

Hegelian Thought and a Shakespearean World Picture: The Positioning and Repositioning of the Iconic Other in *The Merchant of Venice*

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The view of Hegel, and of many other philosophers, is that the character of any portion of the universe is so profoundly affected by its relations to the other parts and to the whole, that no true statement can be made about any part except to assign it its place in the whole. Since its place in the whole depends upon all the other parts, a true statement about its place in the whole will at the same time assign the place of every other part in the whole.¹

Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.²

¹ See Russell, Bertrand, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1946), (repr. by Routledge, 2010), p. 671.

² See Johnson, Samuel, 'Preface to Shakespeare' in Shakespeare, William, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, in Eight Volumes, with the Corrections and Illustrations of Various Commentators : to which are added notes by Sam. Johnson, ed. by Samuel Johnson (London: Printed for J. and R. Tonson, H. Woodfall, J. Rivington, R. Baldwin, L. Hawes, Clark and Collins, T. Longman, W. Johnston, T. Caslon, C. Corbet, T. Lownds, and the Executors of B. Dodd., 1765).

Abstract

This study focuses on the role of Otherness in *The Merchant of Venice*. The suggestion is that the play presents contradictory, and iconic, poles in the forms of dramatic figures and dramatic locations, which serve mutually to define their counterparts, thus presenting a world picture aligned with Hegelian thought in which any one part of the world of the play is dependent upon its relationship to the other parts of this same world for definition. This will be discussed in relation to the dramatic figures of Shylock and Antonio, and the dramatic locations of Venice and Belmont.

Otherness, a dramatic element inherent to, and prevalent throughout, Shakespearean and Renaissance drama, commonly functions as the fuse and fuel employed to engender and develop the machinations of the performance itself. Stephen Orgel highlights the importance of ‘Otherness’ to the Elizabethan playwright as follows:

We would have to say that there are lots of Others, and Others of many kinds, in this theatre: in fact, Elizabethan drama is dependent on otherness. Comedies are Italian, French or provincial, tragedies Spanish or Scandinavian or ancient; pastorals programmatically take place Somewhere Else. Dekker, Jonson and Middleton, placing comedies in contemporary London, are recognized as doing something new. The Other, for this theatre, is as much foreign as female – in their separate ways, both Othello and Portia are the Other. And in the largest sense, such figures are metonyms for theatre itself,

the great Other functioning within society as both a threat and a refuge.³

There is, it can be argued, a clear connection between Orgel's assessment of the 'Other' in Elizabethan drama and Bryan Magee's concise, but accurate, summary of Hegel's doctrine regarding 'the pattern of development':

Hegel had a specific doctrine about the pattern of development: it was, he said, dialectical. Every movement created an opposition to itself, every action evoked a reaction, and each such clash of opposing forces found resolution in a new, third state of affairs that carried the process forward – thereby, inevitably, evoking a new reaction. Thus, putting his technical terms for these successive stages into italics, he taught that every *thesis* inevitably conjures its own *antithesis* into being, and that the incompatibility between these two gives rise to a conflict which is resolved by a *synthesis* – which, because it then brings its own antithesis into being, becomes the thesis of a new triad.⁴

Whilst Orgel highlights Portia as being a key Other within *The Merchant of Venice*, similar claims can be made for both Shylock and Antonio. These two figures, presented according to their relationship with each other, depict each other through a constant and engendering focus on an otherness in

³ Orgel, Stephen, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 12.

⁴ See Magee, Bryan, *Confessions of a Philosopher: A Personal Journey through Western Philosophy from Plato to Popper* (New York: Modern Library, 1997), p. 360.

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each other deemed definitive. They are the Jew and the non-Jew, the spat-at and the spitter, the lender and the borrower, the flesh-taker and the flesh-provider. This recalls Hegel's theory of every *thesis* creating its own *antithesis*, as described by Magee.⁵ It becomes apparent that *The Merchant of Venice* is structured upon Other defining Other leading to conflict to be resolved through *synthesis*. In the case of Shylock and Antonio, this *synthesis* is provided by the judgement of Portia. In turn, and in line with Hegelian theory, the second stage *antithesis*, stemming from the newly created *synthesis*, is found in audience reaction to this *synthesis*.

Of further interest is a key similarity connected to a sense of Otherness that exists between these two members of Shakespeare's *dramatis personae*. Both figures, Shylock because of his Jewishness, and Antonio because of his apparent incompatibility with traditional structures of love and marriage, function as Others foreign to the standard population of the Venetian Comedy. In this respect, Shakespeare's Shylock and Antonio appear to align themselves with Marlowe's tragic heroes as defined by Stephen Greenblatt:

Marlowe's heroes fashion themselves not in loving submission to an absolute authority but in self-conscious opposition: Tamburlaine against hierarchy, Barabas against Christianity, Faustus against God, Edward against the sanctified rites and responsibilities of kingship, marriage, and manhood. And where identity in More, Tyndale, Wyatt, and Spenser had been achieved through an attack upon something perceived as alien and threatening, in Marlowe

⁵ Ibid.

it is achieved through a subversive identification with the alien.⁶

Shylock's 'identification with the alien', in this case the 'alien' being the non-Christian, is central to the figure's dramatic presence from the very outset. Indeed, the figure is positioned in iconic opposition to the culture of Christianity. When given an invitation to dine within a Christian setting, Shylock responds as follows:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet
the Nazarite conjured the devil into. 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.⁷ (1.3.22-26)

This speech, an early example of Shylock's labeling of himself as non-Christian and, therefore, Other, is followed by three short statements which reassert the strength and visibility of the moneylender's religious and cultural mindset.

I hate him for he is a Christian. (1.3.29)

Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe,
Will furnish me. (1.3.45-6)

When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep -
This Jacob from our holy Abram was,

⁶ See Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 203.

⁷ Quotations are taken from *The RSC Shakespeare: William Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Macmillan, 2007)

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As his wise mother wrought in his behalf,
The third possessor. (1.3.61-4)

Shylock's positioning of self outside of Christian Venetian society through continual and aggressive assertion of his particular brand of anti-Christian Jewishness is paralleled by Antonio's self being positioned exterior to the traditional processes of heterosexual love, marriage and procreation as supported by the European Christian Church. Antonio's exclusion from society is intimated towards in his opening words to the play:

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. (1.1.1-7)

Of interest here is the reason behind Antonio's sadness. Many critics and performances have suggested that an explanation for this state of mind can be found in the figure's unrequited homosexual love for Bassanio. Stanley Wells notes, for example, that 'Bill Alexander's 1987 Stratford production,⁸ which had Antony Sher as Shylock, made it clear that Antonio's melancholy stemmed from frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio'.⁹ Wells then outlines

⁸ *The Merchant of Venice*, The Royal Shakespeare Company, dir. by Bill Alexander: 1987 RST/1988 Barbican

⁹ See Wells, Stanley, *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 81.

his interpretation of this element of the production by explaining that ‘Antonio reeled as Bassanio spoke of his admiration for Portia and kissed him with despairing passion but little response as they parted’.¹⁰ Wells then suggests that ‘Antonio was to be understood as a depressive homosexual and the manner in which Bassanio reciprocated his affection – which is undeniable in the lines – did not preclude the thought that they might have had a consummated physical relationship which was coming to an end because Bassanio had fallen in love with Portia.’¹¹

Authorial intention and critical reaction need not, however, be matched in true alignment. Alexander’s ‘exterior to the play’ critique, displayed in performance, of Antonio’s love for Bassanio is, however, partnered by the ‘within the play’ critique offered by Salerio:

I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:
Bassanio told him he would make some speed
Of his return. He answered, ‘Do not so,
Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
But stay the very riping of the time.
And for the Jew’s bond which he hath of me,
Let it not enter in your mind of love.
Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts
To courtship and such fair ostents of love
As shall conveniently become you there.’

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

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And even there, his eye being big with tears,
Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
And with affection wondrous sensible
He wrung Bassanio's hand, and so they parted. (2.8.36-50)

This speech, frequently cited as evidence of Antonio's frustrated love for Bassanio, takes on further connotations when considered in the light of Greenblatt's assessment of the nature of 'the fashioning of identity' in the sixteenth century:

What is central is the perception - as old in academic writing as Burckhardt and Michelet - that there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities. This change is difficult to characterize in our usual ways because it is not only complex but resolutely dialectical. If we say that there is a new stress on the executive power of the will, we must say that there is the most sustained and relentless assault upon the will; if we say that there is a new social mobility, we must say that there is a new assertion of power by both family and state to determine all movement within the society; if we say that there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological, and psychological organization, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives.¹²

¹² See Greenblatt, pp. 1-2.

If Greenblatt's evaluation of sixteenth-century perception of human identity is accurate, Antonio's predicament is profoundly problematic. Antonio's 'heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological, and psychological organization', is rendered inactive by 'a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives.'¹³ The tears Antonio sheds at Bassanio's departure are tears of defeat. The forceful imposition of an ideology supporting heterosexual marriage has nullified the possibility of open and socially acceptable gay union. The dialectical forces attendant to identity formation are, then, centrally influential on Antonio's mindset.

So as to retain appropriate focus on the topic in question, it is important to consider what, exactly, has been - and will be - signified by the words 'Shylock' and 'Antonio' in this analysis. It should not be forgotten that Shakespeare's Shylock and Shakespeare's Antonio are nothing more and nothing less than dramatic roles to be performed to an audience within a theatrical space. Their value, as Michael Goldman accurately proposes, is found in their distance from the true human form as opposed to their synchronicity with it:

All acting roles have a quality we may call iconic - they give the impression of a fixed or masklike definition. We feel we are watching a figure that, although animated, is yet a type or effigy. It's through the interplay between the iconic and the animate, between mask and face, that drama is able to deploy some of the uncanniness

¹³ Ibid.

associated with acting itself. So we may think of the actor's task as both projecting an icon and filling it with life.¹⁴

As Gina Masucci Mackenzie suggests, 'the terms of art are totally different from the terms of life'; to render a dramatic figure 'human' is to negate the rich potential for communication of meaning that is embedded within and inherent to the iconic nature of the *dramatis personae*.¹⁵ Dramatic representations of Shakespeare's Shylock and Antonio are of artistic and philosophical interest precisely because of their distance from outer-theatrical reality. It is precisely this condition that allows *The Merchant of Venice* (and, in this instance, *Measure for Measure*) to meet the conditions attributed to it by Jonathan Bate:

The Merchant of Venice and *Measure for Measure* make us think about the conflicting demands of mercy and justice. But 'matter' of this kind was usually derived by Shakespeare from his sources. He was not a moral philosopher or a deliverer of homilies. His interest was in *dramatizing* 'matter' and if there is a principal 'moral' to be drawn from his work it is the one which follows from his mastery of dramatic form – that any position may be answered by a counter-position and that actions are worth more attention than opinions.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Goldman, Michael, 'Performer and Role in Marlowe and Shakespeare' in *Shakespeare and the Sense of Performance: Essays in the Tradition of Performance Criticism in Honor of Bernard Beckerman* pp. 91-102 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 93.

¹⁵ See Gina Masucci Mackenzie, *The Theatre of the Real* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁶ See Bate, Jonathan, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 159.

Bate's comments, whether intentionally or not, return discussion of Shakespeare's theatrical structuring to the aspect of Hegelian thought mentioned above. Of note, and of relevance, is Bate's suggestion that, in the theatre of Shakespeare, 'any position may be answered by a counter-position'.¹⁷ Could it be argued that Bate's 'position' and 'counter-position' are semantic kin of Hegel's '*thesis* and *antithesis*'? If Goldman's notion of all acting roles having an 'iconic' quality is considered alongside this theoretical understanding of theatre performance, the roots of a possible approach towards defining key aspects of Shakespeare's dramatic methodology are rendered visible. This understanding, in turn, has direct consequences for further investigation into Greenblatt's proposal regarding the fashioning of self in Renaissance England.

At this juncture it seems appropriate to consider the nature of the play society in which the dialectical forces mentioned in the first stages of this study have emerged. W. H. Auden's assessment of the city in which Shylock and Antonio are positioned is astute and to the point:

Venice does not produce anything itself, either raw materials or manufactured goods. Its existence depends upon the financial profits which can be made by international trade,

... the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations

¹⁷ Ibid.

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that is to say, on buying cheaply here and selling dearly there, and its wealth lies in its accumulated money capital. Money has ceased to be simply a convenient medium of exchange and has become a form of social power which can be gained or lost. Such a mercantile society is international and cosmopolitan; it does not distinguish between the brother and the alien other than on a basis of blood or religion – from the point of view of society, customers are brothers, trade rivals others. But Venice is not simply a mercantile society; it is also a city inhabited by various communities with different loves – Gentiles and Jews, for example – who do not regard each other personally as brothers, but must tolerate each other's existence because both are indispensable to the proper functioning of their society, and this toleration is enforced by the laws of the Venetian state.¹⁸

This notion of 'tolerance' to allow 'proper functioning' is, as intimated by Auden, symptomatic of a society in which Otherness is prevalent. A variation on the Venetian business practice of tolerating the other so as to encourage gain is transferred into Antonio's personal situation. His 'tolerance' of Bassanio's desire to woo Portia, and his related financial support is, then, a charitable act of anti-business in which the Other oppresses his own ideologies for the sake of the Venetian norm. A straight marriage between the desirable female and the previous target of the gay man's affections is, thus, instigated and supported, if painfully, by the gay man himself.

¹⁸ See Auden, W.H., 'Brothers and Others' in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Wilders (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 224-240, pp. 225-226.

In contrast, Shylock's business deal with Antonio reflects a negation of tolerance of the Other. His steadfast refusal to withdraw his famous demand for a pound of Antonio's flesh is an act of anti-Venetian defiance which initially appears, however, to be acceptable according to Venetian law:

... by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond.
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom.
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 answered? (4.1.37-44)

If every ducat in six thousand ducats
Were in six parts and every part a ducat,
I would not draw them. I would have my bond. (4.1.86-88)

I stand here for law. (4.1.144)

My deeds upon my head! I crave the law.
The penalty and forfeit of my bond. (4.1.206-207)

By my soul I swear,
There is no power in the tongue of man
To alter me. I stay here on my bond. (4.1.241-243)

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When Antonio's self-oppressing act of charity is placed in juxtaposition to Shylock's aggressive drive towards self-satisfaction the nature of the societal structures active in the Venice of the play become apparent. As was the case for the iconic definitions of Shylock and Antonio, examples of societal interaction within the world of the play recall Hegel's theory of *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*. This society, then, rotates around the notions of acceptance and denial of the Other. Acceptance of the Other, at least within relevant parameters, is required if mutually advantageous transactions, both business-related and personal, are to be instigated and developed. Denial of the Other marks a fall into future Denial of self. In both cases, whether directed positively or negatively, *thesis* creates *antithesis* which, in sequence, encourages the generation of *synthesis*. To achieve this in performance, iconic representation of the Other is produced by the figures of Shylock and Antonio, both in their concurrent self-definition, and in their behavioural patterns when interacting with each other. As an example, Shylock's denial of Antonio, be it in response to reprehensible acts of racism suffered, or not, leads to societal denial of the Other within Shylock, as requested by Antonio:

So please my lord the duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content, so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it,
Upon his death, unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more: that for his favour

He presently become a Christian.
The other, that he do record a gift
Here in the court of all he dies possessed
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter. (4.1.387-397)

Shylock, initially a Jew, father and wealthy money-lender is thus translated into a fatherless Christian of restricted means. As highlighted by Auden, the prosperity of Venice is dependent upon mutual understanding and agreement between two interacting Others. If such understanding and agreement is strangled in a fashion deemed unreasonable by local cultural patterns and authoritative powers, the offending Other is assigned a new and unwanted role and identity. This Other is, thus, repositioned and its iconic meaning is reassigned. *Thesis* generates *antithesis*, and this coupling of opposing dramatic elements necessitates *synthesis*.

It should be noted that within *The Merchant of Venice* the city of Venice itself is partnered by an Other in the form of Belmont. The relationship between these locales, mirroring the relationship between Shylock and Antonio, is one of mutually-dependent definition. Auden offers insightful definitions of these contrasting settings, highlighting their foreignness to each other, whilst making pertinent references to the structure of *Henry IV*:

The action of *The Merchant of Venice* takes place in two locations, Venice and Belmont, which are so different in character that to produce the play in a manner which will not blur this contrast

and yet preserve a unity is very difficult. If the spirit of Belmont is made too predominant, then Antonio and Shylock will seem irrelevant, and vice versa. In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare intrudes Falstaff, who by nature belongs to the world of *opera buffa*, into the historical world of political chronicle with which his existence is incompatible, and thereby, consciously or unconsciously, achieves the effect of calling in question the values of military glory and temporal justice as embodied in Henry of Monmouth. In *The Merchant of Venice* he gives us a similar contrast - the romantic fairy-story world of Belmont is incompatible with the historical reality of money-making Venice - but this time what is called in question is the claim of Belmont to be the Great Good Place, the Earthly Paradise. Watching *Henry IV*, we become convinced that our aesthetic sympathy with Falstaff is a profounder vision than our ethical judgment which must side with Hal. Watching *The Merchant of Venice*, on the other hand, we are compelled to acknowledge that the attraction which we naturally feel towards Belmont is highly questionable.¹⁹

The mercantile society of Venice finds its definition through its relationship to the fairytale setting of Belmont and the societal health of each locale is called into question by its counterpart. This is to suggest that the usury that resides at the very centre of Venetian prosperity is realigned by the devaluation of gold and silver that necessarily accompanies the Belmontian casket riddle with its focus on lead as the correct, and worthy, choice.²⁰

¹⁹ See Auden, pp. 226-7.

²⁰ See *The Merchant of Venice*, (3.2).

The thesis, thus, creates its antithesis. To clarify this point further, it should be noted that both societies are introduced via reference to material wealth. Venetian wealth, as intimated by Salerio's description of Antonio's fully-stocked ships when referring to the merchant's mindset, is defined within the realm of consciousness of a hierarchy of relative financial value:

Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
There where your argosies with portly sail
Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood,
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,
Do overpeer the petty traffickers
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,
As they fly by them with their woven wings. (1.1.8-14)

Antonio's ships, being larger, faster and laden with, in financial terms, a more valuable cargo than all others are deemed 'superior'. Belmont, however, is home to a contrasting ideology. Nerissa's comments, in response to Portia's expression of dissatisfaction, and later supported by Portia, clearly serve to undermine Salerio's definition of value in their support of 'competency' over 'superfluity':

PORTIA By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this
great world.

NERISSA You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were
in the same abundance as your good fortunes are, and yet,

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for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much,
as they that starve with nothing; it is no small happiness,
therefore, to be seated in the mean. Superfluity comes sooner
by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

PORTIA Good sentences and well pronounced. (1.2.1-6)

Belmont, then, is the *antithesis* to the *thesis* presented by the play's definition of Venice: the ideology of the one countering and challenging the ideology of the other. The *synthesis* generated by this *thesis-antithesis* development is found in the reassessment of appropriate human interaction embodied within the ring episode.²¹ This episode begins with two female figures, Portia and Nerissa, giving rings which they endow with particular importance to their respective male husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano. These rings are to be treasured and, perhaps naturally, never given away. The female figures then dupe their male counterparts into giving the rings away (to Portia and Nerissa themselves, but in disguise, it should be added). Next follows a period in which the female figures tease, threaten and teach their husbands before the play moves towards comedic reconciliation.

It could be argued that these rings serve as icons to evoke both the Venetian focus on financial wealth at the expense of humanity, or 'superfluity' and the Belmontian focus on quality of human life above financial gain, or 'competency'.²² The ideologies attendant to the games and discussions

²¹ See *The Merchant of Venice*, (3.2), (3.4), (4.1), (4.2), and (5.1).

²² See *The Merchant of Venice*, (1.2.5): 'Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.'

involving these iconic rings, and the consequences of their owners' treatment and usage of them, formulate the *synthesis* which develops out of the *thesis-antithesis* generation. An ideological structure built upon iconic communication and closely resembling Hegel's doctrine concerning the dialectical nature of the pattern of development is, thus, integral to the structuring of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

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