

Social Regeneration: A Theme in Select Shakespearean Romances

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore selected Romance plays of Shakespeare namely, *The Winters Tale*, *Pericles Prince of Tyre*, and *Cymbeline* for discourses of the ideals for a healthy and prospering community. It attempts to undertake exploration of important questions regarding the basis of construction of power in society and how it impacts the agency of the individual. At the center of the thematic concerns of the plays lies the idea of social regeneration.

Keywords

Romances, Social Regeneration, Pastoral, Anarchic Individualism, Moral Order.

Introduction

Shakespeare is one of the most influential writers in English literature. His works transcend not only national boundaries but also time and space, as is well elucidated by his continued relevance in contemporary world literature. His plays are generally categorized under broad headings of Comedy, Tragedy and Histories. Shakespeare explores varied issues relating to the myriad aspects of human nature, psyche and life as is played out in society in his plays. Issues relating to law enforcement, human freedom and responsibility and social justice, man's relation to society are explored by Shakespeare through the genre of the Problem Plays. From these, he spans the vast space of a disintegrating universe of Tragedies wherein the individual's alienation from society leads to the eventual destruction and death of the hero. The tragedies depict how conduct of the hero without moral and social constraint leads to his isolation. It is these very constraints which are re-instated as a pre-requisite to an integrated social existence. With this understanding Shakespeare arrives towards his last plays, where he offers a more mellowed view of the Individual as an inextricable part of society.

His Comedies are often designated as Romances or Romantic Comedies. '*The Winters Tale*', '*Pericles Prince of Tyre*', '*Cymbeline*' and '*The Tempest*' are collectively termed as 'Romances'. Critics have observed common themes in these plays like birth and death, breakdown and reconciliation, love of young couple, recovery of lost royal children, to name a few. Good and evil coexist in the world of the Romances but there is a sense of acceptance and reconciliation. The Individual alone cannot change society but there is an awareness of the need for a social regeneration.

Aims and Objectives

- The paper seeks to explore the selected Romance Comedy plays of Shakespeare for discourses of ideal community building.
- Through the selected plays the study seeks to undertake cogent questioning of the basis of power and how it affects the individual.

The Study Area and Methodology

Though these plays deal with several themes and motifs, social regeneration, an important theme in these plays, is what the paper proposes to explore. The 'Winter's Tale', 'Pericles Prince of Tyre' and 'Cymbeline' belong to the last phase of Shakespeare's writing and the study delimits itself to the study of these selected plays only. With the coming to power of Stuarts, Tudar absolutism ended and merchant class emerged as a major financial, economic power. There was a cogent questioning of the basis of power and how it affects the individual. As a politically conscious dramatist Shakespeare makes use of stage as an instrument of expressing ideas otherwise censored in the social domain. A cognizance of the fact that man cannot change in isolation and that an effort towards social integration and upliftment has to be initiated, is a major argument forwarded by these plays. Ethical life in social groups is supported by the order that emerges from a focal center of power that rewards and punishes. However, when the center itself becomes tyrannical, its corruption seeps down to every sphere of life and society. Man is a social being with family, caste, religion and other social relationships. Actions of the state heads when arbitrary to these considerations are bound to be despotic and oppressive. They would eventually lead to a break-down of relation at all levels; social, political, familial. However, redemption and regeneration are possible and the potentiality of this lies in these plays in the inclusion of the marginalized domains and characters namely, the pastoral, the female characters and the common man. The pastoral idyll is a posited as a coherent source from which restorative qualities of brotherhood, sharing, love can be imported to the courts which have become morally, ethically decrepitude. The pastoral, is not offered as an alternative to the court but merely as a repository of natural healthy impulses, which when transported to the court will reinvigorate it. As Mythili Kaul puts it, "The attitude and values of the country are brought to the court and accepted and adopted by it." (62).

In the plays, women characters are seen as retaining the requisite values imperative for propitiation of a fragmented and decentered society. Fortitude, morals, values, endurance are the qualities which define most women characters in the plays. They suffer as victims of a patriarchal order and its despotic perpetrators, the monarchs. It is only when the younger generation of Perditta, Marina and Imogen, discard the passive goodness of their predecessors for an active dynamic voice of protest, they are able to contribute towards a happy conclusion. The values of equality and human connection represented by them might seem transitory but they are important.

An important step towards social amalgamation is the inclusion of the common man into the fabric of court existence. As events progress towards a happy conclusion, there are resonances of voices other than that of the omnipotent tyrant which dominates the initial part of the plays. From the realization that the individual cannot be arbitrary and is accountable to society as well as in a relationship of interdependence with it,

emerges an imperative to practice right relationships with fellow beings. How to operate in society, retaining individuality, as well as not undermining the very fabric of social construct is a prospect that fascinated Shakespeare right from the problem plays. With the Romances the wheel comes to a full circle with a different ending. Though not idealistic, a tone of propitiousness dominates the closure of these plays which is the outcome of practicing correct social impulses. Family is the smallest unit of society. When relationships in family become a cracking and breaking image of the family tree, not far behind follows a fragmented and decentered society. The personal and political are inextricably bound together. Towards the end of each play, the tyrant has to learn to correct his alliances, within familial bonds, as well as in society as the state head. The anarchic Individualism which starts a series of tragic events, is finally given up in favor of strengthening sociological impulses.

An awareness of a moral order operating over destinies of men; forming an exigent for practicing right conduct with other human beings; is acknowledged towards the conclusion of these plays. 'Pericles Prince of Tyre', the first of the Romances, opens in the court of Antiochus, a perverter of filial relationships, inviting his daughter to incest. The initial scene establishes the theme of corruption in court through a morally decrepitude ruler. A tyrant whose voice is the only one in his court apart from Pericles's and his daughter's. Cleon's court is complimentary to Antiochus' court, where the subjects similarly suffer, as well as starve. Bad governance has orchestrated the downfall of a prospering society, dragging it to a state where, "Those mothers who to nozzle up their babes are now ready to eat those little darlings whom they lov'd. So sharp are hungers teeth that man and wife / Draw lots who first shall die to lengthen life." (Alexander I: iv; 42-46).

It is a picture of a starving degenerate society where men have relinquished every humane instinct and have turned into savages. The absence of any councilors to guide and direct the ruler is conspicuous. In the lack of a council to steer him towards correct conduct, Cleon remains an ineffective ruler alienated from any concern for ameliorating the conditions of his subjects. The one voice that is heard over and above Cleon's is Dionyza's. It becomes increasingly dominating and ultimately overpowers Cleon forcing him to be an ally in Marina's murder. This act violates all ties of friendship, trust and humanity itself. When the center of power becomes corrupt it also becomes increasingly ineffective in leading society. Rather, conversely it engenders a degeneration in the larger society.

Though the play does not present any alternative pastoral construct as a contrast to court, the values of trust, sharing, love, honesty, hospitality which the countryside stands for, are incorporated into certain characters who embody these values. Similarly, court values of distrust, flattery, tyranny, craftiness, materialism abide in another set of characters. In the case of Antiochus moral order is regained through intervention of divine justice. As a foil to the courts of Antiochus and Cleon, are presented the courts of Pericles and Simonedes. It is out of concern for his subject's well-being that Pericles decides to travel until Antiochus's wrath abates. He says, "Subjects punish'd that ne'er thought offence;/ Which care of them, not pity of myself - / who am no more but as the tops of trees / which fence the roots they grow by and defend there." (I; ii; 28-31)

The play postulates the basis of a well governed kingdom: the common subjects whose care and upliftment are the moral duty of a ruler. In Pericles' court there are other voices of lords apart from his own. Everyone

has a say in contributing towards social betterment. Helicanus is the ideal councilor whose concern for the king and the subjects, blends harmoniously. He acts as the council and medicine of the king, recalling to him that men should remember they are men and not God. Pericles says of him "Thou speakest like a physician Helicanus" (I; ii; 67). He will cure the king of any narcissistic arbitrary tendency, binding him closer to his subject's welfare. Simonedes' Court is also one where familial, filial and political relationships are correct and natural. The fishermen call him 'good Simonedes' testifying to his good governance. G. Wilson Knight comments, "The society is not levelled, but the men are as happy and rich hearted in their station as the king in his." (45)

In the capacity of a father, Simonedes is caring and loving. Significantly, it is in his kingdom that scenes of the common fishermen are set and they voice their views. Simonedes is also democratic, and marries Thaisa to Pericles even when he takes him to be a Commoner. The fisherman embodies the virtues which Cleon and Dionyza lack. Though poor, they are ready to share their venison with Pericles. Knight says of them: "The warm-hearted men invite him to share their simple life and its homely comforts, the general warmth and kindness overtopping both humor and satire." (45) Grace, sharing and humanity are qualities which, though banished from most human institutions, are held on to by them. They are capable of feeling pity for those who drowned. They emerge as better human beings when compared to those inhabiting the courts where jealousy, corruption and self-aggrandizement reign supreme. They are the force which can regenerate society by their ideals.

Befittingly Pericles calls Cleon 'Savage Cleon'. (Alexander V; i, 214) Lacking essential qualities of trust and humanity needed to co-exist in society, Cleon is not fit to live in it. Appropriately, Pericles allies himself with the fishermen. His finding the lost armor through them is symbolic. Only when the society is based on mutual trust and interdependence, and when the common man has a voice, can the Kings honor in the shape of the armor shine forth.

The shift of the setting to the city reveals a co-existence of both good and bad elements in it. Cerimon the city dweller is renowned for his charity and healing powers: "Your honor has through Ephesus pour'd forth your charity, and hundreds call themselves your Creatures, who by you have been restored." (III; ii; 42-45). He is the restorer in the real sense of the word. His scenes are alternated with those of Cleon and Dionyza, thereby heightening the contrast. Antithetically, the city of Mytilene presents a picture of moral and ethical decrepitude, where bawdry reigns supreme. The first scene in Mytilene opens in a brothel where Marina who is abducted fights for her honor. Using her intelligence and innate dignity she argues so well for her cause that she is able to transform others to virtuous ways. A gentleman customer remarks: "Come, I am for no more bawdy houses. Shall's go hear the vestals Sing?" (IV/v; 6-7) Marina embodies the regenerative power needed to restore a degenerated society. From being almost a victim to its debasement, she becomes its transformer. Lysimachus, the governor of the city who himself is corrupt, is also converted by her reproach: "Had I brought hither a corrupted mind, Thy speech had altered it." (IV, vi, 3-4).

Thaisa with her grace, warmth and love also embodies redemptive powers, but her goodness is a passive one. To survive in the putrid world of Mytilene, Marina has to use all her brains and energies. She barter with the bawds for her chastity. She is a woman with brains, talent and dynamism. Only dynamic goodness is effective for survival. She wishes to teach various arts and has a hopeful attitude that: "I doubt not but this populous city will yield many scholars." (V, vi, 84.85) She with fortitude gears herself for social upliftment and education. In this society, a center generating and inspiring virtue is wanted, a kernel around which people can rally their faith. She under-takes to provide that center for engendering social change. Towards the end, with the reunion of the separated family of Pericles, Lysimachus is also incorporated within the social fabric. Distinctions blur in an all-inclusive consensus for social rejuvenation.

II

Cymbeline opens on a spectacle of breakdown of bonds in the family. Having already lost two sons at their birth, Cymbeline finds out that his daughter has married without his consent. He disregards the loyalty and love of Posthumus in banishing him from the kingdom. The arbitrary behaviour of the father, who plays into the hands of his second queen, initiates estrangement between father and daughter. Unsympathetic towards Imogen, he wishes to force a match between her and Cloten. Imogen correctly calls him "like the tyrannous breathing of the north." (Nosworthy I; iv; 36) who wishes to break the bond between husband and wife.

The king wishes to force his will on Imogen leading to divided loyalties amongst nobles. Instead of open exchange of ideas and counselling the king, the courtiers are forced to hide their true feelings and "Wear their faces to the bent/ of the kings looks" (I, ii, 13.14). In a court where the ruler has become a tyrant their role is confined to be sycophants of the King and his foolish stepson Cloten. In this dystopic kingdom loyal servants like Belarius are exiled. Narcistic in his family relations, Cymbeline is also ineffective in political capacity as King. The exclamation of the gentleman in the opening scene, "That a Kings children should be so convey'd/ so slackly guarded, and the search so slow/ that could not trace them!" (I; i; 63,64) focuses sharply on the inefficiency of the kings' power.

In act III, when the Roman ambassador arrives with a reminder of the tribute due to them, he is answered by the Queen and Cloten. Cymbeline is barely a mute bystander. His reliance on the Queen is so complete that in her absence, learning that Roman troops have landed on English shores, his only response is, "Now for the counsel of my son and Queen /, I am amazed with matter." (IV; iii; 27, 28) He is only able to exert himself to action on the courtier's exhortation. Here is a despot who has lost the capacity to make decisions. Political and personal are interlinked and the play seems to posit that only a good individual can make a good king. A tyrant with his daughter, he is a puppet in the hands of the Queen, who in her wickedness is a counterpart to Dionyza in Pericles Prince of Tyre. She says, "he does buy my injuries, to be friends pays dear for my offences." (I, ii; 36-37) With her removal he is left floundering in the fragmented universe of his own making. He will have to rectify his social alignments before sanity returns to his universe.

Imogen withdraws from this ignominious society and refuses to fraternize with anybody after the banishment of Posthumus. In Imogen repose qualities of love, trust, chastity and honor and they are put to severe test by the patriarchal set up of the society. Forced by arbitrary behaviour of her father to abandon the court, Imogen is abandoned by her husband who wagers on her chastity also. He is convinced by Iachimo of having lost the wager. Imogen now has to adopt an active role in order to protect her honor. Towards the end, through a questioning of Iachimo, she is able to prove her innocence.

Posthumus on the other hand believes Imogen to be an adulterous even before any concrete proof is vouchsafed. In the nihilistic world of Posthumus' psyche, the conviction of this act of adultery brings about a total isolation from all bonds and ties. He condemns the whole of womankind indiscriminately, "The vows of women/ of no more bondage be to where they are made Than, they are to their virtues, which is nothing." (II; iv; 110-112). In the chimera of his perverted perceptions, he even implicates his own mother as adulterous, "that most venerable man, which I/ Did call my father, was I know not where/ when I was stamp'd." (II; iv; 155-157). At this point, there is no difference between the foolish egoistic Cloten and Posthumus who has lost his capacity to think because of jealous rage. Aptly, Imogen mistakes the beheaded Cloten for Posthumus. The restoring vision comes with the acceptance of his mother, father and brothers in a dream.

The country and court contrast is once again highlighted with the Welsh hills offering the pastoral idyll. The country embodies the values of "hardihood thrift, simplicity and courage" (Goddard, 254). Hailing existence in the wilderness Belarius exclaims "O, this life is nobler than attending for a check" (Nosworthy 84). Money is nothing but 'dirt' for Arviragus and Guiderius. In the countryside, right relations are practiced towards fellow human beings and ready hospitality is extended to Imogen. Commenting on the country Imogen says: "Our countries say all's savage but at court; Experience, O, thou disprov'st report!" (IV, ii; 33-35)

The threat to this locale comes from the court in the form of Cloten and the sleep-inducing vial of the queen. Cloten who is already disassociated from society meets his end in the hands of Guiderius, the false heir is destroyed by the rightful heir. The pastoral does not present itself as a substitute to the court, but its values will regenerate it and heal its fragmented social existence. By itself even the country is inadequate, a 'Cell of ignorance' and 'a prison', as the two heirs point out. Interaction with the court is required, but the values from the country have to be incorporated into the fabric of society for its redemption.

The positive attributes of Imogen and countryside reign supreme and even the courtiers find a voice as advisers to the king. The play concludes with Cymbeline the king realizing his responsibility towards social integration and upliftment. As Derek Traversi puts it:

In this final vision of conservation to a unifying purpose, the personal issues of the play, the love of Imogen for Posthumus maintained through trials and separation, and the integration of natural simplicity to the graces of civilized order, find in the subjection to a universal unity, through the figure of Cymbeline as father and king, their proper culmination. (282)

III

'The Winters Tale' opens on a propitious note of harmony and well-being. Sicilia is a picture of prosperity and hospitality with all bonds of friendship, family and state, in a happy natural provision. Polixenes and Leontes both emphasize their closeness to their sons. But whereas Polixenes' son according to him, "With his varying chillness cures in me/ Thoughts that would thicken my blood." (Pafford I, ii; 170-171) Mamillus cannot do so for Leontes. He is rather victimized himself by the poison that his father Leontes spreads because of his jealousy. Most critics view Leontes' jealousy as unaccountable, engulfing him suddenly like madness. In the haze of his biased vision all bonds become foggy and he doesn't reconsider even once before doubting the fidelity of a loving wife and loyalty of a devoted friend. Paulina attributes the evil that befalls Hermione to the dangerous and unsafe bouts of lunacy which ail the king. Leontes becomes arbitrary to all others in his senseless, mad, jealousy. In his tyrannical behaviour he is an isolated psyche obsessed by his own conviction of the queen's adultery. He is alienated from the rest of the universe by his stubborn arrogance in refusing to listen to anyone else's counsel. Camillo, Antigonus, Paulina and the lords, all attempt to reason with him but their opinions are dismissed, "cease; no more ...You smell this business with a sense as cold as is a dead man's nose" (Pafford II, i; 152-2).

The voice of the despot is all powerful and he threatens to dismiss his advisors if they will not accept his point of view, "Why, what need we commune with you of this, but rather follow our forceful instigation? Our prerogative calls not your counsels" (II; i; 162-165). The king is alienated from his correct function as a protector of his subjects. He appropriates all the power to himself without any consideration of his social or familial responsibilities. In the familial sphere he has imprisoned his wife, plotted to murder his friend and forced the 'priest like' counselor Camillo to run away. All else melts in the face of the conviction of his wife's disloyalty, "Is this nothing? / why then the world and all that is in't, is nothing, / The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing, My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothing, / If this be nothing" (I, ii, 292-295) The reiteration of the word 'nothing' defines the extent to which Leontes' psyche is reductive of all realities, familial, social, universal, except that which his mind creates. He takes leave of his every human/ humane instinct when he denies his name to his new born child, abandoning her to the mercy of fate. The lens of his nihilistic vision allows only for a universe where all is corrupt and the world is 'a bawdy planet' where anarchy reigns. He fails to see that chaos and degradation anchors deep within his own perception of the world. He even rejects the veracity of the oracle when it confirms the queen's innocence claiming, "There is no truth at all i'th oracle" (III, ii, 140-141)

The heavens, in order to reinforce moral order, punish his blasphemy by bringing about the death of his son and the apparent demise of his wife. His shock and grief force him to repent his own actions. Here onwards the voice of the tyrant suffers a diminution and the voices of his loyal supporters like Paulina and other lords gain impetus. Pain and sadness have been caused by human willfulness, alienated from social and familial bonds. Evil and decay that have been injected into the society has rendered it heirless.

In this disintegrating universe, Hemione, Paulina and Perditta bring hope of redemption. Hermione has beauty, strength warmth and courage and the good acclaim of all the courtiers. She displays loyalty and fortitude in face of difficulty. When accused by Leontes, she claims to fight to retrieve her honor with continued grace. As a foil to her calm strength and goodness, Paulina is openly vocal in her support of Hermione and takes Leontes to task. In her courage she braves to face the wrath of a tyrant and leaves no argument to bring him to senses. After Leontes' repentance, she acts like his conscience, constantly reminding him of the goodness of his queen. In the aftermath of his wrongly placed jealousy, Leontes is kind, gentle, humble, considerate and good. However, his reform alone is insufficient and to regenerate this society elements from some external constructs are required.

This alternative construct is provided by the countryside of Bohemia, the home of Perditta. Once again it is the value system of the pastoral, embedded in commoners like the Shepherd and the clown, which have the capacity to redeem the society of the court. The abandoned Perditta is lovingly picked up by the shepherd even though she is not his offspring and he suspects her to be illegitimate. He offers a contrast to Leontes who has cruelly cast his own child to the fates, merely on a suspicion of her not being his issue. The Shepherd is capable of feeling pity for those who drowned and for Antigonus who is eaten up by the bear. "Would I had been by, to have helped the old man!" (III; iii; 106). He worries that Perditta is a less skillful hostess than his wife was, exhorting her to extend warmth and hospitality to all. Drawing a picture of his wife attending to all, dancing with all, he proffers a contrast to Leontes jealous, possessive nature, which had led him to misinterpret his wife's hospitality. The old shepherd is a kind and humble man who looks after an abandoned child. Though he delights in the wealth and high position that circumstances have thrust on him, his high position does not make him forget others and he encourages the clown to speak well to the prince of Autolyws. "Prithee, son, do; for we must be gentle, now we are gentlemen" (V; ii, 152-153). He redefines and enriches the meaning of the word gentlemen. The pastoral forms a complimentary to the court, offering a more desirable alternate universe which reposes humane values and provides fertile ground for deeper human connections by anchoring the individual into the community.

Concomitantly, a full circle of breakdown and reconciliation takes place in the Bohemian court. Filial relations between Polixenes and Florizel are discordant. The son doesn't confide in the father and would not care to 'acquaint' his father of his wedding. Polixenes on the other hand shows no qualms about spying on his own son. The threat to the utopia of the countryside comes from the dystopic court. Polixenes' anger with the old Shepherd and with Perditta is reminiscent of Leontes's blind fury and he too threatens those who offend him with dire consequences. The tyranny of the King forces the couple to flee. With the discovery of Perditta's royal parentage and Hermione's resurrection, there is a reunion between family members as well as between friends and the two nations. The final image of the reformed court is one in which even the Shepherd and the clown are accepted as brothers, equals, and peers. Perditta, the child brought up in the pastoral landscape, reposes in herself values which will replenish moral values of the society of the court and society at large. She shows courage and fortitude in her relationship with Florizel. Complemented by all on her natural grace and wisdom, her breeding itself is a compliment to the countryside. With a royal birth she

combines the positive values of the countryside with the royalty. She is not unduly frightened by the threats of Polixenes and her comment: "I was about to speak, and till him plainly the selfsame sun that shines upon his court. Hides not his visage from our cottage" (IV; iv; 442-446) sums up the main ingredient of social integration, namely equality. The recognition of the integrity of each individual as a valuable member of the collective, will form the basis of practicing equal relationships between them and the creation of an ideal society.

Reformation of society followed up by its regeneration, alone can rejuvenate society. What is required is the inclusion of the common man within the structures of the decision-making center. A proper realization of one's place in society is necessary to abate anarchic individualism. For the redemption of a society which has become fragmented because of breakdown of correct social relationships, virtues embodied by the marginalized namely, most of the women characters in these plays, the countryside and the common man, need to be center stage. In the final analysis, the plays advance towards a correction of alliances in community and a reinvigoration of a sterile society by incorporation of new values which tether on an investment in the collective.

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