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‘TO DO A GREAT RIGHT, DO A LITTLE WRONG’: *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND ITS ETHICAL CHALLENGES**

Abstract

When Bassanio urges Portia to break the law in order to thwart Shylock— ‘to do a great right, do a little wrong’ (4.1.213)— she at first refuses, on the grounds that to do wrong is always immoral; but despite her words, her actions show her ready and willing to do just that. Critics usually explain Portia’s actions with reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and the principle of equity—an open-handed, individualised approach to justice when hard legal questions exceed the scope of the law; but the misalignment between Portia’s words and her actions indicates that the question of justifying any ‘little wrong’ with ‘the greater right’ is more complex than it may at first seem, particularly if the ‘greater right’ is defined by one’s own interests. This signals the presence in the play of a different, non-Aristotelian ethical framework: that of Nicolò Machiavelli’s post-Epicurean teleological utilitarianism. Shakespeare’s moral considerations in *The Merchant of Venice* are compelling

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** The paper is based on a lecture given as a part of a senior undergraduate course on *Shakespeare on Stage and Screen*, University of Western Australia. I dedicate it to my dear teacher, Professor Veselin Kostic, whose lectures gave me the first taste of what I wanted to do. Professor Kostic’s books on Shakespeare and early modern history, his inspired conversation and the unstinting encouragement of my writing and translations of Shakespeare’s sonnets over several decades, continue to act as mainstays of my courage.

precisely because they routinely juxtapose Machiavellian utilitarian ethics with principles of deontological ethics, to explore a crucial question: is expediency more apt in real life, than principles not defined by expediency? Applying this question to the main themes of *The Merchant of Venice*— cultural and religious difference, stereotyping, discrimination, scapegoating, gender equality and spin, themes no less relevant and divisive in Shakespeare’s time than they are in our own— holds particular didactic value in the twenty-first century classroom.

Key words: The Merchant of Venice, Aristotle, Machiavelli, ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, teaching Shakespeare

Decoding texts is a moral process. Growing up as readers or viewers, we learn to hunt for clues to help us distinguish protagonists from antagonists, good characters and bad, and adjust our responses. We have this tendency in common with the audiences in William Shakespeare’s own time, as well as any other audience in time and space: it is part of being human. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare challenges our need for ethical certainties. While all Shakespeare’s “problem plays” reveal a profound preoccupation with ethics — a philosophical discipline concerned with values governing human conduct, the rightness or wrongness of motives, ends and actions—*The Merchant of Venice* makes it particularly hard to take sides, yet even harder not to. The play’s moral landscape shifts frequently between deontological ethics (ethics in which actions are deemed good or ill inherently, rather than by reference to their consequences) and utilitarian or teleological ethics (ethics in which actions are deemed to be good or bad on the basis of the expediency (often interpreted as morality) of their consequences). In plain terms, we are made to believe people are good, then watch them perform actions which have bad consequences, and vice versa. The ethical challenges posed by *The Merchant of Venice* are useful to us in that they encourage examination of core values which may have been taken for granted but for this challenge.

Elizabeth Wheeler recognized the debt that *The Merchant of Venice* owes to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* when it comes to the play’s central structure, as well as articulation of Aristotle’s main theme—the achievement of happiness (ευδαιμονία) and the subsidiary questions of pleasure, virtue, the mean, choice, equality, justice, and friendship, themes which underpin the play’s plot, characterization, and language. No less important to the play is the concept of “wealth”, which can also be interpreted morally, or, as Wheeler writes:

It is often supposed that *The Merchant of Venice* is about the proper use of wealth. This is in part true. But [...] wealth in the sixteenth century meant both 'riches' or 'goods' and also 'welfare' in the sense of spiritual prosperity or happiness. The most apposite example of wealth used to mean 'happiness' is furnished by John Wylkinson's translation (1547) of Aristotle's *Ethics*: "Then is beatitude the greatest welth and the most soverai[n]e thing a man can have."¹ Indeed Wylkinson's choice of "welth" either to translate or to define εὐδαιμονία is particularly apt since Aristotle virtually identifies this concept with 'the good life' or 'doing well' (*Nic. Eth.* I. iv. 2, viii. 4), [...so that] εὐδαιμονία, usually translated as 'Happiness', "would perhaps be more accurately rendered by 'Well-being' or 'Prosperity'" (Wheater 1992: 467).

But Shakespeare's considerations of moral questions in *The Merchant of Venice* — and this is insufficiently recognized—go beyond first Aristotelian questions into more uncomfortable, utilitarian (teleological) ethical explorations concerned with the expediency of the consequences of one's actions. The play's moral landscape raises some uncomfortable questions which are highly relevant to us as we negotiate life in our complex twenty-first century societies. They concern cultural difference (particularly conflicts between religious and cultural paradigms and personal ethics, cultural stereotyping, (perceived) discrimination of the minority by the majority or (perceived) harassment of the majority by the minority); gender discrimination within relationships, marriage and society at large; individual need for social acceptance and the unstable nature of truth in society (does our society value words more than it values actions?). Shakespeare's themes are as divisive in our own times as they would have been for his pre-modern Christian audiences.

The Merchant of Venice is renowned for supporting conflicting ethical interpretations equally well. Perhaps because of this quandary, the play has proven attractive to directors. It was performed forty-seven times at Stratford-upon-Avon in the hundred years between 1880 and 1980; in London, it appeared thirty-five times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the First World War; it is popular on Broadway; and the Internet Movie Database records seventeen film and television

¹ (Aristotle and Latini 1547, sig. Avi), compared with *Nic. Eth.* i. vii. 7, viii. 14, ix. 2-3, and xii. 4, cited in (Wheater 1992: 469, note 3).

versions between 1908 and 2004. Since *The Merchant of Venice* shares with *Othello* the unlikely distinction of having a villain, not a protagonist, who attracts the best talent, it is the memorable character of Shylock who represents the greatest attraction to lead actors, and the way the character is interpreted gives the production its ethical “tone”. Shylock has been played as a representation of monstrous evil, in the comedic vein, or, as became fashionable in the nineteenth century with Edmund Kean, sympathetically — and it is this interpretation that made Edmund Kean’s reputation as a character actor, and paved the way for most great Shylocks after him to be played sympathetically, with an eye on the moral complexities of the character. Henry Irving’s dignified, aristocratic Shylock, for instance, played in 1879 to Ellen Terry’s Portia, was considered one of the summits of his career. In the early twentieth century, Jacob Adler prophetically played the role in Yiddish within an otherwise English-language production played in New York.

The adaptability of this character to divergent moral interpretations is uncanny. In 1933, *The Merchant of Venice* was staged no fewer than 20 times, with Shylock played as a character representing straight evil and the danger that Jews would bring to the fledgling Nazi world order. (Makaryk and McHugh 2012; see also Whaley 2011). How could this be done, one might ask, when even one glimpse of Shylock’s famous “hath not a Jew eyes” speech is enough to win the viewer over to Shylock’s point of view?:

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? If you prick us
do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If
you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us
shall we not revenge? (3.1.54-62)²

The undeniable power of the speech and the moral dilemma posed by it were represented in the Nazi versions of the play as precisely the diabolical challenge which is likely to be posed by Jews to the sacred moral resolve

² All citations from *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from (Shakespeare 1998).

of young Nazis. Viewers were urged to steel themselves against such pleas and be resolute in the knowledge that their victims were sub-human, and that, consequently, their arguments should not be given the same consideration as arguments advanced by a German (for more on this, see Bonnell 2010).

Much has been made in critical literature of Shakespeare's alleged anti-Semitism; but although Shylock happens to be Jewish, and Antonio Christian, their particular religions are immaterial, and a different constellation of religions could be imagined (Shylock Muslim, Antonio Jewish; Shylock Christian, Antonio Muslim, etc.) without loss of either narrative or ethical import. This play's most important discussion concerns the relationship between the "I" and the "Other": two members of two different normative groups who view each other as antagonistic. Shakespeare juxtaposes the opposing world-views of these groups, and the fundamental questions the play raises apply equally well to any cultural paradigms in which two groups judge one another, in Shakespeare's time as well as ours.

The Nazi affection for productions of *The Merchant of Venice* vilifying Shylock caused a general shift of sensibility, and after World War II there was a rise in the awareness of this play's ethical complexity. This is reflected in the two filmic productions of the 1940s, Ernst Lubisch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and Elia Kazan's *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1946), both of which use Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech in their films to plead for common humanity. Trevor Nunn's 2001 restaged and filmed-for-television version and Michael Radford's film version, made in 2004, stem from this school of thought. Directors, as readers or viewers, often take one point of view; but as far as the text is concerned, the very fact that Nazi and pro-Jewish versions of the play can exist without changes of text taking place, shows (as do other texts) that Shakespeare is adept at writing text that supports both points of view. Each reader will have to make up his or her own mind about where their allegiances lie; or at least to see clearly and impartially the allegiances (and criticisms) that we owe each side.

Shakespeare's main plot guides the audience firmly towards a feeling of pity for Antonio. A wealthy merchant and a respected member of the Christian community, Antonio is a symbol of entrepreneurial spirit and the value of honest, hard work. He is an unusually generous friend: not only is he willing to help his friend Bassanio financially at his time of need, but also goes further — he will help him at a time when he has no money of his

own, and needs to borrow money to help: something very few friends are willing to do. And, if that were not enough, he is also prepared to accept the creditor's (Shylock's) macabre condition to offer a pound of his own flesh as surety for the debt. Once the debt is forfeited and we find that Shylock actually wants to pursue his right and have the pound of flesh cut out of Antonio, we, the audience, fear for him and do not want such a good friend to die.

Siding with Antonio is made even easier as Shylock, the man who threatens Antonio, is not easy to like. To begin with, Shylock is old, rich and stingy — a character type straight out of ancient literary traditions that demand that they be ridiculed and swindled by younger and cleverer characters. He cries about the loss of his daughter Jessica and the loss of his ducats in the same sentence, and would, in fact, rather lose Jessica than his valuables: "I would my daughter were dead at my / foot and the jewels in her ear!" he says. (3.1.82-3).

Second, Shylock makes his living as a usurer. Usury, lending money at interest, may be how banks run their business today; but in Shakespeare's time, there were very few professions with a worse reputation. Chaucer thought the practice as bad as fornication, defamation and witchcraft (*The Friar's Tale* 1. 1301-10, in Chaucer 1957: 90; see also Bond 1985) and, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, usury remained a phenomenon forbidden, denounced and repudiated, although economically necessary and continually practiced. Shakespeare explored ethics of usury in his other works, such as *The Sonnets*, and, in the context of Platonic ethics, *Timon of Athens* (Kator 2012: esp. 139). Lending money at interest remains morally ambiguous to this day.

Further, Shylock openly denounces Christians. He laments his daughter Jessica's marriage to a Christian as the worst fate on Earth. He has nothing good to say about Antonio, and refuses to dine with him in good faith when invited. He bears long grudges. He is officious and pompous, as well as bloodthirsty and stubborn. When it seems he might be getting his revenge, he shows no remorse or reason. None of this will have endeared him to a Christian audience. But none of this aversion-building is an accident. If Shakespeare wants us to loathe Shylock, it is not because he is an anti-Semite — but so that we could be aware of the disappearance of our reserve, and the unexpected power of pity and understanding which we will, inevitably, be brought to feel for Shylock.

In the course of his time on the stage, Shylock is quick to complain and to curse. Yet, much like Caliban's ranting in *The Tempest*, Shylock has the power to change our point of view. To begin with, we discover that Antonio – that selfless, generous friend – has repeatedly mistreated Shylock. Antonio has explicitly insulted his religion, insulted him personally, hindered his business efforts and even spat on him. We may not like Shylock, but we find ourselves baulking at this treatment. And by the third act, when Shylock starts waving his knife around and calling for a pound of Antonio's flesh, we may find ourselves thinking: "Perhaps I would behave like Shylock, if someone had treated me that way." Our moral allegiances have shifted, and Shylock's rage is a thing of darkness we acknowledge to be ours.

As for the softly spoken and genteel Antonio, his life is in danger because of a generous gesture he made to help his friend, and we feel for him. But we can also see that Antonio never acknowledges that he has hurt Shylock. Shylock will complain against him, but Antonio never once retorts; he simply never gives Shylock's grievance the dignity of a response. Antonio claims the privilege of the majority to ignore the complaints of the minority, treating the claimant as too preposterous to warrant serious engagement. Such tactics are prevalent in our society and often mistaken (usually by the majority) for politeness; yet can be deeply offensive. Modern-day socio-legal studies have found that apology and acknowledgment of wrong-doing (of one group against another, or one individual against another) must happen before the wrong-doing can be forgotten. Holocaust survivors consider absence of acknowledgment and apology particularly offensive, and Holocaust and genocide denial is illegal in a number of European countries (Balint 2002). Once we notice and ponder the silence which meets Shylock's pleas, it is very hard to return to seeing Antonio simply as the wronged friend.

In addition, some traits that Shakespeare has given Shylock make him look conspicuously good. Throughout the play, Shylock is unwavering in his faith and, regardless of the difficulties he is exposed to, remains true to his identity. Unlike his daughter, within the moral parameters of his religion and culture, Shylock is scrupulously honest. He displays touching loyalty to the memory of his late wife: it can hardly be an accident that Shylock, who has treasured the ring his wife had given him in her youth, passes the very test of faith which the two Christian husbands in the play fail so abysmally. And Shylock shows dignity when defeated: his final words, "I am content" (4.1.391) are a more disturbing and poignant comment on

the justice he has received in a Christian court than any prolonged speech could ever have been. If the main plot favours Antonio, the subplot favours Shylock, and the moral conflict generated between their two world-views lies at the heart of the play.

In his 2004 filmic version of *The Merchant of Venice*, Michael Radford tones this moral conflict right down. From the outset, he picks his agenda, and his directorial perspective is scrupulously sympathetic to Shylock's viewpoint. In an interview, Radford explained this by the need to create a clear moral vision favouring the underdog, with which today's audiences can identify. Radford recognized the greatness of Shakespeare's plots and stories (which, one may argue, are great precisely *because* ethical views are never spoon-fed), but wanted to make the ethical bottom line, as it emerged for him, more transparent and attractive to young audiences today (Canavese 2004). Radford therefore foregrounds the moment when Antonio spits on Shylock by moving it from the middle of the play to the beginning of the movie, making the spit a prominent visual emblem of Shylock's life as a Jew in Renaissance Venice. We are shown the frightening Jewish ghetto, as well as scenes of book burning in a clear reference to the gruesome tendency of the strong, so-often repeated moment in history from Savonarola to Nazi Germany and the recent Balkan wars, to destroy the written culture of the nation they seek to humiliate.

If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (3.1. 61-2)

The truth of everyone's fundamental humanity, equal amidst the differences of religion, culture or financial status, is a truth as often forgotten in Shakespeare's world as it is in ours. Al Pacino's delivery of this speech is profoundly moving; Michael Radford gets sensationalist value out of this. But the question we find in Shakespeare's play, if not in Radford's film, is: if we always revenge, when will the cycle of violence stop?

Gender injustices are explored in *The Merchant of Venice* within its broader discussion of cultural inequities and examination of utilitarian ethics. The inferiority of women was a notion broadly held in pre-modern England, and Shakespeare examines it in most of his plays, most notably in *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like It*. St Augustine believed that woman was not created in the image of God, and that there is no reason for her existence other than the bearing of children:

Woman together with man is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she has the role of helpmate, which pertains to her alone, she is not the image of God. But with regard to man alone, he is the image of God, just as fully and completely as he is joined with the woman into one. (St Augustine 2002: 12.7.10)

If one rejects giving birth to children as the reason why woman was created, I do not see for what other help the woman was made for the man. (St. Augustine 1982: 9.5.9; see also Matter 2002).

The medical views of Aristotle and Galen, propagated by many influential Renaissance books, was that a woman's gender was the result of faulty gestation, and the very things that make her female, also make her stupid:

...when a woman is born, it is a defect and mistake of nature, [...] as is [...] one who is born blind, or lame, or with some other defect. (Castiglione 1959: III: 11)³

"She [Woman] was by God created cold and moist, which temperature, is necessarie to make a woman fruitfull and apt for childbirth, but an enemy to knowledge". (Huarte y Navarro 1604: 270)

Eve was believed to have caused Adam's fall from God's grace (not without debate initiated by intelligent women, see Speght 1617); and medieval and early modern ideas on female education suggested that a woman's place was in the home. In addition to what their mothers taught them, most women needed merely to receive religious and ethical instruction from their husbands to the point deemed necessary (Vecchio 1992: 118-

³ Here Castiglione is citing Galen. Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* [Book of the Courtier] was originally published in 1528.

121).⁴ In other words, the inferior position of women was seen as part of natural law, and women were expected to live within its precepts.

Since we know how highly intelligent and capable Portia is, as well as being a rich heiress, we may feel sad that she is treated as an inferior out of tradition. Her father has given her no voice in choosing her own husband. And once she was chosen by a husband who is significantly poorer and less intelligent than she is, she is forced to assume a submissive role or employ strategies which conceal her agency. When she falls in love with Bassanio (3.2), she signals love by giving a highly eloquent speech claiming lack of eloquence. This is deliberately ironic: Portia knows exactly whom she wants, and she has ample means to get him, but she must be covert about it. It is necessary for her to work within acceptable codes of behavior, according to which “a maiden hath no tongue but thought” (3.2.8). By professing herself “unschooled”, “unlessoned” and “unpractised” (3.2. 159), Portia also sends signals that she is sexually chaste, pandering to perceptions of uneducated, “clean-slate” women as sexually and biologically attractive. Sexual inexperience aside, it is quite clear that Shakespeare’s Portia could not be further from the notions of “unschooled” and “unpractised” when it comes to articulateness, intelligence and ingeniousness; so her ebullience, much like Juliet’s and Desdemona’s, is both endearing and confronting. As she is a comedic character, however, Portia’s verbosity will not become a tragic flaw, but merely serves to foreshadow her virtuoso legal performance in the court scene. Her verbal facility is tempered not only by conformity with the tenets of Renaissance views of ideal women as obedient and silent (on this see Boose 1991, Smith 2002, Smith 1995, and Phillippy 1998), but also the tenets of the sixteenth century law on marriage, which specified that “That which the husband hath is his own” and “that which the wife hath is the husband’s” (Doddridge and I. L. 1632: 144).⁵ On marriage, the wife lost her right to own property, even if before marriage it was all her own. Portia professes Bassanio to be her king, adding “myself and what is mine, to you and yours / is now converted (3.2.166-7). Viewing these words as an expression of generosity would be anachronistic. In Shakespeare’s lifetime, a woman bestowing all her money on a man was not acting on a generous impulse, but simply within the law.

⁴ The idea had a classical lineage. In [Aristotle’s] *Economics* and in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* it is proposed that a husband educate his wife as household manager.

⁵ *The Lawes resolutions* were printed in 1632, but thought to have been written at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Nevertheless, Portia's submission of her person and her property can also be symbolically interpreted as emotional and sexual surrender. Expressions of gender have a crucial role here. "But now," says Portia,

...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's." (3.2.167-171, *emphasis mine*).

Lord, not lady; master, not mistress. Portia conspicuously trades her habitual control of her estates, which she genders masculine, in return for wifely submission appropriate to her femininity. (Thankfully, Shakespeare allows her to reclaim a little dignity when she reminds the audience of who will have done the husband-buying, when she tells Bassanio: "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear." (3.2.311).) Feminine submission is, of course, most seriously interrogated when Portia dresses up and poses as a lawyer. The court scene, in which Portia reclaims the masculine voice of control and public power, never fails to delight the audience and offers unique challenges for actors, making Portia one of Shakespeare's most sought-after female roles. When she performs in court, Portia is finally in her element. She shines; and we are happy that she finally speaks without needing to mince words, or to self-deprecate for the sake of conforming to cultural expectations associated with her gender. Her performance in the court scene is so brilliant that it must make any viewer re-consider the magnitude of exactly what Portia will be sacrificing by submitting to her husband and society's expectations. As an indication of the limitations that the pre-modern society placed on individuals, however intelligent and talented, because of their gender, Portia's brilliant court performance retrospectively adds poignancy to her submission speech.

On the other hand, however, within the ethical framework of her own society, Portia did what she did without a right to do it, and broke a number of relevant laws. By wearing male clothes, Portia acted against the Biblical prohibition forbidding honest women to wear male clothes (Lev 13:45; Vows; Deut.22:5, Prohibitions (Idolatry)). "Commandments, The 613 in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: 772), the same laws that prevented women from acting on a public stage in Shakespeare's time. She broke Renaissance laws which indicated that the purpose of clothing was to show clearly who

you are and to what rank you belonged (Ruggiero 1993: esp. 25), in this, she is a match for Bassanio, who broke the same law in order to woo her. Finally, appearing in court without licence was, and remains to this day, a grave criminal offence.⁶

Similarly, swept along in the main plot, we want Bassanio to marry Portia, so we barely give credit to her comment on the unsuccessful suitor who preceded Bassanio, who was black. When he fails, she is relieved: “Let all of his complexion choose me so.” (2.7.79). The casual racism of this comment compares to Iago’s at the beginning of *Othello*, and it is particularly cruel if we remember that, according to the dictates of Portia’s father’s will, a failed suitor must never come back, or marry again. (Characteristically, in his film, Michael Radford cuts out the danger inherent in the prince’s wrong choice, and minimizes the racism of Portia’s comments.)

Jessica’s character and behavior are ethically equally divisive. On one hand, she betrays her father for love; we condone this, as it is something we have been taught young women in stories must do. After all, Juliet and Desdemona have done the same, and we have applauded them. We know it takes great courage to confront or hurt your father, and abandon everything for the man you love. But there is something about the way Jessica does it that seems wrong. For instance, she could have escaped without stealing her father’s money and valuables, and she could have made her own fortune with her new husband. If she needed money, she could have taken only what she needed, without stealing the ring his late wife had gifted him — she must have known how much Shylock loved that ring — surely something that a loving daughter, or even just a decent person, leaves behind. *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Jack Gold for the BBC in 1980 presents a rebellious and heartless Jessica, more interested in escape and her father’s money, than in Lorenzo. Trevor Nunn and Christ Hunt’s masterpiece, a restaged and filmed Royal National Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice* (2001), sets the story in the 1920s, the time of rising anti-Semitism, focuses, for instance, on the cultural conflict between traditional and modern viewpoints. Their production highlights

⁶ For example, many laws govern the legal profession and the practise of law in Western Australia, such as the *Legal Profession Act 2008*. Under this Act, The Supreme Court or Legal Practice Board have a responsibility to protect the public interest in the proper administration of justice by ensuring that legal work is carried out only by those who are properly qualified to do so by issuing and enforcing solicitors’ “Practising Certificates”. A “Practising Certificate” is a licence which allows a solicitor to provide legal services (Government of Western Australia 2008).

the cultural contrast between the cabaret world of the Christians and the traditional setting of the Ghetto. Shylock speaks English when speaking to Christians, but Yiddish when addressing a dowdily dressed Jessica, represented as a frustrated young woman who cannot wait to escape a tyrannical father. In Michael Radford's film, this complexity of Jessica's character is simplified to cater to modern audiences. In the final scene, in one of the most significant feel-good whitewashes of the original text, Radford shows that Jessica is eaten away by guilt for taking her father's ring: the pretty Zuleikha Robinson's Jessica, directed by Michael Radford, is much easier to forgive than Shakespeare's Jessica. Shakespeare's text easily supports the differing versions of this character.

On close inspection, Lorenzo behaves strangely as well. Lorenzo says he loves Jessica, but has an uncanny knack of complimenting her in the same breath as insulting her cultural heritage and origins. He says to her, for instance,

If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven
It will be for his gentle daughter's sake:
And never dare misfortune cross her foot,
Unless she do it under this excuse:
That she is issue to a faithless Jew. (2.4, 33-37)

Is there a woman alive, who, having left her faith and her father for her love, would hear such praise from the lips of her future husband without re-examining her decision? Other characters put her down as well, but she seems not to notice. Jessica may be foolish and too eager to please; she could be positive; she could deliberately ignore her doubts. Shakespeare is highlighting the risk that women took when eloping for love: the Marriage Law makes Jessica as vulnerable to Lorenzo as Portia is to Bassanio. In a production of *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Gorčin Stojanović in Belgrade in 2010, Jessica and Lorenzo's love was portrayed as having gone sour: the minute they were married, Lorenzo broke his promises, took brutal control of her money and started to taunt and verbally abuse Jessica (Stojanović 2010). Yet this heart-breaking menace was portrayed on stage only by the gestures and facial expressions of the actors, *without a single word of Shakespeare's text being changed*. In contrast, Michael Radford chooses not to make use of this depth. In his film, Lorenzo is a simple, warm-hearted, gorgeous lout in love, and his relationship with

Jessica unfolds in conventional terms. But the fact that Shakespeare's text is ethically ambiguous enough to be used as a basis for a convincing stage representation of marital happiness, as well as marital unhappiness, must give us pause.

What is true love? Is it reflected in words, or in actions? In emotions, which are by their nature ephemeral, or in commitment? This play offers us several practical tests for answering this question. Would we borrow money we do not have, to give it to someone else? Would we pledge a pound of flesh for someone? If so, for whom?

And there is our answer. Antonio pledges this for Bassanio. In a play about multiple lovers, the only person whose actions clearly recall the words of Gospel according to St John, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18, in Coogan, ed. 2007: 410), is a man who shows love for another man. The ultimate love-test of the play — the lead casket with which Bassanio wins Portia—conceals a message which says that, to win love, one must risk, "give and hazard all he hath" (2.29.20); once again, the only person in the play who lives by this precept is Antonio, acting for Bassanio. The viewer must reach his or her own conclusions as to the comment that Shakespeare is making here. *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Jonathan Miller and John Sichel in 1969, the National Theatre version videoed by Precision Video was boldly the first to place an emphasis on the potentially homoerotic relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. The version is set in the nineteenth century, and Laurence Olivier plays Shylock with a particular awareness of the underhanded nature of racism, which seemingly accepts members of the minority, only to reveal prejudice hidden away beneath the surface. Michael Radford's film also simplified potential homosexual overtones to explain Antonio's extraordinary generosity to his friend. Antonio (Jeremy Irons) and Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) employ *double entendres*, laze around on a four poster bed, and Antonio is often filmed in close-ups directing long and tearful gazes at Bassanio. When, after the court scene, Fiennes' Bassanio tells Portia "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow." (5.1.284), this is done in a way that links with the homosexual undercurrent in the play.

And yet, the same utterly selfless, loving man who goes above and beyond the call of duty to help his friend, is capable of spitting at another man, because he is Jewish. Shakespeare's lesson here is as striking and thought provoking, as it is relevant to our own times. Love and kindness towards a member of one's own group do not mean that we will be equally

kind to those whom we see as different (“the Other”). By making a loving friend of one the abuser of another, Shakespeare proposes that, however selfless it may seem, love is, at its root, a possessive and selfish emotion — or at least one that is particular, and by no means universal. The capacity to love one’s own should not be confused with genuine, disinterested goodness, or even with social responsibility.

The discussion the play offers of the relationship between ends and means is also consistently challenging. Consider, for instance, the relationship of money and truth. Bassanio is handsome, young, and the play’s romantic hero, so it is easy to forget that he is penniless and brazen enough to ask his (also penniless) friend for money so that he can represent himself as richer than he is, in order to impress an heiress. Whatever Portia’s gifts of beauty, wit and loyalty, Bassanio had never met her before he went to woo her, and his initial motives are solely financial. Even once he has met her and fallen in love with her, Bassanio continues to praise her money along with her other qualities. Since, according to the law of marriage, Bassanio stands to win Portia’s fortune along with her hand, the money he borrows from Antonio in order to impress Portia should be seen simply for what it is—an investment.

Bassanio has a way of keeping his eye on the prize, regardless of the price others have to pay to help him get to his goals. He is happy to ask Antonio for a loan when Antonio has no money, presumably because the prize will be worth it for him (not for Antonio). This is an example of thinking about actions in terms of expediency (utilitarian ethics), not of their inherent (deontological) ethics. In the court scene, Bassanio asks of Portia to “Wrest once the law to your authority. / *To do a great right, do a little wrong,*” (4.1.212-3, my emphasis). Portia refuses. Isabella Wheeler reads this request, together with Portia’s refusal, as reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and its postulates of moral and fair dealing as the basis of prosperity, and its opposite, a misfortune (Wheeler 1992: 487). The principle of equity — a more open-handed, individualised approach to harder legal questions requiring that the spirit, rather than the letter of the law be upheld—is also a concept derived from *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Hadfield 2014: 159). It is, however, crucial to note that Portia initially offers Bassanio *verbal refusal* to engage in creative interpretations of the law on the grounds that this would be immoral, but proceeds to *actions* whereby she does exactly as Bassanio asked—wrong, in order to do what they both believe is right. The fact that Portia’s actions and

her words are in misalignment clearly signals introduction of a different ethical framework at play here, the originally Epicurean, utilitarian ethics of Niccolo Machiavelli: “A ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.” (Machiavelli 1998⁷: 55; see also Pearce 2010: 99-100, Wells 2005: 56-57, and Rosenblum 2006: 138). Bassanio defines his interests here as “the greater right”, and judges Portia’s morality on the basis of whether her actions will support his interests.

Portia’s behavior throughout the play is also an exemplar of utilitarian ethics, a philosophical signal that she is a perfect match for Bassanio. Like Bassanio, she is likeable. She is fiercely intelligent and shows the ability to love deeply and selflessly. Her facility with the argument in the legal scenes is elating, and she enjoins Shylock to be merciful in eloquent and unforgettably moving terms. She offers him three opportunities to be merciful; to fetch a surgeon; to accept double his forfeit. He refuses, and he is punished, so we cannot blame Portia. Or can we? Portia has shown herself to be a racist early in the play, when she dismissed a dark-skinned suitor. She refers to Shylock almost always as “The Jew”, without using his name. Of all the participants in the court scene, Portia is the only one who has true power; she knows, long before the scene ends, how things will play out for Shylock if he refuses to be merciful. Her own injunctions to Shylock to give mercy freely do not apply to her; her own mercy is not free, but depends on Shylock’s. As a lawyer, Portia promises justice with promises that sound like threats: “the Jew shall have all the justice”; “For as thou urgest justice, be assured / Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir’st”; (4.1.318; 4.4.313-4). She achieves her victory by breaking the law and disregarding the rules. Shakespeare may have been accused of anti-Semitism, but his Christians, who spit on Jews, hinder their business efforts, withhold citizenship even when Jews have lived in their midst for generations and prefer legal loopholes to true justice, do not look much better.

There is no doubt that Shylock is Shakespeare’s villain. He is miserly, horrible and, even when offered double his forfeit, irrationally stubborn and bloodthirsty in his desire for revenge. But Shylock can also be said to be a representative of the older framework of deontologist ethics, as he is merely using legal means to fight to punish a man who amply deserves punishment. He asks no more and no less than what the law entitles him

⁷ *Il Principe* [The Prince] was originally published in 1532.

to; he asks no more than what the state says, and he believes, is right. He continually calls for justice. Who shall determine what is right and what is wrong? While we must agree that for Antonio to die for Shylock's version of justice is too harsh a punishment for his offences, to do so would be to be utilitarian; and deontologically speaking, we cannot question Shylock's motives. Neither can we condone that it is just for Shylock to die instead. It is impossible for us to condone the fact that the legal loophole which saves Antonio is the fact that the Venice law regards Shylock as a legal alien, although he has lived in Venice all his life -- a law singularly lacking in inherent justice and reminiscent of the plight of long-term refugees in our own world, Palestinians in Lebanon or, before 2004, Croatian Serbs in Serbia, people without the right to citizenship of their host countries even after decades of forced exile (see Moor 2010, and Štiks 2013: 30-32). And then, as an additional "mercy", instead of being killed — since no one must die in comedies — Shylock is to be baptized, a fate which we already know is worse for him than death itself. He will also be humiliated before his daughter and stripped of his money, which means that— as a money-lender—or, in today's terms, a banker—he is also being stripped of his livelihood, expertise and identity.

Portia's success in the court scene teaches her viewers two single most important utilitarian lessons of the play:

- One: What is legal is not always just, and what is just, not always legal.
- Two: Breaking the rules pays, if you think your objective is justified, and if you manage not to get caught.

Should these lessons be believed, and applied to real life? The difficulty at the heart of this play is that it asks of every reader and viewer to make up their own minds about that question. If the answer is yes, the viewer has become an adherent to utilitarian ethics. If the answer is no, the viewer has become an adherent of deontological ethics. A choice must be made, and each group will be vehement in justifying their choices.

Regardless of the choice we make for ourselves, we must learn to *value the uncertainty* we feel when we contemplate the implications of this choice. It is this uncertainty that is the unique gift of thinking human beings.

Katharine Eisaman Maus ends her Norton introduction to this play by talking about its ability to annihilate dangerous dualities by emphasizing the distance between its charmed fictions and real life.⁸ By contrast, I suggest that the play emphasizes dualities, which have enormous value in teaching applied ethics. The only way for our children to succeed morally in the world we have created for them, is to learn to think like the “I” and the “Other”, as well as like a deontologist and utilitarian, simultaneously.

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⁸ William Shakespeare, Introduction to *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, Or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

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Received: 16 September 2014

Accepted for publication: 1 December 2014

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“УЧИНИ МАЛО ЗЛА РАДИ ВЕЋЕГ ДОБРА”:
ЕТИЧКИ ПРИСТУП МЛЕТАЧКОМ ТРГОВЦУ

Сажетак

Када Басанио затражи од Порције да прекрши закон да би осујетила Шајлокове намере (“да учини мало зла ради већег добра”, 4.1.213), она то испрва одбија, тврдећи да је чинити зло увек неморално. Упркос том вербалном исказу, међутим, Порција својим делима јасно показује да је спремна да то учини. Критичари обично објашњавају Порцијино понашање принципом равнотеже (equity) из Аристотелове *Никомахове етике* — отвореним, појединачним приступом постизању правде у ситуацији када компликована правна питања превазилазе слово закона. Међутим, несразмера између Порцијиних речи и дела указује на то да је оправдавање “малог зла” “већим добром” етичко питање које је комплексније него што изгледа на први поглед, а нарочито онда када се “веће добро” дефинише сопственим интересима. Ова несразмера скреће пажњу на присутност у драми филозофско-етичке поставке другачије од Аристотелове: телеолошког прагматизма Никола Макијавелија. Шекспирова морална расправа у *Млетачком трговцу* упечатљива је управо стога што редовно супроставља Макијавелијев прагматизам делеонтолошкој етици, постављајући кључно питање: да ли је експедитивност примеренија као приступ свакодневном животу него дубоки принципи који се не дефинишу експедитивношћу? Јасно постављање овог питања у контексту дискусије о главним темама Млетачког трговца— а то су културне и религијске разлике међу људима, питање идентитета, стереотипи, налажење жртвених јараца, питање полне једнакости и манипулација идеја у јавности, теме које нису ништа мање узнемирујуће данас, но што су то биле у Шекспирово време— има посебну дидактичку вредност у савременој учионици.

Кључне речи: Млетачки трговац, Аристотел, Макијавели, етика, делеонтологија, прагматизам, Шекспир, методологија