

## Devising Happiness in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Merchant of Venice* is a literary master piece written by William Shakespeare. This paper aims at exploring the philosophy of happiness extant in the play employing the Aristotelian critical framework of happiness. The objectives of this study are to enquire how to determine the essence of happiness and how to ensure it in the life of the polis. The paper reveals that virtue is highly necessary for attaining happiness in human life. The paper suggests that doing good to others is the highest virtue, which is a predominant element to bring happiness in our personal as well as societal life.

**KEY WORDS:** William Shakespeare; Aristotle, happiness; virtue; polis;

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### INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare is widely read and discussed over the centuries for his significant contributions on tragedies and comedies. Scholars and critics of Shakespeare have covered almost all possible aspects embedded in Shakespearean plays. Shakespearean critics have discussed politics and religion, love and marriage, life and death, psychology and psychoanalysis, ecology and eco-criticism, sadness and happiness, among others over the years. However, the focal point of this paper is "exploring happiness in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*."

In 1600, Muhammad al-Annuri, the Ambassador of Morocco, was sent to London by the Moroccan Sultan Ahmed al- Mansur to meet with Queen Elizabeth with a proposal of forming a military alliance against Catholic Spain. It is very interesting that William Shakespeare attempted to write one of his masterpieces *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* just some months after the arrival of the Moroccan Ambassador in London, which was toward the end of 1601. *Othello* is set in the Mediterranean, which was controlled by the then Muslim Ottoman Empire. After Muhammad al-Annuri, 'although no other ambassador visited

London, another Moor appeared though 'not at London's royal court, but on its stage' (Brotton, 2016).

However, *The Merchant of Venice* was composed in late 1596 by Shakespeare and was given its full title at the time of its first publication in 1600, *The Most Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice with the Extreme Cruelty of Shylock the Jew*.

Shakespeare was encouraged in a number of ways to write this play. The Cadiz expedition which took place as scholars suggests nearly the same year in 1596 summer, when the playwright wrote this play, influenced him a lot. Therefore, he gave a clear reference to the Spanish ship *St. Andrew* which was captured in Cadiz by Muslim warriors in the opening lines through the voice of Salarino "my wealthy Andrew dock'd in sand" (1.1).

Jerry Brotton writes that Shakespeare was inspired for his remarkable character Shylock from an incident which happened in January 1594. Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese-born Jewish convert to Protestantism, was the personal physician to Elizabeth I, and who was also paid for spying the Spanish. He was accused of treason and conspiring with the Spanish to poison the Queen, for which he received 50,000 crowns from Philip. Finally that June in the trial, he was sentenced to death and was executed. This demise of Lopez spreads throughout the play. For the last four hundred years the audiences have been able to laugh at Shylock's downfall and the anti-Semitic abuse brought by Portia and Antonio with it. But at the same time with the laughter, Shylock was given a sense of humanity unlike Marlowe's Barabas. As Jerry Brotton senses it: 'Shakespeare provides Shylock with a depth of humanity not out of some secret liberal desire to express tolerance toward the Jewish faith, but to sharpen the dramatic ambiguity and the power of his character' (Brotton, 2016).

After Shylock, Shakespeare portrays a historical figure Prince of Morocco, who is a man of virtue and heroism and, who has no doubt to marry Portia who is a Christian lady. The Prince of Morocco is also a man of virility, who boasts and promises to win Portia's love:

By this scimitar  
That slew the Sophy and a Persian prince  
That won three fields of Sultan Solyman. (2.1.24-26)

It is historically proven that no one could kill a Persian ruler and overthrow the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent while nevertheless, a Moroccan warrior casts a challenge to have victory over Persian forces and the Ottoman, which bears an overwhelming likeness to al-Mansur, who had a diplomatic and military offer with Elizabeth's England.

#### [Racism as the hurdle for attaining happiness](#)

Ania Loomba (2016) in her essay 'Religion, Money, and Race in *The Merchant of Venice*' sketches multiple implications of miscegenation and British colonialism in sixteenth century England in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Loomba begins with Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which is the story of an inter-racial marriage between a Christian girl

and a Jewish man and their child, who is called the 'Moor'. Indeed Rushdie in this novel presents the tale about the conflict and love in India, a multi-religious and multiracial land, where different kinds of Muslims, Christians and Jews migrated from the West for different purposes: the Portugal Christians for trade, the Jews to escape persecution in Spain and Portugal, and Muslims for both reasons. They eventually were to fight over control of peeper trade with one another. But also they used to intermarry and be in harmony among themselves, indeed with other communities in India. While narrating their saga Rushdie looks back to *The Merchant of Venice*, which is the mouthpiece of Shakespeare of similar loves and tensions and which focuses the period in which it was composed, and the then politics in Europe.

Unlike Portia Rushdie's Aurora flouts her family to marry a Jew. Portia instead follows her father's advice to the point to select her husband and finally she marries the person who rightly chooses the casket of lead, which contains her picture. Portia is unprecedented for her justice as Rushdie notes, and is cheerful when the prince of Morocco cannot find the right casket:

A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go.  
Let all of his complexion choose me so.  
(2.7.78-9)

Rushdie argues that Portia is 'No lover of Moors ... I adduce all this evidence to show why, when I say our tale's Aurora was no Portia, I do not mean it wholly as a criticism' (Rushdie, 1995, p.114-115). In spite of her being Christian, his Aurora is not European rather she is 'near the height of her very Indian beauty' (Loomba,2002, p. 136). Bassanio in Shakespeare's play compares such beauty to 'dangerous sea' as he elucidates that because of his prudence and because of his ability to differentiate between appearance and reality he was able to choose the right casket:

Ornament is but the guiled more  
To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf  
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,  
The seeming truth which cunning times put on  
To entrap the wisest.  
(3.2. 97-101)

The phrase 'Indian beauty' is oxymoronic for Indian indicates a dark skin, which Portia already rejects and views as unattractive. The lady is compared to 'cunning times', which denotes unattractiveness; simultaneously she is made tempting by the 'beauteous scarf'. If the individual, Loomba senses, is tricked and unable to acknowledge her danger, miscegenation will be the outcome, which dominates the caskets scene and the whole play. However, Rushdie concludes that the words which explain the development of both justice and romance in the play claim that Moors, Indians, and Jews be 'waved away'(Rushdie 115).

While a large number of men from outside Italy try to conquer Portia, only an insider can win Portia for only can he differentiate between appearance and reality, inner and outer selves. Ironically Portia herself rejects to make this differentiation in the case of Morocco, confessing that even if he were a saint, she would not be able to overlook his blackness: 'If he have the

condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me' (1.2.126-8). Portia asserts Morocco that he must

swear before you chose, if you chose wrong  
Never to speak to lady afterward  
In way of marriage. (2.1.40-2)

Some critics recommend that this order is exclusively applied for Morocco, for they fail to observe that the prince of Aragon also promises 'never. .. I To woo a maid in way of marriage' lest he should lose Portia (2.9.12-13). Portia assures that every suitor of her must follow this command. Thus through expressing her dislike intensely and strongly in 'a racialized terms, she threw both Morocco and the Spaniard as outsiders, which is emblematic to the culture which surrounds both Venice and Belmont.

Spain was usually deemed as the centre of unrestrained and violent miscegenation. Edmund Spenser in his *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1890) records this claim. In this book, Irenius wails that though Ferdinand and his wife Isabella beat the Moors from Spain, they were not eradicated thoroughly. Through their intermarriage she laments, they made the Spanish blood impure and therefore, 'the Spaniard is the most mingled and most uncertain' (Spenser, 1890, p. 82) nation. Although *The Merchant of Venice* reflects 'many features of contemporary Italy, such as its cosmopolitanism, its international trade, and the wealth of its upper classes, it uses them, as does Othello, to address specifically English anxieties about commerce, race, and sexuality' (Loomba, 2002, p. 137).

Although Portia is emblematic with white beauty, and symbol for justice, she clearly represents the view of miscegenation of early modern English society where the blacks are treated with inferiority, of which prince of Morocco is a quintessential character and who is not only disliked by Portia but is compared with the devil (complexion of the Morocco).

### **Money, commerce and women matter happiness**

Karen Newman (1987) in his article 'Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*' presents the real female position in Elizabethan society where they were commercialized and abused as portrayed by Shakespeare in his *The Merchant of Venice*. According to Newman the title of the play denotes to Antonio, but also it describes Shylock and in fact the whole act of the comedy that includes the action of pledge and love. Newman quotes these lines "of dangerous rocks, / Which touching but my gentle vessel's side / Would scatter all her spices on the stream, / Enrobe the roaring waters with my skills" (1.1.30-34), where 'the feminine personification of merchant ship as woman wounded figures both the commodification of woman and her violation' (Newman, 1987, p. 20). Belmont at a first glance seems different, which is full of discussion of love, sexuality, and relationships between women and which is apparently void of Venetian commercial reality. Portia is racially prejudiced when she judges her suitors.

However, it is misrepresentative for many readers to put a binary opposition between Belmont and Venice, for though Belmont possesses an blue-blooded rural life, it shares a lot with commercial Venice: if we revisit the caskets scene, we find that Belmont belongs to a commercial ideals, Portia's choice of husband is ruled by her father's will, which is but patriarchy. Undertaking a journey to Belmont is undeniably utopian. Nevertheless, Bassanio's venture to win Portia is given a mythical facet by comparing it with the voyage of Jason and Portia's father's wish satirizes rather than approves economic values---what is significant is the structure of exchange which embodies both the commercial values of Venice and fictitious love relations at Belmont.

The language of economy which characterizes the love relationships in *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates both the commercial factors of matrimony in Shakespeare's England and its commercial ambience more commonly, which includes expansion and growth of urban centres like London, overseas trade, industrial growth and the rise of banking. Such changes, as Walter Cohn (1983) has displayed unavoidably promoted tension, which the audience of *The Merchant of Venice* have acknowledged in the anxiety amid usury and commerce Shakespeare created, and in Antonio's final victory and his incorporation with the noble realm of Belmont (Cohen,1983, p. 765-89).

The give-and-take of gifts overarched the kinship relations as well as power relations, which was a substantial element in Elizabethan and Jacobean society and which was displayed by royal support, and the noble families used to compete with one another in gift-giving with a view to earning favour from the monarch. Beside the noble and the monarchs, the gentry, the middle class even the poorest families were used to exchange gifts. However, in the 1620s, 30s, the tradition of the gift-giving decayed and the separation prevailed in the aristocracy, gentry, and urban elite.

Portia in III.ii of *The Merchant of Venice* presents her love to Bassanio in a speech, which is emblematic with the gender system of early modern England:

You see me Lord Bassanio where I stand,  
Such as I am; though for myself alone  
I would not be ambitious in my wish To wish  
myself much better, yet for you,  
I would be trebled twenty times myself,  
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times  
more rich. (III.ii. 149-55)

This speech starts with 'an affective paradox', in which Portia offers herself to Bassanio, and in which she uses the first person: "Such as I am". But her indication to herself, as Newman suggests, 'illustrates the exchange between the erotic and the economic that characterizes the play's representation of human relation' (Newman, 1987, p. 25).

The dominant analogy in Portia's speech epitomizes the quintessence of early modern political aspect which outlines family and marriage as a kind of kingdom, which is tiny and a miniscule

unit of the society ruled by the husband and in addition, Portia describes ‘woman as microcosm to man's macrocosm and as subject to his sovereignty’ (Newman, 1987, p. 25). By offering her ring Portia accepts the pre wedding contract with Bassanio, which narrates the typical patriarchal men-women relationship in the Renaissance society, wherein husband of a wife is deemed “her lord, her governor, her king” (Ill.ii.164). The ring embodies Portia’s woo of love to Bassanio, which represents her ratification of early modern nuptial system in which women were under suppression and threat of losing their legal rights and their rank as commodity. It magnifies her status in a male dominant society; and her love-proclamation typifies her subjugation in the extant gender system.

### **Friendship, marriage and happiness**

Henry Turner S. (2006) frames his discussion in his essay ‘The Problem of the More-than-One: Friendship, Calculation, and Political Association in *The Merchant of Venice*’ by a close examination of friendship and justice narrated in two famous books namely *Nicomachean Ethics* (1947) and *De officiis* (1947) written by Aristotle and Cicero respectively, and one of the aims of this essay is to display the constructive socio-political role played by both of these works over the audiences of *The Merchant of Venice*. For Neal Wood (1990) *De officiis* “seems to have been the first book of classical antiquity to be printed” in early modern England (Wood, 1990, p. 188). Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is cited widely by the English writers, which was a diverse study of moral and political philosophy. Equally was it a “long-standing source of medieval and early modern economic theory, and indeed Shakespeare critics have turned to Aristotle most frequently for his economic arguments” (Turner, 2006, p. 146).

The *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that the ultimate Good is the “happiness” which characterizes a righteous person who accomplishing moral deeds is worthy of imitation. The book also stresses that a happy noble man has to be influential and powerful: it claims that he must possess power of not only ethical and moral life but of political man (Aristotle, 1947, p. 8). If Antonio is not happy, it is because of his pursuit of Fortune, who is awaiting but not yet in the possession of that supreme Good. Being a merchant, his case is difficult and different: “the life of money-making,” viewed by Aristotle, “is a constrained kind of life, and clearly wealth is not the Good we are in search of, for it is only good as being useful, a means to something else.” (Aristotle, 1947, p. 8). If “happiness” appears to necessitate the adding of outward affluence (Aristotle, 1947, p. 17), it is better not to puzzle ‘this happiness with’ the Ultimate Good, which finally eschews the “mercantile logic of accounting” (Turner, 2006, p. 422): when we think of happiness as the most attractive of all nice things we don't necessarily think of it as being among the best; for if it were considered among the best, it is obvious that we would deem it more appealing when even the tiniest of other great issues were blended with it, for this inclusion would lead to a higher maximum of good, and when two goods are equal in value, the greater of the two is very often preferred. (Aristotle, 1947, p. 8).

If we view from ethical and political perspective, we see in the outset a Venetian resident who is dejected and whose ownership of the property is in uncertainty, and who is caught in unfortunate repetition. As Aristotle suggests, the really righteous person “will remain happy all his life” (Aristotle, 1947, p. 11): he will be constantly or at the very least most frequently busy

in doing and pondering the activities that are in accordance with virtue. And if, as we have shown, a man's existence is decided by his actions, no one who is immensely happy can ever be considered to be miserable (Aristotle, 1947, p. 13).

Antonio here seems to be in tougher position for the inert grief adumbrates a lawful inability for real “happiness” which is a seamless dispossession “of the virtue and power” (Turner, 2006, p. 422).

Aristotle regards happiness not to be for a season, nor for a beautiful day but for a thorough life time (Aristotle, 1947, p. 16). The person who really desires to be happy cannot remain apart from his best friend as Antonio does (Cicero, 1947, p. 44) ; in fact even if he longed for seclusion it would not seem possible “since man by nature a social being” (Aristotle, 1947, p. 6). The interrogation of Salarino and Salanio proves Antonio to be a figure of intimate friendship. It seems likely that the absence of the best friend is a loss more than a loss of ships. Bassanio’s absence makes Antonio melancholic, which characterizes a dual threat: dismissal of a private self that loves a mate and loss of altercation of adoration, which connects ‘private friends and public citizens’ (Turner,2006, p. 423) are the same. Aristotle regards the utmost structure of amity: when someone loves their buddy, they are also adoring their own good, for the wonderful man, in becoming dear to another, does become other's usefulness. Since amity is equality, each person is motivated by a desire for his own well-being while simultaneously wanting the well-being of the other and providing him with joy. As the adage goes, "Amity is equality," and this is most fully understood in good-natured friendship (Aristotle, 1947, p. 5). One who loves his friend is akin to love his self and likewise by participating in the act of loving the friend, one earns affinities with all citizens of his *polis*. Conversely, one who fails to do so, is as if he isolates himself from the human association and the virtue of human community. However, a truly virtuous man dedicates himself for the interest of his friend and even as Aristotle had argued, chooses death with a view to helping his friend (Aristotle, 1947, p. 4), of which Antonio is a typical example, who announces himself as an enemy to Shylock:

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not  
As to thy friends; for when did friendship take  
A breed for barren metal of his friend?  
But lend it rather to thine enemy  
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face  
Exact the penalty. (1.3.128–33)

Shakespearean comedies either comedy of manners or romantic comedy ends with marriage. In other words, the characters essentially move towards marriage with a view to attaining happiness in their life. It is because in Elizabethan or early modern England, marriage is viewed as the key to happiness, by which Shakespeare was greatly influenced. Therefore, for Shakespeare marriage is so important that in some comedies *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instances, more than one marriages take place. Both these two conclude with three weddings. *The Merchant of Venice* is not an exception, which also moves towards marriage. However, marriage is observed in this play as “a more absolutist form” of friendship

(Turner, 2006, p. 433). Here also three couples unite together in the form of marriage: “Although marriage has assumed the power to maintain the political entity that friendship once did enjoy, we observe this replacement of wedding for friendship as a means of political authority—as Lorenzo and Jessica, Bassanio and Portia, Graziano and Nerissa commemorate their fresh unions—is unquestionably the most distinctly (early) modern characteristic of this play” (Turner, 2006, p. 433-34).

### **Geographical differences influence happiness**

In the essay ““Mislike Me Not for My Complexion” Whose Mislike? Portia's? Shakespeare's? Or That of His Age?”, R.W. Desai (2002) has foregrounded the historical background of Jewish persecution in Europe, which reached its peak during the past fifty years, and which Shakespeare foreshadowed in sixteenth-century when he composed the text of *The Merchant of Venice*. This motif was represented by the play’s criticism over the past decades. However, the present title of the essay as Desai argues, was deserted and therefore, not paid enough concentration. However, Desai claims that beneath the layer of the play’s seeming happy conjunction of Portia and Bassanio, there lies a predisposition for black by Shakespeare, which is not in accord with his age, which Desai unfolds in this present essay.

Over the centuries Venice being attracted by the attentiveness of the critics for its eminence for trade and commerce in the Renaissance Europe, it was not focused from the geographical perspective, to which Shakespeare pays concentration with sociocultural consequences in the context of race and colour in *The Merchant of Venice*. Of the eight suitors, six of them were from northern Europe including the English suitors namely Falconbridge, who does not know Latin, French or Italian, and whom Portia evaluates as “he is a proper man’s picture” (1.2.69). Of the six suitors only the English man and the French man are given names in the text, but none of them were able to become Portia’s husband. The six northern suitors have discarded to yield to the patriarchal authority which Portia’s “dead father” exercised (1.2.25) while the three southern suitors ---Morocco, Arragon, and Bassanio--- yield to the punishment assigned by Portia once they fail to choose the right casket:

...If you choose wrong  
Never to speak to lady afterward  
In way of marriage.... (2.1.40-43)

It is true that Morocco is ready to vie in a fight to win Portia and succumbs to consigned terms laid down:

Mislike me not for my complexion,  
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun,  
To whom I am a neighbour and near bred.  
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,  
Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,  
And let us make incision for your love,  
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine. (2.1. 1-7)



It is wrong that the prince of Morocco recognizes Portia ‘with Scandinavia in the extreme north’ (Desai, 2002, p. 307) as he refers to “icicles”, which would have entertained the early modern audience. For Morocco anyone who is located beyond Mediterranean would be “northward born”. In *Merchant* Shakespeare creates exclusive “phenomenological” insight through geographical differences, which sounds quite logical that the ears of early modern audience were more delicate than are those of today’s. (Desai, 2002, p. 30).

Thus a contrast between the north and the south is viewed in the onset of the play where the former is conserving selfhood and steady, the latter is acquiescent, yielding to the inconspicuousness of self-identity. While the suitors from south flattering her, worship her beauty; the suitors from north abandon her, inferiorise her supremacy over her demand of universally desired object. Morocco enthusiastically declares “From the four corners of the earth they come/ To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint” (2.7.39), which is an exaggeration from an African suitor, who like Othello aspire a white-skinned European wife.

Shakespeare’s introduction of as Desai argues “the Princes of Morocco and Arragon as suitors indicates a carefully crafted ethnic and racial semiotics without which *Merchant* is an emasculated text” (Desai, 2002, p. 315). In fact, Desai as does Loomba elsewhere upholds the sense of miscegenation which permeated the age of Shakespeare and which is but a hurdle for attaining happiness.

## CONCLUSION

Happiness is outlandishly investigated in *The Merchant of Venice* by the playwright Shakespeare. In the form of marriage, friendship plays a significant role in driving the characters in the play toward happiness. In addition, virtue, which is, according to Aristotle, is doing good to others, which is evident in the character of Antonio, works as the primary mean of bringing happiness to individual life and the communal life in the play. However, racism and geographical differences are considered obstacles to attain happiness.

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