# Reading *The Merchant of Venice* Dialogically

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Seen through the eyes of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, three - perhaps four - of Shakespeare's plays stand out as ideologically problematic or 'politically incorrect': The *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *The Tempest* - and perhaps *The Taming of the Shrew*. The specific ways in which these plays address, or are seen to address, issues of anti-Semitism, race, colonialism, and gender respectively, have elicited a wide range of politically charged responses, both in criticism and performance. None perhaps more so than *The Merchant of Venice*. The play's dominant action of castigation and forced conversion of Shylock the Jew will inescapably jar post-Holocaust sensibilities to such an extent that critical responses almost inevitably find themselves bogged down in negotiating strategies of dismissal or apology, or both. One of the most recent, and most sophisticated instances of such a negotiation is found in Harold Bloom's chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999). The initial and provocative point made by Bloom is this:

> One would be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work (p171)

Of course, this remarkably explicit ethical stance towards Shakespeare clearly contradicts Bloom's stated intentions in the introduction to this same book, where he polemicizes what he calls elsewhere "The School of Resentment" or "French Shakespeare":

> Though professional resenters insist that the aesthetic stance is itself an ideology, I scarcely agree, and I bring nothing but the aesthetic (in Walter Pater's and Oscar

> Wilde's language) to Shakespeare in this book. Or rather, he brings it to me, since Shakespeare educated Pater, Wilde, and the rest of us in the aesthetic, which, as Pater observed, is an affair of perceptions and sensations. Shakespeare teaches us how and what to perceive, and he also instructs us how and what to sense and then to experience as sensation. Seeking as he did to enlarge us, not as citizens or as Christians, but as consciousnesses, Shakespeare outdid all his preceptors as an entertainer. Our resenters, who can be described ( without malice) as gender-and power-freaks, are not much moved by the plays as entertainment. (9-10)

Bloom does not explicitly acknowledge this contradiction between his "aesthetic" ideology and his profound ethical concern about Shylock, strongly coloured by his own personal stake in "the Jewish question". Bloom's notion of Shakespeare's effect on his audience, " not as citizens or as Christians but as consciousnesses" fails to confront the problem that no consciousness exists in the abstract, without some specific preconditions and subject matter from which consciousness springs and with which consciousness is concerned - and Bloom's own puzzlement in the face of the conflict between the aesthetic and ethical issues of *The Merchant of Venice*, textually and contextually, bears ample witness in this regard. Michael Bristol, referring to a *Paris Review* interview with Bloom, makes a similar point:

> Bloom has in fact argued that an honest production of this play, one that faithfully transmits the work's original intentions, would be unbearable and intolerable in a post-Holocaust context. Here it is abundantly clear that Bloom speaks as a concrete situated subject, a Jewish son of immigrant parents who still remembers fighting street battles to defend himself against persecution by Irish gangs in the Bronx during the 1930s [...]
>
> Bloom acknowledges the crucial point that has been made over and over again by the 'resenters', namely that

> literary works are always received against the resistances and the grievances of their actual but unforeseen addressees. Criticism really is 'agonistic'... (Bristol:137)

In the following I propose a dialogic reading of *The Merchant of Venice* which attempts to steer clear of two types of monological readings: on the one hand the Scylla of Harold Bloom's ethically motivated ' bafflement', and on the other hand, the Charybdis of the reductiveness of what Bloom – without malice, or so he says, – refers to as the school of 'gender- and power freaks', or 'resenters'.

The opening scene, always crucial in Shakespeare in terms of setting of mood and themes, is not at all about Shylock. It is Antonio, the 'merchant of Venice', who speaks:

> 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 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
> I am to learn:
> And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
> That I have much ado to know myself.
> (I,1,lines1-7)

To explain Antonio's sadness as stemming from his worries about his financial vulnerability would make little sense in the context of the play as a whole. There is no discussion in the play about the soundness of Antonio's dispositions ( if we leave out the general issue of payment of interest, or usury), no warnings against putting all one's eggs in one basket, and the miraculous return of all of Antonio's ships in Act V is just mentioned in passing. To argue that Antonio is sad because Bassanio is getting married draws on what has become more or less conventional, the reading of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio as homoerotic. There is much to be said for a reading along those lines, with all the mental reservations as to the peculiarities of Elizabethan conceptions of love, but, dramatically speaking, Antonio has not been told about Bassanio's suit for Portia, when he makes his opening speech about

his sadness, only about a "lady" and a "secret pilgrimage" (I,1,lines119-20) - and, going by Bassanio's description of the project, it is not primarily a love project, but "plots and purposes how to get clear of all the debts I owe"(I,1,lines133-34). Indeed, according to Bassanio's description of the project, this is not the first time that he has sought Antonio's financial assistance in projects like this. The only real clues to the mystery of Antonio's sadness are found in Antonio's two statements about himself: the most quoted one is from the trial scene, and in response to Bassanio's attempt to cheer him up:

> *Antonio* I am a tainted wether of the flock,
> Meetest for death, - the weakest kind of fruit
> Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me;
> You cannot better be employ'd Bassanio,
> Than to live still and write mine epitaph."
> (IV,1, lines111-118)

The Old Testament image of the 'tainted wether' resonates with connotations of the barrenness of the sexual outsider, and with the sacrificial function of the scapegoat, just as the less striking image of the 'weakest fruit' indicates vulnerability to worms or disease.The second clue, and perhaps one just as important, lies in Antonio's response to Gratiano in the opening scene of the play:

> *Antonio* I hold the world but as the world Gratiano,
> A stage, where every man must play a part,
> And mine a sad one.
> *Gratiano* Let me play the fool,
> With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
> And let my liver rather heat with wine
> Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
> (Act I, sc.1., lines76-82)

The notion of ' teatrum mundi', or the world as a stage, was a commonplace one, and one which is echoed throughout Shakespeare's plays. But how does one make dramatic sense of Antonio's grandiose stage metaphor, or indeed Gratiano's

response, so early in the play? John Drakakis' discussion of Antonio's sadness in "Historical Difference and Venetian Patriarchy" (Drakakis:200-03) identifies Antonio's inability to understand himself: " And such a want-wit sadness makes of me/That I have much ado to know myself"(I,1,lines 6-7), but, while recognising the persuasive arguments for a homosexual or homosocial reading made by W.H. Auden ((Auden 1963) and Leslie Fiedler (Fiedler1972), Drakakis steers admirably clear of them as an exhaustive *explanation* of that sadness. Instead, Drakakis draws on the Marxist notion of alienation:

> [...] commercial activity is never quite represented in the play as itself, and is forced to repress, not homosexual desire, but the reality of its own operations in the world. The result is precisely that 'alienation' or loss of identity which Marx identifies in the 'Christian state' which has yet to become fully secularised [...] From the outset, therefore, Antonio's 'sadness', and the lack of his self-knowledge are, to a very considerable extent, the *subject* of *The Merchant of Venice,* although the play cannot speak its concerns directly except in terms of an intolerant, deeply nationalistic fear." (Drakakis:202-03)

Why is it that this magisterial *Ideologiekritik* is less than satisfactory? Is it perhaps because of its linguistic insistence on the elision of human agency? "...commercial activity...is forced to repress... the reality of its own operations"; "...the play cannot speak its concerns directly..." And is it not because this elision of human agency is indicative of a particular kind of critical blindness? There is after all no such thing in the play as commercial activity in the abstract, but human beings doing business with other human beings within the confines of the Venetian commercial system. If 'alienation', and consequent sadness, is a systemic function of 'The Christian state not yet fully secularised', why are not *all* the Christians in Venice sad? Could it be that the reason why Drakakis feels that 'the play cannot speak its concerns directly' is that *players* speak, not the play, and while people may have concerns, the play does not. In other,

and Bakhtinian words: the play should not be seen as expressive of a particular (monologic) set of concerns, not even ultimately or 'in the last instance', but as a set of dialogic transactions - a polyglossia of discourses interacting within the broad generic framework of comedy. Shakespeare may of course have had his concerns, but I suggest that Shakespeare's *primary* concern as a playwright was to create a dramatic dynamic out of a rich material of themes, conflicts and oppositions drawing not just on existing literary sources, but on received notions of the concepts of Venice, Jewry, usury, etc, and the genre of romantic comedy. It is in this context that the sadness of Antonio should be seen - as a position within the play which may be open to psychologising notions of repressed homosexuality, or sociologising notions of the displacement of real economic necessities, but whose primary *meaning* is the dramatic one within the play - the function of what one might term *melancholy relief.* Again the term relief should be understood not primarily as an affective function - of the audience being temporarily relieved of of the dominant comic appeal of the play, but in the sculptural sense of the term, of throwing into relief. Just as Shakespeare perceived a dramatic need for the melancholy relief of a Don John in *Much Ado,* or Jacques in As *You Like It,* there is in *The Merchant of Venice* a structural need for a passive, melancholy counterpoint to the youthful energies of the young males of Venice, to be redeemed by the female resourcefulness of a Portia, whose financial clout is not based on risky venture capitalism, but on stable, inherited wealth. This "functional" reading of Antonio and his sadness is signposted, I suggest, by Antonio's quasi-metatheatrical remark quoted above (" I hold the world but as the world Gratiano/A stage where every man must play a part/ And mine a sad one".), and of course supported by Gratiano's rejoinder ( "Let me play the fool..."). Indeed, within the Renaissance understanding of the balance of humours within the human body, there was no need to *explain* melancholy. Melancholy was simply understood as the effect of an imbalance in the relative proportions of blood, phlegm, green bile and black bile within the body, the melancholy person having an excess of black bile. Which is to say that in terms of the conditions of intelligibility that

obtained at the time of the production of the play, neither the playwright nor the audience would have felt the need to look beyond Antonio's own explanation in Act I, sc.1 : the world is a stage where every man must play a part, and his is a sad one. Antonio's sad part in the play is a parallel one to Portia's dead father: Portia's father is the originator of her wealth, and has determined the conditions under which his daughter is to be married; Antonio, by the same token, provides Bassanio with the money necessary to propose to Portia in the proper fashion, and the conditions of the loan agreed to between Shylock and Antonio are to play a central role in the relationship between Portia and Bassanio. Structural counterpoint is a recurrent feature in Shakespeare's comedies and the dialogic negotiations of divergent or opposed discourses are the basic ingredients of Shakespeare's comedic universes, and in *The Merchant of Venice* the male-dominated world of Venice is set against the female world of Belmont. It is however, important to note that a central clue to the problematic nature of the play is to do not with Belmont and Venice as a binary or dialectic relation, but rather with the *dialogic* nature of that relation. Belmont and Venice are already related *before* the beginning of the play: Bassanio's first conversation with Antonio follows up on a previous discussion:

> *Ant.* Well, tell me now what lady is the same
> To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage -
> That you to-day promis'd to tell me of?
> ( Act I, sc.1, lines 119-121)

Similarly, the first presentation of Belmont clearly spells out Portia's coyness in pretending not to have a clear pre-play memory of Bassanio, at the end of the expository catalogue of lovers (Act I, sc.2, lines 108-115). The last lines of that scene form an ironic thematic bridge to the next one:

> Come Nerissa, sirrah go before:
> Whiles we shut the gate upon one wooer, another
> knocks at the door
> (Act I,sc 2, lines 126-27)

There is indeed another wooer knocking at another door, but it is Bassanio, in the following scene, who is 'wooing' Shylock for the sum of three thousand ducats:

> Enter Bassanio with Shylock the Jew.
> *Shy.* Three Thousand ducats, well.
> *Bass.* Ay, sir, for three months.
> *Shy.* For three months, well.
> *Bass.* For the which as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
> *Shy.* Antonio shall become bound, well.
> (Act I, sc.3, lines 1-5)

Shylock's verbal 'entrance' is among the most spectacular in all of Shakespeare's plays, comparable perhaps only to Hamlet's in Act I, sc. 2 : "A little more than kin and less than kind... ". From his very first line, Shylock, like Hamlet, imposes himself on the drama, dominating the exchange with Bassanio in an idiom of calculated repetitions and "well's" which is as individualised as Hamlet's. The resonance of Shylock's "well"s is strikingly paralleled in Bakhtin's/Voloshinov's conversation analysis of the single word "well".[1]

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[1] "Two people are sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then one of them says, "Well!". The other does not respond..

For us, as outsiders, this entire "conversation" is utterly incomprehensible. Taken in isolation, the utterance "Well!" is empty and unintelligible. Nevertheless, this peculiar colloquy of two persons, consisting of only one -although, to be sure, one expressively intoned - word [...]does make perfect sense, is fully meaningful and complete.

In order to disclose the sense and meaning of this colloquy, we must analyse it. But what is it exactly that we can subject to analysis? Whatever pains we take with the purely verbal part of the utterance, however subtly we define the phonetic, morphological, and semantic factors of the word *well*, we shall still not come a single step closer to an understanding of the whole sense of the colloquy.[...]

What is it we lack, then? We lack the "extraverbal context" that made the word well a meaningful locution for the listener.

This extraverbal context of the utterance is comprised of three factors:(1) *the common spatial purview* of the interlocutors (the unity of the visible - in this case, the room, a window, and so on, (2) the interlocutors' *common knowledge and understanding of the situation*, and (3) their *common evaluation* of the situation.

At the time the colloquy took place, both inerlocutors *looked up* at the window, and *saw* that it had begun to snow; *both knew* that it was already May and that it was high time for spring to come; finally, *both* were *sick and tired* of the protracted winter - *they were both*

Harold Bloom's characterization of The Merchant of Venice as " a profoundly anti-Semitic play" may be highly problematic, but what is beyond debate is that Shylock from his very first words is cast as a villain. Shylock's 'well's and repetition of Bassanio's phrases ( "Bass.: Ay sir, for three months/ Shy.: For three months, well... " etc), his smug assessment of Antonio's credit rating ( "...ships are but boards, sailors but men, there be land-rats, and water-rats...") and his aggressive rejection of dinner with Bassanio and Antonio ( "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you...."), all of this signals a seething resentment that is rooted in a posited *prior extradramatic context,* anchored in contemporary presuppositions, but fleshed out through the specific inflections provided by Shakespeare. This is exacerbated by Antonio's entrance. Shylock's *aside* is unmitigated venom:

> *Shylock [Aside]* How like a fawning publican he looks!
> I hate him for he is a Christian:
> But more, for that in low simplicity
> He lends out money gratis, and brings down
> The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
> If I can catch him once upon the hip,
> I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
> (I, 3, lines 36-42)

The confrontation between Antonio and Shylock is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense : two competing discourses, set within a context of unspecified past antagonisms. The venom of Shylock is matched by the laid-back arrogance of Antonio, who, however, is in the unenviable and vulnerable position not only of having to stoop to borrowing money from his enemy, but to compromise on his principled aversion to interest-taking. Antonio's opening line in this

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*looking forward* to spring and *both were bitterly disappointed* by the late snowfall. On this "jointly seen" (snowflakes outside the window), "jointly known" (the time of the year - May), and "unanimously evaluated"(winter wearied of, spring looked forward to) - on all this the utterance *directly depends*, all this is seized in its actual, living import- in its very sustenance." (Holquist 1990:62-63)

confrontation is indicative of this complex power game taking place between the two characters – it is designed to put Shylock in his place :

> *Ant.* Shylock, albeit I neither lend or borrow
> By taking nor by giving of excess,
> Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,
> I'll break a custom...
> (Act I, sc. 3, lines56-59)

Shylock, savouring the vulnerability of his old enemy, is not prepared to let Antonio off the hook so easily. In his highly personalised idiom of hesitation, repetition, and feigned attempts at recollecting things that are crystal-clear in his mind, he is extracting the maximum of pleasure from Antonio's discomfort:

> [...] Well then, your bond, and let me see, - but hear you,
> Me thoughts you said, you neither lend nor borrow
> Upon advantage.
> *Ant.* I do never use it.
> *Shy.* When Jacob graz'd his uncle Laban's sheep...etc
> (Act I, sc.3, lines63-66)

Shylock begins a leisurely and rambling Old Testament analogy which, ostensibly makes a point about breeding and thrift as time-honoured Biblical qualities, linking these concepts to that of 'interest'. The primary - dialogic- function of Shylock's speech is not, however, in its semantic content. It is, rather, in its act of appropriating the right to speak, indeed to preach at Antonio. As Bakhtin puts it,

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (Holquist 1981:294)

The simmering mutual aggression and resentment make for a dialogue between Antonio and Shylock - with Bassanio refereeing

the contest - which is constantly on the verge of running off the rails, with bad faith on both sides, and with both parties constantly grasping every opportunity to get at the other person's sensibilities, or throat. Shylock's choice of an Old Testament analogy - a text shared by Jews and Christians - to make his case for the taking of interest, predictably incenses Antonio ( "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose..."), and Antonio's attempt to close the deal ("Well, Shylock, shall we be beholding to you?") affords Shylock yet another opportunity to push the advantage of his situation:

> ...You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
> And spet upon my Jewish gabardine,
> And all for use of that which is mine own.
> [...] What should I say to you? Should I not say
> "Hath a dog money? Is it possible
> A cur can lend three thousand ducats?...
> (Act I, sc.3, lines 106-08; lines 115-17)

Language, in this dramatic confrontation between Shylock and Antonio, is indeed a contested space, not just in terms of appropriating the right to speak, but also semantically, in the process of naming. The phenomenon at the core of this dispute - borrowing money at interest, is constantly re-named: Antonio: "I neither lend nor borrow/ By taking nor by giving of *excess*";"Shylock: "You neither lend nor borrow/Upon *advantage*"; Antonio: "And what of him? [Jacob] did he take *interest*?"Shylock: "In the Rialto you have rated me/ About my moneys and my *usances*;"Antonio: "...when did friendship take/A *breed for barren metal* of his friend?"

The semantic quibbling continues, now focusing on the terms 'kind' and 'kindness':

> *Shy.* ... This is kind I offer.
> *Bass.* This were kindness.
> *Shy.* This kindness I will show...
> (Act I, sc. 3, lines 138-39)

Whereupon Shylock explains the conditions attached to the loan, 'the merry bond' of a pound of flesh. J.L. Halio (Halio 1993)

suggests that Shylock's use of 'kind' in "this is kind I offer" is unidiomatic, reflecting his status as an alien. John Russell Brown (Arden edition of MV) points to the double meaning of 'kind' as 'generous' and 'natural'. I would add, against Halio, and supplementing Brown, that Shylock's use of 'kind' makes a third kind of sense: as "payment in kind", i.e. payment not in money but "in goods or natural produce" (COD). This makes all the more sense, since it connects logically with the preceding lines, in which Shylock, masterfully, calms down Antonio, who, after Shylock's "You call'd me a dog " - speech, has risen to the bait, and stormed: "I am as like to call thee so again/To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too."

Shylock, playing Antonio like a yo-yo, now calms Antonio down, as he would a child:

> *Shy.* Why look you how you storm!
> I would be friends with you, and have your love,
> Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,
> Supply your present wants, and take no doit
> Of usances for my moneys, and you'll not hear me, -
> *This is kind I offer.* [ My italics]
> (Act I, sc.3, lines133-38)

The word 'kind' is interpreted by Bassanio as 'generosity', but Shylock immediately picks up the word 'kindness' and imposes his definition on it: "*This kindness I will show you*" - and it is indeed payment 'in kind' that he is referring to - the pound of flesh. There may be even a further semantic layer involved: Shylock has just made the first of his two 'identity' speeches ("Hath a dog money?"( to be followed up in III, 1 by "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?")) The 'merry bond' may indeed signify that, however much he may be treated as a dog, he and Antonio are 'of a kind', belonging to the same species. Shylock's offer can thus be seen as a parodic version of Antonio's feudal notions of the taking of interest as being dishonourable among peers. Contrary to his earlier Old Testament analogy of interest as 'breeding', Shylock now suggests the opposite: interest as physical reduction- the carving out of human flesh.

Shylock clearly reiterates Antonio's terms ' friendship' ("... when did friendship take a breed for barren metal of his friend?") in his phrase: " I extend this friendship,/ If he will take it, so - if not, adieu." And there is in fact a surprisingly quick inversion at the end of this act, when Antonio seems to be won over by Shylock's baited offer, or at least mollified, echoing Shylock's declension of kind/kindness: ( "... there is much kindness in the Jew" ; "... The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind.") It is now Bassanio, up until this point broker and mediator of the deal, who has second thoughts: "I like not fair terms, and a villain's mind."

The dynamics of this crucial scene between Shylock and Antonio, accordingly, hinge on two semantic negotiations: on the one hand, the idea of a concept, or a signified - the payment of interest - expressed through a whole range of shifting signifiers. On the other hand, the presence of one - compound - signifier: kind/kindness, which is given a whole range of semantic inflections. But these dynamics do not simply co-exist, they relate to one another dialogically. Language is "over-populated with the intentions of others", always pre-empting or anticipating future answers. And "utterance" in Act I, scene 3 in *The Merchant of Venice* is dialogic in a very overt sense, in that the two main characters continuously negotiate, or struggle, both semantically and in terms of what contemporary linguistics would call "turn-taking". The scene could almost be said to be dialogically overdetermined, in the sense that it is quite literally a negotiation over the conditions of a loan, with all the ideological implications involved in Venetian/ and by extension, Elizabethan borrowing and lending in the 1590s.

What Bakhtin calls the "internal dialogization" of discourse, in which the speaker echoes or imitates or redefines the phrases of others may take many forms, but these forms are always oriented towards an answer, in anticipation or rebuttal or negotiation or approval. In the scene between Shylock and Antonio this "answerability" of utterance is primarily between the two characters - although wider contexts of social, cultural and religious implications resonate throughout.

Two scenes further on in the play, we come across an instance of 'internal dialogization' contained within the utterance of not two characters, but one, in the form of the first soliloquy of *The Merchant of Venice,* interestingly not given by a major character in the play, but by Launcelet Gobbo, the Clown, a farcical character in the employ of Shylock. The leaving of an empty stage to a minor, and static, low-life character contains in itself a parodic element, foregrounding as it does the incongruity of a minor character in a dramatically major function.[2] This soliloquy marks an abrupt change of address from the previous scene, in which the Prince of Morocco fails Portia's test at Belmont. Morocco's closing couplet: "- Good fortune then, / To make me blest or cursèd among men" - rhymed blank verse, marks a level of formality, against which Lancelot Gobbo's babbling prose is a dramatic drop, an effect of *bathos* or 'sinking'. Furthermore, the audience experiences a sudden switch of *direction.* From *overhearing* conversation between characters on stage, the audience is suddenly addressed directly, and are being taken into the confidence of Gobbo. This is the mode of address Shakespeare's audience of the 1590s, many of which first generation urbanites, would be familiar with from earlier popular theatricals of streets and courtyards, morality plays in particular. And not only is the form of address reminiscent of the morality play, this is also true of Lancelot Gobbo's subject matter and rhetoric. Gobbo parodically casts himself in the role of Everyman, caught in the middle between the tempting 'fiend' and his conscience. His dilemma, parodically, is not a major moral issue, but the more mundane one whether to stay in the service of Shylock or not, and, again in a parodic inversion of the morality tradition, Gobbo opts for the advice of the fiend, and chooses to leave Shylock. Gobbo's language is another indication of the 'heteroglossia' of the scene. His 'malapropisms' mimic the posturing of an uneducated man trying desperately to master the complexities of a language beyond his

[2] Among the few examples are Lance - and his dog - in *Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Act 4, sc.4; Bottom the Weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Act 2, sc.1 ("Bottom's Dream"), and perhaps Pompey in *Measure for Measure,* Act 4, sc. 3, although the last example is little more than a catalogue of prison inmates.

reach. Historically speaking, the ambiguity of Launcelot Gobbo - "the clown", as it says in the stage direction - is the ambiguity of a theatrical stereotype in transition: the clown or fool of popular late medieval theatre developing into the fast-talking, street-smart domestic of city comedy and (much later) Sam Weller fame in Dickens. Indeed, as Launcelot Gobbo's morality soliloquy segues into the next situation, with the arrival of Old Gobbo, Launcelot's father, modern audience sympathies are likely to be tested to the full. Launcelot's father is old and blind, arriving with a dish of doves for his son's master, from the slow, deferential world of a rural subsistence economy, totally out of place in the ironic, commercialised universe of Venice, in which loyalties are as ephemeral as the fortunes of vessels at sea:

> *Launcelot* [*Aside*] O heavens! This is my true-begotten father, who being more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind, knows me not, - I will try confusions with him. (Act II, sc.2, lines 33-35)

One may wonder just how funny it will have appeared to an Elizabethan audience to watch an old, blind man, lost in the city, being played tricks on by his own son. The cruelty exhibited in the taunting of this old man could be seen to prefigure an equally gratuitous exhibition of cruelty towards another old man - Shylock, who is not only deprived of his livelihood - his money - but is forced to convert to Christianity. In fact, the 'unpleasantness' of *The Merchant of Venice* is nowhere stronger than in the trial scene, in which the entire Venetian establishment are openly ranked against Shylock, whose only protection is the impartiality of the City Charter. As gratuitously cruel as Launcelot to his father is Gratiano, constantly jeering and sneering. As Harold Bloom puts it," [his] anti-Semitic vulgarity reminds me of Julius Streicher; Hitler's favorite newspaper editor." Bloom continues:

> The last two centuries of stage tradition have made Shylock a hero-villain, but the text cannot sustain such an interpretation. Since Shylock is a murderous villain, then Gratiano, though a touch crude, must be taken as a good

> fellow, cheerful and robust in his anti-Semitism, a kind of Pat Buchanan of Renaissance Venice. (Bloom:173)

Bloom is right in pointing out that the text does not support an interpretation of Shylock as a hero-villain. But he is wrong in drawing the conclusion that this *eo ipso* means that we should read Gratiano as a 'good fellow'. In fact, Bloom himself provides part of the argument against his own 'monologic' reading of the play in some of his closing comments on the play, with reference to A.P. Rossiter's justly famous *Angel with Horns* from 1961:

> "A.P. Rossiter [...] said that ambivalence was peculiarly the dialectic of Shakespeare's history plays, defining Shakespearean ambivalence as one mode of irony or another. Irony is indeed so pervasive in Shakespeare, in every genre, that no comprehensive account of it is possible. What in *The Merchant of Venice* is not ironical, including the Belmont celebration of Act V?" (Bloom:190)

Indeed, and why should Gratiano be exempt from this pervasive irony? Consequently, whereas the trial scene of Act IV may be the dramatic culmination of the play, running the full gamut of legalistic argument, political consideration, appeals to mercy and sheer vindictiveness, and leaving the audience with all the uncertainties of response voiced by Harold Bloom and others, it is in our interpretation of Act V that we ultimately need to make up our minds as to what *kind* of play *The Merchant of Venice* is. A.D. Nuttall, in his analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* from 1983 (Nuttall: 88) makes an interesting distinction between 'transparent' and 'opaque' critics: on the one hand critics whose desire is to disambiguate or monologise Shakespeare, on the other hand critics who are concerned with the dissonances and ambiguities in Shakespeare's plays. The first school of critics will be looking for closure in Act V of *The Merchant of Venice*: John Russell Brown, whose performance-oriented approach sees the two themes of love and money reconciled in Act V, in the celebration of 'love's wealth' (Russell Brown: 174), or C.L. Barber in his *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, whose broader socio-cultural approach brings him to identify Act V as the joyful reestablishment of social harmony. As Barber puts it,

> No other comedy, until the late romances, ends with so full an expression of harmony as that which we get in the opening of the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. And no other final scene is so completely without irony about the joys it celebrates.[3]

A more 'opaque' reading of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice* is provided by Catherine Belsey in her essay 'Love in Venice' (Belsey 1998). Act V - one continuous scene - functions as both resolution and epilogue to the play. The act opens with the famous "In Such a Night" exchange between Lorenzo and Jessica :

> *Lor.* The moon shines bright. In such a night as this
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls
> And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents
> Where Cressid lay that night.
> *Jes.* In such a night
> Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew,
> And saw the lion's shadow ere himself
> and ran dismayed away.
> *Lor.* In such a night ...etc
> (Act V, sc.1, lines1-11)

In her analysis of the opening tete-a-tete between Lorenzo and Jessica, Belsey notes elements which appear incongruous in what is supposedly an unqualified celebration of the joy of love. The stories of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, and Medea are love stories, but they are stories of betrayal, desertion and death. The beautifully cadenced shared lines of Lorenzo and Jessica create a subtly discordant effect with the classical references to unhappy stories of love. Belsey interprets this element of discord as a

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[3]C.L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom (Princeton, NJ, 1959), p.187. I owe this reference to Catherine Belsey, 'Love in Venice', in The Merchant of Venice - Contemporary Critical Essays, ed. by Martin Coyle (Macmillan 1998), p.140.

conflict in the text between an older view of love as 'anarchic, destructive and dangerous' (p.141) and a domesticated view of love as 'marriage, concord, consent and partnership':

> ...the older understanding of love leaves traces in the text, with the effect that desire is only imperfectly domesticated, and in consequence the extent to which Venice is superimposed upon Belmont becomes visible to the audience (p.141)

Belsey then moves on to broader and well-argued considerations of 'desire', 'riddles' and 'love vs friendship' in Act V, emphasising the multiplicity rather than the indeterminacy of such elements. However, Belsey's reading of the Lorenzo-Jessica exchange, imposing as it does broad structural allegory on this passage, misses the way it is anchored to the two characters in question, and the significance of this anchorage. A more detailed textual analysis may illuminate this:

> Shakespeare can be seen to have created subtle directions of diction in the 'take-overs' ('antilabe' is the technical term) between the two characters: the first two 'take-overs' are perfect pentameters : "Where Cressid lay that night/In such a night"; "And ran dismayed away/In such a night". The next two increase the tempo and intensity by overlapping by one beat:"To come again to Car(thage)/In such a night"; "That did renew old Ae(son)/In such a night". The two last take-overs, however, turn towards their personal relationship, and all of a sudden the opposite effect is introduced: the lack of a beat - the significant pause: "As far as Belmont (-)/ In such a night"; "And ne'er a true one (-)/ In such a night" - after which Jessica waxes meta-poetical, expressing her impatience with the repetitive 'night' motif, and including, perhaps, some sexual innuendo: " I would out-night you did nobody come..." - an indication of the playful tit for tat nature of their exchanges. J. L. Halio's reading of this scene, while more concrete than Belsey's, psychologizes the exchange:

> ...the allusions may seem inappropriate in the mouths of these newly-weds, even as they tease one another, joking half-nervously, perhaps, about love's transience... (Halio:137-38)

Halio makes further reference to what he calls 'dark undercurrents' in lyrical scenes in Shakespeare, e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I, 1, lines 168-79. However, Lysander's unfazed response contradicts Halio's theory of dark undercurrents in lyrical scenes in Shakespeare. Lysander does not take Hermia's 'dark' references seriously, because they are not *meant* to be taken seriously, either by him or by the audience. Rather, they are to be read as meta-poetical playfulness, an anti-Petrarchan swipe at courtly posturing. In addition, this tongue-in-cheek, yet serious response is a way of asserting the independence of mind of the female character, a signalling of anti-submissiveness which adds interest and grit to the love relationship.

These points can be applied to the Lorenzo/Jessica exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*, but with a couple of differences: Lorenzo and Jessica are not major characters in the play - consequently there is little or no focus on nuances and developments in their relationship. They are, rather, dramatic functions that mirror or contrast themes or conflicts driven by the major characters. Add to this the fact that that their exchange is placed as an opening mood setter in the final act of the play - the 'coda', to use Belsey's musical analogy, and the significance of this interchange becomes more apparent. As a bridge to the previous scene in Act IV it continues the mood of erotic bantering and functions as a prequel in 'minor' to the 'major' romantic resolution of the play. Indeed, the musical theme is literalized as the resident musicians of Portia's aristocratic household are brought outside for some night music to welcome the return of Portia and Nerissa from Venice. Into the mouth of Lorenzo is placed a series of meditations on the power of music:

> The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,
> (Act V, sc.1, lines 83-85)

As Portia and Nerissa enter, this is followed by yet another series of philosophical reflections on relativity. As Portia phrases it, " Nothing is good ( I see) without respect," relating her observation both to the light from the house that was not visible while the moon shone, and to the sounds of instruments and birds, which sound sweeter by night than by day.

However beautifully phrased and harmoniously organised, it is difficult to make sense of this sequence in dramatic terms, except as purple patches bridging the gap to the final comic resolution, not of the love plot itself, which was effectively resolved as early as in Act III, but of the final consummation between the two pairs of lovers, which was delayed by the Shylock/Antonio trial, and given a final twist with the introduction of the ring complication.

In dramatic terms, there is no way of explaining away the fact that we have arrived at the epilogue. The minuscule lovers' tiffs left to be sorted out leave us with no sense of substantive unresolved conflict. The only way to make dramatic sense of Act V, accordingly, is to see it as a way of effecting closure by means of constructing a broad movement of mood, from night to early dawn. The entire act is permeated with references, metaphorical and otherwise, to the fact that this is a scene set at night - moving towards early dawn. It opens with Lorenzo and Jessica's "In Such a night "- dialogue. It continues with Portia and Bassanio meeting:

> *Bass.* We should hold day with the Antipodes,
> If you would walk in absence of the sun.
> *Portia* Let me give light, but let me not be light,
> For a light wife doth make a heavy husband,...
> (Act V, sc.1, ll. 124-130)

The closing lines of the play, spoken by Gratiano, are a final underscoring of this night/early dawn setting:

> *Gratiano* Let it be so, - the first inter'gatory
> That my Nerissa shall be sworn on, is,
> Whether till next night she had rather stay,
> Or go to bed now (being two hours to day):
> But were day come, I should wish it dark

Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.
Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing
So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.
(Act V, sc.1, lines 300-307)

So, although the play ends on a light note of sexual banter by a relatively peripheral character, the general sense of Shakespeare elaborately constructing a final movement towards comedic closure cannot be ignored.

It is, however, an indication of the dialogic strain of combining the Belmont and Rialto plots that Shakespeare felt it necessary to have a full final act to attempt to reconcile the heteroglossia of a play which seems to be coming apart at the seams in its attempt to be both a comedy, a romance and a problem play.

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