

Copenhagen 27 October 2002

Fools with Varnish'd Faces

a reading of *The Merchant of Venice* as a parable about *Homo Ludens*¹

by Stephan Schwarz

*How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in 't!*

Shakespeare: *The Tempest* (V.i.182ff.)

Abstract

The drama is known for the systematic use of the difference between appearance and substance in human affairs. The present paper, likewise, sees the drama not as a fairy tale², nor as a morality about the victory of love and mercy over hatred and revenge, or of equity over the letter of law, as a direct reading of the text appears to suggest. Rather, it is seen as an exposé, with surprising actuality to-day, of strategic games for social and economic power and dominance, where xenophobia (in the play's didactic example of anti-Semitism) is but one element. This supremacy of games with hidden agenda and rules ready-made for the occasion, of which numerous examples are identified, makes integrity, dignity, sincerity, and morality (sometimes loosely dressed up in religious terms) subordinate to expediency in pursuing human desires, thereby creating tensions and inconsistencies within the personalities.

1. Introduction

In his introduction to the NCS edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch remarks

... To this cruelty [i.e. Shylock's] an artist at the top of his art would have opposed mansuetude, clemency, charity, and, specifically, Christian charity. Shakespeare misses more than half the point when he makes the intended victims, as a class and by habit, just as heartless as Shylock, without Shylock's passionate excuse. (Qu 26, p. xxvi)

The point referred to is postulated themes of love and mercy vs. hatred and revenge, and equity vs. law, which appear to be implied by the text. But many other perspicacious critics (Bloom, Girard, Goddard, Gross, Midgley, Moody, Rabkin, Ryan, Stephens, Weisberg, to name a few [see ref. list]) have pointed at the complex and paradoxical (in the sense of *seeming* inconsistencies) design of plot and *dramatis personae*, contradicting any single thematic reading. It seems that it is exactly this lack of a single obvious theme, or rather the ambiguity that allows the co-existence of many different themes emerging clearly only after what can appropriately be called 'cognitive dissonance reduction'³, that makes the play an eminent instance of 'Shakespeare our Contemporary'.

What Shakespeare shows us is a society (Venice and Belmont alike), where the supremacy of games⁴ makes integrity, dignity, sincerity, and morality (sometimes loosely dressed up in religious terms) subordinate to

expediency in pursuing human desires, thereby creating tensions and inconsistencies within the personalities. The ensuing masquerade and carnage in feelings and action is aptly placed in Venice in times of Carnival, and its rules of what is commendable or condemnable are made up by the powers in the social system - differently for insiders and outsiders⁵. The theme of discrepancy between appearance and substance is found to have extremely complex recurrence in all principal characters of the play, who skilfully use invisible masks 'to entrap the wisest', (cf. Bloom's (Bl 98) rhetoric question: "What in *The Merchant of Venice* is not ironical, including the Belmont celebration in Act V?") Most incentives, relations, and actions are different from what they (are made to) look and it is generally impossible to decide what they really are, as they partly grotesquely and surrealistically reflect everyday experience of games people play in modern society.

2. On games people play

The pervasive presence of strategic games people play to defend and support social status and ambitions is naturally most evident in the main characters of the play (Portia, Bassanio, Antonio, Gratiano, and, not least, Shylock), but it is seen also in most other roles (Jessica and Lorenzo, Solanio and Salerio, Nerissa, Launcelot). This dominant role of strategic games, and the way these games are designed and pursued can be seen in a more general perspective of human interaction.

As pointed out by many critics, the difference between appearance and substance is a recurrent feature in the play and so, by its ubiquity, acquires the character of a theme. And one of the general instances of this theme in the Venice-Belmont societies is (as will be shown by many examples) the difference between what *personae* say and what they might mean (in Shakespeare's imagination), and again also between what is said and how a theater-goer construes both what could be meant and what meaning the other *personae* attribute to what was said. Pursuing this theme, the examples consistently emerge as practical instances of more general rhetoric devices pointing to interesting features of construction of the dialogue and characterization of *personae*.

The importance in cognition, language and communication of expressions that create ambiguity or diffuseness of meaning has been the object of much theoretical and empirical research foremost in rhetorics, psycholinguistics and philosophy of language (see, e.g., Co 71, Gr 89, and Or 93, for an analysis of Shakespeare's use of such devices see Jo 47). The calculated use of such discrepancy and ambiguity in a much wider category of statements (considering also a discrepancy between the speaker's knowledge/beliefs/intentions and the meaning of his

utterances) as moves in strategic games conceived to influence the addressee's opinions/actions in a direction favourable to the speaker's (covert) interests does not appear to have attracted equal interest. Yet this is the background to much 'lobbying' in everyday decisionmaking, where justification is based more on perceptions of role-fulfillment and personal relationships than of personal integrity.

Shakespeare formulates this aspect of communication explicitly, for example

Viola: *A sentence is but a chevril'd glove to a good wit - how quickly
the wrong side may be turned outward.*
12th Night III.i.11

Similarly the voice of innocence

Isabel: *O, pardon me, my lord! it oft falls out
To have what we would have, we speak not what we mean.*
Measure for Measure II.iv.118

confronted with the cynic insight of the rules of power games

Angelo: *Say what you can: my false o'erweighs your true.*
Measure for Measure II.iv.169

We can also not that, whereas

Antonio: *A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!* (I.iii.96)

is a straightforward statement about discrepancy between appearance and substance, when used by someone equally double, or, as the case might be, as a false *ad personam* insinuation, it becomes part of a strategic game⁶.

Techniques for creating a difference between what one means and what he says are legion, as appears from the following examples of categories (not mutually exclusive) of which there can readily be found examples in *The Merchant of Venice*:

- Mendacity, from "white lies" through all shades and colours of calculated misinformation, including self-deception, after-rationalization, bluff and planting or spreading gossip/rumours, insinuations, misleading half-truths (suppression of relevant parts of a full account)⁷.
- Indirect or figurative expressions (like euphemisms, metaphors, analogues, stereotypes, irony⁸, over-/understatement, puns), where it is left to the addressee to find a meaning and to sort out ambiguities.
- Vague or ambiguous general statements that are likely to incite or amplify a bias desired by the speaker.

In analyzing meanings of utterances in this sense, we have to penetrate beyond the dialogue into the minds of *personae*, by using hints provided by the text. In combining of instances from the text, with inference of their possible meaning we must avoid absurd types of forensic reasoning. As always, each case of reconstruction of meaning has to be judged by its own merits. For example, Shakespeare certainly takes poetic liberty with time, but he is rarely inconsistent when it comes to realistic elements of

his plays, and he often plants ambiguities as to the intentions of his *personae*, thereby creating a healthy reminder about the fallibility of our moral judgements. Non-realistic instances of the plot design preclude this kind of analysis and have to be accepted as such: Why would Bassanio need 'thus much moneys' only to dress up deceptively as a *grand seigneur*; - why was Portia's disguise not revealed? - how could the casket selection test be so poorly designed that already on 3 random choices the expected hit chance would exceed 2/3? Yet, even given such situations, the actions and responses of *personae* follow some kind of logic (albeit sometimes weird or corrupt), which allows us to perceive a plausible personality.

The analysis often takes the form of hypothetical reasoning about the fictional characters. It is basically not different from the complementary but coherent features inferred by an actor or a stage director in the process of transforming the text into dramatic representation. A case in point is provided in a note by John Gielgud (Gi 91a) on acting Angelo in *Measure for Measure*: "...I understood....that he is deeply repressed, and when he realises that he hopes to seduce Isabella, it really shocks him deeply and so he does everything to cover it up."

Finding different possible interpretations of what could be meant by what is said, we prudently should, as a rule, assume that the author was aware of these possibilities in elaborating the complexities of the plot and the text. The basic requirement for the analysis of meaning as discussed here is therefore that all relevant elements provided by the text are reconsidered, so that we avoid the temptation of cognitive dissonance reduction. So, for example, does Portia's monologue on mercy (IV.i.180ff) not by itself make her an incarnation of true love and self-effacing generosity, nor does Shylock's about tolerance (III.i.155ff) make him a great humanitarian, or Bassanio's on appearance and substance (III.ii.73ff) make him a sage with immaculate integrity. We only note, without surprise, how little their insights rule their desires and actions as the author provides further elements of his conception of their personalities. The techniques of 'character assassination' (like its opposite 'character sanctification') by biased selection of data, arguments and values, applied by critics to Shakespearean *personae* (Le 79), is also applied by the *personae* themselves - in *The Merchant of Venice* mainly with regard to Shylock, respectively Portia and Antonio.

There may be many reasons to mask the meaning (i.e. hiding the substance) of utterances, some of which are common ways of expression where the difference is readily understood or of little consequence. Often masking is used in typical gaming situations where there is an advantage in one's counterpart being misinformed. This often leads to a balance on

the limits of decency and honesty. For example, making a false denunciation to gain an advantage, or opportunistically stating religious, political or moral allegiance can be judged as normal power game strategy, but could be judged dishonest and cowardly, depending on the perspective.

3. Intolerance: Two general, related areas of social games

In MoV two areas of discourse have an emblematic function in the structure of games of self-assertion and exclusion, which therefore must at least be hinted at in the present study: religion (which is really a case for the Sociology of Religion), and xenophobia. In the play, reference to “Christian” and “Jewish” is ubiquitous, and yet there is no mention of the religions as such, nor to religiosity as a guiding factor in human conduct, not even in Portia’s famous soliloquy on “mercy” (IV.i.180ff.). The labels really describe a social barrier where only the opinions and attitudes of the dominant group matter. It is assumed by the nominal “Christians” in MoV that their objectives and actions are *ipso facto* righteous and morally justified, in contradistinction to those of their adversaries, and that this standard is innate in the sense that it cannot be acquired by conversion.

It is not possible here to go into details on how a “moral point of view” is founded in an individual in the course of maturing within a social context, nor what is the role of religions and religious congregations of various shadings on moral attitudes and practices in a social system. The basic question is: Why should you, in questions of morality, expect individuals to behave in a particular way (presumed to be characteristic of a certain religion) just because they happen to be nominally or by some form of religious conviction associated with a certain religious congregation or faction? Suffice it here to refer to scholars like Lawrence Kohlberg and his critics (Ko 84) to indicate the complexity of the origins of moral attitudes and conduct. It is however obvious that (at least within the religions referred to in MoV) there are great differences in interpreting the practical implications of moral principles and a wide range of tolerance of what can be acceptable in any particular social setting. The variation of practical morality between individuals within a group delimited only by nominal adherence to one “religion” is so great as to preclude any general judgements of moral standards within that group, and in particular to expect certain standards from particular individuals. But being a nominally shared feature, religion provides a well-developed conceptual framework and value-charged expressions that penetrate into current usage as *idées reçues* that can be used to give an illusion of a moral justification of a barrier between insiders and outsiders.

It is not possible here to go into details on how a “moral point of view” is founded in an individual in the course of maturing within a social context, nor what is the mutual impact on moral attitudes and practices of moral conduct and judgment between a social system and religious congregations to which its members are affiliated - suffice it to refer to scholars like Lawrence Kohlberg (Ko 84). It is however obvious that (within the religions referred to in MoV) there are great differences in interpreting the practical implications of moral principles and a wide range of tolerance of what can be acceptable in any particular social setting. The variation of practical morality between individuals within a group delimited only by nominal adherence to one “religion” is so great as to preclude any general judgements of moral standards within that group. But being a *nominally* shared feature, religion provides a well-developed conceptual framework and value-charged expressions that penetrate into current usage as *idées reçues* inviting themselves to be used to give an illusion of a moral justification of a barrier between insiders and outsiders.

Using these idioms as strategic tools, biblical references and religiously tainted moral concepts are invoked frequently on both sides in MoV, but merely rhetorically to signal political correctness (to use a modern term) and to render an appearance of decency to attitudes and actions contrived for expediency. This has nothing to do with morals founded on religious convictions but is really a kind of performative (meaning “I am a good [...], therefore I am in my right to ...”) – the *personae* of MoV simply are not religious in the sense of acting on the characteristic principles of righteousness, but they know the social rules of the game – again an example of the difference between appearance and substance.

This analysis can be amplified by examples: Attributing religious zeal to Antonio’s requirement of Shylock’s forced conversion, offering him Christian salvation and eternal life (Coghill in RI 63 and Br 55), is a rationalization not supported by the text, and is inconsistent with Venetian attitudes to conversion in general, as shown later in the context of Jessica. *The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose* is thrown at Shylock (I.ii.97), but citing scripture, and invocation of divine support to justify one’s own objectives is equally done by the others. A case in point is Portia’s speech on mercy (IV.i.180ff), which is eclatanly at odds with her own manipulations. The expression “faithless Jew” is not only used as an insult, but also to suggest that the speaker is both faithful and “gentile”, religiosity being outside consideration.

The ambiguity of the term “religion” is discussed by Moody (in Wh 91) and Girard (Gi 91), but ignored by those critics who want to see the play as an allegory of the victory of (Christian) faith and mercy over (Jewish) hatred and greed⁹. Possibly this is the root of the problem perceived as a defect in drama construction and as a failure to identify a single message - such readings of MoV seem to be based on implicit assumptions that need to be formulated and justified.

Few of the characters Shakespeare created (none in MoV) are made to recognize this ambiguity in their own conduct, but there are instances:

King: *My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.* Hamlet III.iii.97
and Angelo: *.....Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name,* MfM II.iv.4

Frequently in the plays, and not only in MoV, the religiously tainted language has little communicative function and is received as mere conventional talk. Not surprisingly, even when real faith is expressed, it is often disregarded (Angelo vs. Isabella in MfM) or rejected as false, as in:

Desdemona: *Heaven doth truly know it.*
Othello: *Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell* – Othello IV.2.39

The second general area of strategic for games of dominance in MoV is *discrimination* (social acceptance vs. rejection). The play openly deals with anti-Semitism, displaying all shades from the vulgar to the subtly concealed and sanctimonious, but one should not forget Portia's explicitly racial argument in rejecting the African prince. The basic refusal of acceptance can, in the perspective of our times, be read as a didactic simplification of the wider resentment of difference, a general xenophobia, although it would be unhistoric to use the term "racism",. Such evidence was also identified by Midgley:

In my opinion, it is not of much importance that Shylock is a Jew, and all of the 'background work' on Jews and Judaism strikes me as irrelevant. The important thing is that he is a Jew in a Gentile society, that all he is and all he holds dear is alien to the society in which he lives. (Wi 69 p. 196)

Likewise, the complexity of Shylock's character, at odds with common clichés, is concisely summarized in Halio's analysis of anti-Semitic elements in the play:

..., [Shylock] transcends the type, shatters the conventional image with his appeal to our common humanity, and leaves us unsettled in our prejudices, disturbed in our emotions, and by no means sure of our convictions. (Ha89 p.13)

On the other hand, Antonio, the title person in the play, is highly regarded in Venetian society, as honest, generous and a good Christian. Evidently (in Venice of the play) this is compatible with aggressive anti-Semitism, which is shown not only in his taking for granted that Shylock (talked about throughout as "the Jew" and apostrophized as "Jew!") and his "tribe" are excluded from the good society, but also in his vulgar abuse on the Rialto, which he refers to in the bond-negotiation:

Antonio: *I am as like to call thee so again, [i.e. dog]
to spet on thee again, to spurn thee too.* (I.iii.1,25)

This is within the limits of gentlemanship, and so Antonio sets the standard of conduct for the less prominent Venetians, like and the inseparable couple Solanio & Salerio, opportunists who flatter the powerful and harass the defenseless, authoritarian personalities in the sense of Adorno (Ad 50) who might turn into "willing executioners" given the adequate conditions for a transition from "civilized" social games.

There is a surprisingly strong tradition among critics to tune down the anti-Semitic atmosphere of the setting, making Shylock a callous villain, the single enemy of an intrinsically virtuous society of "goodly people". Even the vulgarity and obvious personality defects of Gratiano are being excused as youthful exuberance, and are no obstacle to his being entitled to share love's wealth and the bliss of Belmont - a striking case of how rules of judgement are determined by the observer's perceived allegiances.

Punning on 'dumb', a well-known critic categorically expounds a radically different view, opening his essay on MoV:

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

Yet, saying that the play is anti-Semitic amounts to claiming that its meaning includes approval of anti-Semitic attitudes, and that any other reading on this issue must be rejected as untenable. Yet, there is no evidence for such sympathies in the text. (To clarify this point by analogy: a treatise need not necessarily be marxist in dealing with marxism.)¹⁰

These two emblematic cases of gaming are based on the existence in society of developed conceptual frameworks, idioms, and preset conclusions that are freely available as tools for games of self-assertion and exclusion.

In other cases, one can proceed in a similar way, with the additional freedom of creating value criteria and norms *ad hoc* for the intended outcome. An interesting example is given in MoV by a discourse on Music, which, in a figurative sense, is also a kind of language for expressing complex feelings and ideas. It has been called Shakespeare's preferred symbol of harmony, and music is part of the characteristics of Belmont (e.g. Coghill, Ri 63, p 220). Lorenzo, in the moonlight of Belmont, has a long monologue on this symbolism, which ends with a strange psycho-social generalization:

Lorenzo: *The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;*

*The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted: - mark the music. (V.1.83)*

There is a similar passage in *Julius Caesar* (I.ii.204). But Shakespeare also provides a contradictory statement in *Measure for Measure* (quoted by Auden in Ri 63)

Duke: *'Tis good; though music oft hath such charm
To make bad good, and good provoke to harm. (MfM IV.i.16)*

Many critics have seen the condemnation of non-musicality as a direct reference to the darker sides of Shylock's character. Even Gross (Gr 92, p. 28) sees a personality defect in Shylock - or at least a negative attitude to life - in the fact that he dislikes the music of the carnival. But this is only consistent with his knowledge of the prodigal and frivolous world of Venice, symbolized by the drums and bagpipes. Having just encountered Antonio's animosity and Bassanio's expensive courting masquerade, he has good reason to fear for Jessica's fascination with the world from which she is excluded, and he knows very well that her dealings with people like Lorenzo do not solve any exclusion problem. So he orders:

Shylock: *Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the vry-neck'd fife
Clamber not you up to the casements then
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces:
But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements,
Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter
My sober house (II.v.29)*

and in the court scene he makes a remark similar to the quotation from MfM, albeit in different style:

Shylock: *And others when the bagpipe sings i'th'nose,
Cannot contain their urine - for affection (IV.i.49)*

implying that music of this kind (in its context) unleashes uncontrolled "passion".

He recognizes those tunes as banal, but he might well appreciate music with distinctive artistic qualities - Jessica's *I am never merry when I hear sweet music* (V.i.69) suggests that she must have heard music in Shylock's house or when visiting in contexts he has approved of. As in our own times, we may wonder how many of the characters of the play would be devotees of their contemporary avant-garde music - in this case, for example, Monteverdi, Marenzio and Gesualdo - which is not ingratiating, having depths and tensions far beyond the characterization as 'sweet music'. But Shylock might well, even if he rejects the popular tunes of the carnival. And when it comes to ennobling effects of musical art, it is rather the former than the latter that might harmonize with Lorenzo's poetry (if it were to be taken as genuinely felt)¹¹.

In Lorenzo's mouth the conclusion that *'the man that hath no music in himselflet no such man be trusted'* strikes false chords, since the 'treason, stratagems and spoils' apply immediately to the couple's own exploits. Perhaps Shakespeare tells us that our embrace of art and religion alike is but 'sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal' (1 Cor. 13), unless internalized in the individual as sincere humanitarian ethics (*love* in the sense of St Paul rather than that of Antonio and his friends) - again a reference to the difference between appearance and substance.

Actually, there is no logic in relating musical interests to trustworthiness, which shows that this is a strategic game of self-assertion and moral superiority. The technique is applicable in other fields of discourse, not only for moral judgement but even for assertion of "facts", as long as one is in a position of power or in a sympathetic setting. We are reminded of Petruchio's games with Katherina during his "educational" efforts in Act IV of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In political indoctrination, particularly in latter-day totalitarian systems, examples of this technique are legion

4. Individual strategic games I: Bassanio, Gratiano and Portia

In idealizing readings, Bassanio is *Lord Love* and a worthy partner in "love's wealth", having his feelings reciprocated even before making the crucial choice, where he alone comes up with all the right arguments.

Bassanio: *The world is still deceiv'd with ornament –*
 ..
 There is no vice so simple, but assumes
 some mark of virtue on his outward parts;

 The seeming truth which cunning times put on
 To entrap the wisest.....(III.ii.73ff)

So he can see through the deceptive games of the world and choose lead before gold, but does he use his clairvoyance to unveil these games or to join them? In the very first scene we are told that Bassanio is a spendthrift deeply in debt, so it is not a big deal for him *to hazard all he hath*. Instead he persuades Antonio to send good money after the bad as a winning strategy: *In Belmont is a lady richly left, and she is fair [...] and of wondrous virtues....* Citing her attractions in that order, his plan is to dress up to "hold a rival place" with princes, successfully concealing his background and so getting the heiress with her fortune, and *love's wealth* as a bonus.

Ironically echoing Antonio's *What goodly outside falsehood hath*, Bassanio's friend Gratiano has his own philosophy of how to entrap the wisest:

Gratiano: *If I do not put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat, and sigh and say "amen",
Use all the observance of civility
Like one well studied in a sad ostent
To please his grandam, never trust me more. (II.ii.181-188),*

reminiscent of Hamlet's straighter (and ironical):

Assume a virtue if you have it not (H III.iv.162).

Gratiano expounds his libertinian view of love's frailty:

Salerio: *O ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly
To seal love's bonds new-made, than they are wont
To keep obliged faith unforfeited!*

Gratiano: *That ever holds: who riseth from a feast
With that keen appetite that he sits down?
Where is the horse that doth untread again
His tedious measures with the unbated fire
That he did pace them first? - All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd. (II.vi.5-13)*

When he proposes to Nerissa, his shrewd matrimonial condition is that Bassanio would be successful in the casket game and so get his fingers into Portia's fortune (III.ii.106).

Bassanio competes with Gratiano in *speaking a great deal* without meaning what they say. In a critical moment before the *peripeteia* entailed by Portia's strategy, they both offer their wives for divine interference to save Antonio, and the matter in this case is called off with a joke:

Bassanio: *But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.*

Portia: *Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer.*

Gratiano: *I have a wife, whom, I protest, I love, -
I would she were in heaven, so she could
Entreat some power to change this currish Jew.*

Nerissa: *'Tis well you offer it behind her back,
The wish would make else an unquiet house. (IV.i.280-290)*

Evidently this is designed as a point in the disguise comedy, but it is not far-fetched to see it also as a further indication of cynicism, where love is primarily an instrument for social advancement and God's main function is to arrange things when one has supped with the devil with too short a spoon. Likewise with honesty: In the ring game of Act V Bassanio in an 'aside' notes that lying can be handy as a strategic tool, assuming one is not caught:

Bassanio [Aside] : *Why I were best to cut my left hand off,
and swear I lost the ring defending it. (V.i.177).*

In idealizing readings, Portia emerges as beauty, wisdom, generosity, compassion and love incarnate, a luminous figure opposing the forces of darkness, represented by Shylock. This image is largely based on a few speeches (*You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand. (III.ii.149)*; *The quality of mercy is not strain'd (IV.iv.180)*) and opinions expressed by other *personae*. But when we first meet her, in the midst of the casket game, she speaks maliciously of her suitors in the same vein as her later sister Célimène in the *Misanthrope*. Before meeting the African prince, she comments

Portia: *If I could bid the fifth welcome with so good a
heart as I can bid the other four farewell, I should
be glad of his approach: if he have the condition
of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had
rather he should shrive me than wive me. (I.ii.121)*

and his departure is glossed over by:

Let all of his complexion choose me so. (II.vii.79)

The Spanish nobleman Arragon does not fare much better. After having found the insulting fool's head in the silver casket, he is sent off with a spiteful remark masked in seeming objectivity:

*To offend and judge are distinct offices
And of opposed natures. (II.ix.61)*

with the likely meaning that a judgement, as opposed to an insult, is *ipso facto* fair and well-deserved. Are these suitors to be seen as pompous bores (as many instructors would have them) or is their rhetoric to be understood as a playfully exaggerated reminder of how cultural differences are reflected in modes of expression?

The question whether the lovely poem rhymed on 'lead' in the Bassanio casket scene

*Tell me where is Fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished? (III.ii.63)*

is actually a hint has been debated by critics (see note 63 for act III in the Arden edition of MoF). Those who idealize Portia's personality refer to several statements on the subject of fidelity to the letter of the will, e.g.:

*... I could teach you
How to choose right, but then I am forsworn. (III.ii 10),*

and *If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana,
unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will (I.ii.102).*

However, she dislikes the will, punning:

... I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father: (I.ii.22).

And she toys with the idea of cheating, not only by appealing to divine support

God defend me from these two (I.ii.51)

but actively:

... I will do anything Nerissa ere I will be married to a sponge (I.ii.94).

More importantly, however, she has some self-insight on her own moral strength:

I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching (I.ii.15),

which sounds much like an educated version of Launcelot's rationale for choosing whatever is in his best interest:

Certainly, my conscience will serve me to ... (I.ii.1)

And so, rather than claiming, as the Arden ed. commentator does, that an intended hint "would belittle Bassanio and Portia and cheapen the themes of the play", it is possible to see a hint as consistent with the general game-playing theme, and with the related limits to truth and honesty. Admittedly, however, the interpretation of the poem as an aside directed to the theater public is convincing.¹²

Once Bassanio has correctly chosen the leaden casket, Portia presents herself in terms which give the appearance of modesty and compliance:

*.... an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised,
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn: happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted (III.ii. 159 ff.)*

Portia may signal conventional submissiveness by the phrase *..her lord, her governor, her king...*, but as she shows in the sequel, this could just be a strategic move. There is a strikingly similar instance, almost *verbatim*:

Katharina: *... thy lord, thy king, thy governor...* (Taming of the Shrew, V.ii.138)

and similarly:

Regan: *Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony;
Dispose of them, of me, the walls is thine.
Witness the world, that I create thee here
My lord and master. King Lear, V.iii.76-79*

Considering the situation in King Lear, where it is obviously inadequate to speak either of love or of submission, and of Portia, where - leaving

aside the fairy-tale element - at least submission is inconsistent with the character - it is not far-fetched to see an instance of game-playing also in Katharina's phraseology. In Katharina's case, although the text is commonly seen as extremely male-chauvinistic (to use a current term), this would allow an ironic reading: the Shrew has learnt her lesson, but in a sense different from that intended by her tamer.

Portia takes the full control of events. Sending Bassanio to the court and then taking the command she shows a basic lack of trust (justified but incompatible with her submissive statement in the casket scene). In the court scene she cuts Bassanio short in public, and then plays suspense games involving both Antonio and Shylock, merely in order to set the scene for a more spectacular victory - the law being necessarily known by the Duke and Shylock (cf. Girard, Gi 91). Not only as an innocent pun, she tells Bassanio:

Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear (III.ii.312).

And in the ring incident she cunningly contrives events so that he shall never forget who has bought him out of his lover's spell and who has got the money, a lesson to be learnt also by Antonio (the lover), and by Gratiano (the appendix).

Sometimes Portia forgets about the pose of modesty:

I never did repent for doing good (III.iv.10)

sounds strange as a self-assessment. And sometimes the pose does not work, as in her slightly frivolous rejoinder to Bassanio's metaphor of her being like the sun¹³:

Portia: *Let me give light, but not be light,
For a light wife doth make a heavy husband,* (V.i.129)

RSC actress Sinead Cussack remarks:

"I could not understand why Shakespeare makes her so unsympathetic in those early scenes - the spoilt little rich girl dismissing suitor after suitor in a very witty and derisory fashion. The girl who does that, I thought, is not the woman to deliver the 'quality of mercy' speech. I knew that was a problem." (Wh 91)

The question is whether Portia does grow or whether that speech is merely an expedient and sanctimonious positioning in her power games. We have seen that she masterfully manipulates both people and events to her own shrewd ends, sometimes "doing good" as a tactical move. The text allows us to interpret her as a pragmatic Realpolitiker, rather like a principessa with Machiavellian principles.

Bloom (Bl 98) takes a strongly critical view, stating that "Portia, the play's center, is far more complex and shadowed than ever I have seen her played as being . . . , and she is at worst a happy hypocrite, far too intelligent not to see that she is not exactly dispensing Christian mercy,

except by Venetian standards.” Strangely, Georg Brandes is euphoric about what he describes at length as Portia’s supremely impeccable character, although he would not normally be insensitive to the massive evidence to the contrary (Br 12).

5. Individual strategic games II: Jessica

Shylock, being an outcast, tolerated but not accepted, used and abused as a necessary evil and occasional resource (like prostitutes) by the good citizens, tries to keep up a measure of human dignity and self-respect which, in the course of events is crushed by the combined effects of a self-destructive strategy and his adversaries’ concerted efforts. In a hostile environment he voluntarily shuts out the external, in his opinion frivolous world. Shylock certainly has strong moral principles concerning married life, indicated by his distress on discovering that Jessica has embezzled his engagement ring - a symbol throughout the play of love, trust and fidelity, which is equally profaned by bawdy talk in Act V. His harsh educational principles cause Jessica to rebel.

Jessica’s life is marked by the exclusion from the good society, and this is also Shylock’s basic problem. Her remark to the servant-fool Launcelot

*Our house is hell, and thou, (a merry devil)
Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness, - (II.iii.2)*

(‘hell’ being not much more than a general malaise with her involuntary seclusion) and her ‘aside’

*But though I am a daughter to his blood
I am not to his manners: O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife! (II.iii.18 ff.)*

tell us much about her predicament. She thinks that she can escape from her environment and outsider background, and be accepted fully in her own right ‘on the other side of the fence’ by marrying Lorenzo and converting - a fatal lack of sense for socio-political realities which she shares with her father. Lorenzo is without financial means but is supported by Antonio and Bassanio, first in the abduction and then introducing the couple in Belmont.

Actually, Jessica is well aware of the uncertainty of her aspirations and her vulnerability once she has ‘chosen to give and hazard all she hath’. She is not convinced that she can rely on Lorenzo when things get tough, and she knows that she can become a social handicap to him. In her aside (II.iii.20) just quoted, Jessica first mentions the ending of her strife, then the strategy to bring it about (cf. Bassanio in I.v mentioning first Portia’s fortune, then her virtues). Her primary goal is to get out of the

exclusion, but she is uncertain about the value of Lorenzo's promise. A further incident of doubt comes in a soliloquy

Jessica: ... – *and if my fortune be not crost,
I have a father, you a daughter, lost* (II.v.55)
and again

... *and now who knows
but you Lorenzo whether I am yours?* (II.vi.30)

Although some critics see it as a sign of loving guidance, Lorenzo's answer is less than comforting to someone lacking confidence and security - (throughout the play 'heaven' is invoked mainly to suggest that at least this time one really means what one says):

Lorenzo: *Heaven and thy thoughts are witness that thou art* (II.vi.32)

In Act V, with seriousness behind the teasing tone, Jessica invokes examples of lovers from antiquity, all bearing on faithlessness, separation and lost happiness (Auden p 240, Moody, p 88), and Lorenzo joins in. Jessica adds not because she is clear-sighted but because she is insecure:

Jessica: *In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith
And ne'er a true one.* (V.i.18)

A remark from the servant Launcelot who is a messenger in what he calls the 'conspiracy', and who often commits slips of tongue and even is scolded by Lorenzo for punning in a line that could be a Shakespearean self-irony

How every fool can play upon the word! (III.v.40)

is worth noting:

Launcelot: ... *, most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew! - if a Christian do not play
the knave and get thee, I am much deceived;* (II.iii.10)

According to NCS, *pagan* here means both 'heathen' and 'prostitute', and 'get' can be short for 'beget' (cf. 'got' in III.ii.9, quoted below). This therefore has the implicit meaning that Jessica is an easy hunt for Lorenzo, with little commitment for a Venetian gentleman. In a similar vein is Solanio's

Lorenzo and his amorous Jessica. (II.8.8)

and Gratiano's

But who comes here? Lorenzo and his infidel! (III.ii.217)

These attitudes confirm Shylock's fears of the outer world's dangers for Jessica, who is not trained to play the clever games where Portia shows such mastery.

When Gratiano tries to be polite and 'use all the observances of civility', it comes with a pun on gentle/gentile, encouraging Lorenzo that Jessica is almost as good as a real person:

Gratiano: *Now (by my hood) a gentle, and no Jew.* (II.vi.51)

Launcelot goes a step further, suggesting

Launcelot: ... *you may partly hope that your father got you not,*

that you are not the Jew's daughter. (III.v.9)

Jessica knows that conversion is a necessary condition for her to be accepted in the good company. But is it enough, in addition to her promised marriage to Lorenzo? There are several references to conversion in the play, which make us conclude that she is rather naïve and open to disappointments: The essence of Venetian/Belmontian religiosity requires the salvation of all mankind, but the socio-political reality of the church and society does not translate this into acceptance on conversion.¹⁴

The most flagrant example is the court scene, where Antonio, after having negotiated a share of Shylock's confiscated property, requests - hardly as a mediator for his enemy's eternal salvation (cf., however, Coghill, Ri 63) - that

Antonio: *He presently become a Christian:* (IV.i.383)

Whereupon Gratiano intervenes with the court:

Gratiano: *In christ'ning shalt thou have two god-fathers, -
Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more,
To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font.* (IV.i.394)

That this is not only Gratiano's gentlemanly private opinion but expresses a public attitude is suggested by Launcelot's analysis of the market economy of conversion, that could almost be used verbatim by present-day xenophobic movements:

Launcelot: *..... we were Christians enow before; e'en as many as could well live,
one by another: this making Christians will raise the price of hogs, -
if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a
rasher on the coals for money.* (III.v. 19-23)

Yet Jessica tries to convince herself (contrary to Sl 80, and considering the context, this should be taken to be a social rather than spiritual salvation):

I shall be saved by my husband, - he hath made me a Christian.

(III.v.17),

which interferes disharmoniously with Lorenzo's earlier conditional

*And never dare misfortune cross her foot,
Unless she do it under this excuse,
That she is issue to a faithless Jew.* (II.iv.35)

This then is the general background to Jessica's strife (even if some of the examples come later in the play), when the elopement is enacted. Jessica, after having lied to her father to avert his suspicions, takes whatever valuables she finds in the house and throws them out to Lorenzo, who is ready with Gratiano and several others in a gondola. We note the word 'casket', which has special connotations of 'love's wealth' in the play (see Brown, Wi 69):

Jessica: *Here, catch this casket, it is worth the pains.* (II.vi.33).

To which come Lorenzo's rationalization of his feelings, poetic but strangely ironic¹⁵ in the situation:

Lorenzo: *For she is wise, if I can judge of her,
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
And true she is, as she hath prov'd herself: (II.vi.53)*

Jessica is so focussed on her own strategies that she eschews any rational consideration concerning her father's predicament and the possibility that his apparently savage bond might be the key element in a power game without harmful intent. Instead she volunteers as denunciator:

Jessica: *When I was with him, I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him: and I know my lord,
If law, authority, and power deny not,
It will go hard with poor Antonio. (III.ii.283 ff.)*

Note the phrase "his countrymen" - Jessica signals where her loyalties are in a way rather like a Freudian wish-dream, combined with a wish to please. We could, like Salerio in another context, say 'full stop!'. Jessica has just acted in a particularly disloyal and partly criminal way against her father, and has shown bad judgment in wasting her dishonestly acquired capital. And she pronounces herself, earlier and later, with contempt about him. Does Shakespeare suggest that in this situation she is lying opportunistically to score a facile point? Strangely, while many critics (Qu 26, Burckhardt in Wi 69, Moody in Wh 91) find Jessica unsympathetic, her credibility as a witness does not seem to have been questioned (cf., however, Gr 92 p. 61). Whatever Shylock may have said in private, Jessica's denunciation adds nothing to his adversaries' knowledge about what he really means and intends. Rather, for Jessica's part it is to be expected that, having behaved indecently towards her father, she now feels a cumulative aversion, a corrupt reaction to guilt, confirming Seneca's maxim *Quos laeserunt, et oderunt* (whom they have injured they also hate). And interestingly, nobody in the party takes notice of her denunciation.

In the romantic moonlight of Belmont, Lorenzo brings up the theme of changed loyalties again

Jessica: *....In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice (V.i.14)*

(Note the 'unthrift' - perhaps self-ironical in this association with 'steal', and cynical since, right after, they willingly accept the arrangement (devised by Antonio in court) which brings them Shylock's fortune as an enforced bequest

and pretty and in love, since she is truly naïve (the only one in the play) and unable to play the strategic games of the lot, and so we feel that her happiness is not lasting.

Many critics, even those who want to find a Love & Mercy-vs.-Hatred & Revenge-morality in the play, and who find the couple Portia/Bassanio an ideal of love and harmonious bliss, have been harsh in their judgment of the couple Jessica/Lorenzo (cf. Sl 80, for a rather favorable view). Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch says in the introduction to the NCS edition (Qu 26, p. xx):

... Jessica is bad and disloyal, unfilial, a thief; frivolous, greedy, without any more conscience than a cat and without even a cat's redeeming love of home. Quite without heart, and worse than an animal instinct - pilfering to be carnal - she betrays her father to be a light-of-lucre carefully weighted with her sire's ducats.

S. Burckhardt (Wi 69) pronounces a similar statement. Heinrich Heine (Wi 69), who saw a performance in Drury Lane in 1839 (with what some critics call a 'romantic' - alternatively a 'sentimental'- representation of the villain), says:

As for Lorenzo, he is an accomplice of a most infamous theft, and according to the laws of Prussia he would have been branded, set in the pillory and condemned to fifteen years of imprisonment, notwithstanding his susceptibility to the beauties of nature, landscapes by moonlight, and music.

The theme of the miser's daughter escaping with her lover and part of her father's fortune is a stereotype in classical comedy, the (primitive) audience reaction being 'it serves him right'. Here, however, we are faced with complex personalities and situations. The stereotype is given added dimensions by the attempted escape not only from an oppressive family situation, but from socio-religious (even "racial") rejection into the good society, and by the implied polarity between Shylock the beast and Jessica the good and virtuous. In the text, however, we look in vain for any indication of goodness on Jessica's part. Perspicacious directors have clearly shown the lack of harmony and moral integrity in her personality. A good example is the Stratford (Ontario) production of 1984, directed by Mark Lamos, which with consistency and admirable inventiveness clarifies what is implied by the context and between the lines in the play (P. Gaudet in Wh 91, cf. also Gross, Gr 92 p 59).

Certainly, Jessica is a fairly unimportant figure in the plot construction, but her case gives rise to reflections on the general socio-psychological context of ascendancy in a segregated society, as described in the text. Can we imagine that Jessica would eventually share some bliss and harmony within the closed walls of Belmont? She is given the impression of being among friends, but is tolerated by most rather than welcome.

And Gratiano will be around, who speaks ‘an infinite deal about nothing’ (I.I.114), and whose not too rare slips she is supposed to swallow without taking offense, as well as Launcelot’s by no means innocent puns. She might stay ‘wise, fair and true’ in Lorenzo’s ‘constant soul’ - but she is more likely soon to become one of the things that ‘are with more spirit chased than enjoy’d’. If that happens she is deemed to be a loser, irrespective of what she does, since she is at best a second rate citizen - her views can simply be ignored, and any pretext will do to hold things against her, whether the accusation is true or false. And in any case she must avoid the more mercantile than merciful Venice, where the Solanios & Salerios of this world will opportunistically adopt any judgments and prejudices that are the order of the day, and both act accordingly and instigate others by well-planted gossip.

6. Individual strategic games III: Shylock

Although he is bound (by the exclusion laws of the city) to the contemptible activity of lending at a profit, this is held against him as a character defect (greed), while no-one in the play gives any thought to the morals - or perhaps the amorality - of how the good society’s own fortunes are amassed. Portia and Antonio, who share their contempt of Shylock’s business would not analyze the very basis of their generosity as coming from profitable investment contracts, exploitation of labour, etc, in a liberal economy moderated only by codes of conduct of mutual benefit in exclusive circles. Among critics who favour the love/generosity versus hatred/greed reading, the unlimited resources freely available to - and generously spent by - those welcome in Belmont, are simply judged as the effortlessly available worldly counterpart to the spiritual conditions of *love’s wealth* and harmony (e.g. Pf 92) – strangely in contrast with all evidence of character defects and inter-personal atrocities laid out as ambiguities in the text.

The scene where Shylock is confronted with Jessica’s elopement is painful, and lends itself to the worst judgments of his character:

Shylock: *... two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels;
I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear:
would she were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin: -
No news of them? why, so! –
and I know not what’s spent in the search:
why, thou - loss upon loss! the thief gone with so much,
and so much to find the thief, ... (III.i.79 ff.)*

Shylock is deranged by the shock - we recall Othello’s phrase ‘*Perplexed in the extreme*’ (Oth. V.ii.344). His daughter leaves him, steals, wastes

and (in his opinion) whores. The first three distress him, the last he perceives as a fate worse than death. In his confusion he mixes this real catastrophe with the, in relative terms, minor problem of the financial loss in a grotesque and revolting way. His complete loss of self-control in this critical situation contrasts dramatically with his composure both in the bond scene and in the beginning of the court scene. Even critics who see a 'human, almost tragic figure', tend to condemn him in this scene as a 'human turned into beast'. But, as Gross points out, this is a terrible curse - but it *is* a curse, and not the expression of greed. On the contrary, the jewels and ducats are to be buried along with the girl who took them. In this self-punishing, self-pitying fury, Shylock calls down destruction on everything that he has lost. (Gr 92, pb ed. p 61, cf also Ha 93 p.13).

Even if Shylock is a revolting character without self-control, so far he is not a criminal (having - at this point in the story - only asked the court to decide on his rights), and so he should have the benefit of doubt as to whether he means what he says. (This is also what Shylock later mistakenly assumes when he says: 'What judgment shall I dread doing no wrong?', IV.i.89). We could even imagine that, for whatever reason, Jessica suddenly comes back and is received like the prodigal son by a father who, by the shock, has come to realize that the events are partly, if unwittingly, his doing (cf. Goddard, Go 51, p. 99). So we have here a case where thoughtful critics, stage directors, and certainly normal readers and theatergoers are led to condone different rules, or rather different application of rules of society to insiders and outsiders. For the ones, a vile utterance is taken as a (bad) joke, for the others it will be taken as expressing genuine attitudes and intents. Yet, either could be one of those many instances where we do not mean literally what we say, perhaps in a situation of stress or playing some (more or less clever) strategic game with objectives quite different from the immediate sense of the words¹⁶.

In Shylock's case, we are faced with the lack of social acceptance. Acceptance can be seen as the inversion of disgust, and disgust is related to hatred (Mi 97). This link is expressed by Shylock when asked about his rationale for insisting on his bond which, as Bloom points out (Bl 98) simply mirrors – and is provoked by – his adversaries' preconceived perceptions of himself:

Shylock: *So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg'd hate, and a certain loathing* (IV.i.59)

He knows from experience that, irrespective of what he does and means, his adversaries will interpret all through their attitude of disgust/hatred. It is notable that nobody (of course not within the design of the play, but not even sympathetic critics or producers/actors) seems to question that we are supposed to assume that (in the sense that Shakespeare for once leaves no room for alternative interpretations) Shylock really intends to

cut his pound of flesh on the condition that the court were to proclaim it his right. (The remark on Shylock whetting his knife could, after all, just as well be meant metaphorically like, for example - and apart from the bawdy pun - Portia being light). But what if the bond is only meant as a strategic game, devised to obtain favours not normally within his reach, not money but acceptance - a game carried too far, due to Shylock's stubbornness and lack of sense for practical politics, and therefore self-destructive? There is indeed no reason why Shylock should be an exception to Bloom's (Bl 98) observation that "no one in *The Merchant of Venice* is what he or she seems to be", why he as the only character should be what he appears to be.

At least the Duke seems to imply that Shylock is trying to play strategic games.

Duke: *Shylock the world thinks, and I think so too,
That thou but ledest this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act, and then 'tis thought
Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty; (IV.i.17 ff)*

But the Duke does not allow Shylock to get to the point where he might reach a strategic advantage, but asks him to renounce immediately and unilaterally.

This idea may not make a big difference at first sight for an interpretation of the play. But let us consider, as a *Gedanken-experiment*, that Shylock in the first place did not ask for his pound-of-flesh-bond, but simply to be accepted as a full and equal member of the trading community and the Venetian Grande-Bourgeoisie. We could expect that his adversaries would see this contract as equally "merry" and that, in the end, they would have used another segregation law with appropriate justification (or a more unobtrusive "gentlemen's agreement") to reject the claim and even punish him for the audacity. The basic fact is, that Shylock is an outcast, used as a last option when all friends fail, and abused whenever risk-free. He is tolerated as long as he knows his place outside the good society, and he is at the mercy of people like Solanio, Salerio and Gratiano. So when Shylock wants to be accepted, this is an intolerable offense. We recall the exchange in Act I with Antonio where he offers to be a friend (and to provide a loan on favourable conditions) and is rebuffed to remain an enemy, while at the same time Antonio talks favourably about the friends who were given free loans but later demonstrate the true value of their friendship by refusing to help when he himself is in vital need. The Venetian attitude to a possible strategic game on Shylock's part can be expressed as: "you should not believe that you can ever be a player in a game with us, we just simply do not relate to you at all!"

Intentionally masking the meaning of utterances for strategic reasons must be distinguished from passing outcries in a state of extreme psychic stress, where, in losing control, one can say things one does not mean and afterwards regrets – (though both cases give hints about character defects). Shylock would not be alone in such uncontrolled reactions, as he shows both in the elopement case and in the end of the court scene where, from a firm belief in having the upper hand (perhaps just to be able for once to negotiate the conditions for renouncing from his rights) he is humiliated and declared a criminal deserving death penalty. Shylock's reaction to the confiscation of half his fortune in the court scene could have been a model for the grotesque exaggerations of Harpagon's monologue in *l'Avare*):

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* (IV.i.370)

For a modern reader, paying a toll or *Reichfluchtsteuer* of one half would seem a good escape. Shylock also responds to Portia's demonstration of mercy:

Portia: *Art thou contented, Jew?
 What dost thou say?*
Shylock: *I am content* (V.i.394)

although it is obvious that he is no such thing' (Gross p. 75). Shylock fails to recognize that, even though in normal conditions he could occasionally win strategic business games, he would never be allowed to win a game on social ascendancy, and that, therefore, his strategy was a losing one from the very beginning.

7. Conclusion

The way in which strategic games work in a social context in an interesting way characterizes the moral climate of that society. The *Merchant of Venice* can be read as a study of this phenomenon. It is chilling how little genuine feeling there is in the interactions - even the expressions of love, compassion, and mercy are largely part of strategic games and pseudo-games, where it is not clear what is genuine and what is only a pose, and it does not really matter, since other purposes seem more important. In MoV the reader/spectator's sensibility concerning the dividing line between decent and indecent games is continually challenged, and he repeatedly finds himself condoning actions he would normally condemn. As a result of the complexity of plot and *dramatis personae*, he is vulnerable to base his judgements on a perspective that eliminates impressions dissonant with his preconceived ideas.

Is MoV an anti-Semitic play as has been maintained? It certainly deals with anti-Semitic characters set in an a-S society. But it is difficult to argue convincingly that Shakespeare shares these attitudes. Indeed, the character of Shylock, revolting as it may appear, is the only one clear-sighted enough to see the viciousness of a society where human rights are a privilege of the ruling elite. This characterization is illustrated by the ironic treatment of the concept of love, which throughout the play is said to be the essence of the good society but systematically turns out to be empty rhetoric. In the present reading, MoV is neither a tragedy, a comedy, an allegory or a fairy play. The idea of setting it up as a (black) farce seems the most congenial way to catch the spirit of its description of the actors of Vanity Fair, the *fools with varnish'd faces*.

References:

- Ad 50** T.W. Adorno et al.: *The Authoritarian Personality* (Harper, New York 1950)
- Be 64** E. Berne: *Games people play – the psychology of human relationships* (Grove Press, New York 1964)
- Bl 98** H. Bloom: *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Books, New York 1998)
- Br 12** G. Brandes: *William Shakespeare – A Critical Study* (3 vols., Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1895-96, English translation, London 1898)
- Br 55** J. Russell Brown: *Preface and Notes* to the 'Arden' edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (Methuen, London 1955)
- Bo 78** S. Bok: *Lying - Moral choice in Public and Private Life* (Pantheon/Random House, New York 1978)
- Bu 91** J.C. Bulman: *Shakespeare in Performancer – The Merchant of Venice* (Manchester University Press, Manchester 1991)
- Co 71** E.P.J. Corbett: *Classical rhetoric for the modern student* (2nd ed., Oxford U.P. 1971); also C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca: *The new rhetoric – A treatise on argumentation* (U. of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 1971 [orig. ed. Paris 1958])
- Gi 91** R. Girard: *A Theater of Envy - William Shakespeare* (Oxford U.P., New York 1991). In particular ch. 28 (pp. 243-255) *To entrap the wisest - sacrificial ambivalence in The Merchant of Venice and Richard III*.
- Gi 97** J. Gielgud: *Acting Shakespeare* (Macmillan/PanBooks, London 1997; orig. ed. (1991)
- Go 51** H.C. Goddard: *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1951, Pb edition 1960). In particular Ch. XII (vol. 1, pp 81-116): *The Merchant of Venice*
- Gr 62** B. Grebanier: *The Truth about Shylock* (Random House, New York 1962); an abbreviated version is reproduced as *Shylock himself* in H. Bloom (ed.): *Shylock* (Chelsea House, New York 1991)
- Gr 89** H.P. Grice: *Studies in the way of words* (Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989)
- Gr 92** J. Gross: *Shylock - Four hundred years in the life of a legend* (Chatto&Windus, London 1992; Pb ed.: Vintage / Random House, London 1994). [References are to the 1994 paperback edition]
- Ha 93** J.L. Halio: Preface and notes to the 'Oxford Shakespeare' edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford U.P, Oxford 1993)
- Jo 47** M. Joseph: *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (Columbia U.P., New York 1947)

- Ko 84** L. Kohlberg: *The Psychology of Moral Development – The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (Harper & Row, San Francisco 1984); J. Rest et al.: *Postconventional Moral Thinking – A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach* (L. Erlbaum Assoc., Mahwah, NJ 1999 – includes a comprehensive bibliography)
- Le 79** R. Levin: *New Readings vs. Old Plays - Recent trends in the reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1979)
- Mi 97** W.I. Miller: *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard U. P. 1997)
- Or 93** A. Ortony (ed.): *Metaphor and Thought* (2nd ed., Cambridge U. P., Cambridge 1993)
- Pf 92** M. Pfister's article on MoV in I. Schabert (ed.): *Shakespeare-Handbuch* (Kröner, Stuttgart 1992)
- Qu26** A. Quiller-Couch: *Preface and Notes* to the 'New Cambridge Shakespeare' edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge U. P., Cambridge 1926)
- Ra 81** N. Rabkin: *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981). In particular Ch.1 (pp.1-32): *Meaning and The Merchant of Venice*
- Ri 63** Anne Ridler (ed.): *Shakespeare criticism 1935-60* (Oxford U.P. 1963) In particular
 - N. Coghill: *The basis of Shakesperian comedy* (1950)
 - W.H. Auden: *Music in Shakespeare* (1957)
- Ry 89** K. Ryan: *Shakespeare* (London 1989, 2nd ed. 1995) The chapter *Re-reading The Merchant of Venice* is reproduced in M. Coyle (ed): *The Merchant of Venice* (New casebooks, Macmillan, London 1998)
- Sl 80** C. Slights: In defense of Jessica (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, Washington DC **31**(1980) 357-368)
- St 93** L. Stephens: 'A Wilderness of Monkeys': A Psychodynamic Study of *The Merchant of Venice* (in B.J. Sokol (ed.): *The Undiscovered Country - New essays on psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* [Free Assoc. Books, London 1993])
- We 92** R. Weisberg: 'Then you shall be his surety': Oaths and Mediating Breaches in *The Merchant of Venice* (Section 10 , pp. 93-104, in *Poethics* [Columbia Univ. Press, New York 1992])
- Wh 91** T. Wheeler (ed.): *The Merchant of Venice: Critical essays* (Garland, New York 1991) In particular
 - A.D. Moody: *The letter of the law* (from *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* [Studies in English Literature 21, Edw. Arnold, London 1964]),
 - L. Tennenhouse: *The Counterfeit Order in The Merchant of Venice* (from M. Schwartz and C. Kahn (eds.): *Representing Shakespeare - New Psychoanalytic Essays*, John Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore 1980)
 - B. Overton: *The Problem of Shylock* (from *The Merchant of Venice - text and performance*, Macmillan, London 1987)
 - S. Cusack: *Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice'* (from P. Brockbank (ed.): *Players of Shakespeare - Essays in Shakespearean performance by twelve players with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 1985)
 - P. Gaudet: *Lorenzo's "Infidel": The Staging of Difference in 'The Merchant of Venice'*(from *Theatre Journal* **38**(1986)275)
- Wi 69** J. Wilders (ed.): *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice - A selection of critical essays* (Macmillan, London 1969) In particular
 - Heinrich Heine: a note (1839)
 - J.R. Brown: *Love's wealth and the judgment of The Merchant of Venice* (1962)
 - G. Midgley: *The Merchant of Venice: a reconsideration* (1960)
 - S. Burckhardt: *The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond* (1962)
 - W.H. Auden: *Brothers and others* (1963)

Notes

1) Quotations in the text follow the Arden Edition, for MoV the 7th ed., edited by J.R. Brown

2) Granville-Barker's term

3) The concept of "cognitive dissonance reduction" (CDR) was introduced in 1957 by L. Festinger in cognitive psychology. It concerns the mechanisms that are triggered "when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. [...]The person rejects, explains away, or avoids the new information, persuades himself that no conflict really exists, reconciles the differences, or resorts to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in his conception of the world and of himself." [Encyclopaedia Britannica (1967)]. Richard Levin's treatise (Le79), without mentioning this concept explicitly, deals throughout with this phenomenon among critics - his concept of character assassination is just that. In the sequel, it will be used also with respect to the reasoning of *dramatis personae* themselves as a feature of personality and socially accepted argument, presumably intended by the author to be recognized by the audience. In essence, dissonance reduction is a means, not always intellectually honest, to handle ambiguity and choices in complex situations we are facing.

4) The term "game" – briefly for "strategic game" - here refers to any situation where at least two conflicting interests are pursued by individuals or groups, and where the actors involved can influence the flow of events. By "pseudo-game" is meant the common degenerate decisionmaking situation where one of the parties controls the events by direct power or by some strategic advantage or influence, so that the adversary stance is effectively ignored in the process and outcome. Evidently, these definitions cover a wide range of interactions in society. The approach emphasizes that the moral qualities of a social system of any size are characterized by the "rules of the game" imposed or tolerated within the system and in the larger context where it is embedded. This concept should not be confused with game theory's mathematical modelling of decisionmaking processes, nor with Steven Potter's well-known but rather lighthearted books about Gamesmanship, or with Wittgenstein's language-game theory. The term is used here in a sense close to Eric Berne's sinister and widely read "*Games people play – the psychology of human relationships*" (Be 64). A distinctive property is that rules are not fully determined in advance but adaptable to objectives within limits loosely determined by the social system, and that agents can only predict rules applied by their adversary from precedents and intuitions about the social climate. Shakespeare uses the term in a similar way in

Salisbury: *It is apparent foul play, and 'tis shame
That greatness should so grossly offer it:
So thrive it in your game! and so, farewell.* (King John IV.ii.93)

5) The "power game" interpretation as a central issue in the play is suggested *en passant* in Bill Overton's "The Problem of Shylock" (in his book "*The Merchant of Venice: Text and Performance*", London, Macmillan 1987; the chapter is reprinted in Wh 91).

6) Shakespeare presents a masterful study (in Richard III.iv.70ff.) of how a false insinuation can be turned into an instrument of power:

Richard: *And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore,
That by their witchcraft thus have marked me.*

Hastings: *If they have done this deed, my noble lord –*

Richard: *If? Thou protector of this damned strumpet,
Talk'st thou to me of ifs! Thou art a traitor:
Off with his head! Now by Saint Paul I swear
I will not dine until I see the same.*

7) For a comprehensive analysis, see Bo 78.

8) Antony's "– *For Brutus is an honourable man*" (JC III:ii), is the paradigmatic example of how irony can change opinion by implicitly induced inference. This technique can just as well be used to influence opinion with false insinuations.

9) For example F. Kermode (1961, cited in Ra 81 p. 8): '...It begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love. And all the time it tells its audience that this is its subject; only by

a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of *The Merchant of Venice*.' Cf. also the quotation at the beginning of this essay.

¹⁰) This does not preclude the possibility of antisemitic readings of the text by appropriately applying CDR (see note 3). For a post-war example, see (Gr 62).

¹¹) We should also keep in mind the adverse attitudes to music (even religiously inspired works of the great masters) expressed by some reformist movements, for example Calvinism - 'Calvin (1509-64) took a more cautious and fearful view on music than Luther, warning against voluptuous, effeminate, or disorderly music and insisting on the supremacy of the text' (quoted from *Encycl. Brit.*, 1974 ed.). This shows that, whatever views we might have about Shylock's adverse views on popular music and their reflection on his character, they were shared by important Christian factions, and can in no way be seen as 'characteristic' (with pejorative connotations) of his religious affiliation (cf. Gr 92, p. 28).

¹²) W. Empson in *Seven types of ambiguity* (Chatto & Windus 1930)

¹³) The lighthearted talk about sexual liberties in the ring incident in act V is evidently to be understood as game-playing, both by the audience and by the *dramatis personae*, thus the lack of reactions on the part of Bassanio and Graziano other than further coarse comments. Graziano's '*Why this is like mending of highways / In summer where the ways are fair enough*' (V.1.263), is easily explained by comparison to *This Doll Tearsheet should be some road* (2 H IV: II.2.159). This interpretation, slightly different from that given in the Arden ed., provides a further clue to Gratiano's attitudes.

¹⁴) Cf. the Swedish nursery rhyme [author's transl.]: 'The zebra is a striped beast, the stripes will not wear off the least'. A dramatic representation of this barrier was given in the RSC 1987 production directed by Bill Alexander, where the cross was used as a symbol not only of Christian faith, but of power and of social cohesion vs. exclusion (Bu91 pp. 132-134)

¹⁵) Psychoanalytic studies provide a number of important clues to a consistent understanding of the play (see, e.g. Stephens, St 93, and Tennenhouse, Wh 91). Some details of characterization are, however, debatable. For example, in Stephens' study, Lorenzo emerges with a unique (among *dramatis personae*) moral integrity which seems to ignore contradictory evidence, and Jessica is seen as a victim of a kind of 'symbolic incest', an interpretation and defense which, considering the text and the context, gets into trouble with Ockham's razor.

¹⁶) J. Gross (Gr 92, p. 83) provides an apparently different analysis: "... even if we set aside their [i.e. Shylock's adversaries'] treatment of Shylock, they are far from flawless. But that does not mean that we are supposed to 'see through' them, or identify them with their limitations. They partly embody the ideals, which at other times they fail to live up to: Shakespeare offers us a mixture of realism and romance". But this really only a different wording of the same interpretation - the way we do (or are induced to) place our sympathies has implications for our way of accounting for attenuating circumstances and of passing judgment. It takes the innocence of a child (as in *The Emperor's New Cloths*) or a certain amount of civil courage not to go along with the currents of opinion, and so, perhaps unconsciously, we apply different rules.