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Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” and “The Merchant of Venice”: A Posthumanistic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper depicts William Shakespeare’s plays “Julius Caesar” and “The Merchant of Venice” through the lens of posthumanism, a philosophical and critical theory that interrogates human-centric ideologies, embraces technological, ecological, and material agency, and deconstructs the boundaries between humans and non-humans. By re-evaluating characters, power dynamics, and socio-political structures in these plays, this paper reveals how Shakespeare’s works resonate with posthumanistic concerns, despite originating in a humanist era. The article explores themes of power, justice, identity, and otherness, analyzing how human and non-human agencies coalesce to shape the narratives.

Introduction

William Shakespeare’s poetic and plays, however deeply rooted in Renaissance humanism, give rich ground for posthumanistic inquiry. Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric worldview, emphasizing the interrelation of humans, non-human realities, and surroundings. In “Julius Caesar,” the focus on political plots, collaborative agency, and fate invites interpretations that move beyond individual heroism.” The Merchant of Venice,” focuses on the complex engagements with law, material wealth, and dissimilarities, foregrounds posthuman questions about justice, morals, loyalty, and the ethics. In this paper these two plays, Julius Caesar and The Merchant of Venice have been attempted to view in the posthumanistic perspective.

Humanism, as a philosophical and artistic movement, centers on the study of the individual mortal subject and the compound features that define humanity. It positions the mortal being as the focal point of the world, attributing agency and influence to mortal studies and conduct. Core to this view is the belief in the existent’s freedom to pursue particular choices, tone- mindfulness, and the capacity for tone- determination. Generalities similar as mortal quality, Human Rights, and debates about the mortal condition are innovated on this universalized notion of a coherent, rational, and independent mortal subject. The mortal substance is traditionally seen to live in the rational mind or soul, distinct from the body, which grants humans the supposed capability to suppose about themselves, reflect upon their actuality, and distinguish themselves from all other forms of

life. Morality, ethics, and responsibility in the ultramodern period(post-1600) have largely been shaped by this anthropocentric worldview.

The scholars N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe describe Posthumanism as a critical response to this human-centric ideology. It challenges the idea of mortal exceptionalism and investigates the way in which dynamic interactions with non-human realities – such as a critical response to this human-centric ideology

Julius Caesar: Decentered Agency and Distributed Power

“Julius Caesar”, in common is a political tragedy. Caesar is a towering figure in the political life of Rome when the play opens. The people worship him; and some members of the Roman Senate are also on his side. However, there is a certain amount of antagonism towards him among the minds of certain persons in the city. One of leading figures in the political life of the country is Cassius who has inwardly been feeling jealous of the growing power of Caesar, and who now initiates a conspiracy against him. But his real success comes when he prevails upon Brutus also to join him in his plan to assassinate Caesar. Brutus is a highly respected man in Rome. He appears to be a far nobler personality than Caesar. The reason behind the conspiracy to kill Caesar is the ambition of an individual, loyalty, and betrayal. However, from a posthumanistic standpoint, the play undermines the idea of singular human agency. The assassination of Caesar, often depicted as the culmination of human will. Caesar’s assassination is portrayed as a mesh of human and non-human factors, such as omens, prophecies, crowd psychology, and environmental forces that rewrite his fate.

Prophesies

Soothsayer is a prophet. He predicts one’s future. In this play, the soothsayer warns Caesar, “Beware the Ides of March”. It means being cautious of danger on March 15th. It signifies the intrusion of knowledge that is beyond the human and which disrupts human plans. Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia’s nightmare and the strange occurrences in Rome, such as the lions in the Capitol and men walking ablaze, suggest a material agency beyond human control. These elements destabilise the illusion of human peace and liberty, emphasising distributed agency.

The Roman mob appears as a posthuman collective object. The mob does not have rational thinking. They are fickle-minded and embody the flux of socio-political energies. Brutus and Cassius are the central figures of the conspiracy. They are one among the fickle participants who are in a larger, non-linear network of forces. Cassius utilises this force properly. He uses the confusion and emotions among the people as a key factor.

The materiality of Caesar’s body post-assassination further exemplifies posthumanist concerns. His corpse becomes a potent symbol, manipulated to incite rebellion. The body, now devoid of individual agency, exerts profound political influence, illustrating the posthuman notion that agency transcends the living human subject.

After assassination, Caesar’s body becomes a potent symbol which manipulated to stimulate rebellion by the assassins and his friend Antony. The corpse becomes devoid of the mob, exerts profound political influence. It shows the posthuman notion.

The Merchant of Venice: Materiality, Otherness, and Posthuman Ethics

In “The Merchant of Venice” foregrounds the trap of humans with profitable systems, legal fabrics, and carnal materiality. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, lived at Venice he was an usurer, who had amassed an immense fortune by lending money at great interest to Christian merchandisers. Antonio had rebuked this inhuman behaviour and character of Shylock at several times. He’s

frequently interpreted through humanistic lenses of prejudice and mercy. Still, a posthumanistic reading highlights how Shylock's identity is constructed through his snares with law, money, and his own corporeality.

Shylock's agreement on the "pound of flesh" literalizes the legal contract, foregrounding the pressure between abstract legalism and embodied materiality. In the courtroom scene, the conflict where human lives are reduced to material goods, exposing the dehumanizing sense of commercial exchange. This made Shylock is both a victim and an agent of posthuman forces, embodying the material agency of profitable and legal structures.

Portia, disguised as a male lawyer, also embodies posthuman fluidity in identity and performance. Hercross-dressing disrupts gender binaries, suggesting that identity is a performative construct told by social scripts rather than an ingrained substance. Her manipulation of legal loopholes further illustrates the posthuman view that knowledge systems (like law) have agency in shaping mortal issues.

Objects and material wealth play vital roles in the narrative. The caskets, for example, are not unresistant props but active agents that determine Bassanio's fate, bedding mortal desire within material configurations. Portia and Bassanio exchange the rings. The rings changed between Portia and Bassanio further emblemize the gyrations of affect and constancy intermediated by objects, emphasizing the posthuman trap of humans and actualities.

Thus, the character of Shylock also invites ecological posthumanist readings. His depiction as the 'Other' glasses the marginalization of non-human others in anthropocentric societies. Finally, the ultimate failure in the play is, to grant Shylock justice reflects the ethical impasse of mortal-centered moral fabrics, prompting a posthuman reevaluation of empathy and justice that transcends species and artistic boundaries.

Intersections and Comparative Insights

Both plays, "Julius Caesar" and "The Merchant of Venice", weaken the idea of the autonomous, rational human subject. In "Julius Caesar," collective bodies such as conspirators and the Roman mob who act as assemblages whose actions cannot be reduced to individual volition. Similarly, in "The Merchant of Venice," the identity is shown as fluid, relational, and materially mediated.

In both plays the agency of non-human elements such as omens, dreams, legal documents, money, and human fates play in the vital role. These elements challenge the anthropocentric belief in human mastery, aligning with posthumanist critiques of human-centered epistemologies.

Moreover, these two plays interrogate ethical relations by complicating the binaries of self or other, human or non-human. Shylock's demand for justice and the conspirators' justifications for murder both expose the fragile foundations of humanist ethics. They help to reconsider a posthuman ethics of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all characters of human and non-human.

Conclusion

Even though they were written during the humanist era, Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and "The Merchant of Venice" foreshadow posthumanist worries by questioning human choice like identities, problematizing human agency, and emphasizing material and non-human forces. These plays demonstrate a proto-posthuman awareness through the interactions of people with their surroundings, possessions, and systems, which strikes a deep chord in today's critical discourse.

Posthumanism allows us to reread and to see Shakespeare not as a monument of humanist tradition, but as a precursor to critical paradigms that challenge human exceptionalism. By interrogating the plays through a posthumanist lens, we uncover deeper complexities in their portrayal of power, justice, and identity, illuminating Shakespeare's enduring relevance in a more-than-human world.

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