

What did Shakespeare understand about the human mind?

By Neema Parvini

April 23, 2016 marks the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death. He remains, and by some distance, the most discussed and critically analysed writer in any language. He is also easily the most performed playwright. Shakespeare wrote widely about many different human situations and his dramatic concerns centred on human beings.

In the past few decades, literary theorists have been looking at literature and finding ideology there. The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser told us that the concept of a natural self is a bourgeois delusion, rather, we are the subjects of ideologies – produced and interpellated by them.[1] Michel Foucault, once Althusser's student, described in forensic detail how concepts that are routinely thought of as being 'natural' are in fact social and cultural constructions – even those concepts that have been 'proven' by science.[2] Jean-François Lyotard told us that we should distrust *all* meta-narratives – that is stories that explain all the other stories – the Bible is one such meta-narrative, science is another.[3] And, later, Judith Butler told us that gender behaviours, rather than being biologically-predetermined, are in fact learned and performative.[4] Although some were resistant at first, these ideas came to sweep the field of literary studies, especially in the 1980s. By the end of that decade, there is little surprise that we find a very different Shakespeare: no longer universal, no longer unknowable, and no longer 'for all time', but rather a product very specifically of the late 1590s and early 1600s, whose plays speak primarily to the ideological concerns of their immediate circumstances. To make matters worse – and you can find the argument summarised in an article by Emer O'Toole that appeared in the Guardian[5] – Shakespeare, it turned out, like his contemporaries, was sexist, racist, royalist, and colonialist. His plays have not endured through their universality, but rather they have been forced onto us by centuries of cultural imperialism, and policed by various education systems. Perhaps the moment is passing in the academy, but O'Toole still speaks for a significant number of my colleagues.

However, there has been pushback and many scholars have defended Shakespeare's work. People have not only argued that Shakespeare was a sexist, a racist, and so on, but also that he's a proto-feminist, a proto-Marxist, a proto-Freudian, a champion of freedom, a Romantic, a cynic, a philosopher, a psychologist – the list might go on for pages.

My view is that these sorts of approaches both wilfully ignore what the findings of the cognitive sciences and crucially miss what makes Shakespeare special as a writer. Before literary theory deconstructed how we read books in the 1960s, Shakespeare was thought to speak a universal language. Shakespeare's fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, once famously eulogised that 'He was not of an age, but for all time!'[6] For those earlier critics, Shakespeare tapped into innate, unchangeable and universal human traits and characteristics that his

audiences, trans-historically and trans-culturally, recognise. For them, the pain of *King Lear*, a man who through his own folly suffers at the hands of his daughters, is also our pain.

I contend that a key reason for this is because Shakespeare possessed an extraordinary ability to understand human thought processes from 'the inside out'. His characters are not merely archetypes or products of generic convention, they are complex simulations of thinking and feeling in action. And in these simulations, I believe, in a very real and obvious way, Shakespeare captures fundamental concepts about the way our minds work that have since been demonstrated by psychologists and outlined in two popular books: Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), and Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* (2012). In the way that he wrote characters, Shakespeare seems to have understood, implicitly, what modern psychology has found: that human beings have a habit of making decisions based more on their intuitions and emotions than on their cognitive reasoning. As a corollary, I believe that this aspect of human thinking is broadly speaking transhistorical; that is a universal.

One reason why so many books and articles have been written about his plays is because they have a seemingly endless capacity to be re-interpreted. This is partly because Shakespeare writes primarily through the vehicle of his characters and cannot be reduced to the viewpoints and attitudes of any one of them. So while Shylock is much abused by the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, he is also given this extraordinary speech about the shared humanity of Christians and Jews:

I am a Jew. Hath
not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? 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? (3.1.60-9)

Although he gives us seemingly naked misogyny in the infamous denouement of *Taming of the Shrew*, in which the previously feisty Kate submits to Petruchio by putting her hand under his foot, he also gives us this remarkable speech by Emilia near the end of *Othello*:

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? (4.3.82-97)

Here we find the same logic of a shared humanity as in the Shylock speech, men and women might have differences, but they have many more similarities. There are similar sentiments in *Richard II*:

For you have but mistook me all this while.
I live with bread, like you; feel want,
Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king? (3.2.169-73)

Here, a vain and pompous king – who believes fully in the Divine Right of Kings, that many have argued that Shakespeare too advocated – comes to recognise that he has the same basic needs and wants as his subjects. In other words, stripped of ‘ceremonious duty’, he is just a man.

However, it would be a mistake to look at these three speeches and draw the conclusion that Shakespeare, therefore, must have been a defender of Jews, a champion for women’s rights or a class crusader. They are his words, but they are spoken by characters making speeches at crucial moments in those respective plays. I have often joked with students that if Shakespeare had written George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, it would not be entirely clear to us whether he was on Winston’s side or Big Brother’s. He would likely give Winston some amazing speeches about freedom, but he’d give O’Brien some equally compelling arguments about the need for total order – not that Orwell didn’t (one thinks of ‘If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — for ever’), but there is no real doubt that Orwell stood against totalitarianism.[7] With Shakespeare, one might just as easily make the contradictory arguments that he was a freedom fighter and that he was a totalitarian (and in fact, I could point you to many books that do one or the other). Shakespeare does not give us political conviction, but rather unflinching human understanding. It does not matter if the human being happens to be a tyrant like Richard III or a psychotic murderer like Macbeth, Shakespeare attempts to understand them from the ‘inside out’. The dramatist’s key facet is empathy without political or moral judgement.

In short, he understands people: how they think and feel; and how, so frequently in life, they come up short of their social, ideological and religious expectations. Like Kahneman, he can see that our thinking is so often lazy, short-sighted, and illogical. He seems, implicitly, to have understood heuristics, which is the study of how people think, and gives us many examples of these thought processes in action. I will pick out six heuristics here that Shakespeare depicts:

1. **Confirmation bias.** In *Othello*, many commentators have questioned the plausibility of Othello’s readiness to accept Cassio’s possession of the handkerchief as proof of Desdemona’s infidelity. Why does he not pause to question his assumptions? Why does he not give her the benefit of the doubt? Why does he come to his conclusion so quickly and easily? Iago himself provides the answer: ‘Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ’ (3.3.322-324). It is a classic example of confirmation bias: as Haidt might say, Othello’s intuitive elephant has leaned

rather strongly towards believing that Desdemona has been unfaithful, and his rider, scrambling for reasons to justify this hunch, readily points to the handkerchief as proof;[8] in this way his intuition becomes a firm belief. Iago, and by implication Shakespeare himself, understood all too readily how confirmation bias can be manipulated.

2. **Othello** also gives us some excellent examples of priming when Iago is persuading Roderigo not to drown himself after his hopes of wooing Desdemona have been dashed. He repeats the phrase 'Put money in thy purse' (1.3.339-40) five times and uses the word 'money' ten times in total in two short speeches. Iago's aim is for Roderigo to sell his lands, nominally to fund a trip to Cyprus where he can follow Othello and Desdemona, but actually, of course, to line Iago's own pockets. The technique works. Roderigo forgets about drowning himself and does as Iago urges: 'I am changed: I'll go sell all my land.' (1.3.382) As we have seen, Iago is a master at abusing the heuristics and biases of others. Of course, later in the play, he uses priming effects again to more devastating results.
3. **The Availability Heuristic.** [9] In *Much Ado About Nothing* when Antonio and Leonato assume that Claudio's slander of Hero as he jilted her at the altar of their wedding is the cause of her apparent death – this is the first thing that comes to their minds and they jump to the conclusion that it must be the cause. We might also think of the moment in *Macbeth* when Macbeth is granted the title of Thane of Cawdor and jumps to the conclusion that the witches' prophecy must be true – the availability of the information leads him to believe, erroneously or otherwise, that it is also the cause of the event.
4. **Framing and the Anchoring Effect.** In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Portia frames the casket test to each of her suitors. Each one is given a slightly different context for the test: she presents it to the Prince of Morocco as an opportunity for him to make her 'yield' to him and 'win' her (2.1.18-19) and so he offers his answer in terms of his past conquests. When it is the Prince of Aragon's turn, Portia presents the test as a form of 'hazard' (2.9.18), which the suitor then repeats twice and his answer focuses on his own potential losses in choosing wrongly. Finally, when Bassanio comes to take the test – and Portia clearly prefers him from the get-go – she presents it as an opportunity for him to show his love to her: 'I am lock'd in one of them: / If you do love me, you will find me out' (3.2.40-1). Accordingly, Bassanio focuses his answer on Portia herself. In this way Portia – in a manner that would not be alien to Kahneman and Tversky – subtly employs narrow framing to influence the outcome of her casket test.
5. **Loss Aversion.** In *Measure for Measure* when Lucio is persuading Isabella to plead with Angelo for him to pardon Claudio's life. Isabella is initially reluctant to act because, having limited power as an apprentice nun, she doubts her ability to change Angelo's mind and perhaps does not want to risk drawing further ire from him. However, Lucio frames Isabella's choice in terms of potential gain and certain loss: 'Our doubts are traitors / And make us lose the good we oft might win / By fearing to attempt.' (1.4.84-6). Isabella's choice is now between acting and potentially gaining, or not acting

and certainly losing. Even though Lucio is trying to get Isabella to take a risk, he appeals to her loss aversion, and this is enough to persuade her to act.

6. **The Sunk-cost Heuristic.** In *Macbeth*, once Macbeth has already killed Duncan, he sees himself as being too invested in a murderous course of action to turn back:

For mine own good,
All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er (3.4.134-7)

In *Macbeth* we witness the lethal combination of the availability heuristic (Macbeth believing the witch's prophecy based on thin evidence), which manifests itself as self-fulfilling, and the sunk-cost heuristic which railroads him on a single-minded path of destruction.

Within the literary academy evolutionary approaches to literature are still seen as controversial, a threat to the political and ideological assumptions of the theory of the 1960s, which are broadly-speaking those described in Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*.^[10] Attempts to apply Darwin to literature directly have often been summarily dismissed as being crude or reductive. It is my hope that recognising these heuristics at work in Shakespeare's plays can bring us one step closer to recognising also that we are instinctual creatures and that human nature does, after all, exist.

I want to suggest in closing that Shakespeare's strength as a writer and storyteller is in precisely these insights into human thinking that I've been talking about. His focus is not only on crafting characters, but on simulating their thought *processes*. This focus on *process* – that is, on how a character progresses in a line of thinking – is true of just about any Shakespeare play that you care to name, but it is especially true in the tragedies, in which the playwright seems unusually concerned with the internal generation – or rather degeneration – of his protagonists. We watch Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Macbeth, in different ways, drive themselves mad. The narrative thread of each play concerns itself less with what each of them *does*, but rather with what each of them *thinks*. And in each of those plays, we trace the thought processes not only of protagonists, but also of other characters too: Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Edgar, Gloucester, Iago, Emilia, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Macduff, and so on. As we have seen, even a seemingly minor character such as Roderigo in *Othello* goes through moments of apparent internal progression. Now, even though Roderigo by Shakespearean standards is a thin character, and a stock buffoon, we *still* watch him *thinking through* Iago's proposition, we watch him being won around. And this, it seems to me, is extremely characteristic of Shakespearean thinking. We understand the thought process by *thinking through* a character's thought processes. And – in that process – we also come to think about ourselves.

References

- [1] See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. Fredric Jameson, trans. Ben Brewster (1971; rpr. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), pp. 85-126.
- [2] Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; London: Routledge, 2002).
- [3] Jean- François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- [4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
- [5] Emer O'Toole, 'Shakespeare, Universal? No, It's Cultural Imperialism', *The Guardian*, May 21st 2012.
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/21/shakespeare-universal-cultural-imperialism>.
- [6] Ben Jonson, 'To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us', in *The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. Barry Cornwall (London: Dover Street), p. 693.
- [7] George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (1949; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), p. 575.
- [8] For the elephant and rider metaphor see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Penguin, 2012), p. 54.
- [9] See Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability', *Cognitive Psychology*, 4 (1973), 207-32. See also, Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York and London: Penguin, 2011), p. 131.
- [10] See Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Behaviour* (New York and London: Penguin, 2002).

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