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(De)marginalization in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract

The Merchant of Venice is in Marjorie Garber's words "a play about living and trading on margin". The article analyses the exchanges between and across gold and sexuality within the play, starting from the double binds/bonds and ending with marginalizing the masculine and re-centring the feminine. In the play gender roles are framed within circuits of dialectical reversals, constantly converting back and forth between subordination and power, marginality and centrality.

Keywords: binds, bonds, marginalization, re-centring

The Merchant of Venice was written during a period of religious controversy in England, also at the time when the leader of the Spanish Inquisition, Tomás de Torquemada, persuaded Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile to exclude from Spain the Jews who refused baptism and thus conversion to Catholicism. A place of order and stability in *Othello*, Venice also happens to be the city where the Ghetto originated and where in the Renaissance Jews were still allowed free circulation, unlike in England. This may have been one of the reasons why Shakespeare chose to set in the Pearl of the Adriatic the story of a Jew who lent money without interest but in exchange for a pound of flesh should the debtor become insolvent. It has often been asked whether Shakespeare was himself anti-Semitic or whether his intention was merely to "caricature a despised race and the religion its members practiced". [5, 296] However, as Marjorie Garber suggested, it is more likely that Shakespeare never met a Jew, since Edward I, after borrowing heavily from the Jewish lenders to financially support his wars, finally banished them from England in 1290. Garber also connected this general animosity against the Jews in the Renaissance to the alleged attempt by the Jewish doctor Roderigo Lopez to poison Queen Elizabeth, an unproved crime which led to his execution. Dr Lopez appeared in plays by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, and "a revival of Christopher Marlowe's 1589 play *The Jew of Malta*, written well before the Lopez affair, enjoyed a surprisingly long run of fifteen performances." [5,297]

IOUs: Voicing Double Binds/Bonds

The Merchant of Venice is "a play about credit, a play about living and trading on margin, as well as on the margins," [5, 284] in which exchanges between and across gold and sexuality are invested with central significance. To be in debt was, so to speak, a fashion in the Renaissance since Queen Elizabeth herself owed large sums to various bankers in Europe, prominent figures

like Sir Philip Sidney, the Earl of Essex, the Earl of Leicester, and the Earl of Southampton had huge amounts to pay back, and Shakespeare's own company borrowed money in order to build both the Theatre and the Globe. [5, 284] Bassanio, himself too much in debt already, puts his friend Antonio further in debt and his life at stake on his behalf in order to buy his way to his future wife: his trip to Belmont where he can try his luck and get Portia needs to be provided for. As *homo oeconomicus* who also has to borrow his way to his love, Bassanio needs to assign the correct value to the caskets, to weigh one against another. In a play which questions the natural foundations of usurious practices, his subtler intellect and keener acumen make him see beyond the literal, natural meaning of precious metals and, in keeping with the philosophy of popular idioms ("all that glitters is not gold", "appearances are deceptive", etc.), Bassanio dialectically opts for the one that is at face value the least valuable as a commodity within which his love might be held. As Freud noted, Bassanio's choice of the least spectacular casket, whose appearance moves him "more than eloquence", is similar to Cordelia's election of silence instead of praise towards her father. [see 4] In fact, the motive Shakespeare employs here as well as in *King Lear* can also be found in many folk tales: the smallest or worst-looking container may conceal an extremely valuable content.

Critics have suggested Antonio's role is as a Jesus of Nazareth, since Antonio offers his life in redemption for another. Yet Antonio's way of giving his life, which, according to Christian doctrine, can be taken by God only, is most unchristian and a "presumptuous imitation of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross." [14, 89] But if Antonio does not act as a Christian, what symbolic role does he fulfil in the play? Garber puts forward the theory that Antonio may be regarded as Shylock's double. Shylock's apparently generous offer not to ask for interest in case the money is returned on time is itself almost Christian in spirit and certainly goes against the Jewish practice of usury. The condition to get the pound of flesh is then, Marjorie Garber argues, an attempt to convert Antonio to Judaism. Since there was no mention in the contract where the flesh should be taken from – "Let the forfeit / Be nominated for an equal pound / Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me."¹ (1.3.150-152) – the vagueness of the clause makes Garber think that what Shylock intends to do is to circumcise Antonio, to convert him to Judaism by force: "If Antonio pays back the money on time, wins the merry sport, Shylock will act like a Christian and take no interest on the loan. If Antonio fails to pay it back on time, Antonio himself will be made to act like a Jew." [5, 309] Even though Garber somehow disregards the fact that, when Portia later reads the bond in open court, it is agreed that the pound of flesh needs to be cut "nearest the heart", there is a sense in which *The Merchant of Venice* trades in creeds as much as in credit – Garber also bases her argument on the undecidability of who 'the Merchant of Venice' ultimately refers to, a confusion presented by Shakespeare himself in the courtroom through Portia who wonders "Who is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" The marginalized (because ostracized) Jewishness would trade places with the central Christian faith according to the terms of the bond, then the resolution in the trial scene.

Contrary to what one would expect from Portia's famous speech about the need for mercy to season justice addressed to Shylock in Act IV, scene 1, the forfeit of freedom and of one's life was less at stake in Jewish law than in Christian law. In his study of verbal usury in *The Merchant of Venice* Mark Shell concluded that, while for the Jews "a man's freedom cannot be bought but only rented for a period of not more than six years – the length of time that the suitor Jacob shepherded Laban's ewes, first to win Leah and then to win Rachel", for the Romans, "the debtor has until thirty days after judgement to pay his debt. If he does not then pay or give security, or sell himself, by entering into the *nexum*, his creditor can seize him, load him with chains and treat him as a slave. ... Then, after sixty days more, if he still fails to pay, he is brought into the market place and either put to death or sold as a slave." [14, 80] Since the Roman laws provided the basis for English law, then ultimately, according to Shell, "Shylock's

¹ We have used William Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, ed. with a glossary by W. J. Craig (Oxford University Press, London, 1966); textual references in the main body of the essay hereafter.

case against Antonio does not contradict the institutions of Venice but merely reveals their more abhorrent aspects.” [14, 80]

Portia’s suitors stake their future lives when making their choices since, in agreeing to enter the fray in order to get Portia’s heart as well as her wealth, they assume the risk of never being able to claim another wife and thus of being figuratively castrated. The Prince of Morocco, who chooses the golden casket, the Prince of Aragon, who plumps for the silver casket, lose not only Portia but also forfeit their future prospects as husbands and progenitors of a lineage – and in view of the overall thematics of the play, we may be here implicitly reminded of the accusation of unnatural filiation which is levelled against the usurers and which may be traced back to the Aristotelian denunciation of usurious practices in the *Politics* (1258^b: 1-6).² It is thus an ironic reversal of our expectations to see Shylock the Jew wishing to waive usurious interest for a Christian whereas he had evinced such unnatural fatherly feelings towards his daughter who had eloped with a Christian.

Having thrice turned down Bassanio’s offer of the bond, Shylock needs to pay for his greed with the confiscation of his goods, half of which will be given to Antonio and half to the state. For Shylock, being stripped of his goods and means of sustenance is tantamount to capital punishment (4.1.377-378), unlike the loss of a renegade daughter on whom he had called for justice earlier on.

Marginalizing the masculine, Re-centring the feminine

In a series of earlier, related articles, following from Marcel Mauss’s theory according to which everything can be exchanged: “food, women, children, possessions, charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank”, [11, 11-12] I elaborated on the distinction between a gift situation (which Aristotle defined as a *natural*, economic generation) and a commodity (which he found to be *unnatural*, usurious). [see 7, 8] According to Lewis Hyde the phrase “to give a woman in marriage”, still preserved in the wedding ceremony in the Protestant church when the minister asks: “Who giveth this woman to be married?” and the father of the bride replies, “I do”, is indicative of “a vestige of the more ancient institution in which marriage is an exchange between tribes or clans, the one giving the bride and the other giving wealth (or service, or a different bride) in return.” [6, 93]

Reworking Mauss’s analyses, Strauss considered marriage the most fundamental form of gift exchange and the woman the main object of exchange: “The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between man and woman [...] but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the object in the exchange, not as one of the partners.” [10, 481]

If we bring these observations to bear on the sexual economics of *The Merchant of Venice*, we can both see how Portia is ultimately an object of exchange – her exchange to Bassanio via her father’s preemptive choice of the caskets, which puts into circulation a chain of debts and bonds between men to be paid in return: Bassanio’s request for money from Antonio and Antonio’s similar request from Shylock – and understand the precedence of the strong homosocial bond between Bassanio and Antonio, to the extent of the latter’s life being pledged in the loan. Portia’s wealth may well be offering her the comfort that Bassanio lacks before becoming her

² See Laurent Milesi [12], who further notes (207-208): “Resting his case on the double (literal and figurative) meaning of the Greek word *tokos*, offspring as well as interest, Aristotle distinguishes between a natural, economic generation and unnatural, usurious chrematistics; what makes the usurer's practices hateful is that he breeds money from money itself rather than from its natural object (wares). Thus *tokos* is applied to interest since the "offspring" of usury, begot against the purpose of exchange for which money was invented, unnaturally and, as it were, incestuously, resembles the parent.”

husband but it fails to offer her social freedom from male bondage. Despite her wealth, she remains an object of trade as she lives in a phallogocentric world where women cannot make independent decisions, and even though her father is already dead, his former decree still presides over his daughter's fate. Portia's phrase "I am lock'd in one of them" (3.2.40), to refer to the three caskets among which the suitors have to choose, registers in the very language her condition as subject to the masculine law and ultimately her feeling of social entrapment or even imprisonment – the play ends on Gratiano's "keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.307), i.e. being the guardian of the sexual-marital bond.

Likewise, in another casket scene whose import need not be restricted to a humorous denunciation of Jewish avarice, Shylock had equated his own daughter with the merchandise she had fled with, as the alternating language of his wailing – like a pair of scales oscillating between the weight of his daughter and that of his precious gold but finally tilting for the priority of the latter – readily testifies:

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

Just like his Marlovian counterpart, Barabas, Shylock holds gold more precious than his own blood. Jessica is thus, just like Abigail, only a possibility to estrange him from his beloved ducats, and the fact that both are (subordinated) daughters rather than (emancipated) sons in the two plays is neither coincidental nor insignificant. Shylock even gives us the exact contents of the casket his daughter "stole" from her very own future endowment and soon asks for retributive justice:

A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
 Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!
 And jewels! two stones, two rich and precious stones,
 Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! find the girl!
 She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats! (2.8.18-22)

The medieval period often assimilated "stones" with testicles; thus, as Garber suggests, "Shylock's phrase inadvertently makes Jessica into a phallic woman. [...] Jessica thus in effect gelds Shylock twice, taking away his family lineage and his money, both ways he could breed" [5, 306-307), a symbolic castration which, as we have seen, is similarly inflicted upon Portia's unfortunate suitors.

Yet, in the trial of the caskets, Portia ridicules the incompetent male suitors, none of whom is indebted nor endowed with any of Bassanio's superior human merits, and later on, in the crucial trial scene of Act IV, Portia's manly role in disguise as a judge "relieves"³ her marginal, feminine status into a central male agent of the play's solution as feminine fairness is overturned into fairness as justice. When Bassanio eventually gets Portia, she ratifies her prenuptial contract with a ring by which she admits and "converts back" to her subservient position in the social hierarchy:

I might in virtues, beauties, living, friends,
 Exceed account: but the full sum of me

³ I am here referring to Jacques Derrida's judicious translation of the verb in Portia's "mercy seasons justice" as a dialectical operation of *relève* in [3].

Is sum of nothing: which, to term in gross,
 Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractis'd;
 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: but now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants, and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord. I give them with this ring; (3.2.157-172)

Portia's "excessive" gift of love and "full sum of [her]" to Bassanio surpasses Juliet's in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the young girl proposed Romeo to "take all herself" in exchange for him giving up on his origins. Unlike the other female protagonist whose gift of love could not have been received by Romeo as long as he was a Montague, Portia does not need to ask for anything from Bassanio, and her speech ultimately signifies, as Karen Newman noted, "her place in a rigidly defined hierarchy of male power and privilege." [13, 25] Newman considers the passives Portia uses in her speech, as well as the shift from the first to the third person, to be signs that she "casts herself grammatically in the role of object *to be directed*"; she and all she owns *is converted* to Bassanio by an unstated agent." [13, 25] But in so doing, she puts Bassanio in debt and wins prestige and power even after surrendering to his phallic authority. Here we have an instance of a generic situation observed by Mauss: Bassanio cannot repay Portia's gift since, as Newman states, "Portia gives more than Bassanio can ever reciprocate, first to him, then to Antonio, and finally to Venice itself in her actions in the trial which allow the city to preserve both its law and its precious Christian citizen. In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio." [13, 27]⁴

Bassanio's indebtedness is sanctioned in the form of the sexualized bond of a ring, a circular *eco-nomy* whose equivalent between Gratiano and Nerissa, as we have seen, will bring the play to a close:

[...] I give them with this ring;
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love,
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (3.2.172-175)

Yet the ensuing speech from Bassanio, whose "worse than nothing" is a match, yet humbler, to Portia's "sum of nothing", imparts that he cannot be bound to Portia since he is already "engaged" to Antonio, who has in turn engaged his "life-blood" to Shylock:

[...] When I told you

⁴ Likewise, in "Brothers and Others", W. H. Auden had observed that "There is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare had read Dante, but he must have been familiar with the association of usury with sodomy of which Dante speaks in the Eleventh Canto of the Inferno. [...] It can, therefore, hardly be an accident that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist a man (Antonio) whose emotional life [...] is concentrated upon a member of his own sex." [1, 231].

My state was nothing, I should have told you
 That I was worse than nothing; for, indeed,
 I have engag'd myself to a dear friend,
 Engag'd my friend to his mere enemy,
 To feed my means. [...] (3.2.258-264)

Commercial love outclasses Portia's offer of all her love and belongings, and "the courtship cannot be completed until the bond between Shylock and Antonio that made the courtship possible is nullified in court, until Bassanio's engagement to Antonio is somehow voided. The marriage bond cannot be concluded until the commercial bond is cancelled." [14, 73] Double binds and double bonds, therefore, and in the patriarchal Venetian society, Portia will need to find a way to become a man in order to take her man back, free herself from the bondage of her sex in order to free her man and undo his own bond to Antonio. Thus, after "evoking the ideal of a proper Renaissance lady", Portia "becomes an unruly woman" [13, 29] as she disguises as Balthazar, who will be able to solve the economic and political crisis Bassanio and the Duke himself cannot solve. Ideologically and linguistically she is better equipped than all the representatives of the legal system, who could not see beyond verbal quibble.⁵ Representing the margin, the group of the oppressed under the Elizabethan rules of class and gender, Portia will enable the Duke to follow the letter of the law and spare Antonio at the same time. Venice may be the place of the phallic law but it is the place where such a law cannot be made to be flexible and depart from the letter. The Duke is unable to bend the law to save Antonio's life; Venice, the world of men, needs the intuition and reading of women in order to undo this predicament: Venice ultimately needs Belmont to restore a rightful law against the literal tyranny of a written contract. As Antonio is Shylock's double, Belmont is Venice's double, the place from which Portia disguised as man in order to be able to "penetrate" the court, comes to do what the Duke of Venice is unable to achieve: to do justice and to punish Shylock's greed and pride, turning his very contract against him. If Venice can be seen as dependent on gold and on commerce, "Belmont would seem to stand not for gold but for the 'golden rule', and yet although Portia articulates just such an ethic in her 'quality of mercy' speech, she then goes on to disregard it." [5, 310]

The play does not end with Antonio's acquittal in court, but with the return of the ring to his owner, "the bargain of faith in patriarchal marriage". [13, 31] Both Bassanio and Gratiano had lost their rings and broken their promises made to Portia and Nerissa respectively. "By obeying Antonio's exhortation and giving his ring to Balthazar, Bassanio affirms homosexual bonds – the exchange of women, here represented by Portia's ring, sustains relations between men." [13, 31] Indeed, Bassanio had reiterated himself the strong bond with Antonio, since

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. (4.1.285-288)

Portia's fear of losing Bassanio because of Antonio is confirmed several times during the play but especially when Bassanio listens to Antonio and gives his ring to Balthazar. There will never be a marriage between Bassanio and Portia as long as Bassanio's bond to Antonio is not (dis)solved. Therefore, once she has reverted to her condition as a female subject, Portia needs to forgive Bassanio for breaking the oath, making him swear another "oath of credit" (5.1.246)

⁵ Bullough claimed that "the separation of flesh and blood is less of a quibble than critics have thought" in [2, 448].

which she will accept “by double self” (5.1.246). Antonio this time guarantees for his friend not with his flesh but with his soul:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband’s ring,
Had quite miscarried: I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.249-253)

Gender roles are thus framed within circuits of dialectical reversals, constantly converting back and forth between subordination and power, marginality and centrality.

Conclusion: The Convertible Borders of Language

When is a pound of flesh not a pound of flesh? Such a question ultimately asks about the referential status of the utterance: is it to be taken literally or metaphorically, symbolically? But what obfuscates matters in this particular instance is that a pound of flesh inevitably bears a synecdochic,⁶ therefore in some sense already figurative, relation to a whole from which it could be literally cut off, at the butcher’s for example. Thus the “exemplarity” of this statement – and of the punishment (*pedeapsă exemplară*) it would mete out – is such that Shylock can seemingly use it as a penalty Antonio would have to pay if he cannot reimburse the loan without said retribution appearing to pose a tangible threat. But when Shylock is bent on seeking its enforcement, the marginalized retribution takes centre stage as the incongruous transaction between gold and human flesh is about to be carried through. Conversely, when Portia gives measure for measure and asks Shylock not to shed a drop of Antonio’s blood in the process as doing so would go against the literal stipulation of the bond, and thus draws a new border (between flesh and blood), the verbal double-dealing eventually short-changes the Jew at his own barter, swapping literality and metaphoricity, centrality (“normality”) and marginality (parasitic deviancy, supplementarity) in language. Leaving aside Derrida’s own warnings against it in *Aporias*, exemplarity is never what it seems or promises to be, especially when linguistic excess and surplus is capitalized on (Shell’s “verbal usury”) and the margins of discourse threaten to engulf the central substance.

The trial starts with Antonio in a tragic plight and ends unexpectedly with Shylock sacrificed instead. As Garber puts it, Shylock “reads the letter, not the spirit,” [5, 301] a literality which Portia’s sentence ironically outbids and turns against him in granting him his demand at first. Disguised as a young doctor of law, Portia carefully “draws” from the bond the blood unthought by Shylock and which would ensue should a pound of flesh be cut off, thus usuriously turning the literality of the letter against its former exponent:

Portia: A pound of that same merchant’s flesh is thine.
The court awards it, and the law doth give it.
Shylock: Most rightful judge!
Portia: And you must cut this flesh from off his breast.
The law allows it, and the court awards it.

⁶ Another interesting, if tangential, case of synecdoche occurs when the three suitors are ridiculed by Portia, each typifying the flaws of the nation they stand for: while the Scotsman is a penny-pincher, the German shows himself to be a drunkard, whereas the Englishman has the worst possible sartorial tastes (1.2. 70-96).

Shylock: Most learned judge! A sentence: [to Antonio] come, prepare. (4.1.294-299)

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
 One drop of Christian blood, the lands and goods
 Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
 Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.304-309)

Portia thus outsmarts Shylock at his attempt at “fleshing out” the letter of the law.

As Sarah Kofman concludes in her essay on *The Merchant of Venice*, the success of Shakespeare's play, “drame de la conversion sous toutes ses formes”, [9, 68-69] lies in the generalized principle of exchange and convertibility, between metals (the gold, silver and lead of the three caskets), religions (Jewish and Christian), sexes (travestying), animate (humans and / or animals – for e.g. Portia's promise of the “full sum of me” to her lover (3.2.158) echoing Shylock's “fulsome ewes” in 1.3.87⁷) and inanimate, and between the various plots, whose conflictual bonds must be (un) tied satisfactorily for the fulfilment of the comedy's requisites. All these polar opposites may be seen to operate and ply between centrality and marginality as the plot unfolds and they fall under this generalized principle of convertibility.

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⁷ See [15, 59]. See also [12, 214] for this summary of the play's overall principle of convertibility whereby words punningly take on double, exchangeable values.

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De(marginalizarea) în *Negustorul din Veneția*

Rezumat

Negustorul din Veneția este, după cum aprecia Marjorie Garber, „o piesă despre cum se trăiește și cum se face comerț la limită”. Articolul analizează schimburile care au loc la nivel financiar sau sexual, pornind de la legăturile duble/ promisiunile duble și sfârșind cu marginalizarea masculinului și recentrarea femininului. Rolurile sexuale se încadrează într-un circuit de inversări de ordin dialectic, în mod constant făcându-se trecerea de la subordonare la putere, de la marginalitate la centralitate.