

Grotesque Encounters:

Reading Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* along the Principles of the Sublime, Beautiful and Grotesque



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Abstract: This article is an attempt to apply the basic principles of the aesthetic discourse on the sublime, beautiful and grotesque to William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Even though it is a discourse that only begins in the course of the eighteenth century, I will argue that the structure of the play parallels the model of the traditional sublime, as it deals with a subject-object binary and meditates on the relationship between the material (body) and the transcendental (mind). However, the play is also rich in disruptive — or grotesque — forces that unsettle this binary structure. The parallels between the play and the aesthetic discourse could not only help our understanding of postmodern criticism and rewriting of the sublime, but the sublime can also, in turn, shed light on the reception of the play.

[A]stonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.! In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.

—Edmund Burke¹

William Shakespeare has often been associated with the sublime, either when being called a 'sublime writer', or in his capacity to trigger sublime feelings in his spectators/readers. Harold Bloom, in his latest book, *Anatomy of Influence*, for example, thinks that:

[t]he difference between reading Shakespeare and reading nearly any other writer is that greater widening of our consciousness into what initially must seem a strangeness of woe or wonder. As we go out to meet a larger consciousness, we metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that sets aside moral judgment, while wonder transmutes into a more imaginative understanding.²

Venerations of Shakespeare of this kind have become all too familiar; they evoke ideas of genius and tradition, but they also carry the hope that sublime writing would somehow raise us through metamorphosis into a larger consciousness through the power of forming great conceptions.³ The sublime would have the quality, as Bloom puts it, to transport and enlarge, so that the reader would experience 'something akin to authorship'.⁴ As conveyed in Burke's and Bloom's passages, the sublime is generally conceived as the coupling of crisis and transcendence. When encountering a special kind of object that is so all-encompassing that it fills the subject completely, judgment is put aside, and 'motions are suspended, with some degree of horror', as Burke writes. The experience of perceiving the object, thus, is so overwhelming that it throws the subject into crisis.

This 'irresistible force'⁵ of the experience eventually leads to some form of transcendence — it enlarges, raising the perceiver to something grander.

The sublime is an emotional experience with a long discursive tradition. Although it mainly emerged in the seventeenth century, emotions do not just appear with their discourses; they are already in the world. Likewise, thoughts on the sublime have been around since before the seventeenth century. Originating in Ancient Greece, the treatise *On the Sublime*, for instance, is generally attributed to Longinus. Contrary to widely held assumptions, 'its early modern revival did not begin with the adaptation published by Boileau in 1647; it was not connected solely with the early Greek editions that began to appear from 1545; nor was its impact limited to rhetoric and literature'.⁶ It was present in art and architecture, philosophy, religion and anthropology, and should therefore not be reduced to literary discourse only; since before 1750, it escaped easy disciplinary classification.⁷ Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Wordsworth were later all preoccupied with the sublime, as were modernist and post-modern writers and philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, or Patricia Yaeger. The history of discourses around emotions can remind us of their social character as well as of their central role for thought and creativity.

Shakespeare's plays are valuable texts for examining emotions because they provide insight into their historical context, test their credibility for contemporary audiences and, thus, offer insight into the social life of emotions. However, this article aims to demonstrate that our current post-modern discourses can also illuminate early modern plays and their emotional content. It thus claims that the sublime can be a fruitful category that frames Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in a new light. The first part of this article considers Romantic and post-modern discourses on the sublime to gain a structural understanding of the play and analyses its inherent power relations as well as its dynamic of crisis and

transcendence. I will propose that while the play can be read along the principles of the traditional sublime, it equally disturbs this order through potentially 'grotesque' encounters with its 'others'; namely Shylock and his daughter Jessica. The second part of this article investigates the sublime as an emotion evoked in Act V that can speak to a (post)modern audience and generate new meanings for the play.

My discussion builds on post-modern rewritings of the sublime by writers and scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jennifer Wawrzinek, who have tried to rework a more ethical version of this emotional experience. The existing body of theory hopefully enables a fresh reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, a play that has not yet been conceived of in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime, beautiful and grotesque.

READING THE PLAY WITH THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE SUBLIME

One of the main issues the discourse on the sublime negotiates is the relationship between subject and object. The sublime experience narrates an encounter with an object or an 'other' too vast to grasp, followed by an overpowering emotion of terror, pain and pleasure, which Burke considers to be 'the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'.⁸ Burke describes a certain sequence of events in this experience. First, the excess of the encounter fills the perceiver so completely that the faculty of judgement is blocked, and language fails: 'In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it'.⁹ This encounter is accompanied by a negative pleasure, a delightful horror which, through its forcefulness, threatens to annihilate the subject. As a consequence of this crisis, writers such as Immanuel Kant and William Wordsworth have described the subsequent transcendence of the mind over 'matter', which experiences a kind of epiphanic new consciousness that has the

quality of a revelation.¹⁰ This heightened sense of the self not only sublimates the disturbing emotion, but also forms the ground for a strengthened ego through a newly acquired concept. Often, this transcendence has taken the form of a celebration of human faculties that are superior to the object of contemplation. For Kant, these powers would lie in human reason. Wordsworth, on the other hand, would find them in the human imagination. A striking example for the process of transcendence described can be found in Wordsworth's encounter with a blind beggar in the streets of London:

Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type,
Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of the unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world.¹¹

Rather than pondering the social circumstances that might have triggered his misery, or else seeking a dialogue with the suffering man, the poet transforms the blind beggar into a type that in the coming verses helps the reader attain new knowledge of the world and the poet's relationship to it.

Not only does the outcome of the Kantian or Wordsworthian sublime strengthen binaries, but the conclusions drawn after this unsettling experience are also hierarchical, for they articulate a valorisation of some kind, be it in mind over

body, reason over imagination, imagination over reason, autonomous self over contingent other, human over nature, and so on.¹² Because of this hierarchical transcendence with its implied mastery over something designated as 'other', the Kantian sublime has been criticised for reinforcing subjectivity based on individuality and autonomy, and for objectifying the perceived other.¹³ Whether through identification with or in contradistinction to the other, the object is subordinate and merely functions as a foil for the strengthened human subject. Transcendence of the subject is oblivious of the context, difference and singularity of the perceived other, whose sole purpose of existence seems to be determined through the capacity to be of use to the perceiver, the human individual. Thus, the traditional sublime encounter relies on a strong separation of subject and object, in which the reality of the object is only of abstract value and serves an intellectual goal.

In a similar way, *The Merchant of Venice* is constructed around a strong binary of subject and object, a logic following the 'us' and 'them' dynamic the play establishes between the white Venetian Christian identity versus Shylock 'the Jew', and other ethnically different 'intruders' of Venice and Belmont. The radical objectification of Shylock becomes apparent through the fact that he is the only character who falls into generic labelling; often he is simply designated 'the Jew'. Further, Venetian Christian identity is in crisis throughout the play, as can be seen through Portia's mainly foreign wooers and her scepticism towards them; Antonio's vulnerable white Christian body subject to Shylock's knife; and through the play's preoccupation with conversion and miscegenation as brought to play through Jessica and Launcelot the clown.¹⁴ But with the help of a forensic trick, Shylock is outplayed, and eventually in Act V, Venetian identity is restored.

This basic plotline illustrates the principle concerns of the sublime, for it is the story of a fragile identity (white Christian Venetian) that finds its unity threatened upon the confrontation with an othered opponent (Shylock, Jessica, and other

'ethnic' intruders), but eventually manages to colonise this objectified other transcending and condemning it. The vertical transcendence over the material reality of the other (materiality meaning here the context and singularity of the objectified) happens with the help of a gained concept; in this case Christian spiritual superiority as expressed throughout the trial scene as well as through the idea of musicality in Act V. This potentially sublime experience therefore leads to religious, aesthetic, or racial supremacy, so that transcendence is exposed as a potentially violent act. The play, however, also harbours 'grotesque' elements that can be said to disrupt the structure of the transcendental sublime.

GROTESQUE IRRUPTIONS

The grotesque has been associated with the bodily, the abject, and the 'low'. The Jewish moneylender, against whom Christian identity is continuously constructed, is marked out by the play through his increasing grotesqueness. It is worth considering how this difference is constructed theologically and aesthetically in order to examine the significance of the grotesque in relation to the sublime.

Shylock's difference is delineated with the help of Christian supersessionist interpretations of Judaism. As Janet Adelman points out in her book *Blood Relations*, the play reflects the balancing act Christians underwent. On the one hand they recognised their religious source of Judaism, while on the other simultaneously displacing this 'father religion', claiming it as a religion of law, rather than forgiveness.¹⁵ Adelman remarks that this rejection of Judaism implied a paradoxical argument: on the one hand, it maintained that Jesus would be the rightful, *physical* descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while on the other hand, it emphasised that Christianity is the rightful *spiritual* inheritor of Judaism; spiritual, for it is open to all peoples of the world no matter of which 'blood line' and because it replaces a supposed 'religion of law' with spiritual values, such as mercy, forgiveness and

love.¹⁶ Adelman uses the following Paulinian passage to illustrate this paradoxical struggle for Christians:

all they are not Israel, which are of Israel: Neither are thei all children, because thei are the sede of Abraham...they which are the children of the flesh, are not the children of God: but the children of the promes are counted for the sede. (Romans 9.6–8)

Adelman thus points out that the Christian exegesis of the Bible reserved the material world to the 'older brother' Judaism, while claiming the rightful spiritual position of the 'younger brother' for themselves. This passage is not only telling for the objectification at hand, but also for the body-mind divide which serves a hierarchical structure. Adelman observes:

the fleshly descendants of Abraham are to be displaced by sons of faith – and these sons of faith come to be typologically represented by none other than Isaac and Jacob, the fleshly ancestors of Christ. Issac and Jacob are thus called upon simultaneously to represent both the Jews from whom Christ descends in the flesh and the triumph of Christian spiritual lineage over Jewish fleshly lineage.¹⁷

Likewise, Shylock's grotesqueness seems to be grounded in his objectification as the representative of Judaism with its supposed material preoccupations with law, money, and the pound of flesh. This is constructed in contrast to the Christian Venetians' self-fashioning as carriers of transcendental ideals of mercy, morality, and music. A short example from the trial scene demonstrates this:

Portia: 'Twere good you do so much for charity.

Jew: I cannot find it; 'tis not in the bond. (IV. 1. 269–270)

The grotesque has been associated with the bodily and the ordinary, as well as the vulgar, all of which seem to be implied in Shylock's wish for the dubious 'pound of flesh', implicitly alluding to Antonio's genitals.¹⁸

Further to this theological categorisation, Shylock is also constructed as an aesthetic typecast by his fellow Venetians, for he is said to be 'the man that hath no music in himself'. As Lorenzo thinks:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted: - mark the music. (V. 1. 83–88)

Since musicality is linked to the capacity to be moral as well as spiritual in the play, it is conveyed that Shylock is mentally and physically incapable of morality, as he has 'no music in himself' and is 'not moved with concord of sweet sounds' (V. 1. 83–84). Implicit in this is his alleged inherent wickedness and the 'primitivism' that the Christians come to despise in the play and which they claim to have transcended long ago with their belief in Jesus. Shylock is the ultimate objectified other, who is loaded with theological concepts, symbols and aesthetic categories that easily slip into a racial construction of difference.

We have now seen how Shylock is both theologically and aesthetically constructed by the Christian Venetians as 'grotesque'. As the play unfolds, however, Shylock seems to increasingly fit into this image of the grotesque Jew that the Christians have reserved for him. To this extent, he even wishes his beloved daughter's death after she has eloped with a Christian, bemoaning the jewels she took with her ('I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear'; III. 1. 79); and it culminates in his whetting the knife on his shoe in the courtroom, hoping for his desired pound of flesh (IV. 1. 121–126). He increasingly becomes a monstrous figure that perfectly fits into a definition by Janeen Webb.

Aside from an imaginary animal or a misshapen variant of a recognisable form, a monster can be 'a person twisted (by such wickedness, cruelty or fanaticism) or otherwise damaged so that he partakes in the inhuman'.¹⁹

With the building up of his monstrosity, Shylock progressively functions like a mirror that reflects the cruelty committed to him by the Christians, who make use of him by borrowing his money, while despising him for doing exactly this. Shylock's famous soliloquy expresses his intention to replicate Christian behaviour:

If you prick us do we not bleed? if you tickle us do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? – if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? – why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
(III. 1. 57–65)

Similar to Mary Shelley's creature (which is often referred to as 'monster') in *Frankenstein*, Shylock is holding a mirror to the society that produced his malice; he 'de-monstrates' that his opponent Antonio is, indeed, just the same in his unrelenting hatred towards the Jews: 'The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction' (III. 1. 65). This interchangeability of Christian and Jew culminates in Portia's strangely salient question when she enters the courtroom as a judge: 'Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?' (IV. 1. 172).

The term 'monster' originates from several noun and verb-forms, as Mark Thornton Burnett explains: 'In Latin, *monstro* means to show, demonstrate and reveal; a *monstrum* is a portent, prodigy or sign as well as an 'unnatural thing'; and *moneo* translates as to give warning of or presage'.²⁰ The category of the monstrous would therefore be useful for its quality of subsuming 'alterity' of many kinds, under which would fall not only the physically 'different' but also ethnic 'others'.²¹ Burnett discusses Shakespearean characters such as Caliban (physically different), Cleopatra

(her appropriation of male power) or Othello (ethnically different) for describing the versatile faces of the monstrous, and how it came to signal 'a range of personality and behavioural traits which fall outside prescribed perimeters'.²² He claims that in Shakespeare's time, representations of the monstrous were circulating widely, and that monsters occupied a firm space in the early modern psyche, making it 'the most intriguing and least understood discourses of the period'.²³ Shylock, however, has rarely been associated in terms of the grotesque or monstrous; Burnett does not mention him at all.

Shylock's threatening 'grotesqueness' seems to have the virtue of destabilising Christian identity, for he becomes an over-determined figure that in its dehumanised monstrosity puts Christian stereotypes on display. As Burnett observes, the monstrous body always seems to be an object of fascination because it produces anxieties about sameness and difference, autonomy and dependency, singleness and doubleness, civility and savagery.²⁴ The development of his character, as well as Jessica's fraught relationship to him, thus show the potential of being a 'monstrous' man. However, this potential also precariously reiterates the image of the abject Jewish body. Maik Hamburger has pointed out that the split between aesthetic and political effect makes it impossible to follow the play's affective potentials without being confronted with the accusation of racism.²⁵ The play's dilemma, therefore, seems to be that Shylock's implied grotesqueness perpetuates anti-Semitic imagery.

We have now seen how the grotesque is connected to the idea of the bodily, the abject, the 'low', how Shylock is constructed as theologically and aesthetically grotesque, and how he also seems to play up to this role with his increasingly 'monstrous' behaviour. But how exactly has the grotesque been conceived of as an aesthetic category and how does it relate to the sublime? The grotesque is excessive, irrational and hybrid; it is uncontainable. While Kant had pronounced the monstrous incompatible with the sublime for the defeat of intellectual end by

material form,²⁶ many postmodern critics place the abject or the grotesque alongside the sublime and the beautiful — as a third often forgotten aesthetic category.²⁷ The grotesque becomes crucial among post-modern critics precisely for its potential to unsettle circumscribed identity, binary thinking and, above all, because it discourages a transcendence that leads to the colonisation of the other through a concept. In her book *Powers of Horror*, for example, Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules'.²⁸ Because the abject has the quality of throwing the subject into crisis by not withholding the neatly circumscribed subject-object relationship, she aligns it with the sublime:

The abject is edged with the sublime. It is the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being [...] for the sublime has no object either.²⁹

She thus writes about a sublime encounter with 'abjection':

The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I. [...] the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.³⁰

The abject encounter described is so ultimately strange to the perceiver that it cannot be assimilated into symbolic structures, such that it threatens to unsettle the subject in its defiance of conventional, instrumental sense-making. While describing a sublime encounter that leaves the subject moved and unstable, Kristeva omits the transcendental part of encountering an object. Rather than drawing conclusions that reinstate the self, the encounter unsettles identity, as meaning collapses and intellectual transcendence is defeated. It is because of this different conclusion to a disturbing contact with an 'other' that the grotesque has been restored in postmodern revisions of the sublime.

Placed in opposition to Christian moral spirituality, Shylock's grotesqueness also has the potential to disrupt the smooth surface of Christian Venetians' alleged superiority. His development into an embittered hyperbolic 'monster' can

deconstruct the religious and aesthetic categorisations including the assumption that Jews lack certain human qualities like mercy, for example. René Girard asserts that the play is obsessed with 'sharpening a difference that is less and less real', a quality which he finds characteristic of all of Shakespeare's works.³¹ This disturbance between self and other lies in the uneasy sense that Antonio and Shylock — the two wealthy men who are somehow marked out as 'different' to the majority of society — are mirrors for each other. Adelman comments on the disruption of subject and object in the play: 'Theologically, the knowledge that *Merchant* simultaneously gestures toward and defends against is that the Jew is not the stranger outside Christianity but the original stranger within it'.³² The aesthetic of the grotesque seems to negotiate its own kind of excessive encounter, in which identities mingle, intersect and therefore transcendence over a designated 'other' is debarred.

Because of the kinship of the two religions at stake, and because the play negotiates questions of personal, national and religious borders, Adelman points out that preoccupation of *The Merchant* with the two religions hinges on questions of 'bloodline' and spirituality, and tells of anxieties about the Christians' unpaid debt to the Jews.³³ These anxieties are not only mediated through Shylock and his Christian opponent Antonio, but also through Jessica, Shylock's daughter. As a Jew converting to Christianity, her own body becomes a field in which definitions of Judaism and Christianity are practised: is this young woman, Shylock's flesh and blood, with her maternal body, her so-called 'Jewish womb', an acceptable figure within the Christian community?³⁴ Is she welcomed among her new Christian brothers and sisters? The play demonstrates that her fellow Christians have great trouble accepting her as their like: Portia mostly ignores Jessica, while Gratiano marks her as different by calling her an 'infidel' (III. 2. 217) and a 'stranger', which awkwardly points to the way in which Jessica is physically excluded on stage: 'cheer yond stranger. Bid her welcome' (III. 2. 236).³⁵ In fact, Jessica's conversation with Launcelot

the clown anticipates this outsider position she cannot escape even after having converted, as Adelman has pointed to:³⁶

Launcelot: Yes truly, for look you, the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children, [...] therefore be o' good cheer, for truly I think you are damn'd; there is but one hope in that can do you any good, and that is but a kind of bastard hope neither.

Jessica: And what hope is that I pray thee?

Launcelot: Marry, you may partly hope that your father got you not, that you are not the Jew's daughter. (III. 5. 1–9)

As Launcelot explains to her, Jessica is pre-destined to remain excluded for her only hope would be not to have descended from a Jewish bloodline. Jessica thus becomes a liminal figure that, similar to Shylock, exposes the Christians' failure of treating their spiritual sister any different after she has renounced her father's heritage and changed her religion. This liminality is not only due to her status as a convert, but also happens by virtue of her femininity, for the prospect of her conceiving a child with a Christian has the capacity to irritate the neatly circumscribed white Christian Venetian identity.

Thus, the extermination of difference, the attempt to turn the 'other' into the same, is not only disrupted through the potentially complex grotesqueness of Shylock, but also through the seemingly marginal figure of Jessica, who has the capacity to disturb identities through her status as a convert, and by sheer virtue of her femininity — her prospect of being a future mother. Does this give her character a grotesque potential? It is certainly for directors to decide how to play her and to play with potentials in characters. In any case, it is she who, next to Portia, marks the play's melancholic last act and who — although having converted — continues to irritate Christian identity, especially after her father has been expelled. As the following section discusses, the last act reveals Jessica's subtle defiance to play into a harmonic end of this 'comedy'.

CHRISTIAN TRANSCENDENCE

The play's conclusion, Act V could be understood as the silence after the storm. It is marked by the ostensible absence of 'others' and presents us with the concept of Christian transcendental spirituality. This happens by means of a discourse on music through which positions and lessons learned are, somewhat abstractly, expressed. Music is literally played over the conspicuous silence of the night which seems to be the silence of the sentenced, the absence of 'others'. Lorenzo, Jessica's newly-wed husband, claims:

In such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise (V. 1. 1–3)

Although the wind stirs the trees, they do not respond. Their silence is uncanny. Lorenzo here seems to point to Jessica's silence and the way she does not respond positively to the 'sweet music' of the last act. For Lorenzo, this 'sweet music' plays a great part as the expression of grand ideals, such as the beautiful and harmonious which enables morality and transcendence:

Lorenzo: Such harmony is in immortal souls
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. [...]

Jessica: I am never merry when I hear sweet music. (V. 1. 70–73; 76)

With its evocation of rising above materiality and those beings that are apparently not sensitive to music, the concept of music conjures a form of the traditional sublime, as a transcendental ideal is expressed at the cost of those that are identified as other. Lorenzo instructs his melancholic wife, Jessica, about the concept of spherical harmony which clearly establishes the binary between materiality and spirituality. Jessica, however, seems to refuse an understanding of transcendence that

happens in differentiation to her father, who apparently is the one alluded to in Lorenzo's utterance '[t]he man that hath no music in himself' (V. 1. 83). She claims she would be 'never merry when I hear sweet music' and thus reveals her sadness after her father has been expelled by alluding to ancient tragic myths of unhappy women, and by falling silent after her above statement (V. 1. 76).

Likewise, Portia displays a remarkable sadness in this last act that is meant to celebrate Venetian Christian self-restoration and the beginning of her marriage:

This night methinks is but the daylight sick
It looks a little paler; 'tis a day,
Such as the day is when the sun is hid. (V. 1. 124–126)

Portia seems to remark here on the fact that day and night are not so much opposites as versions of one another; the night merely resembles a dim day; it is characterised in terms of lack and illness – it is 'sick', 'pale' and 'hidden'. The night is thus not an entity in itself with moon and stars, but characterised in terms of what is missing. Further, Portia embarks on a reflection of the circumstantial and relative, in contrast to Lorenzo's absolute categories of harmony and morality through music³⁷:

Portia: Nothing is good (I see) without respect –
 Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.

Nerissa: Silence bestows that virtue on it, madame

Portia: The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
 When neither is attended: and I think
 The nightingale, if she should sing by day
 When every goose is cackling, would be thought
 No better a musician than the wren!
 How many things by season season'd are
 To their right praise, and true perfection! (V. 1. 102–8)

Nothing is good 'as such', she claims, everything depends on the perspective of the perceiver. Here, the nightingale may only be loved because of the appearance of her song at a particular time of the night. Ruth HaCohen has remarked that the play hinges on the question of whether Shylock's wicked behaviour is the result of an 'original sin', or whether it is the circumstances of Venetian society that have led him to his monstrosity — a question Portia seems to resolve in favour of the latter, as she criticises a notion of a fixed morality or truth.³⁸

This brings us back to the theory of the sublime and grotesque, for the grotesque specifically conveys the defiance of absolutes in favour of a material reality of context, of time and space. As Jennifer Wawrzinek remarks: '[T]he grotesque belongs to time and space, rather than the supersensible world of the sublime. It insists upon a body that is open and incomplete and which exists within a social and ecosystemic network'.³⁹ Shylock's grotesqueness holds the potential of seeing his otherness in context, thereby serving to demystify and de-demonise his alterity. Despite — or perhaps because of — Portia's role in Shylock's harsh punishment (which in fact seems to be his death sentence), she seems torn and unsatisfied in the concluding act of the play. 'Nothing is good without respect' (V. 1. 102); and even the dark creatures, crows, can be regarded as singing beautifully — depending on the context.

THE OTHER SUBLIME

After Portia rids music of appropriation and exclusivity, such as who possesses proper sounds, the playing of music over the silence of the sentenced has the potential to express the inherent melancholia in the play's conclusive fifth act. This act attempts to celebrate the transcendence over Shylock; yet, as mentioned above, Portia claims that the night is 'pale' and resembles a dark day. The night of this final act is not an entity in itself with moon and stars, but is characterised in terms of lack,

of what is missing. The sense that something has gone missing evokes the idea of melancholia which Sigmund Freud describes in his seminal essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). He defines it as a condition in which one is unable to declare the object of sadness dead. Freud contrasts this condition with mourning, finding that mourning is the healthy, unrepressed process of letting something go. When we mourn there is an end in sight, he claims; it is a process with a successful outcome: the object of sadness is finally released and the 'I' learns to live on. Melancholia, in contrast, entails a feeling of loss that cannot be determined and, therefore, not overcome. The ego, in this case, cannot enjoy 'the satisfaction of knowing itself as the better of the two, as superior to the object'.⁴⁰ Freud thus seems to designate melancholia with a failure of transcending the object of sorrow, so that the loss of the object taints the self, and results in what he claims to be an unproductive emotion.

The melancholic fifth act seems to revolve around a missing object, but is never able to refer to it or name it. We know, of course, that the end of the play needs to be seen in relation to Shylock's condemnation: the character who, previously an important agent at the play's core, is never mentioned explicitly again in Act V. It is therefore possible to say that instead of celebrating the rise over difference by having successfully shaped it as the same, the play's final scene is shaped around an obvious absence. The striking melancholia of Act V thereby points to the failure of absolute transcendence. In this way, it seems to speak to the unsettling effect the colonisation of its Jewish characters has had on the Christian Venetian's subjects. That is, Act V stages the realisation that the stranger is no longer without.

In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva offers a theory of modernity circling around the tension between union and separation — something that Act V anticipates. Kristeva describes the anxiety that arises when trying to distinguish between what is one's 'home' or people, and what is not.⁴¹ Similarly, the play circles around the tension of self and other, and dramatises society's investment with

strangers, which both enable and disable the exclusion of ‘foreigners’. This ambivalence comes to the fore with the expulsion of Shylock and the supposed integration of Jessica. Kristeva proposes to recognise the stranger in ourselves by internalising and individuating it: ‘The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from our struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious — that “improper” facet of our impossible “own and proper”’.⁴² This disquieting realisation is seemingly embodied in the play through Jessica. Functioning as a kind of placeholder for her father, her apparent discomfort in Belmont — a white Christian Venetian society — is expressed through her defiant position to Lorenzo’s theory on music, as discussed above. There seems to be no satisfying conclusion, no harmony and no redemption possible after her father has been expelled, as this melancholic last act reveals.

The failure of absolute transcendence over Shylock is not only delivered by the seemingly melancholic women, but also by Antonio — Shylock’s mirror image, and the person who does not pair up at the end of this ‘comedy’. It is he who sets the melancholic tone and whose melancholia never gets resolved and therefore leaves plenty of space for speculation (unrequited love for Bassanio is the most commonly conceived). The play opens on his melancholic note:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it or came by it,
What stuff ‘tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn; and such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself. (I. 1. 1–6)

This evocation of a ‘disease of the mind’ evokes Freud’s interpretation of melancholia, in which the object of sadness is not known and can thus not be mourned: ‘But how I caught it, found it or came by it, / What stuff ‘tis made of,

whereof it is born, I am to learn' (I. 1. 4). It further evokes the 'strangeness to oneself' that Kristeva points to: 'That I have much ado to know myself' (I. 1. 6). In this context, it is interesting to note that it is Antonio who is Shylock's most important hater and opponent, his mirror image whose hatred Shylock swears to replicate. Thus, the unhappiest character also seems the most relentless in his hatred towards the great 'other' of this play. It is as if the melancholia of the last act after the transcendence over Shylock has infected other characters too.

With the discourse on transcendental music and beings that are or are not receptive to it, it is possible to say that Act V centres on the emotions of the sublime and melancholic. To Jean-François Lyotard, these are the most characteristic aesthetics of modernity, which would describe a different kind of sublime experience:

[...] modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.⁴³

What is nostalgic in modernity is an unnamable 'missing content', as Lyotard suggests. What has gone missing is the concept under which Lyotard understands the grand meta-narrative. It might be worth recalling Longinus' text from ancient Greece mentioned earlier, in which the sublime was precisely defined as the 'power to form great conceptions'.⁴⁴ Lyotard, however, describes the sublime as an experience in which representation must necessarily fail, for 'the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept'.⁴⁵ In the postmodern criticism of the sublime, it is the grand concepts or the totalitarian meta-narratives that are no longer possible. The sublime would thus be an emotional experience that refutes transcendence. It is not the 'real sublime sentiment' — by

which Lyotard seemingly refers to the traditional sublime of Romantic discourse — but a new kind of sublime, a (post)modern sublime which tells of the sense that there is no totalising concept possible anymore, as objects are always bigger than what we can know about them. *The Merchant* seems to exemplify just that: a potentially sublime attempt at overcoming an ‘other’ that results in a melancholic conclusion. However, the colonisation ends with unsettled subjects, in the sense of an unnamable loss and the realisation of failure, as Act V suggests. The unsettling repercussions of Shylock’s grotesque development, as well as Jessica’s status as a convert and potential Jewish/Christian mother, seem to have successfully disrupted the smooth unity of white Christian Venetian society. The emotional household of this play seems so effective because it foreshadows modernity and its catastrophic investment with supposed ‘strangers’.

CONCLUSION

At the precise point where emotion turns into sound, on that articulation between body and language, on the catastrophe-fold between the two, there looms up ‘my great rival, music’.⁴⁶

As I hope to have shown, one fundamental emotional experience potentially at stake in *The Merchant of Venice* is the sublime. The last act in particular is concerned with questions of sublime transcendence, and of the perceived conflict between body and mind, between the grotesque and spiritual transcendence. The playing of music in Act V can convey several things, such as the failure of language, sublime supremacy — as wished for by Lorenzo — or for articulating the emotional residue of the conflict with Shylock: melancholia. The literal playing of music in this conclusive act thus has the power to determine the emotional outcomes of the play, as ‘emotion turns into sound’.⁴⁷ It is up to directors to decide how to play this part. However, the striking melancholia inherent in the text emphasises that in this conclusion, smooth reconciliation is debarred and transcendence out of this negative emotion

impossible. Some characters are left unsettled, they cannot be 'merry' when they hear 'sweet music'. As Portia and Jessica suggest, they refuse to rise with music over difficult events. Others remain silent altogether — the melancholic Antonio hardly plays a part at the end.

This process is also helped through the virtue of possible grotesque encounters in the play, including those with Shylock and Jessica. The grotesque stresses relativity and context over absolute ideas and judgements which leads to the awareness that 'otherness' always exists in relation to what it deviates from. The grotesque in relation to the sublime speaks of the necessity to consider the material reality of the other, and in doing so, warning of supersensible meta-narratives that happen at the cost of the marginalised. It speaks of the wish to de-demonise alterity as well as the necessity for otherness to exist in its own right, rather than to be seen as a means to an end or a mere disturbance that needs to be overcome for achieving human greatness. Therefore, this aesthetic can trigger an earthbound, non-transcendent, but nevertheless transformative state. Act V conveys that no redemption is possible, as transcendental supremacy and absolute understanding become debarred, or an excess of meaning fails to be grasped in the realisation that the stranger is within. This gains particular relevance for a post-Holocaust, postcolonial audience. When considering accentuations and angles for interpretations, directors ultimately have to decide on the relevance that the 'other', the grotesque, or the abject takes in the symbolic structure of the play, for these aesthetic questions seem to be inextricably linked with ethics.

In the light of the aesthetics discussed, it is interesting to examine the history of reception of the play, such as the one from post-War Germany, which I will only briefly touch on here. Markus Moninger has remarked that every post-War staging of *Merchant* inevitably evokes Auschwitz.⁴⁸ This assertion has been problematised by Sabine Schülting and Zeno Ackermann, who have discussed the precarious

implications of staging the play in terms of post-Holocaust remembrance in Germany.⁴⁹ Moninger's observation remains undeniable; the association cannot be thought away. It seems fair to say that the discourse on transcendence and music in the last act hold potential for new meanings generated in the context of a post-Holocaust audience. As Ackermann has analysed, the play was remarkably popular in West Germany for the first sixteen years following the war for its capacity to confront the immediate past in a somewhat distanced, abstracted form; but also for the play's potential — if played with a certain accentuation — to celebrate a restored Venetian identity and provide the needs of a shattered national collective.⁵⁰ Many of these post-War productions would place their emphasis on the musical and romantic aspect of the play as well as on Portia's supposed genius at restoring harmony through mercy. Ackermann stresses that this interpretation was working in contradistinction to Shylock, for the rehabilitation of the German national collective happened at the cost of a renewed (symbolic) exclusion of the Jewish figure.⁵¹ He concludes about the end of this early phase of post-War German productions between 1945 and 1961:

Indeed, the confrontational figure of Shylock eventually proved more potent than the compensational plot of the play, so that performances of *Merchant* actually renewed the need to face what early productions had been quite eager to forget. In the long run, it proved impossible to simply 'play' the recent past 'away'.⁵²

With its over-determined figure, the play has often triggered confusion between ethical and aesthetic problems, and as Ackermann analyses, has proven to escape reconciliatory ends that would enable a smoothly harmonious German remembrance.⁵³

The text of the play itself indeed squares off against a cathartic, transcendental ending as wished for by some Venetians. When considering the context of a post-War German audience and the evocations generated by Shylock's trial, the inherent

melancholia as well as the playing of music over the silence of the sentenced, might speak of the crisis of transcendence over historical events, or finding a concept that would match the rupture in civilisation committed during the Shoah. However, it is easy to play over nuances in Shakespeare's complex and poetic texts, and so Lorenzo's and Portia's attitudes to music in Act V could be read quite differently in the immediate post-War period on the West German stage. In the German context, the way that transcendence over Shylock is played out immediately gains political significance.

A sublime that disables supremacy and a renewed harmonious community based on some kind of deeper connection could protect society's 'others' from being instrumentalised, from being seen as a necessary sacrifice or a means to an end. *The Merchant* seems uncanny in its foresight; in its ability to speak of the past and a haunted present in a playful, embodied form.

Notes

- ¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London, 1757; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 53.
- ² Harold Bloom, *Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 20–1.
- ³ From Dionysius Longinus, 'On the Sublime', trans. by William Smith (1743), in *The Sublime: a Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by A. Ashfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24.
- ⁴ Bloom, *Anatomy of Influence*, p. 18.
- ⁵ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 53.
- ⁶ Caroline van Eck et al, *Translations of the Sublime: The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of Longinus' Peri Hupsous in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture and the Theatre*, ed. by C. van Eck et al (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 1.
- ⁷ Van Eck et al, *Translations of the Sublime: The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of Longinus' Peri Hupsous in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture and the Theatre*, pp. 2–4.
- ⁸ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 36.
- ⁹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 53.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the Sublime', Sections 25–29, in *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J.C. Meredith (London, 1790; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 92–94. Compare: William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind: An Autobiographical Poem* (London, 1850; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 268.
- ¹¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 268.
- ¹² Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime* (New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 37–8.
- ¹³ Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects*, p. 39. I will also refer to the Kantian sublime as the 'traditional' sublime. This kind of sublime entails the notion of the human reason/imagination as superior to its object of contemplation. This understanding, however, is not represented by Burke.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.97.
- ¹⁵ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, pp. 36–7.
- ¹⁶ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 44.
- ¹⁷ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 45.
- ¹⁸ Allusions can be found in I. 3. 147–50 and III .1. 29–31.
- ¹⁹ Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice, 'Domesticating the Monster', in *Seriously Weird: Papers on the Grotesque*, ed. by A. Mills (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 89–104 (90).
- ²⁰ Mark Thornton Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 2.
- ²¹ Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters'*, p. 2.
- ²² Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters'*, p. 2.

- ²³ Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters'*, p. 4.
- ²⁴ Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters'*, p. 4.
- ²⁵ Maik Hamburger, 'Unser Shakespeare – ein Judenfeind? Der Kaufmann von Venedig auf den Bühnen der DDR', in *Shylock nach dem Holocaust*, ed. by S. Schülting and Z. Ackermann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 85–102 (97).
- ²⁶ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 100. Compare: Patricia Yaeger, 'Toward a Female Sublime', in *Gender and Theory*, ed. by L. Kauffman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 17–19.
- ²⁷ Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects*, p. 44.
- ²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.
- ²⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.
- ³⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 1–2.
- ³¹ Girard cited in Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 48.
- ³² Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 137.
- ³³ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 4.
- ³⁴ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, pp. 36–7.
- ³⁵ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 75.
- ³⁶ Adelman, *Blood Relations*, p. 75.
- ³⁷ Cf. Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel against The Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 58.
- ³⁸ Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel against The Jews*, p. 58.
- ³⁹ Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects*, p. 46.
- ⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Complete Psychological Works*, trans. by J. Strachey, vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), pp. 242–244; 257.
- ⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 20.
- ⁴² Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 191.
- ⁴³ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.
- ⁴⁴ James S. Hans. *The Sovereignty of Taste*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 141–145.
- ⁴⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 78.
- ⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 190.
- ⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 190.
- ⁴⁸ Markus Moninger, 'Auschwitz erinnern. Merchant-Inszenierungen im Nachkriegsdeutschland', in *Das Theater der Anderen: Alterität und Theater zwischen Antike und Gegenwart*, ed. by C. Balme (Tübingen: Francke 2001), pp. 229–248 (229).
- ⁴⁹ Zeno Ackermann and Sabine Schülting have problematised the assertion that the Holocaust is the unavoidable companion of this drama, drawing attention to the way that *The Merchant* is 'strangely inadequate as a vehicle for remembrance, the play also having the virtue of squaring off against

established discourses' (Ackermann, p. 395). They assert that Shylock is a reluctant memory figure for the Shoah, as it hardly seems possible to integrate him into symbolic structures without running danger of reproducing anti-Semitic imagery or dynamics. See Zeno Ackermann, 'Performing Oblivion/Enacting Remembrance: The Merchant of Venice in West Germany, 1945 to 1961', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62.3 (2011), pp. 368–370; 376; *Shylock nach dem Holocaust: Zur Geschichte einer deutschen Erinnerungsfigur*, ed. by S. Schulting and Z. Ackermann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011). See also the research project website: 'Shylock in Germany: The Reception of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice after 1945', *Freie University Berlin* <<http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/shylock/index.html>> <accessed 19/8/2015>.

⁵⁰ The play was performed ca. 24 times until 1961 (a date which has been marked as the beginning of a new phase in the West German reception of the play when the director Peter Zadek approached the play in a radically different way), as compared to East Germany, where the play was not performed at all until 1976. See Ackermann, 'Performing Oblivion/Enacting Remembrance', pp. 366–67.

⁵¹ Ackermann mentions the evocation of sublime terror (in relation to the war) and transcendence over the barely passed events by analysing a brochure from 1947, published by the theatre director Heinz Hilpert, in which the crimes committed in the Shoah are addressed with a 'feeling of sublime terror,' which leads to Hilpert's hope that 'the war, the downfall of the Third Reich, and even the guilty implications of the past might become the basis of a 'deeper peace.' Hilpert's wish for a 'deeper peace' points to the intricate relationship between the sublime (here evoked in terms of war) and transcendence (in this case the early wish to distance, forget, 'overcome', and rise above the catastrophe experienced). See Ackermann, 'Performing Oblivion/Enacting Remembrance', p. 376; p. 379; p. 384.

⁵² Ackermann, 'Performing Oblivion/Enacting Remembrance', p. 386.

⁵³ Ackermann, 'Performing Oblivion/Enacting Remembrance', p. 386.