

# Ends and means



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The Oxford English Dictionary defines the prefix “ sub-” to be “ of something immaterial, a quality, state, etc,” listing the root word “ plot” as a term often associated with this definition. Therefore, to be a subplot means to be an immaterial plot, in light of this interpretation. This however is not the case with Shakespeare’s plays. In Shakespeare’s eyes, the subplot does not subvert, undermine, or remain immaterial to the principal plot, but rather it is wholly connected with and emphasizes it. Although for theatrical performances, they serve a practical purpose for costume changes and explanation of the plot, Shakespeare’s subplots serve a much higher calling. Throughout his historical, comedic, and tragic plays, Shakespeare manipulates the subplot not only to reflect the principle plot but also to attest to a greater truth-he illustrates that although the deeds are essentially the identical, the motivations behind those actions make the deed itself honorable or dishonorable. The Henry V principle and subplot focus on the theme of and corruption behind waging war, revealed in the contrast between King Henry V’s actions in war versus those of Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol. Likewise, Much Ado about Nothing reveals that the art of deception can also be slanted for good or evil purposes, as revealed in the scheme against Beatrice and Benedict and the conspiracy against Hero and Claudio, respectively. King Lear also reveals that the motivation determines the morality of a deed, depicted in the daughters’ goals in obtaining Lear’s land by fighting among each other. Although the principle plot and subplots are identical in deed, they are skewed by the motivation behind the actual act. Just war. Moral war. These phrases are staples in political vocabulary in modern days. Shakespeare himself dealt with these concepts while writing Henry V. What does it mean to fight a moral war? Can there ever really be

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morality in war? Is “ war crime” just a redundant phrase? In examining the actions of several characters in this play concerning England’s war with France, the concept of morality and war come to light. King Henry V, the former roguish Prince Hal, seems to approach this war with every aim of maintaining justice. Although he is duped by the Archbishop into the actual pursuit of the war, he tries his best to verify that he has just cause by pointedly asking the evidence to support his aim. Furthermore, Henry establishes a very strict code of honor for his men to follow: the French citizens and their property are to be treated with complete respect. Although he conquers and takes control of land that does not belong to him, he does so with at least some semblance of respect for the French. Lower down on the military hierarchy exists Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol-all former companions/lackeys of Falstaff and pub dwellers in Eastcheap. These individuals also approach this war as a means to add to their material wealth, but unlike Henry, Bardolph and Nym do so in a disrespectful manner. They proceed to pillage the conquered lands, taking advantage of individual property owners, rather than the government. They, unlike Henry, remain fully aware that their deeds are inappropriate and unfounded morally, even within the context of war. Remaining loyal to his decree and aim for justice, Henry puts these offenders to death for their crimes, thus perpetuating his image as a just conqueror. The subplot of this trio serves to emphasize the fact that there can be both injustice and justice in war-it all depends on the motivation in the pursuit of that war. Little white lies are the bane of every child’s first encounter with morality lessons. Is it ever justified to lie? What if the lie is intended to help people or to shelter their emotions? Much Ado about Nothing bases much of its storyline on the methods of deception

through many vehicles: wordplay, sarcasm, disguises, and flat out misinformation. Whether the actual deed of this deception is appropriate or not depends entirely on the motivation behind the telling of the lie. Furthermore, determining the principle plot from the subplot remains quite subjective; regardless, one exhibits pure intent and therefore excusable trickery whereas the other arises from malicious intent and therefore deplorable deception. Throughout the first couple of scenes, there appears to be a battle of wits between Beatrice and Benedick-whether the underlying emotion is fondness or hatred remains subjective as well. Led by Don Pedro, their friends and family lovingly plot to produce affection from their superficial hate. In telling both characters that the other confesses undying love for them, the conspirers knowingly instigate a lie. Because their pure aim is to bring together two strong personalities in love, their deed is forgiven and in fact encouraged by the audience. Conversely, the other plot reveals Don John deviously scheming as to how he can bring an end to the merriment in Messina. In an effort to bring ruin to Claudio, Don John deceives Claudio into believing that his fiancée Hero has taken a lover the night before their wedding. Unlike the plot of Don Pedro, Don John's trick aims to bring tragedy, discord and unhappiness. Although both characters spread lies about innocent people, the intention behind these lies makes Don Pedro's forgivable and Don John's condemnable. Inheritance is a touchy subject, especially when the parent dispensing his possessions is still alive and asking his heirs to compete for his belongings. Fighting among one's siblings for family property is an undesirable situation to say the least. After having "earned" their halves of Lear's land by falsely confessing their love for him, Goneril and Regan remain discontent with their portion. They begin

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to fight over every aspect of their lives ranging from a man whom they both love to one another's property. Their greatest desire is to acquire more and more wealth. This intrafamily feud produces a disdain for these women and their morals. The motivation behind their warring is improper and disrespectful. In contrast, Cordelia, now the queen of France, chooses to honestly convey her love for her father by saying she loves him only to the extent that she should. Offended by this, Lear banishes her from the kingdom and divides his property between Goneril and Regan. Because of her loyalty to her father coupled with her suspicion of her sisters, Cordelia remains in contact with Lear's servants. Upon hearing of her father's mistreatment, Cordelia wages war against her sisters. Although succumbing to sibling rivalry, her goal in conquering their land is to redeem her father and rightfully restore his land to him. Because Goneril and Regan's methods employ dishonesty and greed, their rivalry and hostility is immoral. Because Cordelia acts out of honesty and loyalty, her conflict with her siblings is justified and admirable. Through the examination of these subplots and their relevance to the principle plot, Shakespeare obviously intended to reveal an insight into human nature through their integration in each play.

Shakespeare never seems to condone black or white interpretation of people, events, ideas, or actions. The juxtaposition of principle plots and subplots further substantiates this position. King Henry V's revelation of the two different conquests of France, Much Ado's theme of deception and King Lear's sibling rivalry reveal two very Shakespearean outlooks on life: 1) that nothing can be classified in simple "good" or "bad" terms without deeper analysis and 2) that the initial intention coupled with end may very well

justify the means. War, deception, and rivalry can be either forgivable or inexcusable depending upon the intentions supporting the actions.