Aristotle in Venice: Reconsidering Plot and Character in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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October 2010

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Paul Yachnin, for his guidance. This work would have a different shape and much altered substance if it were not for his instruction.

Many of the insights in this discussion arose as a result of attending the lectures of Professor Gordon Teskey at Harvard University, and from conversations with Daniel Nadler, a PhD candidate at that same institution.

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Introduction

The Merchant of Venice resists traditional interpretations and classifications where genre is concerned. Within the arena of literary criticism the subject of genre is fundamental. The categorization of artistic forms facilitate the easy access of information. Broadly, a wide range of structural possibilities are compared and grouped together according to similar qualities, which in turn underlines dissimilar characteristics. In this way we arrive at generalizations, or types, such as comedy and tragedy. Genres thus provide scholarly commentators with both the conceptual tools and a vocabulary with which to approach a play. The option to disregard classical categories (or even all categories) exists. But allowing for the assumption that the distinctions upon which categories are based are not arbitrary, criticism that does not at least acknowledge the tradition takes the risk of speaking of a play with only part of the essential lexicon. Furthermore, the English Renaissance (as the name implies) was particularly interested in reviving classical traditions, and as the oft-cited passages from Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* demonstrate, the subject of genre was not overlooked. Nevertheless, although it was written between 1596 and1598, *MV* is an example of a play that does not observe the classical traditions of tragedy or those of comedy[1] (or of any other "lesser" genre, such as satire)[2] and is therefore elusive and difficult to categorize – a favorite activity of literary scholars since Aristotle.

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[1] See *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory and Interpretations,* edited by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) for a discussion of the various theories concerning drama during early modern England.

[2] The principle ancient dramatic types are comedy, tragedy, and pastoral. Early modern England "recognized" all three genres – and even added other types to the list, for example history – but gave prominence to tragedy and comedy.

While *MV* is billed as a comedy in the First Folio (1623)[3], and while the play accords with most of the general principles of comedy and shares many structural similarities with Shakespeare's other comedies (I go into detail below), certain key irregularities of both plot and character prevent some modern scholars from even classifying it at all. Without the guidance of categories, scholars have instead turned to more abstract approaches such as thematic interpretation, wherein a single theme is argued to unify the different parts. The problem with this approach is that the irregularities of *MV* are largely structural ones, and even when not strictly structural – as in the case of character – their nature is such that a thematic interpretation does very little to reconcile the separate parts into one cohesive whole. Thus while the various themes that scholars like Barbara Lewalski identify in *MV* might certainly be present, the very fact that more than one theme is discernable suggests that although a thematic interpretation speaks of the similarities among the various parts, it cannot account for their differences. We are therefore back where we began, because if we cannot account for the whole, then we only understand in part. I return to the problems of a thematic approach in the section following the introduction.

The Merchant of Venice's structural irregularities are unique because along with placing *MV* outside of any one generic category, they also obscure the logic behind the construction of the play. In particular, two aspects – one concerned with the plot, and the other concerned with characters – have been repeatedly distinguished as the primary "obstacles" that complicate our understanding of the play. Instead of giving the impression of cohesion, these parts often appear to be disharmonious, either having internal contradictions or not fitting well together within the larger whole of the play – or both.

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[3] The available categories were Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Later, the category of "Romances" was added.

MV's plot is divisible into two distinct storylines, each chiefly distinguished according to the location where the action occurs, and each can be further differentiated according to the bonds around which the action develops. The first storyline begins in Venice and is concerned with the flesh-bond between Antonio and Shylock; the second storyline is set in the fictional place of Belmont and is concerned with the casket trial between Portia and Bassanio. It is difficult to determine which story begins first, since although the play begins with Bassanio initiating the flesh-bond in Venice, the flesh-bond nevertheless arises out of his desire to marry Portia. Yet once the plot begins to divide into two distinct storylines, the two stories become only very loosely connected, and the degree of disjunction that the combination of both storylines produces is considerable. While many of Shakespeare's other plays have two locations as well, the story tends to continue uninterrupted as the action alternates between the locations. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place in Athens and in the forest, but the action in the forest is a seamless continuation of the action that begins in Athens. The plot of *MV* is further differentiated by its ending, which occurs in Belmont and not in Venice. This is unusual for a comedy because the comedic formula, as described by Northrop Frye, is traditionally "real world" to "green world" and back to "real world."[4] Although not a forest, Belmont serves as the play's metaphorical "green world." The actions' repeated alternations between Venice and Belmont *and* the fact that the play concludes in Belmont are both departures from the typical comedic plot.

With respect to character, the criticism tends to concentrate on Shylock, who is generally recognized as the play's villain.[5] Despite this characterization, interpretations of Shylock – both critical and performative – have fluctuated from understanding the character as purely clownish, to tragic, to tragic-comic.[6] In particular, Shylock's conversion in Act IV seems unsatisfactory, *even though* the comedic villain is often either exiled or killed. Shylock is at times at odds with himself as well. Although unwavering in his hatred of Antonio, Shylock is notably unsure *himself* whether he is villain, as he alternates between positioning himself as an outsider and as a man trying to integrate into Venetian society and culture.[7] The ambiguity that characterizes Shylock has alone caused some critics to argue that *MV* is not a 'comedy.'[8]

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[4] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)

[5] See E.E. Stoll, "Shylock," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Merchant of Venice*, ed Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 17.

I try to understand some of the problematic characteristics of the *MV* in terms of the taxonomy of ancient classical poetics. I begin with a discussion of genre and categories. Once this approach is proven unsatisfactory I explore some alternative methods to interpret *MV*, and conclude that a return to Aristotelian notions of poetics proves to be the most beneficial approach.

The Mixed-Mode

I begun by speaking of categories, and I return briefly to the issue of genre – with the intention of bracketing the subject for the remainder of the discussion. What is a category? A category is defined as a division or group of things that share particular characteristics.

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[6] An excellent summary of Shylock's performance history can be found in John W Mahon, "The Fortunes of *The Merchant of Venice* from 1596 to 2001," in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John W Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon (New York: Routledge, 2002) 21-34. Stephen Orgel describes Shylock's performance history in Stephen Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 145-149. See also Toby Lelyveld, *Shylock on the Stage* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University, 1960).

[7] When teaching at the New School in 1946-7, Auden observed that Shylock was on outsider for reasons of religion and of profession, but "chiefly by character, for which society is partially responsible, though social conditions are never quite enough to determine the character." Mahon, "Fortunes,"16. Orgel remarks that "Shylock is conventionally identified as an outsider in *The Merchant of Venice*, though generally as a prelude to observing how he also embodies all the essential Venetian qualities." Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 144.

[8] Mahon notes that the play "inspired commentators as early as the eighteenth century to regard it as a tragedy." Mahon, "The Fortune," 2. H.W. Hudson argues that "Shylock's character is essentially tragic; there is none of the proper timber of comedy about him." Mahon, "The Fortune," 26. E.E. Stoll, however, disagrees, arguing "that this comedy is only like the others." E.E. Stoll, "Shylock," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Merchant of Venice*, ed Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 15.

Categories are formed by comparing and distinguishing like and unlike objects; in more complex systems, for example the taxonomy of living organisms, there are categories and subcategories. The subcategories all share particular characteristics which classify them as a particular category, but they differ from each other in ways that permit further categorization. The scientific community has long since recognized the evolutionary benefits of information processing activities (such as categorization) for human survival and efficiency.[9] Numerous studies have attempted to determine "the cortical substrates that mediate this function,"[10] indicating that the human brain is hardwired for categorization.[11] Long before there were dramas and dramatic types, there existed the need to distinguish (often instantaneously) between friend and enemy, and between edible and inedible. In other words, the ability to categorize *visual* objects as either potentially beneficial or potentially harmful is an important evolutionary step: "Stimulus situations are unique, but organisms do not treat them uniquely; they respond on the basis of past learning and categorization. In this sense, categorization may be considered one of the most basic functions of living creatures."[12]

At some point in our cognitive development, human beings began to categorize not only visual objects, but less tangible and more abstract things, such as poetry. Thus while categorization might be a basic function of nonhuman primates as well, it nevertheless has particularly *human* dimension which scholars and academics (in areas far removed from biological concerns) depend upon.[13] The origin of, or reason for the different poetic and dramatic forms is not immediately pertinent to this discussion, and it is sufficient to simply note that such distinctions do exist.

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[9] Jack Grinband et al, "A Neural Representation of Categorization Uncertainty in the Human Brain." *Neuron* 49 (2006).

[10] Jack Grinband et al, "A Neural Representation," 757.

[11] Ibid

[12] Carolyn B Mervis, "Categorization of Natural Objects," *Annual Review of Psychology* 32 (1981): 341.

[13] For a brief sketch of the importance of categorization in literary theory see Christy Desmet "Character Criticism," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide* ed Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin. 351-362. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

However, that is not to say that the need to remain within the prescribed rules of particular genres has always been treated with equal severity. The complicated nature of literature is such that most of the distinctions or similarities upon which the categories are based are not as obviously rooted in nature as are other, more scientific distinctions, such as human and monkey. For example, while a human and a monkey might share many features which group them together under the category "primate," their differences are sufficiently pronounced and *visible*, that no rational person would mistake a human for a monkey. In this view, while a hybrid creature might be possible, it would no longer assume the name of either monkey or human, because the respective parts are what differentiate each subcategory from the other. Whether dramatic categories (in particular, comedy and tragedy) correspond to something found in nature is relevant to this discussion, but I will put the question aside for now, and return to it when I speak of Aristotle closer to the end of the section.

In *Imagining Shakespeare*, Stephen Orgel describes the title page to Ben Jonson's 1616 folio, which is an image of a theater, as "arguably the most far-reaching conception of theater," that the English Renaissance produced.[14] In the picture, the figures of Tragedy and Comedy stand on either side of a central cartouche. Below are two scenes – the *plaustrum* or cart of Thespis, and a small amphitheater with an endless dance in progress labeled *visorium* – and each is an illustration of one of the ancient sources of drama. Above Tragedy and Comedy, the third ancient drama, the pastoral or satiric, is anatomized, and between its two parts is a Roman theater. At the top of the arch stands Tragicomedy, flanked by the two patrons of ancient theater, Bachhus and Apollo. Orgel notes that "Jonson's title page, with characteristic gravity, presents nothing so transient and particular as a scene from a play. It defines the drama in relation to its history and its kinds, and offers a set of generic possibilities."[15] The inclusion of the figure of Tragicomedy is significant because the title page (and by extension, Jonson) thus shows its recognition of tragicomedy as an established genre type. Interestingly, Orgel points out that although at first glance the particular figures seem "quintessentially classical," upon closer examination, the details in fact betray a Jacobean reinterpretation of classical ideas.[16] Thus, "For the Renaissance classicist, the ancient world was our world, and anachronism was an essential element in the realization of the past."[17] In this view, certain elemental facets of ancient dramatic theory were preserved, but at the same time reinterpreted in a way that the ancient Greeks would still have recognized.

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[14] Orgel, *Imaging Shakespeare*, 21.

Notably, Orgel makes an implicit distinction between the Renaissance classicist and others dramatists who wrote and performed their plays in early modern England. That other theories of drama persisted at the same time is clear, but there is reason enough to believe that Shakespeare belonged to the earlier group of dramatists who acknowledged the classical traditions of comedy and tragedy before they deviated from them.[18] This paper does not propose a history of the different dramatic types, ancient or otherwise. However, a brief review of the early-modern conceptions of classical drama will prove useful. Such a review will necessarily extend to ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of drama, both of which greatly influenced the early modern understanding of generic types.

The First Folio is divided into three categories: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. The inclusion of History as a dramatic form is already a departure from the ancient categorization of dramatic types which did not include History. During the late nineteenth century, the category Comedies was further subdivided into three more categories: romantic comedies, late comedies, and romances. *The Merchant of Venice* fell into the first subcategory, romantic comedies, along with nine other plays written from the beginning of Shakespeare's career until 1601.[19] I will work backwards, beginning from the nineteenth century definition of romantic comedy and then moving to theories of comedy prevalent in Renaissance England; finally, I conclude with the ancient understanding of comedy.

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[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] A.C. Bradley argues that Shakespeare was influenced by the classical tradition of drama.

In "Romantic Comedies," William C. Carroll describes romantic comedies as plays where the major themes involve love and desire, where love is frustrated, and a journey takes place; where improbable or magical events occur, and as plays that end with either marriage or the promise of a wedding.[20] Notably, the ending is not particular to romantic comedies, but is a common feature of comedies in general. Thus the ending of *Love Labor's Lost* is usually pointed to as an example that violates the tradition. Interestingly, Carroll groups the character of Shylock with the abortive ending of *LLL* and Valentine's forgiveness of Proteus in *The Two Gentleman of Verona* as deviations from the classical mold.[21]

During Renaissance England, the most prominent classical sources for the theory of drama were Horace, Cicero, and the fourth century grammarian Aelius Donatus.[22] I put Horace and Cicero aside: the former because, for the purpose of this paper, my discussion of Aristotle will prove Horace to be redundant[23]; the latter because Cicero's dialogue does not directly engage the question of comedy[24]. Two essays on theater were ascribed to Donatus, "On Comedy," and "On Drama," although the second is now attributed to a contemporary grammarian, Euanthius. "On Drama" speaks in part of the differences between Old Comedy and New Comedy. New Comedy is closer to the type of comedy practiced in Renaissance England, and is concerned with "typical situations and in general terms with men who live a middle class life."[25] According to Galbraith, these ancient theorists, "provided Renaissance Europe with the essential vocabulary and structural understanding of the genre," and he cites as an example Donatus' division of comedies into four parts: Prologue, Protasis, Epitasis, and Catastrophe.[26] There are good reasons to suppose that Shakespeare was familiar with these theories and their practical applications. As Galbraith notes, during the sixteenth century, school children (such as Shakespeare) would have encountered the various theorists since the study of comedy played an integral role in the school curriculum.[27]

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[19] William C Carroll, "Romantic Comedies," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, ed Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 176.

[20] Carroll "Romantic Comedies," 176.

[21] Carroll "Romantic Comedies," 178.

[22] David Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*," ed Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 7.

[23] Galbraith notes that "Throughout the [sixteenth] century many critics aimed for syncretic conflations of Aristotelian-influenced genre theory and rhetorical models that looked to Horace." Galbraith, "Theories of

Euanthius summarizes the differences between classical categories of comedy and tragedy. I cite his description in full:

> Of the many differences between tragedy and comedy, the foremost are these: in comedy the fortunes of men are middle-class, the dangers are slight, and the ends of the actions are happy; but in tragedy everything is the opposite – the characters are great men, the fears are intense, and the ends disastrous. In comedy the beginning is troubled, the end tranquil; in tragedy events follow the reverse order.

Comedy," 12. Since I am more interested in the substance and content of genre theory than the delivery of the theory, I will put aside Horace for the remainder of the discussion.

[24] Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," 8.

[25] Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," 9.

[26] Ibid. Interestingly, Protasis (the first action of the story), Epitasis, (the complication) and Catastrophe (the unraveling and the resolution) share striking similarities with Aristotelian theories of plot construction.

[27] Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," 10.

> And in the tragedy the kind of life is shown that is to be shunned; while in comedy the kind is shown that is to be sought after. Finally in comedy the story is always fictitious; while tragedy often has a basis in historical truth.[28]

Most of these formal distinctions were observed in early modern England. While the differences are insightful, and provide us with a blueprint and counter-examples with which to compare both the structural design and the content of *The Merchant of Venice*, what is perhaps most notable in Euanthius' presentation is that tragedy and comedy are very clearly conceived of as opposites.

It is therefore not surprising that many Renaissance poets considered the mixing of genres as tantamount to a perversion of each form. Stephan Greenblatt notes how for the sixteenth century the mixed mode "would be contrary to the rules of art; it would destroy the unity of plot, baffle the response of the audience, jumble together opposing styles, mix high and low persons, and thus violate good art and good statecraft."[29]

In his *Defense*, Sidney speaks of the mixing of different dramas in a manner which Shakespeare would later mock in *Hamlet*: "it is to be noted that some Poesies haue coupled together two or three kindes, as Tragicall and Comicall, wher-vpon is risen the Tragicomicall. Some in the like manner haue mingled Prose and Verse, as Sanazzar and Boetius. Some haue mingled matters Heroicall and Pastorall."[30] Notably, Sidney seems to approve of the mixed mode for poetry, "for if severed they be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtful," but not for drama, and he censures the playwright whose plays,

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[28] Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," 9-10.

[29] Stephen J Greenblatt, "Sidney's 'Arcadia' and the Mixed-Mode," *Studies in Philology* 70, no 3 (1972): 270 http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173809

[30] Greenblatt, "Sidney's Arcadia," 272.

> …be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained.[31]

Sidney's principal criticism is that when tragedy and comedy are mixed the end product is confused, and consequently transfers this confusion onto an audience that gains only little guidance as to how to interpret the action and the story. The inclination to understand *MV* in terms of pre-existing categories is natural, and the play's ambiguity is understandably perplexing. In the passage cited above, Sidney is actually echoing Aristotle – who spoke of catharsis as a defining characteristic of either genre – and anticipating the more modern view of determining genre as "a two way process," first with respect to the content, and then "partly by the drama's reception by the reader or audience."[32]

That there in fact exists a large quantity of critical literature concerning *MV*'s generic category suggests that Sidney's concerns were not without merit. However, the question is not usually whether the play is one genre or another. Almost all scholars acknowledge that, were we to have to choose just one, *MV* is certainly intended to be "classified" as a comedy. Instead, the questions typically revolve around particular aspects of the play that are not comedic in the classical sense of the term, or that have tragic undertones. And although the strange structure of the plot – in particular, that the plot consists of two storylines that are quite distinct – is strictly speaking neither comedic nor tragic, its idiosyncratic form nevertheless suggests that any reading of *MV* which relies solely on generic interpretations of the play can only be partially correct. Finally, Sidney's concerns are not sufficiently strong to undermine the mixed-mode as a legitimate genre. Thus Tragicomedy is included in the title page of Jonson's folio alongside Comedy and Tragedy.

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[31] Sir Philip Sindey, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed JA Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 68.

[32] Paul Edmondson, "Comical and Tragical," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, ed Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 267.

No serious scholar has classified *The Merchant of Venice* as a tragedy – at least structurally and in the classical sense of the word. Therefore, I will not spend time discussing the structural particularity of tragedy. Rather, I focus on general theories about dramatic characterization and, more specifically, theories pertaining to the tragic character, because this is especially relevant to our interpretation of *MV* for reasons related to Shylock. Linda Woodbridge argues that "Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists were not fussy about keeping their genres and influences pure … A deeply tragic figure like Shylock appears in a comedy."[33] Woodbridge's statement is a simple observation, and relies on generic terms to describe *MV*. It does not – nor does it pretend to – explain why a "deeply tragic" character happens to appear in a comedy. Woodbridge does not defend her categorizations. But the language that she uses simultaneously draws our attention to the fact that there exists in the play a discrepancy that ought to be accounted for, and to the truth that theories of genre cannot guide us beyond the recognition of an interpretative problem. The controversy surrounding Shylock's character is significant to this discussion. Accordingly, I return to the topic of characters and characterization (broadly as well as with respect to *MV*) in the following section.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Shakespeare was neither confused nor ignorant when he broke from the tradition and wrote plays, such as *MV*, which do not conform to either genre. The deliberateness of Shakespeare's choices is evidenced throughout his plays; in various plays, Shakespeare parodies the mixing of genres – all the while continuing to mix them as well. The title of Peter Quince's play in *Dream* is "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (I.i.11-2). And in *Hamlet*, Polonius compliments the players for being "the best actors in the world either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited" (II.ii.396-400). In this way Shakespeare shows that he is aware of the distinctions that exist among the genres. This in turn suggests (a) that most (if not all) of Shakespeare's transgressions would be deliberate rather than a product of ignorance or neglect, and therefore (b) since they are deliberate, the changes are meant to achieve some effect that would not be achievable had Shakespeare kept to the classical parameters.

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[33] Linda Woodbridge, "Tragedies," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, ed Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 216.

The problem then remains how to go about understanding *The Merchant of Venice*, an undertaking that requires that we explore the interaction between the various parts of the play. As previously discussed, many scholars have thus turned to thematic interpretations as an alternative to generic readings of the play. However, at least with respect to *MV*, this approach has proven unsatisfactory. I discuss why in detail in the following section. If none of the usual procedures apply, how ought we to go about interpreting *The Merchant of Venice*?

Aristotle

In his work *On Poetics*, Aristotle was the first to speak about the forms and parts of poetics broadly, drama, in particular, and tragedy, specifically. The observations, descriptions, and analysis of drama that Aristotle puts forward are all useful interpretative tools with which to approach a play. Using Aristotle as a guide has proven to be a rewarding approach. By understanding exactly what a play is made of – for example, plot and characters – and by further understanding exactly what each part can do, cannot do, and ought to do, one is able to think and to speak about *The Merchant of Venice* in a way that accounts for more of the play than what is available in the existing literature.

There are a couple of likely objections to this approach. The first is that Aristotle is outdated, that his classification of dramatic types is no longer relevant, and that therefore his work ought to be acknowledged as foundational but then put back on the shelf in exchange for contemporary theories of poetics. The second is that we have no conclusive proof that Shakespeare ever encountered the *Poetics*, or any other work by Aristotle, and therefore it seems juvenile to simply "assert" a connection between Shakespeare and Aristotle. My response to the first objection ought to render a discussion of the second unnecessary, but for the sake of thoroughness, I address both.

A philosophic work, like Aristotle's *On Poetics*, either describes, reflects, and categorizes a phenomenon – as it exists in independence of any inquiry into it – or else it makes phenomena out of categories. For the purpose of this paper, and to avoid overcomplicating the subject, I put the second aside and speak only of the first type of inquiry.

To the extent that the categories in the *Poetics* are reflections and not creations of phenomena, the categories reflect things which exist necessarily in nature, indifferent to whether or not men speak of them. To the extent that the categories in the *Poetics* somehow correspond to natural divisions of the mimetic form, it is irrelevant whether Shakespeare encountered Aristotle's inquiry, because a mind of Shakespeare's penetration would have perceived precisely that same necessities and possibilities within the mimetic task as did Aristotle, and would have crafted art in respect of those laws no matter who else had or had not written them down. In this way, the plots and characters of Sophocles are not bound by Aristotle's explanation of them.[34] Instead, Aristotle's explanation of them was bound by the same natural necessities which bound Sophocles' creation of them. In this view, it is actually beside the point that Shakespeare was born after Aristotle, or that Aristotle was born after Sophocles but before Shakespeare. Therefore Aristotle's usefulness as a guide does not depend on whether Shakespeare read the *Poetics*.

Nevertheless, there are good arguments to be made that Shakespeare did in fact encounter Aristotle and his work, either directly or indirectly. The usual objection arises out of Jonson's remark that Shakespeare knew only "small Latin, and less Greek," which would thus imply that Shakespeare could not have read any of Aristotle's work. But there is reason to believe that despite Shakespeare's apparent ignorance of ancient languages, he would have encountered Aristotle nonetheless. Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out that since the age of seven, Shakespeare was likely enrolled in the Stratford free grammar school, "whose central education system was total immersion in Latin."[35] Thus, while Shakespeare may have known very little Greek (although, perhaps this too ought to be suspected), he was certainly proficient in Latin. Dewar-Watson suggests that "the relative inaccessibility of Greek literature in England makes it more, rather than less, likely that Shakespeare was able to read the *Poetics*, because of its circulation in Latin."[36] As it so happens, Jonson owned a copy of the *Poetics* which had a parallel Greek-Latin translation.[37] Thus it becomes increasingly probable that Shakespeare had some direct exposure to the *Poetics*. Furthermore, even if he did not read the text in either Latin or ancient Greek, the text was translated into other European languages, for example Italian,[38] in which Shakespeare is known to have been proficient.

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[34] That is not to say that Shakespeare was not influenced by Aristotle. Only that Aristotle speaks in the *Poetics* of things which exists naturally in nature – such as beginnings and end – and which would therefore be reflected in poetry regardless of whether Aristotle spoke of them or not.

[35] Stephan Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 25.

[36] Sarah Dewar-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle," *Literature Compass* 1 (2004): 2 DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2004.87.x.

[37] Ibid

Supposing, for a moment, that Shakespeare never read the *Poetics*, he is nevertheless likely to have become familiar with its central tenets. As previously mentioned, the English Renaissance was particularly interested in reviving ancient or classical traditions, and the arts (broadly) were no exception. Thus Dewar-Watson argues that the "significance of mediating sources is often underestimated, but the transmission of Greek literature though a variety of textual and oral sources clearly played a crucial role in a culture which was intent on rediscovering its classical heritage, but in which direct access to Greek texts remained the privilege of the scholarly elite."[39] Put another way, early modern theorists and artists, beginning with the Italians, turned to Aristotelian theory as the foundation for their own commentary. In this way, A.C. Bradley argues that he is justified for interpreting Shakespearean tragedy through an Aristotelian lens, because while "it was a favorite idea that Shakespeare was totally ignorant of the 'rule," nevertheless, "this is quite incredible … [Shakespeare] could find pretty well all of them in a book so current and famous as Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*."[40]

It is almost extremely difficult for literary criticism to escape (intentionally or otherwise) the influence of Aristotle. For example, Crewe remarks that "Notwithstanding the significant impact of theory on public rather than just academic literary cognition, the world of reviewing and reception has never ceased to be Aristotelian."[41] This claim is supported by Dewar-Watson, who argues that "although it is now more usual for Aristotle's premises to operate on the level of critical subject rather than as part of an explicit interpretative strategy … this shift of emphasis should not be taken to imply a diminution in Aristotle's influence; rather, it indicates how fully his ideas have been assimilated into critical tradition."[42] It therefore would appear impossible to speak of Shakespeare without borrowing in some way from Aristotle's critical theory. With this in mind, and following a brief interlude to examine some of the problems with alternative approaches as well as some of the central issues surrounding the play, I turn to Aristotle for help in understanding *The Merchant of Venice*.

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[38] Dewar-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle," 3.

[39] Dewar-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle,"4.

[40] A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 55-56

[41] Jonathan Crewe, "Reclaiming Character?" *Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Review*. 36 (2006): 37 International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text, EBSCOhost

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[42] Dewar-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle," 45.

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Alternative interpretations and critical issues

The space of this paper does not permit a full survey of the various interpretive approaches that have been applied to *The Merchant of Venice* since the seventeenth century. However, thorough surveys are available, such as John W Mahon's introduction to *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*. Mahon titles his introduction "The Fortunes of *The Merchant of Venice* from 1596 to 2001," and he fulfills the promise implied in the title by presenting a (mostly) objective summary of the significant contributions to the critical literature, beginning from what has survived from the period closest to the play's initial performance. As mentioned, I bracket the issue of genre, and I concentrate mostly on the thematic approach – in large part because this approach seems to dominate contemporary *MV* criticism. To the thematic approach I now add a second, "character criticism," because of the amount of public and critical attention the character of Shylock has received throughout the centuries. Shylock's generic ambiguity is often identified as the cause of our generally confused understanding of the play.[43] Yet, while I will address this point, it is the tendency to understand *MV* and Shakespeare's other plays in term of characters – championed by A. C. Bradley – which I hope to challenge or to qualify. My objective in this section is therefore to sufficiently ground the reader in two broad subjects – the thematic approach and character criticism – but as they relate to *MV*. Interestingly, a third issue naturally arises out of the two, which is the concern for the play's apparent disunity of plot, or its structure, briefly touched upon in the introduction.

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[43] A.C. Bradley argues that "One reason why the Merchant of Venice fails to satisfy us is that Shylock is a tragic character, and we cannot believe in his accepting his defeat and the conditions imposed on him." Bradley, *Shakespearian Tragedy*, 13.

The Thematic Approach

Methods of interpretations, classified as other than strictly thematic, have surfaced during the twentieth century. For example, beginning with Freud – who wrote a paper examining the significance of the three caskets – there is the psychoanalytic approach. Two more recent approaches are the feminist approach[44] and postcolonialism.[45] The main problem with the latter two approaches is that they approach the play – or any play, in fact – with a lens through which to interpret the action, the characters, and the overall story. While perhaps most interpretive methods fall under a similar trap of projecting an idea o*nto* the play – as opposed to beginning *from* the play – I find gendered and postcolonialist approaches particularly alienating. Gendered readings of Shakespearean plays do not pretend to present cohesive interpretations, because the focus is rather on how a particular phenomenon manifests itself in the literature. Thus for persons who do not accept the initial (gendered/postcolonialist) theory as axiomatic, the interpretations are of significantly less interest or relevance.

The psychoanalytic approach is more nuanced, and can be seen as a cousin to "character criticism" in its necessary focus on character. In fact, character criticism, which was practiced before the psychoanalytic approach, can nevertheless be said to incorporate key aspects of the psychoanalytic approach. For example, in “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” Freud touches upon the role of choice in *MV*, and in *Comic Transformation is Shakespeare*, Ruth Nevo attempts to contextualize the play in terms of “will” (in particular, Antonio’s and Bassanio’s respective wills). These two facets of the human experience, choice and will, are two subjects with which character criticism is similarly concerned. On the other hand, the psychoanalytic approaches are so “specialized” that, much like gendered approaches or postcolonialism, the field of vision is again alienating and only useful to those who support the initial theory. This approach consequently leads to such erroneous conclusions as the one put forward by Leonard Tennenhouse: “By replacing Shylock with Portia in the triangular relationship with Bassanio and Antonio, Shakespeare has substituted for an orally destructive father a nurturing mother.”[46] Tennenhouse puts forward an interpretation that has no obvious basis in the text. In fact, perhaps one of the most popular readings of the Antonio-Bassanio dynamic – at least in the twentieth century – is that they are in an implicit homosexual relationship. To everyone – save perhaps to the psychoanalysts – eroticism is the opposite of paternal love; in this light, the notion that Antonio represents Bassanio’s father is absurd. Finally, the tendency of the psychoanalytic approach is to reinterpret various “things” such as caskets as “death wishes,” – an association which has obvious validity, but not in the world of the play – once more exhibits a willful desire to (mis)understand *MV* through the preconceived terms of a specific theory or discipline.

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[44] See Steve Patterson, "The Bankruptcy of Homeoerotic Amity in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 9-32 http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902109; Alan Sinfield, "How to Read The Merchant of Venice without Being Heterosexist," in *Alternative Shakespeare, Volume 2,* ed by Terence Hawkes, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and the Structure of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 no 1 (1987): 19-33 http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870399.

[45] Kim F Hall, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonisation and Miscegenation in The Merchant of Venice," *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992): 87-111.

The thematic approach is the most likely to succeed because it begins by identifying a theme which unites the different parts of the play. By the late nineteenth century, the critic Fredrick Boas argued that the approach was valid, since it has previously been demonstrated that “there runs through many of Shakespeare’s dramas a leading theme which appears, with variations, in the several sections of the plot." As such, there cannot be anything "*a priori* inadmissible in the many attempts that have been made to discover such a theme in *The Merchant of Venice*," thereby fixing "a central point round which the whole action revolves."[47] Although Boas concluded that the thematic approach ultimately was not rewarding when applied to *MV*, the numerous commentaries on the play that continue to employ the approach suggests that the thematic approach requires further consideration. Below I provide a brief summary of several examples of thematic interpretations of the play.

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[46] Mahon, “The Fortune,” 38.

In "The Mature Comedies," Frank Kermode argues that *MV* is about "judgment, redemption, and mercy," and in this view suggests that the play "begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love."[48] According to Kermode, Shakespeare is not subtle, and the play "all the time tells its audience that this is the subject; only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme." Yet *MV* is no more about judgment and mercy than it is "about" commerce and capitalism or about Christian love. Furthermore, although the fifth act begins with a discussion of the heavenly spheres (from whence Kermode derives the impression of harmony), it nevertheless occurs in the fictional world of Belmont – as opposed to the "real" world of Venice – a variable which Kermode does not sufficiently take into account. As Allan Bloom notes, "Belmont is the seat of love; but it does not exist; it is a utopia … The realization of Belmont does not solve the problems of Venice; it mitigates their bleakness for those who understand."[49]

Several critics have agreed with the main component of Kermode's interpretation, which is the claim that the *MV* is concerned with judgment, redemption, and mercy. Among the group

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47 Fredrick S Boas , Shakespeare and his Predecessors (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) 218
48 Mahon, "The Fortune," 44.
[49] Allan Bloom, "On Christian and Jew: The Merchant of Venice," In *Shakespeare's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 39.

is A.N. Moody, who qualifies his own interpretation by describing the play's center as ultimately ironic. In this way, Moody joins critical commentators such as Richard Levin, and performers such as Edmund Kean, who understand the Christian characters in the play – for example, Antonio and Portia – as hypocrites. For Moody, the play is hence about "the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practicing their ideals of love and mercy." Ultimately, this means that the play shows "the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges, whose triumph is even more a matter of justice than his would have been. In this view the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence."[50] Thus while Kermode and Moody both begin by recognizing identical themes, Kermode presents a literal interpretation and Moody advances an ironic one.

In "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" Barbara Lewalski argues that the different parts of the plot can be understood as an allegorical whole, citing as a founding example the work of Dante.[51] According to Lewalski, "In contrast to personification allegory wherein a particular is created to embody an insensible, Dante's symbolic method causes a particular real situation to suggest a meaning or meanings beyond itself."[52] In this view, Lewalski is able to identify a central theme: "In *MV* Shakespeare, like Dante, is ultimately concerned with the nature of Christian life," and here Shakespeare in particular means to "explore and define Christian love and its antitheses."[53] Lewalski argues that Antonio is the embodiment of Christian love, while "Shylock functions as one (but not the only) antithesis to it."[54] The story of Bassanio and the casket trial folds in nicely as an allegorical and moral supplement to Antonio's story: "At the moral level, the incident explores the implications of Christian love in romantic relationship, whereas Antonio's story deals with Christian love in terms of friendship and social intercourse."[55]At the same time, "at the 'allegorical' level, the caskets signify everyman's choice of the paths to spiritual life and death."[56]

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[50] Mahon, "The Fortune," 45.

[51] An alternative allegorical interpretation of The Merchant of Venice can be found in René E Fortin, "Lancelot and the Uses of Allegory in The Merchant of Venice," *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900 14, no 2 (1974) http://www.jstor.org/stable/450053

[52] Barbara Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13, no 3 (1962) http://www.jstor.org/stable/2866826.

[53] Lewalski "Biblical Allusion and Allegory," 328, 329.

Several scholars have challenged Lewalski's allegorical and thematic reading of *MV*. In *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*, written almost a century before Lewalski published her paper, Boas anticipates and serves as a critique of Lewalski, rejecting a Christian interpretation of the play. "To maintain that Shylock's defeat is a triumph of Christian conciliatory love, or mediating mercy over law, is absurd."[57] Instead, Boas suggests that "the issue over Antonio is fought out between the two great legal systems of antiquity."[58] In this way, Lewalski and Boas both recognize the legal aspects of the play, they just offer different interpretations. In a similar way, Stephen Marx juxtaposes Lewalski's interpretation of Belmont to that of Richard Levin's in *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy*, borrowing from Levin his skepticism regarding whether *MV* advocates the triumph of Christian love: "Rather than figur[ing] forth a 'Heavenly City' [Lewalski's words] or a romantic fairy-land or music and beauty that contrasts with the self-seeking mercantile world of Venice, Belmont is a country-club suburb that excludes Jews, homosexuals, and foreigners of any complexion, disguising its own cutthroat competition for status and control with surface gentility."[59] Yet Marx's description of Belmont overlooks the honest simplicity with which Lorenzo speaks of the heavenly music – indeed, that Belmont is a place where music figures so prominently contradicts any interpretation of it as a place of hypocrites because hypocrites would not “sit and let the sounds of music/Creep into our ears” (V.i.55-6). Nevertheless, Lewalski is not correct either, and I cite both Boas and Marx as examples not only of critics who have rejected Lewalski’s interpretation, but, particularly in the case of Marx, of how thematic interpretations in general are too easily projected onto actions. In this view, Mahon asks whether it is “possible that a thematic approach like Lewalski’s allows for harmony but that consideration of characters as staged (Shylock’s departure after 4.1 and Antonio’s isolation in 5.1) undermines the thematic harmonies? … [C]an we argue that thematic harmony is possible on the page, in the study, but not on the stage?”[60]

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[54] Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory," 329.
[55]Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory," 335.
[56] Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory," 336.
[57] Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, 232
[58] Ibid
[59] Mahon, "The Fortune," 43.

It is worth investigating whether “thematic harmony” is possible – or simply even what the phrase suggests. Does Mahon mean to argue that Lewalski’s thematic interpretation has reconciled all of the separate parts of the play under the banner of Christian love? Or rather that while Lewalski has correctly identified a theme that is present in the different scenes, it does not extend far enough to explain the structural features and plot irregularities? His reference to Shylock’s departure and Antonio’s isolation suggests that the latter is more probable. Even permitting the supposition that Belmont is intended to figure as the Heavenly City, this still does not reconcile the remainder of the play to the seemingly disparate conclusion we find in Act V. The contrast between the violence of Venice in Act IV and the quiet music of Belmont in Act V cannot but be intentional; that we see the same characters (save one) in both locations suggests that whatever figurative meaning each place is supposed to represent, it can only extend so far to characters who pass through both worlds. Different characters have been identified as the play’s Christ-figure. Broadly, the weakness of Lewalski’s approach – which is shared by all thematic and allegorical interpretations – is that it is too descriptive in nature, and therefore necessarily overlooks the more structural elements of the play – a point Mahon also makes in the passage cited above.

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[60] Mahon, “The Fortune,” 45.

Character Criticism

Character criticism is a form of literary analysis. Beginning, most famously, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge – who said that he had “a smack of Hamlet” in him[61] – both the literary public and critical scholars have shown what Orgel calls “a general tendency to locate the truth of drama in the life of its characters, whether historical or not, and to assume for them an existence before and beyond the play.”[62] The earliest fully formed character portrait is found in John Dryden’s “The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy,” written in 1679. In it, Dryden attributes the bad qualities of *The Tempest*’s Caliban to psychological influences often based on hypotheticals – i.e. not taken directly from the text.[63] For example, Dryden argues that Caliban’s wickedness is not only a product of his being a slave, but also a genetic consequence, derived from his devilish father.[64]

The inclination to comprehend Shakespearean characters as much more than “marks on a page”[65] extends beyond the critical audience and into the general audience, which is best exemplified by Mary Cowden Clark’s *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*, first published in the middle of the nineteenth century. The book is divided into five chapters, each dedicated to the childhood history of one Shakespearean heroine. For example, the chapter "Ophelia The Rose of Elsinore," details the life of Ophelia from infancy up until the point when Laertes returns to Denmark from his studies in France. In "Confusing Shakespeare's Characters with Real People," Michael Bristol explains that Shakespeare's characters "are people who live in a world we can understand. We don't need any specialized historical knowledge to understand Constance or Shylock or Lady Macduff .. Our response to these dramatic moments is underwritten by the shared complexity of our human emotions."[66]

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[61] Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare’s Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 36.
[62] Orgel, *Imaging Shakespeare*, 40.
[63] Desmet, “Character Criticism,” 352.
[64] Ibid
[65] There is extensive literature debating the “role” of Shakespearean characters. For example, see Jonathon Goldberg, *Shakespeare’s Hand* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2003); L. C. Knights, “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” in *Explorations: Essays in Criticism Mainly on the Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), 1-39; Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights, ed *Shakespeare and Character* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Although, as Orgel remarks, literary exercises such as Clark's have fallen out of fashion,[67] they can nevertheless act as a useful proxy for what motivates much of the scholarship behind character criticism. In "How Many Children Hath Lady Macbeth?" L.C. Knights acknowledges the popular description of Shakespeare as "pre-eminently a great 'creator of characters,'" but warns that this characterization causes literary scholars to be concerned "with everything, in short, except with the words on the page." [68] Nevertheless, the tendency to examine a Shakespearean play by speaking primarily in terms of its characters does not extend to the early modern audience. According to Christy Desmet, "Shakespearean character criticism, as we understand it today, would have seemed alien to Renaissance audience. The term 'character,' which derives from the Greek word for a graphic 'mark' or alphabetical letter, indicates a sharply drawn figure, based on social, psychological stereotypes."[69] Thus, instead of thinking of characters as "virtual people," the early modern audience approached a character in terms of the character's "type". For example, Jaques from *As You Like It* and Hamlet both resemble the "type" of the disaffected courtier.[70]

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[66] Michael Bristol, "Confusing Shakespeare's Characters with Real People," in *Shakespeare and Character*, ed Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 39.
[67] Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 37.
[68] Knights, "How Many Children," 1.
[69] Desmet, "Character Criticism," 351.

This approach is in large part owing to the wide spread performance and popularity of morality plays, a genre dating from the medieval theater. A distinguishing feature of the morality play is characters with functional names that place them either on the side of good or evil, such as Vice, Diligence, or Idleness. The moral or message of the play is very easy to discern, because the outline of the play can read something like the following: "Penance touches Mankind's heart with his lance and saves him from his wicked companions, the Seven Deadly Sins."[71] In this way, each "character" in a morality play is the personification of a single quality or thing. As such, any attempt to imagine the life of Penance before his appearance on stage would be without purpose because Penance was always Penance and would continue to be Penance, never changing. While Shakespearean characters are almost universally more nuanced than the characters in the morality plays, this did not prevent Shakespeare from drawing from the tradition of morality plays,[72] or an early modern audience from understanding Shakespearean characters in terms of the characters' position in the plot – i.e. hero, villain, or clown.

With character criticism, the *place* of the characters within the general story has lost much of its significance, and instead the action, or plot, came to be seen as originating from the characters. Thus A.C. Bradley describes the process as such:

> We see a number of human beings placed in certain circumstances; and we see, arising from the cooperation of their characters in these circumstances, certain

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[70] Ibid

[71] This is Greenblatt's summary of *The Castle of Perseverance*. Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 33.

[72] According to Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespeare was extremely familiar with morality plays, likely having seen several performed in his childhood. For a detailed account of visible influences in Shakespeare's plays, see Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 32-33.

> actions. These actions beget others, and these others beget others again … The effect of such a series on the imagination is to make us regard the sufferings which accompany it, and the catastrophe in which it ends, not only equally as something which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused by them. [73]

Although Bradley's published lectures on Shakespearean characters are concerned almost exclusively with the tragedies, his remarks are nevertheless useful for their insights into the general relationship between plot and character. Broadly, Bradley argues that the "center of tragedy" is located in the character, as it "may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character or in character issuing in action."[74] According to Bradley, to say that Shakespeare's interest "lay in mere character, or was a psychological interest, would be a great mistake, for he was dramatic to the tips of his fingers … But for the opposite extreme, for the abstraction of mere 'plot' (which is a very different thing from the tragic 'action') … it is clear that he cared even less."[75] In Shakespearean plays, an interest in plot "is subordinate to others," and hence as an audience we "are rarely conscious of [plot] apart" from other interests, and strongly feel that "the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character."[76] In this view, we approach the story in terms of the individual choices or deeds of the characters, which means that the plot is divided into parts, and therefore is not examined as a whole.

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[73] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 6.

[74] Ibid

[75] Ibid

[76] Ibid 6-7

If we understand the play in terms of its characters – mostly neglecting the "abstraction of mere 'plot' – then, paradoxically, this can often result in the misinterpretation of the characters. Bradley writes that "One reason *The Merchant of Venice* fails to satisfy us is that Shylock is a tragic character, and that we cannot believe in his accepting his defeat and the conditions imposed on him. This is a case where Shakespeare's imagination ran away with him, so that he drew a figure with which the destined pleasant ending would not harmonize."[77] Harold Bloom agrees with Bradley that "Shylock got away from Shakespeare seems clear enough."[78] Yet Shylock is not a tragic character transplanted into a comedy. Furthermore, it is beside the point whether Shylock's acquiescence is believable or not. The likelihood of Shakespeare intending "to give us a pathetic monster in Shylock, but being Shakespeare, he gave us Shylock," is improbable exactly because "being Shakespeare" he would be able to successfully form the precise character that he intended.

The influence of character criticism in the university is considered to be greatly diminished. According to Desmet, "Character criticism rose with the reputation of Shakespeare as an author in the Restoration and eighteenth century; reached its high point as a critical genre during the Romantic and Victorian periods … and declined after the 1930s[.]"[79] Nevertheless, the theoretical underpinning of the approach continues to influence present-day commentaries, and the notion of characters as "virtual persons" has become commonplace in the age of the novel.

Finally, and of particular pertinence to this paper, Jonathon Crewe unites Aristotelian theory with character criticism, and sketches the influence of Aristotle's theory of mimesis from early modern poetics to modern times. Crewe argues that “Both the appeal and durability of ‘character’ may owe something to people’s ordinary human interest in other people. The vividly realized, exemplary ones of drama and fiction take on a life of their own in the public imagination. Their ability to do so is an effect of the deliberate mimesis-imitation of life that Aristotle posited as a fundamental life capacity.”[80] Crewe notes the shift in the “character-action ratio,” beginning from the early modern poetics of Sidney and Spenser, and which is carried on today, the effect of which is “to produce stable, iconic character in a shifting medium of action.”[81]

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[77] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 13.

[78] Harold Bloom, *Introduction to Modern Critical Interpretations:* The Merchant of Venice (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 2.

[79] Desmet, "Character Criticism," 351

Shylock

With respect to *The Merchant of Venice*, most of the critical attention since the sixteenth century has been directed at the character of Shylock; Portia comes in at a distant second. Thus Mahon notes that “Among Shakespeare’s characters, only Hamlet has inspired more critical commentary than Shylock.”[82] This tendency in itself is not strange because (for reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper, but which are mostly obvious) a character is what is most visible out of all of the different parts that together comprise a play.[83]

However, what is not immediately clear is why and how a *character* (or a few characters) can guide our understanding of a particular drama, when this has traditionally has been the role of the *plot*.[84] Whether a play was thought to be a tragedy or a comedy depended on its ending –

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[80] Crewe, “Reclaiming Character,” 37

[81] Ibid

[82] Mahon, “The Fortune,” 1.

[83] Aristotle lists six different parts, which I discuss in great detail in the following sections.

[84] Lena Cowen Orlin notes that “In practice, the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare’s time were differentiated more in terms of plot resolution … Comedies ended with characters pairing off for marriage, and tragedies

not on the audience's dislike or sympathy for a particular character. Harold Bloom unintentionally presents us with an explanation as to how characters are able to strongly affect our interpretation of a play when he says that "Shylock is to the world of the comedies and romances what Hamlet is to the tragedies, and Falstaff to the histories: a representation so original as to be perpetually bewildering to us."[85] Putting aside, for a moment, the question of Shylock's "originality" – which Bloom himself appears to contradict when he says (only a few pages later) "We must not underestimate the power and influence of Shakespearean mimesis, even when it is *deliberately* unoriginal, as it is in Shylock"[86] – what underlies Bloom's statement is the supposition that characters can escape their "generic mold." If characters are not limited by the rules of genre, then it is logical to suppose that they can in turn influence the "classification" of the play in which they are a part – which, as discussed in the introduction, then affects how accessible the play is to the general public and to literary critics. Thus both H.W. Hudson can write that "Shylock's character is essentially tragic; there is none of the proper timber of comedy about him,"[87] and Henrich Heine can assert that "Shakespeare, as I think, has clearly enough intimated that he does not in any way consider Shylock a tragic character,"[88] about the same character.

The title of the play has attracted its share of controversy derived from opposing interpretations of the characters and their position within the framework of the play. An audience knows that *Hamlet* is about Hamlet before the play begins because Hamlet is the "title

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concluded with many dead bodies on the stage." Lena Cowen Orlin, "Introduction to Shakespearean Genres," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide* ed Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 169.

[85] Bloom, *Introduction*, 1.

[86] Bloom, *Introduction*, 5.

[87] Mahon, "The Fortune," 31.

[88] Heinrich Hein, "Shakespeare justifies 'an unfortunate race,'" in *Shakespeare The Critical Tradition: The Merchant of Venice*, edited by William Baker and Brian Vickers (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005) 54

character", and the same can be said for other plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cornelius*. But while there are additional plays by Shakespeare, other than *MV*, whose title does not consist of a character's name, unlike *MV*, these titles are completely free of references to people altogether – the one other exception being *The Two Gentleman of Verona*. That the "merchant" of Venice is not directly named in the title has been sufficient cause for the reinterpretation of the title. This in turn illustrates that how a particular critic or audience member sees Shylock can often come to inform the manner in which he understands the play as a whole. The original entry in the Stationer's Register for 1598 refers to the play a "booke of the Merchaunt of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce"[89]; in 1701 Lord Landsdowne renamed his production of the play "The Jew of Venice"[90]; three hundred years later, Harold Bloom writes that "Shakespeare after all wrote what might as well be called *The Jew of Venice*, in clear rivalry with his precursor Marlowe's *The Jew of Matla*."[91] Renaming the title after Shylock willfully ignores the text of the play, in which Antonio is referred to as "the noble merchant Antonio." At the very least there is a playful ambiguity in the title.

The most precise classification of the play thus far is found in the 1623 Folio, where *MV* is listed as a "comicalle historie." Referring to the Folio, Mahon argues that "One might speak of the 'comedy' that revolves around the casket-test and of the 'history' that unfolds as a result of the pound of flesh plot."[92] In light of Orgel's comment, cited above, it is noteworthy that Mahon describes the pound of flesh plot (of which Shylock is at the center) as the historical element – especially because it is entirely fantastical, as Mahon must be aware. If the story itself is not historical, than the "history" must hence be located in some other aspect of the drama; in *MV*, the only alternative explanation is that the characters (either Antonio or Shylock) that figure in the pound of flesh plot are sufficiently nuanced as to be appear to be real or historical. Antonio does not develop or change throughout the play; it is a feat all the more notable because even though his recklessness almost killed him once, in the final act he seems eager to offer his life as surety for the sake of Bassanio. In this way, Antonio is more of a caricature than a fully developed character, which leaves Shylock as the character which lends the pound of flesh plot its historical texture.

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[89] Leslie A Fielder. "These be Christian Husbands" In *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Merchant of Venice*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 64.
[90] Ibid
[91] Bloom, *Introduction*, 1.
[92] Mahon, "The Fortune," 11.

While other characters in *MV* have been the subject of critical commentaries, most notably Portia and Antonio, none other than Shylock are thought of as either undermining its generic unity or as seriously complicating our reading of the play. Although Shylock is a character in a comedy, his role on stage concludes in such a manner that he is often described as either tragic or some analogous variation of the theme. Harold Bloom suggests that "Shylock is essentially a comic representation rendered something other than comic," and describes Shylock as "at once comic and frightening."[93] Throughout the centuries, actors have seized upon "the ambiguous character of Shylock,"[94] and preformed him as either a clownish villain or a sympathetic, tragic figure. Leslie Fielder notes that at the start of the eighteenth century, "the appeal of Shylock was not so much pathetic as horrific and grotesque. It took three generations of nineteenth century romantic actors to make the Jew seem sympathetic as well as central[.]"[95] During the eighteenth century, the actor Thomas Dogget played Shylock as a comic character in Granville's adaption of the play, *The Jew of Venice*.[96] Not until 1740, beginning with Charles Macklin's Shylock, did actors return to the original text; Macklin was the first performer to conceive of Shylock as "a terrifying villain with no redeeming features, eaten up with malice and vindictiveness[.]"[97] According to Orgel, "The transformation of the sympathetic Shylock, psychologically human and essentially a martyr to Christian intolerance, was the work of Edmund Kean. Kean's Shylock was far less localized than Macklin's had been, a victim but recognizable as an outsider."[98] By 1879, the transformation of Shylock from comic figure to tragic character had been so thoroughly accepted that the actor Henry Irving wrote "For that Shakespeare intended us to regard the Jew of Venice with feelings of exalted pity and commiseration I have no doubt."[99] This is reflected in the response of the audience as well. Around the same time as Irving, the poet Heinrich Heine recalled his encounter with a member of `the audience during a performance of the play:

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[93] Bloom, *Introduction*, 3,5.
[94] Mahon "The Fortune," 11.
[95] Fielder, "These be Christian," 64
[96] Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 144-145.

> When I saw this play acted at Drury Lane a beautiful pale Englishwoman standing beside me burst into tears at the end of the fourth act, crying out several times, 'the poor man is wronged.' She had a refined classical face and large dark eyes which I could not forgot because they had wept for Shylock. [100]

Structural Problems

Many literary critics writing on *MV* begin from the structural disunity of the plot. For example, Lawrence Danson gives his introduction of the play the title "By Two-Headed Janus," alluding to the distinct quality of the two dominant storylines.[101] Granville-Barker argues that the flesh bond plot and the casket plot "do not naturally march together,"[102] and asks "How is the flimsy theme of the caskets to be kept in countenance beside its grimly powerful rival?"[103] If the critical scholar finds that the separate parts cannot be reconciled into a harmonious whole, then the disunity is usually bracketed and dismissed as an oversight. In this view Harold Bloom writes "That Shylock got away from Shakespeare seems clear enough."[104] Often the character of Shylock is presented as the 'tipping point,' and representative of the flesh bond plot which overshadows its less weighty counterpart, the casket trial. The general tendency among critics who propose a harmonizing interpretation of the play, is to establish structural unity and balance by increasing the importance of the casket trial at the expense of the flesh bond plot.

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[97] Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 145.
[98] Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 146.
[99] Henry Irving, "Shylock: an actor's view," in *Shakespeare The Critical Tradition: The Merchant of Venice*, ed William Baker and Brian Vickers (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005) 126.
[100] Heine, "Shakespeare Justifies," 54.

Joan Ozark Holmer and Thomas H Fujimura both begin from the recognition that the majority of literary criticism centers around the flesh bond plot, but argue that the correct approach ought to begin from the casket trial instead. Holmer suggests that Shakespeare uses the casket trial "as a test of wisdom … illustrating character and defining values by which character and action may be understood with a single dramatic unity of interwoven plots."[105] Harmony can be found between the two stories if we understand that "The values informing Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock are intimately related to the values symbolized by the casket test, thus contributing to the unity of the play's two basic plots."[106] Like Lewalski, Holmer puts forth a Christian interpretation of the text, but instead of a lesson in Christian love, she argues that MV is about the attainment of spiritual wisdom, or "the ability to perceive the spirit behind the letter so that tone can discriminate between appearance and reality and can choose rightly[.]"[107]

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[101] Mahon "The Fortune," 35.

[102] Herbert S Donow, "Shakespeare's Caskets: Unity in The Merchant of Venice," in *Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Reviews*, ed J. Leeds Barroll, III, Google books edition, 86.

[103] Mahon "The Fortune," 39.

[104] Bloom. "Introduction," 2

[105] Joan Ozark Holmer, "Loving Wisely and the Casket Test: Symbolic and Structural Unity in The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Studies*, 11 (1978): 53.

[106] Holmer, "Loving Wisely," 60.

Fujimura divides the play into three distinct worlds instead of two. Rather than separating the *MV* according to location – Venice and Belmont – or even storylines – the flesh bond and the casket trial – he divides the play according "to what is central to the drama," which are "action, and the mode (romantic, realistic, ironic) which determines the structure of the action."[108] Fujimura then assigns each world its central characters: Bassanio-Portia, Antonio, and Shylock, respectively.[109] Like Fujimura, Alice Benston divides *MV* into three parts, but instead of modes, she conceives of the play as a series of trials:

> The basic form of the play is tripartite: Bassanio's casket scene, Shylock's trial, and the ring episode are equal partners in a drama concerned primarily not with law versus mercy, but with the law itself and its complex relationship to vice, virtue, and vicissitude … And the play's crucial figure is neither Antonio nor Shylock but Portia, since it is her attitude toward the law that is central for these trials.[110]

Yet Benston perhaps takes the tripartite nature of the play too far when she suggests that Antonio is the symbolic "father" of Bassanio, and the third father in the play, thus overlooking the elder Gobbo as the more probable third. According to Benston, all three fathers surrender their control, previously exercised "… through images of death. Portia's father controls her actions through his death-bed plan of the caskets. Interestingly, Antonio manipulates Bassanio only after the threat to his life had occurred. And Shylock's control over Jessica also suggests death."[111]

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[107] Ibid

[108] Thomas H Fujimura, "Mode and Structure in *The Merchant of Venice*," *PMLA* 81 no 7 (1966): 499 http://www.jstor.org/stable/461206.

[109] Ibid

[110] Mahon "The Fortune," 63.

In "Shakespeare's Caskets: Unity in The Merchant of Venice," Herbert S Donow places Jessica's elopement at the forefront, alongside the casket trial, because "these two lines of action, far from being incidental or irrelevant, are vitally important to the scheme of the play."[112] While the flesh bond story "is the most sensational part of the play," according to Donow, "the main events center on the courtship of Portia and, secondly on Jessica's elopement."[113] The mutual hatred between Shylock and Antonio, usury, and anti-Semitism are "important as themes, and without them the play would have little chance to excite a modern audience, but the primary dramatic situation is not significantly altered by the presence of these extraneous elements."[114]

The presumption underlying most – if not all – of these approaches is that the disharmony expressed through the structural disunity needs to be resolved. I question whether the imbalance between the casket plot and the flesh bond plot is in fact a weakness of the structural integrity of the narrative. The common variable in all of these interpretations and criticism is that general agreement that the end effect upon the audience is oftentimes disturbing and usually unsatisfactory. The relationship between the production and the performance of a play in early-modern England was "very close indeed"; much closer the theater experience which follows in subsequent centuries. [115] According to Robert Weimann,

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[111] Ibid

[112] Donow, "Shakespeare's Caskets," 86

[113] Ibid

[114] Donow, "Shakespeare's Caskets," 87

[115] Robert Weimann, "Shakespeare's Theater: Tradition and Experiment," in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Longman, 1992) 122.

> [T]he actor-audience relationship was not a subordinate relationship, but a dynamic and essential element of dramaturgy. For the Elizabethan playgoer the drama was more than a play taking place on a stage separated from the audience; it was an event in progress in which good listening and watching were 'rewarded by a sense of feeling part of the performance.'"[116]

In this view, the possibility that the disunity of plot and structural irregularity of the play is a poetic device employed by the poet for a particular end ought to be explored.

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[116] Ibid

+III+

There are multiple ways to approach a Shakespearean text, and an Aristotelian reading is one out of the many options. The objective of this paper is to present an interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* alternative to the recent criticism. As previously discussed, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a foundational text of literary criticism and therefore influences the language and conceptual framework of most modern literary criticism. Paradoxically, contemporary scholars nevertheless largely overlook the *Poetics* as an instructional resource that can guide their interpretations of a text. *The Merchant of Venice* presents several interpretive problems. Why does the play have two storylines? Why did Shakespeare choose to produce the specific degree of disjunction that the combination of these two storylines produces, and what are the consequent effects on the audience and the reader? How can we understand the relative weight allotted to plot and to characters in the play? Through the *Poetics*, I explore *MV* with these questions in mind. I begin with a brief sketch of the historical circumstances surrounding the *Poetics*. The sections that follow each examine a particular aspect of the *Poetics* and then apply it to the *MV*.

Introduction to **On Poetics**

The only known critical work on poetry that predates Aristotle's *On Poetics* is Plato's *Ion*. In ancient Greece, poetry was the attempt at a comprehensible translation of the divinely-inspired utterances of the *prophētēs*, or temple oracles.[117] Poets gave articulation to the divine vision, which was imagistic in nature, and which was passed to them through the enigmatic visions of the *Puthiā*. Gregory Nagy offers as an example the *prophētēs* of the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, who "declares, formalizes as a speech-act, the words of the inspired *mantis*."[118] At Delphi, a priestess known as *Puthiā* (or Pythia) held the office of the inspired *mantis.* Nagy concludes that "we know it was the Pythia, not the *prophētēs* who controlled the *content* of the manic utterances," and therefore, he infers "that *prophētēs* controlled the *form*," while the *mantis* – as "the intermediary between the source of information and the *prophētēs*" – "recomposed of the inspired message in poetic form."[119] Poets who wanted a poem to bare the mark of authority hence compared themselves to persons who consult the oracle, and to whom the oracle responds through the intermediacy of the Pythia.[120] In this way, for the ancient Greeks there was an implicit connection between the poetry, prophesy, and the divine.

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[117] Gregory Nagy offers a detailed historical account of prophesy and poetry in ancient Greece.

The older Homeric era poetry was different from the later Greek poetry in that the ancient Greeks thought of it as literal copies of the already articulated speeches of the muses. Accordingly, the *Odyssey* begins with the invocation of the Muses, "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far journeys, after he sacked Troy's citadel" (Book I, 1-2). Nagy notes that "the word for Muse reflects an earlier stage when … the one who is inspired and the one who speaks the words of inspiration are the same."[121]

Broadly, in ancient Greece poetry was the articulation of the divine by certain human beings whom the gods had chosen to act as intermediaries between the divine and the mortal worlds. The ancient Greeks believed that prophetic utterances were no more than prescriptive or

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Gregory Nagy "Ancient Greek Poetry, Prophesy, and Concepts of Theory," In *Poetry and Prophesy: The Beginning of a Literary Tradition*, ed James L Kugal (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1990) Google Books edition.

[118] Nagy, "Ancient Greek Poetry," 61.

[119] Ibid

[120] Nagy, "Ancient Greek Poetry," 63,

[121] Nagy, "Ancient Greek Poetry," 60

descriptive commands. No more, because such utterances – articulations of the imagistic visions of the Pythia – were thought to have no depth, in that their meaning, since divine, was inaccessible to the human mind. The visions were "imagistic" because they captured more than the human mind could comprehend. Speech is the expression of thought; the quality and nuance of our thoughts is in part constrained by the quality of our vocabulary. The precise relationship between language and thought is unclear, but since the nineteenth century linguists have been arguing that the particular nuances of language affect how the speaker thinks.[122] In divine visions, images take the place of words. An image is similar to (the best) poetry in that the connections between individual entities are not *said* but *shown* – except that an image can contain countless such implicit connections; thus, the visions are imagistic because it is impossible for the human mind to realize the literal translation of divine communication. Put another way, our vocabulary can never be sufficiently extensive to fully comprehend any communication that occurs directly between ourselves and the divine. Parenthetically, the ancient Greeks were not the only society to conceive of this: the ancient Hebrews have a similar understanding and thus (as an example) in the Old Testament, Ezekiel speaks of his encounter with God in the metaphorical terms of a chariot.[123] Since the ancient Greeks believed that the origin of poetry is likewise divine (as with prophetic utterances), they also thought that its meaning was equally inaccessible. A listener could comprehend the literal meaning of a poem, but as with prophetic utterances, he could not see beyond it.

Even in our modern, secular age many people are still of the opinion that poetry, or art in general – although perhaps not an articulation of divine sentiment – is too mystical to speak of in a methodical way. We can say how a work makes us feel, or what we like or dislike about it, and even what we think the author meant – although this is already getting back into contentious territory – but we cannot fully pin down what it is about a piece of art that makes it beautiful or terrifying – or art. The creation of art, the argument continues, is a mysterious and inexplicable process. Writers can tell us their writing schedule – when in the day, and for how many hours they write – but they often cannot explain to us the subtle complexities of their own work.

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[122] For example, the linguistic relativity principle.
[123] See Ezekiel (1:4-26)

Plato, or Plato's Socrates, began from the commonly held position of his time that prophetic utterances, or poetry in particular, are inaccessible. Consequently, Plato reasoned, the poets could not be expected either to understand or to explain the meaning or the construction of their utterances. Briefly, the *Ion* is seminal because Plato argued that although the poet cannot make intelligible his art, poetry *can* be penetrated through the application of *reason*: When reason is applied to either prophetic utterances or to poetry, the utterances can be understood to a significant and insightful depth. By importing divine utterances into the realm of logic, Plato appropriates the divine into the realm of philosophy and of the philosophers – and away from the poets. From here, Aristotle begins; from Aristotle over two thousand years of literary criticism grew.

The earliest European scholarly work on the *Poetics* occurred in the intellectual centers of Italy. Most notably, the burgeoning tradition of Aristotelian commentary developed in Venice in the fifteenth century.[124] In 1498, Giorgio Valla published a Latin translation of *On Poetics;* in1548 Robortello published the first commentary (with a Latin translation), called *In Librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Explincationes*; a few decades later, A.S. Minturno published two treatises, *De Poeta*, in 1559, and *Arte Poetica*, in 1564, which were the most comprehensive discussions of poetry and drama at the time, and so forth. Italian theorists were largely responsible for the dissemination of Aristotelian theories of drama during the Renaissance, as well as for advancing general notions of dramatic form. Dewar-Watson notes that the Italian commentaries continue to shape how we study the *Poetics* today, citing as a representative case the Aristotelian concept of Unities of Time, Action and Place, which was first systemically formulated by Catelvato. [125] Another example is Minturno's *De Poeta*, which includes the first known analysis of Aristotle's theory of catharsis. These theorists read the *Poetics* in an historically specific way, taking great liberties with respect to the theory.[126] For example, Minturno speaks of catharsis in terms of the homeopathic theory of medicine, and argues that there exists a connection between the medical treatment of illness of the body and the purgation achieved through tragedy.[127] As previously mentioned, the revival of classical Greek texts in Renaissance Italy and the subsequent critical literature that followed influenced the English theorists and playwrights writing during the English Renaissance a couple of centuries later.

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[124] The information in this paragraph is taken from Dewer-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle," 3.

Technical details

Aristotle approached poetry as he did politics and numerous other human activities previously thought of as opaque or inaccessible: by organizing each activity into a coherent and inclusive system of classification. Aristotle begins from the whole of an activity, such as politics, and breaks it into its smallest parts, grouping like objects and distinguishing each according to its differences. His work, *On Poetics*, to which this section is devoted, is the ordering and classifying of the whole of the poetics.

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[125] Ibid

[126] Ibid

[127] Leon Golden, "The Purgation Theory of Catharsis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30 no 4 (1973): 473 http://www.jstor.org/stable/429320

On Poetics is conventionally thought of as Aristotle's work on tragedy. His treatise on comedy is lost. Nevertheless, Aristotle does not overlook comedy in the *Poetics*, and he speaks of the genre and its origins. According to Seth Benardete, in *On Poetics*, "Aristotle will argue that tragedy is paradigmatic for poetry, and so a book about poetry can be primarily about its most perfect manifestation," meaning tragedy.[128] Benardete also calls our attention to a passage in which Aristotle describes comedy and tragedy as originating from the Dorians, who in turn cite their name as evidence to support the claim: "And they say they name doing *dran*, but that the Athenians name it *prattein*" (1448b 1-5). Although tragedy and comedy developed into two distinct dramatic forms, they share the same genesis, and are therefore both called drama. In this view, Benardete suggests that by tracing the etymology of drama to the Dorians, Aristotle is inviting the reader to consider *poiein* and *parattein* as synonymous. The title, *Peri Poietikes*, is hence translatable not only as "on the art of poetry," but also as *On the Art of Action*.

If comedy and tragedy are both dramas, then as dramas each genre is potentially similar to the other in areas not directly related to the act of performance. Many of Aristotle's observations on tragedy, in particular its parts, length, and composition, can easily be extended to comedy (and thereby generalized so that they apply to drama as a whole). Moreover, by applying Aristotelian analysis of tragedy to comedy, we are able to learn more about comedy as well.

The name 'poet' and the word 'poetry,' which describes the activity of a poet, are both derived from the ancient Greek word *poietike* – or poetics, the title of Aristotle's treatise. *Poeitike* is the art of *poiein*; *Poiesis*, is the product of *poiein*, and its meaning ranges from its verb form "making," to the noun, "something made," and often to the narrower meaning of "poetry".[129] According to Benardete, in the work, "Aristotle is conducting a class at once in fiction writing and in literary criticism; his subject, *poiesis*, is both the making and the thing made."[130] *On Poetics*, as a complete work, is in this way a macrocosm in which the smallest parts follow the same laws that govern the whole: just as *On Poetics* can be simultaneously about the making and the thing made, so are the separate parts of poetics distinct yet also the same.

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[128] Seth Benardete, introduction to *Aristotle On Poetics*(St. Augustine's Press, 2002), xiii.

[129] Benardete, *Aristotle On Poetics*, 2.

I begin with Aristotle's general theory of poetics, which is largely encompassed in the discussion of the relationship between imitation and art. Afterward, I turn to several specific poetic devices advanced by Aristotle: the story, the characters, the entanglement, and the beginning and the ending.

Mimesis

Aristotle categorizes the different forms of poetics as "all in general imitations" (1447a 15-16). He lists six forms of poetics, [131] out of which I concentrate on two: "the *poiêsis* of tragedy, and further comedy," or more broadly, drama (1447a 10-15). Benardete indicates that this is a strange place for Aristotle to begin because imitations are "always derivative from what they imitate," and therefore it would seem that, "[f]or poetry the first things apparently are second things."[132] Furthermore, according to Benardete, the classification of poetics as imitation implies that "Insofar as all human action is already an imitation of action, it is in its very nature poetic."[133] The meta-theatrical elements of drama and performance are derived in large part from this aspect of poetics; interestingly, so are the other levels of drama, such as its structural shape and the action of performance (which is not the same as the performance as a whole).

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[130] Benardete, introduction, xvi

[131] The six are: story, character, speech, thought, song-making, and *opsis*.

[132] Benardete, introduction , xvii

[133] Ibid

The connection between action and poetics is visible in the language that we use to speak of each. If we examine the words we use to describe the act of acting, the relationship between action and imitation becomes similarly clear. We define a "play" as a dramatic work that is performed. The verb "to act" has several meanings, among them (1) "to take action," (2) "to fill the function or serve the purpose of," and (3) "to perform a fictional role."[134] Thus the verb "to act" is defined as taking an action which is simultaneously real and fictional. The added dimension of fictionality reflects the *idea* of the act – nevertheless enclosed in the act itself – rather than the *doing* of the act. For example, the action of a man walking on a street is identical to a performer walking on a stage. Yet the man walking on the street is not pretending to walk, while the actor walking on the stage is performing, and therefore pretending to walk although he is quite literally walking. Therefore, the imitative nature of action, and of poetics, can be seen in the second and third meaning of the verb.

In this way we enter the labyrinth in which Shakespeare created. Shakespearean characters are at times aware of this, and they demonstrate the awareness through meta-referential remarks. For example, in *As You Like It*, the melancholic Jaques says,

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts. (II.vii.139-42)

These lines are written by a poet, and spoken by an actor standing before an audience that is expected to forget – or to pretend to forget, i.e. to forget that they are forgetting – that they are watching an actor speak lines already written for him by a poet. Furthermore, Jaques is a player pretending to be a man standing in a forest, speaking of how all men are players – and perhaps also suggesting that the audience's lives are neither more nor less real than his. There are other examples throughout Shakespeare's plays, both tragedies and comedies. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the likewise melancholic Antonio says, "I hold the world but as a world, Graziano,/A stage where every man must play a part,/And mine a sad one" (I.i.77-79); in *Hamlet*, during the performance of the "Mouse trap," a play within a play, the audience watches Hamlet (who is also melancholic) watch Claudius watch a play that mirrors the story of the play *Hamlet*.

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[134] "act, *v*." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press.

There are a several common place observations that are worth noting at this juncture, because they further illustrate the mimetic quality of poetics. If poetics are all in general imitations, and drama is a form of poetics, then a play in its entirety must in the same way be an imitation. Just as an action is an imitation, a play is an imitation as well. But whereas it is often easy to identify what is being imitated in an action, it is less clear what a play might be an imitation of.

Imitations ask that the audience forget that they are watching imitations. In modern terminology this is called suspension of disbelief. When a character dies on stage, he does not really die. He lives to die again the next evening, and then to die again for the Sunday matinee. An actor must *pretend* all the gestures that he makes; he must pretend to die or pretend that he is in love. The surest way to achieve this is for the actor to come as close as possible to convincing himself – to *feeling* – that he is about to die, or that he has fallen in love. It is important to note that the necessity of suspension of disbelief implies that imitations must be in some respects flawless. If the actor dies in an exaggerated way – and therefore in an *unbelievable* way – then the effect is necessarily lessened, or at least different. For example, death, or the process of dying, which can be tragic, if overdone can be made comedic.

A play is most effective or successful when the audience is able to experience the characters' experience as the characters experience it themselves. While this observation is perhaps obvious, it is not clear *why* this is the case. One explanation is that the audience must believe in the authenticity of the character's performance for them to enjoy the play. Aristotle addresses this possibility in his discussion of the origin of poetics. Not surprisingly, the very existence of poetics appears to be inseparable from certain native characteristics common to all human beings. Aristotle speaks of the two natural causes that "are likely to have generated poetics as a whole" (1448b 4-5). The first is that "to imitate is natural to human beings from childhood," and the second is that "it is natural for everyone to take pleasure in imitation" (1448b 5-6, 8-9). He argues that human beings are, more than any other animal, imitative by nature, and that they learn first through imitation. Poetics therefore came about through a natural inclination to mimic combined with the equally natural feeling of pleasure we derive from watching imitations. Combined, Aristotle's two deductions suggest that there is something inherently pleasurable not only in watching imitations, but in doing the imitating.[135]

The pleasure we feel when watching an imitation is not derived purely from the visual experience. According to Aristotle, pleasure arises when, while contemplating an image, "there is a coincidence of learning and figuring out what each thing is," or put another way, when there is recognition (1448b 16-17). Recognition is the identification of a thing from previous knowledge. For the purposes of defining pleasure, Aristotle creates a distinction between learning and recognition, but later he demonstrates how the two activities are not entirely separate. According to Aristotle, if the image has not been seen before, "it will not qua imitation produce pleasure except on account of its workmanship or color or on account of some other cause of this sort" (1448b 19-21). If the image is not familiar, then pleasure is lessened since it is only felt out of appreciation of the parts – i.e. workmanship or color – and not because of the entirety of the imitation.

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[135] It is not immediately obvious that human beings would feel pleasure from watching imitations, and, as I have already suggested, Aristotle explains this phenomenon. There are several biological and evolutionary reasons which address the correlation between imitation and pleasure. However, for the purpose of this paper – whose aim it is to speak of Shakespeare's play – it is more useful to keep to the terms and to the language that Aristotle employs.

Aristotle is arguing that we feel pleasure not only in watching imitations, but in doing the imitations ourselves. At a certain point, the two categories – watching imitations and imitating – collapse into one. When an actor pretends to fall in love, and the audience derives pleasure from his performance, it is not because the audience likewise falls in love. If the actor is convincing, then the audience is able to feel something akin to what they might suppose that the actor – through his speech and actions – is feeling. Thus we have in English the idiom "To be moved to tears," or "To be moved to rage." Watching a performance – when it is good or convincing – can *move* us emotionally to feel something which we would otherwise not have felt. There is no technical reason to feel fear or love when we sit in a theater. We know that the actress playing Juliet is not dead, and that actor playing Gloucester is not blind. Yet some audience members cry nonetheless. *The audience therefore becomes, in this limited way, actors themselves*.

At least two degrees of imitation occur when an actor – or a company of actors – causes us to feel an emotion either as a response to or similar to the one he appears to be experiencing. I will use an actor pretending to be in love as an example. The first imitation is the imitation of the actor imitating a man in love. The second imitation, once removed, is the imitation of the audience *feeling* the love, and hence themselves imitating the act of being in love which is being imitated by the actor.

In film, a common way for the director to portray the success of a staged performance is to have a few (or all) of the actors acting as audience members shout out warnings or advice to the actors performing the play on the stage. The only reason to yell warnings would be if the actors on the stage did not know what was coming next and if they had any control over the sequence of events. The audience "forgets" that they are watching a play because the imitation is successful; if they remembered, then would they bother with warning? A good illustration can be found in the film *Stage Beauty*, which is about the life of Margaret Hughes and Edward Kynaston. Hughes is believed to be the first English female stage performer, and Kynaston is one of the last of the Restoration "boy players." In the film, the director shows Hughes' performance of *Othello*'s Desdemona. Hughes is so convincing in the final scene, that after Desdemona dies, not only does the audience remain stunned – unsure whether they ought to leap the stage to check her pulse – but the actors on stage are equally worried.

(Dis)unity of Plot

If a play needs to convince its audience of the authenticity of the imitation, how are plays that involve fantastical elements, such as fairies, successful? Notably, in *The Tempest*, Prospero throws away his magic book once he leaves the island and returns to Naples and in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, the fairies only appear under the dual cover of the night and of the trees. It is thus possible for the audience to accept the fantasy because it does not directly contradict the logic underlying the expectation of how (and where to) a sequence of events can develop. The flesh bond, which is arguably the most fantastical part of *The Merchant of Venice*, occurs in the real and ordinary city-state of Venice. Yet this does not stop W.H. Auden from describing Belmont as "the romantic fairy world," which is "incompatible with the historical reality of money-making Venice."[136] Venice is certainly as concerned with money-making as much as it is not a romantic fairy tale. But the bond is even stranger in the money-making world of Venice, where it cannot be dismissed as a consequence of circumstantial peculiarities which could not occur beyond the stage.

While the beginning of *MV* is unusual, the ending of both of the stories of which it is comprised are predictable. Although within the world of the play it initially appears possible and then probable that Shylock will kill Antonio, an early-modern audience would have found it hard to believe that the Jew would triumph over the Christian in a comedy, and thus either the death or the exile of Shylock would be expected. Similarly, Bassanio will obviously marry Portia; if her love for him is not a sufficient hint, then the spectacle of two of Portia's suitors failing to choose the correct casket for want of character is. Although scholars and audiences in general often think of the flesh bond plot as the principal storyline, it is the story of the three casket s which most resembles a typical comedic plot, and is therefore technically the basis of the story.

The combination of a fantastical tale placed in a realistic setting and the simultaneous predictable and strange qualities of the *MV* produce a strange effect which is not as easy to categorize as the "cathartic" responses that traditional comedies and tragedies elicit. On top of which is the structural disharmony of the play caused by the amalgamation of two storylines which "are in the final analysis not completely integrated,"[137] – an observation that is proven by the fact that the flesh bond story concludes in Act IV and not in Act V. As Harley Granville-Barker argues, the "real problem" of the *MV* is "how to blend such disparate themes into a dramatically organic whole … The stories, linked in the first scene will, of themselves, soon part company."[138] James C Bulman agrees that "Venice and Belmont seem to belong to different plays," and writes,

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[136] W.H. Auden, "Shakespeare's Method: The Merchant of Venice," in *The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays*, ed Thomas Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 80.
[137] Mahon, "The Fortune," 10.

> If history is any judge, the crucial problem in staging *The Merchant of Venice* is how to balance its two distinct and seemingly unrelated plots. Although both ultimately derive from folk tales, Shakespeare dramatized them in such disparate styles that they seem to compete with rather than to complement one another.[139]

Taken together, the play is an assembly of contradictory parts.

If dramas are imitations and *MV* is a drama, then the play is an imitation, and the question is simply of what is it an imitation? The discord that characterizes the relationship between many of the plays' parts might not be, as most scholars have until now believed, an issue of perspective, but rather a deliberate facet of the play which, when accepted as such, can lead us to a more comprehensive reading. Put another way, the discord is not something which needs to be resolved, but something which cannot be explained away. For example, the *MV* is successful *because* it has two storylines – each of which on its own would be predictable – and which are only very loosely connected, interwoven to make one play. The lack of unity in the plot allows Shakespeare to create tension.

If the play is an imitation, then its effect upon the audience ought to be a good indication of what it is an imitation of, yet here as well the reactions have been contradictory. Notably, Shylock has been at the center of the disagreement. But as Toby Lelyveld notes, this is not incidental: "The character of Shylock, more than any other that Shakespeare created, is at the mercy of the actor who portrays it … Had Shakespeare intended to make an out-and-out villain of his Jew, he would not have endowed him with sensitivities that draw upon our humanitarian instincts. Conversely, had he aimed at enlisting our sympathies for a pathetic Shylock, he would not have so infused him with evil."[140] The "beautiful pale English woman" standing next to the poet Heine, who "burst into tears at the end of the fourth act," and Toby Lelyveld's Elizabethans, who "doubtless, have [been] pleased" with a "monstrous Shylock, without any human overtones,"[141] are both justified in their reactions.

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[138] Mahon, "The Fortune," 39.
[139] Mahon, "The Fortune," 10.

Time in The Merchant of Venice

Aristotle remarks in the *Poetics* that tragedies try "especially to be bound by one circuit of the sun or to vary only a little from this" (1449b 13-5). Shakespeare decided, in particular with his later plays, both tragedy and comedy, to disregard this rule. For example, *Hamlet* takes place over an expanse of time long enough for Hamlet to undertake a voyage from Denmark almost to England and back; the story of *Pericles* occurs over more than a decade; the action of *The Merchant of Venice* covers slightly more than three months. Even though these plays deviate from the rule, they are no less successful imitations than their counterparts. According to Aristotle, the length of time in a play should not exceed a day because "it ought to be possible for the beginning and end to be seen together" and "what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is diluted over a long period of time" (1459b 19-21, 1462b 2-3). If *MV* is pleasant even though it exceeds the optimal time period for a play, then either its events are not diluted as a consequence, or the beginning and end are nevertheless seen together – or both.

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[140] Lelyveld *Shylock*, 133

[141] Ibid

Shakespeare does not try to distract the audience from the amount of time that has elapsed in *MV*. Instead, he makes it conspicuous *from the beginning*. The qualification of three months is an integral component of the pound of flesh loan between Shylock and Antonio. To the spectator, a performance of *MV* – and accordingly, the world and the characters which make up the play – lasts for no longer than several hours. But for the characters – who theoretically exist before the play begins, and who continue to exist after it ends – the same actions take days, weeks, and months. This necessarily creates a chasm between how the audience and how the characters experience time and consequently the action of the play. Yet by fixing a point in time where a resolution must occur, Shakespeare in fact reduces the chasm. The potential consequence that waits at the other end of three months is sufficiently grave to unite the audience and the characters in the recognition that time is elapsing. Put another way, the characters can experience time as the audience is actually experiencing time: the events that take place during the three months which are not related to the loan lose their significance to the characters as well.

We ought to ask ourselves why Shakespeare would modify the classical principle advanced above by Aristotle. A brief comparison of *The Merchant of Venice* with two of Shakespeare's other comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Comedy of Errors*, will help illustrate certain aspects of the play that are concerned with the subject of time.

Both of these comedies were written before *MV*, and neither violates – as *MV* does – the classical rule of limiting the action, or story, to one sun cycle to such an extent. By the end of the first act, all three plays have, in a figurative sense, a clock hanging over the stage. In *Dream*, Hermia is sentenced "Either to die the death or to abjure/Forever the society of men," if she refuses to marry Demetrius, and given until “the next new moon,” to decide (I.i.65-6). Although this gives Hermia several days, the action still appears as though it takes place over one day. The forest sequence, which occurs at night, is straddled by two day-time events, giving the false impression that a single night separates both days. *A Comedy of Errors* keeps to a single day. When Aegeon is condemned to death, he responds, “My woes end likewise with the evening sun” (I.i.27). As previously discussed, in *MV*, Antonio and Shylock enter into a bond. By the terms of the bond, Antonio faces the possibility of losing a pound of his flesh upon failure to repay Shylock within three months.

One difference between *MV* and *Dream* and *A Comedy of Errors* is the duration of the time specified. In the latter two plays, the time allotted meets Aristotle’s criteria of twenty-four hours – even if only superficially, as with *Dream*. In *MV*, Antonio has three months. In *MV*, the person specifying the time is Shylock, while in the other two comedies, the figure is the Duke, who is the representative of the state. A particular feature of *Dream*, as the title suggests, is that most of the action occurs at night; the exact opposite is true in *A Comedy of Errors*, where all of the comedy of mistaken identities takes play in daylight. In *MV*, since the story takes place over three months, there are both night and day scenes. Notably, the play concludes the *night* following the day in which the trial occurs.

A consequence of having the play occur over three months is that the possibility of ‘tomorrow’ is present, whereas in a twenty-four hour day it is not. That there is a tomorrow is a basic precondition of any loan, and a fact which Antonio calls upon when he agrees to enter into the bond. His ships are at sea, but “Within these two months – that’s a month before/This bond expires – I do expect return/Of thrice three times the value of the bond” (I.iii.154-56). The possibility of tomorrow also permits such forces as fate or fortune to take a more prominent role in the conclusion of human affairs. Shylock, whose job requires of him to examine all of the possible permutations that might arise out of ‘today,’ recognizes this. He speaks of “land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves – I mean pirates – and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks” (I.iii.21-24). All of these are variables which could occur any day between today and three months, and which would compromise or entirely destroy the possibility of getting a return on his investment. In *Hamlet*, tomorrow or ‘later,’ arises out of Hamlet’s hesitations. Were Hamlet to kill Claudius today, then tomorrow would not be necessary, or rather, tomorrow would begin a new story. Tomorrow is therefore inserted by, or an *assertion* of Hamlet’s. *In* MV *tomorrow is a product of the story*. Three months are written into the plot. Antonio thinks that he can repay Shylock within two months, but he fails to do so within three.

For the audience, because the actual, or real-time, action of the play is even less than twenty-four hours tomorrow does not exist. Thus the sense of tomorrow that the characters have ought to be lost. The disparity between how the audience and how the characters experience time in *Dream* and in *A Comedy of Errors* is not as great as in *MV*. Yet somehow, even in *MV*, Shakespeare is able to use the metaphorical clock to full effect. The question is how, and to what purpose?

The fog of choice

As discussed previously, most critics approach a distinguished dramatic work with the expectation that they will find coherence, but few have found it in *The Merchant of Venice*. For example, Bulman speaks of the crucial problem of staging *MV* as “how to balance its two distinct and seemingly unrelated plots.” What accounts for such strong critical preferences for reconciliation and coherence? From what arises the almost universal critical impulse to search beneath the surface-level disorder of a work for an underlying, and initially invisible unity? As we have just seen, the Aristotelian origins of criticism held in close attention the imitative qualities of the dramatic form. If the basis for the critical preference for unity is to be found, the relationship between imitation and subject is thus the proper beginning. In this view, an incoherent or disconnected dramatic work is only defensible as an imitation if its subject possesses such qualities. The degree to which *MV* has resisted critical unification and reconciliation thus suggests that it is only either, at least in classical terms, an indefensible imitation of a unified subject, or a proper imitation of a disunified one. Leaving the first possibility to the critics who have so thoroughly examined it, I limit myself to entertaining the second.

Were the various attested incoherencies of *MV* in fact proper and fitting imitations, in classical terms, of a disunified subject, then the identity of that subject might most efficiently be searched for not in the realm of history or social phenomena – which have traditionally lent themselves to quite coherent dramatic imitations – but rather in the interior realm of the human mind of the play’s character-subjects, whose actual indecisions, anxieties, and caprices so decisively propel the plot of *MV*. Put another way, the critically attested structural incoherence and disunity of *MV* might be properly understood as in fact accurate and fitting ‘structural-level’ dramatic imitations of the psychological conditions of its subject-characters, not the least of which are the external disorderliness and internal incoherence of their ever-changing judgments. Viewed in this way, the disunified plot simulates the ‘fog’ and indecision that surrounds making choices ‘on the spot,’ as it were, and with only limited information – the precise situations of Antonio, Shylock, and the various suitors, who play a game that is seemingly designed to make this very point. This concept of ‘the fog of choice,’ more universally familiar in experience than in reflection, is how objectively or otherwise clear choices become indistinct or difficult when confounded by a lack of information, by manipulation, or by the pressure of limited time – and few dramatic symbols more accurately encapsulate its predicaments than does the *MV*’s casket trial in which limited time and limited information force choices that are intended to reveal the true characters of those who can normally dissimulate under normal conditions. But perhaps it is not only the other interactions of the play – Bassanio’s request for help, the bond between Antonio and Shylock, and their behavior and relation to the enforcement of that bond – that simulate how limited information and limited time characterize the ‘trials’ of choice that all people experience, but the very structure of the play as well, which places the audience or reader in the position of experiencing how the relatively fixed and simple goals of the characters shift, mutate, and become distorted over time as new and only partial information arrives through a rapid succession of strange and substantial reversals of fortune.

Plot and Character

According to Aristotle, “without action tragedy could not come to be, but without characters it could come to be” (1450a 20-30). Aristotle defines “story” as “the putting together of events” (1450a5-10). By events Aristotle means occurrences, and occurrences are made up of actions. Thus when he says that *without* action tragedy *could not* come to be, Aristotle means that a tragedy requires a story, or plot. Aristotle adds that tragedy *could* come to be *without* characters. But since tragedy requires a story, we can have tragic stories without characters. A story without characters seems like a strange notion. But in fact, stories *about* individuals – or characters – and of individual deeds are a relatively new innovation.

The etymology of the word “story,” supports Aristotle’s claim. We define the word “story” as either a fictive account, or as a retelling of events that have already occurred. But since the original stories, such as the Bible or the *Odyssey*, were actually considered to be factual accounts of past events, the word “story” could not have meant a fictive account. Therefore, originally, the word “story” was reserved for the telling of a history which concerned an actual, unimagined event. This is reflected in the etymology, as “story” is a derivation of the word “history.” However, beginning from the likely presupposition that people have always been telling fantasy, perhaps the difference is that in the past storytellers claimed even the wildest fantasy as deeply ancient history.

The evolution of the novel – of which fictionality is a prominent characteristic – provides an informative illustration of this point. Two of the earliest samples, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615) and Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), both try to maintain the illusion of the authenticity of the events that are being chronicled. Rousseau’s novel is written in the epistolary form, which removes the presence of an author, and Cervantes introduces his work as the assemblage of various newspaper translations and first-hand reports. Although in ancient Greece, the less central tales were knowingly digested as fictive accounts, referring to the *Iliad* as fiction would be akin to heresy. In essence, these novelists borrowed from Homer the invocation of the muses, but secularized it. Claiming something as history is itself a poetic device, useful in part because it helps to develop suspension of disbelief.

By speaking of a story without characters as one of at least two options, Aristotle is pointing directly at the distinction between history and story. There is history as fact, history as story, and a lot of overlap. Histories require a certain vantage point – which is quite high – to be told. A "history" is defined as (1) "the study of past events, particularly human affairs," which includes, "the past considered as a whole"; (2) the whole series of past events connected with someone of something"; (3) "a continuous, typically chronological, record of important or public events or of a particular trend or institution."[142] Two defining characteristics of histories therefore are that they take place over a long space of time, and that they in some way encompass a whole. Aristotle's statement suggests that he is not speaking of history as a poetic device, but about the structure and substance of histories.

Stories about individuals can only be told on the micro-level, and thus the bird's eye view is not possible. Understandably, the subject of histories is typically the movements of nations, because this is what stands out over great swaths of time. This is evidenced in the "original stories," like *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the Bible, or the *Mahābhārata*, that correspond to the oldest known oral traditions, and which are all epics. There are two ways to study the most original human epics. The first reading, perhaps more modern, understands epics as novels, and novels are concerned with characters, and therefore characters are what should be primarily studied if one is to understand a novel. The second understands that while characters such as Achilles and Abraham are obviously pivotal characters, they exist within a broader attempt at the genesis of nations. Aristotle, familiar at least with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, appears to be suggesting that we ought to think of the "original stories," as about the genesis of people and nations, and not about particular characters. In this view, before the *Odyssey* there was the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* is the history of nations – i.e. of the battle between the Hellenic Greeks and the Trojans – while the *Odyssey* is the story of a single man's journey.

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[142] "history, *n*." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press.

Tragedies are like the original stories, or epics, in this respect, because while tragedies are often concerned with character, they are not dependant on character. A character can be 'tragic,' but a situation can be tragic as well. For example, Sophocles' *Antigone* is not about Antigone, but instead about the circumstances which surround her. Antigone does not have a 'tragic flaw,' as perhaps does Oedipus, but rather she is caught in a situation which becomes tragic because it is a conflict between two *goods*, for example positive and natural law. Bradley argues that in Shakespearean tragedy, the circumstance is typically not tragic, but rather that "the deeds are the prominent factor," and these are "deeds which issue from character."[143] Put another way, the play is a tragedy because of the tragic character: "In the circumstance where we see the hero placed, his tragic trait, which is also his greatest, is fatal to him … He errs, by action or omission; and his error, joining with other causes, brings on his ruin. This is always so with Shakespeare."[144] Thus Bradley concludes that "The tragic world is the world of action, and action is the translation of thought into reality."[145] In the first instance, the characters are almost entirely incidental to the progression and to the ultimate conclusion of the story. In the second, the 'story' is most necessary at the beginning, but once the scene is set, the inner quality of the characters translate into external actions which push the story towards its end.

Classical comedies are often more plot-driven than tragedies, especially because the basic structure remains relatively fixed: a young man is frustrated in his desire to marry, usually by a paternal figure; he undergoes some sort of trial or transformation, and the story concludes with his success and a wedding. There is no room for individual choice because all of the choices which lead to the conclusion are predetermined; if any of the actions are changed, then they will not lead to marriage, or if marriage is nevertheless still possible, then the actions changed are not sufficiently significant within the sequence of events.

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[143] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 6,9..

[144] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 13.

[145] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 17.

The Merchant of Venice is a unique example of a play that incorporates the basic comedic storyline, but is nevertheless also a play in which the deeds of the characters appear to drive the plot in the sense Bradley speaks of. Bassanio's predicament gives rise to the second storyline, the flesh bond plot. Within the second storyline there is a subplot, which concerns the relationship between Shylock and Jessica, and the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo. The initial story, the casket trial scene, requires a choice only in so far as Bassanio must choose the correct casket; both the flesh bond story and the elopement subplot that grow out of the initial story require increasing degrees of character peculiarity. For example, a different moneylender might not have suggested the flesh bond, and then not insisted on its fulfillment, while a different moneylender might not have been as imprudent.

Not all Shakespearean comedies place as much of an emphasis on the character of individual characters. Compared to *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, the characters in *MV* at least appear to be given a much greater degree of autonomy with respect to the plot. Whereas in *Dream*, none of the characters hesitate when it comes to their actions, in *MV* the characters are conscious that they are choosing, beginning from Act I, when Shylock proposes the terms of the bond. In *Dream*, Hermia is seamless in her love of Lysander, and unlike Jessica, does not pause when crossing her father. In fact, in the play each character is certain of whom they love and whom they wish to marry, and only the fairy dust confuses their certainty. In this way the plot seems to push the narrative, as even the fairies, since fantastical, appear to be inserted into the story.

In Act I of *MV*, Shylock suggests the flesh bond to Antonio, and the sequence of events that follows is a consequence of the initial choice or action "which begets others, and these beget others again." Antonio might unhesitatingly agree to the loan, but the audience is given a counterexample in Bassanio, who says "I like not fair terms and a villain's mind" (I.iii.176). The scenes that follow are likewise marked by hesitations and self-reflection. Shylock questions the purpose of having dinner with Christians "But wherefore should I go?/I am not bid for love. They flatter me," and the clown Gobbo Lancelot deliberates whether "my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master" (II.iv.13-4; II.ii.1-2). Notably, even when the characters are unwavering, as is Antonio when he agrees to the bond, the text makes clear to both audience and to the characters that alternative and often preferable choices are available. During the trial scene, Shylock is repeatedly urged by the Duke, Portia, and Bassanio to forfeit the surety either for the sake of mercy or for monetary gain. Yet Shylock repeatedly answers "I would have my bond," and "I crave the law,/ the penalty and forfeit of my bond" (IV.i.86,203-4). Had he agreed to Bassanio's offer, Shylock would not have been forced to convert. But Shylock is certain of the legitimacy of his claim, just as Antonio was confident that his ships would return a month before the loan expires.

Shylock

How should we understand action and character as poetic devices? What function does each part fulfill with respect to the overall drama? I have already discussed a play *with* action and *without* characters. To answer the above questions, I explore how a play with characters but without action might seem.

If a play has characters but does not have any action, then by definition such a play could consist of no more than the characters standing or sitting still. Any movement would constitute an action, and a sequence of actions can be arranged into a story. As discussed previously, Aristotle defines the story as “the putting together of events.” The “putting together” is the creation of a narrative, and the narrative is created by the putting together of action. Therefore, without action there cannot be a narrative, and without a narrative there cannot be a play. This is reflected in the etymology of the word “drama” which English adapted (via Latin) from the ancient Greek word *dramata*. According to Aristotle, drama is so called because dramatists “imitate those doing” (1448a 25-30). A play without action is therefore no play at all.

Since this is the case, it becomes senseless to continue a discussion of a play without any action. Instead, we ought to shift our attention to the relative weight that each part – story and character – are given in *The Merchant of Venice*. We need to understand how each part affects the other, and especially how action and character relate to each other as poetic devices. Is the relationship between the two devices zero-sum? Does the prominence of one come at the expense of the other?

A comparison of the ancient Greek plays to a genre of twentieth-century drama called the Theater of the Absurd can serve to better define the relationship between character and action. The absurdist movement took place in the middle of the twentieth century, closely following the Second World War. It is characterized by several features, one among them that its subject is often broad comedy composed in part of tragic images. The people and playwrights that followed the movement perceived life as largely irrational, although independent bursts of reason could exist within the vast space of confusion. In this view, moments of great tragedy could still occur, which hence produced tragic images against a comedic backdrop. The plot or the story of an absurd play would be in effect non-existent (thus it seems “absurd”); otherwise the play would not reflect the disorder and chaos of the universe. A good example is Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. In the play, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait around for a third character named Godot who never appears. While they wait, the two men speak of various topics and move around, but nothing happens. A narrative is hinted at but never manages to coalesce.

Notably, *Waiting for Godot* has neither a proper beginning, in the Aristotelian sense, nor a proper ending. Aristotle defines a beginning as “whatever in itself is not of necessity after something else but after which another has a nature to be or to become” (1450b 25-30). An end is “whatever in itself has a nature to be after something else – either of necessity or for the most part – but after it nothing else” (1450b 25-35). Beckett’s play starts with the characters waiting, and it ends with the characters continuing to wait. Even the suicide rope (Estrogen’s belt) is not strong enough for a successful suicide attempt, which again prevents any real sense of finality. The play’s weak beginning and non-existent end prevents it from having a true narrative – the exact impression the playwright is trying to impart. If the world is absurd, then it must be chaotic and can therefore have no well defined narrative arc. The best reflection of this is the absence of beginnings and ends, and therefore a negation of any sense of a natural order.

Of course, Beckett’s play has some action. Minor characters come and go, and the two principle characters shuffle about. Imitations cannot seem to escape action. But for the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to say that a play with very limited action reflects a weak narrative. Thus we come to the conclusion that if the structure is strong, then it is supported by the “putting together of events,” or the story, and not by the characters. When Boas says that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare seems to have compromised – or at least neglected – the unity of plot for the sake of strong characters, he is not incorrect is supposing that there is a correlation between the two poetic devices.

In *MV*, the chaotic undertones are most visible in the highly comical third act, and it is likewise here where the relationship between plot and character becomes most distinct. By the end of the first scene of Act III, the audience is reminded of what it already knows – that Jessica has run away with Shylock's ducats to marry Lorenzo – and informed that Antonio "hath a ship of rich lading wrecked on the narrow seas" (III.i.3-4). Shylock learns of each event after the audience, and by the end of the same scene concludes "I will have the heart of [Antonio] if he forfeit" (III.i.119-20). The shipwreck is a consequence of the plot, and does not arise from any decision that Antonio makes. Put another way, it is a product of chance. On the other hand, the perilous situation Antonio finds himself in, while not inevitable, is nevertheless more directly a result of his earlier decisions. Tubal tells Shylock of Antonio's misfortune while detailing the extent of Jessica's betrayal, alternating between the two events. Shylock is thus repeatedly distracted between lamenting the loss of his daughter and ducats, and celebrating the shipwreck. By the end of the scene, Shylock is placed in a position of choosing, and he makes his choice based on three factors: the first is his hate for Antonio, for "were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will," the second is his conviction in the legality of the bond, and the third (which is made explicit in this scene) is that Jessica has run away and stolen his ducats (III.i.121). The decision Shylock arrives at the conclusion of Act III Scene I determines what follows next. Chance is responsible only for the shipwreck; all the other factors that either place Shylock in the position to choose or which influence his decision are products of human choice.

Neither of the events which figure in the beginning of the third act, had they occurred independently, would necessarily lead to the trial. By eating with the Christians, Shylock has shown himself willing to compromise, and his thrift might not have been able to refuse twice his initial investment under alternative circumstances. If Jessica had run away but Antonio's ship would have arrived in time for him to repay the loan, then a trial would not be required. But if Jessica had not run away, would Shylock have insisted on the surety? The answer, like Shylock's position within Venetian society, is ambiguous.

The two, seemingly separate events, come together through Shylock because Shylock has a stake in each, and in doing so both become connected. Tubal tells Shylock that while Jessica cannot be found, she is known to have "spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night forescore ducats," that she has stolen (III.i.101-02). But Tubal also tells Shylock that Antonio's creditors "swear he cannot choose but break," which means that Shylock, as he puts it, could "have the heart of him if he forfeit" (III.i.107-08, 120). Shylock is thus diverted between lamenting the "loss upon loss! The thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief," and celebrating the "Good news, good news," of Antonio's misfortune.

Interestingly, this draws our attention not only to the seeming fickleness of lady fortune, but also to the human ability to experience the same moment in time in two different ways. What Shylock considers fortunate, to another man (Antonio) is extreme misfortune. In this way we can see the two aspects of misfortune, which are most potent when they occur concurrently. Misfortune can be an absolute disadvantage, or an absolute loss. For example, the shipwreck is an absolute loss. Misfortune can also be a disadvantage, or loss, that is unfortunate because it develops at the most inopportune of moments. For Antonio losing a ship full of merchandise when he is indebted to Shylock *and* Shylock's daughter has betrayed him for a Christian is horrible timing. On the other hand, Shylock thinks of Antonio's loss as very well timed. In this way Shakespeare is also showing us how difficult it can be to distinguish between absolute and relative value. The loss of a ship is an absolute loss, but a relative gain for Shylock.

The particular aspect of *this* moment is that it combines the tendency to think of fortune as fickle with two entirely separate events (Jessica's betrayal and the shipwreck) that are simultaneously experienced by *one* man (Shylock) who has a strong interest in the outcome of each. Shylock could not control either outcome, nor could he know beforehand that Antonio would request a loan. But all of these factors join his already present hate to make Shylock insist on the terms of the bond – to the point where his original interest (money) has been entirely supplanted by personal concerns. The turns and tricks of the plot (or perhaps of fortune) have largely placed Shylock in the position that he is in; but the decision to pursue what he calls revenge seems entirely his and thus becomes the new driving force behind the progression of the story. Add to this the obscure and unknown Venetian law which states that "if thou dost shed/One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods/Are by the laws of Venice confiscate/Unto the state of Venice," which Shylock only learns about after the fact, and what we see is Shylock experiencing the 'fog of choice.'

Decision making requires that we distinguish between absolute and relative gains and losses. By the end of his exchange with Tubal, Shylock is put in the interesting position of having to make a choice. Shakespeare is thus both showing *and* making us feel how difficult it is for people to determine the absolute value of a gain or of a loss when it is put against – as it almost always is – the subjective experience of a particular situation. It is difficult to make a correct and wholly rational decision when the absolute value of a gain or a loss is lost in the fog of subjective experience. Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" monologue hence assumes an entirely new meaning. Like Shylock, all human beings experience the world primarily through their senses.

We bleed, are tickled, we eat, and we are cold. When either a misfortune or a fortunate thing arises, it is hard to accurately measure the absolute value of either the loss or of the gain because we cannot abstract either the loss or the gain from our immediate experience of it.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, because Shakespeare stresses the chaotic and irrational manner in which the characters make what they believe to be deliberate decisions, the plot necessarily loses some of the integrity of structure that we see present in Shakespeare's other plays, in particular his earlier tragedies and comedies. Put another way, if the emphasis is to be placed on the *choices* that the characters make then the narrative arc of the play cannot be very obvious; otherwise every choice would have a pre-determined sparkle. The two storylines only accentuate this point because the constant interruption of one for the other in every act but Act V weakens the structure. The constant interruption also slows the action of the play down, whereas each plot on its own would conclude quiet quickly. It creates suspense and makes foresight, valuable in decision making, difficult to attain.

If the intention is to emphasize decision making, the characters necessarily become less interchangeable and thus more conspicuous than they might have otherwise been. Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play are both extreme examples. Hamlet, who is sufficiently knowledgeable of as a performer to instruct the touring actors, is conscious of what avenging his father signifies, and hence resists the thousands-year old inertia that propels him to become the injured son in a revenge play. He stalls the story with his own decision, or rather with his indecision. The action consequently recedes into the background, and what we remember are his magnificent pauses. The interesting quality of *MV* is that the choices that are made by particular, and non-interchangeable characters, push the story toward its totally *predictable* ending.

The Entanglement

In *On Poetics*, Aristotle calls conundrums such as the flesh-bond and the casket trial "knots." According to Aristotle, a dramatic knot is a "complication" in the plot which is both tied and unraveled by the poet. The complication can therefore be thought of as the middle of the story, even if it occurs at the beginning or closer to the end. Notably, it also incorporates a turn of fortune. Although Aristotle speaks specifically of tragedy, the principles that he elucidates can be applied to all narratives with a plot:

> Of every tragedy there is an entanglement and an unraveling, the things outside and often some of those within being the entanglement and the remainder the unraveling. And I mean the entanglement to be what is from the beginning until that part which is an extreme from which it changes into good fortune or misfortune, and by unraveling what is from the beginning of the change until the end… But it is just to speak of tragedy as the same as or different from another by nothing so much as by story, those being the same of which the weaving and the unraveling are the same. (1455*b*-1456*a*)

For Aristotle, the "entanglement" is the problem or conundrum around which the story is formed. The ancient Greek word for entanglement, *desis*, also translates as tying, binding up, or complication. The weaving of the entanglement refers to the crisscrossing of threads that eventually become or produce a conundrum that will need to be resolved. The unraveling of these threads is the movement towards the play's resolution. The ancient Greek word for unraveling, *lusis*, comes from the verb *luo*, which means to loosen. *Lusis* also carries the meaning of resolution.

When a story is unraveled, the unraveling should come from the inner logic of the story itself and not from either a contrivance or the events surrounding the story. Aristotle remarks that "many, while weaving well, unravel badly. Yet both should be set in unison" (1456a 5-15). The weaving that brings the story toward the conundrum, or the arranging of the knot, is easier to put together than the unraveling that resolves the problem. But both need to be in unison because the putting together of events should be arranged according to "the necessary and the likely,"[146] and thus each event should logically follow the one before.

The Ducat

In *The* M*erchant of Venice*, the entanglement can be traced by following the development of a common artifact. The same is true, and more visible, in *Antigone*, where the artifact is the dead body of Polyneices, Antigone's brother. The plot of *Antigone* centers on, and follows, the relationship of each of the central characters to the dead body of Polyneices: Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, whose son is engaged to Antigone, orders that the body of Polyneices be disgraced, and left on the battlefield to be fed on. Antigone desires to save her brother from dishonor and, unbeknownst to Creon, buries him herself. Creon finds out, and the remainder of the play concerns her punishment and his. In *MV*, the artifact that the action begins from and develops around is not as large as a body,[147] and perhaps for this simple reason is less noticeable.

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[146] Benardete notes that ""This coupling of the likely and the necessary in a phrase is limited in Aristotle to *On Poetics*." Benardete, *Aristotle On Poetics*, 26.

In *MV*, the artifact is the ducat. A ducat is a gold coin that was formerly used as trade currency in most European countries, including England during Shakespeare's time. One notable aspect of the ducat is that, for discernibly practical reasons, its value was considered the same in all of the countries in which it was traded; one ducat in England equaled one ducat in Italy, and so forth. It is significant that the ducat did not replace – nor was it ever intended to replace – the individual currencies of each country. The purpose of the ducat was to facilitate trade. Thus an English merchant did not have to haggle about the relative price of the pound sterling to the numerous currencies used throughout sixteenth-century Italian states. The ducat hence allowed all of the merchants involved to speak a common language; five ducats for one barrel of Arabian spices was much simpler and clearer to understand – thereby facilitating a quicker trade – than the exchange of foreign (and therefore uncertain) currencies for the same barrel of spices would have permitted.

The ducat was first introduced to the world by the Venetians in the thirteenth century. Venice also happens to be where Shakespeare chose to set this particular play. In fact, the play's title, *The Merchant of Venice*, calls the audience's attention to the aspects of trade, the general business of merchants – and therein the ducat as well – that figure in the play. These features ought therefore to be taken into consideration in any discussion that puts forth an interpretation of the play.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the ducat can be interpreted as nothing other than a ducat. It has a value commonly agreed upon by all of the characters who happened to encounter it.

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[147] The action cannot be said to revolve, for example, around Antonio's body because there are too many episodes in the play – such as the casket-trial and Jessica's and Lorenzo's elopement – that have nothing to do with Antonio's flesh. The ducat, on the other hand, is relevant to all of these stories.

Bassanio is the first character to mention money, when speaking of his lack of it, and his intention to get some of it by pursuing "the lady richly left" in Belmont (I.i.161). Thus the first story is initiated out of an interest in money, and the second story arises out of the first, carrying over similar concerns. The first mention of a ducat occurs within the context of a business transaction related to Bassanio's stated purpose of marrying Portia. Bassanio requests a loan – three thousand ducats – from Shylock and for which Antonio will be bound. The very first words that the audience hears Shylock speak are, "Three thousand ducats. Well" (I.iii.1). To which Bassanio replies, "Ay, sir, for three months," assuring Shylock, "For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound" (I.iii.2,4-5). In this way, all three characters are linked to each other, for at least three months, each with his own interest in the three thousand ducats.

Shylock's first remark, "Three thousand ducats. Well," shows the ducat to be quantifiable, and a viable alternative to 'spoken language' which seemingly offers fewer possibilities for misunderstandings. In conversation with Bassanio, Shylock describes Antonio's eligibility as a potential client as "good." Bassanio misinterprets Shylock's meaning, and asks, "Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?" (I.iii.13) "Good" is a value judgment, but also an abstraction; we cannot touch "good". On the other hand, a ducat is not an idea, but an actual object – a *thing*. It can be touched, and counted, and seen by everyone. While "good" might mean different things to the speaker and the listener – i.e. what is good does not mean for Bassanio (as it does to Shylock) what is "sufficient" – a ducat is equally intelligible to all of the participants as a ducat. Thus far, a ducat is a ducat.

Ducats, however, can double through financial ingenuity. In such a case – for example, when usury is practiced – where there previously was only one ducat, there could now be two, or three. While each ducat is still a ducat, the original ducat is no longer worth one ducat, but has come to in essence be valued at two or three ducats. The only thing that has changed its worth is *time*, and the collective agreement of the relevant parties that after such and such a period, a certain percentage of interest will be drawn, or taxed.

Shylock and Antonio debate the point of usury indirectly when Shylock paraphrases the parable of Jacob's ewes. Shylock understands the success of Jacob's "wands" as not simply due to their magical qualities, but to the human ingenuity that thought to apply the wands to the sheep. He admits that Jacob was "blest," but places the emphasis on human will. Antonio refutes the interpretation, and argues that the venture was "A thing not in [Jacob's] power to bring pass/But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven" (I.iii.88-90). Antonio defers to providence, and he will "neither lend nor borrow/By taking nor by giving of excess," while Shylock believes that much is still left to the individual to decide, and thus can make his money "breed." The respective interpretations by Shylock and Antonio of the parable reflect how they make decisions, which are based in a moment in time, at least with respect to ducats. Shylock perhaps accentuates the role of human will too much, while Antonio does not do so enough.

Within the context of the flesh bond, Shylock's relationship to money changes once Jessica steals the ducats. In his disturbed state, Shylock begins to conflate Jessica and the ducats: "I would that my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot and ducats in her coffin!" (III.i.83-5) The ducats also acquire a Christian quality which they did not have before the elopement: "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!/ Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!" (II.vii.15-6). Upon hearing of Jessica's theft, Shylock immediately looks for to the law for recourse, called for "Justice! The Law! My ducats and my daughter!" and thus it is perhaps predictable that once he learns of the shipwreck, Shylock turns to the only legal option available to him, which is the flesh bond. He declares that he will collect the surety which has notably transformed from a pound of Antonio's flesh to "the heart of him."

Whereas in the beginning of the play, the ducat is a common symbol with universally recognized value, by Act IV it has come to hold different values to the respective characters. Bassanio returns to Venice, newly rich, and offers Shylock twice the amount he invested in return for the forfeiture of the bond. Shylock refuses, not because he is suddenly ignorant of the monetary worth of a ducat, but instead because money, or ducats, have come to mean significantly less than the promised pound of flesh which he at first described as "not so estimable, profitable neither,/As flesh of muttons, beeves, or goats" (I.iii.63-4). Bassanio offers to repay Shylock the loan, and when Shylock refuses, Bassanio offers "For thy three thousand ducats here is six" (IV.i.3). Although Shylock's ducats are multiplying like Jacob's lambs, he refuses the offer because in exchange he would have to relinquish his legal claim to the pound of flesh. Shylock hence says to Bassanio that he would not accept the ducats, "If every ducat in six thousand ducats/Were in six parts, and every part a ducat" (IV.i.84-5).

Shylock's irrational behavior during the trial is apparent to everyone including Shylock. He anticipates that the Duke will not understand how a pound of flesh could be worth more than three thousand ducats, and thus he mockingly says, "You'll ask me why I rather choose to have/A weight of carrion flesh than to receive/Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that,/But say it is my humor. Is it answered?" (IV.i.39-42). Yet Shylock persists in his choice nevertheless.

The characters are entangled because they begin with a common median (the ducat) that only has absolute value, but when Shylock finds himself having to express his particular predicament through the subjective valuation of money, the commonality breaks down – yet the characters are all still held to the original terms. For Shylock, there are two elements in play: the money and the bond. What Shylock cares about initially is the three thousand ducats, and the prospect of killing Antonio functions as the mechanism for enforcing the business enterprise. By Act IV, what has changed is his priority, which is no longer collecting his capital, but his seeming legal right to kill Antonio, which to him is *priceless*. No amount of money can make Shylock forfeit this right. The characters become entangled because they all agree to interact with each other through money, and when Shylock changes his position and assigns subjective value to ducats which ought to have absolute value, they are trapped.

Shylock is making a decision based on imperfect knowledge of the situation, and an emotional response to past events. Shylock does not doubt the legality of his claim, and notably, only the audience is aware that Portia, dressed as the lawyer Balthasar, is on her way to Venice. When Portia arrives, the two storylines finally intersect, which is symbolized by all of the characters standing together for the first time on the stage. Through the character of Shylock, Shakespeare is showing the audience the variables that surround decision making when we are situated in a moment in time. Often people are blinded by prejudices and "humors." Furthermore, since human beings are situated in a moment in time, they are nearly always incapable of abstracting themselves from a particular situation to see and to measure all of the relevant circumstances.

+IV+

Conclusion

The “weaving” of *The Merchant of Venice* is, significantly, free of the supernatural intervention found in other storylines, e.g., the witches in *Macbeth* or the ghost in *Hamlet*. In both of those plays, the action is initiated by fantastic creatures. But in *MV*, Shakespeare presumably makes a deliberate choice to keep the action of the play—and in particular its beginning—free of any influences that would cause the play to appear more mythical than real. And thus while the situations in the play are absurd, the relationship between cause and effect remains authentically ‘human,’ and, to an extent, probable.

The characters of *MV* find themselves in peculiar situations. Antonio stands to lose a pound of his flesh, and Shylock interprets the acquisition of a pound of flesh as representative of justice; Portia can only marry a suitor who “chooses” her father’s meaning in the “lott’ry that he hath devised,” which means that Bassanio can only marry Portia if he correctly picks a lead casket (I.ii.26-9). These affairs appear strange not only to the audience, but to the characters as well. For example, the Duke’s remark concerning Shylock’s “strange apparent cruelty,” is echoed by Portia when she says, “Of a strange nature is the suit you follow” (IV.i.20,174).

In the play, the fantastic arises from the transfiguration of a recognizable reality – Venice, politics, marriage – and the scenes throughout are notably crafted out of familiar and worldly materials, such as metals, caskets, laws, and ducats. Dramatic devices, like Prospero’s magic in *The Tempest* or the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, are conspicuously absent. The consequent effect is that, to the audience, truly absurd and improbable situations – such as those that constitute the play's two principle storylines – becomes less extraordinary and more seemingly ordinary.

The poet and the historian

Aristotle distinguishes between a poet and "one who gives an account of nature," citing as examples of each Homer and Empedocles, respectively (1447a 19-20). Empedocles is a pre-Socratic philosopher who was the first to speak of the four elements (earth, air, water, and fire), as well as the last philosopher to put down his thinking in verse – thus Aristotle also says that "nothing is common to Homer and Empedocles except the meter" (1447a 17-18). Poetics is therefore *not* a historical account. The historian and the poet, according to Aristotle, further differ in that "the one speaks of what has come to be while the other speaks of what sort would come to be" (1451b 4-6). Empedocles, although not strictly a 'historian,' nevertheless gives an account of nature by, quite literally, speaking of the material world in scientific (or objective) terms, and not adding, nor taking away from what exists in nature – hence giving an *account* of nature. On the other hand, the poet speaks of what sort would come to be, thus offering more of a prophesy than an account; the poet begins from the material world, but he *chooses* among the elements a combination of components – thus necessarily *not* accounting for *all* of nature – that speak of what sort will come to be.

Aristotle refines the distinction in arguing that "*poiesis* is more philosophic and of more stature than history. For poetry speaks rather of the general things while history speaks of the particular things" (1451b7-8). The general is what "falls to a certain sort of man to say or to do certain sorts of things according to the likely" (1451b 8-10). History speaks of the particular because it is constrained by the details of what has happened at particular intersections of space and time. Poetry, according to Aristotle, aims for the general by attaching names to various things, and names have the habit of transforming the general into the particular. The poet begins from archetypes and, in part by assigning names, shapes the general into something both discernable and legible – i.e. a particular person, like Macbeth who is a figure for the ambitious man; or Romeo who is a figure of the lover.

Benerdate suggest that Achilles knows that he wants to die like Achilles, before "to die like Achilles" has any significance.[148] Like most ancient Greeks, Achilles is concerned with his reputation, which permitted him the ability to abstract himself from his own life (to the extent than he knew that he would die were he to fight) and his own time, and to realize that his name would come to stand for a quality greater than himself. Therefore, in acting, Achilles is imitating the courageous man that he perceives himself to be, *before* Achilles became Achilles. Since if he did not fight and die, then he would not be Achilles as he is to us now, more than three thousand years later. The genius of Shakespeare, Plutarch, and Machiavelli – to name a few of the greatest thinkers that followed the ancient Greeks – was to combine history with poetry in the same manner that Homer does with the Trojan War and Achilles. The particular – for example, an individual, such as Achilles or Caesar – consequently loses his particularity, and the name comes to signify a more general and less temporally situated quality, such as courage. *In this way, the particular is elevated to the level of the general*.

In *MV*, Antonio, the "royal merchant" of Venice, acknowledges that he holds the world "As a stage where every man must play a part,/And mine a sad one," thus calling attention to the player's real-world role as an actor (III.ii.237; I.1.78-79). The truth that we are an audience, watching a play written by Shakespeare and performed by actors becomes more obvious in situations where fortune miraculously intervenes, or when magic and fantastical creatures play on the stage. The less real or likely what we see is, the more we are obliged to credit its manifestation to some omniscient hand: We instinctually try to make sense of the world around us, and when we cannot logically explain to ourselves why or how the things around us are occurring, we often attribute their cause to a greater, perhaps divine, power who *can* see the order that we cannot, because it is reassuring. Antonio's remark contradicts the impulse to suspend our awareness since he reminds us that the world is a stage—and he, an actor in it—and thus that we are watching a play. The happy resolution—happy for us because we are no longer suspended in a state of contradiction—is that we begin to perceive the possibility that we are characters as well. By keeping the action of the play logical and entirely without magic, Shakespeare (as the author) becomes an abstraction: the idea of the playwright survives, but his fingerprints are erased.

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[148] Benardete, "introduction," xv.

The happy resolution

Story is the "first principle, and like the soul of tragedy … characters are second" (1450a 35-40). Characters are like the details, or the beautiful colors that Aristotle refers to when he says that " if one should smear the most beautiful colors at random one would not give delight to a like degree as one would were one to give an image an outline" (1450b 1-5). The delight comes first from the outline which, in terms of poetics, is story. Characters are meant to accentuate the outline; and like the beautiful colors, ought to be arranged according to the story. Characters should not to be presented at random because the shape will not be recognizable and the spectator will consequently derive lessened delight. Thus, in this way, character must be subordinate to action.

We can see this further by considering Aristotle's comment that tragedies are about actions, and not human beings, alongside his remark that history is about the particular, while poetry concerns itself with the general. History is preoccupied with details, for example dates and names. On the other hand, names are only a secondary consideration for poets, while the outline, or the story, according to Aristotle is of first importance. The story is the putting together of events, which means a sequence of actions. Names speak to the particular, which is why Aristotle says "the particular is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered," stipulating the proper name, Alcibiades (1451b 10-15). Aristotle offers the example of a play by Agathon in which "both the events and names have been made up … and it delights no less" (1451b 25-30). Nor are only tragedies about action, as "in the case of comedy this has already become clear; for, having put the story through likelihoods, only then do they support it with random names" (1451b 10-15). Aristotle uses the word "random" here, as he does when he speaks of the beautiful colors smeared at random, in the quotation cited above. The story, like the outline in a painting, is first because, as was discussed above, it has a recognizable shape – i.e. not random; story is therefore "the soul of tragedy" because it is of the soul, in that it speaks to our soul (thereby bypassing reason). But poetry generalizes the particular by taking proper names, and elevating them to the level of certain human types – for example, literary figures such as Caesar and Romeo.

While a stage and a part both suggest the existence of a script—which in turn implies the existence of a writer—the emphasis in Antonio's comment is nonetheless on his inability to know the *entirety* of the script, thereby creating a distinction between the character and the playwright or audience, both of whom have access to information that the characters do not. We are all like Antonio in that we are unable to foresee the next scene or the upcoming twist of the plot. Often we do not know what other characters are thinking, nor can we anticipate chance events. Even when we are certain, as Shylock is of the lawfulness of his bond, we can be wrong.

If we are aware that we are like characters in a play, then the logical next step, suggested by Shakespeare, is that we too might have an audience. This realization ought to impel us toward a higher state of consciousness, because then we begin to consider ourselves from a position outside of ourselves, as an audience might see us and our actions. Jessica and Lorenzo allude to this in the beginning of Act V when they compare themselves to other, classical lovers. Beginning each example with the phrase "In such a night," they alternate naming couples, until Lorenzo says,

> In such a night
> Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew
> And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
> As far as Belmont.

and Jessica replies,

> In such a night
> Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
> Stealing her soul with many vows of faith
> And ne'er a true one. (V.i.20)

Jessica and Lorenzo conclude with the example of their own story, and thereby acknowledge that they, as characters in a story, will come to figure as something separate from how they experience themselves (which is more inward looking). Certain aspects of their story will be isolated (by an audience) and come to represent the whole—just as the characters and story of Troilus and Cressid, Thisbe, Dido, and Mesea and Aeson are symbols to Jessica and Lorenzo. In this way, like Achilles they become their own audience, anticipating their metamorphosis into literary characters.

Our transition from *character* to *audience* to *figure* cannot be complete: our ability to see ourselves objectively is limited, and furthermore, we can never have access (as argued above) to all that surrounds us. Thus we are perpetually caught in a state of uncertainty, since we cannot know conclusively how significant our choices or the things that surround us will turn out to be. We may be able to achieve a broader perspective, but it can never be broad enough for us to correctly judge all that we see. Even if we are aware of ourselves as characters, thus achieving a more elevated consciousness, the problem of how to interpret the world around us remains: are the things we see what we perceive them to be, or would a distant observer (who we can never fully be) sitting in the front row perceive them differently?

The end

The Merchant of Venice is often characterized as a generically ambiguous play. Nicholas Rowe, the first English writer to publish a critical edition of the works of Shakespeare, said of *MV*, "though we have seen the play received and acted as a comedy, and the part of the Jew performed by an excellent comedian, yet I cannot but think it was designed tragically by the author."[149] Rowe is pointing to the fact, first articulated by Aristotle in his discussion of 'catharsis', that genre is determined in large part by how an audience becomes involved in the play. As Edmonson notes, the genre of a play is not only determined "by the content of the drama itself," but according to "the drama's reception by the reader or audience."[150] The involvement of the audience in *MV* is complex, as is evidenced by the varying and contradictory critical and popular responses toward both the characters and the play. The genre of *MV* is ambiguous because the audience is suspended in the generic ambiguity of the characters and the ending, and intentionally not given sufficient distance to either evaluate or to experience the comedic (or perhaps tragic) aspects of the play without any interference from the other conflicting parts. In this way, the audience cannot achieve either a comedic or a tragic catharsis. The 'fog of choice' which envelopes the characters, identifiably relates to the audience's own experiences of being in the world, and thus it consequently mutes the traditionally fantastic quality (common to all comedic narratives) of the play, thereby obfuscating its generic identity which otherwise would have been less ambiguous.

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[149] Mahon, "The Fortune," 22.
[150] Edmonson, "Comical and Tragical" 267.

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