

## ON FORGIVENESS AND TOLERANCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S "MERCHANT OF VENICE"

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**T**olerance is not to be understood in subjectivist or voluntarist terms but rather as a right arising from the "very nature" of the human person. Past and prospective crimes of racial, religious or ethnic slaughter, historical murders such as those of the Inquisition, or the Holocaust emphasize that tolerance is a theme of great variety.

Nowadays the concept of TOLERANCE is more complex than was often assumed to be in the past. Many contemporary authors have tried to determine the nature of tolerance and its limits. One of them is Paul Ricoeur who has gathered together a number of prominent thinkers from various parts of the world and areas of activity and invited them to reflect on the "obstacles and limits to tolerance". The result is a remarkable collection of essays. As Ricoeur says in his Foreword: "Tolerance is a tricky subject: too easy or too difficult. It is indeed too easy to deplore intolerance, without putting oneself into question, oneself and the different allegiances with which each person identifies."

Tolerance is a historical theme of great contemporary interest. We can wonder whether any progress toward greater tolerance has really been achieved since the sixteenth century. We can notice that the period ca. 1500-1700 witnessed a steady expansion of intolerance, as we can see the enormous complexity of religious identity and conflict in the early modern age. The experiences of such groups like witches, Jews, and religious dissenters show that the story of intolerance is much more clouded and depressing than nineteenth-century Protestantism would suggest. Referring to the historical echoes of tolerance's and intolerance's manifestations one can remark for instance that executions for heresy were relatively rare before the mid-sixteenth century. Even then, such executions remained limited in number and they had for the most part died out in most regions by 1600. At that time tolerance remained at best a practical political concession, not something valued for its own sake.

A great author such as William Shakespeare grasped such an idea in a play called "The Merchant of Venice". The Trial (between Antonio and Shylock) which is the dramatic climax of the conflict in the play presents and resolves two different conflicts: (1) the conflict between good (love, tolerance) and evil (hatred) and (2) the conflict between a good (justice or the law) and a greater good (mercy or the **law of love and tolerance**). The choice of "either / or" pertains to the more obvious choice between good and evil. Shylock will be proved literally guilty of attempting to murder Antonio, but, as a Christian, Antonio will be spiritually guilty of murder if he returns Shylock's hatred.

*The Merchant of Venice* is more than a romantic play because its subject of **tolerance and love** includes the love of friendship as well as romance, the love of parent and child and the love of master and servant. Essential is the problem of "loving" and "not loving or hating". Loving wisely, not foolishly, in all aspects of life and human relationship may be the most difficult challenge of all.

The problems of usury and free lending, enemy and friend, hate and love, folly and wisdom, appearance and reality, safety and risk, keeping the law and violating it, giving and forgiving, justice and mercy are all *bound up* in the formulation of the flesh bond and its resolution in the trial. As J.C. Holmer observed the flesh bond in Venice, like the casket test in Belmont, is both literally and symbolically meaningful [1]. As the casket test is the literal means by which Portia gains a true husband, the flesh bond is the literal means by which Shylock can revenge himself on Antonio and by which Antonio can demonstrate his love for Bassanio so that Bassanio can sue to love Portia. The choice of the leaden casket represents wise love just as the choice to take the bond represents foolish hate. The bond scene anticipates the trial scene, because usury and murder are conceptually associated in XVI-th century thought and are carefully linked together through Shylock's flesh bond.

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In Shakespeare's time as well as today **tolerance** was more than a barrier against the tendency to extend one's power into every corner of human life. Tolerance which is protected by law in civil society gives rise to a robust public moral conversation. And in that conversation which can at times be quite sharp (as it is the case of Shakespeare's Trial) the citizens grapple with the truth about freedom.

In "The Merchant of Venice" Shakespeare's dramatic art is rooted in "multiple unity" characteristic of High Renaissance art but it also anticipates "unified unity" characteristic of Baroque art. The integrity of artistic vision that Shakespeare creates out of the many disparate elements in his play springs chiefly from a richly refined ideology about **tolerance and human choices**. From this point of view the Trial is one of the most important sequences of the play.

The Trial opens not with what the audience might expect, a confrontation between Antonio and Shylock or one between Shylock and Portia, but with the Duke's compassion for Antonio. The Duke seems surprised to see Antonio appear in court even before his "stony adversary" (4. 1. 4) arrives: "What, is Antonio here?" (1) Antonio's honesty and courage impress us. He rightly recognizes that "no lawful means" (9) can remove him from Shylock's reach. He does not try to avoid the penalty but stoically opposes Shylock's "fury" with his "patience", his "quietness of spirit" (11-12). The trial's prelude, before Portia arrives disguised as Balthasar, turns on judgement as reason. The Duke reasons with Shylock and expects "a gentle answer" (16-34). Shylock's "answer" explodes that expectation; he has sworn an oath by his nation's "holy Sabaoth" to have his bond (35-39). Shylock now dominates the discussion by posing questions for the court and answering them as he pleases: "You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / three thousand ducats" (40-42). Shylock appears honest but is not. He can give reasons for his hatred of Antonio, but he will not in this court. Why not? It is because hate is not prosecutable offence in courts of law unless that harboured hate is translated into a word or deed that violates some statutory law? Shylock's answers may not please the court, but they are lawful. He seems to recognize that it is important to keep his answers technically lawful. He tells the court not the whole truth but only part of the truth as to why he insists on his bond.

Shakespeare's court may suspect Shylock and fear Antonio's death, as Antonio himself does (3. 2. 316), but it will be Balthazar's task to prove in court that Shylock attempts to murder Antonio. Balthazar's proof will not be useful in judging the bond itself but in subsequently judging the author of the bond and his

purpose. With dramatic irony disguised Portia must undisguise Shylock who desires to use a bond (legal by one law) to commit an act (illegal by another law) without any legal risk to himself.

At this point Antonio momentarily loses his hard-earned "quietness of spirit" and counters the court's reasoning with his own that it is useless to try to "soften" the hardhearted Jew. Antonio is resolved to suffer his judgement. Shylock mockingly refuses Bassanio's offer of twice the bond's sum (84) as well as his later prayerful appeal (127) and the Duke rationally challenges Shylock, "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?" (88). Shylock confidently returns "What judgement shall I dread doing no wrong?" (89)

Shylock analogises the "rightness" of his bond with the Christian ownership of human flesh in form of slaves. His reply indicts the Christians's failure to live according to their creed. Although slavery might be legal according to man's law, it is not "legal" if judged by God's law. This is one of the many instances in the trial scene, when the interplay between the laws of man and God serves to underscore the necessity but also the inherent injustice or fallible man's law and the perfect justice of God's law.

In his defence of taking and owning flesh Shylock represents the man who ironically is a slave to himself, "enslaved" to the "flesh" because he refuses to live in the "spirit". Shylock's **spiritual blindness**, his **self-righteous arrogance**, his hypocritical reverence for literal legalism, his **intolerance** and his contempt for mercy continue to build Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock, begun in Shylock's first scene (1. 3.), as a false Pharisaical Jew, not a true patriarchal Jew as Shylock would like to see himself. The values for which Shylock stands in the trial are all associated with the New Testament's condemnation of the "ambition, covetousness and hypocrisy" of the Pharisees who are presented as the moral opposites of the Old Testament prophets: "Woe be unto you, Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites: for ye build the tombs of the Prophets ... If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in the blood of the Prophets" (Mt 23. 29-30; cf vs1-39)

In the spirit of the leaden casket the willingness of Bassanio and Antonio during the trial to give all for the other, to die for each other (111-116) morally opposes Shylock's willingness to take all, according to his desire. The human generosity of these two friends evokes, as Sir Israel Gollancz first noted the greatest sign of **tolerance and love** in opposition to Shylock's hate: "Greater love than this hath no man, when any man bestowed his life for his friends" (Jn 15. 13). Except for Antonio's two brief affirmations and his

important farewell speech to Bassanio, we can only read between the lines what Antonio is thinking and feeling and how that is clarified when he finally participates in the judgement of Shylock.

With the court at a stalemate disguised Nerissa and Portia enter as a clerk and civil doctor “informed thoroughly of the cause” (169) (courtesy of the learned Bellario).

Quick-witted Portia like her father has wisely left little to mere chance. Before she left Belmont she sent her “honest true” servant Balthasar with a letter ahead of her to her male cousin Bellario, a doctor of law in Padua, and smartly told Balthasar to bring back with him “What notes and garments” Bellario gives (3. 4. 45-46).

Bellario’s letter to the court allows Portia flexibility in the trial and her eloquent speech on **tolerance and mercy** is probably her own, her bettering of the legal opinion with which Bellario has furnished her (155-156). Bellario is Shakespeare’s creation and his realistic addition to his literary source “Il Pecorone”. Bellario’s letter introduces Balthasar by name and advises the court to expect a paradox, a wise but young judge: “I never knew so young a body with so old a head” (160).

As Lawrence Danson observes Portia is presented here in terms of the Renaissance moral commonplace and the classical topos of the « puer senex », the individual who combines in one person the best of youth and the best of age.

Viewed within a biblical context, moreover, Portia as a wise youth will be aptly named Balthazar / Daniel because Daniel was also a wise young judge, and “Daniel” means “Judgement of God” [2].

Shylock joyfully renames Balthasar as Daniel once the wise young judge desists from advocating mercy and tells Shylock what he wants to hear, that his bond is legal and that he may prepare to take it. Shakespeare makes the legality of Shylock’s bond unmistakably clear. When Portia first enters the court, she proclaims to Shylock: “Of a strange nature is the suit you follow / Yet in such rule that the Venetian law / Cannot impugn you as you do proceed” (173-175). Again, when Portia examines the bond, she declares: “Why, this bond is forfeit, / And lawfully by this the Jew may claim / A pound of flesh, to be cut off / Nearest the merchant’s heart” (226-229). Later Portia reasserts that Shylock’s bond is legally valid. “The court awards it, and the law doth give it” (296). Without exception, everyone in the court recognizes Antonio to “stand within danger” (176) because the bond is lawful. As much as Bassanio and other Venetians would like to wrest the law to save Antonio’s life, this cannot be done without impeaching “the justice of the state” (3. 3. 29) that legally

guarantees the benefits foreigners enjoy in Venice: “there is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established” (212-215).

Shakespeare, keenly aware of the **pedagogic power** of role-playing has Portia accept the role of the devil’s advocate in her sentence of “all justice” (317) to teach Shylock, and us the need for the grace of **tolerance**.

Shylock’s important and carefully chosen words in the bond “nearest his heart” (250) are not revealed to the audience until Portia refers to them (226), but they receive climactic emphasis when Antonio is directed to lay bare his bosom: “For if the Jew do cut deep enough, / I’ll pay instantly with all my heart” (276-277).

Antonio’s ironic statement symbolizing his offering of both tolerance and life for Bassanio renders shockingly clear that Shylock does not contradict this: “We trifle time; I pray thee pursue sentence” (4. 1. 294). Prior to the trial scene the only clue that Shylock wants Antonio’s heart is Shylock’s promise to Tubal: “I will have the heart of him if he forfeit” (3. 1. 100-101).

Despite this evidence of criminal intent and attempt Portia has no more legal right to deny the taking of a lawful bond. Shakespeare deliberately contrasts the letter of the law with the spirit of men. The letter of the law allows only justice and judgement. If either Antonio or Shylock are to receive any **tolerance**, it will not come from the law but from the hearts of men. Because Shylock’s bond is legal according to the letter of Venetian law, the letter of the bond itself – not the letter of the law – is what is left open to interpretation. Portia has just given Shylock the essential linguistic clues when she asks Shylock if he has “the balance” ready “to weight the flesh” (251) and if he should have a surgeon ready to prevent Antonio from too much loss of blood (254). Shylock has the balance ready but he cannot admit the surgeon: “Is it so nominated in the bond? / ...I cannot find it, ‘tis not in the bond” (255, 258).

The precise literal meaning of the words “a pound of flesh” means just that – a pound (neither more nor less) of flesh (not blood, hair or bone that could accompany the flesh). It is Shylock, not Portia, who desires a figurative interpretation of “a pound of flesh”.

Shakespeare structures Portia’s judgement in three parts. The first two pertain to Portia’s literal interpretation of the bond; the third pertains to the legal consequences of Shylock’s attempt to murder Antonio. The literal form and progressive order of these three parts enlighten our understanding of what Shakespeare wants Portia to accomplish.

In the two parts of her interpretation of the language of the bond, Portia gives Shylock his desired principle

(literalism) used now, however, with good intent and for a good end.

There are two ways to read the words literally: one can deconstruct "flesh" or "pound". Shakespeare chooses to present the flesh / blood dilemma before the exact measure of weight.

Most importantly, Shylock tacitly acknowledges the legitimacy of Portia's interpretation because he voices no objections to it. Shylock does, however, indicate his surprise at the legal penalty he faces if he transgresses this interpretation in the taking of his bond.

Now Portia introduces the principle of risk that is native to the casket choice and foreign usury. Shylock may still take his bond but if he violates the letter of it by shedding even one drop of "Christian blood" (306), his "lands and goods are by the law of Venice confiscate / Unto the state of Venice" (307-308)

The personal hazard of financial wealth is the significant turning point at which Shylock begins to back away from his bond.

Portia will "raise the waters" (2. 2. 39) and offer the other possible literal interpretation and its consequent legal penalty: "If thou tak'st more / Or less than just pound ... / Thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate" (322-328). For the first time Portia announces the only penalty, the death penalty, that knowledgeable

members of an Elizabethan audience would have been expecting to hear. Portia is trying to give a lesson. She wants to teach Shylock by making him experience it: the danger of "all justice" and the wisdom of **tolerance**.

From a contemporary point of view the **concept of Tolerance** - as it is shown in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* - can revitalize the idea of pluralism, giving it a richer moral and cultural content. Reading again this play and making the effort to look at matters objectively we can see that there is a "fundamental commonalty" transcending all the differences which distinguish individuals and peoples. For different cultures there are but different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. And it is precisely here that we find one source of the respect which is due to every culture and every nation. And here we see how important it is to safeguard the fundamental right of freedom of conscience as the cornerstone of the structure of human rights and the foundation of every truly free society. No one is permitted to suppress those rights by using coercitive power to impose an answer to the mystery of man.

### NOTES

- [1] The play was published for the first time in 1600 but it was probably written in 1596. The plot is mostly inspired by a collection of short stories "Il Pecorone" written by Giovanni Fiorentino in 1378. Elements of the same plot can be distinguished in "Gesta Romanorum" - a medieval collection of short stories (translated into English in 1577) and in Marlowe's play "The Jew of Malta" as well as in a lost play "The Jew" mentioned by Stephen Gosson in "The School of Abuse" in 1579. A reasonably close comparison of Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta" and Shakespeare's "Merchant", undertaken herein, reveals not only that Shakespeare is far more indebted to Marlowe than had generally been suggested, but also that Shakespeare is sufficiently independent in his deliberate departures from Marlowe, charting his own remarkably new dramatic territory. If Shakespeare is anxiously trying to contain Marlowe's ghostly influence, he succeeds wonderfully with various examples that range from assiduous assimilation to innovative imitation and to confident contradiction.
- [2] In the New Testament, Balthasar is the name of one of the three wise men who followed the star in Bethlehem in order to bring gifts of homage to the child in the manger.

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