

## **Xenography – The Stranger in *The Merchant of Venice***

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### **Xenography**

All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe more than any other Shakespearean play *The Merchant of Venice* is a strange play – at once full of strangers and strange events, and also a play about strangers and their strangeness, an evaluation of the strange as such. This essay provides not only a formal evaluation of the various ‘representations’ of strangeness but also analyses the ethico-political implications of the process of representation as such, for culture, theory and literature.

It is important to distinguish between ‘strangers’ – as e.g. Greimasian ‘actants’, who have a specific ‘function’ within the structure of the play (the Jews [i.e. Shylock and Tubal] and Portia’s suitors, but also Antonio, whose character remains withdrawn and elusive) – their strangeness (which is ‘captured’ in representations of difference, stereotypes, ‘deviant’ behaviour, comedy, etc.) – and the strange (which is the uncanny otherness that the representations of strangeness try to fixate but which at the same time escapes, remains un(re)presentable and survives only as a trace). However, the ‘marks’ left by the strange are structural ambiguities that are at the centre of any representation of strangeness. As such they constitute a kind of (psychic) ‘writing’ which the term ‘xenography’ in the present context tries to convey.

The concept of ‘xenography’ should be understood both as this ‘writing of strangeness’ (inscriptions of the stranger within specific texts) and the ‘strangeness of writing’ (the deconstructive effects of various concepts of ‘strangeness’ which allow the constant slippages, displacements and transformations of strangeness to take place). The representations of strangers in Shakespeare’s *Merchant* follow a dialectic in which otherness is situated either externally or internally in order to give rise to, confirm or legitimate a community, a self, a space, etc. This dialectic projects differences onto strangers and their uncanny strangeness (or the ‘strange’), just to

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*. Cambridge, 1997, 17.

better contain, settle and inoculate 'it' (either by stigmatization and rejection or by appropriation and incorporation).<sup>2</sup> As in any dialectic, however, the projected difference is never able to consume the strange-other completely. The remainder always escapes and, worse, strangeness is clearly seen to be necessary for the dialectic to work and hence always threatens to subvert its own containment. The resulting 'psychosis' of the dialectic lies in the fact that the strange always 'precedes' the 'selfsame' which it is supposed to legitimate – the stranger is always already, necessarily, there before the dialectic, and thus gives rise to the 'allergic' reaction. The strange has thus the structure of a (Derridean) 'trace', or of *différance*.<sup>3</sup> Its meaning is constantly deferred, displaced and differing from itself. Nevertheless, structural traces of strangeness abound and are 'written' into the representations at the very moments the dialectic seems most triumphant. These moments – (re)inscriptions of strangeness – will be called 'xenographic' moments. Although the entire *Merchant* can be understood as a textual 'machine' in which this outlined dialectic can be seen at work almost 'frenetically', the following reading will focus on merely two such moments (namely scenes 4.1 and 5.1).

The main (structural) function of these xenographic moments within the play is transfer and displacement (designed to resolve and overcome an antithesis), hence the stranger's role as that of 'go-between' – between self and other, identity and difference, community and individual, mercy and justice, Belmont and Venice, mercantile and finance capitalism, men and women, etc. The various strangers and their strangeness in their function as 'go-betweens', through their self-effacement (as the play progresses the stranger-figures recede more and more into the background), guarantee the stability of identity, the community, morality and economy. Although Shylock is undoubtedly the main stranger of the play – his role is to provide a negative but fascinating counterpart to Antonio's mercantile capitalism and to the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, who, in *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, with reference to the historical ordering process of modernity (at the beginning of which the 'early modern' *Merchant* is located), states that "Order-building was a war of attrition waged against the strangers and the strange". Bauman goes on to point out that the "two alternative, but also complementary strategies" in this war against strangers have always been either "*anthropophagic*" (i.e. "annihilating the strangers by *devouring* them" through assimilation), or "*anthropoemic*" (i.e. "*vomiting* the strangers" through exclusion) [p. 18].

<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Différance", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Brighton, 1982, 1-28.

moral values of the (Christian) community – there are many other strangers and moments of strangeness: the casket plot provides a comical discussion of national and racial stereotypes, the cross-dressing episodes (involving Portia, Nerissa and Jessica) pose questions of sexuality, gender and identity and their transgression, the jester’s ‘strangeness’ (Launcelot Gobbo) consists of his playful transgression of class boundaries and questions of the ‘appropriate’ use of language. This essay will argue, however, that the strangers’ strange going-between in the play not only preserves and protects (identities, communities, laws, morality, etc.) but also ‘deconstructs’ them and thus opens up possibilities for subversion which necessarily escapes the closures of justice and love the play seems to privilege.

As far as the interpretation of this oscillation between closure and subversion is concerned, the essay will focus on two main issues in contemporary criticism: the question of the *specific* ‘link’ between the ‘early modern’ and the ‘late’ or ‘postmodern’ strangers, and the question of the text’s apparent anti-semitism.<sup>4</sup>

### **Displacement –The Strange Sliding of the Signifier**

Mais l’Autre, ce n’est pas seulement le dissemblable – l’étranger, le marginal, l’exclu – dont (par définition?) la présence serait censée déranger, plus ou moins. C’est aussi le terme manquant, le complémentaire indispensable et inaccessible, celui, imaginaire ou réel, dont l’évocation crée en nous le sentiment d’un inaccompli ou l’élan d’un désir parce que sa non-présence actuelle nous tient en suspens et comme inachevé, dans l’attente de nous-mêmes.<sup>5</sup>

The signifier ‘strange’ or ‘stranger’ evokes, like any other signifier, a conceptual signified, ‘strangeness’, an occurrence or an ‘event’ of strangeness, which is part of a

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent summary of the second aspect see Oliver Lubrich, *Shakespeare’s Selbstdonstruktion*, Würzburg, 2001, 98-110. The present essay follows Lubrich in that it emphasises the ambiguities *in* the text (or its “Selbstdonstruktion” – “das Systematische oder Systematisierbare [des] Wechselspiels der Affirmation und Subversion als Funktion des literarischen Textes”, according to Lubrich [p. 21]). However, the idea of a ‘self-deconstructing’ text should not lead to the illusion that a text could ever have an identifiable ‘self’, or could in any way be identical to itself. Instead this essay highlights the semiotic displacement of strangeness within the play – the continuous sliding of the ‘strange’ as signifier.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Landowski, *Présences de l’autre*, Paris, 1997, 10.

culturally and historically specific system of values. This system of values is related to a variety of other signifieds and their signifiers only by negative difference. In the case of strangeness these are all metonymically and semantically related to 'not of this place' or 'out of place, order and common knowledge'. In this it is akin to 'foreign', 'alien', 'different', 'other', etc. It is one signifier whose signified refers to the 'unknowable', 'otherness', the 'unexpected' (change, newness, or the 'monstrous').

Its place within the signifying process or the chain of signifiers is thus a void (strangeness recedes as the strange becomes concrete or promises to appear, just like 'truth'). What first gave rise to an economy of difference and similarity escapes or must remain absent. Strangeness as such is an absence, unthinkable, but constantly leading to 'inscriptions' of the strange: statements 'about' strangeness and strangers, i.e. 'metaphors' and 'metonyms' of strangeness. The 'void' of strangeness, the irruption of the other into an economy structured according to principles of sameness, difference and identity, leads necessarily to a displacement that exceeds any specific inscription or temporary 'capture' of the strange. This is not a denial of strangers or strangeness but, on the contrary, their proliferation (or fetishisation). Like the aporia between the absolute (ethical) Law and the concrete (political) laws of hospitality, one can only do justice to the (concrete) stranger by violating the (principle of) strangeness, through measuring their distance. It is due to the impossibility articulated in this aporia that deconstruction occurs by unsettling the 'stability' of the opposition between the strange and the 'familiar'. But this process is happening all the time through an ongoing inscription process where concrete strangers/occurrences of strangeness exceed their 'forms' and subvert their 'logic'.

Usually interpretations of the *Merchant*, and especially the ones that directly treat the issue of strangeness in some form or other, focus on Shylock. But the question is indeed whether Shylock is not a 'red herring' in terms of strangeness, overdetermined as he is. Maybe his strangeness is rather of the 'uncanny' kind which means that he is not so much a stranger but merely 'strange' – namely contradictory or ambivalent.<sup>6</sup> Shylock must be seen in connection with other forms of 'strangeness'

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<sup>6</sup> This is again very well illustrated in Lubrich's reading of the *Merchant*. He lists what he calls the "Pendelbewegung" between moments of 'sympathy' and 'disgust' the spectator feels with regard to Shylock (see Lubrich, *Shakespeares Selbstdonstruktion*, 129-30). Lubrich interprets the resulting forms of ambivalence to show how the *Merchant* displays "Formen der Stigmatisierung und Strategien ihrer Bewältigung durch die Betroffenen" (p. 149).

in the play. Leslie Fiedler, in his study of strangers in Shakespeare, identifies issues of gender and race as privileged areas of strangeness, but there are many others, namely the relation of strangers and strangeness to the nation, to place or location, justice and universalism, sexuality, class, humour, God and the supernatural, language and 'writing' (i.e. the question of literature), authority and its legitimation, alienation on various ontological levels, 'translation', reason, and 'modernity' in general.<sup>7</sup>

It is true of course that Shylock in terms of visibility is the single most important outsider of the play but it would be wrong to see Shylock 'in isolation'. Instead it is important to acknowledge the structural parallels which turn this play almost into a treatise on strangers and their strangeness, outsiders and community. Its textual 'machinery' sets up its own dialectic between opposites like insider/outsider, individual/community, identity/difference etc. Its representations of strangers and their strangeness are connected and form a network of traces and displacements in which strangeness is temporarily 'captured' in paradigms of difference but *per se* always escapes, is deferred and differs from itself (cf. *différance*, see above).

The play famously opens with the 'riddle' of Antonio's sadness. The most likely explanation for Antonio's world-weariness which makes him 'withdraw' from the merry community of the frivolous Venetian merchant dandies is that it is psychologically motivated by self-hatred – very possibly a result of his repressed homosexuality triggered by Bassanio's recent decision to go 'wiving'. What Antonio's predisposition in effect sets up, however, is a system of comparative-contrastive structural parallels with other strangers and other forms of strangeness in the play. First of all, with his main 'opponent', Shylock – the stranger within, living in the Jewish ghetto, stigmatized by his outward appearance, his language, his religious and cultural difference and his stubborn unwillingness to integrate. However, he is a 'necessary evil' because as a 'usurer' (or 'banker') he provides Venice with credit to pay for its extravagance. From an economic standpoint, the whole play could be said

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<sup>7</sup> Shylock's uncanny strangeness might indeed be read, on the one hand, as the symptom of repression or trauma; on the other, his 'monstrosity' points towards the 'logic' of deconstruction, namely that in his obvious, superficial monstrosity he harbours an even greater one, a 'monstrous monstrosity' which is threatening to invade the 'selfsameness' on which the community has built its order. Cf. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms", trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of 'Theory' – History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll, Stanford, 1990, 79-80.

to be about how to have Shylock part with his money. Antonio is the stranger 'without', so to speak, himself an insider who, weighed down by some strange affliction, withdraws from the community apparently of his own will. These two thus form a spectrum whose endpoints are the 'outsider inside' (Shylock) and the 'insider outside' (Antonio). Portia, who could be seen as either the third or indeed the only main character of the play, on the other hand, seems to be at home anywhere and everywhere. She changes identity as quickly as her mind and her clothes, and is the one who resolves, overcomes, maybe even sublimes the stalemate between the main monomaniacs of the play locked in a kind of 'sado-masochistic' bond-game (Antonio and Shylock). Physically and spatially she is the go-between who shuttles between the socio-economic and politico-juridical and patriarchal 'real' world of Venice and the romantic matriarchal and idealist fantasy (stage-)world of Belmont (which is, however, much closer to Shakespeare's London idealised).

The *Merchant* is undoubtedly a play about identity, individual, sexual, communal, cultural and national. But it begins with a critique of 'alienation' and retreat from the world (*Weltfremdheit*, one could say) and the riddle of appearance and reality.<sup>8</sup> Behind Solanio's comment "Now by two-headed Janus, / Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time" [1.1.50-51],<sup>9</sup> lies the imperative directed towards Antonio: 'Be thyself', which can be seen as eponymous with the modern shift in identity construction away from the supernatural to the material, to consumption, bourgeois capitalism and liberal humanism. However, Antonio's sadness seems to point at the darker side of this transition expressed in his alienation and the symbolic pun on "purse" and "person" [1.1.137]. The additional sexual connotation of 'purse' inaugurates the constant combination and displacement between the two major discursive levels of the play: love and money. Antonio's world-weariness is mirrored later in the play on two occasions: Portia, who is weighed down by her father's 'lottery' rule ("my body is weary of this great world" [1.2.1], which are Portia's first words that already reveal her sarcasm), and the County Palatine's, whose

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<sup>8</sup> In general, the play seems to suggest that in order to 'become thyself' you need to 'make strange' first, e.g. in the cross-dressing episodes in 2.6, 3.4, 4.1, the conversions (of Jessica and Shylock) and Bassanio's casket episode [3.2.73-107; esp. "The seeming truth which cunning times put on / To entrap the wisest" 100-101]. The role of the clown Launcelot Gobbo [e.g. in 3.5] is also relevant here.

<sup>9</sup> Edition referred to throughout this essay: William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, based on Quarto 1 [1600], ed. M.M.Mahood (The New Cambridge Shakespeare), Cambridge, 1996.

“unmannerly sadness” is characterized as being that of a “weeping philosopher” [1.2.41-2].

On the other hand, Shylock, who appears for the first time in 1.3, is the reverse of this psychological alienation, or indeed rather represents its projection by the self onto the other/outside(r). Shylock is outwardly characterised by his physical appearance but also by his (complicated prose) language which, notwithstanding the question of whether he was or was not supposed to speak with an accent, leads to frequent misunderstanding, for example when he ironically remarks: “Antonio is a good man” [1.3.10] which Bassanio misreads as a moral judgment. In the course of the play Shylock is stigmatised and repeatedly ‘monsterised’ or ‘dehumanised’ either as “devil” [1.3.90; 2.2.16, 3.1.18] or as “dog” [1.3.110] who is driven by a strange passion [2.8.12]. He is also racialised or ‘blackened’, both through a contrast with his daughter’s ‘whiteness’ [3.1.31-33] and through parallels with Morocco’s “complexion” [2.1.1; 2.7.78].<sup>10</sup>

### **Trying the Stranger**

On en veut à l'étranger parce qu'on échoue à l'intégrer, comme s'il portait en lui quelque chose qui résiste, qui met à l'épreuve nos points de résistance.<sup>11</sup>

Shylock’s desire for justice is announced on several occasions before the trial scene. Solanio recounts how Shylock, upon his daughter’s elopement displays “a passion so strange, outrageous, and so variable”, thereby bemoaning his ducats as much as his daughter and already, it seems, confusing the law with justice [2.8.12-22]. Asked why he would insist on having Antonio’s flesh, Shylock repeatedly stresses his desire for “revenge” which certainly makes any attempt to see his famous “hath not a jew eyes” speech as a display of ‘humanism’ problematic [3.1.41-57].

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<sup>10</sup> To illustrate the ‘availability’ of the (racialised) parallel between ‘Jews’ and ‘Ethnics’ see e.g. Emblem 61 in George Wither, *A Collection of Emblems* [1635], Menston, 1968, 219, in which the narrator explains: “But, I have also found, that other things, / Have got a wheeling in contrary *Rings*; / Which *Regresse*, holding on, ‘tis like that wee, / to *Iewes*, or *Ethnicks*, backe shall turned bee.”

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Sibony, *L'Entre-deux – l'origine en partage*, Paris, 1991, 354.

But it is without doubt the trial scene [4.1] which is the dramatic climax of the play and its turning point. The bond plot is 'resolved' through a surprising intervention by the 'rogue judge' Portia, in cross-dressing who acts as a kind of *iudex ex machina*. The scene ends in the cruel dismantling of Shylock's case and the dramatic change of fortune which leads to the Jew's outrageous forced conversion (which is also Shakespeare's main addition to the inherited 'pound of flesh' plot in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone*). All the major lines of strangeness come together in this scene: the social, economic, political and legal status of the stranger in the Venetian community; the uncanniness of (cultural, sexual, etc.) identity and its subversions.

In his reading of the *Merchant*, Jacques Derrida focuses on Portia's line, "when mercy seasons justice" [4.1.193] and claims that the main problematic of the play is one of "translation" (in relation to the law). "Portia aims to translate Shylock's Judaic discourse of 'justice' into the 'merciful' discourse that underwrites the 'Christian State'", and in doing so she is caught in between the age-old antithesis between "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" translation.<sup>12</sup>

Scene 4.1 begins with a brief exchange between the Duke and Antonio. The ducal patriarch of Venice expresses his sympathy to the merchant who once again stresses his 'world weariness' (*Weltfremdheit*) and his preparedness to suffer ("am armed to suffer with a quietness of spirit the very tyranny and rage" [4.1.11-13]). Shylock is characterized, in anticipation of Portia's rule, as being incapable of showing "mercy" [4.1.6], as a "stony adversary" and most importantly an "inhuman wretch" [4.1.4] who pursues a "rigorous course" [4.1.8]. Shylock's 'rigour', his obdurate demand for the respect of the letter of the law poses an inevitability to Antonio's fate that cannot itself be stopped by "lawful means" [4.1.9]. It seems that authority is helpless with regard to Shylock's "fury" [4.1.11], fired by "envy" [4.1.10].

Upon Shylock's entrance into the courtroom the Duke once more tries reasoning. In fact the whole discussion between the Duke, Shylock, Bassanio and Antonio (until the arrival of Nerissa, disguised as lawyer's clerk, who announces

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<sup>12</sup> See Lawrence Venuti's "Introduction" to his translation of Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), 170-171. Cf. also Venuti's, "Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance" in *Discipline and Practice: The (Ir)Resistibility of Theory*, eds. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, Lewisburg, 2004 (forthcoming).

Portia's (i.e. Doctor Balthazar's) arrival [4.1.119]) is a legal argument within or in anticipation of the actual court hearing. It is interesting to see how the political authority of the ruler compares to the legal and moral authority of the rogue judge. In the 'first' hearing, it is in fact Shylock who everyone pleads with, appealing for mercy and thus putting him in the position of 'merciful' authority. "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew" [4.1.34] recalls the irony of the situation in which Christian law turned against itself expects a gentile answer, or its own message in return, from its 'other', the Jew. Not even "stubborn Turks" and "Tartars" could fail to be moved by Antonio's pitiful situation – financial, legal and emotional. This comparison (in contrast to the scenes in which the other main 'infidel' of the play, the Prince of Morocco speaks in defense of his "complexion") emphasizes Shylock's *uncanny* strangeness, rather than his *canny* strangeness determined by racial or national 'difference'. Something altogether more frightening and familiar seems at stake in Shylock's "strange apparent cruelty" [4.1.21], namely the suspicion that the law itself may be unjust. The Duke, in fact, expects nothing short of a miracle: showing "mercy and remorse" would indeed be even "more strange" than Shylock's strange cruelty [4.1.20-21]. Read as a 'xenographic' moment, the 'more strange than strange' announces that Shylock's difference is about to be combined or collapsed with other discourses and displaced and linked to other levels of strangeness.

Shylock starts by presenting his case as a religious one. He has sworn to "our holy Sabaoth" to "have the due and forfeit" of his bond [4.1.35-37]. His 'use' of Venetian law is subservient to his sacred Jewish Law and to the community of his 'own'. Law thus seems to stand against law, justice will create injustice – a classic case of a differend.<sup>13</sup> Shylock's threat is serious. Should he be denied justice by law, the "charter" and the city's "freedom" are at stake. Clearly Shylock here speaks to defend not only the legal status of the minority of 'strangers' (outsiders) but as a representative of all citizens of a multiethnic or multicultural community. The law

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend*, Paris, 1983. The difference between a litigation and a differend, according to Lyotard, is that the latter is "un cas de conflit entre deux parties (au moins) qui ne pourrait pas être tranché équitablement faute d'une règle de jugement applicable aux deux argumentations" (p. 9). The differend signifies precisely that which cannot be expressed in the normal 'language game' of litigation: "Le différend se signale par cette impossibilité de prouver. Celui qui porte plainte est écouté, mais celui qui est victime, et qui est peut-être le même, est réduit au silence" (pp. 24-25).

must be blind to race, nation, class, etc., if justice is to be maintained as a principle. Only justice based on the law guarantees the freedom (of commerce, individual and communal identity, culture, etc.). However, it is Shylock's stubborn 'letteredness' (which is not so much an insistence on the 'literal' application but rather a kind of 'fetishisation' of the letter of the law as such) which has always cost him 'Christian' affection without necessarily winning him any 'non-Christian' support. His cynicism ("say it is my humour" [4.1.43]) is only matched by his logical precision. Is hate unlawful? Is not the hatred of the 'just' lawful? These seem to be the powerful questions that Shylock is asking and which have strangely familiar reverberations in a time of rising religious fundamentalism, the social phenomenon of 'hate speech' and the philosophical/ethical problem of forgiveness (*pardon*), not to speak on a 'war on terror(ism)'. Can the court demand of the Jew to forgive the Christian Antonio? Shylock makes his claim by appealing to cultural difference ("some men there are love not a gaping pig" – a spiteful comment in the form of an ironic self-stereotype [4.1.47]) while, at the same time, clearly acknowledging its relativism ("As there is no firm reason to be rendered why he cannot abide a gaping pig... so can I give no reason, nor will I not" [4.1.53-59]).

Thus far Shylock merely seems to defend his right to his own 'Jewish' opinion amongst other possible, all contained within the limits of the letter of the law. But the problem is the dialectical move towards claiming the transcendental position of 'detaining' the letter of the law, inhabiting or 'incorporating' the meaning of the law, or indeed 'being' the law which, in Shylock's case is informed purely by hatred ("a certain loathing I bear Antonio" [4.1.60-61]).<sup>14</sup> This appears to be nothing but retaliation for Antonio's and Venice's anti-Semitism, but it also constitutes Shylock's 'blindness' (related to his belief that he detains the 'truth' of the 'letter', or the pure signifier).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In this he strangely resembles Sylvester Stallone whose motto as 'Judge Dredd' is "I *am* the Law" (cf. *Judge Dredd*, dir. Charles M. Lippincott, Beau E.L. Marks, 1995). Dredd, the dreaded but also dreadful judge, has to undergo a long and painful learning process until he becomes the 'humble' good judge who merely 'interprets' the law, abidingly. Since the Christian sense of justice implies that no-one is 'above' the (divine) law, both Dredd and Shylock, in fact, are punished for their blasphemous hubris.

<sup>15</sup> The logic of this blindness (the "politique de l'autru(i)che") is the one analysed in Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and the important theoretical discussion it started. See John P.

What is particularly striking about Shylock's lawful desire, and desire for the law is the impeccable logic and powerful persuasiveness it follows. He is the clear winner of the argument, at first. The points the Christians make are weak, Shylock's position is that of sound common sense ("What, wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?" [4.1.69]). The Duke appeals to Shylock's conscience and anticipates Portia's *coup-de-théâtre* by asking: "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?" [4.1.88], thus demonstrating that 'Christian' justice *necessarily* implies mercy as its principle of 'hope'. Justice, here, is merely a 'hope' for justice, which also means that justice without hope would be the opposite of justice. This is the moment when Shylock makes himself most vulnerable: "What judgment shall I *dread* [my emphasis; see footnote 14], doing no wrong?" [4.1.89]. Shylock's hubris lies in his claim that he "stands for judgment" [4.1.103]. He invokes a law that he himself points out is blind to blatant social and moral injustice, namely to the way the 'Christians' treat their slaves [4.1.90-98]. But Shylock is neither a humanist nor is his cause a 'humanitarian' one.<sup>16</sup> The same law that protects the 'ownership' of human beings (slavery), he argues, should grant him his 'pound of flesh'. What Shylock demands is, it seems, a kind of justice that does precisely *not* overcome injustice (slavery, cruelty, etc.) and double standards; he in fact demands the 'legalisation' of injustice. It would be wrong to see Shylock as a tolerant liberal fighting for the rights of the oppressed.

Shylock's position is so powerful that the Duke's only possibility of stopping him may be an 'act of power' (to exercise "*la raison du plus fort*")<sup>17</sup> in using his

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Muller and William J. Richardson (eds.) *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> If Shakespeare's 'genius' is that of 'inventing the human', according to Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, London, 1999, then Shakespeare is also (in part at least) responsible for the 'inhuman', the modern 'other' with its associated forms of strangeness, which represents the 'darker side' of the social, economic and moral success story called 'modernity'. This is for example Lyotard's suspicion towards 'humanism': "et si les humains, au sens de l'humanisme, étaient en train, contraints, de devenir inhumains, d'une part? Et si, de l'autre, le 'propre' de l'homme était qu'il est *habité* par de l'inhumain?" Cf. Lyotard, *L'Inhumain – causeries sur le temps*, Paris, 1988, 10. Maybe Shylock's ambivalence as to his 'humanity' / 'humanism' hints at a possibility for a 'posthumanist' reading of Shakespeare – i.e. a deconstruction of (modern, Christian, liberal) humanism, or, how to read he *Merchant* without being a humanist?

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Voyous*, Paris, 2003, esp. "La raison du plus fort (Y a-t-il des États voyous?)", 17-24 and *passim*.

prerogative: “Upon my power I may dismiss this court” [4.1.104]. All the more strange seems Antonio’s reiterated desire for suffering, to be finally punished. Antonio really wants to be finally stung by the Jewish “serpent” (“Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will” [4.1.83]). Antonio’s speech uses the letter differently. While Shylock is ‘letteral-minded’ (fetishising the letter) Antonio is more ‘literal-minded’ (taking language as a means for ‘frivolous’ gaming) in his constant punning on “Jew” and “ewe” (later he famously refers to himself as “tainted wether” [4.1.114]), and on “hard” and (Jewish) “heart”.<sup>18</sup> Antonio’s strange sadness (most probably at the loss of his lover Bassanio, his age and his sexual decline, or maybe something like his mid-life crisis) seems as spiteful as Shylock’s hatred, in his desire for ‘posthumous’ recognition (“You cannot better be employed, Bassanio, than to live still and write mine epitaph” [4.1.117-118]). Both parties of this lawsuit begin to look less than victims, wronged, but driven by their own vanity. This stalemate situation calls for Portia’s entrance.<sup>19</sup>

The time before Portia/Balthazar’s entrance is filled with mutual ‘hate speech’ between Gratiano, the most outspoken antisemite of the play who continues in his comparison of Shylock to a dog or wolf, while Shylock starts whetting his knife. Interestingly, however, Gratiano also anticipates the outcome of the scene by questioning divine *and* secular justice which, according to him, should have put an end to Shylock’s existence a long time ago [4.1.129].

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<sup>18</sup> In this he stands in sharp contrast to his opponent Shylock who is in no mind for punning at all and instead famously ‘cannot tell’ whether gold and silver are the same as ewes and rams, making them “breed as fast” [1.3.63-88]. The question of Shylock’s ‘strange’ language is a central one and is closely related to the ‘differend’ mentioned earlier. As Derrida, in *De l’hospitalité – Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre*, Paris, 1997, explains, the stranger first and foremost seeks hospitality in the (host) language: “La question de l’hospitalité commence là : devons-nous demander à l’étranger de nous comprendre, de parler notre langue, à tous les sens de ce terme, dans toutes ses extensions possibles, avant et afin de pouvoir l’accueillir chez nous?” The idea of hospitality thus harbours an ‘aporia’ that in fact renders strangeness and hospitality mutually exclusive:

S’il parlait déjà notre langue, avec tout ce que cela implique, si nous partageons déjà tout ce qui se partage avec une langue, l’étranger serait-il encore un étranger et pourrait-on parler à son sujet d’asile ou d’hospitalité ? (p. 21).

<sup>19</sup> The structural role of letters within the play also stands in opposition to Shylock’s letteredness and the fathers’ law (Shylock’s strict rule over his daughter Jessica, and Portia’s father’s lottery). The letters in the play are more like ‘divine’ interventions leading to changes of fortune (cf. Antonio’s, Portia’s and Bellario’s letters; the letter announcing the return of Antonio’s ships in Act 5).

Shylock's new opponent, the cross-dressed 'rogue' judge, Portia, from Belmont, is quite the opposite kind of stranger to Shylock. Portia's famous question which formally opens the case "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" [4.1.170] has given rise to many interpretations and speculations.<sup>20</sup> But it is first and foremost a symbol of justice's blindness (a blindness echoing Cupid's, evoked in Jessica's 'shame' expressed at her transformation into a boy [2.6.36-46] – an instance of cross-dressing with quite different connotations than Portia's and Nerissa's) and hence Portia's 'impartiality', the possibility of justice, the promise of finding a reconciliation between Shylock's and Antonio's "difference" [4.1.167]. It is the promise of the law as dialectic – the resolution and sublation [*Aufhebung, relève*] of antitheses.<sup>21</sup>

In principle at least the law of Venice is democratic in the sense that it protects the right of strangers in the same way as that of 'natives', as Antonio himself explains: "The Duke cannot deny the course of law; / For the commodity of strangers have / With us in Venice, if it be denied, / Will much impeach the justice of the state, / Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations" [3.4.26-31]. Venetian community, according to the merchant Antonio, is a (proto-)multicultural community based on a liberal-capitalist legal framework. Strangeness is not a legal 'problem' as long as all nations subscribe to the liberal and economic principles that guarantee justice.

Portia immediately describes Shylock's case as being of a "strange nature" [4.1.173] but apparently not 'unlawful', i.e. in respect of the letter of the law. The

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<sup>20</sup> See for example, Avram Oz, "Which Is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?: Riddles of Identity in *The Merchant of Venice*", *The Yoke of Love: Prophetic Riddles in The Merchant of Venice*, Newark, 1994; Tony Tanner, "Which is the Merchant here? And which the Jew?: The Venice of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*", in *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, eds. Manfred Pfister and Barbara Schaff, Amsterdam, 1999, 45-62; and Thomas Moisan, "Which is the Merchant here? And which the Jew?: Subversion and Recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*", in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, London, 1990, 188-206.

<sup>21</sup> For a deconstruction of this dialectic see Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical' Foundation of Authority", in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, New York: Routledge, 1992, esp. 14-17. Instead, a justice that *is* deconstruction is based on the experience of aporia, or the impossible. The differend between justice and mercy in the play thus gives rise to a completely different 'idea' of justice as impossible-possibility and promise.

central 'aporia' is named once Portia (after having established the legality and validity of the bond) demands that Shylock be "merciful" ("Then [my emphasis] must the Jew be merciful" [4.1.178]). For Shylock, Portia's "Then" is the very hiatus that constitutes his 'differend', and in not recognising Portia's 'logic' he excludes himself from such an obviously 'Christian' obligation towards other members of the community. Portia thus unfolds the rather clichéd model of Christian mercy 'for' the stranger.

This is the point where Derrida's interpretation of the play sets in. For Derrida the *Merchant* symbolizes the impossible debt of the translator, or put differently, the inevitable 'treason' that every translator must commit in the very process of translation, the impossible fidelity to the more than one [*plus d'un*].<sup>22</sup> The translator's double injunction is that of equivalence *and* relevance, or absolute translatability (everything is translatable, because everything can be made relevant, or linked) *and* untranslatability (nothing, strictly speaking, is translatable because there is never complete equivalence). Since the play is about 'conversion', religious, economic, legal, cultural, symbolic, sexual, etc., Portia's task in 4.1 is thus equivalent to the impossible 'task of the translator'. The crux of this process lies in the conversion/translation of an oath/bond into a pardon/mercy. Shylock, on the other hand, stands for the refusal to translate, for calculable reason and also for a disregard for the power of language.<sup>23</sup> An oath, as Derrida explains, is at once 'in' language, and at the same time transcends language; it thus corresponds to an inhuman or superhuman 'truth' which is always at stake in every translation. This is what it shares with the 'pardon' of mercy, the superhuman quality within the human, a 'gift' without return and supplement to justice. Accordingly, Derrida 'justifies' his translation of 'seasons' (in "when mercy seasons justice") by *relève* (a term he originally 'invented' to translate the Hegelian dialectic of '*Aufhebung*') by explaining that the dialectic put forward by Portia and the Duke and Venice in general implies a 'conversion' of the Jew Shylock before any possible 'choice'. If he were to follow the logic of the divine pardon put to him by Portia he would already have subscribed to a Christian logic, would already speak a language no longer his 'own', and thus would already have

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Fidélité à plus d'un – mériter d'hériter où la généalogie fait défaut", *Cahiers Intersignes* 13 (1998), 221-65.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?", 185.

broken his oath. The real challenge the play poses is therefore the question whether the play actually hints at a possibility of (merciful, 'divine') justice that would not always already be culturally specific and instead would be truly universal; i.e. whether another translation of justice (namely a 'non-dialectical' one) is possible.<sup>24</sup>

Christian mercy, as the play continues, is more and more revealed to be a sham (or a 'theo-political device') that barely conceals the economic and political interests of the community that are being preserved here against the outsider and 'alien' Shylock. So, while everybody is clear about the 'unethical' and unjust nature of the bond, the resolution through 'mercy' (by a rogue judge who indeed beats Shylock not by divine merciful in(ter)vention but by playing his own unethical game, by being willfully more letteral-minded than him) is equally distasteful. Justice, Portia tells Shylock, is not an end in itself, but is 'sublated' by prayers for mercy. Shylock's stubborn answer, however, is his pure desire for the law. Bassanio speaks the witnesses' minds when he says that if Shylock is not prepared to accept ten times the worth of the original bond the reason must be "malice" and not justice. But his appeal goes towards the Duke to "wrest once the law to your authority; to do a great right, do a little wrong" [4.1.211-21]. Can mercy be 'forced', Shylock rightly asks, not willing to break his oath "for Venice". Thus in being right he also confirms his resistance to integrate, to accept a communal vision; his 'desire' for justice is purely motivated by using Venetian law against 'itself'.

Again, rather 'masochistically' Antonio joins Shylock in "pressing for judgment". Both main strangers are once more linked/bonded in their dialectic, the 'stranger within' and the 'stranger without' in the antithesis of a chiasmic relation. Antonio is eager to leave this world from which he is too 'estranged'. In the proceeding towards judgment Portia does everything to expose Shylock's greed and rage for the witnesses. Shylock knows neither mercy nor charity (a surgeon to ease Antonio's pain, he says, is not part of the bond). But it may be Antonio who

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<sup>24</sup> What Derrida does not do in defense of his translation (of which he says somewhat disingenuously, in the end, that it may not be so much a translation but a "*trouvaille*") but what most translators probably *would* do is to compare Shakespeare's use of the verb "season" with other usages in the play. These other occurrences of "seasoning" suggest indeed a greater scepticism; see 3.2.73-80 (Bassanio's choice between false appearance and truthfulness; 4.1.97 (Shylock's 'slave speech'); 5.1.107 "by season seasoned" (Portia's discourse of divine 'order')).

unwittingly gives Portia the idea for the reversal of fortunes in this case. Antonio hopes that Shylock will cut deep enough so that he can pay at once the debt of love – a debt that links him and Bassanio – and his financial debt to Shylock “with all his heart”. Symbolically in adhering to the bond of male love Bassanio breaks his other bond, the one he gave his wife, Portia, present in disguise. And once again it is Shylock who speaks the revealing truth about the hypocrisy of Christian morality: “These be the Christian husbands”, and reminds us how much he has been previously wronged, legally, economically but also emotionally: “I have a daughter”. Twice Portia insists and urges Shylock to exercise his lawful rights: “The court awards it and the law doth give it” [4.1.296]. The second time however already prepares the shift back from divine mercy to political power which is about to occur: “The law allows it, and the court awards it” [4.1.299]. It is at this moment that Portia’s famous “Tarry a little” announces the dramatic shift in Shylock’s fortunes. It is an interpellation by the law’s executive power. It is here that the racial-religious Christian community lays bare its “auto-immunitary” instinct.<sup>25</sup> ‘Christian’ blood must not be shed by the foreigner. The law turns against the one who desires to be ‘judgment’ itself. “Thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest” [4.1.312]. Shylock is undone by the very language whose power he chose to ignore: “Is that the law?” [4.1.309], he asks.

The very moment that Shylock’s cruelty finally seems established beyond doubt and when Christian justice “seasoned” with mercy seems to outdo Jewish ‘law-letteredness’, the moment that Shylock’s ‘strange’ lawsuit is fully comprehended in its strangeness, something very odd happens: Antonio’s undoubtedly ‘sexually’ motivated estrangement from the world – which has arguably made him seal the suicidal bond with Shylock in the first place, namely as a kind of self-sacrifice or ultimate gesture of the frustrated lover of Bassanio – ‘returns’ in his final words when he asks Bassanio to commend him to his “honourable wife” [4.1.269]. The ironical gendered subtext here starts interfering with the dialectic of law – mercy – justice, intent on containing the stranger who is by now ‘set up’ for punishment. Antonio identifies Shylock with female fortune (“she cut me off”) and builds a possible link with Bassanio’s “wife” (whose ‘honour’ is of course put in doubt for the spectator by her cross-dressed presence; fortune as the feminised Shylock and the masculinised

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Derrida on the “pervertibilité auto-immunitaire de la démocratie” in *Voyous*, 59 and *passim*. See also Derrida, “Foi et savoir”, in Derrida, and Gianni Vattimo, *La Religion*, Paris, 1996, 9-86.

Portia). For Portia the law – mercy – justice dialectic thus spills over into a question of jealousy as soon as she must realise that Bassanio’s male ‘friendship’ is stronger than the ‘bond’ with her, symbolised by the ring episode [3.2.171-185]. As supreme irony, Antonio says, “bid her be judge”, she who is the judge of his and Shylock’s bond must learn of another ‘bond’, the bond of all bonds that excludes her: “Antonio, I am married to a wife / Which is as dear to me as life itself; / But life itself, my wife, and all the world, / Are not with me esteemed above thy life. / I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / Here to this devil, to deliver you” [4.1.278-283]. Gratiano confirms this strange misogynistic confession of ‘fraternity’ and at the same time opens up a possibility for the mortified and cynical Portia to take some form of revenge:<sup>26</sup> Bassanio’s reference to the devil is once again linked to Shylock’s ‘doglike’ animality (“currish Jew”) who, at this moment of displacement, when sexual and legal discourse are linked by their common ambivalence, this moment of xenographic reinscription and re-turn (i.e. when strangeness is displaced onto another structural level) speaks Portia’s ‘truth’ which then prompts a new turn in the dialectic: “These be the Christian husbands!” However, for Portia, what matters most here is Shylock, the father, who adds: “I have a daughter” by which he reenacts her own father’s law, and the eternal law-of-the-father designed to alienate, control and exclude the daughter-woman.

## Strange Sex

But there remains among us – the ‘us’ of Europe, all the way to its remote American and Russian poles – an unassimilated, perhaps forever unassimilable, stranger, the first other of which the makers of our myths, male as far back as reliable memory runs, ever became aware. And that stranger is, of course, woman, as scarcely anyone has to be told in a time when – after a couple of generations of celebrating their minor triumphs – the spokesmen of women are crying out in rage and hysteria that their sisters are still aliens in a culture and society dominated by men.<sup>27</sup>

The next turn of the legal screw, from Portia’s point of view, is directed not against Shylock, the stranger, but against Shylock, the father figure and ‘keeper’ of

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<sup>26</sup> For a deconstruction of ‘fraternity’ see Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié*, Paris, 1994, esp. 253-300.

<sup>27</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, London, 1974, 38-39.

patriarchal law. What follows is a destruction and ‘execution’ of Shylock that thinks through his own logic to the end (“Thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest” [4.1.312]; “He shall have nothing but the penalty” [4.1.318]). Portia, the ‘rogue’ bearer of Christian mercy is even less merciful in her destruction of the Jew than the Jew was in his ‘perverse’ lettered desire for law. She unveils the hypocrisy behind the benign patriarchal authority of Christian mercy and brings forth its cruel supplement, its ‘alien laws’. Portia’s second “Tarry, Jew” [4.1.342] unleashes the full power and xenophobia of Christian law that has Shylock begging or rather ‘praying’ for mercy. The mercy that first was characterized as mysterious divine sublation of justice turns out to be nastier than any injustice, culminating in the pure malicious and gratuitous nature of Shylock’s forced conversion and the even more dehumanising extracted confirmation of his ‘baptism’ (“I am content” [4.1.389]). One cannot help but think that Portia’s unmerciful additional legal twist is linked to her husband’s ‘treason’, that it is Shylock’s status as ‘alien’, his finally ‘contained’ strangeness (the moment when he is “vomited” from the “anthropoemic” community; see Footnote 2), which gives rise to a displacement in which it is transposed and escapes onto a different level. As for Antonio’s Christian mercy (“What mercy can you render him, Antonio?”), it resolves another, earlier, opposition set up within the play, namely the dialectic of use and usury. Shylock, as newly converted Christian, may no longer live off money lending, while half of his goods will be ‘used’ for Antonio’s profit. As for the other half it will fall to his also converted daughter upon his death. To add insult to injury, the political authority, the Duke, threatens to “recant the pardon” that he has pronounced. It seems thus that Christian justice, seasoned by mercy and enacted as “pardon”, is structurally xenophobic in that it always already demands and presupposes an acceptance of its own legitimation. It is ‘performatively’ self-legitimizing both in the sense that it posits an ‘other’ merely to legitimate a ‘self’, and by doing so, demonstrates its exclusive hierarchic violence and ‘auto-immunitarian’ instincts. In its relativism, however, also lies a chance, the trace or spectre of a chance, in the form of a question: what if there really was a form of mercy or pardon that would function without any return, as a gift, from an other to whom one cannot but be merciful because he, she or it conditions the very possibility of mercy. The *Merchant* does not seem to give an answer to this question, but rather enacts the kind of deconstruction of justice, pardon and mercy seen at work in Derrida’s writings on the topic.

Portia's revenge, however, is far from over, the motive of the bond, the dialectic of justice, law and mercy continues or is now reinscribed at a sexual level. It is often said that Act 5 strikes by its contrast and 'remove' from the previous action of the play. But looked at it from a 'xenographic' point of view Belmont rather seems to reflect or reenact the trial scene in a displaced form. The only 'stranger' allowed into Belmont is the converted Jessica – the outsider who wants to blend in, the archetype of the integrated ('swallowed' or assimilated) but still merely 'tolerated' other, who pays her integration with her psychological alienation. She remains unsusceptible to the "sweet power of music" [5.1.79]: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" [5.1.69]. Her apparently light-hearted exchange with her lover Lorenzo expresses her 'melancholy' and her disillusionment: "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" [5.1.17-20]. But this is only in anticipation of the real battle between the sexes to follow, between the mistress and master of Belmont and their followers, which will end with nothing less than an example of modern 'gynesis',<sup>28</sup> in Gratiano's words: "Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" [5.1.307].

The play thus closes its dialectic development by returning the 'letter' and wealth to Antonio and (his) men. The unleashed power of the 'strange sex' is contained in an all too obvious 'self-effacing' address by Portia and Nerissa to her 'masters' to remain alert and to make sure to keep (your) woman in check and sexually controlled.

### **Conclusion: Early/Post/Modernity**

On parle d'aliénation. Mais la pire aliénation n'est d'être dépossédé *par* l'autre, mais dépossédé *de* l'autre, c'est d'avoir à produire l'autre en l'absence de l'autre, et donc d'être renvoyé continuellement à soi-même et à l'image de soi-même.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca, 1985, 25: "...gynesis – the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity..."

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard et Marc Guillaume, *Figures de l'altérité*, Paris, 1994, 174.

So what is the status of strangeness in the play? Strangeness is ultimately ‘diverted’ and ‘contained’ in a ‘sexual’ closure. The strangers and strangenesses that have informed the play serve as nodal points, displacements through which the crisis of (male) sexual ambiguity can be negotiated and ‘resettled’. However, the established order remains one of fear, repression and psychosis. The ‘price’ of identity is constant (dis)identification and alienation. In this respect Portia’s (almost Lacanian) irony towards Bassanio’s repeated pledging and (re)bonding (“I swear to thee, even by thine own fair eyes / Wherein I see myself” [5.1.242]) reveals the hypocrisy behind the narcissistic logic of this identification: “Mark you but that? / In both my eyes he doubly sees himself; / In each eye one. Swear by your double self, / And there’s an oath of credit!” [5.1.243-246].

The early modern period in many ways not only ‘foreshadows’ cultural and economic developments that have come to constitute ‘our’ contemporary legacy but it also shows the historical ‘dialectic’ of modernity in the making and thus allows ‘us’ as ‘children of the postmodern’ to relive that very process of repression which led to the complex ‘project of modernity’ in the first place. This does not mean that this form of interpretation has to be ‘nostalgic’ (i.e. in trying to find a non-existent idyllic period of ‘premodernity’, criticism’s ‘Belmont’ so to speak) but rather it elucidates the psychoanalytic logic that underlies the task of ‘perlaboration’ (i.e. of the modern trauma, or the ‘postmodern’ in the Lyotardian sense).<sup>30</sup>

Late modernity (understood as ‘our’ postmodern modernity)<sup>31</sup> abounds in the production of strangers and strangeness. It seems that rather than a proliferation of ‘homeliness’, globalisation (whose beginnings must be traced back to Shakespeare’s time, the ‘early modern’ or even before) rather leads to an expulsion from home on a planetary scale. Strangers have always been among ‘us’, have preceded ‘us’, expropriating any simple legitimation of community. Late modernity is at once the proliferation of strangers and strangeness in the form of migration and travel, and of the strangeness ‘within’, the questioning of identity. ‘We’ are “strangers to ourselves”,<sup>32</sup> and this inflation of strangeness is not without fundamental effects and changes to the very idea of ‘the strange’. If strangeness is now a ‘global’ experience, the encounter with the strange ‘other’ is constantly receding behind the horizon of

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<sup>30</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, 1988, esp. 7-28.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, Paris, 1988.

representation, mediation and virtualization, leading at once to an inflation of xenographic practices and 'uncanny' strangeness, and a disappearance of strangers.

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