

Jews, bastards, and black rams (and women): representations of 'otherness' in Shakespearean texts

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the various articulations of 'otherness' in a range of Shakespearean texts, and focuses particularly on those figures, such as 'bastards', 'jews' and 'negros' all of whom stand in a constitutive structural opposition to the dominant discourses of texts such as *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello*. The position that these types occupy in these plays are not identical to each other but structurally similar, and this also allows us to establish a connection with the structure of gender politics as they are articulated here. A distinction is initially drawn between a modern reading of 'otherness' of the sort to be found in the ending of Julie Taymor's film *Titus* with its Levinasian echoes, and the more stringent process of marginalisation that takes place historically. Each 'type' is presented in these texts as a challenge to the phantasmagorical unity that the dominant late Elizabethan or Early Jacobean culture weaves for itself, and the process of marginalisation discloses a series of tensions for which dramatic (and fictional) aesthetic, political, and social solutions are sought.

I begin with an ending: to be precise, the ending of one of Shakespeare's earliest plays *Titus Andronicus*, and with Julie Taymor's film which reads the ending in a remarkable way. In Shakespeare's text the captured black Moor Aaron appears at the opening of Act 5 and is about to be hanged with his bastard infant son whom he has fathered on Tamora, Queen of the Goths. Before the execution can take place, Aaron pleads with his captor Lucius:

Lucius, save the child,
And bear it from me to the empress.
If thou do this, I'll show thee wondrous things
That highly may advantage thee to hear.
(5.1.53-56)

The late Kenneth Muir (1972:20) thought the figure of Aaron “splendidly theatrical” and that throughout the play Shakespeare “seems to have hoped to arouse commiseration as well as admiration by means of effective oratory.” Perhaps we might be persuaded that this moment reveals a humanity in the villain absent up to this point, although an attentive reader of the New Testament book of Revelations might well detect echoes of the fornicatrice Jezebel (Revelations 3:22-23) and the beast Satan himself marked here not with a number but by his colour (Revelations 13:16-18), and whose concern is not to have his son sacrificed for the benefit of humanity but preserved. Aaron’s ‘revelations’ cast him in the role of ‘beast’ and ‘devil’, indeed he identifies himself with the figure of Satan in the Book of Revelations:

If there be devils, would I were a devil,
To live and burn in everlasting fire,
So I might have your company in hell
But to torment you with my bitter tongue
(5.1.147-50)

Aaron is gagged and he and his bastard son are taken off at the end of the scene. Two scenes later Aaron is brought onto the stage again, but we hear no more of his bastard son. He is permitted one short speech in which he alludes obliquely to his offspring: “I am no baby, I, that with base prayers / I should repent the evils I have done” (5.3.184-85), and the attention then turns to Lucius’s pronouncement of the fate of the body of Tamora: “Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity” (5.3.198-99). This is the Q1 (1594) reading of the final lines of the play, but Q2 (1600), Q3(1611) and F(1623) extend this by four further lines:

See Iustice done on *Aaron* that damn’d Moore,
From whom our heauy happes had their beginning:
Then afterwards, to Order well the State,
That like Euent, may ne’re it ruinate.

I leave aside the historical irony that undermines Lucius’s closing remarks, since the Roman ‘State’ was about to be ‘ruinated’ by the very Goths that are deployed to counterbalance the threat from within from Tamora and Aaron. Aaron is not forgotten in the early texts that follow Q1, but in no early version do we know what happens to his bastard son.

In her recent film version of *Titus* Julie Taymor has a solution. The events of the final scene are telescoped, and the infant remains to be taken up by Lucius who walks slowly from the amphitheatre, where the play begins

and ends, out towards a breaking but still menacing dawn. In an interview with Bill Moyers, broadcast on American Prime-time TV, on 20 September 2001, Taymor had this to say about her changing of the ending of the play:

There is the child of the enemy. Aaron the Moor, has a baby. Normally I think in any normal culture, the baby would have been confined or killed. Because, of course, as these children, if their parents are slaughtered they're going to grow up and avenge their parents and their culture. But I had a different ending. This is the ending that I would hope for, which is I took my 12 year old boy because the whole sequence is told through the eyes of Titus' grandson, the whole movie I see through these eyes. At the end of the film on his own after he's seen all the slaughter, after he's been complicit. He was also part of the vengeance act, he took this child, this black child, out of a cage – because I had it in a cage. They wouldn't kill the child, but keep it in a cage, his parents, the young boy's father. But he himself on his own will took the child out and held his enemy and moved out of the coliseum... And he exited. Now he's going to a bleak landscape. There's water. There's the beginning of a sunrise, but he's taking the enemy out of the coliseum. When we opened on Christmas Day 1999, that's what I hoped for. I hoped that when we went to the next millennium that there would be that, that the children... And I believe there has to be children... the children have to start to question because they're inculcated.

I quote her comment almost in full because the context of the events of 11 September in New York allow her to revisit the ending of *Titus*, although behind that re-visitation is a philosophical position that in some respects challenges much of what I am about to say. Lucius's embracing of 'otherness', his taking of responsibility in a manner that in Shakespeare's text is unthinkable, allows him to expose himself to alterity. But even more than that: the relationship with Aaron's child is Levinas (1989:108-109) might have called a "relationship with the other, the one-for-the-other" that threatens the very notion of a logocentric 'consciousness' that would re-assert an egotistic mastery over that which is exterior to it. Taymor rejects the allegation that she had been 'sentimental' for a much more radical position that challenges the short-lived, and consequently, ironically-framed, imperialism, realised imperfectly in what Bate (1995:97) asserts was "the working manuscript" that lay behind Q1, and made more explicit in the three following texts, of the ending of Shakespeare's play.

I use this example to lead into a discussion that aims to link together three Shakespearean plays, *The Merchant of Venice* (1597), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), and *Othello* (1604), although I am aware that some of the issues that I want to raise are present, in one form or another in a much wider range of Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean texts of the period. My concern with 'otherness' is also a concern with the structural dynamics of

marginalisation. I emphasise the issue of structure here not because I want to dwell exclusively on the formal properties of these texts, but because the dramatic, cultural, and historical tensions that they disclose suggest certain homologies. I do not wish to argue that the marginalised figure of the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* occupies the same position as the figure of the 'bastard' in *Much Ado About Nothing*, or that of the Moor in *Othello*, or that all these positions can somehow be collapsed into that of the marginalised figure of 'woman'. However, in a provocative study of *Othello*, Fiedler (1973:166-67) draws attention to the waiting-woman Emilia's "full-scale defence of female infidelity as woman's sole weapon in what she takes to be the endless warfare of the sexes." Emilia, he says, "speaks from the point of view of the oppressed rather than the oppressor," and this leads him to draw a telling conclusion: "Exploited outsiders tend to resemble each other strangely, so that women and Jews fall together not only in Shakespeare but in the imagination of the Western world as a whole." That in 1973 Fiedler should find this homology all but inexplicable – his resort to the adverb 'strangely' discloses an anxiety – is an indication of precisely how far Shakespeare Studies has come in the last 30 years. We no longer find this resemblance 'strange'; indeed, we are more inclined to see in this connection a series of fundamental political tensions that intersect with questions of genre, aesthetics, and that body of collective, ideologically over-determined fantasies within whose powerful aegis that which is constructed is represented as 'natural'. In their articulations of these cultural tensions, in the discourses used to represent them, in the disposition of antagonistic forces, and in the artistic solutions that these plays pose, we overhear, not only our own voices, but also those of an historically distant culture in its attempts to grapple with (perhaps resolve, even) discursively the problems posed by a multi-faceted 'otherness'. At the same time we need to remind ourselves of that double-edged Foucauldian maxim whereby discourse (Foucault 1981:101) can be "both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy." In short, 'otherness' may be both an *effect* of power, but it may also provide a site of *resistance* to it. Marginalisation may be both a consequence *and* a constitutive feature of the assertion of what we might call a symbolic centrality; but in any event, what this emphasises is what Foucault (1981:95) calls "the strictly relational character of power relationships." Part of the argument I want also to advance in relation to these three plays is that there are certain issues that they all engage with although at different levels and in different dramatic and cultural registers. Let me begin with what has become for us the most difficult case: difficult because we cannot easily separate our responses to the play from some of the horrifying consequences of the history of the last half-century.

The Merchant of Venice (1597) presents us with a series of thematic problems that, in a world where questions of racial diversification and their political consequences are now more sharply in focus than ever, threatens to collapse the historical differences between late sixteenth-century England and our own time. At one level, we might say that the economic world that the play shapes anticipates the one we now live in, although there are certain dangers in positing an unproblematical historical continuity of this kind. Perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* requires a context. There are three possible contexts: firstly, the context of genre that relates the play to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) which, according to one editor of the play, N.W. Bawcutt (1978:1), was revived in 1594 at the height of the scandal involving Queen Elizabeth's 'Jewish' physician, Dr Lopez who was executed for treason on 7 June, 1594, and there were 8 performances of Marlowe's play in 1596. A second context would be the 'history' of Venice and its appeal to Elizabethan sensibilities. In his essay on "The idea of Venice in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson," Salingar (1993:173) argues that Shakespeare, and later Jonson, "made little or no dramatic use of the city's reputation for visual splendour"; rather, he argues, they concentrate

on the idea of Venice as an aristocratic republic and cosmopolitan centre of capitalism, with her exceptional freedom for strangers and her exceptional attraction for travellers in search of sophistication. The image of Venetian society in their three plays is a refracted projection of London.

Much of the evidence for this is derived usually from plays themselves, and also from accounts from travellers such as Thomas Coryat which, for the most part, ante-cede the plays. What in Coryat's view (1611:160) was "this thrise worthy citie: the fairest Lady, yea the richest Paragon and Queene of Christendome," was already balanced early in the reign of Elizabeth by William Thomas's less besotted, more analytical account in which Venetian commercial practice had already begun to supersede military force as an instrument of political subjugation. In his *Historye of Italye* (1561) Thomas observed:

For sins Constantinople was gotten by the Turkes, theyr dominion hath decreased, both by reason (as the same goeth) they practise with money, to bie and sel countreys, peace and warre: than to exercyse needes of armes: and for that most Venetians are at these daies become better merchauntes than men of warre.

This perception informs both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, two plays which, taken together, comprise the full spectrum of the late

Elizabethan concern with what we might think of as both a geographical and a moral (not to say, religious) location.

In a wide-ranging account of Shakespeare's concern with 'the Jewish question,' Halpern (1997:185) suggests that in addition to what he calls "a certain taxonomic perplexity about whether the Jews were a religious, racial, cultural, or national entity," it is necessary now to "add the belief that they actually may be an economic one." In Shakespeare's play the figure of the Jew looms large because, although a marginalised and demonised figure, his stance in relation to the Venetians in the play is one of symbolic centrality. So much so, that it becomes possible, through the play's unwitting deployment of the *structures* of prejudice, to draw some conclusions about how they operate in a society famed during the Renaissance for its liberal tolerance of different ethnic groups. In Shakespeare's play the difference that the Jew represents is not so much 'real' as phantasmatic, and we need to understand it in terms of the capacity of the Elizabethan imagination to project its anxieties onto alien groups and geographical spaces. The Christian hostility to Judaism is coupled with an acknowledgement of the necessity of employing 'Jewish' financial practices to underwrite a political economy in which the circulation of investment capital for the purpose of generating profit was becoming a necessity. We have here a classic instance of the tension that arises when the social relations of production (and consumption) gradually get out of synchronisation with developing forces of production. In his book on *Racism* Memmi (2000:52-53) observes, in connection with the astonishing mythological claims that "All Jews have syphilis and the women are said to bite off the sex of their lover," that

What is remarkable is that these disparaging myths, whether funny or not, always devolve to the same basic themes: money, power, and sex, which reveals the preoccupations of the ones who impute the myth. Racism is a mode of behaviour, but it is also a discourse, the presentation of a case, both as an accusation and a self-exoneration.

If Memmi is correct, and I think he is, then the question we need to ask ourselves is why should such fantasies emerge at particular historical moments? What kind of threat does the figure of the Jew present in a play such as *The Merchant of Venice*, and what might the need for a kind of collective 'self-exoneration' be in this case? Arendt (1958:20,27) connects the birth of anti-Semitism with the growth of the nation state and the transformation of the role of the Jewish financier, unfettered by the allegiance to any state, from one of personal provider of money for an aristocratic master involving the "handling of private business" that was

“unrelated to political considerations” or that of a nomadic outsider inadvertently caught up in the political retreat into an ethos of competing nationalisms. This analysis does not quite square with the theatrical representations of the figure of the Jew, although texts such as Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* appear to be aware of the role of the Jew, in this case Barrabas, as a source of State finance. It is Barrabas’s contradictory rootlessness *and* commitment to a geographical location, Malta and his adherence to a Machiavellian ethic that he shares with his Christian adversary Ferneze, that makes him a complex source of demonic energy in the play. His activities ultimately vindicate (though how ironically is open to question) the operations of a Christian providence. The subjugation of the Turk Calymath restores Christian power in Malta and Ferneze’s Machiavellian tactics turn out to be, not the result of accident or pagan destiny, but divinely authorised:

So, march away, and let due praise be given
Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven.
(5.1.122-3)

Shakespeare’s Jew is drawn a little differently. His name, ‘Shylock’, may, in fact be of English origin, as Furness (1888:ix-x) suggested in the Variorum edition of the play,¹ and he inhabits a ‘house’ in Venice. His most virulent opponent is Antonio, the ‘merchant’ of Venice whom he berates for calling him “misbeliever, cut-throat dog” whom he accuses of spitting “upon my Jewish gaberdine” (1.3.105-106), and who admits himself that he is “as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too” (1.3.125-26). The source of the antagonism is that Antonio has ‘rated’ his adversary “About my money and my usances” (1.3.102-103), betraying a tension that is the precise opposite of the myth of Venice as a multi-cultural republic.

But the antagonism is more complex than that, as the textual evidence of their radically opposed attitudes to the metaphor of ‘generation’ makes clear. Antonio’s dedication to the lordly Bassanio in the opening scene of the play is much more than a business relation: “My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlock’d to your occasions” (1.1.138-39). Antonio’s ‘purse’ is the receptacle in which his money is kept, but it is also his scrotum, the biological receptacle of the means of generation. In a reading that firmly resists reducing the play to a heterosexist norm, Alan Sinfield (1996:124) has suggested that “the mercenary nature of Bassanio’s courtship (...) allows him (Antonio) to value their love, and gives him a crucial role as banker of the enterprise.” Another possible reading might be

¹ This suggestion was recently corroborated by Stephen Orgel in a lecture entitled “Shylock’s family” at the World Shakespeare Congress in Valencia (April, 2001).

to link this display of intimacy with the demands of a homosociality that articulates male bonding erotically, while at the same time being forced to acknowledge an instrumental use of women. Sonnet 20 articulates the complexities of the economy of divided desire perfectly; here the male object of the narrator's attention has "A woman's face with nature's own hand painted" (l.1), a 'gentle heart' that is not subject to allegedly female (and also fashionable) change, eyes which are windows of the soul, "less false in rolling, / Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth" (ll.5-6), and an authoritative demeanour destined to exert control. Of course, it is biology that frustrates the narrator's passion since the act of generation interferes with the process of homosocial bonding and demands another, complementary form of attachment: "But since she (Nature) pricked thee out for women's pleasure, / Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure" (ll.13-14). It is almost as though the woman is perceived in the poem as something added to the masculine 'principal', the usurious 'profit' that is both necessary and, in mythological terms, fraught with danger.

Whereas for Antonio the process of generating wealth is articulated as being as 'natural' as breeding – and in this case Bassanio's pursuit of wealth is naturalised as his pursuit of Portia – the Jew's generation of wealth is 'sterile' and perverse, and depends for its explanation on a deception, an interference with nature:

And when the work of generation was
Between these woolly breeders in the act,
The skilful shepherd pill'd me certain wands.
And in the doing of the deed of kind
He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,
Who then conceiving, did in eaning time
Fall parti-colour'd lambs, and those were Jacob's
(1.3.77-83)

Antonio wishes to recuperate this Old Testament narrative for a mercantilist ethic that attributes the ultimate responsibility for nature's 'skill' to heaven: "A thing not in his (Jacob's) power to bring to pass, / But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven" (1.3.87-88). It is a short step from this allegation to the claim that Shylock is "An evil soul" who invokes "holy witness": "A goodly apple rotten at the heart. / O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" (1.3.96-97). Shylock's narrative is an attempt to justify himself; Antonio's rejection of it is couched in terms that re-stage the Fall (aligning the devil with deception and temptation), and is designed to undermine the foundation of his adversary's identity. Such utterances provide the justification for the Jew's suffering as a punishment associated both with the biblical Fall from grace, and the historic crime that made

redemption possible, and for continuing to usurp divine power through the process of making money 'breed'. Antonio reads Shylock's narrative allegorically and asks "Was this inserted to make interest good? / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" (1.3.89-90); the Jew's response is "I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast" (1.3.91). Implicit in Antonio's question is a firm sense of the inherent illegitimacy, and animality, of usurious practice, locating it at a lower level in the established hierarchy of Christian values. The 'gold' and 'silver' here allegorised negatively as 'ewes and rams' will later be displaced into the contents of the caskets that two of Portia's suitors will choose. But Morocco and Arragon will later be deceived by appearances and they will mistake the substance of money for *real* worth. We can see how nervous the play is at the prospect of the circulation of a commodity that heralds the separation of 'worth' from the act of exchange: a signifier in danger of losing contact altogether with a stable signified. 'Interest' in the play, therefore, is articulated as a deception, a gesture of false friendship, and a mark of the sterility that threatens to destroy society; it is the empty sign, the representation of a representation. Is it an accident in the play that the Jew should insist upon the provisions of the 'scripted' bond and upon a bizarre equation between writing and flesh, brought into a symbolic alignment with each other? If Antonio can ridicule Shylock's account of parturition, then the Jew's 'revenge is to strike, literally, at the 'heart' of Christianity. We will encounter a version of this opposition later in *Othello* in connection with another representative of Venetian 'otherness', when Iago incites Brabantio with the words: "Your heart is burst, you have lost your soul, / Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.86-88).

The echo in *Othello* of the moment I have been glossing in the earlier play is, to my mind, striking and suggests a connection between the wilful Desdemona and Shylock's daughter, Jessica who is the model for her later, tragic counterpart. But there is also another form of dramatic economy at work in *The Merchant of Venice*. The wilful daughter who is, at one level, the *effect* of her father's deviancy becomes the instrument of his Christian subjugation and the testimony of his conversion will be the role he will henceforth have to play as a Christian patriarch. Viewed in this context Shylock's role is less that of a scapegoat than a displacement of Venetian anxieties. His historic destiny is to be converted in what is a war between Christian and infidel. But the challenge he mounts provides both the test and the justification for Christianity itself. The Jew's 'suffering' is not an agony that he will undertake as a precondition of salvation but justice, of a decidedly Christian kind, for the crimes (many of them imaginary) of which he stands accused. But there is something even more perplexing about this in that once we begin to examine the *structural* relationships that prevail in

Venice, we uncover a disturbing anamorphism. Venice is and is not England. Elizabethan sympathies with the fiscal dealings of the Venetians are offset by the inadvertent disclosure that Venetian Christianity is imperialistic in its designs: conquest, subjugation, financial domination, are its objectives which it habitually mis-recognises in the idealistic domestic discourses of Christian patriarchy, courtship, marriage, and the theatrical genre that sustains them, comedy. Rather than think of there being, in Greenblatt's (1990:43) terms, "obscure links between Jew and Gentile" which compels Shakespeare's audience "to transform its disturbing picture of sameness into a reassuring perception of difference" that difference is constitutive in that Jewish and Christian identities in the play are mutually dependent upon each other. The Jew's fiscal dealings which have serious religious and moral implications for the circulation of capital in the play, challenge the discourses of a fundamentally homosocial mercantilism that depends for its efficacy upon a series of patriarchal domestic supports that theatrical art validates.

I want now to turn to the second category that is indicated in my title, that of 'the bastard' and let me attempt a tendentious bridge between *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. I have in mind the episode when the indistinguishable duo of Solanio and Salarino / Salerio confront Shylock with the elopement of his daughter. Jessica is, Shylock, asserts, "damn'd" for her elopement and there occurs the following exchange:

Shy. My own flesh and blood to rebel!
Sol. Out upon it old carrion! rebels it as these years?
Shy. I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.
Sal. There is more difference between thy flesh and hers,
than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods,
than there is between red wine and Rhenish:
(3.1.31-36)

Two allegations seem to be rolled into one here: the strong hint of proscribed domestic sex, and the claim that Shylock is 'black' and that Jessica is not his daughter. Salarino's insult, however, accuses the *father* of being illegitimate, and this gives added point to Shylock's conversion later in the play. But it also recalls, in part, the episode from *Titus Andronicus* with which I began, in which the illegitimate black infant discloses, even as it embodies, the sexual transgression of its parents while at the same time emphasising a polarity of 'black' and 'white' that according to Kim Hall (1995:9) "is most often worked out in representations of black men and

white women". It will surface once more a little later in *Othello* where the overbearing patriarch is exchanged for the 'black' husband.

For Neill (2000:129-30) the bastard in Renaissance drama "is habitually figured as a creature who reveals the 'unnaturalness' of his begetting by the monstrous unkindness of his nature (...) whose mixed nature is expressed in an idiom that systematically subverts the 'natural' decorums of kind." Neill (2000:142) goes on to comment on the one bastard in Shakespeare, the figure of Faulconbridge in *King John* who is rendered admirable by the fact that in the play "the legitimacy of all claimants to the throne is under challenge." Without a 'name' Faulconbridge's only recourse to power is through possession of land; his honour is 'new-made' and as such it unpicks the precarious order. Faulconbridge is a forerunner of Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and, of course of Edmund in *King Lear*. Neill (2000:131,147) is surely right to see the figure of the 'bastard' as a "special class of transgressive male" who is marginalised as part of "the attempt to define and preserve a certain kind of social order", but whose role is "by definition (...) to challenge that order." But the question arises about to what extent this was a real or an illusory challenge.

In his book *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* (1996) Richard Adair notes that while illegitimacy rates piqued during the last decade of the sixteenth century the figure never rose beyond 4.5%, and in the South East of England it was never above 1.9% for the whole of the decade from 1591-1600. By the time that Jonson's *Volpone* appeared in 1605 the figure of the 'bastard' had become one of a select group of outsiders whose very existence had become entrenched in those phantasmagoric processes of demonisation that we might now read as an index of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean cultural anxiety; Corvino's urgent request to Mosca regarding Volpone's progeny: "Has he children?" is met with the following response (Parker 1983:181):

Bastards,
Some dozen or more that he begot on beggars,
Gypsies, and Jews, and black-moors, when he was drunk.
(1.5.42-45)

These are translated into "the dwarf, the fool, the eunuch" of which 'family' Volpone is "the true father" (1.5.47-48). Here deformity is naturalised as the *effect* of illegitimacy, thus establishing a causal relation between morality, the laws governing sexual activity, biology, and, of course, dramatic characterisation. In *King Lear* (1605-606), a play very close in time to *Volpone*, Gloucester's 'bastard' son Edmund rails against the law

that excludes him from a place within the social order: "Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me?" (1.2.2-4). A little later in the same scene Edmund demystifies the projection of human sexual transgression onto supernatural agency in his decrying of "the excellent foppery of the world." The 'bastard's' *energy* derives from the very activity of illicit generation (an awareness of the materiality of sexual activity), and a keen sense of exclusion, from a positioning which marks as marginal all those forces that contribute to the definition of order itself. As the 'other' of a regulated sexual activity which is the key to the principle of social order, bastardy challenges a carefully circumscribed and heavily policed set of practices that function to legitimate the securing and transferring of the material supports of patriarchal power. Neill (2000:131) enumerates a series of 'bastard' figures in the drama of the period, but he distinguishes between the *historical* evidence of illegitimacy, particularly from within the aristocracy, which indicates both a negligible illegitimacy rate accompanied by "a large degree of practical tolerance" on the one hand, and what he calls "the disruptive power of the bastard figure in the drama", for whose "transgressive potential we need to look beyond the more or less rational realms of politics, moral judgement, and social regulation into regions of more obscure anxiety" on the other. The two spheres are not, of course, unconnected, since what is at issue here is the shared fantasy-life of Early-Modern culture in which ideology (and aesthetics) prescribed (and sometimes challenged) those social boundaries which effectively regulated the behaviour of gendered human 'subjects'.

This discussion brings us a little closer to *Much Ado About Nothing* and to some understanding of why the figure of the 'bastard' Don John should loom as a threat to the comic harmony of the play. It will be obvious from what I have said so far that the discursive field within which 'bastardy' is articulated during the period is causally connected with the matter of the shaping of female subjectivity. It is the consequence of the violation of the marriage-bed, and involves, as Neill (200:134) correctly observes, a process of defilement or pollution. *Much Ado About Nothing* begins with a victory over the bastard brother of Don Pedro, Don John. It is, of course, a symbolic victory designed to constrain the latter's anarchic energy. That energy derives its source from unrestrained sexual activity associated in the play with a wilful individuality. There is an initial recognition here, as elsewhere, in Shakespeare that this energy derives from a potentially uncontrollable *desire*. The sexually frustrated Portia admits as much early on in *The Merchant of Venice* when she recognises that the 'blood' may disregard legal constraint, with the result that the source of her frustration is the powerful patriarchal prohibition imposed upon her: "so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father; is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot

choose one, nor refuse none?" (1.2.23-26) This problem in *The Merchant of Venice* emerges in a range of Shakespearean comedies, but is of particular significance in *Much Ado* where the daughter Hero follows the path that patriarchy maps out for her, but where her cousin Beatrice (who is, significantly, fatherless) insists upon making a choice for herself. To have no choice in this play is to place Hero at the mercy of patriarchy itself that effectively textualises the female body. The well-known pun in the play's title on 'noting' and 'nothing' seems to me a brilliant encapsulation of that process, where 'noting' is both symbolising and signifying (a kind of 'writing') and 'nothing' is the groundless substance of female chastity whose materiality resides entirely in the practice of signification. This is, of course, something that the cynical misogynist Iago recognises in *Othello* when he persuades the hero that female 'honour' is an illusion: "an essence that's not seen, / They have it very oft that have it not." (4.1.16-17). Hero's plight, which is engineered by Don John, articulates in the play a patriarchal logic that assumes bastardy to be the effect of female promiscuity. And in a play where romantic attachments can be engineered using the very same forms of deception that can divide potential marriage partners, the 'much ado' circulates around a form of desire that has anarchic potential and requires some form of social regulation.

Female 'honour' in the play is inscribed within a constellation of discursive practices that can transform masculine sexual desire in to a carefully circumscribed text; Claudio does more than mediate his "soft and delicate desires" for Hero through a ritualised language that Don Pedro immediately identifies:

Thou wilt be like a lover presently,
And tire the hearer with a book of words.
(1.1 286-7)

In Benedick's more cynical formulation a little later: "now is he turned orthography – his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes" (2.3.20-21). This is particularly ironical in a play in which the 'married' woman, Leonato's wife Innogen, who appears in two scenes, is silent; it is even more ironical in that this very discourse, later in the play, reduces the object of Claudio's amorous attentions to a condition that imitates 'death'; and what is even more ironical is that the most voluble female in the play, Beatrice, is herself ultimately reduced to silence by an utterance: "Peace I will stop your mouth" (5.4.97). Both quarto and folio texts ascribe this line to Leonato, which would be appropriate since he has successfully stopped his wife's mouth. Only from Theobald onwards have editors emended this and attributed the line to Benedick. In either case it

makes Beatrice the object of a sentiment that she had herself expressed earlier in the play when Claudio was embarrassed into silence by his mistrust of Don Pedro and Hero: "Speak cousin or, if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let not him speak neither" (2.1.292-93). But, perhaps the greatest irony resides in the fact that the 'bastard', the very cause of the misreadings that occur here and later in the play, should characterise himself as a figure who is "not of many words" (1.1.146).

But, of course, the 'bastard' is already a signifying body, who, like Aaron's son in the earlier play, bears the 'stamp' and the 'seal' of his parentage (*TA*. 4.2.71). He is already the articulation of an explicitly political, and implicitly political, anarchy. If the bastard is 'nothing', the *filiius nullius* of legal discourse, he is also that non-identity in a society which is caught in the contradictory process of 'naming' as a necessary step towards self-identity, but forced to disclose, time and time again, the differential mechanisms of its own signifying practices.

Insofar as we are invited in the play to think of the potential for 'deformity' that inhabits linguistic practice, then Don John becomes a kind of virus that infects language and society, an unruly excess that resides at the core of meaning that the symbolic order of Messina wrestles to control. At one end of the social spectrum we have the figure of the bastard who violently challenges all of those domestic and public institutions that comprise the symbolic order. At the other end of the spectrum we have the hilarious Watch, who, in the figure of Dogberry in particular, attempts to reconstitute the grammar of the language as a mimetic equivalent of the order they are charged with upholding. Deformation at one extreme threatens the social order; at the other extreme it functions to make that threat public. This movement is a mirror image of the centripetal processes of deception as they are made to operate in the play. Don John deceives Claudio into thinking that Hero has been unfaithful to him; in other words, that she has engaged in that allegedly feminine propensity for unrestrained sexual activity that produces bastards. But at the same time, Hero is involved in a plot to bring Benedick and Beatrice together that will depend for its efficacy upon a creative linguistic deformation: "And truly I'll devise some honest slanders / To stain my cousin with: one doth not know / How much an ill word may empoison liking" (3.1.84-6). The claim is that Beatrice "cannot love, / Nor take no shape nor project of affection" because "She is so self-endear'd" (3.1.54-6). In a society where the patriarchal law legitimates and manages (hetero-) sexual desire, Beatrice's resistance is both 'shrewish' and 'individualistic' to the point where it threatens both the internalised emotional structures of affection *and* the objectively constituted order that requires its human subjects to behave in particular ways. In *All's Well That Ends Well* the appropriately named Parolles sums up the debate in his

insistence that "virginity is peevish, proud, idle, made of self-love, which is the most inhibited sin in the canon" (1.1.141-3), and this prompts Helena to articulate a dilemma that frustrated Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and is clearly behind Beatrice's virulent misanthropy: "How might one do, sir, to lose it (virginity) to her own liking?" (1.1.147). To move too far in one direction, and without restraint, runs the risk of producing bastards; to accept uncritically the dictates of patriarchy is to be deprived of choice.

And it is no accident that the mechanism for displaying the risks that are inherent in the complexity of marriage choices in *Much Ado About Nothing* should himself be an *effect* of divorcing desire from those social structures that exist to contain it. Demonised though he is as a malcontent, Don John represents that heteroglossic activity that constantly threatens Messina's precarious attempts to impose a monologic order on its daily activities. He is that constitutive 'otherness' that resides at the very heart of the language of the play that threatens to destabilise signifying practice itself. We have only to look at the devastating textualisation of Hero's body as she stands on the threshold of marriage. Claudio's allegation of infidelity is immediately accepted by Leonato with the extraordinary rhetorical question: "Could she here deny / The story that is printed in her blood?" (4.1.121-2). Hero's very 'blood' – and 'blood' here is used in both its literal and metaphoric senses – is now a narrative, and as if that were not sufficient, he goes on to lament:

I might have said. 'No part of it is mine;
This shame derives itself from unknown loins'?
But mine, and mine I lov'd, and mine I prais'd,
And mine that I was proud on – mine so much
That I myself was to myself not mine,
Valuing of her – why, she, O she is fall'n
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,
And salt too little which may season give
To her foul-tainted flesh.
(4.1.134-43)

So far as I am aware, no account of this episode has emphasised the extent to which Hero is almost reduced at this crucial moment to the same status as the bastard Don John. But because the play is a comedy there is an alternative way of reading Hero's 'body language' that will ultimately restore her to life and reinstate patriarchal authority; the Friar's "Trust not my reading nor my observations, / Which with experimental seal doth warrant / The tenor of my book" (4.1.165-7) opposes ecclesiastical (and by implication patriarchal) authority against the risky democratising potential of

individual interpretation. 'Freedom' in *Much Ado About Nothing* 'deforms' society, but the only way in which the counter-intuitive structures of constraint can negotiate this problem is to position the anxieties that they generates and to subject them to laughter. Insofar as we might say that comedy aims to be therapeutic, then the therapy inheres in a revivification of the phantasy-life of the audience. The besmirched Hero is cleansed of any allegation of promiscuity, and brought back to life as the silent wife at the end of the play whose only words assert her innocence: "One Hero died defil'd, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid" (5.4.63-64). Attention then turns to the loquacious Beatrice and she too is reduced to silence, while the 'cause' of the instability, Don John is, yet again, recaptured and brought under the rule of Law. This symbolic capture, that is also a repetition, forcibly subjugates the disruptive term 'bastard' which will always threaten to return and undo the social formation.

The Merchant of Venice and *Much Ado About Nothing* are in different ways precursors of *Othello* since each play has a particular stake in a shared discursive field, and the intertextual relations between them are complex. In the earliest of these three plays the 'outsider's' involvement in the financial life of Venice functions as part of a series of structural oppositions that disclose both the distributions and the hierarchies of power, while at the same time articulating the psychological investments that each group makes in the state's institutions. In *Much Ado About Nothing* the figure of the 'outsider' presents a different sort of challenge but one that is equally symbolically central to the ways in which Messina defines its institutions and its human subjects; also the way in which the play deals with sexual jealousy indicates the *emotional* investment that patriarchy makes in the social relations it prescribes.

In *Othello* many of these elements are combined in a new synthesis involving the 'black' outsider, a theatrical relation of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* who is also the military defender of the very Venetian values from which his 'race' excludes him. Like the Jew before him, Othello is indispensable to the functioning of the Venetian state, but his appearance renders him an ambivalent figure, an uncomfortable amalgamation of apparent opposites susceptible to vilification from 'indigenous' Venetian subjects. The play exposes the audience to a negative valuation of Othello before he appears, so that Iago's and Roderigo's judgements of him as "the thick lips" (1.1.66), or, even worse:

Even now, very now, an old black ram
Is tugging your white ewe; arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.
(1.1.88-91)

This is part of a dual perspective that strategically foregrounds the nature of judgement itself, and there are a number of occasions when the veracity of the empirical evidence is laid open to question. The explicit ambivalence of Iago: "I am not what I am" (1.1.65) cynically counterbalances the ambivalence of Othello himself. The protagonist, like the Jew before him, is both necessary and demonised, and the trouble arises when that political necessity spills over into more intimate social relations that threaten the patriarchal authority of Venice. Desdemona, like her precursor, Jessica, elopes, and in the context that Iago and Roderigo provide – both of whom have an interest in Othello's actions (Roderigo as a competitor for Desdemona, and Iago as a competitor for the post that Cassio has secured) – her father is persuaded to pre-judge the issue according to an antecedent moral imperative:

It is too true an evil gone she is,
And what's to come of my despised time,
Is nought but bitterness. Now Roderigo,
Where didst thou see her? (O unhappy girl!)
With the Moor say'st thou? (Who would be a father?)
How did'st thou know 'twas she? (O thou deceivest me
Past thought). What said she to you? Get more tapers,
Raise all my kindred, are they married think you?
(1.1.160-67)

Desdemona's action is here regarded as a "treason of the blood" (1.1.169), the very energy, articulated here as political rebellion, that Portia's 'law of the dead father' was designed to curb. But it is a treason whose material effects are devastating. Desdemona has violated those laws devised "for the blood" (*MV* 1.2.17-18) by illicitly aligning herself with one whose complexion and whose 'blood' symbolises the act of rebellion itself. This chain of significations extends back to *The Merchant of Venice* in which Morocco's "shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun" and his 'red' blood (2.1.2,7), is aligned with the rebellious "flesh and blood" of the Jew (3.1.31). In the earlier play Jessica's "treason of the blood" is projected mischievously onto the Jew himself, whereas in the later play the 'insider' patriarch, Brabantio, is allowed to project his anxiety onto the 'outsider' patriarch Othello, whose own hybrid identity effectively amalgamates the politico-

moral oppositions of Venetian and Turk. That conflict is staged in the narrative of Othello's suicide at the end of the play where he characterises himself as "one not easily jealous, but being wrought, / Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand, / Like the base Indian / Judean, threw a pearl away, / Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.346-49). The quarto reading 'Indian' corrected by the folio reading 'Iudean' reaffirms Othello's identification with the archetypal infidel, the Jew, who is easily transcoded into another infidel figure, the Turk, who shares certain ritual practices with his non-Christian adversary:

set you down this,
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.
(5.2.352-57)

The folio reading 'Iudean', that is almost certainly a compositorial turned letter in Qq, restores this discourse of marginalisation that would otherwise be less precise. Here, to use a formulation proposed by Memmi (2000:44), the phantasmatic, the fictional demon emerges as both 'real' and 'different'; the 'black devil' merges with the tragic protagonist in a form of heterophobia that now "takes manifest form in terms of actual events that pose a potential threat." But that threat embodies a contradiction in that it is both feared and loved; positive and negative stereotypes amalgamate in an impossible unity that death itself simply fails to resolve. Curiously it is Othello, the 'black' protagonist, who is the 'racist' in this final scene, since it is he who both internalises and then deploys what Memmi (2000:37-38) describes (in a different context) as "a difference to denigrate the other, to the end of gaining privilege or benefit through that stigmatization."

But there is also a further level of complexity in the play. Brabantio's heterophobia is rooted in the fantasy-life of Venice. When he is first told of his daughter's elopement his response is:

This accident is not unlike my dream,
Belief of it oppresses me already:
Light I say, light!
(1.1.142-4)

He dreams of filial disobedience, of bestiality, of miscegenation, of the corruption that will ensue, and of the consequences for the process of inheritance. And this anticipates Othello's own Iago-induced fantasies about

his wife's imagined infidelity. When the 'dream' is realised, when the phantasmagoria becomes flesh, it 'kills' the father. In *Othello* however, the phantasy does not die with the father; it is bequeathed, almost in the manner of a legacy, to the husband. Though racially distinct, the positions that Brabantio and Othello occupy in the play are structurally similar.

The cause of their anxiety is 'women'. Desdemona has disobeyed the law of the father in eloping with Othello, except that we never quite get to the bottom of the affair. What are we to make of Roderigo's description of the elopement and his characterisation of Othello?

Your daughter (if you have not given her leave,
I say again), hath made a gross revolt,
Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes,
In an extravagant and wheeling stranger,
Of here, and every where.
(1.1.133-37)

Has Brabantio encouraged Othello? What can we make of Othello's later statement that: Her father lov'd me, oft invited me, / Still question'd me the story of my life" (1.3.128-29).

Othello's evident rootlessness, that is articulated contradictorily as romantically attractive 'otherness', encapsulates the contradiction of Venice itself in that, as I suggested earlier, like the Jew he is both necessary *and* other. If we put the matter thus we can then begin to see the structural similarity with the category 'woman'. Desdemona is accused of a 'gross revolt' of allowing her 'blood' to dictate her actions. It is Iago who pursues this masculine Venetian definition of female subjectivity:

Come on, come on, you are pictures out o' doors;
Bells in your parlours; wild-cats in your kitchens;
Saints in your injuries; devils being offended;
Players in your housewifery; and housewives in your beds.
(2.1.109-12)

And it is this duplicity that cleaves the image of Venice in two. Iago is not what he is, nor is Othello, nor, it is claimed, is Desdemona. And that pathological duplicity, exemplified in each of the marginal groups to which I have referred, is a product both of female desire *and* of patriarchal fantasy that Desdemona's waiting-woman, Emilia articulates:

What is it that they do,
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?

I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have we not affections?
Desires for sport? and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do their ills instruct us so.
(4.3.96-103)

This is not so very different from the Jew's own mimetic identification with the Christian capacity for revenge in *The Merchant of Venice* which begins from a position of 'sameness' but proceeds to a mimicking of the least defensible aspects of Christian practice. It is at moments such as this that the coherence and cohesion of the Venetian ruling patriarchy becomes destabilised in these plays. What Emilia's utterance focuses for us is both the oppressive structures of patriarchy *and* the representation of the lived experience of women as they negotiate its restrictive practices. This is a remarkable moment, and it reverberates through all of the male-female relationships in the play. She is saying that female subjectivity is an 'effect' of male behaviour, and in doing so she speaks for the wider structures of domination and subservience in the play. Analogously, the domain of the 'Turk' as the historically 'real' other of Venice is incorporated into the realm of the Venetian 'subject' and then projected outwards as a psycho-geographical space to be conquered. The 'Turk', the alien, the 'Moor', and (by implication the Jew) are psychological projections that tell us more about the fears of the State and its ruling subjects than they do about the social lives of those marginalised groups. In this respect we might regard Venice as a screen upon which Elizabethan and early Jacobean London sought to project its own tensions, and the conceptions of 'otherness' that it formulated were those phantasmagoric, spectral threats whose significance was pre-eminently psychological, moral, ethical, and of course, religious.

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