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# 'The tragedy of a Jew', the *passion* of a Merchant: shifting genres in a changing world

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As many scholars have argued, the space physically and figuratively represented in *The Jew of Malta* and in *The Merchant of Venice* places the texts on the threshold of modernity.<sup>47</sup> John Drakakis wrote that the Shakespearean play is performed in an epistemological context that reflects *modernity* in line with the definition of Gianni Vattimo of the modern age as an 'era of history'.<sup>48</sup> According to Hugh Grady, the *Merchant* provides the vision of a desacralized space where we may perceive the 'enabling structures of Western modernity': the autonomous and instrumental reason, and more precisely the Machiavellian logic supporting the nation-state, and the growing capitalist economy.<sup>49</sup>

It is not by chance that Machiavelli appears as a character in the Prologue of *The Jew of Malta*, speaking through his *prosopopoeia* and astounding the spectators in such an unexpected way:

Albeit the world think Machevill is dead,  
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps;  
And, now the Guise is dead, is come from France,  
To view this land, and frolic with his friends. [JM 1-4]

Not only has Machiavelli/Machevill taken the inheritance of the Duke of Guise, the fierce leader of the Catholic French faction against the Huguenots, but he is destined to establish astonishing relationships with the Jew, Barabas – who of those structures is the ambiguous fulcrum of Western modernity – and indirectly with Ferneze, the governor of Malta who exercises authority in domestic and foreign politics.

Machiavelli has the function 'to present the *tragedy* of a Jew | Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed' [IT Prologue 31-32]. And it is to such a use of the word 'tragedy' we should pay more attention: can we really consider *The Jew of Malta* a 'tragedy' according to classical rules? Or rather 'a farce' according to T.S. Eliot?<sup>50</sup> And what about *The Merchant of Venice*, with its apparently reassuring *happy ending*? Starting from the idea of a changing world and of a new way to represent the world in early modern theatre, I intend to analyse the Jews' characters focussing on their theatrical power and function in transforming traditional models and genres; secondly, I would like to argue how the classical concepts of *sacrifice* and *fortune* changed in these modern plays, paying particular attention to the story of Abigail in *The Jew* and to the concept of *hazard* in *The Merchant*.<sup>51</sup>

First of all, with reference to what Walter Benjamin pointed out in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,<sup>52</sup> we may say that modern, baroque drama differs from ancient tragedy in its conception and

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<sup>47</sup> See, among others, A. Hiscock, 'Enclosing "infinite riches in a little room": the question of cultural marginality in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*', in *The uses of this world: thinking space in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cary and Jonson*, ed. Hiscock (Cardiff: 2004), pp. 52-81; J. Drakakis, "'Jew. Shylock is my name": speech-prefixes in *The Merchant of Venice* as symptoms of the early modern.' in *Shakespeare and modernity: early modern to millennium*, ed. H. Grady (London: 2000), pp. 105-21; H. Grady, *Shakespeare's universal wolf: postmodernist studies in early modern reification* (Oxford: 1996)

<sup>48</sup> Drakakis, pp. 108-09.

<sup>49</sup> 'a capitalist economy reinforcing in its own autonomous operations the purposeless purposiveness that provides the characteristics, often catastrophic non-teleology of Faustian Western (now global) development' [Grady, 33]. See also P. D. Holland, 'The *Merchant of Venice* and the value of money' in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* vol. 60 (2001), pp. 13-30.

<sup>50</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected essays* (London: 1932), p. 123.

<sup>51</sup> L. Woodbridge, *Money and the age of Shakespeare: essays in new economic criticism* (London: 2003); M. Shell, *Money, language and thought* (Baltimore: 1982); H. Berger, Jr., 'Marriage and mercification in *The Merchant of Venice*: the casket scene revisited' in *Shakespeare Quarterly* vol. 32 (1981), pp.155-62.

<sup>52</sup> Original edn: W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: 1963)

representation of time: while the latter tends to be characterized by the a-temporal world of myth, the former acts out history, which is often allegorically treated. This allegorical treatment of history also contributes to changing the classic, Aristotelian notion of dramatic genres, in particular the distinction between tragedy and comedy.<sup>53</sup> Through the mirror of literary characters, individuals are no longer represented in their fight against the Gods and their divine, absolute laws, but against history, against other men, human passions and social forces (such as the economic ones). When in the Prologue of *Tamburlaine the Great* the spectator was invited to ‘View but this picture in this tragic glass, | And then applaud his fortune as you please’ [*IT Prologue* 7-8], for example, the same terms *tragic* and *fortune* had already changed their traditional meaning: the world is ultimately tragic, and tragic is any representation of it. Tamburlaine – the Scythian thief ‘come up from nothing’ [*2T*, III.i.74] – is himself like a God, and while symbolically holding the world on his shoulders like Atlas (‘Such breath of shoulders as might mainly bear | Old Atlas’ burden’, *1T*, II.i.10-11), he performs and shows ‘on a tragic glass’ the cruel spectacle of the world itself where he plays the protagonist’s role. Tamburlaine, besides, overturns the stereotypes connected to the image of the Wheel of Fortune: he does not undergo the same destiny of triumph and of fall as traditional heroes of tragic tradition do, but he achieves full power and conquers most of the world; finally, he dies of a fatal disease in a general apotheosis.

Speaking about characters, and taking the Aristotelian definition of tragic and comic characters in the *Poetics* as our reference point, we see that Barabas and Shylock cannot be labelled either as *chrestoi/spoudaioi* or as *phauloi* (i.e. neither of ‘a higher type’ nor of ‘a lower type’):<sup>54</sup> they are in fact simply *Jews*. What does this imply? In early modern England the Jews played a paradoxical role: they represented an abstract and evanescent myth, because people did not know them directly but from the Middle-Age legend of the money-lender;<sup>55</sup> but at the same time they were concretely involved in the development of the Western capitalist economy.<sup>56</sup> While being instruments of this new economy, the Jews were at the same time characterized as parasites. Accordingly, on the one hand both the tragedies of Barabas and Shylock play on the confusion between Jews and merchants,<sup>57</sup> and on the theatrical power and the resonance of figures such as the Medieval Vice and the ‘stage Jew’;<sup>58</sup> on the other, they express the contradictory conditions of their being *homines clausi* in an open, modern world here represented by Malta and Venice, which symbolically concentrate in their territory a juxtaposition of different meaningful spaces, and contain a variety of religious and ethnic factions often in conflict (such as Jews, Turks, and Catholics).<sup>59</sup>

Based on the public’s strong reaction, Marlowe and Shakespeare represent in their plays the trauma of the Jews in coming openly in contact with society and the world outside. When Barabas is forced out of his ‘world’ – out of the ‘little room’ where he keeps ‘his infinites riches’ [*JM* I.i.33-37]<sup>60</sup> – and his fortune confiscated, he becomes a monster taking violent and witty revenge on whoever he considers an enemy (his daughter included): whereas the catastrophic ending may be compared to a classical tragedy because it brings death to everyone, the developments of the plot turn it into an almost farcical play deprived of any catharsis.<sup>61</sup> Shylock lives in a ‘world apart’ too, belonging to the confined Jewish quarter of Rialto [*MV* I.iii.104-106] where he is visited by Christians only to be asked for money and to be cursed [*MV* I.iii.109-111]. Despite discrimination, therefore, Shylock claims that, before being a Jew, he is a human being:

<sup>53</sup> We can speak of ‘performing history’ - W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the force of modern performance* (Cambridge: 2003), pp. 28-39.

<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. S. Halliwell (London: 1995), p. 48a; p. 49a; p. 54a.

<sup>55</sup> I would like to refer to the concept of artificial persons as presented in J. C. Agnew, *Worlds apart: the market and the theatre in Anglo-American thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: 1986). In particular ‘Artificial persons’, pp. 101-148 and pp. 121-122. See F. Marengo, ‘Barabas-Shylock: ebrei o cristiani?’ in *Il personaggio nelle arti della narrazione*, ed. F. Marengo (Roma: 2007), pp. 169-189; J. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: 1996); G. K. Hunter, ‘Elizabethans and foreigners’ in *Dramatic identities and cultural tradition: studies in Shakespeare and his contemporaries*, ed. G. K. Hunter (Liverpool: 1978), pp. 3-30. See also ‘The theology of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*’, pp. 60-102.

<sup>56</sup> S. Kleinberg, ‘The merchant of Venice: the homosexual as anti-semitic in nascent capitalism’, in *Literary visions of homosexuality*, ed. S. Kellogg (London: 1983), pp. 113-126.

<sup>57</sup> *The merchant of Venice*, IV.i.172.

<sup>58</sup> E. Schiff, *From stereotype to metaphor: the Jew in contemporary drama* (Albany, New York: 1982) See in particular the introduction: ‘The tradition of the stage Jew’, pp. 1-36.

<sup>59</sup> D. Hillman, ‘Homo Clausus at the theatre’, in *Rematerializing Shakespeare: authority and representation on the early modern English stage*, eds. B Reynolds & W. West (London: 2005), pp. 161-185.

<sup>60</sup> M. Garber, ‘Infinite riches in a little room: closure and enclosure in Marlowe’, in *Two Renaissance mythmakers: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson*, ed. A. Kernan (Baltimore: 1977), pp. 3-21.

<sup>61</sup> It could be interesting to refer to S. Žižek, *First as tragedy, then as farce* (London: 2009)

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, 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? [MV III.i.55-59]

Behind the cruel bond requested by Shylock from Antonio ('an equal pound | Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken | In what part of your body pleaseth me', MV I.iii.147-149), we may thus see not only the most appalling revenge on Christians, but also – paradoxically – a sort of desire to establish a contact between Christians and Jews through the symbolic, Eucharistic medium of flesh and blood.<sup>62</sup> From the making of the bond to the final trial – and also through the allusions to patience and sufferance in reacting to Antonio's swear words [MV I.iii.107-108] – Shylock's story may also be read as a story of passion, although parodically rewritten (as parodic is the use of Biblical language in *Malta*).<sup>63</sup> At the same time, in the fierce words that Shylock pronounces against Antonio ('You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, | And spit upon my Jewish gabardine, | And all for use of that which is mine own...', MV I.iii.109-111), we could find an echo of the Book of Isaiah ('I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting', *Is* 50:6) and of the Gospel of Mark when he describes the death of Christ: 'And they shall mocke hym, & scourge hym, spit vpon hym, and kyll hym: And the thirde day he shall ryse agayne' (*Mark* 10:34),<sup>64</sup> as related in *The Bishops' Bible* (1568). Shylock, who as a usurer is the symbol per excellence of avarice and greed, highlights what lies at the core of the ethics of the gift: he does not ask for an external gift, but the gift of the self taken from the body, with the (cruel and paradoxical) sacrifice of Antonio's flesh and blood. Failing to do so (and obviously he should fail), he must then suffer the worst punishment for his identity, that of losing all his wealth and of converting to Christianity.

From a theatrical point of view, not unlike Barabas, Shylock is neither a martyr nor a tragic figure: he is a villain with great ability to perform a comic role. Just think of the tragicomic scene when Solanio relates to Salerio the reaction of Shylock to his daughter's elopement with Lorenzo and to the theft of his treasure:

I never heard a passion so confused,  
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,  
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:  
'My daughter! O my ducats! Oh, my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O my  
Christian ducats! Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!' [MV II.viii.12-17]

It is a comic cliché whose sources are probably Plautus's *Aulularia*<sup>65</sup> and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* ('My gold, my gold, and all my wealth is gone!', *JM* I.ii.258), and which will be continued in Molière's *L'avare*.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, it is history that compels us to regard Shylock as a tragic character. If, like Barabas, he is forced out of his world too, it is because the happy ending implies his conversion, but that means also his removal from that public space which he will never belong to (as is shown by Shylock's last words: 'I pray you give me leave to go from hence, | I am not well', MV IV.i.392-393). As Lisa Freinkel argues referring to *Slavoj Žižek's The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 'An ideology really succeeds when the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour'<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> 'The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all, | Ere thou shall lose for me one drop of blood' (*The Merchant of Venice* IV.i.112-113); compare Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: 'One drop would save my soul, half a drop' (sc. XIV, 75-76) and see J. Adelman, *Blood relations: Christian and Jew in 'The merchant of Venice'* (Chicago: 2008)

<sup>63</sup> S. Munson Deats, 'Biblical parody in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*: a re-examination' in *Christianity and literature* vol. 37 (1988), pp. 27-50; J. Parker, 'The curious sovereignty of art: Marlowe's sacred counterfeits', in *The aesthetics of Antichrist: from Christian drama to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. J. Parker (Ithaca; London: 2007), pp. 183-245 (also 'Blood money: Antichristian economics and the drama of the sacraments', pp. 87-138); D. Inbar, 'Taming of the Jew: Marlowe's Barabas vis-à-vis Shakespeare's Shylock' in *The journal of religion and theatre* vol. 4 (2005), pp. 160-174.

<sup>64</sup> Compare the gospels of Mark (14:65) and of Matthew (26:67); in Isaiah (50:6) and Job (30:10).

<sup>65</sup> 'Heu me miserum, misere perii, | male perditus... Perditissimus ego sum omnium in terra; nam quid mi opust vita, tantum auri | perdididi, quod concustodivi | sedulo?' [Plautus, *Aulularia*, ll. 713-716]

<sup>66</sup> 'Au voleur! Au voleur! à l'assassin! au meurtrier!... Je suis perdu, je suis assassiné, on m'a coupé la gorge, on m'a dérobé mon argent...' [Molière, *L'avare* IV.iv]

<sup>67</sup> L. Freinkel, *The merchant of Venice: 'modern' anti-semitism and the veil of allegory*, ed. Grady, pp. 122-141.

Also female characters – Abigail in *The Jew of Malta*, Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* (whose melancholy at the opening of Act V Scene 1, in Belmont, has been compared with Antonio's initial sadness), but especially Portia – have a fundamental, pivotal role in expressing the shifting relationships between tragedy and comedy in these two plays. On the one hand, Abigail's unfortunate story recalls the myth of Iphigenia (from Lucretius' *De rerum natura* to Euripide's *Iphigenia in Aulis*), the beautiful young girl destined to love and marriage but condemned to death by her father Agamemnon [JM I.i.132-136]. Abigail is described by her beloved, the Christian Mattia, as 'A fair young maid, scarce fourteen years of age, | The sweetest flower in Cytherea's field, | Cropped from the pleasures of the fruitful earth, | And strangely metamorphised nun' [JM I.iii. 14-17]. Forced by Barabas to love Lodovico and to be closed in a nunnery (pretending to be a nun), Abigail converts to Christianity and suffers her father's revenge: she is killed by the poisoned water along with the whole nunnery. From this point of view Abigail's sacrifice could be compared with Califa's slaughter in *Tamburlaine*, which borrows from Isaac's sacrifice:<sup>68</sup> Abigail betrayed her father becoming in reality what Barabas asked her to be in the art of simulation (JM I.ii.251 sgg.).<sup>69</sup> Just as Califa is unable to fight, Abigail is unable to simulate. That is what the tragedy of Barabas, not unlike Tamburlaine's tragedy, shows in a tragic glass: the Machiavellian world claims that every form of innocence, simplicity and sincerity has to be removed and sacrificed. If the tragedy of the modern world consists in simulation, the theatre assumes, on the contrary, the function of revealing the truth behind the mimesis while demystifying the power struggles prevailing in the society.

*The Merchant of Venice* displays a similar context and analogous premises, but raises more problematic issues. The same episode of the Jew's daughter's betrayal fades from tragedy to a gloomy, happy-ending-comedy characterized by Jessica's evident sense of guilt [MV II.iii; II.vi] and by her melancholic revival of ancient sad stories (Troilus and Cressida, Thisbe, Dido, and Medea: MV V.i.1-85).

More generally, and also in line with the anthropologic implications of Machiavelli's thought (see the recent interpretations of Giulio Ferroni),<sup>70</sup> it is the notion of *Fortune* that changes from the classical conception of *Fate* or *Tyke* to a wider, historical, human 'field of forces' here converging into a modern conception of hazard.<sup>71</sup> We may consider the semantic transformations of some key-words such as *venture*, *fortune*, *misfortune*, *chance*, which absorb and reflect an economic meaning here embodied in the Venetian scene.<sup>72</sup> When Solanio and Salerio analyze Antonio's sadness, at the beginning of the drama, for example, they use 'venture' [MV I.i.15, 21, 42] to indicate investments or merchandise [MV I.i.45]. The words 'fortune' [MV I.i.44] and 'misfortune' [MV I.i.21] are used in similar contexts and tend to have similar economic meanings. The tragic conflict between the human condition (and human sufferance) and Fate, between *éthos* (also literary character) and divine laws, in fact, is transferred into a different field of forces where instrumental reason and economic worth tend to dominate and prevail.<sup>73</sup>

Accordingly, we may read the caskets' scene as a sort of *mise en abyme* of these premises, and of the relationships between intelligence and chance in running any risk. The notion of hazard, in particular, is a fundamental key-word in Portia's lottery [I.ii.28-30]; etymologically linked to an Arabian (and later French) name referring to the game of dice, and to the castle called Hasart or Asart during the siege of which the game was invented (OED), it summarizes and substitutes the notion of fortune itself. Used for the first time in the *Merchant* by Bassanio [MV I.i.151] when he confesses to Antonio his will 'to shoot another arrow' [MV I.i.148] when leaving in pursuit of Portia (who is described as a 'golden fleece', MV I.i.170), the word hazard assumes in the caskets' scene a twofold meaning: firstly it refers to the whole enterprise of choosing the correct casket (an act, that of choosing, which involves judgement and chance); and secondly to the

<sup>68</sup> M. Ephraim, 'Jephthah's kin: the sacrificing father in *The merchant of Venice*.' , in *Journal for early modern cultural studies* vol. 5 (2005), pp. 71–93; I. McAdam, *The irony of identity: self and imagination in the drama of Christopher Marlowe*, (London: 1999)

<sup>69</sup> A. Beskins, 'From Jew to nun: Abigail in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*' in *Explicator* vol. 65 (2007), pp.133-36.

<sup>70</sup> G. Ferroni, *Machiavelli, o dell'incertezza: La politica come arte del rimedio* (Roma: 2003)

<sup>71</sup> Compare 'Thy life is dear, for all that life can rate | Worth name of life in thee hath estimate: | Youth, beauty, wisdom, courage, all | That happiness and prime can happy call; | Thou this to hazard needs must intimate | Skill infinite or monstrous desperate' (*All's Well that Ends Well* II.i.186); 'Now expectation, tickling skittish spirits, | On one and other side, Trojan and Greek, | Sets all on hazard' (*Troilus and Cressida* Prologue, 22); 'The terms of our estate may not endure | Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow | Out of his lunacies' (*Hamlet* III.iii.6); 'Give up yourself merely to chance and hazard, | From firm security' (*Antony and Cleopatra* III.12.19).

<sup>72</sup> J. Ozark, *The merchant of Venice: choice, hazard and consequence* (London: 1995) (see also: Shell; Woodbridge).

<sup>73</sup> G. Melchiori stresses the shifting boundaries between the traditional genres, and proposes for the *Merchant* the definition of tragicomedy, speaking of a kind of theatre where – in opposition to the classical theatre – 'il gioco del caso si è sostituito alla necessità del fato' - G. Melchiori, *Introduzione to Shakespeare: Le commedie romantiche* (Milano: 1982), p. XXXVIII.

correct casket, the lead one, which bears the inscription ‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath’ (*MV* II.vii.8-10): Bassanio becomes thus the hero who gives and hazards all he has (Antonio included).

So, if hazard may be considered as the symbol of a modern conception of Fortune which unites chance with intelligence and judgement, and choice with risk (which is a mathematical and financial concept<sup>74</sup> also connected to the idea of a religious salvation),<sup>75</sup> we may consider Portia (‘a lady richly left’, ‘fair’, ‘and | Of wonderful virtues’, *MV* I.i.161-162) as really being the positive embodiment of the Machiavellian qualities (those of the Prince): beauty, intelligence, and (as she shows not only in the caskets’ scene, but also in the trial scene) the capacity to exploit the best opportunities and to strike a balance between fortune and hazard, and between knowing and doing [*MV* I.ii.12-14]. It is thanks to her wit so convincingly used and performed in the final trial that the play turns to its (almost apparent) happy ending; and that is not surprising: even though among her social and marital duties there is the necessity to tame an ‘alien’ like Shylock,<sup>76</sup> the young lady of Belmont cannot avoid showing once again her virtue (corresponding to the wide notion of *virtus* in Machiavelli’s work: i.e. physical and moral courage).

Portia contributes to changing not only the rules of the game (the lottery), but also the rules of the play, making more shifting and aleatory the distinctions between tragedy and comedy, in her directing a successful performance of a changing world, a play which we may compare to the image (related by Portia herself) of the last night at Belmont as a ‘daylight sick’, ‘a little paler’, ‘a day | such as the day is when the sun is hid’ [*MV* V.i.124-126].

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<sup>74</sup> M. Netzloff, *The lead casket: capital, mercantilism, and The merchant of Venice*, ed. Woodbridge, pp. 159-76.

<sup>75</sup> I refer for example to John Donne (*Sermons* 11) and Blaise Pascal (*Pensées* 443 ff.).

<sup>76</sup> E. S. Mallin, *Jewish invader and the soul of the state: The merchant of Venice and science fiction movies*, ed. Grady, pp. 142-67.