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“All my plots and purposes”: Staged Diegesis in Shakespearian Drama

Abstract

The relevance of narrative as a fundamental, although long undervalued aspect of Shakespearean plays has been increasingly explored by scholars in the last few decades (Rees 1978; Richardson 1988; Wilson 1995; Hardy 1997; Holland 2000). Further inquiries into the playwright's assorted repertoire of diegetic elements (Nünning and Sommer 2011) have also been encouraged by the most recent contributions of post-Genettian, cognitive and trans-medial narratology (Fludernik 1996; Hermann 1999; Ryan 2004) that have re-conceptualized narrativity as an all-embracing human construct crossing literary genres and media. In the light of the ongoing academic debate, this article explores the dynamic interplay of diegesis and mimesis in *The Merchant of Venice*. A fascinating contamination of the two competitive but complementary modes pervades indeed the whole play, from Bassanio's long narration in the opening scene (1.1.120-75) to the micro-narratives embedded in Lorenzo and Jessica's moonlight dialogue in act five (5.1.1-24), that ironically insert the play's supposedly happy ending within a disturbing parade of stories of unhappy lovers. Along with the numerous instances of narration in the whole Shakespearean corpus, *The Merchant of Venice* offers a remarkable standpoint, as this article argues, to explore the potential applications to drama of the narrative categories of perspective focalization and point of view. Shylock's peculiar report of the Biblical story of Jacob and Laban (1.3) or Solanio and Salarino's mocking account of the Jew's despair after Jessica's escape (2.8) particularly illustrate how 'performed narrations' may become powerful dramatic instruments for contrasting perspectives or directing sympathies. Going far beyond the mere purpose of providing off-stage information and connecting actions, the play's several instances of staged diegesis perform a variety of dramatic functions that deserve particular attention in relation to the socio-cultural, economic, and ethical conflicts underlying the play.

1. Narrative in Shakespeare

The deep-rooted critical view that dismisses 'narrative' elements in Shakespeare's plays as tedious interruptions slowing down the forward moment of dramatic action dates back to Samuel Johnson. As he argued in his 1768 *Preface to Shakespeare*: "In narration he [Shakespeare] affects a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution, and

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tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few. Narration in dramattick poetry is naturally tedious, as it is unanimated and inactive and obstructs the progress of action; it should therefore always be rapid and enlivened by frequent interruption” (Johnson 1908: 22). Echoes of such a view are discernible in a long critical tradition that has been reluctant to recognize the role of storytelling in the playwright’s dramatic technique. As Bradley claimed: “the process of merely acquiring information is unpleasant, and the direct imparting of it is undramatic. Unless he uses a prologue, therefore, he must conceal from his auditors the fact that they are being informed, and must tell them what he wants them to know by means which are interesting on their own account” (1904: 54).

Positing the intrinsic difference between narrative and dramatic forms, Francis Berry has gone so far as to argue that, despite Shakespeare’s ability to insert narrative ‘insets’ in his plays and “to render the narrative complementary to the dramatic”, the two modes “are nevertheless theoretically opposed: they are opposed in theory, as are objective and subjective” (1965: 14). This incompatibility has long been sustained, in a wider perspective, by influential normative theories of the two genres, based on the Aristotelian distinction between narration (*diegesis*) and drama (*mimesis*) and starting from the assumption that the former *tells*, whereas the latter *shows* by means of action (Genette 1980). Identifying the presence of a mediating narrative instance as a constitutive quality of narrative texts, Franz Stanzel concludes that “mediacy is the generic characteristic which distinguishes narration from other forms of literary art” (1986: 4). Likewise, semiotic-based analyses of the communicative processes in plays are rooted on the assumption that “dramatic worlds are presented to the spectator as ‘hypothetically actual’ constructs, since they are seen in progress ‘here and now’ without narratorial mediation” (Elam 1980: 111).

This view has been widely problematized by influential investigations into the mediating strategies of drama. As Manfred Pfister most notably points out, in many periods “playwrights have preferred to integrate some sort of mediating communication system or ‘narrative function’” (1993: 59). In a wider perspective, it is indisputable, as Chatman has claimed, that “plays and novels share common features of a chronology of events, a set of characters, and a setting. Therefore, at a fundamental level they are all stories. The fact that one kind of story is told (*diegesis*) and the other shown (*mimesis*) is of secondary importance” (1990: 117).

A far more fluid theoretical perspective of the two forms has been introduced by recent trends of post-Genettian, cognitive and trans-medial narratology (Fludernik 1996; Hermann 1999, 2013; Ryan 2004; Olson 2011) that

have radically re-conceptualized narrativity as an all-embracing construct characterizing all human cognitive processes and crossing literary genres and media (Ryan and Thon 2014; Igl and Zeman 2016). Positing a more comprehensive notion of narrativity that includes both diegesis and mimesis, Monika Fludernick contends that drama is "the most important narrative genre whose narrativity needs to be documented" (1996: 348), thus highlighting the indisputable, though hitherto disregarded fact that modern narrative theory emerges from Aristotelian dramatic theory:

It is a little remarked-upon fact that the discourse vs. story distinction is fundamental to the drama, too, and in the wake of narratology one has to remind oneself that, actually, Aristotle's model set out to discuss Greek drama and not narrative. Thus, paradoxically, narratology has taken its origin from a text of drama criticism, but this foundational frame has been repressed so successfully that drama has now frequently come to occupy the position of narratology's non-narrative Other. (Fludernick 1996: 250)

Following Chatman's notion of 'narrative agency' and his taxonomy of diegetic and mimetic storytelling (1978: 90), a distinction between "mimetic and diegetic forms of narrativity" (Jahn 2001; Nünning and Sommer 2008) has been recently introduced as "a rough yardstick that allows one to determine the respective portions of mimetic and diegetic narrative features that a given play or novel displays" (Nünning and Sommer 2011: 208). Above all, it permits investigation of various forms of overlapping and interaction, as Marie-Laure Ryan has claimed: "A diegetic narration is the verbal storytelling act of a narrator . . . a mimetic narration is an act of showing, a 'spectacle' . . . But each of these two modes can intrude into a narration dominated by the other" (2004: 13).

A new 'narratology of drama' has been accordingly proposed (Nünning and Sommer 2011: 212), starting from the assumption that "plays have a narrative world (a diegesis), which is not distinct in principle from any other narrative world" (Jahn 2001: 674). As Brian Richardson has persuasively pointed out, "specific categories of narrative theory need to be expanded or modified to encompass the many salient examples from drama" and, on the other hand, "drama provides a great number of compelling examples that can greatly enrich our understanding of key elements of narrative theory" (2007: 154).

The challenging implications of a by no means uncontroversial view that "allows for potential attributions of narrativity to practically any text" (Fludernick and Olson 2011: 15) go far beyond the aim of this essay. What is relevant for the purpose of our inquiry is the theoretical frame that such views provide to explore more fluid interpenetrations between *mimesis* and

diegesis. It is a relation denied by Genette (1980), but already described by Plato who draws a distinction, as Stephen Halliwell remarks, “not so much between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ in the standard (if problematic) modern opposition, as between two modes of ‘telling’ (itself not a bad translation of the Greek *diegesis*): telling in the voice of an authorial narrator *versus* telling in the voice of the agents . . . : ‘it is *diegesis* both when the poet delivers character-speeches *and* in the section between these speeches’, which underlines the fundamental point that *mimesis* is not opposed to, but one type of *diegesis*” (2014: 130-1). The *diegesis/mimesis* terminology of Plato’s *Republic* Book 3, as Halliwell remarks, is “the vehicle of an embryonic narratology which posits connections between narrative form (including narrating person, voice and viewpoint) and the psychology of both performer and (by extrapolation) audience” (130). It openly treats *diegesis* as an overarching category in its tripartite typology:

- 1) *haple diegesis*, ‘plain’ or ‘unmixed’ *diegesis*, i.e. narrative in the voice of the poet (or other authorial ‘storyteller’, *mythologos*, 392d); 2) *diegesis dia mimeseos*, narrative ‘by means of *mimesis*’, i.e. direct speech (including drama, *Republic* 394b–c) in the voices of individual characters in a story; and 3) *diegesis di’ amphoteron*, i.e. compound narrative which combines or mixes both the previous two types, as in Homeric epic, for example. (129)

Against such a manifold theoretical background, the pervasiveness of storytelling in Shakespeare’s drama has gained increasing prominence in the academic debate of the last few decades. On the one hand, pointing out the fundamental role that narrative played in the Renaissance educational system, Rawdon Wilson has highlighted the ineradicable patterns it left ‘in the mind’: “The narrative mind print helps construct the world . . . For Renaissance thinkers, the world is a story to be told, a nest of stories, parts and motifs of stories to be reassembled, and in all respects the patient subject of the storyteller’s art” (1995: 23). Traces of this frame of mind are discernible, as Joan Rees already claimed, in Shakespeare’s mastery of storytelling techniques and in his distinctively ‘narrative’ articulation of the events of his sources: “Shakespeare’s plays have stories at their core, stories which can be extracted and retold, as he himself extracted them from his sources and retold them” (1978: 6). It has not gone unnoticed, on the other hand, that narrative dominates Renaissance literary production in a variety of forms including “epic, Ovidian epyllia, history, romance, pastoral, allegory, hagiography, anecdote, and yarn, biographical, geographical and exploratory report”, as Wilson argues, without forgetting that “*narration*, the second and major move in forensic oration, comprises the fundamental act of collocating incidents into an effective sequence so that a compelling case may be

made" (1995: 21).¹ Such influential texts as George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* or Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* most notably celebrate narration, and especially the tales of heroes, as a fundamental instrument of human education that exceeds both history and philosophy in the transmission of virtues through *exempla* that invite emulation (Wilson 1995: 21-4).

In opposition to "a nearly overwhelming disposition to ignore, even to dispraise, the narrative aspects of Shakespeare's drama or to assimilate the embedded narratives, naturalizing them as 'lines', 'speeches', or 'declamations' to the model of drama" (20-1), Wilson has thus called attention to the playwright's remarkable command of narrative conventions in plays that are not only punctuated by 'embedded stories' but, "in several important respects, they *are* narrative" (1989: 771). As the scholar more explicitly argues: "In most urgent moments characters interrupt the dramatic action to tell stories that evoke a different action, a different place and time, even an absent fictional world, and they do this with an extensive and varied range of the storyteller's traditional skills" (Wilson 1995: 18).

Claiming that "drama need not apologize when it is narrative but handles narrative in special ways to make it theatrical" (1997: 29), Barbara Hardy has identified a number of forms and functions of Shakespeare's dramatic storytelling in *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* that go far beyond providing off-stage information, explaining chronological gaps or merely connecting actions (177-221). More specifically, as she points out, Othello's use of storytelling as an instrument for seduction or 'witchcraft' ("my story being done / she gave me for my pains a world of sighs . . . this only is the witchcraft I have used", 1.3.157-8, 169), epitomizes the deceitful power of narration to which he himself ironically falls victim, in a play entirely focused "on the ethics of narration" (Hardy 1997: 23, 58). To some extent, as Nünning and Sommer have more recently pointed out, Iago's malicious hint at Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness "exemplifies the performative power of char-

¹ The influence of forensic orations in Renaissance drama, and above all in Shakespeare's plays, has gained increasing prominence in the academic debate of the last few years. As Lorna Hutson argues: "the very rhetorical techniques for evaluating probabilities and likelihoods in legal narratives were perceived by dramatists in London of the late 1580s and 1590s to be indispensable for their purposes in bringing a new liveliness and power to the fictions they were writing for the increasingly successful and popular commercial theatres" (2007: 2). The scholar has more recently shed light on Shakespeare's distinctive use of the topics of 'circumstance' of forensic enquiry (in terms of Time, Space, and Motive) to create his dramatic and narrative universes. Circumstance, as Hutson points out, was a "word . . . powerfully associated with narrative, with the forensic invention of so-called artificial or technical proof (*probationes artificiales*), and with descriptions so vivid that they conjure up visual and auditory illusion (*enargeia*) and evoke strong emotions" (2015: 2).

acter narration that stems from its reality-constituting potential” (2011: 201).

On the other hand, following a deep-rooted scholarly investigation into Shakespeare’s weaving of narrative and dramatic forms, above all in the complex texture of his *romances* (Mowat 1976) – “a *dramaturgical term*” that “functioned as a *narrative form*” in the early modern period (Henke 2014: 66) – it has been pointed out how narration is also skillfully used by the playwright as a vehicle for accessing other worlds, raising metatheatrical issues or introducing epistemological instability. This is most clearly exemplified by *The Tempest*, where narration “profitably breaks the theatrical boundaries . . . tests the limits of the representative potential of theatre and illustrates the instabilities of meaning thus casting truth as a problematic category” (Bigliuzzi 2014: 112).

Set within such a multifaceted scholarly debate that encourages further enquiries into Shakespeare’s assorted repertoire of diegetic elements (Holland 2000), this essay investigates the distinctive use of storytelling in *The Merchant of Venice*. Along with the more pervasive and widely studied instances of narration in Shakespeare’s corpus, this play offers a remarkable standpoint, as I will argue, from which to explore the potential applications to drama of the narrative categories of perspective focalization and point of view (Richardson 1988; McIntyre 2006). If it is unquestionable that narrative elements do not “stand in contrast to the performative quality of Shakespeare’s plays”, but rather serve “to enhance their performativity”, and that “the act of narration on stage is a performance in its own right”, since “the verbal performances by the characters are as important as their actions” (Nünning and Sommer 2011: 206, 220), the several instances of staged *diegesis* in *The Merchant of Venice* perform a variety of dramatic functions and establish distinctive aesthetic structures that deserve particular attention, as I will point out, in relation to the social, economic, and ethical conflicts underlying the play.

2. “*Plots and Purposes*” on the Stage

The inherently narrative core of *The Merchant of Venice* is primarily testified to by its inventive interweaving of the three plots of its main source, Ser Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone*, with a variety of tales and anecdotes regarding cruel Jews and usurers that were circulating in early modern England, within the context of a lively debate on moneylending (Le Goff 1990; Shapiro 1996; Biale 2002). Before outlining the major narrative sequences and identifying the principles of dramatic development that underlie their designed distribution in the play, it is to be underlined that *The Merchant of Venice* begins and ends with a demand for narrative, like many

other Shakespearean texts, including *Othello*, *Hamlet* or *The Winter's Tale* (Wilson 1989: 787). The play starts with Bassanio's promised account, solicited by Antonio ("Tell me what lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage / That you today promised to tell me of", 1.1.120-3; my emphasis) and ends with Portia's announced clarification of the events at the very end of Act 5 ("I am sure you are not satisfied / Of these events at full. Let us go in, / And charge us there upon inter'gatories, / And we will answer all things faithfully", 5.1.296-9).

As soon as Antonio confesses his obscure melancholy in the opening lines ("In sooth I know not why I am so sad", 1.1.1), Salarino and Solanio perform an expository function that they will carry on throughout the play. By means of a "single tightly woven sea-metaphor" (Raffel 2006: xix) that conjures up the theatrical quality of Venetian majestic argosies, they try to explain Antonio's anxiety for his sea business:

SALARINO Your mind is tossing on the ocean;
 There, where your argosies with portly sail,
 Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,
 Or, as it were, the pageants of the sea,
 Do overpeer the petty traffickers,
 That curtsy to them, do them reverence,
 As they fly by them with their woven wings.
 (1.1.8-14)

In the light of Richardson's taxonomy of narrative roles in drama, they perform the function of 'internal narrators', namely characters in the fictional world of the play "who recount to other characters events which occur off stage or prior to the first act" (1988: 209). Salarino and Solanio, however, go far beyond framing and elucidating the events that are about to be enacted, as happens in Egeon's long narration at the beginning of *The Comedy of Errors*, or in Prospero's extensive recounting in the first act of *The Tempest*. Besides offering the audience essential information about Antonio's sea ventures within the context of a thriving centre of trade, they go so far as to imagine their own state of mind if they were in Antonio's place:

SOLANIO Believe me, sir, had *I* such venture forth,
 The better part of *my* affections *would*
 Be with *my* hopes abroad. *I should* be still
 Plucking the grass, to know where sits the wind,
 Peering in maps for ports and piers and roads;
 And every object that might make *me* fear
 Misfortune to *my* ventures, out of doubt
 Would make *me* sad.
 (1.1.15-22; my emphasis)

A few lines later Salarino acts out similar fantasies, following the images conjured up in his own mind:

SALARINO *My wind cooling my broth*
 Would blow *me* to an ague, when *I* thought
 What harm a wind too great at sea might do.
I should not see the sandy hour-glass run,
 But *I* should think of shallows and of flats,
 And see *my* wealthy Andrew dock'd in sand,
 Vailing her high-top lower than her ribs
 To kiss her burial. *Should I* go to church
 And see the holy edifice of stone,
 And not bethink *me* straight of dangerous rocks,
 Which touching but *my* gentle vessel's side,
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
 Enrobe the roaring waters with *my* silks,
 And, in a word, but even *now* worth this,
 And *now* worth nothing?
 (1.1.22-36; my emphasis)

It is unquestionable, as Genette has pointed out, that “in contrast to dramatic representation, no narrative can ‘show’ or ‘imitate’ the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, alive and in that way give more or less *the illusion of mimesis* – which is the only narrative mimesis for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating” (1980: 164). The imaginative narrative that Salarino and Solanio construct through an extensive use of deictic terms (*I, my, me, now*), offers, in this perspective, an interesting instance of interaction between the two competing but complementary languages of *diegesis* and *mimesis*.

If the performativity of drama is mostly articulated along deictic orientations related to the various ways in which characters move and address each other (Serpieri 1978), the careful orchestration of Salarino and Solanio’s “deictic fields” (McIntyre 2006: 99)² is here dramatically used to enact the process whereby their ‘possible worlds’ – as the conditionals *would, should* testify – are gradually constructed and take shape within the minds of the

² Following the study of deixis initiated by linguistic and semiotic approaches to drama (Lyons 1977: 636-724; Serpieri 1978: 11-54), and carrying on a long scholarly tradition (Groff 1959; Barnard 1984) that has introduced “in drama the analysis of point of view usually reserved for modern fiction” (Richardson 1988: 194), McIntyre has recently proposed a ‘cognitive theory of deictic shifts’ to explain “how readers/audiences are made aware of different viewpoints and how particular points of view might be foregrounded within dramatic texts” (2006: 90).

two characters. The audience is thus allowed to 'visualize' the potential perils of mercantile ventures through the amplifying filter of two emotionally involved diegetic instances in ways that action on stage could never achieve.

The overall effect of this scene is to lay emphasis on the crucial theme of risk, and to introduce the interwoven semantic areas of 'venture', 'hazard' and 'fortune' that have far reaching implications in a play constructed within the context of the sixteenth-century transition from feudal economy to early-modern capitalism (Squeo 2012: 93-107). As Ian MacInnes points out: "To miss the play's persistent focus on risk and hazard is to miss its connection with critical contemporary debate on chance and fortune, which turned from a manifestation of divine Providence into a way of knowing and controlling the world by evaluating probability and assessing risk" (2008: 42-3). Although Antonio refuses to acknowledge risk as the main cause of his sadness, the uncertainty of his 'ventures' definitely accounts for his choice of diversifying them: "My *ventures* are not in one bottom trusted / Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate / Upon the *fortune* of this present year" (1.1.42-4; my emphasis). Indisputably, the play's emphasis on the hazard inherent in mercantile activities bears the traces of sixteenth-century debates supporting legitimate trade profit on account of its intrinsic perils, against the detestable practice of usury: "risk was then believed to be a necessary factor in legitimate enterprise, and usury violated that condition because it was calculated, certain gain ensured by bonds and pawns" (Holmer 1995: 36). As Thomas Wilson claimed in his *Discourse Upon Usury*:

In buying and selling, your gaine is not alwayes certayne, as it is in usurie: for he that buieth lande thys day for five hundreth poundes, shall not alwayes be sure to gaine a hundreth pounds by the burgayne, but sometyme hee loseth, and cannot have hys own againe; wheras the usurer is alwayes suer to gaine, whosoever loseth, having good and sufficient assurance alwayes for hys money. (1925: 271)

The most relevant instance of intradiegetic narration in the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, however, is provided by Bassanio's promised account to Antonio. His recount covers a broad period of time as he competently constructs his 'plot' by arranging a variety of events according to his own criteria of relevance. He starts by acknowledging the consequences of his frivolous life and admitting that he is now unable to pay off his debts to Antonio:

BASSANIO 'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
 How much I have disabled mine estate
 By something showing a more swelling port
 Than my faint means would grant continuance.
 (1.1.121-4)

Then he moves back to the time of his boyhood, and accounts for the request of a new loan by means of a long and elaborate metaphor taken from archery:

BASSANIO In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft
 I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
 The selfsame way, with more advised watch,
 To find the other forth; and by adventuring both
 I oft found both.
 (1.1.139-43)

In order to encourage Antonio to help him “shoot another arrow” (1.1.147), he shifts his narration forwards and anticipates a possible future evolution of the events: “I will watch the aim . . . bring your latter hazard back again / And thankfully rest debtor for the rest” (1.1.149-51), and then he finally comes back to a more recent past to introduce the long promised tale of his “secret pilgrimage”:

BASSANIO In Belmont is a lady richly left;
 And she is fair, and fairer than that word,
 Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
 I did receive fair speechless messages.
 (1.1.160-4)

Breaking the chronological order of the events in the story through a clever use of both *analepsis* and *prolepsis* (Genette 1980), Bassanio’s narration performs a number of dramatic functions. His recounting primarily becomes an instrument of indirect characterization, as frequently occurs in Shakespeare (Hardy 1997: 20-5; Nünning and Sommer 2011: 218), as it portrays the young man as an Elizabethan *gallant*, one of those rich, aristocratic and unmarried squanderers whose cheerful existence (“my time, something too prodigal”, 1.1.128) made them the most likely victims of usurers (Pettet 1969: 101). Furthermore, in so far as Antonio is immediately persuaded to help him (“therefore go forth, / Try what my credit can in Venice do, / That shall be racked even to the uttermost / To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia”, 1.1.178-81), Bassanio’s story epitomizes “the theatrical power of narrative, its capacity to change events” (Hardy 1997: 60) and affect the further evolution of action.

Far more relevant, however, is that the biased arrangement of happenings in the *ordo artificialis* of Bassanio’s narrative betrays a carefully designed ‘plan’. His intention to unburden himself to Antonio of “my *plots* and *purposes* / How to get clear of all the debts I owe” (1.1.131-3; my emphasis) only too explicitly relates *plot* and *purpose*, thus hinting at the powerful resonances of the polysemic status of *plot* in early modern English, as testified by the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

. . . 1. A fairly small piece of ground . . . 1574 T. Tusser *Points Huswifrie* . . . 1598 J. Florio *World of Wordes* . . . 1600 Shakespeare *Midsummer Night's Dream* . . . 2. a ground plan, a map; a nautical chart. Later also: a representation on a chart of the movements of a ship or aircraft . . . 1579-80 T. North tr. Plutarch *Lives* . . . 3. A plan made in secret by a group of people, esp. to achieve an unlawful end; a conspiracy . . . 1579 G. Fenton tr. F. Guicciardini *Hist. Guicciardin* vii. 378 . . . 1597 Shakespeare *Richard III* I. i. 32 . . . 4. A design or scheme for the constitution or accomplishment of something. 1587 A. Fleming et al. *Holinshed's Chronicle* . . . 1599 Spenser *View State Ireland* . . . 5. The plan or scheme of a literary or dramatic work . . . 1613 F. Beaumont *Knight of Burning Pestle* . . .

Bassanio reveals how any narrative inherently implies a degree of 'manipulation' in view of a 'design': it is, to borrow Peter Brooks' definition, a 'plotting' process, "a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress towards meaning" (1992: xiii). The young man's secret aims and his distinctive view of his 'pilgrimage' to "the lady richly left", as a decisive solution to his financial problems, are thus shared with the audience by means of his own carefully constructed 'plot' in ways that exceed the effectiveness of the purely mimetic mode. In this sense, the scene explores the dramatic potentialities of the intrinsic 'opacity' of narratives: ". . . being artifacts and also representations, narratives have a purpose and their design is in service of that purpose" (Lamarque 2014: 9).

Besides introducing the parallel developments of action in Venice and Belmont, Bassanio's narrative unfolding foregrounds his own view of the connection between human relations and profit, love and money ("To you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love", 1.1.129-30) within a universe in which the spirit of calculation casts an oblique ray of light on all human actions, where traces of commercial lexis are disturbingly discernible even in the language of lovers (3.2.139-40, 3.2.149-65). By unburdening himself of his "plots and purposes" in the opening scene, he calls attention to the pervasiveness of money in a play where the servant Lancelot abandons the miserly Jew for free-spending Bassanio, who "indeed gives rare new liveries" (2.2.89), where Jessica steals her father's ducats and jewels before fleeing with her lover ("I will make fast the doors, and gild myself / With some more ducats, and be with you straight", 2.6.50-1), and even her conversion to the Christian faith is eventually seen in terms of its monetary effects, through Lancelot's joke about the increase of the price of pork: "This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs: if we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money" (3.5.18-20).

The distinctive lexical choices in Bassanio's narration acquire further relevance when he hints at Portia's *virtues* and at her numerous suitors,

thus embedding a second narrative level by introducing the story of the Greek hero Jason, who sailed to Colchis in search of a fabulous treasure:

BASSANIO Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
 To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia
 Nor is the wide world ignorant of her *worth*
 For the four winds blow in from every coast
 Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
 Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
 Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
 Which many Jasons come in quest of her.
 (1.2.164-72; my emphasis)

Beyond reiterating the sure 'profit' he envisages in his expedition (1.2.174-5), Bassanio's tale foregrounds two of the play's key words – *worth* and *value* – whose polysemic status bears all the traces of the semantic fluidity of early modern English, where many words that still bore a strong moral meaning were gradually acquiring new economic significance under the socio-cultural forces of an emerging capitalist system (Thomas 2008: xxiv). The relevance of the *worth/value* motif introduced by Bassanio's narration finds indeed abundant testimony throughout the play where a number of characters are confronted with the difficulty of assessing 'value' or 'worth' by establishing shared standards of commensurability. It is a condition clearly epitomized by Morocco and Aragon, who unsuccessfully weigh the 'value' of gold, silver and lead against Portia's 'worth', their own merits and what they 'deserve' on account of their love (2.7.23-34). In the trial scene, in the highest moment of dramatic tension, Bassanio himself weighs the 'value' of his own life and of his love for Portia against the 'worth' of Antonio's existence:

BASSANIO Antonio, I am married to a wife
 Which is *dear* to me as life itself;
 But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
 Are not with me *esteemed* above thy life.
 (4.1.278-81; my emphasis)

He is then eventually persuaded to give Balthazar his own wedding ring by acknowledging a form of 'commensurability' between the man's merits and Portia's command:

ANTONIO My lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
 Let his *deservings* and my love withal
 Be *valued* 'gainst your wife's commandment.
 (4.1.445-7; my emphasis)

This pervasive logic of "exchanges, purchases and pledges, among a remarkable range of physical, abstract and personal entities" (Turner 1999: 55) finds its most disturbing instance in the well known equation established by Shylock's bond between 'money' and 'human flesh' (1.3.142-4), whose absurdity the Jew himself proclaims by paradoxically remarking on their different market 'value':

SHYLOCK A pound of man's flesh, taken from a man,
 Is not so *estimable, profitable* neither,
 As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats. . . .
 (1.3.158-60; my emphasis)

3. News and Reporters: Performing the Instability of Meaning

If the narrations embedded in the opening scene are largely functional to the construction of the characters' distinctive world models (Herman 1999) and to the introduction of the thematic core of the play, Shylock's appearance on stage in 3.1. exemplifies Shakespeare's weaving of *diegesis* and *mimesis* as a means to raise epistemological issues and cast truth as an unstable category.

In his opening dialogue with Bassanio, the Jew embodies an emerging cultural and economic frame, whose 'modern' meanings resonate in an 'old' vocabulary, as his peculiar definition of *good*, merely signifying financial reliability, unmistakably confirms:

SHYLOCK Antonio is a *good* man.
 BASSANIO Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
 SHYLOCK Ho no, no, no, no: *my meaning* in saying he is a *good*
 man is to have you understand me that he is
 sufficient.
 (1.3.11-14; my emphasis)

As soon as Antonio arrives, Shylock's long aside further reveals the unbridgeable gap between them ("I hate him for he is a Christian . . . he hates our sacred nation", 1.3.34, 40) and creates an apparent feeling of complicity with the audience, according to a widely explored dramatic convention of Elizabethan drama: "This 'complicity through shared information' is often put to use by Elizabethan dramatists who want to make the villain of the play less repugnant" (Pavel 1985: 68). Antonio's generous munificence towards Bassanio ("my purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions", 1.1.137-8) appears foolish from the Jew's perspective ("in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice", 1.3.36-7) and their conflict is openly

set within the context of the sixteenth-century dispute on money lending, as their discrepant terminology testifies: “my *bargains*, and my well-won *thrift* / Which he calls *interest*” (1.3.42-3; my emphasis).

A new narrative is embedded in dramatic action a few lines later, when Shylock tells the story of Jacob’s agreement with Laban, detailing all the conditions of their covenant as reported in the Genesis:

SHYLOCK . . . Mark what Jacob did:
 When Laban and himself were compromised
 That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied
 Should fall as Jacob’s hire, the *ewes* being rank
 In end of autumn turned to the rams
 And when the work of *generation* was
 Between these woolly *breeders* in the act
 The skilful shepherd pilled me certain wands
 And in the doing of the deed of kind
 He stuck them up before the fulsome *ewes*
 Who then *conceiving*, did in *eaning* time
 Full parti-coloured lambs, and those were Jacob’s.
 (1.3.69-80; my emphasis)

By citing the Bible and mentioning “*our* holy Abram” (1.3.64) – thus ironically hinting at the common roots of Christianity and Judaism –, Shylock calls attention to a text that was crucial in the debate on usury, and whose prohibitions against usury were given conflicting interpretations by Jews and Christians (Geisst 2013: 55). Furthermore, the scene explores the theatrical potentialities of the narration of biblical *exempla*, which early modern audience were more used to finding in sermons (Streete 2011). Introducing a biblical anecdote to provide a moral justification for his thrift, Shylock shrewdly delves into the powerful imagery of the story of Laban to highlight the essential philosophical and theological problems underlying the sixteenth-century debate on moneylending. By comparing Jacob’s cunning method for gaining Laban’s sheep with his own practice of usury, the Jew forcefully establishes a similarity between animal reproduction (“the act *generation* . . . woolly *breeders* . . . *conceiving* . . . in *ewing* time”) and the multiplication of his money (“I make it *breed* as fast”, 1.3.88). He thus calls attention to one of the most controversial issues in the emerging capitalist debates in which, under the influence of Aristotle (Meikle 1995), usury was condemned as *unnatural*, starting from the assumption that ‘barren’ metal cannot ‘breed’ (Langholm 1984) or, as Bacon claimed: “It is against nature for money to beget money” (2008: 123).

Equally relevant for the purpose of our enquiry is the shift the scene marks from *diegesis* to *exegesis*, from the narration of the biblical epi-

sode to its inconsistent interpretations. "Was this inserted to make interest good? / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" (1.3.88-9), asks Antonio, warning that "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (1.3.90). Displaying the instability of meaning inherent in storytelling, the scene becomes paradigmatic of the play's extensive exploration of what Mieke Bal defines the paradoxical potential of narration: ". . . all narratives sustain the claim that 'facts are being put on the table. Yet all narratives are not only told by a narrative agent, the narrator, who is the linguistic subject of utterance; the report given by the narrator is also, inevitably, focused by a subjective point of view, an agent of vision whose view of the events will influence our interpretation of them" (1997: 97). This is most notably exemplified by the characters' conflicting reports on different occasions. The Jew's accounts of the iterated episodes of cruelty he has endured ("you have rated me", 1.3.99; "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine", 1.3.103-4; "You that did void your rheum upon my beard", 1.3.109) are thus contrasted with a variety of reported instances of his malice, as Jessica's memories, among others, testify: "When I was with him, I have heard him swear / To Tubal and to Chus, his countymen, / That he would rather have Antonio's flesh / Than twenty times the value of the sum / That he did owe him", 3.2.283-7). An interesting contribution in this respect is provided by the dramatization of Launcelot Gobbo's inner conflict in 2.2. Though not technically a narrative, the scene lingers on the character's indecision whether to leave Shylock's service or to be faithful to him, thus exemplifying the "dramatic equivalent of thought presentation in prose fiction" that "permits the dramatist to explore certain areas of human experience generally thought to be more accessible to the novelist" (Groff 1959: 274).

A remarkable use of narration as a device to introduce contrasting perspectives occurs in 2.8, where Shylock's desperation after discovering Jessica's escape is not performed on stage by the character himself but is reported through the narrative filter of Salarino and Solanio, who provide a satiric account of the furious Jew, hounded by laughing boys through the streets of Venice:

SOLANIO I never heard a passion so confused,
 So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
 As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
 "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
 Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
 Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
 A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
 Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
 And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
 Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;

She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats”.
(2.8.12-22)

This diegesis embedded in dramatic action intriguingly incorporates a further mimetic level in that Salarino and Solanio imitate Shylock’s hysterical gestures and furious voice in a deliberately exaggerated fashion that ridicules his acquisitive nature (“my ducats . . . my Christian ducats . . . a sealed bag, two sealed bags . . . and stones, two rich and precious stones”), in a performance that prevents the audience from sympathizing with him. Shylock’s unrestrained passions (“confused”, “strange”, “outrageous”, “variable”), explicitly associated with the animal world (“the dog Jew”), are then effectively contrasted with the filters’ parallel account of Antonio’s composed sadness on Bassanio’s departure:

SALARINO . . . his eye being big with tears
Turning his face, he put his hand behind him
And with affection wondrous sensible
He wrung Bassanio’s hand, and so they parted.
(2.8.47-50)

The preference for the diegetic mode in a scene which would not have been difficult to stage, exceeds the mere reasoning of dramatic economy and allows Shakespeare to explore the theatrical potential of what Culler defines the double nature of narration “as a fundamental form of knowledge (giving knowledge of the world through its sense-making)” and as “a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals” (1997: 92). Going far beyond the necessary “compensation for the well-known restrictions of the Shakespearean stage” (Nünning and Sommer 2011: 217), the dynamic interaction of mimesis and diegesis in 2.8 responds to precise aesthetic purposes. The narrative filter of Salarino and Solanio, through whose perspective the Jew’s grief is visibly caricatured, becomes a way of directing sympathies and reinforcing Shylock’s isolation. It is, furthermore, also functional to shifting attention away from ‘events’ to ‘reported accounts’, ‘information’ and ‘news’, through a process that acquires increasing relevance within the play.

Starting from Portia’s question in the opening act (“How now! *What news?*, 1.2.309; my emphasis) up to her final promise in the last scene (“I have better *news* in store for you”, 5.1.274; my emphasis), the whole play is indeed full of references to an intricate texture of reported information and news that enhance uncertainty and instability and involve many characters, including Solanio (“Now, *what news* on the Rialto? . . . Now now, Shylock, *what news* among the merchants?”, 3.1.1, 19; my emphasis), Shylock (“How now, Tubal *what news* from Genoa?”, 3.1.64; my emphasis), Gra-

ziano ("What's *the news* from Venice?", 3.2.237; my emphasis), and Lancelot Gobbo ("There's a post come from my master, with his horn full of good *news*", 5.1.46-7; my emphasis). The most interesting instance in this respect is provided by the reported accounts on the sinking of Antonio's ships. Fragmented and uncertain news is initially introduced by Salarino's second-hand report:

SALARINO I reasoned with a Frenchman yesterday
 Who told me in the Narrow Seas that part
 The French and English, there miscarried
 A vessel of our country richly fraught
 I thought upon Antonio when he told me
 And wished in silence that it were not his
 (2.8.28-33)

New pieces of information are added in the following act, where Salarino's unwillingness to accept bad news – "it leaves there unchecked" (3.1.2), "as they say" (3.1.5), "If my gossip report be an honest woman of her word" (3.1.5-6) – is contrasted with Solanio's rough realism: "I would she were as lying a gossip . . . But is it true without any slip of prolexity . . . he hath lost a ship" (3.1.7-15). Through a skilful slowing down of the pace of 'narration', the scene displays what Irene de Jong defines the "experiencing focalization" of the messenger who "recounts the events as he understood, or failed to understand or misunderstood them at the time" (1991: 61). The characters' anxiety about Antonio's destiny ("I would it might prove the end of his losses", 3.1.16) is thus foregrounded, enacting the "implicit prolepsis" of the messenger (46). A further iteration of the same news occurs in 3.1., where Tubal's account of Antonio's losses acquires sharper focus: "Antonio, as I heard in Genoa . . . hath an argosy cast away coming from Tripolis" (3.1.77-80), "There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break" (3.1.89-90), and finally "Antonio is certainly undone" (3.1.98). A new repetition occurs in the following scene, when a letter from Antonio erupts into Bassanio's bliss in Belmont (3.2.314-9), announcing the loss of all the merchant's ventures. It is only at the end of the play that such news proves partially false, when Portia announces that three of Antonio's ships are safe, as reported by a mysterious letter: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter", 5.1.278-9).

Unquestionably, such passages highlight the crucial role that news had in Venice, the leading centre of information and communication in early modern Europe and "a natural center for economic information about the East, especially about the Ottoman Empire" (Burke 2000: 392). It was one of first cities to adopt a system of resident ambassadors, spies and diplo-

mats, and to develop early forms of a postal system, all set within “a new regime of information and communication” (ibid.). The urgent “news” mentioned by Solanio, Graziano and Shylock had a primarily economic relevance on the Rialto, where the credit of merchants largely depended upon assessment of their risk and the likelihood that they would be able to repay their debts. Circulating news and detailed information about the merchants’ potential losses had an even more crucial value in all those policies of insurance and re-insurance, which late sixteenth century England imported from Venice (MacInnes 2008: 43).

On the level of narrative, however, the disjointedly reported news, reports and letters in the play acquire further significance as devices functional to exhibit the complexity of an intricate universe where the objectivity of ‘facts’ is increasingly replaced by biased accounts allowing multiple viewpoints. It is a technique extensively explored in many other Shakespearean plays, such as *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Macbeth* through “unreliable manipulative and dangerous communications of rulers, spies, secret agents and reporters. The process of every play depends on the intricate cellular structure of narrative exchange” (Hardy 1997: 23).

The epistemological implications of the intrinsic instability of narrative gain particular relevance in the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica and Lorenzo provide a curious recapitulation of their story in their famous “in such a night” exchanges (5.1.1-24). At first sight, the scene seems to follow a dramatic convention widely used by Shakespeare. A concluding recapitulation occurs indeed in a great number of his plays, as in the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Laurence’s promise “I will be brief” (5.3.228) most notably introduces a long summary of the dramatic events that effectively adds nothing new to the audience, as Samuel Johnson famously commented: “It is much to be lamented that the poet did not conclude the dialogue with the action and avoid a narrative of events which the audience already knew” (1908: 187-8). Shakespeare also seems to have invented the “figure of the total future recapitulation”, as Barbara Hardy argues, that takes a variety of forms including “a demand, or request, or invitation at the end for someone to recall and relate the story of the play” (1997: 72-3). Fourteen of his plays end with an explicit demand for a final account (Meek 2009: 181) including *All’s Well That Ends Well*, where the king asks to hear the events of the play from beginning to end (“Let us from point to point this story know / To make the even truth in pleasure flow”, 5.3.325-6) and *The Tempest*, where Prospero himself eventually promises to tell “the story of my life, / And the particular accidents gone by / Since I came to this isle” (5.1.305-7).

To some extent, Lorenzo and Jessica offer an interesting variation of those “narrative injunctions” (Hardy 1997: 72) that posit an oral afterlife for

the play, imagining a future narrative retelling of the events, as happens in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Mistress Page suggests "let us every one go home, / And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire" (5.5.241-2), or in *Richard II*, where the queen is invited to imagine a familiar place by the fire where she will listen to "woeful tales of long ago" and then tell the tragic story of Richard II in the context of other tragic narratives:

KING RICHARD In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire
 With good old folks and let them tell thee tales
 Of woeful ages long ago betid;
 And ere thou bid good night, to quit their griefs,
 Tell thou the lamentable tale of me
 And send the hearers weeping to their beds.
 (5.1.40-5)

Following this model, Lorenzo and Jessica also position their story within the context of other tales of lovers, but the narrative frame they choose proves to be inappropriate and sheds a sinister light on the seemingly happy ending of the play. Their accounts "sound to innocent ears like lyrical evocations of great lovers past", Jonathan Bate argues, but "to the mythologically literate members of Shakespeare's audience, the allusions would be shot through with irony appropriate to the sharpness that underlies the relationship between Lorenzo and Jessica" (1989: 134). Beyond the surface music of their words, a disturbing similarity is indeed established with the tragic tale of Cressida, who eventually betrayed Troilus ("in such a night / Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls / And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents / Where Cressid lay that night", 5.1.3-6), the cruel destiny of Pyramus and Thisbe, who killed herself when she found her lover dead ("In such a night / Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew / And saw the lion's shadow ere himself / And ran dismayed away", 5.1.6-9) and the sad story of the queen of Carthage, abandoned by her lover Aeneas ("In such a night / Stood Dido with a willow in her hand / Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love / To come again to Carthage", 5.1.9-12). Even more sinister is the reference to the story of Medea and Aeson, "In such a night / Medea gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew old Aeson" (5.1.12-14), narrated in book seven of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "a peculiarly disgusting plot to take vengeance of the family of Pelias for the wrong done by him to Jason's family" (134-5).

Through an imaginative metaleptic intrusion (Genette 1980) into such a frame, as the iteration of the "in such a night" refrain confirms, Lorenzo and Jessica provide a third-person narrative of their own story, replacing the deictic *I/my* of the mimetic code with the anaphoric *he/her* of diegesis. This

allows them to introduce an inconsistent perspective on their love, as the lexical choices hinting at deceitfulness and falseness unmistakably testify:

- LORENZO In such a night
 Did Jessica *steal* from the wealthy Jew,
 And with an *unthrift* love did run from Venice
 As far as Belmont.
- JESSICA In such a night
 Did young Lorenzo swear *he* loved *her* well,
 Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
 And *ne'er a true one*.
- LORENZO In such a night
 Did pretty Jessica, like a little *shrew*,
 Slander *her* love, and *he* forgave it *her*.
 (5.1.14-22; my emphasis)

Dynamically interacting with the mimetic level, these micro-narratives unveil significant incongruities within the seemingly happy conclusion of dramatic action and undermine the harmony eventually restored to the ideal world of Belmont that the sweet music of the spheres seems to suggest (5.1.54-88). Furthermore, the narrative universes conjured up by Jessica and Lorenzo cast a threateningly relativistic light on the entire play, thus epitomizing “the capacity . . . narratives have to make audiences imagine a story world refracting multiple perspectives” (Korthals Altes 2014: viii).

Along with the purposes of introducing off-stage information, connecting actions, foregrounding crucial themes or directing sympathies, diegesis in *The Merchant of Venice* is thus to be explored in its epistemological potential (Lamarque 2014), as a powerful instrument to perform the undecidability of truth and show the unsteadiness of any interpretative and signifying process. As Korthals-Altes points out: “engaging in literary narratives leads readers into taking perspectives on perspective taking, assessing the value of values” (2014: viii), a notion that is mostly epitomized in the famous trial scene in Act 4, imbued with an extraordinary perceptiveness of duplicity (Locatelli 1988). Testifying to Shakespeare’s parallel interest in “the theatre as a medium of storytelling and in narrative as a mode of representation” (Nünning-Sommer 2011: 221), *The Merchant of Venice* epitomizes Shakespeare’s remarkable command of narrative conventions and his extensive use of the inherent instability of narration, so heavily submitted to a subjective “perspectival filter” (Jahn 2007: 94), as an ideal dramatic instrument functional to voice his deeply rooted preoccupations with questions of ‘viewpoint’ (Thorne 2000).

If “narrative designs prompt the construction . . . of different sorts of storyworlds . . . and the process of building storyworlds in turn scaffolds a

variety of sense making activities" (Herman 2013: x), the narrative 'insets' brought onto stage foreground the very process of making sense in the increasingly unintelligible early modern universe. In this perspective, Shakespeare's use of storytelling in drama is functional to enact the "great structural and epistemological crisis that occurred between a *symbolic model* of the world (a classical-mediaeval-Renaissance heritage) and a *syntagmatic model* of the world, inaugurating the relativism of the modern age" (Serpieri 1985: 127). Within the cultural conflicts of a rapidly changing world, the various instances of staged diegesis in Shakespearean plays – as *The Merchant of Venice* testifies – may be said to "anticipate several forms and epistemological functions in the dramatic genre, which, from the eighteenth century onward, were increasingly taken over by the novel" (Nünning-Sommer 2011: 22).

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