

Leah Smith

Dr. Gideon Burton

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### Human Condition, the Prime Directive, and the Bard's Connection with Star Trek

The writings of William Shakespeare have been considered some of the best writing in human history and are often associated with high culture. Star Trek in contrast has been derided as a cult following group within pop culture portrayed on mass media television. However, throughout the period of time Star Trek has aired, there have been many episodes with both blatant and covert references to Shakespeare's writings. Although Shakespeare may seem like a high culture phenomenon that has no place in a pop culture venue such as Star Trek, the connection between the two lies in the portrayal of the human condition and the hope for humanity that comes in recognizing ourselves in others.

The year 2016 marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death and this has created an even more overwhelming celebration of his work through performance and dramatization. 2016 also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Star Trek series. The alignment of these anniversaries is a coincidence but points to the significant connection that exists between the two. Shakespeare has always been a part of Star Trek and there are many episodes that contain references to plays, sonnets, characters, and Shakespeare in general. Many of these stem from the fact that many of the actors in Star Trek such as William Shatner, Patrick Stewart, Brent Spiner, and Christopher Plummer, were all Shakespearean actors in the theatre before they played these roles on the screen. Their influence with the show led to these episodes. Their experience with the world of Shakespeare brings depth to the series that many people would not expect from a

science-fiction television show. In addition to these overt references to Shakespeare, episodes will frequently explore many of the same themes that Shakespeare deals with.

Shakespeare addresses many themes throughout all of his writings that draw readers to his literature over and over. He often develops characters that demonstrate the complexity of human nature. Harold Bloom, a notable literary scholar, wrote an entire book on Shakespeare and his “invention of the human.” Bloom heralds Shakespeare as one of the greatest writers of all time and believes that he established human nature as we know it through his writing of personalities such as Falstaff and Hamlet. (Bloom 4). He builds on elements of human nature that are universal such as love, anger, lust, envy, and kindness. One of these uniquely human characteristics that pervades Shakespeare’s literature is the idea of empathy and tolerance or even finding connections with other by seeing ourselves in other people.

The underlying idea behind empathy is understanding others through shared experiences or seeing ourselves in others. One example of this idea of self-reflection is present in Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar.” Cassius expresses this sentiment to Brutus: “Since you know you cannot see yourself so well as by reflection I, your glass, will modestly discover to yourself that of yourself which you yet know not of” (1.2.69-72). He is expressing this very idea of being able to better understand ourselves better when we examine the people around us. Cassius offers to reveal Brutus’ flaws and personality to him since he cannot see himself except in a reflection. This addresses a problem that has existed for centuries in that we often cannot see ourselves clearly unless we see the same problems and shortcomings in others. We can also see this in a positive light in which we can see the effects that our good characteristics have on others. In this sense, not only do we come to know ourselves better but we know others better as well. We become more empathetic to others who are in situations that we cannot fully comprehend.

Another example is in the play of Sir Thomas More. This play is considered to be written by several hands including a notable section that is widely attributed to William Shakespeare. It chronicles a few events from the life of the Catholic martyr Thomas More. One of the most interesting passages is More's monologue on the uprising known as Ill May Day and how he quells the rioters. He appeals to their humanity by describing images of destitute families and children in hopes that they will have empathy. This is the "empathy that is found in Shakespearian treatments of the abuse of strangers" (Sokol 64). After his appeal for compassion, an apprentice replies "Faith, a says true. Let's do as we may be done by" (*Sir Thomas More*, 2.4.124). This is the golden rule—that in an empathetic moment, we see ourselves in others and realize that if we were in their shoes, we would seek tolerance as well as a fair and compassionate treatment despite any differences that may exist between us. Shakespeare demonstrates in his portrayals of tolerance both "the celebration of those who can transcend rancor arising from human differences, and the tragic disasters of those who are misguidedly or pathetically unable to do so" (Sokol xiv).

These disasters are meant to be warnings against those who are unable to rise above human differences or acquire empathy in their dealings with others. Although these are among the examples of intolerance in Shakespeare, "We should note that much of the intolerance portrayed by Shakespeare lacks a rationally justified cause, and therefore is (in comedies), or might have been (mainly in tragedies), overcome by means of a better will and understanding" (Sokol 170). It seems that generally Shakespeare was a proponent of empathetic tolerance and included this important theme in his writing, possibly in an attempt at some form of didactic literature and encouragement for those who would enjoy his plays.

There are many instances in which we can recognize the presence of empathy and self-reflection within Shakespeare's plays. In addition, we may examine the influence that Shakespeare has upon the empathy of those who view his plays. A study was done in which teenage school students attended plays, including one by Shakespeare. Their intellectual understanding of the plays was evaluated before and after (as well as against control groups in which they watched television performances or just read the plays) in addition to an evaluation of their ability to understand and recognize the emotions and thoughts of others. In the end, seeing a live performance of the play, "demonstrates that seeing plays is an effective way to teach academic content; increases student tolerance by providing exposure to a broader, more diverse world; and improves the ability of students to recognize what other people are thinking or feeling" (Greene et al).

This real world application of Shakespeare's ideas helps us to better understand why people are so drawn to Shakespeare and why it is so effective in bringing together large groups of people from different walks of life to enjoy the same literature performed on a stage. "They may indeed be 'old stories' but the works of William Shakespeare contain universal themes that resonate in both the Seventeenth and the Twenty First Centuries nonetheless. It does not matter if they are performed for the traditional stage or wrapped within the narrative of contemporary science fiction, they still offer a reflection of humanity in its purest sense" (Letizia). The timelessness of Shakespeare's themes is what makes it so believable that hundreds of years in the future, after another devastating World War, we will still be quoting Shakespeare. However, Star Trek does not just quote Shakespeare flippantly hoping that it will add some class to the science fiction show. "Rather than merely nodding in the Bard's direction, the series often involves the allusion in two types of action, ontological and ethical. Ontologically, Shakespeare supplies a

fundamental definition of human nature” (Reinheimer 46). We can begin to draw connections between the themes of Shakespeare’s plays that we have discussed and the themes the producers of Star Trek hoped to express in their show.

Because Shakespeare has always been a presence within the Star Trek Universe, there are strong connections between the portrayals of empathy and tolerance within Shakespeare as well as the culture of Star Trek. We hear a lot about Shakespeare throughout Star Trek because it seems that it will always be an important part of Earth culture. In a non-canonical history of Star Trek, it is revealed that a new edition of Shakespeare’s Works, *The New Britannia Complete Shakespeare*, was published just as the world was recovering from World War III. “This volume comes to symbolize the resiliency of humanity and its culture in the face of destruction. In other words, Shakespeare represents the human ability to overcome trials and tribulations” (“The Noble Heart of Star Trek”). It does not seem to be a very far stretch to say that taking this step of re-introducing the works of Shakespeare was an important step in reconnecting the different factions that had broken apart during times of war. The end of this war also meant a new beginning when “warp-drive” technology became available and suddenly the world began having contact with alien cultures. It was quickly discovered that guidance was needed.

One of the most important and most frequently discussed beliefs and guidelines in Star Trek is the prime directive. The Prime Directive was developed shortly after Starfleet, the series’ benevolent parent organization, began sending out starships with the goal of encountering other cultures from alien planets, something for which there was no precedent. It is “the embodiment of one of Starfleet’s most important ethical principles: noninterference with other cultures and civilizations” (“Prime Directive”). At first look this noninterference may seem to stem from selfish intentions of Starfleet and a desire to not share technology with races that are still

advancing towards traveling through the stars. However, with further inspection we can understand that this directive comes from the same idea that Shakespeare perpetuates in his plays—tolerance and a recognition that pieces of ourselves exist in others. Some of the civilizations that they encounter in space are not nearly as technologically advanced as Starfleet is, because of the experiences of earth and the understanding of the devastation that they can cause by interfering with cultures that are different from their own, the prime directive gives them guidance on not interfering with the development of these cultures. This comes from trying to understand what their culture must be like and empathy for them.

One example of this from the series “Star Trek: The Next Generation” is the episode “Darmok,” (Season 5 episode 2). In this episode the crew of the Enterprise rendezvous with an alien race called the Tamarians in order to try to establish communications between them and the Federation. All previous attempts had failed. They attempt to communicate but like previous occasions, neither party can understand what the other is saying. Suddenly both the captain of the other ship and Captain Picard are transported to the surface of the planet they have been orbiting. During the course of the episode they are able to realize that the Tamarian language is entirely based on metaphors that are derived from the experiences and mythology of their race. Picard and Dathon, the Tamarian captain, are in a situation where they have to fight a beast that lives on the planet. The Tamarian captain gives his life but not before Picard realizes that his hope was that by facing a common enemy, the two sides would finally be able to understand each other. As he lays dying, Dathon asks to hear a story from Earth. Picard tells him the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu at Uruk. Commander Riker later discovers Picard reading the Homeric Hymns and he explains to Riker that maybe becoming more familiar with their own mythology would help

them relate to the Tamarians. This episode demonstrates Picard's realization that an understanding of other cultures comes from seeing ourselves in their shoes.

Data, one of the characters from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is a perfect example of using Shakespeare in order to understand the emotions that make us human and allow us to connect with others. Data is an android and has a lot of trouble connecting with the humans and other species that he interacts with during the series because he does not have physical feelings such as pain and hunger but also does not experience human emotions such as sadness, envy, and anger. Captain Picard, generally a lover of Shakespeare, recommends that he reads and performs the Bard's plays in order to understand humanity better. Data seems intrigued by this and spends much of the series going through many events that increase his personal understanding of the human race, the race that created him and with which he has developed a rather important relationship. This falls in the ethical category of allusion and provides the show with its "most extended series of Shakespearean allusions [centered] around Commander Data... whom Shakespeare guides on a quest for human emotion" (Reinheimer 46).

In "The Defector," Data is performing the scene from *Henry V* where he is disguised as another soldier in order to go out among his men in the English camp at Agincourt and gauge their feelings about the war. Captain Picard interrupts his performance to praise his improvements. Data then tells him, "I plan to study the performances of Olivier, Branagh, Shapiro, and Kullnark." Picard is a little concerned at this idea and reminds him that "you're here to learn about the human condition and there is no better way of doing that than by embracing Shakespeare. But you must discover it through your own performance, not by imitating others." This is more difficult for Data than it is for any other person since he is an android and does not experience emotions. However, we can see through his example that throughout the series he

uses Shakespeare to understand the human condition and, therefore, more able to understand those around him through these performance of Shakespeare. By the end of the series, Data was performing Shakespeare including his own interpretations of the style in which it should be performed—definitely making progress towards understanding Shakespeare’s depictions of humans. He created his own set on the holodeck. However, he still struggles with understanding some of the human emotions and he asks Picard for insight on how to improve his performance. Data points out that there is a tragic aspect to the character in this scene (*The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1). Picard agrees, “Yes, but there’s a certain expectancy too. A hopefulness about the future. You see, Shakespeare enjoyed mixing opposites. The past and the future. Hope and despair” (Berman, “Emergence”). We can see progress throughout the series of Data coming to understand human emotions despite the fact that he is still an android and not fully capable of feeling these emotions for himself. Shakespeare’s plays were Data’s aid in understanding the human race to the most of his capabilities.

The expansion of the human mind to a greater understanding of the universe is the entire message that Star Trek promotes. In the final episode of the Next Generation series, Captain Picard faces Q, a member of an even more intelligent species that has spent the entirety of the television show trying to evaluate if the human race is capable of higher thought. In the final episode, Q tells Picard, “We wanted to see if you had the ability to expand your mind and your horizons...for that one fraction of a second, you were open to options you had never considered. That is the exploration that awaits you. Not mapping stars and studying nebulae, but charting the unknowable possibilities of existence” (Berman, “All Good Things”).

This is not only the message of the entire Star Trek franchise, but it is also the message of Shakespeare. Both give us a medium through which we can expand our mind to not only

comprehend our own emotions and existence, but that of other cultures, people, and groups with which we would not have connected with otherwise. The Prime Directive is driven by a certain kind of empathy in trying to place ourselves in the shoes of other cultures. Shakespeare's plays encourage this mentality of empathy where we look at how we would feel in the place of another and contains the same themes as many of the episodes of Star Trek as the crews of the starships encounter other cultures and worlds out among the unknown.

Each alien culture to which we are introduced on Star Trek is symbolic of a different aspect of humanity such as logic, greed, empathy, piety, and violence. These cultures force the crew of the Enterprise and, by extension, the audience to confront situations from new perspectives. Just like Shakespeare, Star Trek teaches that lesson that by knowing others we can know ourselves ("The Klingon Hamlet"). Shakespeare has lived on for hundreds of years and still manages to touch many lives today. With this shared theme of empathy and tolerance for other cultures, it seems like Star Trek might just be able to last far into the future as well.

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