
Antonio's Melancholy in The Merchant of Venice-A Critique

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Paper Received on 29-03-2023, Accepted on 20-05-2023,
Published on 22-05-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.85

Abstract: The motiveless melancholy of Antonio had baffled and still baffling the critics ever since the play came into being but with different layers of observation from the school of critics, for ages together, unraveling the mystery only to make it appear more mystical as such, more fascinating. This paper intends to glean-off worthy cogitations of some of the most expert modern Shakespeareans. Josuah Sylvester, an English poet in his translation of Du Bartas' (**French**) work 'Diuine Weekes and Workes' brings up a dialogue between Heraclitus the weeping philosopher, and Democritus the laughing philosopher.

Key words: Motiveless melancholy, cogitations, dialogue, weeping philosopher.

According to a widely disseminated view of the critics, Antonio's melancholy is one of the most puzzling aspects of the play *The Merchant of Venice*. Majority of the critics are of the opinion that the cause of this malaise in the character of Antonio is never revealed.

Antonio's melancholy disturbs both himself and his fellows as he tells Salerio and Solanio in the opening lines of the play:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you . . .
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it
What stuff 'its made of, Wherefore it is born, (I i:5)
I am to learn.

He maintains that neither love nor money is the cause of his depression, but that his role in the world is "a sad one"

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one. (I i: 83).

Now if we look at the repertoire of criticism on the 'state of Antonio's mind', which had given rise to much speculation among the critics, I would like to, or this paper intends to glean-off worthy cogitations of some of the most expert modern Shakespearians.

The motiveless melancholy of Antonio had baffled and still baffling the critics ever since the play came into being but with different layers of observation from the school of critics, for ages together, unraveling the mystery only to make it appear more mystical as such, more fascinating.

E. K. Chambers, an English literary critic and Shakespearean scholar, in his essay on *The Merchant of Venice* observes: "The melancholy of Antonio is a perpetual undertone in the gaiety and the tribulation of *The Merchant of Venice*. It claims your pondering in the first significant words of the play: nor is its meaning, there or elsewhere, clearly or explicitly set forth"¹

The editors, Dover Wilson and Quiller Couch, in order to explain the absence of the motive of Antonio's melancholy,² think that "the explanation may have been lost in Shakespeare's second Re-handling of the text."

Thus, no satisfactory explanation, indeed, has ever been generally accepted for Antonio's melancholy.

Now, if we look at the first scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, it appears that Shakespeare was affected by some dialogue treatment of this theme of melancholy versus joy. The initial scene of the play will make it clear that over and against Antonio and his melancholy, are placed the characters of Salarino, Salanio, and more especially Gratiano, who uphold the side of mirth in the game of life as against deep-seated, settled melancholy.

Time and again in the plays, even the general reader of Shakespeare is aware of the fact that now and then, one or the other, from Shakespeare's galaxy of characters tend to maintain incidentally that "a merry heart lives long-a," (Henry IV, II, Act V, Scene 3) but nowhere else is a whole scene given over to what almost amounts to a balanced artificial debate in regard to this matter of the weeping and the laughing attitudes toward life.

The last few lines of *Love's Labour's Lost* without going further into the matter demonstrate that. They consist of a medieval "estريف" motif, the Debate between Spring and Winter.

[SPRING]

When daisies pied and violets blue,

And lady-smocks all silver-white,
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight,
The cuckoo then on every tree
Mocks married men; for thus sings he:

“Cuckoo! (V ii:970)

[WINTER]

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail;
When blood is nipped, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl
“Tu-whit to-who.” A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot. (V ii:990)

Josuah Sylvester, an English poet in his translation of Du Bartas' (french) work 'Diuine Weekes and Workes' brings up a dialogue between Heraclitus the weeping philosopher and Democritus the laughing philosopher. This dialogue debates the matter of sadness versus laughter. ,it is true that some earlier edition of this very dialogue makes clear the otherwise inexplicable melancholy of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, a brief history of the literary treatment of the Heraclitian melancholy and Democritian mirth will be warranted here, particularly in view of the fact that by way of this digression, it will appear that the treatment of the Heraclitus-Democritus theme has its culmination in English poetry in Milton's L'Allegro and II Penseroso and in English prose in *The Laughing Philosopher*, ascribed to Charles Lamb.

The dialogue included in almost all the editions of Joshua Sylvester's translations of Du Bartas, which more than any other dialogue will presently be found to be closely related to the treatment of the theme in *The Merchant of Venice*. The most elaborate survival of this literary convention is to be found of course in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which Democritus and Heraclitus are referred to in their laughing and weeping capacities times innumerable.

It is important to note here that of the many treatments of the theme of Heraclitus and Democritus as the weeping and laughing philosophers, the Dialogue in Sylvester's editions of 'The Devine Weekes' helps best to throw light on the contention between Antonio, spokesman for melancholy, and Gratiano and his group, spokesmen for mirth, in the first scene of the first act of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The most extraordinary of all the lines spoken by Antonio in the play are those in which he emphasizes to Gratiano his melancholy attitude to life as against the laughing attitude of Gratiano. We should notice the extraordinary similarity of this speech to that of Democritus

speaking to Heraclitus in the Dialogue of Sylvester, a similarity too definite to be brushed aside as an Elizabethan commonplace.

Commonplaces indeed have been assembled in connection with the better-known saying of Jacques in *As You Like It*,

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.'

But none of them corresponds closely to the very words of Antonio. Those of the Dialogue cited here do correspond very closely:

I hold the world but as the world,
Gratiano,
A stage where every man must play
his part
And I a sad one.³

I take the world To be but as a Stage
Where net-masked men do play their
personage⁴

It so happens, moreover, that only one hundred and sixty lines further forward in *The Merchant of Venice* Portia comes back to a reconsideration of the sadness-mirth theme and characterizes one of her suitors, the County Palatine, as follows: "He hears merry tales and smiles not. I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher when he grows old, being so full of unmannerly sadness in his youth. I had rather be married to a death's head with a bone in his mouth." By this time, it is apparent that "the weeping philosopher's the well-known Elizabethan term descriptive of Heraclitus. These considerations, one of them in the very body of the debate over melancholy and mirth waged by Antonio and Gratiano, and the other almost immediately after it, make it appear likely that Shakespeare who wrote the original draft of *The Merchant of Venice* had read this same dialogue or some dialogue from which it came.

We can however conclude that Shakespeare was familiar with the Heraclitus-Democritus device for dallying with the theme of melancholy versus mirth, and employed it as literary men did before him and are doing to this day. He had certainly read the essay on the subject in Florio's Montaigne. But this would not go far toward explaining the first scene in *The Merchant of Venice*. His familiarity with the theme, however, as developed in the Dialogue would help to explain it.

References:

Shakespeare: A Survey (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1925).

Shakespearean Tragedy, P.122.

The Merchant of Venice, I, i, 77, 78.

Du Bartas, loc. cit. Among the many Elizabethan commonplaces which have been gathered in connection with Jacques' "All the world's a stage," it will appear upon examination that none of them so closely resembles the passage cited above from The Merchant of Venice as this one from Sylvester's Dialogue.

Du Bartas, His Devine Weekes and Workes(London, 1641), p. 281.

A Dialogue upon the Troubles Past: between Heraclitus and Democritus, The weeping and laughing philosophers.

.Sat. x. 34.

'Lea Sources et 'Evolution degasses is do Montaigne (Paris, 1908), II, 35.

'Walter Jerrold, "Charles Lamb and the Laughing Philosopher," Cornhill Magazine, LVII, 541 ff.

The Riddles of Heraclitus and Democritus, by T. Park, 1598.

How to cite this article?

Dr. B.Venkataramana¹& Dr. Prashant Luthra² " Antonio's Melancholy in The Merchant of Venice-A Critique" Research Journal Of English(RJOE)8(2),PP:82-85-2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.2.85