
“A Pound of Flesh as Forfeit”.

Deconstructive Patterns in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Shakespeare’s ‘anti-Semitism’, as manifested in one of his most ideologically controversial plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, has been intensely debated throughout the centuries and continues to be, now more than ever, a most intriguing issue. Analytical approaches have variously inclined towards one or the other side of the debate, by constructing Shylock sympathetically or by condemning him for his excessive hatred. Critics like Harold Bloom, James Shapiro and John Gross believe that the play is rampantly anti-Semitic. In the opposite camp, a recent study by Martin Yaffe proposes that, on the contrary, the play should be seen as pro-Jewish, since Shylock is nothing more than a bad Jew who cannot be representative for his race. Everybody agrees on the fact that we can hardly speculate as to Shakespeare’s own attitude towards Jews, for his personal views are notoriously absent from his texts. Yet he could not have constructed such a character without taking into account all the prejudices and clichés of his time, which he re-moulds in his play until they are turned into uneasy questions haunting the minds of readers and audiences. Our linguistic and stylistic analysis focuses on the ways in which religious enmity is transmuted and taken to a climactic development through a financial and legal dispute based on an intransigent logic of usury fuelled by an inexpressible spite. Jewishness and Christianity confront each other through a secular law that is indifferent to their spiritual tenets and that equally menaces them both. It is the blind rejection of the other that deconstructs both perspectives and paves the way for a future transcending synthesis which, like the pale lead praised by Bassanio, no longer hides errors beneath deceiving ornaments..

Keywords: Jewishness; Christianity; discourse; identity; law; subversion.

The *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare’s “problem play”, has been a continual source of critical controversy over the centuries. This controversy reached its climax in the second half of the 20th century, after historical tragedies like the Holocaust. In the wake of mass killings of Jews by the Nazis, a text such as that written by Shakespeare has been perceived, especially by Jewish analysts, as a prefiguration of the anti-Semitic doctrines that wrought havoc in the Jewish community.

Most prominent among such literary critics is Harold Bloom who, for all his openly declared veneration of Shakespeare as centre of the western literary canon, identifies in *The Merchant of Venice* an uncharacteristic mentality which convinces him that, “[i]n this play alone, Shakespeare was very much of his age, and not for all time” (1998: 205). “One would have to be blind, deaf and dumb”, Bloom asserts, “not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work” (2008: 171). Other critics, on the contrary, feel that “Shylock is no more a mere means to exemplifying the Semitic problem than is Othello for the raising of the colour question” (Granville-Barker, 2005: 351).

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Admittedly or not, the entire dispute originates in what Bloom considers “Shakespeare’s disconcerting addition to the pound of flesh story: the forced conversion” (1998: 175). The American critic believes it is dramatically unmotivated, which demonstrates, for him, that the author must have been contaminated with racial hostility against a disadvantaged ethnic group in a period when the world was not yet dreaming of tolerance and political correctness. Simple logic would suggest that dramatic inconsistencies can only prove an author’s creative awkwardness or failure. However, general critical thought (Harold Bloom included) finds it hard to accept that Shakespeare, an author so attentive to all sorts of details and shades of meaning, could have committed such unconscious blunders. After all, at the time of composing *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare had already produced some of his incontestably great tragedies and comedies (among them, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). Thus, the only possible conclusion to be drawn is that ‘the Shylock mistake’ must have been made intentionally. At this point, the temptation of qualifying this intention as racial prejudice may become, as it indeed has become, irresistible.

One of the causes of such slippages in literary criticism is undoubtedly the fact that Shylock is not considered as a being woven into the fabric of his world, defined by his connections, rejections or acceptances of the things of that world. He is instead taken out of his context: “Detaching Shylock from the comic structure, ignoring his cunning, malice, and hypocrisy, ascribing to him high-minded motives, seeing him as a sincere representation of persecuted Judaism, even imagining that Shakespeare was unable to ‘control’ his character – this whole seemingly innocent distortion of the play’s central emphases results in the charge that Shakespeare was guilty of anti-Semitism” (Baker, 2005: xxiv).

When reinserted in the world of the play, Shylock’s individuality not only confirms the ontological weight that appears to make his conversion untenable for some, but it also offers us valuable clues for understanding his problematic behaviour. The baffling “I am content” (4.1.390) answer at the end of the trial is less shocking if we place it within the sequence of answers given by Shylock in the scene, a sequence showing him as a human being reduced almost to caricature by his monomaniacal desire to cut the pound of flesh from Antonio’s breast. His judgment being clouded by his “affection”, Shylock is unable to regain his initial poise and is doomed, for lack of self-control, to lose everything. His punishment, in true Shakespearean fashion, is necessarily triggered by his evil passion of resentment and vengefulness evolving to an unacceptable extreme.

Harold Bloom’s reproach to Shakespeare, at this point, is that he did not allow Shylock to die a tragic, but honourable death, by refusing to convert to Christianity. On the one hand, as other critics have argued, Shylock’s death would have been inappropriate in a romantic comedy in which the Jew plays the role of the comic villain, not that of a tragic hero. On the other hand, and more importantly, Shylock’s words and deeds throughout the play do not qualify him for the “negative transcendence” (Bloom, 1998: 187) villains like Iago or Edmund will later partake of. In spite of his occasional pathos, Shylock cannot overcome his limits and open his mind and heart to truths alien to the paradigm of money – the only one he seems to understand properly. His appraisal of Antonio at the beginning of the play signals a very narrow and downgrading perspective:

SHYLOCK
Antonio is a good man.
BASSANIO
Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
SHYLOCK
Oh, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient... (1.3.12-16)

The semantic reduction of “good” to “sufficient” is the first instance of the effects of the equivocation that governs the whole play. Shylock himself deconstructs, as it were, the other’s

discourse in order to affirm his way of dealing with things. This deconstruction is fuelled by and performed through an irony rooted in a long-lived resentment:

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. (1.3.39-43)

As it turns out, this hatred is less motivated by religion than by financial competition, which subverts any attempt to interpret the play as religious confrontation first and foremost. By subordinating everything to the discourse of financial matters, Shylock also deconstructs himself into a mercantile Venetian. His assimilation by the greedy merchant society in which he lives threatens his integrity as a member of the Jewish community. It has been said that Shylock and Portia are the representatives of the Old Testament and the New Testament, respectively, and that their conflict is the conflict between the old law and the new, the latter finally pushing the former into the background. Still, despite the fact that Shylock “can cite the Scripture for his purpose” (1.3.97), he does it quite rarely and only to manipulate it for his own interests, not for the sake of any high moral purpose or ethical personal improvement. What he wants is to defeat his enemies with the same weapons they use, on a common ground. Jewish critics themselves recognize that Shylock’s desire of revenge is untypical of Judaism and that what is missing in Shylock is “the whole region of Jewish spirituality” (Baker, 2005: xxxviii). Inner faith or truly lived religion is replaced in Shylock by a set of rules.

The equivocation or duplicity of his discourse is symbolically pre-figured, at the beginning of the play, by the image of the “two-headed Janus” (1.1.50) Salarino uses when he tries to find the reason of Antonio’s sadness in the first scene. The name Janus itself is mirrored graphically and phonetically in another name, Jason, twice mentioned in the text. Linguistically, the partial inversion of letters and sounds (*Janus/Jason*) in these names brings their meanings closer, thereby implying that differences are only superficial and that they are melted in the course of pursuing a common goal – that of gaining material riches. Antonio and Shylock may figure as foils, but there are more similarities between them than they would like to admit: their superficial spirituality, their dirty financial dealings, their intolerance, their passionate natures. When Portia, the *dea ex machina* of the play, enters the court in Act IV, she begins her trial by asking a most intriguing question: “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” (4.1.170). The question is intriguing because it would have been apparent to all participants in the scene who was who: at the time, Jews could be easily spotted in a crowd by their clothes and by various outward signs imposed on them by the authorities:

We know that Shylock would have been dressed in a “gabardine”, because, we are told, Antonio habitually spits on it. This was a long garment of hard cloth habitually worn by Jews who, since 1412, had been obliged to wear a distinctive robe extending down to the feet. Shylock would have been, literally, a “marked” man (in a previous century he would have had to wear a yellow hat). Antonio, a rich merchant who [...] is more likely to have been dressed in some of the “silk” in which he trades [...]. It would have been unmissably obvious which was the merchant and which was the Jew. (Tanner, 2010: 117)

Thus, the question cannot be interpreted as an index of disguised inability, on Portia’s behalf, to make the difference between them. Instead, it signals a deconstructive ambiguity of reference that has also been identified in the title of the play itself. The title, just like the play, somehow, becomes a sort of *undecidable*, to use Derrida’s term. One line of argument has it that Shylock

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cannot be the merchant of the title since he is prevented by his Jewishness to do commerce in Venice. His source of income is the practising of usury – an occupation that was forbidden to, and consequently very much despised by, the Christians of the time.¹ Besides, Antonio is foregrounded as merchant from the very beginning of the play, when we find out about his trade overseas.

One counter-argument to the idea that Shylock may not be the merchant of the title is the fact that the terms “merchant” and “usurer” were often used interchangeably at the time: “Before they were expelled from some European countries and restricted in their professions in others, Jews figured prominently as merchants in international trade, taking advantage of their contacts with their coreligionists throughout the Mediterranean. During this time, the term Jew was as associated with trade as with usury” (Rosenshield, 2002: 30).

Moreover, the historical truth is that Venice, in that period, offered shelter for three distinct Jewish groups: the Pontines and the Levantines, who spoke Spanish or Portuguese and had come from across the Alps after having been expelled from the Spanish peninsula, and the *Nazjone Tedesca*, thought to be of German origin, but who were considerably more integrated in the Venetian community and spoke the language of the adoptive country. Shylock belonged to the latter group, more as a native than as a newcomer, as indicated by the fact that he practised usury, commerce being forbidden to the German Jews, but being allowed to the other two communities (see Roth, 2005: 358-359). Also, Shylock’s language is hardly different from that spoken by the other characters in the play, even though an attentive analysis can reveal subtle differences in certain word choices or syntactical constructions.² Although he was one of the Jews that were not allowed to practise trade in Venice, it would be by no means accurate to say that the Jew as a type could not have been associated in the minds of his contemporaries with that of the merchant.

Be that as it may, religious prejudice was bound to influence commercial relations between economic actors of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (especially between Christians and Jews), as proven by Antonio’s defamatory behaviour towards Shylock:

SHYLOCK

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances: [...]
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own. [...]
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: moneys is your suit
What should I say to you? (1.3.106-108; 1.3.111-113; 1.3.117-120)

When Shylock addresses such words to Antonio, comedy has already set on stage one of its characteristic reversals: it is no longer Shylock that is at a financial disadvantage, but Antonio, the latter being compelled to appeal to usury and thus expose himself to Shylock’s despised practices. This reversal, like all the others in the play, blurs the culturally sanctioned distinction between the

¹Usury was also forbidden to Jews by the *Torah*, but there was no prohibition regarding Jews charging interest on loans to non-Jews. For Christians, however, usury was prohibited by papal edicts, especially beginning with the 14th century (see Chazan, 2006: 51-66).

²In Otto Jespersen’s view, such linguistic deviations from the standard of Shakespeare’s day (for example, the preference of ‘advantage’ or ‘thrift’ for ‘interest’, of ‘usance’ for ‘usury’, of ‘equal’ (pound) for ‘exact’, of ‘rheum’ for ‘saliva’, or of ‘estimable’ for ‘valuable’; words used only by Shylock in Shakespeare: ‘eaneling’, ‘misbeliever’, ‘bane’; peculiar phrases like ‘we trifle time’ or ‘rend out’ instead of ‘rend’) helped the playwright construct characters like Shylock, Caliban or the witches in *Macbeth* by “stamping them as beings out of the common sort” (1921: 219).

Jewish usurer and the Christian merchant by reducing them both to obeying one and the same harsh logic: the logic of money. Ambiguity further reaches an ironical climax in Shylock's imposed conversion, a moment in which Shylock symbolically turns into Antonio, i.e., another Christian merchant, no longer linked with Jewishness and usury.

This could be taken further into other critical fields. For Gary Rosenshield, it is less Shylock's conversion that is at stake here than Antonio's unconscious fears that his being a merchant is at odds with the principles of his Christianity: "The question that the play implicitly asks is not whether Shylock can become a Christian but whether Antonio can be both a Christian and a merchant: that is, a merchant and not in some way also a Jew. Is it possible for a Christian to escape 'Judaization' in a world rapidly being transformed by a mercantile and pre-capitalist economy? And if Antonio cannot escape the corruption of finance, can anyone?" (2002: 29).

To go back to Portia's question, its inescapable hint that the two men are practically indistinguishable by their outer appearances brings with it a momentary liberal stance that cares nothing for race or class. Antonio and Shylock are perfectly equal in the act of justice and both of them bow before and cherish this equality, albeit from very different emotional vantage points. Here, more than anywhere else in the play, the text emerges as absolutely lacking in anti-Semitism. Being a Jew does not prevent Shylock from claiming his right, just as being a Christian does not favour Antonio. I believe that, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores the possibility of a discourse able to function as a common denominator for everyone belonging to the world of the play.

The setting chosen for this purpose appears as the most appropriate, as the Venice of the time was renowned for its benevolent policy towards strangers. According to Allan Bloom, "it was the place where the various sorts of men could freely mingle and it was known the world over as the most tolerant city of its time. [...] From the end of the sixteenth century up to the middle of the seventeenth, Venice was constantly admired and written about as the model for a good political order in modernity. It preceded Amsterdam as the model" (1964: 14-15).

As a citizen of Venice, Shylock was privileged in comparison to the other members of the Jewish diaspora spread out across Europe in the sixteenth century. It is not only his wealth and relative freedom that forms his privilege, but primarily that "law of Venice" which Shylock obsessively cites as the irrefutable authority under whose protection he can have his "forfeiture". No one can contradict him on that. While they are trying to make him reconsider his position, the Venetians are fully aware that the Jew's insistence that he "have his bond" cannot be denied – not even by the Duke himself:

ANTONIO

The duke cannot deny the course of law:
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of his state;
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. (3.3.28-33)

Antonio's words reveal that the discourse on the grounds of which everybody can claim their rights irrespective of race or class does not derive its power from traditional values linked with religion, but from another element, much more appropriate to the paradigm of modernity. Allan Bloom shows that the achievement of an atmosphere of tolerance in Renaissance cities like Venice was the result of the awareness that religious attachment could only be overcome by a social order in which religion would not play the leading part:

It was not thought possible to educate men to a tolerant view nor to overcome the power of the established religions by refuting them; the only way was to substitute for the interest and concern of men's passions another object as powerfully

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attractive as religion. Such an object was to be found in the jealous desire for gain; the commercial spirit causes men to moderate their fanaticism; men for whom money is the most important thing are unlikely to go off on crusades. (1964: 16)

In Shakespeare's play, it is this very "jealous desire for gain" that curbs wills and shapes destinies, whereas old principles are trespassed: Antonio's Christianity is subverted by his discriminatory treatment of Shylock, and Shylock's apparent solidarity with his community and obedience of the Jewish doctrine is exposed as shallow in his accepting to have dinner with Christians or in his refusal to be merciful. Such trespassing will soon be punished, and the "forfeitures" are going to be quite dramatic for those involved. It may be no coincidence that one of the most often repeated words in the play is "forfeit" (it appears eleven times in this form and nine times as part of "forfeiture"). Punishment for an excess of passion (be it melancholy, envy, hatred or resentment) is thus translated into the language of commercial contracts. Shakespeare, contrary to what we might expect from one belonging to his age, had the profound intuition of the fact that the nature of the discourse in whose terms the participants would have been able to find themselves on the same ground with the others could not be religious, but juridical and political. And quite prophetically, Shakespeare also understood that this discourse can but be marked by many insufficiencies causing hostility and unrest. It is nevertheless inextricably interwoven with the mercantile economy of Venice, where any impeachment of the law would endanger the entire social and economic edifice by dissolving power and authority.

Shylock, in his desire for gain, is cynical enough to understand, better than any other character in the play, the necessity for such a secular law governing the fabric of society. However, his utter materialism eventually condemns him, for it makes him idolize the law and fail to escape its "eye for an eye" literalism. If Shylock is to be seen as a representative of his race, then he must be seen as the specimen through whom Shakespeare criticizes Jewish fundamentalist attitudes that refuse any transcendence, openness or creativity. Following the same logic, if Antonio is the representative of Christianity, then, through him, Christianity is exposed as hypocritical and false.

Such criticism is at its highest in the trial scene, during which both religious paradigms and mentalities are revealed as superficially adopted by the characters. By the time Portia arrives in court as Balthasar, Shylock has reached the climax of his own idiosyncratic power. For a time, his incontestable demand reigns supreme, despite the others' repeated injunctions for mercy and pity. The "knife" of his hatred, sharpened on the hard "stone" of his heart, is ready to cut out the pound of flesh out of Antonio's breast.³ His "justice" is based on a linguistic trick which uses an apparently less harmful synecdoche in order to conceal an atrocity: while he purports to take "only" what is his, i.e., just a pound of flesh, what he is really bound to do is kill Antonio. Portia's victory over Shylock is not obtained by appeals to ethical principles. These are counteracted by Shylock through a self-degrading exaltation of what he calls "affection":

SHYLOCK
You'll ask me, why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I'll not answer that:
But, say, it is my humour: is it answer'd? [...]

³ Shylock's ardent desire to "have his bond" by cutting out a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast has deep roots in cultural history. It carries with it centuries-old fearful reminiscences of Jews as perpetrators of ritualistic murders on innocent Christians, an accusation that began with the so-called Norwich incident of 1140, when a boy named William was found dead outside of town and the Jews were accused of the crime, despite the fact that there was never enough evidence to support some of the people's spiteful suspicions (see Chazan, 2006: 157). Also, the forfeiture of the pound of flesh automatically triggers associations with the Jewish ritual of circumcision and turns Shylock into the exponent of a rebellious minority attempting to 'circumcise' or even 'castrate' the other, to convert the other to his own law, in the same abusive way in which the other tried to convert him to Christianity.

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dear” (3.2.113). The ambiguity of the word “dear” blurs the semantic slash that otherwise would have rendered love and financial interest safely apart from each other. Furthermore, it becomes even more uncomfortable when echoed, with the same meaning, by Shylock’s petition in Act IV: “’Tis dearly bought, ’tis mine, and I will have it” (3.1.100). In the same way, Jessica’s words to her Christian lover, “I will make fast the doors, and gild myself/ With some more ducats, and be with you straight” (2.5.98-99), reverberate with Shylock’s desperate cries after her elopement: “My daughter! O my ducats!” (2.8.15).

Identity discourses are thus tinged with associations, gestures or deeds that remind us of how Shakespeare’s favourite game as a playwright was to study stereotypes not only by presenting them as such, but also by overthrowing them. Apparently, Antonio is the representative of Christianity (the New Law) and Shylock, that of Jewishness (the Old Law), but in the course of the play, their supposedly unsurpassable difference from each other turns into *différance* by means of imagery, language and structural devices (repetition or reversal). Antonio and Shylock appear as both different and similar in terms of religion and financial matters. They are defined, so to say, against and through each other. They mirror each other in a circular mechanism involving identity and otherness. While each of them declares absolute allegiance to their own spiritual paradigm or community, they both trespass the limits imposed by those authorities. They are both tainted by an excess of passion which cannot go unpunished in Shakespeare. It is in fact they who symbolically choose the third casket, by risking all they have, and thus “gaining” Portia – who becomes the goddess of their destinies, their Nemesis.

The economic discourse that is woven into the fabric of *The Merchant of Venice* helps us understand why Antonio’s and Shylock’s passions cannot reach any transcendence: these passions are more like “affections” or “humours” of the body. The mercenary materialism of their outlooks, necessary for their trade, does not allow them to overcome the shallowness of their spiritual principles. Antonio’s or the Duke’s Christian mercy at the end of the trial feels more like cruelty, whereas Shylock’s tribal Jewishness is translated into a sort of individualistic manipulation of “the law” for the sake of individualistic profit. As Nuttall observes,

Shakespeare employs throughout a latent system of allusions to the economic character of Venetian society and this system of allusions, instead of corroborating the stark opposition of good and evil proposed in the play’s main action, subtly undermines it. The economic allusions tell us – against the simple plot – that the Jews and the Christians are deeply similar, for all are mercenary. The general vice which Christians ascribe to the Jews is one of which they are themselves – in a less obvious manner – guilty. The Jews therefore perform a peculiar ethical function in that they bear the brunt of the more obvious dirty work necessary to the glittering city. (2007: 141)

Shylock’s apparently too easy acceptance of his conversion is based on his equating “life” with “living”, i.e., life with the material means physically sustaining it. When his money is taken away from him, everything is taken away, including any ultimately irrelevant (for him) metaphysics:

SHYLOCK

Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live. (4.1.374-377)

If the body is the exclusive standard of measure and judgment, in a confrontation with the menace of death it is only the life of the body that prevails. Shylock’s silence and sickness render him coherent: it is only by the law of the body/matter/money that he can react or make decisions. It is not his Jewishness that dictates his reaction here, but his humanity, that carnal humanity he

so precisely describes as being shared with all the other people in his “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech. And after all, how many Christians, faced with pending death, would choose it over life for the sake of high-minded principles? The problem of the “forced conversion” emerges as rather helplessly human.

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