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Measure for Measure: Exploring the Relevance of Equity Theory on Shakespearean Characters

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Abstract:

Shakespearean characters, plots and themes are being read, analysed, reinvented, reinterpreted, deconstructed and reconstructed everyday in classrooms all over the world. Defying historicism that locates and regards a literary work in its historical time and context, Shakespearean works transgress their initial premise of liberal arts and move into the interdisciplinary spheres like Philosophy, Management or Filmography. Through a deductive approach, this paper aims to test the feasibility of management theory of equity with regard to Shakespearean characters and thereby establish that the theory of Equity can be applied in the light of the vindictiveness that arises due to the lack of it in Shakespeare's plots.

Keywords: Shakespearean characters, Equity theory, Shakespeare in management studies

In the Preface to the first folio edition to William Shakespeare's works, his contemporary playwright Ben Jonson arduously mentions that Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time". What started as a passing line in a preface, considering the ages that followed, it almost seems like a prediction. Starting from the intial production at the Globe theatre of London to the multiple theatre versions and film adaptations across cultures and languages to other art forms including graphic novels and music, Shakespeare has withstood skepticism, the test of time and the question of relevance.

Today, the Bard's works have spawned an entire genre of Shakespearean studies and is an indispensable component of the literature curriculum in academic institutions across the 'globe'. Shakespearean characters, plots and themes are being read, analysed, reinvented, reinterpreted, deconstructed and reconstructed everyday in classrooms all over the world. Defying historicism that locates and regards a literary work in its historical time and context, Shakespearean works transgress their initial premise of liberal arts and move into the interdisciplinary spheres like Philosophy, Management or Filmography.

Though Shakespeare's characters are kings and Queens and Court Jesters, the problems and situations that they face are comparable to the problems all leaders face in any age. Contemporary B schools have been bringing together playwrights, religious leaders and

philosophers in their pedagogy for years now. Centuries after the Bard lived, academicians and researchers are looking at various ways in which his works can serve as management and leadership training tools. Though it may seem that a comparison between literature from the 16th century and management concepts from today in the 21st century is unfeasible, it is not very far-fetched if we look at the fact that they both deal with organizations and management systems that are composed of people.

Through a deductive approach, this paper aims to test the feasibility of management theory of equity with regard to Shakespearean works and by extension establish that Shakespearean works especially his characters are universal and pertinent to management theories and concepts in the present age as well.

Prior to management or leadership theories which are relatively new and interdisciplinary areas of study, Shakespearean works have been studied through the lenses of postcolonial theories, psychoanalytic theory, New Criticism, New Historicism and Subaltern Studies. The more recent theories of Management and Leadership applied to Shakespeare include intercultural management, organizational behavior and organizational communication while the practical applications range from Theatre as a pedagogical practice to ‘mythodrama’ (Gill 526), the essence being that Shakespearean characters, plots and themes can provide analogous situations and analogies that help in learning through the experience of ‘otherness’ (Corrigan 31).

Though certain academicians are skeptical about the viability of management lessons from Shakespearean characters as “they are literary constructs... it is impoverishing management and impoverishing Shakespeare” (Brown) there are also academicians like Richard Olivier who feel that “Shakespeare covers the human dilemmas of leadership better and more clearly than any other management or business course” (Brown).

The Equity Theory, considered one of the justice theories, was first developed in the 1960s by J. Stacy Adams, on the premise that employees seek to maintain equity between the inputs that they bring to a job and the outcomes that they receive from it against the perceived inputs and outcomes of others (430). Further, the theory also asserts that in any position of a system, employees/members desire recognition and rewards for their contributions and work performance, the absence of which may lead to sentiments like hostility, resentment and malice in an individual.

In Shakespeare’s plays also, unfairness and resultant desire for vengeance is one of the recurring themes. The theory of Equity can mainly be understood in the light of the vindictiveness that arises due to the lack of it Shakespeare’s plots.

An inquisition to this effect can be made by looking at the ‘Gulling of Malvolio’ in *Twelfth Night*. Malvolio is the quintessential disciplinarian, devoted to his work, serious and with a strict code of morality. In the absence of a patriarch in Olivia’s household, Malvolio takes it on himself to assume the responsibilities essential to the running of the estates and the household. In

the midst of all the characters in the play who only indulge in merriment, leisurely activities and the exultations of love, Malvolio, unlike them is the only person who takes his duties seriously. Olivia herself admits that Malvolio is crucial to the household and wished to retain his good services. Hence, it can be seen that Malvolio assumes and executes the responsibilities of the Master of the house but is not given any authority. In this light, it is possible to understand Malvolio's thoughts as to his position if he were married to Olivia. Due to his innate serious nature, Malvolio is always at odds with the comic spirit of the play which irks the other characters and he becomes an object of ridicule for them. The final 'Gulling' of Malvolio by forging an amorous letter from Olivia, which leads him to make a fool of himself and lands him in jail is very unfair considering his numerous dedicated services to the household.

The character of Malvolio is subjected to unfair treatment which is completely disproportionate to his contributions. He is denied of any recognition or respect for his work; on the contrary his desire of enhancing his position is cruelly utilized for ridicule. Towards the end, as seen in Act V, scene I, Malvolio understandably harbours vengeful feelings against all those involved in his Gulling. His last words in the play echo this bitterness and hostility as understood in the Equity Theory. It is also interesting to note that this line also signifies Malvolio's feeling of being isolated from the rest of the characters.

"I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you!" (5.1 2590)

The other characters of the plot are rewarded with love and companionship, Malvolio remains a 'poor fool' who has been as Olivia believes 'baffled and most notoriously abus'd' (5.1 379)

Another example of inequity can be seen in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. Both the plays deal with the life and the fall of the titular characters who are Roman leaders and great generals. Caesar comes back after great conquests as is Caius Marcius who is given the agnomen of 'Coriolanus' after his victory at Corioli. There is much similarity between the two characters and but also some distinct differences. Caesar's triumphant return from Pompey is much celebrated by the commoners and he is a much loved conquerer. But, in Coriolanus, the commoners are rioting due to shortage of grain for which they blame Coriolanus. Irrespective of this public response, both these characters are similar in their noble qualities, their bravery and their dedication and loyalty to Rome. Injustice comes in the form of other significant characters Brutus and Cassius in Julius Caesar and Brutus and Sicinius in Coriolanus. In both the plays, these agents of anarchy drive the commoners against Caesar and Coriolanus. In the words of several characters like Antony,

"You all did love him once, not without cause
 What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?
 O Judgement! Thou art fled to brutish beasts,
 And men have lost their reason." (3. 2 101- 104)

These two men are extolled for their generosity, their dynamism, their powerful leadership and their significant contribution to the preservation and betterment of Rome. Whereas, these noble men should be celebrated and rewarded for their military and political contribution to Rome, in the end Caesar is killed by his false well wishers and Coriolanus is banished in the riots provoked against him. Caesar and Coriolanus both are not given their due of rewards for their great deeds. This unfairness ignites the desire for justice, which is achieved for Caesar through Mark Antony and for Coriolanus through his own scheme to join the enemies of Rome to achieve his vengeance.

The idea of illegitimacy and the stigma surrounding it is a much explored theme in literature. Whether it be Jon Snow in *The Song of Fire and Ice* or Voltaire's *Candide*, bastards have been subjects of unfair treatment harbouring resentment and rejection especially when pitted against their legitimate siblings. Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is one such character.

"Why bastard? wherefore base?

When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?" (1.2 6- 10)

Edmund poses a series of questions that point to "incomprehensible unfairness" (Woodbridge 264) on account of society's discrimination against illegitimacy. Though, he is as handsome, as 'generous' and as capable as Edgar, his legitimate sibling, he is never given the same social standing. What is not granted to him by the right of his birth, he proceeds to take by force, dying in the process. Edmund is a victim of inequity, he is unfairly treated and he voices this in his monologue. The reward for being an Earl's son is different for Edmund and Edgar, for one it is death, for the other it is the promise of the throne.

Religion has been at the centre of antagonism and conflicts throughout history. At its worst, this hostility has given birth to dictators who have changed the course of history. History is strewn with instances of catastrophe when religion becomes the grounds for despise. As literature is inspired by history, brilliant examples of characters inspired by historical events and people can be seen in literary works through the ages. Religious stereotypes, attitudes and practices have also been explored in various works. Right from the Bible to *The Jew of Malta* the Jew stereotype has often reflected the attitude of Anti-Semitism prevalent for centuries.

The iconic Jew, Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* can be analysed as a victim of inequity, religious and occupational. Shylock has been represented as the "modern capitalist" (Draper 47), and it has been argued that his conflict with Antonio has nothing to do with his race and religion. However, throughout the play we have evidences of religious intolerance and aversion to Jews. Shylock and Antonio are both affluent businessmen in Venice. Though members of the same

society with the same occupation who contribute to its economic affairs equally, and “lend out money” (1.3 45) one has a high social repute while the other is despised and ridiculed for his religion. He mentions all the religious slurs and insults he is subjected to by Antonio on numerous occasions; he has been called ‘misbeliever’, ‘cut-throat dog’ and he has been spat upon—‘voiding’ the disgusting phlegm upon Shylock’s beard, as one ‘voids’ shit! – and he has been kicked, as one kicks a stray dog out of doors (1.3 110-112) He is cruelly slighted on his religion, his race and his attire which he has still borne “with a patient shrug”. Further, he also makes efforts to make peace with Antonio inspite of all these insults as he expresses in the lines “I would be friends with you and have you love/ forget the shames you have sham’d me with” (1.3 139-140)

Antonio the much respected decent man reacts in a manner not befitting his reputation,

“I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.” (1.3 31-32)

The demonization of Jews was very much a part of the 16th century English society as can be seen in the fact that Shylock has been referred to as a devil eight times in the play (Saunders), whereas he demonstrates humane generosity, forgiveness and a genuine attempt at reconciliation with those who despise him.

Apart from the discrimination that Shylock is subjected to because of his religion, he is also looked down upon because of his profession. As mentioned in Warren D Smith’s Shakespeare’s Shylock, the profession of lending money was legal with an interest rate of 10 percent (by Queen Elizabeth in 1570), it was still not accepted by the English public “as a lawful or a moral vocation... the term Jew was frequently made equivalent to usurer”

As mentioned earlier, these labels and occupations became derogatory only when a Jew was practicing them even though it was sanctioned by the Crown. There is a fundamental inequity in the honour and social standing available to Shylock and Antonio, which results in Shylock’s resentment and self identification as a perpetual ‘other’ who will never be treated equally as his Christian counterparts. It is understandable hence, that Shylock refuses to dine with Bassanio with these vehement words

“I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you
Walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat
With you, drink with you, nor pray with you.” (1.3 35-37)

Much like Edmund in King Lear, Shylock brings out the unfairness of his position through the oft quoted lines

“...Hath
not a Jew hands, organs,

dimensions, senses, affections

Passions...

If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us
do we not laugh, if you poison
us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not
revenge?" (3.1 60-69)

The reward he expects through vengeance, is not granted to him, even the sum of three thousand ducats that he lent which should be returned to him by law is denied to him. The perpetrator is the victim.

Adding to the statement made earlier that Literature is inspired by history, societal issues and patterns also come under its purview. Gender based patterns of marital inequality have existed across ages and cultures as shown in the UN Development Programme's Human Development report for 2015. Centuries ago, this disparity in marriage that eventually leads to a tragic end is aptly portrayed in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello* through the characters of Desdemona and Emilia.

Desdemona is a devoted wife, who loves Othello irrespective of his lineage, race or her father's opposition. As she says , she saw "his visage in his mind" She insists on accompanying Othello to Cyprus and is in every way , "a maid, so tender, fair and happy" (1.2 66) as Brabantio describes her. Her seemingly unquestionable love for Othello can be seen in the following lines

"That I did love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honor and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him." (1.3.283-294)

As the plot develops, Desdemona becomes the instrument of Iago's revenge. Her loyalty, purity and their marriage itself are questioned by Othello. She is called 'strumpet', 'whore' and 'mistress' (4.2 81-82)

"O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,

And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
 And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
 That keep a corner in the thing I love
 For others' uses" (3.3 268-273)

In spite of Desdemona's undivided loyalty for her husband, she is doubted on the basis of circumstantial evidence projected by Iago for his own vengeance. That same evidence provided by Iago is easily taken to be the absolute truth, whereas Desdemona's pleas of innocence are ignored. In fact, she is unaware of the exact terms of Othello's accusations. Desdemona is portrayed as so innocent and naïve that she wonders whether there are women who deceive their husbands. Emilia's famous monologue on the gender based disparity in marriage rings true in this context. In her electrifying speech, she unmasks and condemns the double standards and hypocrisy that exists in marriage, where adultery by men is not as severe a sin as adultery committed by a woman. Emilia's speech ends with a passionate justification of extramarital affairs by wives as a revenge for the adultery of men. Thus, "the assertion of equality is inseparable from the justification of revenge" (Woodbridge 269). She says

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
 If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
 And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
 Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
 Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
 Or scant our former having in despite;
 Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
 Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
 Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
 And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
 As husbands have. What is it that they do
 When they change us for others? Is it sport?
 I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
 I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
 It is so too: and have not we affections,
 Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
 Then let them use us well: else let them know,
 The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." (4.3 92-109)

The potency of the equity theory, as understood in the case of Desdemona , can also be applied to the her perpetrator, Iago. Though one spites the other to avenge personal unfairness, both the perpetrator and the victim, are subjects of inequity.

Iago, generally believed to be one of Shakespeare's most destructive characters, is Othello's 'trusted' adviser who has been deprived of the promotion that he believes he deserves, at the beginning of the play.

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
 A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;
 That never set a squadron in the field,
 Nor the division of a battle knows
 ...And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
 At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds
 Christian and heathen, must be be-lee'd and calm'd
 ...And I--God bless the mark!--his Moorship's ancient (1.1 19-32)

His desire for revenge is born out of the resentment and bitterness at this unfair decision. His vengeance also extends to Cassio, who is a charming gentleman and who constantly "reminds (him) of (his) own ugliness".

The Theory of Equity can also be applied partly to other characters like Philip Faulconbridge, from Shakespeare's King John who like Edmund is denied his rights due to the illegitimacy of his birth; Malcolm from Macbeth who was also denied the throne after the death of his father Duncan inspite of being the crowned prince, due to Macbeth's ambition; Rosalind's father Duke Senior in As You Like It who is banished from his kingdom by his brother; Hamlet's Uncle usurping the throne after his father's death thus denying him of his rightful claim; or the lowly Caliban who is unfairly colonized by Prospero.

From the mentioned characters and plots, it can be seen that a desire for revenge in Shakespeare's plays emanates from an existing inequity in terms of various grounds ranging from power, legitimacy, ethnicity and religion to gender equality in marriage. As Linda Woodbridge, in her book *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* aptly writes, "Unlike an absolute model of fairness bestowing each person's due (*suum cuique*) fairness as *equal* treatment is relational: one person deserves the same as another" (Woodbridge 261). All the characters mentioned protest the fact that they do not receive their due share of power, recognition, position or love that they deserve or they think that they deserve because they see their counterparts receiving them. As members of any institution, which here may be marriage, family or an empire, these characters in turn feel resentment, bitterness and harbor malice. This forms the premise of the theory of Equity. In Shakespeare it can be seen that the malice is channelized through vindictive actions which often steer the action of the plot towards the climax. Many a time, the protest against inequity is a challenge against existing "hierarchy itself" (Woodbridge 270) In every age, the desire and endeavour for equality and equity has given birth

to rebellions, revolutions and inspired literature which was the spirit of English Renaissance, which is in every sense An Age for all time. Renaissance Egalitarian principles can be clearly seen in these characters and plots. As a justice theory, The Theory of Equity, which also has the premises of fairness and just rewards is befitting for the Bard's characters.

“That wronged do right themselves before they die”

The Duke of Milan (5.2 606)

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