On the Borders of Convention

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INTRODUCTION

ALEKSANDRA NIKČEVIĆ BATRIĆEVIĆ AND MARIJA KNEŽEVIĆ

This book comprises a selection of papers delivered at the fourth international conference on English Language and Literature, *On the Borders of Convention*, which took place at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nikšić, University of Montenegro on October 30—November 1, 2008. Participants coming from all over the world, including as distant regions as South Africa, the United States of America, Great Britain, France, Italy, Belarus, the Balkans, were brought together by their interest in reconsidering conventions in language, literature and culture. Needless to say that one of the good things about this international cooperation is that owing to their different socio-cultural backgrounds, these scholars have contributed to producing an extremely varied picture of ways of approaching the challenge of a changing world.

The papers on literature and culture collected in this book contribute a further element of rigour into the discussion of numerous and always varying and changing borders of convention in a literary text, literary genre, and literary theory, as well as in general culture and everyday paths of life. Therefore, the papers are divided into two parts that respectively discuss mere literary issues, as are textual and genre borders, and those issues that are more culturally oriented and determined.

Talking about literary conventions, we expectedly start with the classic master—Shakespeare. In a paper titled "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Shylock," Peter Preston from the University of Nottingham writes that in spite of the play's title, Shylock is the most familiar and frequently discussed figure in *The Merchant of Venice*. As the type of the grasping and merciless Jew he is a descendant of the figure of Judas in the medieval mystery plays, while his legalistic insistence on the word of the law is set against Portia's pleas for mercy and the spirit of the law as the central conflict of the play. As a despised yet necessary figure in the speculative mercantile world of Venice, however, and as a father and

member of the Jewish community he appears in a rather different light. Shakespeare's characteristic problematising of Shylock's personality and his role in the Venetian community gives the play its energy and interest. By means of a close examination of some of Shylock's language, this paper explores some of the complexities of the play and asks some questions about its representation of both Jewish and Christian values.

Marina Ragachewskaya's paper, titled "Psychoanalysis in the Works of Modernists: From Theory to Fantasy (H. Read and D. H. Lawrence)," assumes that though the connection between literature and psychoanalysis has been the topic of profound research throughout the whole of the 20th century and the influence of Freud's ideas on the prose and poetry of modernists is already an undeniable fact, the very mechanism of the subtle transformation of psychoanalytic techniques into a fantasy world of literature is still a matter of vast possibilities of investigation. On a purely theoretical level, D. H. Lawrence's *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) may be said to have laid the foundation for the connection between psychoanalysis and fiction and it can also be evidenced in the writer's prose. H. Read (1893-1968) was one of the earliest to practice psychoanalytical criticism. In *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism* (1938) he saw depth psychology necessary for understanding literary creation. This paper seeks to uncover some of the mechanisms of psychoanalytic techniques proceeding from the analysis of the above works to tracing certain devices in the writers' fiction.

Vanja Vukićević argues that the idea of epiphany—a belief in significant and elusive moments in which the hidden and higher, undeniable and ultimate reality can be glimpsed—is one of the crucial concepts in the art of James Joyce, as well as in modernist literature in general. We could say it became almost a modernist convention in a philosophical, psychological and, particularly, structural sense. However, in his early masterpiece *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's aesthetics approaches the borders of postmodernism in the treatment of the final phase of aesthetic apprehension, which is actually, here unnamed and unpronounced, the moment of epiphany. Her paper is titled "A Shift in Joyce's Idea of Epiphany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: On the Borders of (Post)Modernism."

In the paper titled "Trespassing or Trespassed Against: Autobiographical Border Crossings," Vesna Lopičić writes that in the second chapter titled "Auto/biography between literature and science" of Laura Marcus' enlightening book on this genre, was the point of inspiration for the present paper. Generic pollution by other types of discourses and consequent

indistinctiveness and blurring of the borders of autobiography are often discussed in theory. Critics underline antonyms often present in autobiography: fact / fiction, objective / subjective, science / literature and many others besides the trespasses on the autobiography by memoir, biography, diary etc. Of all of them, the paper focuses on the interplay between literature and history starting with a premise that every autobiographer is a historian of the self and frequently of his times as well. If history is a record or narrative description of past events and if literature may be defined as imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value, it is clear that the boundary between the two discourses is far from clear. An autobiography is supposed to be a factual account of the self and, at least implicitly, of the spirit of the times but her claim is that it gives only a version of the truth of the past events. It is indeed between literature and history. Even when the sub-genre of historical autobiography is in question, its veracity cannot be taken for granted. Her reflections on these issues will be set against Finney's and Spengemann's and illustrated on the corpus of Dragan Todorović's *A Blues for Yugoslavia*.

Mirjana Daničić from the University of Belgrade writes about the borders of storytelling. She analyzes the structural organisation and metaphorical colouring of the beginnings and endings of Toni Morrison's novels, drawing parallels and, at the same time, finding dissimilarities between the conventional forms and Morrison's (experimental) variations. The author tries to discover if this Morrison's modification of the conventional beginnings also means closing the narrative in an unconventional way.

In her paper "Writing Closure," Aleksandra V. Jovanović writes that narrative closure has become one of the major issues of debate in the modern narrative world. In the traditional narrative the narration always leads to closure. In modernist novel, the closure is, even implicitly, there. On the other hand, in postmodernism, closure is usually blurred or even intentionally hidden from the reader. The question is who hides the closure? Which of the narrative voices are even in charge of closing the narrative? Or could any of them close it without the danger of ruining its potentials? In John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenants Woman* there are three closures. In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* the closure is presented to the reader as the one which has been chosen among many possible closures. It is important to remember that from the time of Roland Barthes the question, how does one close a writerly text, has imposed itself on us, for the simple reason that in a writerly text there is at least one of the narrative voices which is always at large. In her paper she argues

that the postmodern narrative always leads the way beyond the boundaries of its predictable world.

In the paper titled "Crime Pays Off: Conventions of the Crime Genre and Crime against It," Jasna Poljak Rehlicki writes that the term genre is set on the bottom of the classification ladder of literature and it consists of a certain set of rules (conventions) that help the audience to recognize and accept it. Crime genre belongs to the so called trivial literature and composes of some unchangeable elements: the mysterious crime in the beginning, the victim, the murderer, the detective, the investigation and the suitable punishment. Besides that, this genre consists of the whole set of rules and characteristics of its own forming an extremely fixed scheme. However, many authors were agitated about these rigid rules and they tried to go around or even break them, one of them being a Swiss author and dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921-1990). Poljak Rehlicki finds his last novel *The Pledge: Requiem for the Detective Novel* (1958) especially intriguing because, while containing all the elements of the crime (detective) genre, it demolishes some of its most fundamental characteristics. The questions she poses, therefore, is if this piece of literature still belongs to the same genre, if the author crossed the line and made a step towards elite literature, if the main supports of the genre conventions are broken.

Monika Kavalir from the University of Ljubljana writes about deconstruction of dialogue in Bret Easton Ellises's *American Psycho.* Her paper explores the thesis that in his novel *American Psycho,* Bret Easton Ellis deconstructs everyday conversation: some of the dialogues that the novel's main hero, Patrick Bateman, leads take to the extreme the structural and ritual characteristics of human interaction, revealing the purely social nature of our exchanges. The initial presentation of the novel, its subject matter and responses to it is followed by the analysis of five excerpts from *American Psycho* which contain anomalous dialogue. The examined features include the textual status of the dialogues, turn-taking and overlap, adjacency pairs and repair and prosody and paralanguage. The concluding part of the paper investigates Ellis's dialogues as input for conversation analysis in general and suggests that it signals a greater importance of structural and ritual dimensions of conversation than has so far been acknowledged.

Goran Radonjić from the University of Montenegro writes about critique and reinvention of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. His paper explores the ways in which Vonnegut's postmodernist novel challenges the conventions of the genre. These conventions are seen on several levels: communication, storytelling, composition, conception of

reality, relation between fiction and reality, between literature and other arts and the relations among various literary genres.

In "The Flouting of Social Conventions and Rules in the Stories of Raymond Carver and Haruki Murakami," Sandra Josipović points out the similarities and differences in the way both Carver and Murakami write about people who either intentionally or unintentionally flout and disregard social conventions and rules, addressing the issues of single, simple men and women lost in the turmoil of their everyday life. There are thematic similarities in their work because they both write about lapses in communication, people just missing each other, chance encounters between strangers, lonely drifting souls, disconnectedness and estrangement. The difference is that Murakami makes a determined assault on what is considered to be a conventional form of social behaviour because he has a knack for dislocating realities, for uncovering the surreal in the everyday and uncovering extraordinary in the ordinary. In his stories Murakami moves from the everyday reality to the realm of absurd and surreal. Unlike Murakami, Carver remains in the house and the back yard and he is obsessed with the drab and quotidian.

Marija Knežević considers Native American conception of language as a solution for what she assumes is the prime reason of the confusion and alienation in the contemporary urban world – degradation of words. Through a series of examples from contemporary literature and theory, she illustrates how Native American idea that words are empirical beings, imbued with powers to order universe, still defines storytelling as a means of identification and an overall cohesion.

The second part of the book opens with a paper by Manuela D'Amore, from University of Catania (Italy). D'Amore writes about Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest*. First published in 1694, this two-part pamphlet was completed in 1697 and became one of the key texts in 1600-1700 conduct literature. The writer's philosophical approach to reality, as well as her ability to prove her theories, in fact, open up to the Age of Enlightment and clearly anticipate the role of women at the end of the century. Starting from Astell's choice to write in letter form to communicate with her contemporaries in a more direct way, this paper shows that the use of Reason is not in contrast with utopian solutions to the woman question. The key words in Astell's work are Nature, Ignorance, Corruption and Authority. For Astell, however, it is especially Custom (that is to say, the long-established conventions of patriarchal society) that more strongly contributes to women's inferiority and hinders them in their search for

truth, knowledge and freedom. After writing about the important role of education in their future emancipation, both parts of *A Serious Proposal* offer a utopian solution to problems and describe a gendered space of intellectual liberty. Echoing Maragaret Cavendish's *Convent of Pleasure*, but also Frances Drake's project to create a new Amazon society, Astell writes about a possible "Happy Retreat," where women will know themselves better, start a satisfying learning process and experiment with a form of sisterhood.

Radojka Vukčević writes about "Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Borders of Convention," in the paper in which she focuses on their poetics and their redrawing of the borders of conventions. The outcome of such approach is discussed in detail, as well as the time of the emergence of American academic criticism in the 1940s and 1950s that has emphasized the effort of the new academic critics to establish literary criticism as a discrete, systematic, even "scientific" discipline within the increasingly rationalized disciplinary structure of the postwar university, the time that preceded the struggle of the American feminist critics who in the 1960s thrived to enter and change the established field of literary studies. Consequently, conventions had to be further redrawn again. However, the sources, means, terms and goals of the quest for authority on the part of feminist critics differed sharply from those of their male predecessors. Authority for them was an expressively collective empowerment as a response to the historical disempowerment of women as a class. The primary inspiration of American feminist criticism came from, as Carton and Graff point out, the revival of the women's movement in the 1960s, whose primary goal was to analyze, combat and overcome the situation of women.

Ksenija Firšt from the University of Osijek, Croatia, contributes to this volume with the paper titled "Constructing Gender through Language in the Works of Raymond Carver" and proposes a simple solution to the question of gender suggesting approaching "gender" as a word. The constitution of gender as a phenomenon of language is perhaps most evident in a literary text, because language is an author's only tool. If the author chooses to clearly mark gender, he can do so quite easily, either by using specific morfosyntactic elements, such as pronouns and endings, or by constructing a context that will make the gender of his characters visible. However, if the author chooses to construct a very different type of discourse, one which uses the same means for marking gender in order to cloud the differences between genders, things become much more interesting. Therefore, Firšt focuses on these "abnormalities," and thus shows how something that we take for granted is not as simple as it seems. In fact, she

examines how the very appearance of gender opens up a discourse on various truths and contexts and how they are dependent on the biological, ideological, discursive and social norms that shape the world as we know it. The point she tries to make is that gender must not be used only as a trait given to a character, but that its very use can be a game of its own. The examples found in Carver's stories show how this gender-game talks about truths that exist for a human being, not for a man or a woman, and how the construction of gender through language can be used in order to show that characters in literary works can be portrayed first as human, and only then as male or female.

Jeanine Belgodere from the University of Le Havre (France) writes about the choreographic art of Isadora Duncan and about "the modernistic and humanistic vision" of this "revolutionary creator," the most outstanding creator of modern dance. Evidently Duncan remains the bold woman who, shaking up the codes of ballet, advocated a revolutionary conception of art and devised a new concept of movement. As she was mainly concerned about restoring a spiritual and a human significance to dance, she could not but disapprove of ballet which, at the close of the nineteenth century, clearly sacrificed emotion for the feats of the body. Duncan broke outside the longstanding tradition of ballet. She dismissed the codified movement vocabulary of ballet, its conventions and themes as well as, the points, the corset and the tutu, in short the ballerina's entire paraphernalia. Instead she ventured into space barefoot and without finery, draped in a chiffon dress or in a Greek style tunic. Just as she moved away from the traditional codes of ballet, so did she also depart from its ethereal, wraith-like ballerinas, embracing instead, full-bodied dancers.

In his paper "Peyton Place: The Boundaries of Sexual Discourse in 1950s U. S. A." John Spurlock writes that in American English, "Peyton Place" refers to a small community where sexual repression competes with sexual indiscretion, and those most repressed engage in voyeuristic gossip. The terms come from a 1956 bestselling novel by Grace Metalious which was turned into a blockbuster movie the following year. The movie softened some of the book's harshest elements in its portrait, but the movie, like the novel, treated many of the same transgressions as had the book, including adultery, incest, rape and abortion. His paper examines several key transformations from the novel to the movie version of Peyton Place. While some of the sexual transgressions shown in the novel never appeared in the movie, the movie made good box office use of the novel's central tension between desire and repression. Where the movie made the sharpest shifts from the novel came in the realm of emotion rather than

sex. The people of Hollywood's Peyton Place are given the opportunity to find redemption through love and romance. The adaptation of Peyton Place allows us to examine the limits of sexual discussion in mid- to late-1950s U.S.A. The distance from book to movie marks a boundary in the shifting sexual values of the mid-1950s. Some topics seemed to have become available for use in fiction and cinema, and in some cases ready for discussion in the forum of public policy in the United States.

In "*Beur* Is the New Black: Minoritarian Culture Adapts Mainstream Canon in the New France" Rosemary Peters focuses primarily on Francophone artists of the rap genre and specifically on the second-generation performers of Arabic origin. Beyond the Francophone context, though, she proposes that this genre deliberately goes beyond and deeper than the specifics of national traditions. That is, both the textual element of the rap-song as a new genre of poetry and the political element of the rap-video as a new means of accessing spatial constructs provide an evolved discourse for understanding place, tradition and subjectivity, seen on a larger global scale.

Marie Leuliet, from the University of Paris IV, Sorbonne, France, writes how from the 15th century onward, history painting was seen as the noblest of all genres. This well-accepted truth was promoted by the prestigious European art academies that had a worldly influence, including the young United States of the late 18th century. Yet, with the War of Independence and the need to find models of one's own not only politically but also culturally, new icons had to be chosen and promoted in the young nation. Genre painting was deemed able to represent the United States. It was nevertheless a transgression of all the rules that decorum had so far promoted and defended. And yet, it became the prime representation of the United States inside and outside the country. Her paper examines the rules that were deemed noble at the time before showing how genre painting changed even the way art should be practiced.

Jim Phelps, from the University of Zululand, South Africa, writes about graffiti as anti-boundary. His paper, taking its cue from a personal experience in which a repeated graffito provoked an imagined response in the author, discusses how this form of expression, by appropriating the conventional borders and boundaries of public space (especially signage and walled divisions) both to violate and ornament it, contributes to the destabilisation and transformation of identities of self and other in the contemporary urban condition. From one perspective, as an act of deliberate provocation (vandalism, "culture jamming"), graffiti destabilise and transform conventional identity by bringing (as reactionary anger) unexamined assumptions of normality into consciousness; while from

another perspective, as a passive backdrop reflecting the troubled unconscious of the unassimilated and marginalised, graffiti destabilise and transform conventional identity by awakening dormant sympathy for and identification with the other; while from yet a third perspective, as ornament and beautification, graffiti transform conventional identity by kindling enchantment rather than alienation as an alternative for blankness or ugliness. In the discussion, the concept of physical walls as manifestations of conventional mental walls, divisions, borders and boundaries, is deployed.

As we are about to close this brief introduction onto the book, we hope that we have drawn an overall picture of the theoretical assumptions of the scholars who have contributed to this volume. We have sought to stress that what is most noticeable from the evidence of their studies is that scholars today concern these issues through a dynamic global process and beyond any preconceived design, or any strict set of theoretical prescriptions, which would otherwise lead them to ignore the ever-shifting borders in literature and culture, as well as in global socio-cultural reality in general.

The variety and complexity of these essays offer fresh views to the problem posed in the title of the book. Therefore, we trust that they will stimulate intellectual confrontation and circulation of ideas within the field of literature and cultural studies.

PART ONE

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AND THE PROBLEM OF SHYLOCK

PETER PRESTON

1

In *Journey Through a Small Planet* (1972), his memoir of growing up in the East End of London in the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish writer Emanuel Litvinoff recalls the experience of Abie, his younger brother. When he was asked to take the part of Shylock in a school class room reading of *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596-8), Abie refused to do so on the grounds that it "insulted his people." "Six times he was caned on the palms of his hands, six times he refused. And Abie, who was then only twelve, became the hero of the neighbourhood for a week."[1] Many years later, in 1951, Emanuel, now a full-time writer, committed his own act of public defiance, challenging not only Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock, but also the anti-Semitism of England's then best-known poet, T. S. Eliot. In his poem "To T. S. Eliot," Litvinoff wrote

> I am not one accepted in your parish.
> Bleistein is my relative and I share
> the protozoic slime of Shylock, a page
> in Sturmer, and, underneath the cities
> a billet somewhat lower than the rats. [2]

Litvinoff first made this poem public when he read it aloud in the prestigious setting of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts and in the presence of T. S. Eliot himself. Litvinoff's poem echoes words and phrases from Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," in which Bleistein's "lustreless protrusive eye / Stares from the protozoic

[1] Emanuel Litvinoff, *Journey Through a Small Planet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 80.
[2] Quoted in "A Life in Writing: Emanuel Litvinoff," *Guardian Review*, 9 September 2008, 10.

slime" and "The rats are underneath the piles / The Jew is underneath the slime."[3]

The incident was reported in the *Jewish Chronicle* for 23 February 1951, which quoted both the lines from Litvinoff's poem and how Stephen Spender—himself of Jewish descent—defended his friend Eliot against the implied charge of anti-Semitism.[4] The debate on this matter continues—most notably in the work of Anthony Julius[5]—but what interests me about both these incidents is that the Litvinoff brothers focus their perception of English anti-Semitism on Shylock. He is not mentioned in Eliot's Bleistein poem, but the poem's language and Venetian setting recall *The Merchant of Venice*, and no doubt Emanuel was mindful of Abie's principled stand when he wrote his own poem.

Such responses on the Litvinoffs' part were hardly surprising because by 1920 the word "Shylock" had acquired negative associations that went beyond any reference to the character in *The Merchant of Venice*. By the late eighteenth century it could refer to any Jew, but by the nineteenth century it was also used to describe any pawnbroker or money-lender, especially one who charges an extortionate rate of interest. "The essence of the real Shylock's business," declared the influential *Westminster Gazette* in 1898, "is that he extorts money from his victims on threats of various kinds."[6] In his satirical novel *The Autocracy of Mr Parham*, published in 1930, H. G. Wells has a character say of the Americans that "They Shylocked Europe," while a character in *England, Their England* (1933), A. G. McDonnell's extremely popular and widely-read novel, says sympathetically of some friends, "One or two of them have had a bit of hard luck lately, and one can't Shylock the poor devils."

These quotations offer a sense of why the Litvinoff brothers should have found Shylock so problematic a figure, for they represent Shakespeare's character in the worst possible light. His clients are always in danger of becoming his victims and to behave in a Shylockian manner is seen as unpleasant, harsh, threatening or cruel. Shylock then becomes a

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[3] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems. 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 42-43.

[4] The *Jewish Chronicle* report can be found at http://www.emanuel-litvinoff.com/News/99a063b9-54e4-4aia-8494-acb1ea1f5520.html (accessed 30 September 2008).

[5] See Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*. 1995 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). See also the discussion of Eliot's anti-Semitism in John Worthen, *T. S. Eliot: A Short Biography* (London: Haus, 2009), 74-78.

[6] This and all other examples given in this paragraph are taken from the second edition (1991) of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

negative representation of Jewishness—a rapacious, vengeful and implacable figure whose very business as a usurer is immoral and heretical because it contravenes the Church's teaching on the unnatural breeding of money in the form of interest. Shylock's vulpine insistence on his pound of flesh is deflected only by the determination, ingenuity and eloquence of a compassionate young Christian woman. Shylock is stripped of his wealth and deprived of his religion, and to ensure that no trace of the values that he represents should remain in the audience's mind, there is a final act, by turns lyrical and bawdy, that sorts out the disguises, affirms the victory of the harmonious values of Belmont over the mercantilism of Venice, nonetheless rewards everyone with lots of money, and by placing an emphasis on marriage and begetting, justifies the play's status as a comedy. Only Shylock is excluded from the happy ending.

Forty years ago, however, Peter Hall directed a London production of *The Merchant of Venice* which ended with a poignant reminder of Shylock and his treatment by the Christians. Hall built his production around the effects of three pieces of paper. The first is Portia's father's will, which condemns her suitors to go through a ludicrous charade and places her at the mercy of mere fortune-hunters. The second paper is the bond between Shylock and Antonio, which nearly costs the merchant his life, but which, thanks to Portia's quick-wittedness, proves to be Shylock's undoing. Finally, there is the document that Nerissa presents to Lorenzo in the final scene: "There do I give you and Jessica/ From the rich Jew, a special deed of gift / After his death, of all he dies possess'd of." (5.1.291-3)[7] Lorenzo's reply says nothing about Shylock; indeed he's mentioned on only one other occasion in the fifth act, and never by name. However, at the end of Peter Hall's production he acquired a kind of presence. As the randy, cheerful Christians left the stage, Shylock's deed of gift fell to the ground and for a moment lay in the centre of the empty stage. Then Jessica returned, picked up the deed, read it, and began to weep; the stage lights dimmed on her lone, disconsolate figure.

The moment was of course non-textual, a purely directorial intervention, in performance an arresting reminder of Jessica's filial treachery that lent ambiguity to the cheerful atmosphere that preceded it. It was successful as the culmination of a production, set in Edwardian England, in which Laurence Olivier played Shylock as a proud and seemingly powerful man whose concern for appearance and social propriety concealed insecurity and vulnerability. His downfall was like an

[7] All quotations from and references to *The Merchant of Venice* are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by John Russell Brown, London: Methuen 1959.

unmasking or the cracking of a precariously maintained façade, as Shylock struggled to retain his dignity in the face of humiliation. Jessica, installed with Lorenzo as the temporary guardians of Belmont, does not witness her father's defeat, but the brief of piece of stage business at the end of Hall's production suggested that she understands what it would mean to him.

It is on this balancing point of sympathy and hostility that the interest of Shylock's character rests. Shakespeare inherited the tradition of the wicked Jew, derived from the stereotyped representation of Judas in the medieval mystery plays—the only character in plays full of Jews who is identified *as* a Jew, his religion rendered problematic by his betrayal of Christ. He also owes something to the Vice figure in the Morality plays. Christopher Marlowe also drew on these traditions in his *Grand Guignol* black comedy *The Jew of Malta* (c.1592), although Barabas—"Sometimes I go about and poison wells"[8]—displays a propensity for evil that in itself becomes a kind of critique of the stock character. Yet Shakespeare, like Marlowe, had a habit of transforming what he borrowed or adopted from his sources and predecessors, whether it was the *miles gloriosus* in Falstaff or the savage in Caliban; and the same is true of Shylock.

In the remainder of this essay I am going to attempt to demonstrate how Shakespeare, by the manipulation of discourses of sympathy and irony, represents Shylock as a highly ambiguous character. My approach will be to examine Shylock's appearances in the play in the order in which they occur. There are only five such appearances and they therefore occupy a relatively small part of the play's action when placed side by side with, say, the suitor and casket scenes or the final act at Belmont. Yet the impact of Shylock's scenes is at odds with their length and frequency, for he quickly emerges as the play's most vivid and pivotal character, with the leading role in its central discourses concerning money, the law, morality and religion.

2

Shylock's first words in the play are about money: "Three thousand ducats, well," (1.3.1) and he is soon caught up in a discussion with Bassanio of the word "good," which he displaces from the realm of morality to that of finance:

[8] Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*. c. 1590. *Doctor Faustus and other plays*. Ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 2.3.177.

Shy. Antonio is a good man.
Bass. Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
Shy. Ho no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand that he is sufficient. (1.3.11-15)

Shylock's identification of goodness with sufficiency—Antonio is good *for* rather than good in any moral or ethical sense—suggests that he is teasingly conscious of the double meaning of what he says. He is amused (or affects to be) by Bassanio's misunderstanding, and perhaps has chosen his words deliberately, to provoke such a reaction. At the same time, to judge a man's worth by his financial liquidity is exactly what the audience would expect of a Jewish usurer, while his play on so freighted a term as goodness suggests a stereotypical failure to judge matters within a Christian moral framework.

However, as we shall see, this is not the last time in the play that Shylock will explain—by choice or necessity—his own words: only a few lines later, reflecting on the safety of Antonio's ships, he tells Bassanio "there be land-rats, water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves (I mean pirates)." (1.3.19-21) Shylock's gloss on his own metaphor is indicative of an anxious literalism that is of a piece with his later insistence on the very word of his bond with Antonio, but also suggests a fear of being misunderstood: he rarely uses metaphorical language without explaining it.

Shylock's next speech, beginning "How like a fawning publican he looks!" (1.3.36-47), further establishes him as the villainous stage usurer and Vice figure, sharing his true feelings with the audience in an extended aside, hating Antonio for his Christianity, his anti-Semitism, and above all for his business practice which "brings down / The rate of interest here with us in Venice." He then embarks upon an elaborate biblical parallel about Jacob and Laban's sheep that again has a built-in commentary: "This Jacob from our holy Abram was / (As his wise mother wrought on his behalf) / The third possessor: ay, he was the third." (1.3.67-9) It matters to Shylock that he should get this kind of thing *right*, and that the application of his story should be clearly understood. When Antonio asks of the Jacob story "Was this inserted to make interest good? / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?", Shylock is quick to put him right: "I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast." (1.3.89-91)

Antonio's response (1.3.92-7) is full of venom and refers to Shylock as "devil," "evil soul," "a villain with a smiling cheek," "a goodly apple rotten at the core" and falsehood with a "goodly outside," all stock characteristics of the deceitful stage villain; and this elicits a speech that takes Shylock well beyond any stereotypical representation. The lines

beginning "Signior Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances" (1.3. 101-24) are a superb piece of controlled rhetoric, full of rapidly shifting tones and imagined dialogue that turns against Antonio the idea of the moneylender as a dog, the epithet that the merchant has often applied to Shylock. The rhythm of the lines is perfectly judged, not least at its first climax, with its telling, monosyllabic, "And all for use of that which is mine own." "Use" is a key word here, both in its primary meaning of "make use of: and in its assonantal link with "usury" and "usance"—money-lending and interest. The speech then develops as a series of imagined exchanges, each clearly signalled: "and you say," "you say so," "Should I not say," and above all the short two-syllable line "Say this," which introduces the powerful conclusion. There are many shifts in tone, most of them rapid and abrupt: the modulation from the wheedling "Shylock, we would have moneys, you say so"; to the anger of "you that did void your rheum upon my beard" (110-11); and then to the affected puzzlement of "What should I say to you?" (115) The final lines of the speech could be delivered in one of two ways: either on a rising note of anger, or, taking a cue from "with bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness," (119) in a level, controlled, but bitter and penetrating manner. The speech shows Shylock apparently in control of the situation and able to gain some advantage over Antonio. Bassanio, of course, has reservations about the "merry bond," (1.3.169) but the merchant, anxious to help his beloved friend, places his faith in the safe return of his ships and accepts Shylock's "kindness" at face value: in the "gentle Jew" (1.3.173) he persuades himself that he finds signs of a gentle gentile.

In Shylock's "Signior Antonio" speech and in his subsequent deal with the merchant is revealed the true ambiguity of the situation of the Jewish money-lender in early modern Venice. As twenty-first century readers or spectators of the play we are likely to interpret the scene in post-colonial terms. For the Christians in the play Shylock represents the Other, marked out by the visible difference of his gabardine and beard, the religious practices that prevent him from dining with Antonio and Bassanio and by his means of earning a living. The recognition and rejection of otherness, however, is a complex matter, composed at one level of a sense of the superiority of the hosts' values and cultural practices, and a fear of their being weakened, compromised or tainted by the incomer. Also involved, moreover, is a response derived from a combination of recognition and projection. The Other, the unfamiliar and threatening incomer, is a convenient screen on which to project the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of the receiving culture. The Christians' contempt for Shylock can be seen

as in part inwardly directed because they are forced to acknowledge and accept his vital role in the way in which they conduct their personal and professional lives. Both Antonio and Bassanio are involved in games of chance: the former by sending out his ships at a venture; the latter by staking his all (or rather Antonio's all) on the hope of winning Portia. Such ventures require financing and in the mercantile culture of Venice it was the Jewish money-lenders who underwrote them, while in order to remain true to a Christian conception of friendship, Antonio needs the assistance of Jewish money. At the time Shakespeare was writing an equally aggressive merchant venturer culture was in rapid development in England, so his audience would have been familiar with the difficulties and risks of proto-capitalism, whether through a company or by means of loans. In the debate about money-lending at interest, however, particular religious principles were at stake. However much the Christians may reject and insult Shylock, he is necessary to their purposes:

> Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last,
> You spurn'd me such a day, another time
> You call'd me dog: and for these courtesies
> I'll lend you thus much monies? (1.3.121-4)

Shylock's next appearance, in conversation with Jessica, finds him irritable, fussy, puritanical and comically miserly—"I did dream of money-bags tonight." (2.5.18) He is especially conscious of the differences in manner of living between himself and "The prodigal Christian," (2.5.15) and is concerned about the safety of his house during a time of carnival, of "the vile squeaking of the wry-necked fife," the streets full of "Christian fools with varnish'd faces" and "the sound of shallow fopp'ry" (2.5.30, 33, 35). To keep his "sober house" free from contamination, he employs another of his literalised metaphors to instruct Jessica to "stop my house's ears, I mean my casements." (2.5.36, 34) No doubt to the amusement and satisfaction of Shakespeare's first audience, Shylock fails to realise that the masque in the streets will act as cover for Jessica's desertion.

Shylock next appears by report when Salerio and Salanio discuss Jessica's absconding and her father's reaction, emphasising his concern with money above family feeling:

> My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
> Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
> Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter! (2.8.15-17)

This evidently parodic speech emphasises the alliterative "ducats" and "daughter" as a means of neutralising any emotional force in Shylock's lament. And when he next appears on stage he is mocked as "the devil […] in the likeness of a Jew." (3.1.20) Shylock's next speech is often cited as displaying Shakespeare's compassion for his character, his sense of a common humanity that goes deeper than religious or cultural difference:

> Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affectations, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?—if you prick us do we not bleed? if you poison us do we not die? (3.1.52-60)

If the speech is reduced to these proportions—as it often is in quotation—then the obvious point about Shakespeare's compassion holds good. But the real power of Shylock's words lies in the fact that his plea for equitable treatment is embedded in a speech that asserts his right to vengeance. His next words are "and if you wrong us shall we not revenge!" (3.1.60), and he argues that in seeking revenge he is behaving in a truly Christian manner:

> if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. if a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew what should his sufferance be by Christian example?—why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.61-6)

Shylock's vengeful sufferings intensify as he receives news of Jessica's profligacy in Genoa. He appears to return to the stock figure of the cash-obsessed Jew, whose cares more about his ducats than his daughter: "I would my daughter were dead and my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin." (3.1.80-2) After the bitterly controlled speech of thirty lines earlier, Shylock seems here almost distracted, his rhetoric veering towards the tragic: "no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o'my shoulders, no sighs but o'my breathing, no tears but o'my shedding." (3.1.86-8) There then appears the most arresting, poignant and mitigating exchange in the play:

> *Tub.* One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

> *Shy.* Out upon her!—thou torturest me Tubal,—it was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys. (3.1.108-13)

Beside the raw, unwatched, spontaneous grief of these words, Shylock's earlier self-justifying speeches seem like prepared set pieces. In this brief moment Shakespeare does more to humanise Shylock than in all his protests against prejudice or his assertions of common humanity. His words reveal genuine pain and a capacity for feeling. Shylock has lost a love token, and Jessica's insensitivity towards her father and her dead mother is captured in an image of bleakness and futility which requires no gloss from Shylock—"a wilderness of monkeys."

After this extraordinary moment, when rage against a living daughter gives way to grief for a dead wife that may cause spectators to refocus their image of Shylock, his following brief appearance returns him to his theatrical type. Antonio and his gaoler (complicit with his prisoner in hostility to Shylock) have come to seek some mercy and compassion. Shylock, however, is quite implacable: "tell me not of mercy" (3.3.1) he says, dismissively. The scene finds him insisting on his legal rights—he repeats the word "bond" six times in thirteen lines—playing on the word "dog" and refusing to yield to "Christian intercessors." (3.3.16) Shylock rejects all the values that the Christian profess, asserts the folly of interest-free loans and once more turns Antonio's canine insults against him: "Thou call'st me dog before thou hadst a cause,/ But since I am a dog, beware my fangs?" (3.3.67-68) Shylock's refusal to relent or consider clemency will rebound on him in the trial scene, of course, but his determination here prepares us for his demeanour in court. Meanwhile, Antonio, equally mindful of Venetian law, hints at a further reason for Shylock's hatred when he reveals his own interventions on behalf of Shylock's defaulting clients: "I oft delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me." (3.3.22-23)

3

The means by which Portia turns the tables on Shylock and uses his own literalism against him are well-known; but his defeat also exposes the inequities of Venetian law and the hollowness of its Christian values. Even as he opens the trial, the Duke, representing the law of the city, makes no secret of his sympathies and offers a characterisation of Shylock that establishes the spirit in which his side of the argument will be received:

> I am sorry for thee—thou art come to answer

> A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
> Uncapable of pity, void and empty
> From any dram of mercy. (4.1.3-6)

Shylock enters the scene in an ebullient and confident mood: he has the law on his side and tells the Duke, "If you deny it, let the danger light/ Upon your charter and your city's freedom." (4.1.38-39) He feels sure enough of his ground to refuse to give any explanation of his actions and develops a dryly offensive reply based on his 'humour' or whim, using illustrations drawn from rats, pigs, cats and urine. He echoes the rhythms of his opponents' lines, changing their words to suit his own purposes

> *Bass*. Do all men kill the thing they do not love?
> *Shy.* Hates any man the thing he would not kill? (4.1.66-7)

* * *

> *Duke*. How shalt thou hope for mercy rendering none?
> *Shy*.What judgment shall I dread doing no wrong? (4.1.84-9)

Shylock follows this with another parallel—the practice of owning slaves—that challenges the Venetians to demonstrate the equity of their laws:

> You will answer
> "The slaves are ours,"—so do I answer you
> The pound of flesh which I demand of him
> Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it:
> If you deny me, fie upon your law! (4.1.97-101)

The atmosphere now becomes edgy, bad-tempered and impatient. Shylock is eager to get on with the business, Bassanio to persuade him to see reason and be merciful, Gratiano to insult him as often as possible and Antonio to meet his fate as "a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death," (4.1.114-5) while the Duke is caught between them, helplessly bound by the law. Portia's arrival shifts the mood once again, with talk of mercy and a cool assessment of the soundness of Shylock's case, dismaying for the Christians. Only at the last moment when he is triumphant at his apparent legal victory, does Portia turn Shylock's literalism to his disadvantage.[9]

[9] A capable advocate, had Shylock found one willing to act for him, would have no difficulty in demolishing Bellario/Portia's argument. The act of removing a human

After this peripeteia, the word "Jew" resounds through the scene, principally in the mouth of Gratiano, who at one point uses it five times in eleven lines (4.1.309-19), emphasising Shylock's otherness and defining and naming him entirely in terms of his religion. He is never again in the play referred to as "Shylock."

Deprived of his revenge and his money, Shylock is ready to concede defeat, but his otherness, his status as "an alien" in Venice now makes him a criminal. This is another moment susceptible of a post-colonial reading, when Shylock's difference is insisted upon and punished by a state which regards him as necessary yet despicable. He stands condemned, deprived of everything, continually insulted by the crowing, unspeakable Gratiano. Yet his final plea runs close to another humanising moment:

> 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. (4.1.371-3)

This confirms the Christians' representation of Shylock as a man who lives only for business and profit and recalls an earlier scene (2.5) in which Shylock shows concern for his house as he sets out for dinner with Bassanio. "Our house is hell," (2.3.2) says Jessica, but to her father it is clearly to be valued not just because it contains his riches, but because it is a sanctuary against contaminating influences. "Jessica, my girl, / Look to my house"; "Hear you me Jessica, / Lock up my doors"; "stop my house's ears / […] Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter / My sober house." (2.5.15-16, 28-9, 34-6) Shylock is proud of his religion and he is anxious to preserve the sanctity of his home as a place free of the foolish prodigality of Christians, to keep it pure; to keep it, as we would say today, kosher.

His plea fails and Shylock receives two further blows at the hands of Antonio—his enforced conversion to Christianity and the signing over of his money to Lorenzo and Jessica. The first of these was a common punishment for Jews in the sixteenth century, while the second is an act of pure vengefulness and insult and marks the return of the Antonio who used to spit on Shylock. He can bear no further public humiliation and his final words, which once again balance on the line between sympathy and hostility, are a superb example of Shakespeare's command of the expressive power of the monosyllable:

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heart necessarily involves the spilling of blood and must therefore be regarded as implicit in the terms of the bond. Portia's argument would only be valid if the bond specified that no blood must be spilled.

> I pray you give me leave to go from hence,
> I am not well,—send the deed after me,
> And I will sign it. (4.1.391-3)

4

The Merchant of Venice is a play that reveals Shakespeare in negotiation with theatrical convention and audience expectation. In one sense convention and stereotype were all that Shakespeare had to draw on in his creation of Shylock's, since Jews had been officially absent from England for three centuries, following their expulsion by Edward 1 in 1290. Small pockets of Marranos—Spanish and Portugese Jews who had undergone nominal conversion to Christianity but continued to practise their faith in secret—may still have existed; but there was no Jewish community or sense of Jewish culture, only an accumulation of age-old myths and prejudices.[10] As Stephen Greenblatt points out, Judaism as described in the Old Testament was fundamental to Christianity. The history, poetry and prophecy of the Israelites found their fulfilment in the coming of Christ, and the language of the Old Testament was familiar to Christian worshippers. However, as Greenblatt goes on to argue, actual contemporary Jews, encountered face to face were very different: as well as being regarded as Christ-killers, they functioned as "symbolic tokens of all that was heartless, vicious, rapacious and unnatural."[11] Indeed, along with such figures as Turks, witches and hunchbacks (all deployed by Shakespeare) Jews were "useful conceptual tools […] feared and despised figures [who] provided quick, easy orientation, clear boundaries, limit cases."[12]

Shylock manages both to inhabit and elude most of these categories as Shakespeare blurs boundaries and expands the limits of his character. There are plenty of moments of grotesque comedy when Shylock amply fulfils the audience's expectations of ruthless greed, hatred of Christian and a lack of compassion. No doubt such scenes were the occasions of

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[10] Many of these prejudices and myths have a tangential relevance to *The Merchant of Venice* in that they are concerned with blood. It was thought that Jewish men menstruated and that Jews murdered Christian children to use their blood in making Passover bread.

[11] Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: how Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (New York and London; W. W. Norton, 2004), 261. See also Walter Cohen, "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," in *English Literary History*, 49 (1982), 765-89.

[12] Greenblatt, *op. cit*., 259.