot:**

Macbeth is the story of Macbeth and Banquo, who are generals serving King Duncan of Scotland, meet the Weird Sisters, three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become thane of

Cawdor, then king, and that Banquo will beget kings. Soon thereafter Macbeth is indeed made than of Cawdor, which leads him to believe the rest of the prophecy. He tells Lady Macbeth, who plots to kill Duncan, when he spends a night at Macbeth's castle, Dunsinane.

Spurred by his wife, Macbeth kills Duncan,. And the murder is discovered by Macduff. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee the country, fearing for their lives. Their speedy departure seems to implicate them in the crime, and Macbeth becomes king.

Worried by the witches' prophecy, Macbeth arranges the death of Banquo, though Banquo's son Fleance escapes. Banquo's ghost haunts Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth is driven to madness by her guilt. The witches assure Macbeth that he will be safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane and that no one "of woman born" shall harm him. Learning that Macduff is joining Malcolm's army, Macbeth orders the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children. When the army, using branches from Birnam Wood as camouflage, advances on Dunsinane, Macbeth sees the prophecy being fulfilled. Lady Macbeth dies, Macbeth is killed in battle by Macduff-who was "from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd-and Malcolm then becomes the rightful king.

Again justice is done in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Macbeth and his wife who are responsible for the deaths of so many innocent people get the punishment they deserve. They die.

### **The character of Claudius**

Claudius is the unscrupulous king of Denmark, stepfather of Prince Hamlet, and second husband to Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Cunning and politically savvy, Claudius

represents blind ambition. Having murdered his brother and seduced and married his sister-in-law, he thinks his only domestic problems are with his weak but unpredictable nephew-stepson, Hamlet. Ultimately, however, Claudius' treacheries bring about the collapse of the kingdom and destroy the royal family.

As Claudius is a villain who will not stop at murder to gain the end he seeks, it is not surprising to find in Claudius one who is completely given over to hypocrisy. Thus from time to time he makes fond references to his dead brother, and tries to pose to Hamlet as an uncle who wishes to take the place of a father. Even when Claudius is sending Hamlet away on the voyage on which it is planned that he should meet his end, the King can still have the falseness to refer to the arrangement made for the traveler's 'especial safety' (Act IV, Scene 3).

That Claudius is a cunning schemer there is ample in the play to show. Indeed, his poisoning of his brother is so skillfully carried through that, were it not for the appearance of the Ghost, it is unlikely that guilt would ever have been laid on Claudius. Then he craftily schemes for Hamlet's death by sending him to England, and, when that fails, he plays on Laertes' emotions in order to make sure that his dangerous nephew is removed; indeed, on the latter occasion he makes doubly sure by not only poisoning the tip of Laertes' sword but also by poisoning the cup from which Hamlet will drink if he escapes the deadly rapier.

Not unnaturally for one who lives by scheming and cunning, Claudius is of a suspicious nature. This we see at once, for he senses that in Hamlet's madness lies danger – a conviction which strengthens as time goes on. Claudius is, furthermore, astute enough to realize that the blow, which killed Polonius, was actually directed against him, while he fully appreciates that the ugly behaviour of the people after the death of the Chamberlain and his secret funeral calls for action if he is to keep his throne.

In spite of all these wretched aspects, however, Claudius is able to some extent to feel the pangs of a conscience, which tells him it was wrong to kill a brother in order to gain a wife and a kingdom. Nevertheless, while these guilty feelings arise, he at no time feels prepared to give up the fruits of his evil deeds. Thus there goes on in his mind a constant battle – a feeling that he has sinned fighting all the time with an unwillingness to give up what he has so nefariously gained. At last, however, Claudius is moved to pray – although we cannot think with any real devoutness.

It has been said of Claudius that, as a king, he is not utterly to be despised, and in support of this it has been maintained that he is able to act promptly and resourcefully to meet situations as they arise. We feel, however, that of Claudius as a king we can say as little good as about Claudius as a man. For however prompt he may be in dealing with difficult situations, he acts all the time in his own interests and not in those of his people. Furthermore, whatever the King does is coloured with

deception and hypocrisy, and every pleasantry is a mask behind which to shield evil thoughts and dark plotting.

### **The plot:**

Hamlet is the story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, who after much indecision avenges the murder of his father.

As the play opens, Hamlet is mourning his father, who has been killed, and lamenting the behaviour of his mother, Gertrude, who married his uncle Claudius within a month of his father's death. The ghost of his father appears to Hamlet, informs him that he was poisoned by Claudius, and asks Hamlet to avenge his death. Hamlet hesitates, desiring further evidence of foul play. His uncertainty and inability to act make him increasingly melancholy, and to everyone around him Hamlet seems to be going mad.

Driven by a guilty conscience, Claudius attempts to ascertain the cause of Hamlet's odd behaviour by hiring Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on him. Hamlet quickly sees through the scheme and begins to act the part of a madman in front of them. To the pompous old courtier Polonius, it appears that Hamlet is lovesick over Polonius' daughter Ophelia. Despite Ophelia's loyalty to him, Hamlet thinks that she, like everyone else, is turning against him; he feigns madness with her also and treats her cruelly as if she were representative, like his own mother, of her treacherous sex.

Hamlet contrives a plan to test the ghost's accusation. With a group of visiting actors, Hamlet arranges the performance of a story representing circumstances similar to those described by the ghost, under which Claudius poisoned Hamlet's father.

When the play is presented as planned, the performance clearly unnerves Claudius.

Despite Claudius' evident guilt, Hamlet still is unable to act, to avenge his father's wrongful murder. He nevertheless confronts his mother and kills the eavesdropping Polonius. Justly fearing for his own life, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who carry secret orders to have hamlet killed. When Hamlet discovers the orders, he alters them to make his two friends the victims instead.

Upon his return to Denmark, Hamlet hears that Ophelia has killed herself and that her brother Laertes seeks to avenge Polonius' murder. Claudius is only too eager to arrange the duel. Carnage ensues. Both Hamlet and Laertes are struck by the sword that Claudius has had dipped in poison. Gertrude, also present at the duel, drinks from the cup of poison that Claudius has had placed near Hamlet to ensure his death. Before Hamlet himself dies, he manages to stab Claudius and to entrust the clearing of his honour to his friend Horatio.

Claudius, like Richard III, Iago, and Macbeth, receives his just punishment for all the foul crimes he committed.

If murderers and killers escape punishment in our world, they cannot escape the just punishment of Heaven. God is just.



## Conclusion

The problem of evil has been a central concern of philosophers and of all the major religions. Evil has, therefore, been the major theme of poets and writers.

Evil is the privation, or absence, of good, as darkness is the absence of light.

“Poetic justice,” Thomas Rymer says, “is an outcome in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded.” This is done in literature especially drama. Rymer required that dramatic action be probable and reasonable, that it instruct by moral precept and example, and that characters behave either as idealized types or as average representatives of their class.

Villains such as Richard III, Iago, Macbeth, and Claudius, driven by their blind ambition, can and will do everything they can in order to serve their wicked purposes. This behaviour is a kind of Machiavellianism that suggests the principles of conduct that is characterized by cunning, duplicity, or bad faith.

For one reason or another, it is difficult to achieve justice in this world. For this reason we expect poets and writers to do that. They can maintain justice in their own way and in their own world, which they create in their works. This is because a poet or a writer is free, unlike the historians or scientists who are tied to facts and rules.

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