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Wonder, Ambivalence and Heterotopia: The City in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

Assombro, ambivalência e heterotopia: a cidade em *O mercador de Veneza,* de Shakespeare

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Abstract: This essay proposes a discussion of the representation of Venice in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, addressing the city as a site of ambivalence and cultural interrogation. It examines how Shakespeare drew on the "myth of Venice" to create a space into which Renaissance anxieties about justice, gender, religion and finances were projected. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia is applied here to show how representations of Venice are used to mirror Elizabethan and Jacobean society. The essay also proposes an analysis of how the Italian city-state is rendered in Michael Radford's filmic adaptation of Shakespeare's play, with special attention to the images of the prostitutes in the film, and the ambivalent portrayal of the justice system during the courtroom scene.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; heterotopia.

Resumo: O presente ensaio propõe discutir a representação de Veneza em *O mercador de Veneza*, de William Shakespeare, abordando a cidade como um local de ambivalência e interrogação cultural. Examina como Shakespeare se inspirou no "mito de Veneza" para criar um espaço em que projeta inquietações renascentistas sobre temas como justiça, gênero, religião e finanças. Para isso, o ensaio usa o conceito de heterotopia, desenvolvido por Michel Foucault, e propõe a ideia de que Veneza cumpre o papel, na peça, de espelhar a sociedade elisabetana e jacobina. Além disso, o ensaio propõe uma análise da representação de Veneza na adaptação fílmica, dirigida por Michael Radford, da peça shakespeariana, privilegiando as imagens de prostitutas no filme, além de discutir a ambivalência do sistema de justiça durante a cena do tribunal.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare; *O mercador de Veneza*; heterotopia.

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When Shakespeare chose Venice for the location of two plays, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, he was responding to the allure of the Italian city-state, known for its splendor, affluence and diversity. English travel writing contributed to "the myth of Venice", imagined as a place that corresponded to Renaissance ideals of freedom and stability, at a time when new discoveries in geography and astronomy required a reassessment of the place of humans in the new conception of the universe. Furthermore, feudalism was being replaced by an economy based on overseas trade and Venice was at the centre of this new order. Fantasies of a democratic society, as well as notions of exoticism, were projected onto the European city. Thomas Coryat (1577-1617) for instance, while speaking of St. Mark's Square in his *Coryat's Crudities*, noted the magnificence of its cosmopolitan texture:

> Here you may both see all manner of fashions of attire, and heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnickes; the frequencie of people being so great […] that (as an elegant writer saith of it) a man may very properly call it rather *Orbis* than *Urbis forum* that is, a market place of the world, not of the citie.[1]

Venice's ethnic diversity and commerce are similarly praised by Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542), the Italian diplomat and cardinal whose *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* was translated from the Italian into English in 1599 by Lewis Lewkenor. Contarini extolled the "wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people, yea of the farthest and remotest nations", whose participation in the economy contributed to the status of the city as "common and generall market for the whole world".[2] As many critics affirm, Shakespeare was well acquainted with the "myth of Venice". Some claim he might even have been there.[3]

This essay proposes a discussion of the representation of Venice in *The Merchant of Venice*, addressing the city as a site of ambivalence and cultural interrogation. It will examine the "myth of Venice" as a *topos* onto which the desires and anxieties of Renaissance England are cast, presenting the argument that, in the play, Venice works as a mirror

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[1] CORYAT, qtd. in GILLIES. *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, p. 124.

[2] CONTARINI. *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, p. 1.

[3] Virginia Vaughan mentions Violet M. Jeffrey, who claimed that Shakespeare must have visited Venice. VAUGHAN. *Othello*: A Contextual History, p. 20.

of Shakespeare's society, a "counter-site" inhabited by the imagination of his contemporaries. In *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, Peter G. Platt suggests that Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia is useful for understanding the representation of the city in the play as a site of self-interrogation and misgivings, rather than an idealized, utopic place.[4] In this essay, I intend to further explore the idea of Venice as heterotopia, a mirror reflecting the anxieties of the Renaissance mind. I will also look at the different textures of Venetian life as rendered in Michael Radford's filmic version of Shakespeare's play.

Although Foucault presented the notion of heterotopia for the first time in *The Order of Things*, the concept was outlined in more detail in the essay, "Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias". Here, when defining heterotopia, he contrasts the concept to a more familiar one, that of utopia. As the French philosopher explains, "utopias are sites that have a relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces".[5] Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".[6] For, as Foucault points out, the space in which we live is not a void "that could be colored with diverse shades of light"; it consists, rather, of "a set of relations that delineate sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another".[7] Among the examples he provides of heterotopias, Foucault includes the cemetery, the prison, brothels, colonies, and gardens, as well as other sites that act as "a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live".[8] It is in this sense that the concept is fitting for the discussion of the representation of Venice in Shakespeare's *Merchant*: in the play, the Italian city-state promotes an interrogation of various issues affecting Elizabethan and Jacobean society, including ones relating to justice, gender, religion and finance. Sometimes represented as an idealized site, Venice serves as mirror for the changes taking place in the world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. As regards the mirror, Foucault interestingly proposes it as a sort of utopia, a "placeless

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[4] PLATT. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, p. 59

[5] FOUCAULT. Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 3.

[6] FOUCAULT. Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 3.

[7] FOUCAULT. Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 3.

[8] FOUCAULT. Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 4.

place", a "virtual space that opens up behind the surface". He argues, however, that the mirror is also a heterotopia, because it "exerts a sort of counteraction on the position" [9] occupied by the subject: one's reflection in the mirror is a shadow that enables one to reconstitute the gaze back to oneself. As such, while looking at the representation of the Italian city in the play, Shakespeare's audience could recognize and question aspects of their own world and become aware of its contradictions.

Venal Venice

During Shakespeare's time, Venice was admired not only as a location of international trade and wonder, a cosmopolitan centre attracting an array of people from different parts of the world: Venetian institutions were also highly acclaimed. It was believed that the Republic of Venice possessed "a set of regulations for decision-making which ensure[d] the complete rationality of every decision and the complete virtue of every decision-maker".[10] Among these institutions, the legal system was praised for its fairness. It is noteworthy that the *topos* of justice in Shakespeare's play is examined in a heterotopic site within the city of Venice, that of the courtroom. The Italian city-state was viewed as a place where the ideal of justice was upheld, a sort of model society where "everyone could live according to his convictions and in which peace, not military expansion, was regarded as the highest good".[11] The notion of an impartial justice, which granted aliens and natives the same rights, was crucial to maintain the economy of mercantile trade, as we see in *The Merchant,* when Antonio reminds Salanio that the wealth of the city relies on a system where the same law must apply to Venetians and strangers:

> The Duke cannot deny the course of law;
> For the commodity that strangers have
> With us in Venice, if it be denied,
> Will much impeach the justice of the state,
> Since that the trade and profit of the city
> Consisteth of all nations. (3.3.26-31)[12]

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[9] FOUCAULT. Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 4.

[10] POCOCK, J. G. A., qtd. in PLATT. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, p. 65.

[11] GILBERT, F. Venetian Secrets, p. 37.

[12] All quotes are taken from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by John Drakakis. The act, scene and lines will be numbered in the body of the essay.

Based on fact and fantasy, these ideas rendered the city "as a convenient geographical location onto which English anxieties could be projected".[13] But the fairness of the system, where the same law is supposed to apply to all people, natives and strangers, is questioned when Shylock addresses the court, reminding the Duke and the Venetians: "You have among you many a purchased slave/Which, like your asses, and your dogs and mules,/You use in abject and slavish parts,/Because you bought them" (4.1.89-92). These lines present an instance of interrogation, directing our attention to a blind spot concerning the impartiality of the justice system, as they expose a subaltern group within that society, to whom the "course of law" described by Antonio does not apply.

While sixteenth-century Venice differed from England, the English preoccupation with strangers, Jews in particular, is projected onto this comedy. The question of the Jew is interconnected with an emerging ideology of race and difference, thus establishing parameters for the consolidation of the English identity. It should be kept in mind, however, that whereas in Venice the Jews were important for the economy of the city, in England they had been expelled by Edward I in 1290 and were only readmitted during the time of Cromwell. In the England of Shakespeare's time, there were fewer than 200 Marrano Jews in a population of about 10,000 aliens. These were Jews who had converted to Christianity to escape persecution, but who might practice their own religion in secret. Very little is known about them; as John Drakakis indicates, "there has always been controversy over whether they were engaged in espionage, or assimilated into the religious life of large cities such as London, or whether they continued to practice 'Jewish rites' privately".[14] In contrast, Venetian Jews were granted religious freedom even while confined to the Ghetto. As moneylenders, they played a crucial role in the development of Venice's mercantile economy, thus contributing to the status of the city as a cosmopolitan centre of international commerce.

Virginia Vaughan points out that the English attitude towards Venice was ambivalent, for at the same time that there were similarities between Shakespeare's England and the Italian city-state, the differences between them were also great. Both were Christian nations, dependent on the navy for "for financial and political security"; both were constituted

[13] DRAKAKIS. Introduction. p. 4.
[14] DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 17.

of "a mixed government with imperial aspirations".[15] While the Republic of Venice offered the possibility of being an ally against Spain, an adversary of the English at the time, it was equally Catholic and therefore viewed with suspicion. Above all, it was the modernity of its economy, unhampered from the constraints on monetary transactions, that attracted the English imagination. According to Drakakis, "The Elizabethan writers, and Shakespeare in particular, *read* Venice, and the result was a representation based in response to cultural forces whose comparative novelty stood as a challenge to accepted modes of thinking".[16]

Interestingly, although *Othello* and *The Merchant* are both located in Venice, the two plays rely on a counter-site to the great Italian city. In opposition to Venice's order and social concord, Cyprus is presented in the former work as a remote outpost, stripped from the veneer of culture, where the forces of passion and barbarism can prevail. Cyprus is the Other to the Republic and its system of regulations that guarantee the safety and well being of citizens. Thus, the movement in *Othello* is away from civilization and order, to a more primitive, darker state of affairs.[17] But if in *Othello* Cyprus is the place where love cannot thrive, Belmont, the alternate setting in *The Merchant*, is presented as a "refuge for eloping lovers", a "haven of hospitality" in opposition to the Italian city's "precarious world of capital and interest and trade".[18] Yet in both plays, it is the relationship between the two places that generates the plot. In *Othello,* Cyprus denotes a rupture with Venice; Belmont, on the other hand, is a site into which Venice is superimposed throughout *The Merchant* in scenes that alternate between the different locations. Interestingly, both plays focus on figures of alterity, on strangers whose difference challenges the established order in the city-state, even as they contribute to its greatness. In many ways similar to Shylock, the Moor is an outsider, a non-Christian, yet Venice relies on him for safeguarding its geopolitical interests. As a moneylender, Shakespeare's Jew conducts an activity of fundamental importance for the city's status as an imperial maritime power. Thus, while Othello's importance has to do with military power, Shylock's occupation is central to the flow of the mercantile economy.

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[15] DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 14-15.

[16] DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 6.

[17] For an analysis of the "symbolic geography" in *Othello*, see KERNAN. *Othello*: An Introduction.

[18] BELSEY. Love in Venice, p. 103.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the role of the Jew is enveloped in ambivalence. Although Shylock is in many ways viewed as the menacing Other, performances of the role from the eighteenth century onwards rendered his character as complex and multilayered.[19] His many facets in the text include the possibility that he may not be so different from the Venetian citizens. He claims to be similar to the Christians, in that he is "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 […]" (3.1.55-57). Further unsettling the portrayal of Shylock is the question raised by Portia when the rich heiress of Belmont, disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, enters the Venetian Court of Justice in Act 4. Addressing the Duke, she asks provocatively: "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.170), implying that there is no clear distinction between Shylock and Antonio, the two men in front of her. Her question, according to Thomas Moisan, "blurs the distinctions" underpinning the polarities between Shylock and Antonio, thus foregrounding the instability of the principle of difference that would set the Jew apart from the Venetians in the play.[20] As Platt explains, pointing out the many paradoxes throughout the plot, "it becomes difficult to base an argument on even a fundamental contrast between Antonio and Shylock, then, because Shylock and the merchant seem to share as much as they do not".[21]

Venice provides a historical site for the hypocrisy and contradictions in the play. While the eponymous merchant refers to Antonio, the financial activities conducted by the Jews were central for the development of the Venetian economy and its transition from landownership to mercantile enterprises, which relied on the flow of capital. This new economy required complex credit operations, such as the lending of money for interest, otherwise known as "usury"; it also introduced the "the practice of one person becoming surety for another", as Martin Luther outlines in his *Trade and Usury*.[22] As the merchant,

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[19] For a detailed description of theatrical representations of Shylock, see John Russell Brown, "The Realization of Shylock: A Theatrical Criticism".

[20] MOISAN. "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" Subversion and recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 188.

[21] PLATT. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox,* p. 81.

[22] LUTHER qtd. in DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 10.

Antonio's overseas trading brought in merchandise that was consumed by the aristocracy; Shylock, on the other hand, dealt with the process of "facilitating the flow of capital through contractual means".[23] In a society which had not yet made the full transition from feudalism to capitalism, both participated in the intersecting operations that generated wealth for the city-state. Shylock's direct involvement in the financing of mercantile enterprises threatened the power held by the church, one of the greatest owners of land during the Renaissance.

Usury was an activity prohibited by the church: it was viewed as an unnatural act of reproduction and had been condemned since the Middle Ages. Unlike land, money was regarded as sterile and incapable of generating fruit; in this manner, the profit derived from usury violated natural and divine laws, contributing to the notion that its practice was not only immoral, but an outright perversion of nature. This perspective reflected the church's anxiety that the feudal system, from which its power was largely drawn, might be replaced with other means of generating wealth. In a sermon published in 1599, Miles Mosse, an English churchman, linked usury with prostitution and other transgressive sexual acts: "Aristotle sayth that Vsurers and Bawdes may well goe together: for they gaine by filthie meanes all they get. Saint Augustine coupleth them with Couetous men and Theeues. Musculus ioyneth Vsurie with Deceit, and Periurie. Lauater reciteth it with Drunkeness and Adulterie".[24] W.H. Auden, in the well-known essay about Shakespeare's play, "Brothers and Others", refers to Dante to indicate an association between usury and sodomy in *The Merchant*: "It behoves man to gain his bread and to prosper. And because the usurer takes another way, he contemns Nature in herself and her followers, placing elsewhere his hope. . . . And hence the smallest round seals with its mark Sodom and the Cahors . . ."[25] To that effect, Auden illustrates yet another relation between the Jew and the merchant, affirming that it cannot be accidental "that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist a man whose emotional life, though his conduct *may* be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex".[26] In this light, Shylock and Antonio are equally engaged in acts of transgression condemned by

[23] DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 12.
[24] MOSSE qtd in DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 15.
[25] DANTE qtd. in AUDEN. Brothers and Others, p. 72.
[26] AUDEN. Brothers and Others, p. 72, my emphasis.

the church. Yet whereas the Jew performs his moneylending in the public sphere, Antonio's affections are private and personal.

The virgin, the whore and the law

Shylock provides an economic function vital to the wealth of the city, but he is antagonized by the Venetians. His ambivalent role configures different instances of cultural self-interrogation in the play. In a sense, his financial activities may be associated with those of another group, likewise tolerated but officially eschewed: the prostitutes. For despite its virtues, for which Venice was known as the virgin city, she was considered a whore by others, a site of corruption. Vaughan tells us that "to keep their daughters intact and their lineage pure, the city fathers not only condoned but promoted prostitution".[27] Venice's gendering is complex and shaky as regards the commercial status of the city, which was praised primarily for its overseas trading, a predominantly masculine enterprise. The commerce of the flesh, performed by the courtesans, was a more covert, feminine occupation taking place under the auspices of powerful men.

Like the Jews, prostitutes performed a social function in the city, one relegated to groups that, despite being in the public eye, were transferred to the margins of society. Courtesans were integral to Venice's diverse, vibrant fabric: to excite the imagination of his readers, Thomas Coryat included an engraving in his *Crudities* where a woman, with exposed breasts, entices the attention of a well-dressed gentleman. The powerful men of the city also exposed the underside of Venice, as G. K. Hunter explains: "At the level of achievement, they are Magnificos, Avvocatori, etc.; but beneath the Venetian robes lie the predatory fur and feather and membrane of fox and flesh-fly, raven, gor-crow, and vulture".[28] These animal images are significant: Barbara Heliodora observes that a possible etymology for the Jew's name in *The Merchant* is the Hebrew word *shalach*, which means a maritime crow.[29] She affirms that these crows, similar to other vultures, were symbols of usurers during Elizabethan time. Shylock personifies the contradictions of his society, which William Hazlitt phrased memorably: "he is honest in his vices;

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[27] VAUGHAN. *Othello*: A Contextual History, p. 17.
[28] HUNTER qtd. in VAUGHAN. *Othello:* A Contextual History, p. 17.
[29] HELIODORA. *Falando de Shakespeare*, p. 226.

they are hypocrites in their virtues".[30] The financial dealings conducted by Shakespeare's Jew, harshly condemned by the church, are vital for the wealth of the Venetians and the glory of their city.

In Michael Radford's filmic adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, released in 2004, the representation of the "virgin" city abounds with images of prostitution and sensual indulging.[31] The events of the play are encased in a specific historical context, denoted in the words "Venice, 1596", which appear on screen at the start of the film, followed by images of a boat in the canal transporting a priest and a large wooden cross. Radford also sets a background to the play, composed by a juxtaposition of images that include the burning of the Talmud and a crowd scene in the Rialto, where there is violent confrontation against Jews. A non-Shakespearean text unfolds the following information for the viewers:

> Intolerance of Jews was a fact of 16th Century life even in Venice, the most powerful and liberal city state in Europe. By law Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or 'Geto' (*sic*) area of the city. After sundown any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law. The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter.[32]

This explicative historical frame is interspersed with images of a door being bolted, a hand taking a coin, and the priest's sermon, which calls out the words from Ezekiel 18:8: "If a man is righteous, and does what is lawful and right, if he has not exacted usury, nor taken any increase, but has withdrawn his hand form all iniquity and executed true judgment between men and man […]". The violence in the crowd scene culminates when a Jew is thrown over the bridge into the canal. From below, Shylock and Antonio observe; when the latter approaches the Jew, Shylock speaks out his name. Antonio turns towards him and spits on his face. Some critics have objected to this historical frame, which establishes a precise date for the events of the play, rather than a vague moment in the Italian Renaissance, claiming that historicization prevents the film audience from

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[30] HAZLITT. *A View of the English Stage*, p. 4.
[31] THE MERCHANT of Venice, 2004.
[32] THE MERCHANT of Venice, 2004.

the direct experience of the text's prevailing antisemitism.[33] But from my perspective, these introductory images in Radford's version of Shakespeare establish a tense, apprehensive context for the plot of *The Merchant*. Also noteworthy are the images of religious ceremonies, Christian and Jewish, which appear in sharp contrast to the hedonism of other Venetians, such as Bassanio, played by Joseph Fiennes, who indulge in masques and revelry.[34] Evening festivities are depicted on a torch lit gondola travelling along a canal, where a courtesan displays her breasts; this image is juxtaposed with others showing the observation of religious rites, thus underscoring the contradictions inherent in the life in the city.

Venice always appears overcast and gray in Radford's film, despite the colorful bustle of the scenes in the street and the canals, where great ethnic diversity may be observed in the marketplace: the presence of people from various parts of the world is evidenced by their different skin tones and ethnic costumes. Two instances of the visual representation of Venice are especially noteworthy. The first of these has to do with the manner in which the film privileges the Venetian carnival in various images of the city, where the characters wear masks, celebrating among bare-breasted courtesans in the Rialto. Depicted in this manner, these women recall the engraving in Thomas Coryat's *Crudities*. Secondly, the film makes an eclectic use of Renaissance depictions, creating a polyphonic hypertext that references paintings by Velázquez, Caravaggio, Titian and other artists of the period, attesting to its vibrant strangeness.

Radford's film exhibits various characteristics of the carnivalesque type of inversions that challenge ecclesiastical authority and socially imposed norms, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, thus indicating a continuation of the "polyphony" of voices and festive Carnival manifestations, characteristic of the Middle Ages. Shakespeare's mixture of comic and tragic elements is in itself a manifestation of the dialogism related to Bakhtin's notion of Carnival.[35] Other carnivalesque subversions

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[33] See especially MAGNUS. Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and the Vexed Question of Performance.

[34] Radford's choice of Joseph Fiennes is interesting, for the same actor played the part of Shakespeare, the enterprising poet, in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Could this choice be suggestive of the ambitious, love struck Bassanio as a representation of Shakespeare in Radford's film?

[35] For Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, see especially Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination*: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin.

in *The Merchant* include comic deceit, festivity, women controlling events while in disguise, cross-dressing and homoeroticism. With regard to the interweaving of comedy and dramatic tension in Shakespeare's text, Radford achieves pathos in some of the images where the courtesans cross the path of the Jew. In a brief, non-Shakespearean scene, a devastated Shylock stands in the rain, observing the movement of the Venetians outside a building bordering the canals. We hear the women solicit the businessmen; when they see Shylock, they call out while laughing: "Jew, Jew, come have some pleasure with us […] Christian pleasure!" As I have observed elsewhere, Radford chose to have Shylock deliver his "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech – undoubtedly the most commented lines of the play – in front of prostitutes, who witness his rage with consternation.[36] The witnesses to Shylock's tragic lines are women who have been reduced to objects of pleasure, fellow Venetians equally marginalized. Thus, while this is by no means a comic scene, the delivery of Shylock's powerful lines at the gutters of the affluent city-state may be considered a manifestation of generic hybridity, a mixture of high and low modes. Regarding the representation of the Jews and the courtesans in the film, Linda Hutcheon observes that "[b]y having his Venetian Jews wear identifying red hats and his prostitutes appear bare-breasted – as both had to by law at the time of the play's setting – the director makes this a play *about* both anti-Semitism and the role of women".[37]

In opposition to Venice, Belmont in Radford's film is an island towered over by Portia's palace, an estate of archways, tapestries, fountains and manicured gardens, softly bathed by sunlight during the day and clear moonlight in the evenings. Addressing Shakespeare's text, Catherine Belsey has pointed out that "Belmont is the conventional critical other of Venice, its defining romantic opposite […] [it] is feminine, lyrical, aristocratic – and vanishing – while Venice represents the new world of men, market forces and racial tensions".[38] As I have argued above, the gendering of Venice is fraught with instability, but Belmont seems to follow a more conventionally feminine order. Nonetheless, in order to arrive at Belmont, and also to leave it, the women in the

[36] GALERY. Shylock and Michael Radford's Version of *The Merchant of Venice*: Perspectives of a Historically Challenging Role, p. 92.
[37] HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 145.
[38] BELSEY. Love in Venice, p. 103.

play disguise themselves as men: the liminal space between these two sites demands cross-dressing and gender bending. It requires Portia to *translate* herself as a man.[39] Portia represents Belmont in the same way that Shylock and Antonio are contiguous to Venice. As such, it is in the trial scene of Act 4 that these two places come together, in the battle over justice and mercy.

The courtroom in Act 4 is a heterotopic site inasmuch as it is a place set apart to serve a specific function in society, that of ensuring the course of law. In the play, the trial in Venice is the moment where Portia asserts her power in the public sphere (she likewise affirms authority in the domestic realm in Act 5, but that is beyond the scope of the present discussion) and she does it in the guise of the young doctor Balthazar. When she is dressed as the doctor of law, Lynn Collins, who plays Portia in the film, gives her most compelling, nuanced performance. Unadorned, disguised and dispossessed of her fairytale dress, she is able to render the qualms of a wife who is also testing the affection of her husband. Her telling facial expressions reveal her reaction to Bassanio's confession:

> Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself;
> But life itself, my wife and all the world
> Are not with me esteemed above my life.
> I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you (4.1.278-83).

Antonio's trial (it is Jeremy Irons who plays the part of the merchant) takes place before a crowd of Venetian citizens who have gathered in the courtroom, a participating chorus voicing the view of the collectivity with their gasps, cheers and protests. Judging from their red hats, this crowd also includes a fair number of Jews. In this manner, Radford makes the courtroom representative of a diverse Venetian society. There is even the presence of slaves, meticulously fanning their masters, underscoring the contradictions within an apparently democratic society.

An important conflict in the courtroom scene has to do with the issue of the letter versus the spirit of the law, based on religious interpretations of God in the Old and New Testaments. Whereas as God appears in the Old Testament requiring strict obedience to laws

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[39] DERRIDA. What is a "Relevant" Translation, p. 430.

and exacting harsh punishment on those who stray, the teachings of St. Paul in the New Testament emphasize an observance to the spirit of the law, portraying a merciful God who forgives rather than punishes, and who offers salvation to those who are able to forgive. Shylock follows a strict adherence to the law and wants neither more nor less than what is "nominated" in the bond. He will not accept any sum of money, only the pound of flesh will do. Underlying his insistence on the words of the contract sealed with Antonio is the notion that, as a Jew, he is tied to the letter rather than to the Christian spirit of the law. As Derrida explains,

> Portia tries to convert [Shylock] to Christianity by persuading him of the supposedly Christian interpretation that consists of interiorizing, spiritualizing, idealizing what among Jews (it is often said, at least, that this is a very powerful stereotype) will remain physical, external, literal, devoted to a respect for the letter.[40]

In other words, for whereas the Jewish faith demands a physical inscription on the (male) body, marked during the act of circumcision, Christianity is moved by spirituality, an internal rather than external acceptance of religion. However, in the play, the Jew's insistence on the letter of the law becomes opportunistic in the sense that it provides him with an occasion for revenge, which is what he desires. This is because Shylock had found out that Antonio was involved in the flight of Jessica away from her father's house. But Portia ends up appropriating the literal interpretation of the law and using it against Shylock. As Drakakis phrases it, "the bond is overturned by an equally opportunistic turning of literalism against itself. Shylock can have a just pound of Antonio's flesh, but the bond contains no mentions of blood".[41] In this manner, the conflict over the letter and the spirit of the law remain unresolved, as do many other problems in the play.

Unrealized ideal

When outlining the principles of heterotopias, Foucault described a function they have in relation to all other space. According to him, "[t]his function unfolds between two extreme poles". At one end is

[40] DERRIDA. What is a "Relevant" Translation?, p. 439.
[41] DRAKAKIS. Introduction, p. 103.

the pole of illusion, a space that exposes "every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory". Interestingly, the example given of such a space is the brothel. At the other end, there is compensation, the projection of a space "that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled".[42] Regarding the latter, the French philosopher is ironic when giving the example of Jesuit colonies in South America: "marvelous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved".[43] As a heterotopia, Venice in *Merchant* lies in the liminal space between the poles of illusion and compensation. It presents and interrogates ideals, such as those of freedom, justice and stability at a moment when the impact of new discoveries in geography and astronomy called for an examination of old assumptions about the world and society. It also questions the principles regulating the economy of the Renaissance. Venice thus lingers in the play as an "unrealized ideal",[44] a site of contestation of the old and new world orders, that space into which many of the issues affecting Shakespeare and his contemporaries are projected.

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[42] FOUCAULT. Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 8.
[43] FOUCAULT. Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, p. 8.
[44] PLATT. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, p. 58.

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