



Class Oppression and Commodification in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*

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ABSTRACT

Karl Heinrich Marx tended to focus on considering how class struggle, oppressive ideologies, and social inequality are portrayed in literary texts throughout history in order to find a definite structural cause behind the modern exploitative capitalist system. One of these historical literary texts that attracted Marx's attention was William Shakespeare's to which he referred a lot. This paper intends to analyze Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice* in the light of Marxism to expose the upper classes' oppressive behavior, their unethical victimization, exploitation, and commodification of the lower classes. Consequently, through a Marxist reading of Shakespeare's plays, one can perceive that there are vivid links between Marxist and Shakespearean thinking, especially the similarities of thought held by each on the subjects of class oppression and commodification. Shakespeare portrayed the bitter social facts which Marxist thought tends to agree with.

Keywords: Class Oppression; Commodification; *Hamlet*; Marxism; *Merchant of Venice*

1. INTRODUCTION

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883), was a famous German political, philosophical, and economic theorist. His theories and ideas influenced the modern world history and he was known as the founder of the Marxist tradition which has strongly criticized capitalism.

Marx, with the collaboration of Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), tried to “produce a critique of capitalist society based on a materialistic conception of history” (Habib, p. 527). He examined history to discover the main forces for all exploitation, oppression, and injustice that he saw in the modern capitalist system. Finally, he concluded that “the dialectic of history was motivated by material forces” (Habib, p. 529). Through surveying history in search of truth, Marx noticed William Shakespeare’s plays. “... The period from 1848 to 1852 saw Marx engaged both in a detailed analysis of French politics and the rise of Louis Bonaparte and in intense reading of Shakespeare” (Stallybrass, p. 23). He read Shakespeare’s plays to create his own philosophy and criticism and wanted to show the negative effects of modern capitalism and its false ideologies through representation of commodification. According to Christian Smith, Marx, in his writings, quoted from or alluded to Shakespeare’s plays frequently. Many of these quotations and allusions occur at significant points in the development of Marxism (2012).

Therefore, Kenneth Muir did not exaggerate when he stated that “Shakespeare was one of the spiritual godparents of the Communist Manifesto” (p. 76). Since Marx was influenced by Shakespeare, through a Marxist reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*, one can perceive Marxist critique of class oppression and commodification in them. This paper reveals how Marxist theories can be applied on Shakespeare’s plays. It is noticeable that class struggle, avarice for power, and victimization of the weaker ones are among Shakespearian dramatic themes. So, it can be perceived that although Shakespeare lived many years before Marx, his society was undergoing radical changes and class conflict, social disparity, and materialistic tendencies were surging up in it. “Twentieth-Century historians such as R. H. Tawney and Christopher Hill have demonstrated that a profound economic, social, and cultural revolution was taking place in England during Shakespeare’s lifetime” (Hatlen, p. 91). In Shakespeare’s time, the feudal system of land-ownership was common and people tried hard to make themselves free from their monarchic-fascist oppressors. One of the main parts of Marxist criticism concerns class struggle and since class distinctions and class struggle can be perceived throughout history and even literary genres, one can reasonably conclude that Marxist criticism is applicable to Shakespeare's dramas.

Shakespeare was born in a middle class family and his father “was a citizen of some prominence who became an alderman and bailiff, but who later suffered financial reverses” (Donaldson et al., p. 484). Shakespeare, whose father was a commoner, saw the corruption and immorality of the ruling class and aristocracy and their oppressive behavior towards the middle and lower classes and he tried to have the depiction of the different social classes and the struggle between them as one of his dramas’ themes. In this paper, two of Shakespeare’s well-known dramas, *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*, a tragedy and a comedy respectively, are analyzed to shed light on the way Shakespeare’s dramas portray class oppression, conflict and social inequality in view of Marxist theories.

2. DISCUSSION

2. 1. Class Oppression and Commodification in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

In *Hamlet*, a sense of class struggle and huge gaps in the social classes are perceivable. Barnardo, Marcellus, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, and Horatio all are lower in class and rank than Hamlet and his aristocrat family and the way this royal class addresses and treats them is

noticeable, because it seems that the upper class tends to commodify the lower class and regard them as objects, means, and tools for achieving their goals. One of the reasons that the aristocracy thought that they are allowed to commodify the lower class and to use them for their personal goals is the presence of ideologies among people. According to Abrams “in any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class” (p. 181). The upper class constructed ideologies which were beneficial just to themselves and then they spread these ideologies among the lower class people in order to make them oppressed and obedient. Class oppression is apparent in this play when the higher rank individuals oppressed the lower rank ones and try to 'use' them, as their own commodity, however they like. People from the lower class like Reynaldo, Marcellus, Bernardo, and Francisco are oppressed by the higher class people, and they are forced to obey the commands of their authorities. Their roles are intentionally ignored by the upper class and their marginalized voices are denied.

2. 1. 1. Discussion on Claudius's character

Claudius, who usurped the throne, as a King of the country had a higher rank than Hamlet and he tried to use his power, wealth and men to oppress his rival, Hamlet. Actually, Claudius wanted Hamlet to be obedient and when he saw Hamlet defied him and didn't behave according to his expectations, he decided to suppress him as much as possible and even wanted to kill him. On the other hand, in Marxist point of view, Hamlet wanted to subvert Claudius's rule and overcome his oppressive rule over him. When he saw the corruption of the royal class, he decided to separate himself from faults of the political structure and tried to resist the ruling class' oppressive ideology.

Commodification is clearly embodied in the character of Claudius. He is powerful and wealthy and tries to achieve his goals through using his money and power. For him, all things and all people are commodities. Claudius commodified Gertrude and married her in order to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the previous king and strengthen the bases of his newly established kingdom; that she is “th'imperial jointress” to the throne of Denmark indicates that she has some power and Claudius's marriage to her had political implications. Claudius also wanted Gertrude for the social status her ownership confers. He wanted her social standing and the image of strength and stability to be imparted to him; he wanted her sign-exchange value in other words.

Claudius also commodified Hamlet. In order to get rid of Hamlet, Claudius used him as a prey to make Laertes believe that all faults and guilt came from Hamlet. He made Laertes believe that they have a common enemy, Hamlet, who must be killed quickly. Of course Claudius's acts of commodification are not limited to his relationship with Gertrude and Hamlet, “Because capitalism promotes the belief that ‘you are what you own’_ that our values as human beings is only as great as the value of our possessions” (Tyson, p. 70). Thus Claudius commodified all people and all things around him.

He commodified Rozencrantz and Guildenstern and 'used' them to spy on Hamlet to see what is truly causing his anger and madness. Hamlet was aware of Claudius's intention and told Rozencrantz and Guildenstern that Claudius “keeps them like an apple in the corner of his jaw; first mouthed to be last swallowed” (IV. ii. 17-9). Hamlet wanted to make them understand that Claudius uses them just as long as he needs them. Claudius also commodified Laertes and 'used' him like an instrument to kill Hamlet and put him out of his way.

Claudius actually regards people as his own commodities and sacrifices them to gain benefit just for himself.

He also agreed with Polonius to 'use' Ophelia in order to find out whether the reason for Hamlet's madness is his love for Ophelia or not. So, he was Polonius's partner to commodify Ophelia and to treat her like an object for achieving their ends. Therefore, Claudius uses his money, power, and social rank to manipulate other people very cold-bloodedly and cruelly to get what he wants, for commodification is, by definition, "the treatment of objects and people as commodities, as things whose only importance lies in their benefit to ourselves" (Tyson, p. 71).

2. 1. 2. Discussion on Gertrude's character

Like Claudius, Gertrude also gains profits from commodifying other people. So, she is not merely an innocent victim of her new husband's commodification. In the first place, Gertrude's marriage to Claudius is an act of commodification: she wanted Claudius's sign-exchange value as much as he wanted Gertrude's sign-exchange value. And she is capable, like Claudius, of treating other people as objects for achieving her goals.

She commodified Claudius and accepted to marry him in order to keep safe her position as the Queen of Denmark. So her hasty marriage to Claudius could be seen as a way of Gertrude preserving her power and to make sure her position as the Queen of Denmark is kept intact. Like her husband, she is willing to use and to commodify other people to her own convenience. For example, when Claudius invited Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Denmark, she was not reluctant to "use" them to find out the main reason for her son's madness. In Act2, scene2, Claudius said:

"Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!
Moreover that we much did long to see you,
The need we have to 'use' you did provoke
Our hasty sending" (1-4).

Then, Gertrude, who agreed with Claudius in using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, told them:

"... I beseech you instantly to visit
My too much changed son" (35-6).

And the other example is when she agreed with Claudius and Polonius to 'use' Ophelia to see whether Hamlet's love for her is the reason for his madness or not. Then she told Ophelia:

"... I do wish that your good beauties be the happy
cause of Hamlet's wildness ..." (III. i. 38-40).

When Ophelia went mad, neither Gertrude nor Claudius were willing to see her and they didn't care for her very much because they didn't need her anymore.

2. 1. 3. Discussion on Polonius' character

Polonius commodified his own daughter, Ophelia, and behaved her like a toy in his hands and had absolute power and control over her. He 'used' Ophelia to prove to the King and Queen that the main reason for Hamlet's madness is because of his love for Ophelia. He used his own child to achieve his own goals and to show how clever he is so that Claudius and Gertrude may admire him for finding out the reason for Hamlet's madness. But in reality, he is just a "rash, intruding fool". Polonius treated his daughter like his other properties and considered her value as an object and used her for his personal aims. He sacrificed her and regarded no respect for her; the way he talked about her is noticeable: "I'll loose my daughter to him" (II.ii.162). In that time, the word "loose" was mostly used for the dogs and people usually did "loose" animals not human beings!

2. 2. Class Oppression and Commodification in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, like *Hamlet*, can be interpreted through Marxist literary theories. Class oppression and commodification are seen in this play in a way that the higher class people oppress, commodify, and exploit the lower class people. By means of his acquaintance with Shakespeare's plays, Marx referred to "*The Merchant of Venice* into his whole critique of capitalism" (Wells 1993, 100). The capitalist ruling class construct false ideologies that only server their interest, then they instill them in people's minds to accept them as something natural. Actually, "it is one of the functions of ideology to 'naturalize' social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself. Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the 'natural' sign is one of its weapons" (Eagleton, p. 117).

The Marxist concept of ideology can be perceived in the characters of this drama, since "... a new ideology of mercantile activity was emerging in Shakespeare's day, and Shakespeare seems to have shared it" (Ferber, p. 447). Shakespeare, as a meticulous observer of his society, portrayed different ideologies which were rampant among his people in his play, *Merchant of Venice*. "Shakespeare, to summarize, has superimposed distinctions drawn within several incompatible ideological discourses:

(1) between the landed aristocracy, ... and the merchant class generally, who have the vice of greed;

(2) between true merchants, who take risks to provide useful goods and may therefore claim profits, and the money-lenders, who risk nothing (because of bonds and collateral) and contribute nothing to the well-being of others; and

(3) between the Christian doctrine of mercy or forgiveness and the 'jewish' doctrine of legality and vengeance" (Ferber, p. 437).

It is perceivable that in this play, lower class people who suffered years of class oppression have no significant social role and their voices are not heard by the upper class and they are marginalized in the society by oppressive people from the higher class. Launcelot, Old Gobbo, Balthazar and Stephano (servants of Portia), Leonardo (Servant of Bassanio) are all from the lower class who are ruled by their higher class lords and ladies. The upper class people regard these people as their own commodities and they think they are allowed to 'use' these oppressed individuals however they like.

The voices of the servants and the workers are ruthlessly smothered by the nobles and they are supposed to be submissive and docile in the eyes of the powerful ones. Besides class discrimination, the misuse of money and usury are portrayed in this play. By surveying history, Marxism believes that money causes discord and division among the people of the same society and it strengthens the basis of capitalism for the future time. “The general critique of usury in the early modern period has been traced to society’s transition from the conditions of declining feudalism to those associated with an emerging capitalism. Specifically *The Merchant of Venice* dramatizes this emerging capital in its portrayal of the conflict and enmity transpiring between the usurer and the merchant” (Lim, p. 355).

2. 2. 1. Discussion on Bassanio’s character

Indeed, Bassanio had the capability of using and commodifying other people for his own personal achievements. Bassanio was indebted to Antonio and he had no money to repay his debt to Antonio. Bassanio thought that if he gets married Portia, he can give Antonio’s money back, so he went to woo sweet Portia. In other words, though Bassanio claimed that he loved Portia, the main reason that he asked for her hand in marriage was that he was awfully in debt and needs her money. In the first scene of Act I, he told Antonio: “In Belmont is a lady richly left...” (164). First of all, he thinks about her wealth and his need for her money. Then, because Portia is beautiful and many “renowned suitors” desire to marry her, he wants to have Portia’s beauty, power, and social standing as well. In other words, besides her wealth, he also wants to gain Portia’s sign-exchange value for himself. He continues: “And she is fair, and, fairer than that word, Of wondrous virtues...” (I.i.165-6). Notice to the way he pays attention to Portia’s richness and fairness:

“Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift,
That I should questionless be fortunate!” (I. i. 168-78).

Thus, one of Bassanio’s reasons for wooing Portia was that he wanted to have access to Portia’s money and ‘use’ her wealth. The other reason was that he wished to marry her because “she is fair, and, fairer than that word” and many “renowned suitors” and “many Jasons come in quest of her.” So if he won her, he could have her sign-exchange value as well, so he decided to commodify Portia for the sake of gaining her exchange value and sign-exchange value. It is perceivable that he finally achieved his goal and could commodify Portia because “the commodity fetish occurs when exchange value takes on a power of its own that abstracts an item’s use into mere status value” (Guerin et al., p. 125).

Bassanio also commodified Antonio, the great merchant of Venice. Bassanio wanted to make Antonio let him have and 'use' his money. So he commodified Antonio for his exchange value. Although he borrowed a lot of money, he was trying to persuade Antonio to give him more money, as he said:

“I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,
That which I owe is lost; but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
As I will watch the aim, or to find both
Or bring your latter hazard back again
And thankfully rest debtor for the first” (I.i.149-55).

He also knew about Antonio's reputation and popularity in Venice. He knew that Antonio is an honorable and a well-known and trusted man among the people. He also wanted Antonio's sign-exchange value. For example when he understood that Antonio had no money, he tried to achieve money in the other way. He 'used' Antonio's credibility and honor as a guarantee to assure other money lenders to lend him money and when the kind-hearted Antonio offered his credibility to Bassanio, he willingly accepts Antonio's offer and 'used' his good name as a credit. Consider the first scene of Act I, Antonio told Bassanio:

“Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
Neither have I money nor commodity
To raise a present sum: therefore go forth;
Try what my credit can in Venice do:
That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.
Go, presently inquire, and so will I,
Where money is, and I no question make
To have it of my trust or for my sake” (180-8).

Two of Antonio's noticeable characteristics are his generosity and real friendship. When Bassanio asked Antonio to help him, Antonio replied kindly: “my purse, my person, my extremest means Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (I.i.141-2). It seems that Bassanio was aware of Antonio's special affection and attention towards himself, so he tried to 'use' this privilege to gain what he had in his mind and took full advantage of Antonio's boundless feelings for him. Although Bassanio claims that he cares for Antonio and loves him, it seems that Bassanio is like a big user, who is not reluctant to take as much as his generous, real friend has to offer. Bassanio not only commodified Portia and Antonio for their exchange value and sign-exchange value, but also he considered others as his own commodities and he thought he is allowed to 'use' them for achieving his aims. He also commodified Shylock and just wanted his exchange value in order to be able to access and use his money.

In this play, money plays an important role and it seems that Shakespeare wrote the story of his play around money. Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* wrote: “Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money”, “Money is the alienated ability of mankind” (p. 324). People, like Bassanio, are ready to commodify everyone just for

the sake of money and personal benefits. Seemingly, these people believe that by gaining more money, they can gain power, respect, and a better social image as well. Actually, in Marxist perspective, such people's discussion on money "... range from the logical status of the Marxian theory of value and the problem of price-value transformation to the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, economic crisis, and long-run capital accumulation" (Ruccio, p. 37).

2. 2. 2. Discussion on Shylock's character

Shylock, like Bassanio, was capable of commodifying other people even his own daughter. He related to the world only through his money. "...Karl Marx himself condemned Shylock's behavior" (Mahon and Macleod Mahon, p. 16). In Marxist perspective, Shylock was a man who considered all things and all people as commodities. The way he behaved toward Antonio and others represents that he is a usurer who mostly communicate with people for their exchange value. In case of his daughter, his maltreatment to Jessica makes it clear that she was like his other properties and things. When he found out Jessica stole his money and eloped with her lover, Lorenzo, he got so angry that it seemed that he was sad for the loss of his money as much as the loss of his daughter. Salanio described Shylock's behavior after his recognition of the truth:

"I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats" (II. viii. 12-22).

Thus, it's quite obvious that with these words, Shylock valued his daughter at least as much as his ducats. He had an overwhelming sense of loss for both his money and daughter. The way he uttered his daughter's name exactly after his ducats indicates that Jessica was like his other commodities for him. He commodified her like a thing or an object. He was not reluctant to sacrifice everyone for the sake of money and his goals. He felt a strong sense of alienation from society and even from his daughter, so he was not able to communicate with others through affection, kindness, and trust. Shakespeare depicted Shylock as a person who feels 'alienated' and can communicate with others only through money. Marx in *German Ideology* asserts such a process of alienation "was already known to Shakespeare better than to our theorising petty bourgeois" (p. 230).

2. 2. 3. Discussion on Jessica's character

Jessica reciprocally commodified her father. She hated Shylock and she privately expressed her shame of having such a father and she was waiting for a good opportunity to

steal his father's money and elope with her lover, Lorenzo. So until then, she tolerated her father's harsh behavior. In Act II, scene 3, she said:

“Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife” (16-21).

Jessica didn't let her father victimize her and treat her like an unworthy object. She decided to commodify Shylock in order to have his exchange value and 'use' his wealth. By stealing Shylock's money and her elopement with Lorenzo, she led her father to misery and sadness. So, she, like her father, was capable of commodifying and sacrificing others to her convenience.

3. CONCLUSION

Although Shakespeare lived many years before Karl Marx, we should remember that class struggle exists in each era as Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* wrote “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (p. 219). Therefore it is not unreasonable to read Shakespeare's plays through Marxist perspective. Marx's theories are applicable on Shakespeare's dramas since he himself was influenced by Shakespeare and used his statements for his own Marxist ideas. For instance, Marx used Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which late Hamlet was addressed as an “old mole”. “In appropriating “old mole” as a figure of revolution, Marx brilliantly illuminates, even as he transforms, the politics of the Renaissance play from which he appropriates” (Stallybrass, p. 25).

Another instance is Marx's use of *The Merchant of Venice* for showing that capitalism was taking root in historical figures' time, in other words, “the Gentile Venetian society” was “a newborn bourgeois capitalist society, no longer feudal, not yet industrial” (Bloom, p. 139). Totally, Shakespeare's demonstration of the comfortable condition of the rich versus the difficult condition of the poor in his dramas is what a Marxist critic looks for in historical literary works. In this paper, two of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*, were analyzed through Marxist perspective and Marxist critiques of class distinction, the struggle between the social classes, the mistreatment and commodification of the poor, oppressive ideologies, and social inequality were exposed. Indeed, Shakespeare's dramas in which the bitter facts about the society are depicted somehow represent ideas of social reformation which Marxism agrees with and his plays convey ideals of social form that Marxism tends to accept.

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