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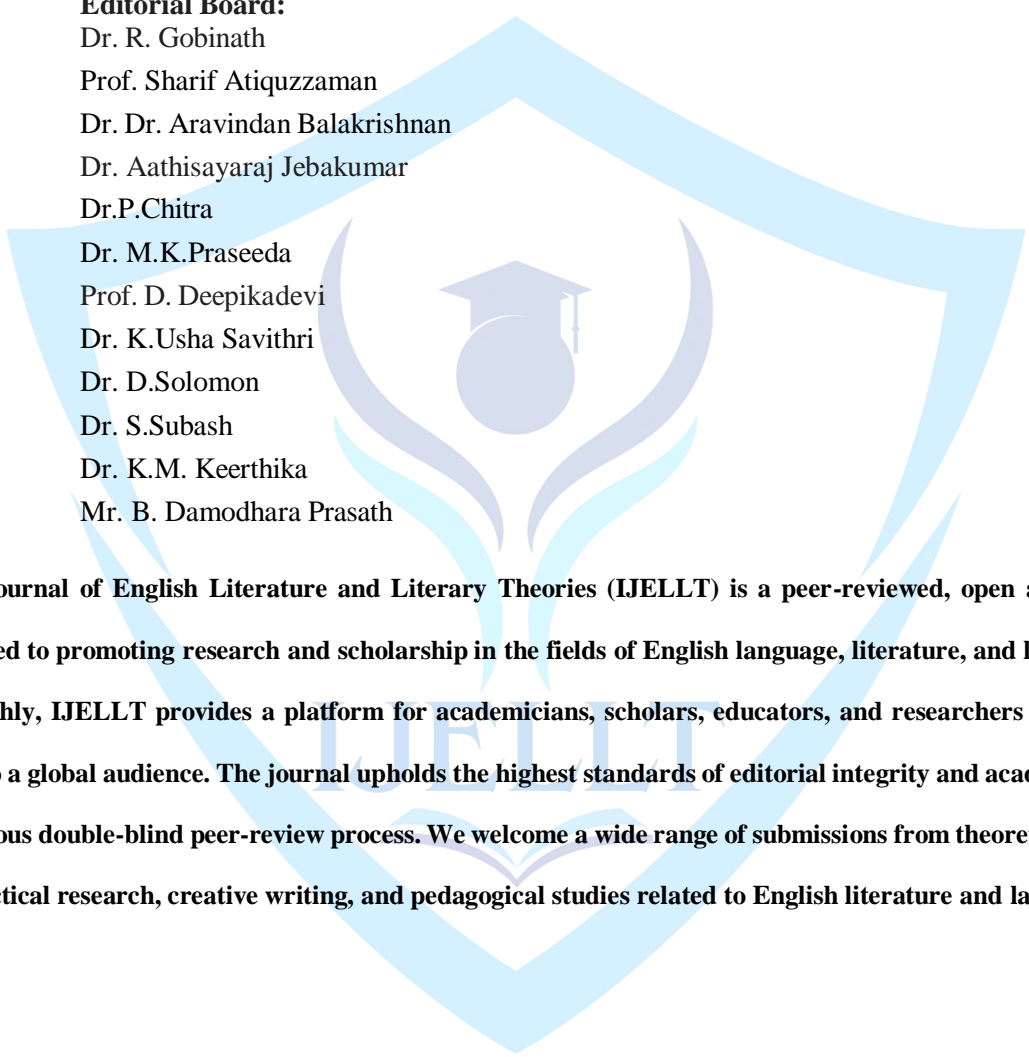
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Fortune's Wheel and the Psychology of Reversal: Boethius, the Cosmological Account of Vicissitude, and Shakespeare's Internalization of Fortune in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract: This paper argues that one of the most philosophically consequential dimensions of the transformation from medieval morality drama to Shakespearean theatre is the displacement of the Boethian cosmological account of vicissitude — in which the reversals of human fortune are governed by the arbitrary turning of Fortune's Wheel, a cosmic mechanism operating independently of individual character, choice, or action — by a psychological account in which reversal is produced from within, as the consequence of specific choices, specific errors, and specific social conditions that are inseparable from the character of the individual who undergoes them. Drawing on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524 CE), the morality play tradition's theological extension of the Boethian framework, Aristotle's concept of *peripeteia* (reversal) in the *Poetics*, and A. C. Bradley's account of Shakespearean characterization, the paper traces the philosophical shift from Fortune-as-external-cosmic-force to character-as-the-agent-of-one's-own-destiny that *The Merchant of Venice* most fully enacts. Shylock's catastrophic reversal in the trial scene is not the turn of Fortune's Wheel; it is the consequence of specific choices, specific social conditions, and a specific psychology of accumulated injury and misdirected desire that Shakespeare constructs with the particularity and the moral ambiguity that the cosmological framework could neither accommodate nor produce. The paper concludes that the replacement of cosmological with psychological causation is among the most philosophically rich dimensions of the transformation from allegorical to psychological drama, and that the Boethian inheritance is the clearest intellectual background against which that transformation can be measured.

Keywords: Boethius, Fortune's Wheel, *peripeteia*, cosmological reversal, psychological causation, *Everyman*, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, Bradley, medieval cosmology, vicissitude.

The Two Accounts of Why Things Go Wrong

There are, at the most fundamental level of philosophical analysis, two fundamentally different accounts of why the great reversals of human life — the movements from prosperity to ruin, from security to catastrophe, from hope to despair — occur. The first account is cosmological: the reversals of human fortune are the product of external forces — Fortune, Providence, fate, the turning of the stars — that operate above and beyond the individual's will and are not caused by the individual's specific choices, errors, or character. The second account is psychological: the reversals are produced from within, as the consequence of the specific choices, the specific temperamental dispositions, and the specific accumulated experiences of the individual who undergoes them. These two accounts are not merely different ways of describing the same events; they are different understandings of what the human individual is, what relationship the individual bears to the world, and what kind of drama is appropriate to representing the reversals that constitute the most significant events of a human life.

The medieval intellectual tradition, shaped above all by Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, favoured the cosmological account. Fortune's Wheel — that central image of the *Consolation*, in which Fortune herself declares that inconstancy is her very essence and the turning of the wheel her perpetual game — provided the conceptual framework through which medieval culture understood the experience of reversal and loss. The morality play, whose central subject was the approach of death and the requirement of spiritual preparation, extended this Boethian framework in a specifically theological direction: the vicissitudes of worldly life — the failure of friendship, the worthlessness of wealth, the transience of beauty and strength — were not the product of Fortune's arbitrary wheel but the expression of a providential order designed to direct the human soul away from worldly attachment and towards the eternal goods that Fortune cannot touch.

Shakespeare's drama in *The Merchant of Venice* offers a different account of its characters' reversals — one in which the catastrophe that overtakes Shylock is not the turn of Fortune's Wheel or the expression of a providential plan but the product of specific choices made by a specific person in a specific social situation, with consequences that neither Fortune nor Providence guarantees and that the play's dramatic structure presents as genuinely uncertain until they occur. This replacement of cosmological with psychological causation is the philosophical dimension of the transformation from allegorical to psychological drama that has received the least sustained critical attention, and it is the dimension that this paper addresses.

Boethius and the Medieval Account of Fortune

Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* was, for the entire medieval period and well into the Renaissance, among the most widely read philosophical works in the Western tradition. Written in the months between Boethius's imprisonment and his execution in 524 CE, the *Consolation* offered, in the form of a dialogue between the imprisoned Boethius and the personification of Philosophy, a comprehensive account of the relationship between human happiness, worldly goods, and the forces of Fortune that govern the worldly sphere. The work's central philosophical argument was that the goods of Fortune — wealth, power, fame, beauty, social status — are not genuine goods because they are not under the rational agent's control: Fortune can give them and Fortune can take them away, and any happiness that depends on them is perpetually vulnerable to the arbitrary turning of her wheel.

Boethius presented Fortune's own testimony in terms that became one of the most cited passages in the medieval literary tradition: "Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn the wheel in its ever-changing circle, glad to see the high come down and the low ascend." The image crystallized a cultural understanding of vicissitude that dominated medieval thinking about the movements of human fortune: reversal is the product of an external, cosmological force — arbitrary, impersonal, and entirely independent of the individual's merit, virtue, or character. The good and the wicked are subject alike to Fortune's wheel; its turning bears no necessary relationship to the moral worth of those it elevates and destroys. What it demands of the wise person is not the prevention of reversal — which is, by definition, beyond human power — but the philosophical detachment from worldly goods that renders Fortune's turning philosophically harmless: "If you are in possession of yourself you will possess something you would never wish to lose and something Fortune could never take away."

C. S. Lewis, whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the medieval intellectual tradition gives him unusual authority in this area, observed in *The Discarded Image* (1964) that the Boethian conception of Fortune was not, for medieval readers, a pessimistic doctrine but a consolatory one: it offered the philosophical framework through which the suffering individual could understand and accept the reversal of their fortunes without being destroyed by it. The wheel turns, the high fall and the low rise, not because justice has been violated or virtue rewarded and punished inconsistently, but because worldly goods are simply not the kind of goods that can be securely possessed. The philosophical response is not rage or despair but the recognition that the goods Fortune controls were never truly one's own to begin with.

The Boethian Inheritance in the Morality Play

The morality play inherited the Boethian framework of Fortune and extended it in a specifically Christian theological direction that gave the vicissitudes of worldly life a providential rather than merely cosmological significance. The goods that Fortune controls — Fellowship, Goods, the physical capacities of Beauty and Strength — are not, in *Everyman*, simply the objects of a cosmological mechanism that turns without regard for individual merit; they are the occasions for demonstrating a theological truth about the proper orientation of the Christian soul. Their transience is not merely a fact about the operation of Fortune's Wheel; it is a lesson about the spiritual worthlessness of worldly attachment, the indispensability of eternal goods over temporal ones, and the necessity of the soul's reorientation from the world to God.

Wickham observes that the morality play reflected a world in which "divine authority was the governing principle and human agency was subordinate to the purposes of God" (283), and the morality play's treatment of Fortune reflects this directly: the reversals that *Everyman* undergoes are not the product of Fortune's arbitrary wheel but of a providential order designed to accomplish the soul's salvation by stripping away the worldly attachments that prevent its proper orientation towards the divine. When Fellowship abandons *Everyman*, when Goods refuses to accompany him, when Strength and Beauty and Discretion withdraw at the approach of death, these are not the turns of Fortune's Wheel but the successive demonstrations of a theological argument: that worldly goods are spiritually worthless, that only virtuous action endures, and that the soul's welfare depends on its recognition of this truth and its response in repentance and sacramental preparation.

The philosophical consequence of this theological extension of the Boethian framework is that the reversals staged in the morality play are cosmologically or providentially caused rather than psychologically generated. *Everyman* does not bring his predicament upon himself through specific choices, errors of judgment, or the operation of a complex psychology of desire and self-deception; he is summoned to account by God because his worldly conduct has reflected the general human tendency towards worldly attachment that theology identifies as spiritually dangerous. The reversal he undergoes — from worldly security to the stripping away of everything worldly — is not the consequence of a specific psychological trajectory but the expression of the providential order that governs the drama. This is the cosmological account of reversal in its most fully developed theatrical form, and it is the account that Shakespeare's psychological drama displaces.

Aristotle's Peripeteia and the Psychological Causation of Reversal

The alternative to the Boethian cosmological account of reversal was provided by Aristotle's analysis of peripeteia in the *Poetics*. Aristotle defined peripeteia — the reversal of fortune that is central to complex tragic plotting — not as the product of an external cosmological force but as the logical consequence of the dramatic action itself: "a change of the actions to the opposite in the way we have described, and that, as we say, in accordance with probability or necessity" (*Poetics* 1452a). The reversal, for Aristotle, must arise from the plot's own internal logic — from the specific choices and errors of the dramatic figures, and from the specific social and moral pressures that those choices and errors have set in motion. Fortune has no place in the Aristotelian account of peripeteia; the reversal is the product of character in interaction with circumstance, not the turn of an external wheel.

Renaissance humanists, recovering the *Poetics* through the translations and commentaries of Italian scholars in the sixteenth century, found in Aristotle's account of peripeteia an intellectual resource for exactly the kind of dramatic reversal that Shakespeare was developing: reversal that was psychologically grounded, causally produced from within the dramatic action, and inseparable from the specific character and choices of the figure who undergoes it. Aristotle's analysis of the relationship between hamartia (error of judgment) and peripeteia (reversal) provided the theoretical vocabulary for a kind of drama in which the reversal was not arbitrary — not the turn of Fortune's Wheel — but specifically caused, the product of specific errors made by specific persons in specific situations.

The connection between the Aristotelian account of reversal and Shakespeare's dramatic practice is not merely theoretical; it is textually demonstrable in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock's reversal — his movement from creditor pressing a seemingly invincible legal claim to debtor stripped of his wealth, his legal remedy, and his religious identity — is not the product of Fortune's arbitrary wheel. It is the consequence of specific choices: his decision to press the bond to its literal conclusion against the advice of those who offered him financial alternatives; his decision to invoke the law of Venice as the instrument of his equality in a social world that was prepared to use that same law against him the moment he appeared to have exceeded his permitted role; his error in not recognizing, until too late, that the technical provisions of Venetian law, applied with the same literalism he was insisting on, could be turned against him with a devastating effectiveness. These are Aristotelian errors — failures of practical judgment in conditions of social and legal complexity — not the turns of an external cosmological wheel.

Shylock's Reversal: Psychological Causation and Its Moral Complexity

The trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice* is the central instance of dramatic reversal in the play, and its construction reveals, with unusual philosophical clarity, how thoroughly Shakespeare has replaced the Boethian cosmological account of vicissitude with a psychological account. Shylock enters the scene in what appears to be a position of invincible legal strength: his bond is formally valid, the Duke himself has acknowledged that the law of Venice cannot set aside its provisions without damage to the state's commercial reputation, and the series of financial offers made by Bassanio has been refused. "I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond" (IV.i.202-203): the words express the confidence of a man who has done his legal and commercial homework and who has every reason to believe that the formal apparatus of the law is on his side.

The reversal from this position — from legally invincible creditor to destroyed debtor — is stunning in its swiftness, and the Boethian interpretation might seem to suggest itself immediately: Fortune, who lifted Shylock to the apex of the wheel in that moment of apparent legal triumph, has now spun him to the lowest point. But the Boethian interpretation is precisely what the play's dramatic construction refuses. The reversal is not the product of an arbitrary cosmological mechanism; it is the product of a specific psychological condition — Shylock's absolute rigidity in insisting on the literal terms of the bond — that Shakespeare has been constructing throughout the play, and that the trial scene's dramatic action reveals as simultaneously the expression of his most genuine demand and the instrument of his destruction.

A.C. Bradley observed that the figures of Shakespeare's plays are driven by "powerful emotions, moral dilemmas, and temperamental dispositions that develop and reveal themselves over the course of the dramatic action" (12). The temperamental disposition that produces Shylock's reversal is not a malfunction that Fortune has arbitrarily introduced into his situation; it is a quality — an absolute insistence on the letter of the law, a refusal of the flexibility that his opponents' social position allows them to exercise — that the play has been developing since his first appearance. The reversal is, in Aristotelian terms, the *peripeteia* that follows necessarily from the *hamartia*: the error of judgment in pressing a legal claim beyond the point of practical wisdom, made under conditions of social pressure and accumulated psychological injury that the play has carefully and sympathetically constructed. It is caused, not arbitrary; psychological, not cosmological. Stephen Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning is relevant here, because the failure that produces Shylock's reversal is, in part, a failure of self-fashioning — a failure to fashion the social persona that the Venetian legal world required of him in that moment, a rigid adherence to a mode of social identity (the creditor demanding his due) that the court was prepared to exploit with a technical precision Shylock had not anticipated. He fashions himself as the creditor seeking legal satisfaction; the court refashions him as the alien who has attempted the life of a Venetian citizen. The reversal is not Fortune's work; it is the product of a specific interaction between Shylock's self-fashioning and the social world's counter-fashioning of his identity.

Everyman's Reversal and Its Providential Character

The contrast between Shylock's psychologically caused reversal and Everyman's providentially governed one illuminates with particular clarity what distinguishes the Shakespearean from the morality play account of vicissitude. Everyman's central dramatic experience is a series of reversals — each encounter with a worldly companion that promises support and then withdraws constitutes a small reversal, and the sequence culminates in the great reversal of death's approach, which transforms Everyman's worldly confidence into spiritual desolation. But these reversals are not psychologically caused in the sense that Shylock's is. Everyman does not bring his predicament upon himself through a specific error of judgment or a specific temperamental failing; he is summoned to account by God because his condition — the general human tendency towards worldly attachment — is representative of the universal moral situation of all Christian souls.

M. H. Abrams observes that allegorical characters operate "simultaneously on two levels of meaning: the literal and the symbolic" (5), and the reversals in *Everyman* operate at the symbolic level with perfect consistency: each withdrawal by a worldly companion is not a specific event caused by Everyman's specific conduct but a symbolic demonstration of a universal theological truth. Fellowship abandons Everyman not because of anything specific Everyman has done to Fellowship but because worldly friendship, by its nature as a category of worldly attachment, cannot endure the demands that mortality places upon it. The cause of the reversal is categorical, not individual; theological, not psychological.

The providential framework that governs Everyman's reversals provides them with a guaranteed outcome that Shylock's psychologically caused reversal conspicuously lacks. Everyman's repentance will be accepted; the sacrament will strengthen Good Deeds; the soul will be received into grace. The reversals are not Fortune's arbitrary turnings but the stages of a providential plan whose end is assured. E. K. Chambers observed that the morality play "served a vital function in communicating moral and theological ideas to ordinary audiences" (2: 152), and the theological idea communicated through Everyman's reversals is precisely this: that the loss of worldly goods is not the work of Fortune but of Providence, designed to redirect the soul towards the eternal goods that alone can satisfy it. This providential guarantee removes from the morality play's reversals the moral ambiguity and the genuine uncertainty that Aristotle identified as the marks of the most powerful dramatic peripeteia, and that Shakespeare's drama fully realizes in the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Cultural Transition: From Rota Fortunae to Psychological Interiority

The transition from the Boethian cosmological account of Fortune to the Shakespearean psychological account of reversal is not simply a change in dramatic technique; it is a change in the fundamental assumptions about what causes the most significant events of a human life — a change that corresponds directly to the broader intellectual transition from a theocentric to an anthropocentric understanding of the forces that govern human existence. In the Boethian framework, the most significant events of a human life — rise and fall, prosperity and ruin, the arrival of death — are governed by forces external to the individual: Fortune's Wheel, Providence, fate. The individual is subject to these forces and cannot control them; what he can control is his philosophical response to them — his willingness to detach from the worldly goods that Fortune controls and to seek the inner goods that Fortune cannot touch.

The humanist recovery of the Aristotelian account of reversal — in which peripeteia is the product of the dramatic figure's own hamartia, arising from the internal logic of the plot rather than from an external cosmological mechanism — provided a new intellectual framework for understanding why human lives go wrong. The reversals of human existence are not the turns of Fortune's Wheel; they are the consequences of specific choices, specific errors of judgment, specific failures of practical wisdom in the face of specific social and moral pressures. This account places the causation of reversal firmly within the individual and the individual's interaction with specific social conditions, and it demands a dramatic mode capable of representing that interior causation — a mode in which the psychological depth of the dramatic figure is not incidental to the plot but constitutive of it, because the plot's reversals arise from the figure's psychology rather than from an external cosmological force.

Burckhardt's argument in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* that the Renaissance constituted "the discovery of the individual" (143) captures, from the cultural-historical perspective, the same transition that this paper has been tracing from the philosophical one. The discovery of the individual is, in part, the discovery that the individual's psychology — specific temperament, specific history, specific patterns of desire and error — is the primary cause of the significant events of a life, including its reversals. This discovery is what makes Shakespeare's drama philosophically necessary: a drama in which the characters' specific psychological trajectories produce their specific reversals, not through the turn of Fortune's Wheel but through the causal logic of human character in interaction with human circumstances.

The Consolation That Drama Cannot Provide

One final philosophical dimension of the comparison between the Boethian framework and Shakespeare's psychological account of reversal deserves attention. Boethius's *Consolation* offered its readers — and, through the morality play tradition, its theatrical audiences — the consolation of philosophical detachment: the assurance that Fortune's goods are not genuine goods, that their loss does not constitute genuine harm, and that the wise person who possesses the inner goods of reason and virtue is beyond Fortune's reach. This is a genuine consolation, and its power through centuries of reading and influence testifies to the depth of the human need it addresses. The morality play extended this consolation into the theological register: Everyman's reversals, properly understood, are not harm but benefit — the stripping away of worldly attachments that were preventing the soul's proper orientation towards the eternal goods that death cannot touch.

Shakespeare's drama offers no such consolation. Shylock's reversal in the trial scene is not the turn of Fortune's Wheel, philosophically harmless to the individual who possesses genuine inner goods; it is the destruction of a particular person in a particular social world, and the goods he loses — his legal remedy, his wealth, his religious identity — are not the insubstantial goods of Fortune but the constitutive elements of a specific human life and a specific human dignity. The play does not offer the philosophical consolation that Boethius's framework made available, because the psychological account of reversal that it employs does not carry within it the philosophical resources for detachment that the cosmological account provided. If the reversal is psychologically caused — if it is the consequence of Shylock's specific choices and specific errors in a specific social world — then the philosophical response to it cannot be detachment from worldly goods but the more demanding response of moral reckoning: the recognition that the outcome the play presents is both the consequence of Shylock's choices and the expression of a social world that made those choices and their catastrophic consequences almost inevitable.

The morality play consoled its audience; Shakespeare's drama troubled his. The Boethian tradition provided the intellectual resources for consolation through the distinction between genuine and apparent goods; the Aristotelian-humanist tradition of psychological causation provided the intellectual resources for a drama that troubled its audience by making the causes of reversal simultaneously comprehensible and disturbing, simultaneously the product of individual error and the expression of social injustice. The distance between these two dramatic experiences — between the consolation of the morality play and the troubling of Shakespeare's theatre — is the distance between the cosmological and the psychological accounts of why things go wrong, and it is one of the most philosophically significant distances in the history of English drama.

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