

> The fallacy of the “intentional fallacy”: the intended sense of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

> A falácia da “falácia intencional”: o sentido intencionado d’*O Mercador de Veneza*, de William Shakespeare

Tiago Cabral

Mestre em Teoria da Literatura e doutor em Literaturas Anglófonas pelo Programa de Pós-graduação em Estudos Literários da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). E-mail: tiagocabralvieira@gmail.com. Orcid: 0000-0002-6069-2702.

Abstract

Members of New Criticism, an American school of criticism that predominated in the decades of 1940 and 1950, coined the intentional and the affective fallacies, which essentially dictated the intentions of an author are irrelevant to the meaning of a literary text. To refute this principle, I discuss William Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. In the play, Shylock is the antagonist, the comic villain, which is a key feature of the intended meaning of the play. In this article, I purport to show how this anti-aesthetic principle from New Criticism contributes little for literary criticism.

Keywords: New Criticism; intentional fallacy; Shakespeare; drama; comic sense.

Resumo

Membros da Nova Crítica, escola de crítica literária americana que predominou nas décadas de 1940 e 1950, cunharam os princípios falácia intencional e falácia afetiva, que essencialmente ditavam que as intenções de um autor são irrelevantes para o sentido de um texto literário. Para refutar esse princípio, discuto *O Mercador de Veneza*, uma comédia de William Shakespeare. Na peça, Shylock é o antagonista, o vilão cômico, o que é uma característica fundamental do sentido pretendido da peça. Neste artigo pretendo mostrar como esse princípio antiestético da Nova Crítica pouco contribui para a crítica literária.

Palavras-chave: Nova Crítica; falácia intencional; Shakespeare; dramaturgia; sentido cômico

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1. Introduction

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio, an opportunistic young man, seeks a loan from his best friend, Antonio, a prosperous merchant, to court the wealthy Portia, not for love but for financial gain. Antonio, not having the money, decides he will borrow it from a man he despises, Shylock. He agrees to lend the money only if Antonio agrees to give up a pound of his flesh if the loan is not repaid. A subplot features Shylock's daughter, Jessica, seeking to run away from her over-possessive father and elope with her lover Lorenzo. Because of an accident, Antonio loses part of the goods involved in a transaction and is unable to pay the loan. Shylock, then, demands a pound of flesh from Antonio, as agreed. With Portia's help disguised as a male lawyer, Antonio is spared and Shylock's life is ruined. In an ambiguous epilogue, the three couples – Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa (Portia's friend) and Gratiano (Bassanio's friend), and Jessica and Lorenzo – gather in front of Portia's house and share words that reveal their ambivalent feelings for each other. Despite the darker tones of the comedy, its comic sense still prevails. As I will argue, this is due to the intended public meaning of the play. Therefore, the “intentional fallacy”, a principle established by the American New Criticism, will show itself to be weak.

2. The intentional and the affective “fallacies”

In *The Anatomy of Influence*, Harold Bloom tells that, in the 40s and 50s, New Criticism was the reigning orthodoxy.¹ New Critic William Wimsatt, alongside the philosopher Monroe Beardsley, coined the expressions “affective fallacy” and “intentional fallacy” in two essays, included in *The Verbal Icon*. The “affective fallacy”, Bloom explains, “launched a major assault on the then pervasive belief that the meaning and value of a literary work could be apprehended by ‘its results in the mind of its audience’”². Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”³. In their view, there would be external evidence, which is “is private or idiosyncratic (...) [and, thus] not a part of the work as a linguistic fact”⁴,

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence*, 2011, p. 16.

² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³ William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, 1974, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

and there would be internal evidence, which “is also public: it is discovered through the semantics and syntax of a poem, (...) through (...) all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture”⁵. Hence, in Wimsatt and Beardsley’s view, internal evidence belongs to literary criticism, while external evidence does not because it corresponds to author psychology and, thus, “leads away from the poem”⁶. They also argue that there must not be

a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), [which] (...) begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself (...) tends to disappear.⁷

This is much the same argument used by Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce and one of his followers, Robin Collingwood, to claim that sympathy, pleasure, amusement, or delight do not belong in the aesthetic since psychological effects would meet a utilitarian demand.⁸ One of the conclusions of Wimsatt and Beardsley is that a “critic is not a contributor to statistically countable reports about the poem, but a teacher or explicator of meanings”⁹. This argument, however, can be easily debunked, as is done by English philosopher Roger Scruton in *Art and Imagination*: amusement is a natural and genuine cognitive reaction to an object and not only an “interest in that object *for the sake of* amusement”¹⁰.

Wimsatt and Beardsley were influenced by Croce. To them, “literature should be studied for the way literary language differs from ordinary practical language and for the unique truths conveyed only through such literary language”¹¹. However, Croce, Collingwood, Beardsley and Wimsatt forget that we only have access to meaning through sensation. Bliss, despair, love, hate, joy, sadness, quiet, anger, relief, fear are all sensations. These sensations correspond to what we call meaning because they physiologically and psychologically affect us. Anything – an event, a person, or an object – that prompts these sensations in us is *meaningful* to us somehow. Scruton explains that Croce’s thought is constrained by a “metaphysical

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁸ Cf. Croce’s *Aesthetic* and Collingwood’s *The Principles of Art*.

⁹ William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, *Op. Cit.*, 1974, p. 34.

¹⁰ Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, 1998, p. 150.

¹¹ Michael Ryan and Julie Rivkin, *Literary Theory*, 2004, p. 3.

framework”¹². Meaning, however, in the physically constrained human mind, is restricted to a range of sensations.

Scruton claims that we should not be indifferent to an artist’s intention because it “is revealed *in* the work, and is sealed off from the artist’s biography. If we are to create a bridge to the artist’s real emotions, it will be possible only when we have first understood the work in its own terms”¹³. Hence, there are probably no such fallacies, for which Wimsatt and Beardsley argue, “since there is no real distinction between studying an artist’s intentions and studying his work”¹⁴. Therefore, “artists control their subject-matter, in order that our response to it should be *their* doing, not *ours*”¹⁵. American philosopher Stanley Cavell argues that the audience should understand intention as a guide, just as the artist let his intention guide him in the first place¹⁶. Cavell makes an analogy to morality: “In morality, tracing an intention limits a man’s responsibility; in art, it dilates it completely. The artist is responsible for everything that happens in his work – and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is *meant*”¹⁷. He concludes that, in morality, the right to ask about one’s intentions

is given in one’s relation to what has been done, or to the man who has done it. In art, it has to be earned, through the talent of understanding, the skill of commitment, and truthfulness to one’s response—the ways the artist earned his initial right to our attention. If we have earned the right to question it, the object itself will answer; otherwise not. There is poetic justice.¹⁸

A literary text is an aesthetic object. Its purpose is to provide a kind of knowledge imbued with highly affective and intimate response. Its purpose, i.e., its intention is, therefore, ultimately to provide cognitive meaning that is accompanied by a sensation. Ultimately, if we are to glimpse at that meaning, we need to at least have an idea of the artist’s intention.

William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is a good example that helps elucidate this issue. As Bloom points out, this play is “a profoundly anti-Semitic work”¹⁹. It is so because Shylock is predominantly a comic villain. He is hated by the

¹² Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 1997, p. 147

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 145

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Idem*, *Beauty*, 2011, p. 105

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1969, p. 236.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 236-7.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 237.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 171.

other characters, and this hatred finds resonance within the audience. According to Bloom, the most accurate way to see Shylock is as an ambivalent figure, thus, neither “entirely a comic villain [n]or only a figure of tragic pathos”²⁰. I argue that to see Shylock exclusively as a figure of tragic pathos is more of a misunderstanding than to see him only as a comic villain. Shylock is hated not (only) because it was acceptable to hate Jews during the time period of Elizabethan England, but because he is a miser, and miserliness is an aspect of personality that is usually displeasing. We are not supposed to judge the audience of Shakespeare’s time for hating him because miserliness is often a displeasing aspect of personality, regardless of its association with Jews. If Shylock were a figure of pathos, thus, *The Merchant of Venice* would be in ironic mode since the hatred the other characters nurture for him would be condemnable. To understand this, let us look at *The Mousetrap*, the play that Hamlet uses to verify if Claudius had murdered his father. Hamlet’s brief “theory” of mimesis says that the purpose of acting is to show the men and women in the audience their own features, that is, “to hold (...) the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”²¹. What Hamlet intended by arranging the play was to make Claudius externalize his guilt for having killed his brother, Hamlet’s father, which would confirm that Claudius was the murderer. *The Mousetrap*, therefore, is ironic. *The Merchant of Venice*, on the other hand, is not ironic because Shylock is intended as a comic villain. In short, if Shylock is intended as a figure of little or no pathos – since hating Jews was not condemnable as it is nowadays – the audience is not supposed to feel guilty for hating him.

Intention is not related to the idiosyncrasies or the biography of an author – how, for instance, Shakespeare felt towards Jews – but to the general and historical context, or, as Scruton suggests, the “public character of the aesthetic object”²². As he argues, “the problem of the role of intention in criticism may not really be a problem. Or at least, it is not a problem that is special to criticism. (...) At the same time, we must beware of any view that sees the reference to artistic intention (...) as irrelevant to public meaning”²³. Hence, we do not “say that a work of art means whatever the artist intended it to mean. But nor do we feel that we can impose an

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

²¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2003, p. 165, 3.2.18-20.

²² Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, 1983, p. 15.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

interpretation which is incompatible with anything that *might* have been intended”²⁴. The audience of Shakespeare’s time would not have seen a problem in hating and mocking Jews. Beardsley and Wimsatt argue that the search for the cultural and historical background in which a work was written is fruitless because “though cultures have changed and will change, poems remain and explain”²⁵. I argue that the problem of intention cannot be solved in absolute terms. If we ignore the historical background, Shylock can be easily and naïvely mistaken for a figure of pathos. We must, therefore, let the author’s intentions, as Cavell puts it, guide us toward a more accurate reading, even if they cannot be fully recovered. In this sense, intention is neither a primary concern – since they cannot be fully recovered – nor cannot be fully ignored – since they serve us as a guide.

3. Shylock’s (intentional) elliptical reply

The problem with *The Merchant of Venice* becomes worse when we specifically consider that Shylock is not allowed a conclusion. In the trial scene, after Portia wittily saves Antonio using a peripeteia²⁶, Shylock abruptly ceases his vengeful quest against Antonio and replies: “I am content”²⁷. To Bloom, this is an aesthetic flaw because his response renders him an unpalatable character. Bloom argues that “Shylock’s conversion (...) [destroys] the plausibility of Shakespeare’s comic villain as a character”²⁸ since the proud and fierce Jew “scarcely would have preferred Christianity to death”²⁹. Additionally,

Shylock’s acceptance of enforced Christianity is a (...) severe implausibility and one that distracts from dramatic or even theatrical effect. Indeed, as drama Shylock’s “I am content” is necessarily a puzzle (...) We anticipate that Shylock the broken new Christian will live in silence: not a dramatic life. Is it that Shakespeare wished to repeal Shylock, as it were, and so cut away the enormous pathos of the character? We have seen no weaknesses in Shylock’s will, no signs indeed that he can serve the function of a comic villain, a new Barabas [from Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*]. No red wig and giant nose will transform the speaker of Shylock’s 360 dark lines into a two-dimensional character. Shylock, however monstrous his contemplated

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

²⁶ Peripeteia (περιπέτεια), “ordinarily translated as ‘reversal of fortune’ or ‘reversal of situation’ really conveys a more precise meaning: it is the outcome of an action which is the opposite of what was intended” (GREENE, 1944, p. 92). This description fits Portia’s trick perfectly because what was intended was that Shylock would have taken a pound of flesh from Antonio, but ends up backing off.

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 162, 4.1.390.

²⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2010, p. vii.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

revenge, is all spirit, malign and concentrated, indifferent to the world and the flesh, unless Antonio be taken to represent both for him. Displaced spirit and so villain as he is, Shylock confronts in the heroically Christian merchant of Venice his tormentor and his double, the play's best Christian, who demonstrates the authenticity of his religious and moral zeal by his prowess in spitting at and cursing Shylock. I intend no irony there, and I fear that I read Shakespeare as he meant to *be* read.³⁰

In Bloom's view, Shylock's acceptance of conversion is a distraction from dramatic effect. Attempting to imbue Shylock with too much pathos is an inaccurate reading. Avoiding seeing Shylock as a comic villain because he is a Jew may result in an unfruitful reading. Shylock is supposed to be understood as a comic villain, much less ambivalent for Shakespeare's audiences than to our current standards, and whose elimination has a necessary positive outcome. To Bloom, Shylock's acceptance of conversion is the most egregious aesthetic flaw in Shakespeare because he loses coherence as a character.³¹

Shylock's response, however, leaves an impression that something is missing. Is there an intention behind Shylock's resignation? Is there missing text or even a missing stage direction? Did Shakespeare plan a different conclusion for Shylock and changed his mind at the last minute? This is the kind of intention that obviously cannot be fully recovered, but the portrayal of Shylock as a comic villain, which derives from a common hatred toward Jews in England during the Elizabethan term, can be recovered. As James Shapiro explains, ignoring the dark aspect of *The Merchant of Venice*, the hatred of Jews, is worse than staging it:

[T]he play's vitality can be attributed to the ways in which it scrapes against a bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual, and religious difference of others. I can think of no other literary work that does so as unrelentingly and as honestly. To avert our gaze from what the play reveals about the relationship between cultural myths and peoples' identities will not make irrational and exclusionary attitudes disappear. Indeed, these darker impulses remain so elusive, so hard to identify in the normal course of things, that only in instances like productions of this play do we get to glimpse these cultural faultlines. This is why censoring the play is *always* more dangerous than staging it. *The Merchant's* capacity to illuminate a culture is invariably compromised when those staging it flinch from presenting the play in its complex entirety, which is what occurred when Nazi directors, in the fifty or so productions they staged between 1933 and 1945, omitted the intermarriage of Jessica and Lorenzo, and which also occurred when the British director Barry Kyle in a 1980 production in Israel was persuaded to omit Shylock's acceptance of conversion to Christianity, since it was so disturbing for Jewish audiences. (...) One thing remains certain: as long as anxieties about racial, national, sexual, and religious difference continue to haunt the way we imagine ourselves and

³⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2010, p. 3-4.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

respond to others, Shakespeare's words will remain "not of an age, but for all time."³²

According to Bloom, in

our post-Holocaust universe, how can we accommodate Shylock's "I am content," too broken for irony, too strong for any play whatsoever? That question, I think, is unanswerable and does not belong to literary criticism anyway. What is essential for criticism is to ask and answer the double question: Why did Shakespeare so represent his stage Jew as to make possible the romantic interpretation that has proceeded from Hazlitt and Henry Irving right through to Harold C. Goddard and innumerable actors in our century, and having done so, why did the playwright then shatter the character's consistency by imposing on him the acceptance of the humiliating forced conversion to that religion of mercy, the Christianity of Venice?³³

English critic Antony Nuttall argues that literature

"can represent reality, but it can also invent, cheat, play, enchant. These, however, are not mere unconnected parallels. Text is texture. Representing, inventing, cheating, playing, enchanting are variously and unpredictably interwoven. They all, always, involve meaning, and meaning is never wholly private to the individual, never radically independent of the public world."³⁴

Ignoring the anti-Semitism of *The Merchant of Venice*, as Shapiro suggests, is a form of censorship. Attempting to read the play ironically is a form of censorship, a weak reading that ignores the public intentions of the text; staging *The Merchant of Venice* nowadays is problematic because of its anti-Semitism. The point here is that nothing would have prevented the audience from feeling sorry for Shylock to some extent, but the general perception of Jews would, in a way, allow for his humiliation. Nowadays, however, ideological censorship might compromise the play's understanding because its public intentions are not acknowledged.

Indeed, there seems to be something missing in Shylock's "I am content". As he himself says, he would rather die than become a Christian and stop lending money because his business is his life.³⁵ If Shylock's acceptance is neither a dramatic flaw nor its inadequacy is due to an unlikely missing stage direction, then, my hypothesis is that it could be an *intentional* ellipsis for which the underlying reasons, both Shakespeare's and Shylock's, we do not have access. This ellipsis could be intentional because it contributes to an overall sense of omission or mystery pervading the play.

³² James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 2016, p. 228-29.

³³ Harold Bloom, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2010, p. 3.

³⁴ Antony Nuttall, *A New Mimesis*, 1983, p. 192.

³⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 161, 4.1.370-73.

This issue, however, is beyond the scope of this article. The point, however, I restate, is that Shylock's elliptical reply can be intentional from the author's part.

4. The dark aspects of Shakespeare's comedy

There are elements in *The Merchant of Venice* that might prevent its categorization as a pure comedy³⁶. Let us discuss some of these elements. Antonio is a melancholy character;³⁷ but is he suicidal? According to Bloom, "Bassanio, we have to assume, is bisexual, but Antonio clearly is not, and his homoeroticism is perhaps less relevant than his sadomasochism, the doom-eagerness that could allow him to make so mad a contract with Shylock"³⁸. Antonio accepts giving up a pound of his flesh, to be cut near his heart, to Shylock if he is not able to pay Bassanio's debt. This is Shylock's bond and, apparently, Antonio's consensual death wish. Moreover, he scarcely struggles to confront Shylock during the trial:

I do beseech you
Make no more³⁹ offers, use no farther means,
But with all brief and plain conveniency
Let me have judgement, and the Jew his will.⁴⁰

Death is convenient to Antonio. The only thing that seems to concern him is Bassanio's love: "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not"⁴¹. It seems that if he can somehow confirm Bassanio's love for him, he is, in a way, free. When Portia, during the trial, asks him if he has anything else to say, he asks for Bassanio's hand:

I am armed and well prepared.
Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well.
(...)
For herein Fortune shows herself more kind
Than is her custom: it is still her use
To let the wretched man outlive his wealth,
To view with hollow eye and wrinkled brow
An age of poverty; from which ling'ring penance

³⁶ Shakespeare's plays are currently categorized as comedies, tragedies, histories, problem plays and romances. The four romances and the three problem plays are known for having both comic and tragic elements mingled. By pure comedy, I refer to the ten plays that fit Northrop Frye's theory of salvation in Shakespearean comedy that he discusses in *The Myth of Deliverance*.

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 69, 1.1.1-2.

³⁸ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 179.

³⁹ "[M]ore (in number)" (BROWN, 2000, p. 107).

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 150, 4.1.80-83.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 1998, p. 139, 3.3.35-36.

Of such misery doth she cut me off.⁴²

Fortune is kind because she puts him out of his misery. In the last scene, he says that he would put himself again in harm's way for Bassanio:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
(...)
I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will nevermore break faith advisedly.⁴³

He took the bond with Shylock knowing his life was in danger, did not insist much in confronting him into giving up the bond and now he is doing it again. Antonio seems to borrow money from Shylock, in part, because he loves Bassanio, but he also seemingly does it largely because he does not see much meaning in life anymore.

According to Bloom, "Antonio, as so many critics observe, is Shylock's mirror image, bonded with him in mutual hatred, and no more cheerful than Shylock is"⁴⁴. During the trial, when being confronted, Shylock says that he has no good reason for choosing his bond over three times the value of Antonio's debt:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that –
But say it is my humour: is it answered?⁴⁵

Humor here is "probably the older meaning 'fixation of character' rather than 'whim', since Shylock goes on to speak of true phobias"⁴⁶. The phobias referred to by M. M. Mahood, the editor of New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, are in the following lines:

What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
As there is no firm reason to be rendered
Some that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others when the bagpipe sings i'the nose
Cannot contain their urine: for affection
Masters oft passion, sways it⁴⁷ to the mood

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 157, 4.1.260-68.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 176, 5.1.249-53.

⁴⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 177.

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 148, 4.1.40-43.

⁴⁶ M. M. Mahood, 2003, p. 148.

⁴⁷ The final form of lines 51-52 is problematic. The Arden Shakespeare edition reads: "for affection / (Master of passion) sways it". The Oxford Shakespeare edition reads: "for affection, / Mistress of passion, sways it". In the end, the general meaning is not considerably affected, and it could be

Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
 Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
 Why he a harmless necessary cat,
 Why he a woollen bagpipe, but of force
 Must yield to such inevitable shame
 As to offend, himself being offended:
 So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
 More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
 I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
 A losing suit against him. Are you answered?⁴⁸

Shylock chooses his bond because it is as if he were paying to have something he hates eliminated. It is our affection, he states, that controls our states of mind, and our affections are ruled by that which we like or loathe. The answer to the question why he chooses his bond over the money is that he hates Antonio. In conclusion: “By my soul I swear / There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me. I stay here on my bond”⁴⁹. There is no kind of reasoning that would annul his hatred.

During the trial, Bassanio seems to become very emotional and says:

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 thy life.
 I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil, to deliver you.⁵⁰

Portia seems to get upset (as we see in her comment that immediately follows Bassanio’s lines) and the sequence ensues, in which she does not seem to mind Antonio’s death anymore:

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.
 SHYLOCK Most learned judge! A sentence: come, prepare.⁵¹

phrased as: affection holds power over passion. There remains a distinction to be made between affection and passion. According to Mahood, there was a “distinction made in Elizabethan psychology between ‘affection’ and ‘passion’. Affection is a strong sensuous response, either of attraction or revulsion, which is thought of as arousing passion – that is, disturbing the mind. . . . Given this distinction, it is just possible to make sense of lines 51-2 as they stand, by taking ‘Masters of passion’ to refer to the various affections, or antipathies, that Shylock has listed” (MAHOOD, 2003, p. 179). The point Shylock is trying to make seems to be that that affection, that which controls the disturbance of the mind, is guided by either liking or loathing.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 149, 4.1.44-62.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 156, 4.1.236-38.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 158, 4.1.278-83.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 158, 4.1.295-300.

However, she almost immediately changes her mind: “Tarry a little”⁵². Portia seems to have gotten upset with Bassanio’s comment on his love toward Antonio, and, being angry, she would temporarily agree with Shylock; but just when Shylock is about to butcher Antonio, she has a sudden change of heart. Shortly after, there comes Shylock’s “I am content”. What is it with these abrupt changes? Portia’s case does not render her an implausible character. Portia, being smart as she is, probably changes her mind by quickly acknowledging that Antonio is too “good” a man to be killed. “Good” here in the sense that Shylock uses it:

SHYLOCK Antonio is a good man –
 BASSANIO Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
 SHYLOCK Ho no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.⁵³

By good, “Shylock means ‘financially sound’, but in a conflict of values typical of the play Bassanio takes the word to mean ‘honourable’ (...) [sufficient means] (...) security enough in normal circumstances”⁵⁴; “‘good’ and ‘sufficiency’ have become synonymous for Shylock”⁵⁵. Portia says that she would never “repent for doing good”⁵⁶. She probably realizes that Antonio would keep being a “good” friend to her husband – which is actually confirmed by Antonio’s lines in the last scene, quoted above. There is no “goodness” either in Antonio or in Portia: they both help people they are interested in out of sexual or economic interests.

Regarding the conflict between Antonio and Shylock in the play, Bloom states that the

antipathy between Antonio and Shylock transcends Jew baiting; Gratiano is an instance of that Christian sport, but Antonio cannot be let off so easily. His ambivalence, like Shylock’s, is murderous, and unlike Shylock’s, it is successful, for Antonio does end Shylock the Jew, and gives us Shylock the New Christian. (...) Shakespearean ambivalence (...) diverts self-hatred into hatred of the other, and associates the other with lost possibilities of the self. (...) It is horrible to say it, but the broken New Christian Shylock is preferable to a successful butcher of a Shylock, had Portia not thwarted him. What would be left for Shylock after hacking up Antonio? What is left for Antonio after crushing Shylock? In Shakespearean ambivalence, there can be no victories.⁵⁷

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 159, 4.1.301.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 83, 1.3.11-14.

⁵⁴ M. M. Mahood, 2003, p. 83.

⁵⁵ John Brown, 2000, p. 22.

⁵⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 140, 3.4.10.

⁵⁷ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 189-90.

Antonio and Shylock's self-hatred are directed toward one another. In this sense, if one of them dies, the other loses his *raison d'être*. Shylock's conversion can be understood as a form of salvation since it seems to be the least worst scenario. Antonio demands that Shylock give half his belongings to his newly-wed daughter and be converted to Christianity.⁵⁸ Shylock accepts, saying: "I am content". Shylock's soul-crushing conversion seems to be preferable to the destruction that would ensue had his revenge against Antonio taken place. As Bloom reminds us, we "need always to keep reminding ourselves that he is a comic villain"⁵⁹. Shylock is hated by the all the other characters, including his own daughter. He, according to Bloom, "is one man against a city"⁶⁰. Therefore, his conversion, especially to Shakespeare's audience at the time, is to be perceived as deliverance rather than destruction, even though there be some pathos in Shylock since half his belongings, earned through work, are taken from him, as well as his undergoing forced conversion. Furthermore, although Antonio strikes us as a philanthropist (since he redirects Shylock's payment from him to Jessica), we must not forget that Jessica and her husband are part of Portia's group, to which Antonio belongs. Bloom argues that Portia's "quality of mercy cheerfully tricks Shylock out of his life's savings in order to enrich her friends"⁶¹. But there is also the disheartening disappointment of Antonio. We know that he is sexually interested in Bassanio, but the relationship cannot be consummated. In the end, both Antonio and Shylock end up paying for the happiness of the young group of characters. Although Bassanio feels guilty he uses Antonio both financially and sexually – as he himself says: "I once did lend my body for his wealth"⁶² – and Portia uses Shylock to enrich their group of young folks. Salvation comes at a cost.

Bloom also argues that "Shakespeare's Shylock, proud and fierce Jew, scarcely would have preferred Christianity to death"⁶³. Is Shylock's conversion worse than death? What is the significance of faith? Spiritually, in the sense of providing meaning for actions, faith is relevant. It is a psychological mechanism that seems to maintain mental or psychic stability, but what is its objective relevance? Antonio and the others do not seem to hate Shylock because of his religious faith, but for his attitude toward money. Is the conversion spiritually, i.e., subjectively, relevant? Is

⁵⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 161, 4.1.377-83.

⁵⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2010, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 190.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 1998, p. 177.

⁶² William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 176, 5.1.249.

⁶³ Harold Bloom, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2010, p. 2.

Shylock going to change his actual faith by outwardly acting like a Christian? Lancelot seems to answer this question best with sharp irony: “we were Christians enow⁶⁴ before, e’en as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs; if we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money”⁶⁵. As Bloom explains,

Shylock is massively, frighteningly sincere and single-minded. He never acts a part: he is Shylock. Though this endows him with immense expressive force, it also makes him dreadfully vulnerable, and inevitably metamorphoses him into the play’s scapegoat (...) Portia is the privileged ironist of *The Merchant of Venice*, but she becomes a brutal ironist at Shylock’s expense.⁶⁶

This characteristic of scapegoating is what approximates comic villains, and specially Shylock, to tragic heroes: “Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy. *The Merchant of Venice* seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance”⁶⁷. Shylock’s ambivalence puts him right on the blurred border existing between a comic villain and a tragic hero, but, in the end, his villainy does not prevail and salvation is achieved since bloodshed is avoided.

5. The comic sense of *The Merchant of Venice*: the intended meaning of the play

According to Harold Goddard, on 22, July 1598, James Roberts published the play in the Stationers’ Register with an alternative name: *The Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce*: “Here is testimony that already in Shakespeare’s own day the public was puzzled by the title of the play and had substituted for, or added to, the author’s another title more expressive of what seemed to be its leading interest and central figure”⁶⁸. As Bloom explained, however, the central conflict of the play is that between Shylock and Antonio, which is solved,

⁶⁴ “Enough” (MAHHOD, 2003, p. 107).

⁶⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 143, 3.5.16-20

⁶⁶ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 183.

⁶⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 2000, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 1, p. 190.

as I explained, by Portia through a peripeteia. Hence, “Shakespeare’s comedy is Portia’s play, and not Shylock’s”⁶⁹.

Laurie Maguire states that “*Merchant of Venice* is a deeply uncomedic comedy, and the disturbing tone is partly linked to the characters’ financial focus”⁷⁰. Moreover, the “last scene is unusually private and antisocial. It is also indifferent to preceding events: the characters indulge in bawdy jokes, oblivious to the fact that they have just destroyed a man. The final impression is one of individuals rather than society, and of flawed individuals at that”⁷¹. What the play does, however, is precisely to conceal this – even if such concealment be not perfect and provide a few glances of the insides here and there – so as to maintain it as a pure comedy. Therefore, I would argue for the opposite conclusion regarding the final scene: the play conveys a comic sense precisely because of the reasons indicated by Maguire. At best, the play is an uncomic comedy, but I still insist that it is a pure comedy.

Other critics see the play not exclusively as either a comedy or a tragedy, but as a tragicomedy. Carlos Ludwig argues that

The final act’s effacing effect creates feelings of discontent and anxiety in the audience, in the readers and in the characters of the play. Thus, such feelings are not fortuitously produced. Shakespeare actually created ambiguities that puzzle the audience and unleash disquieting and anguishing feelings after someone sees or reads the play. At the end of the play, the audience may feel constrained and uneasy of what happened to Shylock. Such feelings are the obscure uneasiness we may feel, because, at first, we laugh at Shylock’s comic repetitive talking and then, reversibly, we eye-witness the cruelties that the Christians had impinged on him.⁷²

This happens not because the play is a tragicomedy, but because the dark elements of the character are omitted. As Ludwig argues, there are ambiguities that puzzle the audience, but these do not necessarily evoke a tragic meaning. Portia’s reasons for helping Antonio remain ambiguous or unclear, which is a sense that is reinforced by the setting of the last scene. The only concrete evidence the play provides is the material gain Portia’s group is awarded by taking down Shylock, who loses all his riches, which are transferred to the members of her party. It would make more sense if Portia had let Antonio be killed since he is her sexual rival, but then she would not be able to take Shylock’s money. Portia gets Shylock’s money for her and her party

⁶⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 197.

⁷⁰ Laurie Maguire, *Studying Shakespeare*, 2004, p. 147.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

⁷² Carlos Ludwig, “Is *The Merchant of Venice* a Comedy or a Tragicomedy?”, 2021, p. 85.

while having to put up with the tradeoff of having Antonio around Bassanio. Salvation is achieved because violence is avoided, but the causes of that salvation are murky and questionable at best. That is why, I argue, the intended comic sense mitigates the negative impressions. Furthermore, Ludwig contends:

The greatest problem of the play that makes uneasy to analyze it as a drama is the fifth act, with its effacing devices and the total forgetfulness of the cruelties that the Christians inflicted upon Shylock. The last act's effect is rather conflicting. The talking about love and romance, music and stars, the reconciliation of the couples Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, who have just quarreled about their giving away their rings are over-determining elements which foreclose the sour effects of the fourth act. (...) Against Shylock's isolation and exclusion is necessary a comic and pretended happy ending to efface the play's sour effects. However, such closure is not dramatically convincing, since the play provokes a sort of bitter feeling at its end, which we try to reject or assimilate. This feeling provoked by such occlusion is disquieting and disturbing. However, some other elements point to sadness and discontent in the last act. Antonio ends the play completely alone. Like Shylock, he continues to be a sort of outcast of the play, a social outcast who is not happy. Likewise, Jessica remains sad and discontent in the final act. The opposing elements – festivity and sadness – have annihilating effects in the audience and the reader. The play's aesthetic effect is thus rather conflicting and anguishing.⁷³

These elements, I argue, are meant to enhance the sense of ambiguity. Shylock's conversion may have been perceived as a negative event even by Shakespeare's audience, but the effect of the final scene soothes that negative effect rather than confound the final meaning of the play, which is comic. Ambiguity can convey both negative and positive meanings. It is usually given a negative connotation because it is associated with confusion, but that depends on perspective. If one wants to be concealed or to conceal something, ambiguity has a positive meaning. Bloodshed had just been averted after all. The comic traits prevail over the tragic ones. The greatest problem of the play is not, as Ludwig suggested, the final scene, but, as Bloom argued, Shylock's consent.

René Girard believes that the “ironic depth in *The Merchant of Venice* results from a tension not between two static images of Shylock, but between those textual features that strengthen and those features that undermine the popular idea of an insurmountable difference between Christian and Jew”⁷⁴. The play, however, as I explained in the second section, is not in ironic mode. It contains instances of irony,

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ René Girard, “To Entrap the Wisest”, 1980, p. 107.

but the whole play is not in an all-encompassing ironic mode, as Girard seems to assume. A suspicion, however, might arise during the trial scene:

BASSANIO 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 thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.
PORTIA Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer.
GRATIANO I have a wife who I protest I love;
I would she were in heaven, so she could
Entreat some power to change this curish Jew.
NERISSA 'Tis well you offer it behind her back;
The wish would make else an unquiet house.
SHYLOCK These be the Christian husbands!⁷⁵

Portia and Nerissa are wearing disguises in this scene. At that moment, Bassanio and Gratiano reveal not to love, or at least not to love enough, their recently married wives. The moment is ironic because Bassanio and Gratiano do not know that Portia and Nerissa are aware of that. The whole play, however, is not in an ironic mode because of Shylock's villainy. Despite his ironic remark regarding the Christian husbands' hypocrisy, his villainy is still prevalent. Shylock might not be the perfect archetype of the comic villain because of his ambivalence, but salvation is met because he is prevented from shedding blood. If his "destruction" through conversion and expropriation as final acts of revenge were necessary, it is another story. Is Portia a hypocrite since she demanded mercy from Shylock but, in the end, took revenge on him? Bloom states that she "is at worst a happy hypocrite, far too intelligent not to see that she is not exactly dispensing Christian mercy"⁷⁶. She might be both, but the truth is that she avoids bloodshed altogether.

Marjorie Garber also indicates that *The Merchant of Venice* is not "festive"⁷⁷ and filled with tragic elements. She argues that there is a certain melancholy or uncomic atmosphere surrounding the play.⁷⁸ However, the atmosphere, I argue, is not uncomic. The meaning of comic salvation, according to Frye, is that "the essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. The normal individual is freed from the bonds of a humorous society, and a normal society is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous

⁷⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2003, p. 158, 4.1.278-91.

⁷⁶ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 1998, p. 178.

⁷⁷ Cf. L. C. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*.

⁷⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, 2004, p. 367-68.

individuals”⁷⁹. Frye’s chief argument about comedy is that “the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world”⁸⁰. Despite all the tragic elements, such as a certain melancholy tone pervading the play, the hatred between Shylock and Antonio, and the conflict of sexual and economic interests among the characters, I argue that the play is a pure comedy – rather than a tragicomedy. Shylock is not a tragic character, a figure of pathos. He may have tragic traits but is still a pure comic villain, and Portia is a pure comic heroine because her actions prevent bloodshed and conceal the ugly truth – the rottenness of the “good” characters – about her party. The intended public meaning of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, is that of a comedy. A denial of such intention may lead to we or ideologically-biased readings of the play.

⁷⁹ Northrop Frye, “The Argument of Comedy”, 2010, p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9-10

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