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A Carnival of Shadows: Perverting Festivity in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*

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‹‹ To live in Venice or even to visit it, means that
you fall in love with the city itself.
There is nothing left over in your heart for anyone else. ››

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM

To a city that profoundly mesmerized me,
and to everyone I had the pleasure to come across there.

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A CARNIVAL OF SHADOWS: PERVERTING FESTIVITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND *OTHELLO*

0. Abstract

According to recent views by scholars (Holderness, 2010), Shakespeare never visited Venice but he was able to use available sources to recreate 'Venetian colour', exploit the city's 'doubleness', and transform it into a debate space to challenge the pre-existing myth. The purpose of this project is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to demonstrate the existence of a Shakespearean darkening 'shadow' which threatens Venetian merriment by evolving from a disturbing festive aristocratic atmosphere in *The Merchant of Venice*, haunted by killjoys, to an evil perversity in *Othello*. On the other hand, I intend to prove that this 'shadow' is related to a Venetian paradigm of pretence, and more specifically to the Bakhtinian 'Carnival'. In order to do this, I will explore the concepts of disguise and cross-dressing, and their relationship with the 'carnivalization' of literality, and of flesh. Furthermore, I will illustrate how the use of masquerade elements awakens a dystopia of quarrels, drunkenness, licentiousness, black magic and bestiality. In sum, this paper aims to show how the Bard challenges the Venetian myth by depicting a 'liminal' Venice, tainted with an infectious carnivalesque 'shadow'.

1. Introduction

The link between William Shakespeare and Venice has existed for long but, according to Graham Holderness in the introduction of his monograph on the topic (2010: 1–17), there are not many extended studies on the question, which has only recently been properly broached. *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98) and *Othello* (1603) – commonly classified as a problem play (a comedy) and a tragedy, respectively – have been broadly studied in terms of plot development, main topics and characters. However, as shocking as it may sound, it seems as if the question of location has been relegated to a second level of importance. In order to mend this oblivion, some critics have underlined that during the Renaissance period the taste for discovering was closely linked with geography:

> Invested with the romance of travels, with the magic of faraway lands and exotic places, geography is also linked with desire, with seduction, with the specific fascination of foreign languages and strange idioms. It awakens curiosity and a sense of wonder, and is tied up with a need to discover the unknown. (Laroque, 2005: 197)

Nevertheless, this 'discovery of the unknown' was apparently not the synonym of a literal trip in the case of the Bard. As expected, there have been many theories on the possibility of Shakespeare having visited Italy during the 'lost years' of his always enigmatic biography, between 1585 and 1592. Some believe that he escaped the Plague in London and the prohibition of dramatic performances at Court, and thus seized the opportunity to see for himself the beauties of the country that had traditionally attracted men and women of taste across Europe. Italian scholar Ernesto Grillo affirmed that 'in *The Merchant of Venice* we find an inimitable Italian atmosphere, whose fragrance can be more easily perceived than explained or analysed' (1973: 137). However, despite such views, the consensus among most scholars is that the Bard never set foot in Italy.

Consequently, the actual link between Shakespeare and Venice is to be explained not through a 'literal' but a 'literary' trip. Quoting Keir Elam, 'Shakespeare's journey was not physical or geographical but discursive, literary, and lectorial' (2007: 100). One of the primary Anglo-Italian intertext at the time was John Florio, whom Shakespeare even quotes in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1597): '*Venetia, Venetia, chi non ti vede non ti pretia*' (4.2.95–96). Elam even recalls the hypothesis of a Shakespeare born in Messina, and Florio's father, on the account of an alleged Anglicization of the Bard's mother's maiden name: Crollalanza, Shake-spear. Leaving aside such theories, a more demonstrable fact is that Shakespeare experienced Italian cultural modes – notably the discursive heritage and Castiglione's *conversazione* – through the available written as well as oral sources. The latter, for instance, consisted mainly in travellers' reports,

accounts from members of Shakespeare's own acting company, and the presence of Italian intellectuals, such as Florio and others, at Court.

Needless to say, already existing plots in the Italian tradition delighted the English audience, and Italian culture in general permeated Shakespeare's plays and Elizabethan literature and drama. The main sources for Shakespeare's Venetian plays are Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (in the case of *Othello*); and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone*, and the medieval collection of stories *Gesta Romanorum* (in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*)[1]. However, in the Cinthio's source, for example, there is no such thing as the elopement of Desdemona, the 'curse' pronounced by the father, or the 'trial' of the Moor before the Duke and the *signiors* of Venice. So Shakespeare indeed copied already existing sources, but also added his own contributions. Scholars have long acknowledged that originality was not an issue during Renaissance, and that a fruitful use of sources gave authors prestige. According to Wayne A. Rebhorn, the ideal consisted in a more or less faithful *imitatio*, but with a certain contribution from the author: 'Renaissance authors [...] were split between wanting to align their texts with a pre-existing authority [...] and wanting to valorize their own historically contingent creativity' (1986: 385).

And Shakespeare did that remarkably well, regardless of the fact that some critics believe his use of 'Italian colour' to be inconsistent. For this reason, many critics believe that Shakespearean abroad locations, including Venice, are actually a 'thinly disguised cover' for problems present in England. It is true that he did not take into account, for example, the fact that in Venice Jews were confined in the Ghetto at night, and that Shylock could not have had a Christian servant such as Lancelot. Nevertheless,

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[1] For further reading on the topic see: Marrapodi (2007) and Clubb (2001).

he skilfully used and adapted sources from various traditions – notably Italian, from the early moments of the Roman Republic, through the decline of the Empire, and to the height of the Italian Renaissance.

At the same time, he introduced a meaningful psychological element, creating characters whose personalities are full of layers and nuances. In that sense, it has been argued that the genius of Shakespeare resides not merely in his mastery of the sources, but rather in his capacity of depicting human experience. Dostoevsky, for instance, believed that Shakespeare illustrated the 'psychology of the insulted and injured' (Goddard, 1960: 96). And other authors such as Harold Bloom have even gone to the extreme of relating the depiction of the human with the actual 'invention' of the human – at least as far as literature is concerned. In his own words: 'by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality in language, [he] thereby invented the human as we know it' (1998: 705).

However it may be, it would be inaccurate to believe that Shakespeare's depiction of Venice – metonymically both as a city and a social organisation – is the mere product of sources and not of a genuine interest in a particular physical space. Holderness (2010) claims that one of the possible reasons for this misinterpretation is due to the fact that Shakespeare's Venetian plays are only partially set in Venice. Likewise, he notes that 'the essential Shakespeare might consist in archetypes of human experience relatively independent of time and of place' (Holderness, 2010: 2). In other words, the Bard would have apparently been more interested in conceiving a liminal Venice which suited his interests, rather than depicting a faithful Venetian atmosphere as Ben Jonson did in *Volpone* (1605–06). With the perspective of time, Venice's 'liminality' has been blamed as a cause of the current touristic degradation. According to such views, Venice is a no-place, void of content: 'It is international, that is to say, nowhere. It is city as

exhibit, city as performance art, city as inauthentic experience' (Fallowell, 2000: 78). And those traits of 'exhibition' and 'lack of authenticity' could already be somehow found in Shakespeare's Venice.

In any case, all things considered, one of the purposes of this paper is to insist on the importance of Venice for Shakespeare, beyond a superficial analysis of sources and/or influence of Italian culture. The *Serenissima* is not simply a picturesque or exotic background for the plays. On the contrary, it merges in one location crucial socio-political questions of major importance for Shakespeare, who will eventually transform the 'Venetian myth' into a paradigm of carnivalesque pretence.

2. Shakespeare and the Elizabethan 'Myth of Venice'

Having thus asserted the importance of an analysis of Shakespeare's Venice, other than through direct sources, it is time to proceed to an examination of the pre-existing Venetian image that Shakespeare was to reinterpret. Venice has in many instances been esteemed and admired by travellers, architects, musicians, writers, painters and artists in general, all throughout history. Its one hundred and seventeen small islands have triggered a profusion of artistic creations, among which Turner's, Proust's or Henry James' masterpieces, which were for the most part inspired by the city's bewildering decadence. Nowadays, the city is a major touristic destination, and some critics argue that its fragile canals are 'doomed to become a historical Disneyland' (Gray, 2014). Nonetheless, Venice has historically attracted foreign presence, particularly during Shakespeare's time, when it was certainly not a moribund city.

In the words of Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi, Venice was at the time a 'city *par excellence*' (2011: 3). It had a privileged geographical position at the far end of the Adriatic Sea, so it was a pivotal mediating location between eastern and western countries, and a crucial trading post for merchants such as Antonio, with his 'argosies' at sea (1.1.9)[2]. From a political and economical point of view, its reputation around Europe was that of a stable Republic devoted to trade – nowadays sometimes described as 'the Dubai of the Renaissance' (Gray, 2014). Venetian citizens were seen as ambitious and audacious merchants whose resources were put at the service of guilds and sea trade (with the perils of 'dangerous rocks' and 'roaring waters', 1.1.31–34), all to the maximisation of wealth. Thus the Venetian civic ideal – that of the '*gran Signori*'[3] – would consist in the embodiment of a 'royal merchant' (4.1.28) such as Antonio, a kind of merchant-prince who is simultaneously a bourgeois and an aristocrat.

Such extreme wealth led the way towards great luxury and sophistication, with the patronizing of arts and the aim of reaffirming Venetian civic pride, along the Grand Canal, inside the palazzos and in the *campi* or the Piazza. Aristocrats rejoiced in the festive milieu – Carnival, gambling, prostitution – and intellectuals revelled in what at the time was the printing capital of the world, with exponents such as the Aldine Press[4]

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[2] This paper will quote Shakespeare's plays from the 2008 Oxford University Press editions (see Bibliography for more details).

[3] A popular saying stereotypes different areas of the region of the Veneto: '*Veneziani, gran Signori; Padovani, gran dotori; Visentini, magna gati; Veronesi... tuti mati; Udinesi, castelani co i cognòmj de Furlani; Trevisani, pan e tripe; Rovigòti, baco e pipe; i Cremaschi fa coioni; i Bresàn, tàia cantoni; ghe n'é 'ncora de pì tristi... Bergamaschi brusacristi! E Belun? Póre Belun, te se proprio de nisun!'* (see Elisa Pasqualetto's article in <http://2night.it/2015/01/22/veneziani-gran-signori-padovani-gran-dottori-ma-perche.html>, 21st January 2015, for detailed explanations).

[4] A Venetian printing office famous for the introduction of italics, and that of smaller and more portable octavo size books, as well as the edition of nearly all the known Greek and Latin manuscripts of the era.

by Aldus Manutius. With the perspective of time, Venice could even be thought to epitomize the 'early modern European city' – if we consider this concept from the perspective of a globalised commercial oligarchy with a mercantile society, in the manner of today's Wall Street in New York or Lombard Street in London.

But Venetians were not the only citizens to benefit from this mercantile wealthy paradise. The city's commitment to commercial enrichment required political stability and, although taxes were often heavy, violent persecution was rare under the Venetian Republic. After all, 'it was only good business for Venice to be tolerant of foreigners and provide freedoms for a heterogeneous population' (Levith, 1989: 21). Venetian population was thus considerably multicultural and multiethnic for a mid-sixteenth century European state, and the 'Other' was generally accepted, even if often on the grounds of commercial interest. Then, of course, the actual tolerance provided to foreigners is a central issue of discussion and, in fact, the granting of 'the commodity that strangers have with us in Venice' (3.3.27–28) is at the origin of Venetian discontent and antagonism towards the 'Other'. It is what will eventually cause their unmasking as perverse intolerants (this issue will be later developed in this paper).

Politically speaking, the well-known electoral system of almost infinitely repeated voting held the curiosity of other European states. The Venetian political system combined traits of monarchy, democracy and aristocratic rule, while other countries were mostly under absolutism. For Venetians it was crucial to keep potential Caesars down, and a complex political system assured that the State was not in service of the Doge, but rather the contrary. In that sense, the Republic incorporated the sinister Council of Ten – one of the Venetian governing bodies whose inquisitive force included

the power to make a Doge resign[5]. Such an organism could be at once regarded as a more or less democratic feature (preventing despotism), but also paradoxically as a tyrannical element in itself, since it did not have to answer to any authority. Thus for a defender of strong rule such as Niccolò Machiavelli, the power given to the Council of Ten was definitely an asset: 'the Venetian republic, which is excellent among modern republics, has reserved authority to a few citizens who in urgent needs can decide, all in accord, without further consultation' (2009: 74–75).

On the whole, these 'sinister' political practices, along with espionage and the various religious interdicts – which made the conflict between la Serenissima and the Papacy evident –, are the attestation of the fact that the apparently perfect political system had some breaches even by Shakespeare's time (see following section for details on a paradigm of pretence and perversion). What is more, such hints of an imperfect Venetian state are certainly at the origin of the future decadence and corruption, and the dehumanization which accompanied eighteenth century hedonistic Venice, embittered by a feeling of a past greatness which had departed the lagoon.

In any case, going back to the original question of the significance of Venice for Shakespeare, it is noteworthy to point out its function in the plays. According to Martin Garrett, 'Venetian settings in Renaissance plays functioned as convenient shorthand for wealth and at least the appearance of civilization' (2001: 188). In general terms, Venice enabled Shakespeare to extrapolate and explore broader questions, notably that of the helplessness of individuals – particularly if they belong to social minorities – in front of the abuses of power. In the case of *Othello*, for the most part, the action does not

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[5] From 1457 onwards, since the deposition of Doge Francesco Foscari, the Great Council regularly accused the Council of Ten of exerting a despotic rule and of enjoying almost unlimited authority over all governmental affairs.

actually take place in Venice. There is instead a transferring of part of the Venetian aristocracy to Cyprus, the birthplace of the libidinous goddess *par excellence*, Venus. Scholars have related this particular aspect to the fact that in the play 'sexual desire goes horribly wrong and turns into jealousy, nausea, madness, and violence' (Tanner, 2010: 525). However, that is not all there is to consider.

Venice also provided Shakespeare with an assemblage of social, political, legal and religious issues, all in one environment. However, such an assemblage implied also the presence of (possibly irreconcilable) contradictions and conflicts. For Venetian author Gasparo Contarini, the city was a *coincidentia oppositorum*: 'so unspeakeablie strange that the straungest impossibilities not seeme altogether incredible' (1599). The city was thus turned into a 'debate space' in which such issues were to be examined and questioned. At the same time, this operation implied the challenging of a (probably unjustified) 'grave and glamorous reputation' (Rutter, 2011: 71), which the city acquired right from its foundation. Some scholars argue that from 697 A.D. – the establishing of Venice's first Doge –, and then 828 A.D., with the commissioning of the construction of St. Mark's cathedral (Lane, 1973: 4–5), the city state started a process of self-mythification. After having dismissed its first patron St. Theodore and having appointed a higher-ranked Saint Mark, the traditional chosen date for the foundation was the 25th of March 421 A.D.: the feast day of its new patron saint, and the mystical reincarnation of Christ (nine months after the Feast of the Annunciation), who somehow 'blessed' the newly born Republic.

Such oneiric origins would in time develop into different symbolic representations, sustained by the renowned political system, the alleged religious tolerance and the mercantile expertise of its citizens. Among those mythical representations, there was that of Venice the Wise, the Just, the Rich and the *città*

galante (McPherson, 1990: 27). Nevertheless, the role of Shakespeare consisted in exploiting the already mentioned 'debate space' to question the city's preceding reputation. The city eventually became for Shakespeare the perfect emplacement to portray a deceitful and perverse merchant society.

Shakespeare was able to carry out such challenging of the Venetian myth due to the already present breaches in the not-so-perfect and not-so-tolerant state. The presence of 'strangers' was very unsettling, surely a major concern for the hermetic Venetian aristocracy. Some scholars such as Gillies – who parallels Venice's relation with foreigners to the situation of Antwerp, where sixteenth century English bankers were welcomed to practise their business – have related this uneasiness to 'doubleness':

> At once an empire and an outpost, Shakespeare's Venice has just this doubleness. It is thus that the themes of 'exorbitance' and 'intrusion' enter the Venetian plays. The antithesis between these Shakespearean themes corresponds closely to the contradiction within the Elizabethan idea of Venice. Self-consciously imperial and a 'market place of the world', Shakespeare's Venice invites barbarous intrusion through the sheer 'exorbitance' of its maritime trading empire. (Gillies, 1994: 124–25)

Indeed, Venice excites contradictions and it does not always reconcile them. For a considerable number of Venetians, even if the city's wealth relied very much on the presence of 'strangers', the degree of liberty enjoyed by foreigners and the estate's complicity with the 'Other' were probably not welcomed.

On the one hand, especially in *Othello*, there is a sort of fascination with exoticism, as if the 'Other' represented the repressed desires of Venetian patricians. However, on the other hand, hatred towards 'intruders' is remarkable. Shylock, for example, is mocked – even by the clown Lancelot – as an ogre of money. He uses a hard financial tone which does not quite fit Venetian decorum. For him, 'Antonio is a good man' (1.3.12), but for him 'good' means economically solvent. So the Jew, by

embodying the evil side of the power of money, 'is the opposite of what the Venetians are; but at the same time he is an embodied irony, troublingly like them' (Barber, 1990: 168). After all, Shylock claims, he is only following Christian example: 'The villainy you teach me I will execute' (3.1.67–68). In short, the 'Other' could be read as a disturbing *doppelgänger* for Venetians, resulting from the city's ever-present ambiguity.

And Elizabethans were not immune to such an intriguing and contradictory city. According to John Drakakis, the early modern English sensibility was 'attracted by its freedoms, wary of its institutions, and suspicious of its social harmony' (2007: 186). One of the examples of this attitude can be seen in Thomas Coryat's *Crudities*. His opinion oscillates between admiration and uneasiness. It goes from the reference of Jews as 'such goodly and proper men' (2006: 117) to the description of a Jewish sermon as an 'exceeding loud yelling, indecent roaring, [...] as it were a beastly bellowing of it forth' (2006: 116). His detailed account of Venetian population, urbanism and customs is generally written in praising terms, since he compliments the commercial skills of the city, 'a marketplace of the world' (2006: 116), as well as Venetian 'abundance' and sophisticated aristocratic celebrations. However, that does not prevent him from noticing as well the ambiguity of the city, and hinting at the problems of clashing between cultures. He acknowledges some mistreatment of Jews and Moors since 'all their goods are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity [...], they are left even naked and destitute of their means of maintenance' (2006: 118). Yet he concludes that he prefers Venetian art and sumptuousness to England:

> [...] the sight of Venice and her resplendent beauty, antiquities, and monuments hath by many degrees more contented my mind and satisfied my desires than those four lordships [he refers to four of the richest manors of his hometown: Crewkerne, in Somerset] could possibly have done. (Coryat, 2006: 121)

In sum, the interest of Venice for Shakespeare is related to socio-political and economic aspects which serve the author in the depiction of a mercantile society. The immanent confrontation between Venetian citizens and the 'Other' is what triggers the collapse of the myth of Venice the Wise and Just. The following section will deal with this 'uncovering' of Venetian aristocracy, whose intolerance will bring about a perversion of festivity in the form of a 'Carnival of pretence'.

3. Venetian Festivity and Its Shadows in *The Merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare's Venetian plays do not particularly depict the city according to the positive mythical representations enumerated my David McPherson (1990) and others. Regardless of whether we are referring to the problem play (the comedy) or the tragedy, Shakespeare's Venice is obscure and disturbing in many regards. The previous section mentioned the existence of an uneasy ambiguity and some serious breaches in the core of the apparently perfect Venetian socio-political organisation. Shakespeare takes advantage of this instability and challenges the Venetian myth. This hypothesis has been recently upheld by Drakakis: 'Shakespeare's two Venetian plays both represent, and maintain a critical distance from, Venice, and [...] in different ways they interrogate and challenge existing elements of the received *myth'* (2007: 172).

Along these lines, the hypothesis that will be developed in this section of the paper is that of the presence of a darkening 'shadow' which threatens the above mentioned myth, and the festive environment. Such 'shadow' will evolve from a disturbing festive aristocratic atmosphere in *The Merchant of Venice* to a much more explicit evil perversity in *Othello*. Tony Tanner already stated that 'merriment' is somehow overshadowed in Venice: '[merriment] is an unequivocally positive word; it

has no dark side, and carries no shadow. Yet [...] Shakespeare makes it become ominous' (2010: 145). Also insisting on that 'darkening', Friedrich Nietzsche described Shakespeare as 'the poet of a restless and vigorous age, an age which is almost intoxicated and stupefied by its superabundance of blood and energy' (2012: 239). And such an 'intoxicated age' would facilitate the emergence of Iago – the exponent of supreme wickedness – from an initial Venetian disquiet.

All of this suggests that, indeed, in Shakespeare's Venice a hidden perversion has been awakened. In that sense, rich merchants are melancholic and cannot fully enjoy themselves, and troubled dreams haunt fathers before their finding that the daughters have fled, in the form of bad omens: Shylock says that 'there is some ill a-brewing towards my rest, for I did dream of money-bags tonight' (2.5.17–18); and Brabantio declares that 'This accident is not unlike my dream; belief of it oppresses me already' (1.1.141–42). Such a deeply disturbed psychic life indicates that all is not well in Venice. There exists a threatening hidden 'shadow', and it has triggered a perverting process of putrefaction (which will culminate in the decadent eighteenth century).

But first, it is important to insist on the fact that Venetian festivity – with which Shakespeare dealt, and in which the myth grew, – could not be conceived without the aristocratic atmosphere. The social class of the nobility is embodied in Antonio, the 'royal merchant', and the trinity of Jasons – Bassanio, Graziano, Lorenzo, – and finds its sublimation in Portia's retreat in Belmont, 'a place of poetry, of the sweet music of the spheres, of classical literature' (Magri, 2003: 2). Historians note that 'as Venetian patricians became nobles [they created] different types of *theatres of the world*. Any family aspiring to a noble lifestyle would have a villa, no matter how modest, in the Terraferma' (Fortini, 2004: 247). So retreats were indeed a capital possession for the

aristocracy, either in the form of Belmont-like villas, or as 'retreats closer at hand' –
namely the *casinì* or brothels.

As aristocrats, Venetians have also the trait of being generous, and riches allow
them to exhibit themselves splendidly. Similarly to Coryat, Venetian writer Francesco
Sansovino, in his 1581 *Venetia, città nobilissima et singolare*, noted the ambiguity of
nobles, and acutely used the term *politia* to describe his Venetian compatriots: civil, and
paradoxically both frugal[6] and profligate at the same time (Fortini, 2004: 2–5). In that
sense, Venetian Jasons and the merchant-princes would anachronistically echo Tomasi
di Lampedusa's words from *Il Gattopardo*, where 'for every glass of champagne drunk
by themselves they offer fifty to others', and where there is even a degree of exculpation
of their 'sins': '[...] when they treat someone badly, as they do sometimes, it is not so
much their personality sinning as their class affirming itself' (1958: 56). However,
'exhibition' and extravagance are so flamboyant that people do not necessarily have to
actually be wealthy. Bassanio, for example, spends recklessly and plans to 'feast' his
'best-esteemed acquaintance' (2.2.164–65) with Antonio's – that is, Shylock's – money.
Unlike the thrifty Jew, who literally clings to the pound of flesh – '[it] is dearly bought,
'tis mine, and I will have it' (4.1.99) – both Antonio and Portia are apparently so very
far above money that they feign to willingly give all they have:

> My purse, my person, my extremest means,
> Lie all unlocked to your occasions. (1.1.138–39)
>   [*note the double sense of 'lie' as 'remain' and 'falseness'*]

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[6] The disruptive effects of ostentatious display were of concern in Venice, and 'sumptuary legislation' was conceived as an attempt to control flamboyance. The earlier such law, for example, dating to 1299, limited the number of gifts, the size of the bridal entourage, and the number of dinner guests at the wedding feasts (Fortini, 2004: 150).

> Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.
> Double six thousand and then treble that... (3.2.298–300)
> > [*we insist on the feigning aspect since for Portia – as Shylock with the pound of flesh – Bassanio is also 'dear bought' (3.2.311)*]

The Venetian elite relish in extreme wealth, the origin of which is often found in sea trade. Undoubtedly, water in general stands as an essential aspect in Venice, known as the 'bride of the sea'[7]. In that regard, Shakespeare uses a perverted mythology of voyaging and sea travel. Metaphors of courteous tone related to ships abound: Antonio's argosies are 'like signors and rich burghers on the flood, or as it were the pageants of the sea' which 'do overpeer the petty traffickers that curtsy to them, do them reverence, as they fly by them with their woven wings' (1.1.10–14). However, such celebration of voyaging becomes ambiguous because there are also 'rocks' and 'roaring waters' which haunt business men. In addition, the various references to the Jason and Medea myth pervert the gold quest, not precisely performed by venturesome Argonauts or *conquistadores*. The metaphors are 'ostentatiously departed from the ancient idea of voyaging by glorifying the voyager as a discoverer (Columbus, Drake)' (Gillies, 1994: 135). The venture is, instead, related to avarice from the beginning, when Bassanio states his plan of wooing a 'lady richly left' (1.1.161) he had only met once. In addition, Graziano boasts at a moment of triumph, after securing his marriage to Nerissa: 'We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece' (3.2.239).

Apart from trade, another occupation of the Venetian elite is that of setting up a festive ambiance anytime the occasion allows it. C.L. Barber (1990), in his book *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social*

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[7] This epithet comes from the ancient ceremony held during the Festa della Sensa ('Ascension' in Venetian dialect) or Bucintoro (name of the galley), when Venice allegorically 'married' the sea. The Doge threw a ring into the Adriatic by saying: 'We wed thee, O sea, in token of perpetual domination'.

Custom, emphasizes the importance of popular theatrical traditions and holidays to understand Shakespeare's comedy. Aristocracy mastered the art of 'festivity' and disposed a wide range of activities with which to spend their leisure time:

> Mirth took form in morris-dances, sword-dances, wassailings, mock ceremonies of summer kings and queens and of lords of misrule, mummings, disguising, masques – and a bewildering variety of sports, games, shows, and pageants improvised on traditional models. (Barber, 1990: 5)

For one of the purposes of this paper – that of demonstrating a Venetian paradigm of deception and pretence – the celebration of the 'masque' acquires special significance. In terms of the plays, according to scholars, the act of masking can influence spectators' sympathies: 'Lorenzo's enterprise in stealing Jessica wins our sympathy partly because it is done in a masque, as a merriment' (Barber, 1990: 165). The city in itself is conceived after a fondness of the art of display, which its citizens mastered like no one all along the sumptuous facades[8] of the Grand Canal, in the manner of a theatrical curtain. In fact, when accessed by foot, the buildings lacked the *glamour* fancied by Venetians, which is why such entrances were normally reserved for servants. However, when accessed by boat, the palazzos glistened with the best Gothic ornamentation, and the more embellished the facades were, the better their owners were considered.

Thus outward show and appearance were at the core of Venetian society, and there existed a close relation with the 'masque' celebration only just mentioned. The term 'masque' developed a special sense of 'amateur theatrical performance' during Elizabethan times, especially in the 1560s, when such entertainments were popular among the nobility. For Shakespeare, the concept goes beyond the mere theatrical sense

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[8] According to the OED, 'facade' or 'façade' is a word used from the 1650s, borrowed from the French form *façade* and the Italian *facciata*, which in its turn come from the Latin form *faccia* or 'face'. From the 1560s onwards, 'face' acquires the meaning of 'to cover with something in front', which recalls the disguising nature of a mask.

to enter the world of deception. In the words of Hornby: 'Perception is one of Shakespeare's major concerns. His plays abound in disguises, mistaken identities, ambiguous sights, confusing noises, misapprehensions' (1986: 133).

In that regard, the fact that Venetian patricians are closely related to 'masking' facilitates Shakespeare's challenging of the myth. Since they are so fond of 'masking' during celebrations, they could as well be applying this 'masking' to their everyday lives – something which would echo *As You Like It*'s 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' (5.7.142–43)[9]. After all, their relationship with the 'Other', as well as the legislation on *meretrici*, was but a 'mask of decency' (Fortini, 2004: 182). In addition, according to Auden, 'Venetians are fashionably frivolous, and it is true that, like all frivolous people, they're also a little sad' (2000: 78). Their riches could paradoxically be a synonym of unhappiness, and they might not be as merry as they want to appear: 'I am not merry; but I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise' (2.1.122–23). From the very first line of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's aristocratic Venice is not precisely presented as cheerful environment. Despite enjoying abundance of riches, melancholy and anxiety lurk around characters: 'In sooth, I know not why I am so sad' (1.1.1). Antonio's mind, in that case, is obsessed by the *imago* of destroyed ships, a premonitory sensation which foreknows the imminent 'catharsis'. His feeling of sadness is so contagious that it even reaches the peaceful Belmont, where fair Portia feels that her 'little body is aweary of this great world' (1.2.1–2). According to sixteenth century Italian philosopher and poet, Tommaso Campanella – known for his utopian *The City of the Sun* (1602) –, feigning and pretending resulted necessarily in the unhappiness of the individual: '*chiamano*

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[9] In the monologue by Jaques, Venetians resemble a lot the soldier described there: 'a soldier, full of strange oaths, [...] sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth' (5.7.152–56).

infelicità quella loro, perché è annichilirsi il mostrarsi quel che non sei, cioè d'esser re, d'essere buono, d'esser savio, e non esser in verità' (1602: 39).

In the two Venetian plays, disguise takes thus place mostly in this form of lying and dissimulation, but also in the 'literal' act of cross-dressing (this will be developed later on). Around the same years of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare wrote two comedies in which the emphasis on the 'festive' aspect is notable: *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, that is not all. Festivity and disguise are so productive for Shakespeare that they constitute the centre of the plot of another play by Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night, or, What You Will* (1601–02)[10]. The confusion between the two siblings and the consequent love plots could not be conceived without the initial act of cross-dressing. Similarly to what happens in the Venetian festive atmosphere, the 'masque' is very present in Illyria. Sir Andrew, for example, refers to the formal courtly entertainments in which masks and dancing played a central part: 'I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether' (1.3.106–07). In fact, the interest of *Twelfth Night*'s plot derives from the repeated misunderstandings and some revealing statements such as 'I am not what I am' (3.1.139). This disintegration of identity and self-dissolution will also be later present in *Othello*, with much more tragic consequences, when Iago utters the exact same words (1.1.65), and when Othello undergoes some sort of personality split before committing suicide: 'That's he that was Othello: here I am' (5.2.282).

In any case, the relevance of *Twelfth Night* for the purpose of this paper is explained by the fact that it parallels the construction of *The Merchant of Venice*. Both

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[10] The source text for the plot of confusing two siblings of different sex is Plautus' *Menaechmi*, which is at the same time very productive in other plays such as Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *La Calandria* (1513) – considered the first Italian comedy written in prose.

comedies have an important element of dismantlement of laughter. Viola, disguised as Cesario, and after realising that Olivia is precariously falling in love with her, exclaims: 'Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness' (2.2.27). This condemnation of disguise as a major evil recalls Bassanio's choosing of the caskets. On that occasion, he condemns gold as a beguiling ornament which hides a treacherous destiny:

> Thus ornament is but the guilèd shore
> To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf
> Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
> The seeming truth which cunning times put on
> To entrap the wisest. (3.2.97–101)

Of course, it could be argued that his words are ironical, since the object of his trip to Belmont is the quest for the 'golden fleece'. According to Sigmund Freud (1988: 245), Bassanio's choosing has to be analysed from the premise of a 'double' personality hid beneath the surface, an impersonation to disentangle the game devised by Portia's father. In other words, Bassanio enacts a very sophisticated deceptive trick by having to deny the object of his desire – wealth – as a condition of achieving it.

As far as the dismantlement of laughter is concerned, it is necessary to highlight the role of characters such as Malvolio and Shylock, who haunt the cheerful environment of Illyria and Venice, respectively. Scholars have noted the parallelism between these two kill-joy figures: 'Once again Shakespeare has built a world out of music and melancholy, and once again this world is threatened by an alien voice' (Barber, 1990: 249; quoting Columbia University professor Mark Van Doren). And since there exists 'a sense of solidarity about pleasure' (Barber, 1990: 8), these alien figures will be the object of continuous mockery. François Laroque goes as far as to argue that Puritans, traditionally considered as kill-joy figures and declared adversaries

of the theatre, are the 'common enemy' who permits 'an alliance formed between the people and the nobility on the occasion of a festival or amusements' (1993: 253–54).

In Shakespeare, although the question is more complex and subtler, the kill-joy characters can be even demonized or transformed into a tortured scapegoat figure like Shylock. The concept of 'scapegoating' resumes the ideas developed in this paper on 'doubleness', ambiguity, and the 'Other' being a necessary evil. After all, a culture dominated by trade and commercial thinking, such as the Venetian one, eventually reduces 'individuals to exchangeable ciphers in a fashion analogous to the transactions of human sacrifice' (Hughes, 2007: 67). For Shakespeare, this 'human sacrifice' is to be found particularly in the annihilation of Shylock and Othello. Both cause discomfort in Venetian society because they are the *doppelgänger* symbol which, as mentioned before, betrays and shows Venetian inner flaws. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, 'Shylock is Antonio's *grotesque double*, and the two are caught in the primal cycle of revenge which fulfils itself in the finding of a sacrificial scapegoat' (2007: 75).

Yet insisting on the kill-joy concept, Shylock and his 'sober house' (2.5.36) are, unlike Brabantio, intended to awake a feeling of displeasure on the spectator. For instance, in terms of music – 'probably the major entertainment in the Venetian home' (Fortini, 2004: 123), – the contrast between the caricatured fierce Jew and other characters is set. While Shylock orders to 'stop my house's ears - I mean my casements' (2.5.34), Brabantio did not mean to 'stop' anyone's ears, and his daughter was allowed to spend time listening to Othello's enticing stories, which she devoured with a 'greedy ear' (1.3.149). In addition, Shylock's son-in-law Lorenzo, a gallant Venetian, claims that being a lover of music, like himself, is a synonym of a purer soul. On that occasion, Lorenzo places himself not only against Shylock, but also indirectly against her own

beloved Jessica, to some degree. His intervention may be read as a reply to her 'I am never merry when I hear sweet music' (5.1.69):

> The man [*and the woman, perhaps*] that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
> And his affections dark as Erebus. (5.1.83–87)

Jessica will always remain a 'stranger' in the eyes of Lorenzo, since the rest of the Jasons (Bassanio and Graziano) have won the 'golden fleece' without having to engage with a converted Jew. Besides, in the final exchange between Jessica and Lorenzo, for example, the newly-weds make various references to tragic love stories from Greek and medieval traditions. Different violations of a bond – to a father, a family, or a city, – due to a transportation caused by passion, resound through the mentioning of Thisbe, Dido, Medea and Cressida. The prospects of possible joy are haunted by 'the personification of black magic' (Kott, 1987: 102) and the presence of a sorceress-like figure such as Medea, traditionally presented as a deceitful character and 'a great performer' (Frantzi, 2007: 308). Nevertheless, the fact of finding such an unsuccessful and condemned union is not completely unexpected. After all, Shakespearean love, regardless of its intensity, is not to be strengthened by impulsive actions, but rather by the 'marriage of true minds' (Sonnet 116, verse 1). So the two Venetian elopers, Jessica and Desdemona, are far from the ideal expressed in the above mentioned sonnet, in which 'love is not love / which alters when it alteration finds' (2–3). Actually, there could not be a fickler and more 'altered' love than the one found in Shakespeare's Venice.

In any way, the final act of *The Merchant of Venice* is tainted by an obscure sense of bitterness and disillusion. This fact already hints at the darkening 'shadow' whose existence this paper tries to demonstrate. Despite the apparent mirth of the fifth act, a

complete happy ending is not fulfilled. According to Hornby (1986: 56), some of Shakespeare's plays end happily after peace and harmony have been restored, despite the horrible events depicted previously. Nevertheless, the upsetting outcome for Jessica and Lorenzo, as well as the recriminations on the husbands' unfaithfulness by Portia and Nerissa (part of the ring plot), are proof that such restoration of harmony is incomplete. Along with this idea, even the possibility of divine (certainly not earthly) redemption is denied, in this case, to the 'Other'. Divine, we say, and not earthly, because Venetian cruelty, as well as the desire to move on quickly from an uncomfortable scenario – 'The object poisons sight. Let it be hid' (5.2.363–64) – do not allow mercy nor forgiveness on the part of human-beings. The tragic consequence for Othello, for example, is that of suicide, after a metaphorical transfiguration into his own enemy, a 'turbaned Turk' (5.2.352), yet disturbingly still himself.

Thus it seems as if the only effective solution for the restitution of Venetian order was the elimination of the 'Other'. For Portia, literally any disturbance is unwelcomed: 'never shall you lie by Portia's side / with an unquiet soul' (3.2.305–06). Venice is profoundly tainted with a persecutory component, aiming at the annihilation of 'intruders'. Barber (1990: 163–91), for instance, explains this reaction by claiming that Venetians are like an exclusive community, devoted to a 'celebration of wealth', whose merriness is threatened by Jewish cruelty and Moorish brutality. Other critics such as Maurice Hunt have suggested the hypothesis of 'Venetian sadism', defending that there exists a 'disturbing paradigm dependent upon the city's multicultural reputation' (2003: 163). According to this interpretation, since outsiders upset the festive mood, they trigger a desire of *vendetta* in Venetians, who are therefore eager to inflict pain. Of course, this might just be a simplistic way of defending and justifying the extreme cruelty on the part of Venetians. In any case, it is true that stereotyping, as well as the

profusion of black-and-white and angel-devil type of images, point to a systematic persecution of the 'Other':

> Venice is the Shakespearean place name for compulsive stereotyping, the conversion of love into hatred that this stereotyping occasions, and the place where the rectification of this conversion proves unsatisfying as a long-term solution. (Hunt, 2003: 164)

In spite of the fact that some views rightly argue in favour of Shakespeare's racial tolerance and empathy, many critics claim that the 'Other' is to be read as a martyr, the victim of a biased administration of justice and a process of extreme mistreatment and cruelty. Although there is a denunciation of the helplessness of minorities in front of an abusive legal apparatus, the mistreatment of Jews, for example, is evident. Before the Second World War, *The Merchant of Venice* was read as a fairytale. More recently, the anti-Semitic readings of Shakespeare's plots – along with the accusations of misogyny and homophobia – have led some scholars to advocate the elimination of these plays from schools' curriculums (Nyoni, 2012). All things considered, it would be sensible to think that Shakespeare, similarly to what he does with the Venetian *myth*, offers a quite balanced – or perhaps ambiguous – attitude towards Jews and other minorities.

In that sense, the plays propose different ways to escape the violence – in the forms of 'racism' or anti-Semitism – which is present underneath the Venetian surface: either through inclusion (marriage or conversion) or exclusion (alienation or even death). However, these solutions are, as previously mentioned by Hunt, 'unsatisfying' and insufficient to overcome the paradox of otherness, a necessary evil. In view of this, not even the honest pleas made in order to empathise with the audience are enough. At least two characters, Shylock and Emilia, try to appeal to morality through their interventions: the former's well-known 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' discourse (3.1.55–69) and the latter's critique of the usual attribution of blame and sin to women (4.3.79–98).

Both speeches are pronounced with frankness, and the aim is to provoke sympathy by appealing to the common sense, through the repetition of rhetorical questions.

Now, after all these considerations, it seems pertinent to sum up the hypothesis of the 'shadow' which taints Venetian festive atmosphere, as well as the relationship between the two Venetian plays in that regard. Some scholars such as Leslie Fiedler (1972) have very pertinently suggested that *Othello* can be read as an upside-down continuation of *The Merchant of Venice*. In this newly reinterpreted and 'perverted' plot it is as if Portia eloped with Morocco, as if the father figures of Portia and Jessica merged into Brabantio, and as if Graziano matured into Iago. In any case, this paper will not deal with such plot analysis. The main purpose is to give evidence of the 'darkening shadow' and to relate it to the concept of Carnival later on. As far as the hidden disturbing elements are concerned, Ania Loomba notes that in Venice there is an 'inner reality' masked by appearances:

> [...] an offer of fellowship is insincere [...]. The levelling that capitalism seems to facilitate only heightens the fear of deception, of dealing with appearances that mask a different inner reality.' (2002)

Thus the concepts of masking and deceiving will be at the origin of the evolution from the disturbing aristocratic festivity of *The Merchant of Venice*, to the tragic and deathly consequences in *Othello*. In other words, the evil perversity which Iago embodies is but the intensification of something that had always been there, under the surface. This process is similar to that of the passage from utopias to dystopias. The latter is often read, not as the antonym of utopia, but rather as a mere exaggeration of the flaws already present in such allegedly perfect societies[11]:

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[11] For a full analysis on the topic see: Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

> We would not always want to live in those societies recommended to us by utopias, because they often resemble dictatorships that impose happiness on their citizens at the cost of their freedom. (Umberto Eco, 2013)[12]

Indeed, very much like Venice and its 'dictatorship of trade', whose mercantile practices taint every aspect of life. Hence Iago, the personification of all Venetian vices, avarice included, is also obsessed by money. Independently of the comic effect, he insistently repeats his 'put money in thy purse' (with small variations) up to nine times in the dialogue with Roderigo in Act 1, scene 3. So after that, his plan to 'abuse Othello's ears' (1.3.384) is ready to be implemented. Even the literal conception of a 'birth' of evil is expressed in his fateful words: 'I have't! It is engendered: Hell and Night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.' (1.3.392–93). According to Drakakis, that particular moment is 'a figuration of the cultural and psychological fears that permeate the life of Venice itself' (2007: 185). So, for the most part, along with the rest of arguments provided in this section, those 'fears' substantiate and verify the presence of a haunting 'shadow' element.

4. The Perversion of Carnival in *Othello*

A further purpose of this paper, as stated before, is to inscribe the fondness of deception and the profusion of 'disturbing' elements into a paradigm of perverted Carnival. According to scholars, the general consensus is that 'Carnival' during the early modern period was a moment of authorised social release which contributed to the maintaining of a stable social order. Regarding Shakespeare's plays, in Leo Salingar's view (1976), even if the plays incorporate many elements borrowed from seasonal

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[12] Quoted by Maria Popova in "Legendary Lands: Umberto Eco on the Greatest Maps of Imaginary Places and Why They Appeal to Us", Available at *Brain Pickings* (Accessed May 2015) <http://www.brainpickings.org/2014/02/17/legendary-lands-umberto-eco/>

celebrations and civic pageantry, the concept of festivity is not really relevant. For him, Shakespeare's plays are above all 'representations of life', and Carnival is but one facet of existence. However, other critics[13] have argued the contrary by analysing the calendrical references of holidays present in Shakespeare's plays. Likewise, we have already mentioned Barber's study (1990), devoted to the importance of popular traditions and holidays in Shakespeare's comedies. In short, we can conclude that, despite not being the principal focus, 'festival time' is in fact relevant:

> [It] is, *par excellence*, the time for permutations among loving couples and switches of partners, for all such changes are encouraged by the equivocation of carnival masks and the atmosphere of freedom which prevails when the prohibitions and constraints of ordinary life are lifted. (Laroque, 1993: 264)

Be that as it may, first the exact concept of Carnival intended here should be specified. Although Carnival's duration may vary, Shakespeare makes a point in his play *Henry IV* by observing that it should be brief to make the act of 'transgression' more enjoyable: 'If all the year were playing holidays / to sport would be as tedious as to work' (1.2.174–75). In addition, general formulations about 'Carnival' inevitably broach Nietzsche's 'glowing life of the Dyonisian revelers' (Stam, 1989: 86) as well as the frequently cited 'carnivalesque' by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

According to the Bakhtinian theory, Carnival has a subversive force which opposes decorum and the established order. During Carnival celebrations, 'borders' can be transgressed for the sake of laughter and merriment. Consequently, in the midst of the jubilant mood, there might be counterpoints such as the 'festive scapegoating of the weak' (1989: 95), a characteristic which directly relates to *The Merchant of Venice*. But of course, cruelty in this case is authorised and justified by a 'ludic undermining of all

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[13] For a full analysis on the topic see: Laroque's "Festivity and Time in Shakespeare's Plays" (1993) and Goldberg (2013).

norms' since 'the carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions' (1989: 86). Strictly, that would not be the situation in Shakespeare's Venice because, independently of the moral standards, rules do exist.

Yet the corrupted – and in a sense 'abolished', too – legal system is a proof of a general disregard for law and rules. After Shylock's operetta trial[14], in which cruelty was allowed and encouraged, in *Othello* we find a disturbing reference to 'the bloody book of law' (1.3.68), which indicates that the application of law is not a synonym of justice. Brabantio, a betrayed father who probably had believed in the idea of the Noble Savage, whom he invited into his house, is in a state of mental agitation in the first act. He wishes to demand responsibilities to her daughter's 'kidnapper' and is driven, similarly to Shylock, by a feeling very close to revenge. Both Brabantio and Shylock are naive believers in the myth of Venice the Just. Shylock thinks that 'were [Antonio] out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will' (3.1.120–21), and Brabantio relies on the city's assistance: 'What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice: My house is not a grange' (1.1.105–06). Even the possibility of interpreting the law to one's advantage is surprisingly suggested by the duke of Venice himself in the first act of *Othello*. The complainers are made to believe that the law is on their side, and that they will be able to act as judge and jury in their own complaints:

> [...] the bloody book of law
> You shall yourself read in the bitter letter
> After your own sense (1.3.68–70)

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[14] The term *operetta* used in this paper refers to what the OED defines as 'a short opera, usually on a light or humorous theme and typically having spoken dialogue'. This concept recalls the farcical trial performed by Portia and the rest of the Venetians, who interpret law in a 'light or humorous' way.

However, the Duke says that before finding out that the 'beguiler' is the 'valiant Othello' (1.3.49), who plays *all* the possible roles: 'accuser, penitent, judge, defendant, witness, jury and, finally, executioner' (Tanner, 2010: 516). Thus both trials will eventually be rigged in favour of the most powerful and beloved figures in the plays: Antonio, assisted by Portia and with the sympathy of the Duke himself ('I am sorry for thee', 4.1.2); and the general Othello (described by the Duke as 'virtuous' and 'far more fair than black', 1.3.288), whose bravery is essential to the State. Brabantio, helpless against Othello's influence in state affairs, can only conclude by saying 'let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile' (1.3.209), not without uttering a final curse on the couple's destiny: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father, and may thee' (1.3.290–91).

Going back to the question of Carnival, apart from the 'reversed' law system and the Bakhtinian 'transgression of borders', other elements such as the 'invocation' of evil are important to mention. Jonathan Goldberg (2013) suggests that Jessica's elopement – after which Bassanio's feast, so insistently forecast, will be cancelled ('no masque tonight', 2.6.64) – is the moment which marks the passage from a 'licentious Carnival' in Venice to a courteous and more civilized wooing in Belmont. However, this paper has sufficiently stated that not even Belmont escapes the 'disturbing shadow'. As a matter of fact, in the transition between the two Venetian plays, the residual disturbing feeling of *The Merchant of Venice* will find its epitome even in the perverse society of Cyprus – a transposed Venice. It thus seems as if the evil side of Carnival was invoked from Iago's screaming in the street to wake Brabantio onwards – an action connected with *charivari*, since Iago 'conjures up popular games and folk traditions only to pervert them to his own ends' (Laroque, 1993: 287).

Thereupon, the dark side of feasts and masques present in *The Merchant of Venice* will be magnified in *Othello*'s 'foul rout' (2.3.201), where drunkenness and quarrels mark the overall tone. There, honour will become futile and even reputation, which had been so precious, will be lost and/or put to question. When Cassio is dismissed from his duties as Othello's officer, he equates the loss of his reputation with the loss of part of his soul: 'O, I have lost my reputation. I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial' (2.3.253–55). And indeed, 'bestial' is what Iago pursues from his 'terrible summons' (1.1.82) of the beginning and all throughout the play. Even up to the point of having 'metamorphic' powers, since 'his special pleasure and intent *is* to transform men into beasts' (Tanner, 2010: 527). Consequently, while in *The Merchant of Venice* the only official 'beast' was Shylock, in Iago's habitat animals from the fouler end of the spectrum – monkeys, goats, dogs, toads, vipers – will be able to roam freely.

Thus in the same way, apart from Cassio degenerating into an irresponsible drunkard, Desdemona's reputation – in terms of virtue – will also be a central target for Iago. Licentiousness in the plays is present through drinking, but also through sex – or at least the appearance of it. Desdemona embodies the image of an extremely ambiguous femininity, being a 'virgin' and a 'whore' at the same time. At first, she is associated with a 'maiden never bold, of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blushed at herself' (1.3.95–97), a 'pure and untouched virgine' – much as Venice itself, never conquered before Napoleon appeared on the scene. Every character agrees on her virtue, but Iago is there to pervert her reputation and make her appear as 'the Whore of Venice'[15] in the eyes of Othello who, since at first pompously condemned erotic

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[15] Unlike the *meretrici* (who were forbidden to dress in silk or with jewels of any kind), the term *cortigiana* remained inconsistent during the early modern period. While the male counterpart *cortigiano* or courtier had no illicit sexual connotations, the feminine *cortigiana* implied both an elevated level of social graces and sexual availability.

diversions – 'my disports corrupt and taint my business' (1.3.269) –, is now haunted by the image of her 'soul's joy' (2.1.179) being stained: 'Was this fair paper, this most goodly book made to write *whore* upon?' (4.2.71–72). As a consequence, Othello will become a foolish and cuckolded donkey: 'And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are' (1.3.390–91). Some scholars relate this to a popular tradition: '[Iago] may have in mind the Carnival custom of making cuckolded husbands ride backwards on a donkey through the streets of a city' (Laroque, 1993: 296).

Thus, in a sense, Iago is a 'master of signs', and his trick consists in metaphorically disguising himself (and others), thanks to his deceptive powers and what Tanner refers to as 'the poisoning of sight' (2010: 522) – that is, the use of perverted 'ocular proof', such as Desdemona's handkerchief. He also plays a 'role within the role': even though he does not literally cross-dress, he feigns a totally different self. In the words of Richard Hornby, '[…] the role may simply be a false attitude or pose; when Iago manipulates Othello, he is still *Iago*, but in the guise of being *honest* (every other major character calls him that), although his true self is utterly wicked' (1986: 73–74). But Iago's harmful intention goes beyond that. His 'mastery of deception' includes beguiling language skills. His 'venom', administrated through words, lethally penetrates the whole play, and is at the origin of Othello's perdition. The Moor awakens for his part an attraction towards the exotic and the unknown, and is accused by Brabantio of using dark magic on Desdemona, through 'spells and medicines bought of mountebanks' (1.3.62). This 'enchantment', however, is not to be understood in a 'literal' but rather in a 'literary' sense, since Othello's – like Iago's – powerful element of beguilement resides in his rhetoric and use of words.

Yet deception and perversity are not limited to the realm of words. Literal masking and disguises are abundant in Venice. One of the reasons for this grotesque

distortion of reality is to be found in the concept of 'fertility'. Overall, Carnival is traditionally related to abundance, just as the medieval Land of Cockaigne[16] – whose Shakespearean equivalent would be Portia's Belmont, where manna is dropped 'in the way / of starvèd people' (5.1.293–94). In the words of Laroque, 'the atmosphere of contagious fertility that surrounds the dancing and festivity affects even the men, whose bellies, full of wine, beer and sausages, are almost as round as those of the pregnant women.' (Laroque, 1993: 49). To put it another way, fertility in respect to Carnival somehow brings grotesque role-reversal situations with it.

Consequently, in Shakespeare's literary Venice, cross-dressing and transvestism will be among the main carnivalesque elements. Coryat, for example, was amazed at the presence of actresses in real-life Renaissance Venice, and the fact that they were perfectly camouflaged: 'their noble and famous courtesans came to this comedy, but so disguised that a man cannot perceive them' (2006: 118). The Bakhtinian theory of 'Carnival' also states how, in terms of disguising, there is 'the notion of bisexuality and the practice of transvestism as a release from the burden of socially imposed sex roles' (Stam, 1989: 93). In particular, feminine figures in Shakespeare's plays are usually responsible for the impersonations and 'acrobatic costume changes', and they are the ones 'who skilfully orchestrated the interchanges in the dance of affinities and passions' (Laroque, 1993: 264).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, this prominence of women in the act of cross-dressing, often as a synonym of overcoming patriarchy, is also remarkable: Portia and Nerissa dress as men on the occasion of the trial, and Jessica in the moment of her elopement. And in that process of disguising there are even explicit references to the

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[16] In the manner of an ironic utopia, this imaginary land of extreme luxury and ease represented a place where all necessities were fully covered without having to work.

'acquisition' of a phallic quality: 'in such a habit / that they shall think we are accomplishèd / with that we lack' (3.4.60–62). In any case, along the lines of the 'shadow' which taints festivity, carnivalesque disguise is not necessarily related to an innocent entertainment. It is rather covered by furtive actions and lies: Jessica's 'do it secretly' (2.3.7), and Portia and Nerissa's claiming that they were going to 'a monastery two miles off' (3.4.31) are examples of it.

Finally, one last important element to consider would be that of the etymological meaning of 'Carnival' and its connotations. The etymology of the word is a bit obscure: 'it may mean a farewell to the flesh – *carne-vale* – or it may derive from *carne levare*, a putting by, a putting away of the flesh' (Goldberg, 2013: 428). Bearing that in mind, Shakespeare's Venetian plays could either follow one sense or the other, or even both at the same time. Indeed, 'Carnival' functions as a continuous 'having' and 'renouncing' of the flesh, and the examples are very numerous: Antonio loses his dearest friend for fair Portia; due to the supranatural intervention of fate through the casket choosing, the suitors of the latter are denied the enjoyment of the lady; Shylock loses his daughter, flesh of his flesh; Lancelot complains that he was not well fed while in the service of the thrifty Jew; and Bassanio and Gratiano, due to the ring plot, cannot have sexual intercourse with their wives until the very end of the play.

Then, most importantly, there is the sense of *carne levare* in relation to the pound of flesh plot. Some scholars have even related Shylock's obsession with Antonio's pound of flesh with a desire for 'spiritual circumcision', since the pound of flesh is to be taken nearest the heart. Others have gone to the extreme of hinting 'cannibalism': 'The old tale of the pound of flesh involved taking literally the proverbial metaphors about money-lenders *taking it out of the hide* of their victims, eating them up' (Barber, 1990: 169). Nevertheless, a possible consensus in that regard could be that suggested by

Goldberg, who advocates for a 'carnivalization of the flesh: having your meat only to lose it' (2013: 429), as well as a 'carnivalization of literality', which explains the operetta application of law, as mentioned before.

In addition, as a final note, the relationship between 'Carnival' and flesh also brings up the themes of ambiguous sexuality and homoeroticism. After all, ambiguity in terms of sex continuously underlies the plays and even Bassanio, who apparently 'abandoned' Antonio for Portia, recoups homoerotic desire during the trial – 'life itself, my wife, and all the world / are not with me esteemed above [Antonio's] life' (4.1.281–82) –, and when he implies the sexual pleasures that her wife could provide him with dressed as a boy: 'Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow' (5.1.284). In addition, Goldberg (2013) has also suggested that Gratiano's promise about 'keeping safe Nerissa's ring' (5.1.307), in the final line of the play, is one of the many erotic puns which alludes to the Latin etymology that links ring and anus. In all, such 'carnivalization' of sexuality and sex roles is but the intimate sphere of a broader 'carnivalization' of law, festivity, reputation and civic behaviour in general.

5. Conclusion

Thus the general Shakespearean depiction of Venice is that of a city tainted by the *libertinage* that comes with Carnival and its lifting of constraints. The city becomes a paradise of pretence and lies, licentiousness, scapegoating, reversal of rules, transvestism, homosexuality, and even 'cannibalism'. This paper has argued that these elements could enter into Bakhtin's paradigm of a festive 'transgression of borders' which, endorsed by authorities, turns into a moment of social release. Consequently, Venetians are allowed to trespass law, and even morality, with impunity. In short, the

atmosphere of freedom – or rather licentiousness, – as well as the obsession for trade profit, are the breeding ground for a perversion of all that is entailed by civility.

The present paper has at first insisted on the importance of thorough and more detailed studies on Shakespeare's use of Venice in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, since such an approach has only been recently broached. In spite of the fact that Shakespeare intended, as with most of his plays, to focus on human experience, setting is actually noteworthy. *La Serenissima* has relevant significance, independently of the fact that the consensus among scholars points at a 'literary' and not 'literal' relationship of Shakespeare with Italy. During the early modern period, the city was of extreme importance – especially in terms of art, trade and politics –, and enjoyed a privileged reputation. In the two Shakespearean plays that occupy us, Venice constitutes an essential element because it allows the author to extrapolate and explore more general conflicts: the ills of money, avarice and corruption, as well as the helplessness of alienated individuals in front of an abusive state.

Venice – as well as Venetian presence in Cyprus, for that matter – is thus more than a mere picturesque background. Shakespeare's aim was not that of faithfully depicting a Venetian atmosphere, and even less that of continuing the existing 'myth'. In his hands, Venice practically stops being a 'real' place to become a 'liminal' space which provides an assemblage of social, political, legal and religious issues to challenge. Shakespeare thus exploited the city's ambiguity, from which even Venetians needed a 'retreat', and the uneasiness which 'doubleness' entailed. In that sense, he took advantage of the breaches which the not-so-perfect Venetian Republic presented, particularly in terms of a contradictory relationship of Venetians with the 'Other'. The latter, a disturbing *doppelgänger*, caused various reactions: from hatred to fascination towards the exotic, including toleration as a 'necessary evil' and scapegoating or

'sadistic' persecution. Critics have insisted on the fact that the 'Other' acts as a troublesome element, as the enemy within:

> The republic is shown briefly to harbour the very seeds of its own dissolution that derive from its manifestly inequitable treatment of the 'strangers' upon whose activity the Venice of *myth* depended for its commercial life. (Drakakis, 2007: 180)

As far as the plays are concerned, Venice's ambiguity penetrates characters' personalities and triggers a darkening process, caused by a 'shadow' of bitterness, melancholy and bad omens. Thus Shakespeare's confrontation with the Venetian 'myth' results in an evolution from tainted merriment in *The Merchant of Venice* to an awakened perversion in *Othello*. Quoting Tanner, 'Venice [...] is a man's world of public life; it is conservative, dominated by law, bound together by contracts, underpinned by money – and closed' (2010: 150). And despite Belmont could be read as an alternative 'gracious retreat' to that harsh and masculine Venetian capitalism, one cannot help but sense that Shakespeare's Venice is far from a utopia of perfection. In other words, Shakespeare's taunting of the pre-existing ideal 'myth' of stability and courteous festivity 'awakens' – through Iago's invocation of evil and infection of Othello's psyche –, a dystopia of quarrels, drunkenness, avarice, licentiousness, black magic and bestiality.

In any case, the 'unmasking' of Venetian aristocracy as an intolerant and corrupted power brings about the features of pretence and disguise – traits which hint at the future corruption of Venetian society and of the city itself. Display and an appearance of *politia* – feigning refinement and civility – are both at the core of Venetian entertainment and behaviour. Similarly to Lady Macbeth's malice – 'Look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't' (1.5.65–66) – Venetians are also deceitful by nature: '[Desdemona] was false as water' (5.2.133, note the relationship

between 'falseness' and 'water', a crucial characteristic of Venice, the 'bride of the sea'). Appearances in general and literal cross-dressing in particular are, in that regard, the germ of the 'sadistic' paradigm and the persecution of killjoy characters. All of this materialises into a fruitful paradigm of Bakhtinian Carnival, in which decorum and social barriers can be transgressed for the sake of laughter. It seems as if in Venice the combination of avarice, disguise and hatred have lead to a grotesque 'carnivalization': of literality (which explains the farcical trials), and of flesh (in terms of sexuality and even 'cannibalism').

In sum, this paper has highlighted the fact that Shakespeare saw in Venice, a place of ambiguity and contradictions, a major inspiration to portrait the essence of human hard-heartedness, as well as the noxious consequences of a city governed by corruption and the rules of 'masquerade', a grotesque celebration of deception. In the depiction conceived by the Bard, the combination of transgressing and 'carnivalesque' ingredients – which proved discordant and improbable for authors such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1907) – becomes plausible in a 'liminal' Venice infected by the 'Carnival of Shadows' of the title of this paper.

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