

“a passion so strange, outrageous, and so variable”

The Invention of the Inhuman in *The Merchant of Venice*

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1. When Did We Become Posthuman?

Historically speaking, there is uncertainty if and when posthumanism started or when we became posthuman.¹ Conceptually, however, it is quite inevitable that with the “invention of the human” the posthuman as one of his or her “others” also becomes thinkable, representable, possible, etc. As soon as some form of “*humanitas*” begins to characterize the species as a whole, non-human (un-, in-, pre- or posthuman) others start proliferating and the process of inclusion, exclusion and differentiation is set in motion.²

Shakespeare, given his central position within early modern Western culture at the beginning of roughly five hundred years of humanism, can be used as an important illustration in this context. Harold Bloom’s monumental study *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human* (1998) insists on the centrality of Shakespeare’s position in the universal “humanist” canon, which transcends individual national literatures through the creation of essentially “human” characters like Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, and in particular Falstaff and Hamlet, who represent the “the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it” (4). “The idea of Western character, of the self as a moral agent, has many sources: Homer and Plato, Aristotle and Sophocles, the Bible and Augustine, Dante and Kant, and all you might care to add. Personality, in our sense, is

a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness" (4). For Bloom, Shakespeare's importance does not so much lie in his central cultural aesthetic or social historical meaning but in his "ingenious" creation of universal truths and profound spiritual and sublime, in short, in his authentic "humanity": "Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible" (17). Bloom's insistent and almost "dogged" liberal humanism represents of course the main target of the kind of constructivist or anti-essentialist antihumanism that characterizes new historicism and cultural materialism (especially, in the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore, Terence Hawkes or Catherine Belsey). As a result of the politicization of Shakespeare studies in the last few decades Shakespeare is usually afforded an "ambivalent attitude" towards rising and consolidating early modern humanist ideologies and modern anthropocentrism (cf. the discussion about "subversion" and "containment", which, from a cultural political point of view, are always "present" as two characteristic moments in Shakespeare's plays).³ This ambivalence is then "resolved" by both camps – the defenders of liberal humanism like Bloom or Brian Vickers, on the one hand, and champions of antihumanist materialism, on the other – and used for the respective ideological purposes. On one side we have the Marxist-materialist critique of capitalist modernity, which targets alienation and individualism as the main evils of liberal humanism, whereas on the other side, from a formal aestheticist point of view, Shakespeare is reclaimed as a monument of essential humanity and humanist cultural achievement.

Jonathan Dollimore in his more recent commentary places this caricature of an opposition into a longer historical and theoretical context. Neither Shakespeare's invoked universal humanity, nor his or early modernity's subversive radicality,

neither the liberal humanist, individual genius, nor the proto-postmodern decentred subject of theory offer the entire truth, because:

The crisis of subjectivity was there at the inception of individualism in early Christianity, and has been as enabling as it has been disturbing (enabling because disturbing). In other words, what we might now call the neurosis, anxiety and alienation of the subject-in-crisis are not so much the consequence of its recent breakdown, but the very stuff of its creation, and of the culture – Western European culture – from which it is inseparable, especially that culture in its most expansionist phases (of which the ‘Renaissance’ was undoubtedly one). The crisis of the self isn’t so much the subjective counterpart of the demise, disintegration or undermining of Western European culture, as what has always energised both the self and that culture... what we are living through now is not some (post-)modern collapse of Western subjectivity but another mutation in its enduring dynamic. (Dollimore, 1998: 271)

This latest mutation could therefore without doubt be referred to as “posthuman” or at least “posthumanist subjectivity” – a new form of humanist identity in posthumanist clothes that calls forth our vigilance and skepticism. In the third and latest edition of Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy* (2005), he gives his preliminary verdict on the outcome of the so-called “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s that his book in many ways helped to spark: “*Radical Tragedy*, first published in 1984, attacked just these ideas: essentialism in relation to subjectivity, universalism in relation to the human, and the belief that there was an ethical/aesthetic realm transcending the political” (2004: xv). While the decentering of the subject and of universalism in late-capitalist society have become the everyday experience of our posthuman(ist) selves, “aesthetic humanism”,

as Dollimore calls it, continues to survive in its commodified form, and, curiously so, as a kind of spiritualizing force. The conviction that art, literature and culture function as a humanizing force is (still) the foundation of the cultural industries as well as all educational institutions. However, Dollimore criticizes this attitude as rather “complacent”: “Far from being liberating, the humanist aesthetic has become a way of standing still amidst the obsolete, complacent and self-serving clichés of the heritage culture industry, the Arts establishment, and a market-driven humanities education system. The aesthetic has become an anaesthetic” (2004: xxii).

This can of course not be the space to discuss the potential transformation of the traditional “humanities” into, for want of a better word, “posthumanities” departments of the future; however, what Dollimore’s analysis makes clear is that in the age of the exposed crisis of humanist education there is no way back for theory and criticism, but also no clear-cut trajectory forward into some posthuman(ist) utopia – a position that Neil Badmington, with reference to Elaine Graham’s work, calls “oblique”: “a ‘critical post/humanism’ must actively oblique the order of things, Humanism must be obliques, knocked sideways, pushed off course, declined” (Badmington, 2004: 63). The oblique between “post” and “human” (post/human) proposed by Graham mainly serves to gain time and to create a critical space for a more thorough deconstruction of humanism, without which an uncritical reinscription of humanist ideology into posthuman(ist) forms would be inescapable. In fact, the liberal humanist and the Marxist anti-humanist can be seen to compete for the same moral authority over so-called human “nature”. Recent approaches within literary criticism are certainly not immune towards this anthropocentric blindspot, even or maybe because they pose as posthumanist engagements with the latest “scientific” insights, for example by promoting a so-called “cognitive turn”. One could take Robin

Headlam Wells's *Shakespeare's Humanism* (2005) as an example, which takes a biological-cum-cognitive starting point in its attempt to "transcend" the opposition between pro- and anti-humanists: "Where 'humanity' was once seen as a purely cultural construct, a consensus is now emerging among psychologists and neuroscientists that our minds are the product of a complex interaction between genetically determined predispositions and an environment that has itself been shaped by generations of human culture" (Wells, 2005: 2). Wells uses the idea of co-evolution of genes and culture to reposition the question about human nature as central within Shakespeare's work, in the hope that "by listening to what other disciplines have to say about human nature, criticism can move on from an outdated anti-humanism that has its intellectual roots in the early decades of the last century to a more informed modern understanding of the human universals that literature has, in Ian McEwan's words, 'always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to'" (5). The rhetoric of "departure" and "overcoming" makes clear that one cannot simply write off humanism that easily. On the contrary, humanism with all its essentialist values relating to some mystical form of human "nature", is currently being reinscribed with the help of cognitive and neuroscientific concepts – supposedly ever-changing yet ever true to itself.

A critical posthumanism would thus need to overcome the ideological confrontation between liberal humanists and cultural materialists mindful of both the historical context and current cultural change. In terms of Shakespeare studies this means situating Shakespeare's work formally and historically at a certain turning point within the process of "post/humanisation" – a process that already contains its own mechanisms of repression and exclusion and thus already inscribes its own demise and end. So, just as Shakespeare might be the possible starting point of a

certain humanism he could also already anticipate its decline and ultimate ruin. A critical perlaboration of Shakespearean humanism should thus open up the possibility of a fundamentally different, more “radical” understanding of “humanity”. Recalling Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991 [1985]) – in which Haraway hints at the permeability of the boundaries between human and animal and between humans and machines at the end of the twentieth century – Fudge, Gilbert and Wiseman (2002) explain that the early modern period provides other and much earlier problematising accounts of humanness and humanism. The spreading of humanist and anthropocentric ideologies during the renaissance and early modern period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries does not happen without tensions, contradictions and resistance. There is no immediate consensus about what constitutes some imaginary “human nature”. This alone should be reason enough to abandon the simplistic idea of a monolithic (Eurocentric) humanism which might today be challenged by one, (global or globalised) form of posthumanism. Instead a critical posthumanism needs to link back to those critical discourses that run within and alongside the humanist tradition. The contributions in Fudge, Gilbert and Wiseman’s *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (2002) provide some clarification in this respect by pointing out moments of ambivalence in the early modern relationship to animals, machines, the rise of the natural sciences, cartography, sexuality, new concepts of the body and embodiment, and modern medicine. Jonathan Sawday, in particular, in his essay “Renaissance Cyborg”, emphasises that body modification is not the privilege of our own, contemporary, period: “Enhancing or altering the body form artificially, whether through adornment – tattoos, cosmetics, padded shoulders, bustles, cod-pieces, wigs – or through more invasive procedures – silicone implants, surgical modification, scarification, the

piercing of ears, lips, and other features – may be traced through a bewildering variety of cultural and historical moments” (Sawday, in Fudge, Gilbert und Wiseman, 2002: 172). Sawday illustrates this ambiguity by referring to a literary example, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and his progressing “mechanisation” during the course of the play, which corresponds to the more general mechanisation of nature especially after Descartes: “When did we first begin to fear our machines?”, Sawday asks. “Certainly, by the end of the seventeenth century, the dominance of the mechanistic model within European modes of understanding had become unassailable. The world, human society, the human and animal body, all could be analysed in terms of the functioning of machinery” (190).⁴

Haraway’s “cyborgisation” of the human can thus be seen to start at the same time as the rise of humanism and actually becomes an integral part of it. Without its ideological and philosophical anticipation the idea of cyborgisation, literally, would have been unthinkable. As much as the metaphor of mechanisation of nature and of the human and human behaviour allows for greater “scientific” control over the environment by humans (and machines), it also provokes the “unease” towards this new and self-produced and self-producing other which threatens to become an indispensable instrument of identification and delimitation and thus to erode the very core of this newly created humanity:

The modern human relationship with machines, from its emergence in the earlier part of the sixteenth century down to the present, has always been tinged with a measure of unease. ‘They’ have always been nearer kin to ‘us’ than we have cared to admit; and in that lies their fascination, as well as their potential horror. It is an uncomfortable prospect that what it is to be human may be defined by ‘forms such as never were in nature’. (191)

In a similar move, Rhodes and Sawday, in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (2000), argue for an anticipation of contemporary information and media society in the early modern period. Almost in analogy with the temporal mode we proposed for posthumanism and the “invention of the inhuman”, Rhodes and Sawday describe a form of “remediation” when they claim that “[t]he experience of our own new technology has enabled us to re-imagine the impact of new technologies in the past” (p. 2).

2. *Shylock's Humanism*

Shakespeare’s “invention of the human” thus implies the invention of the inhuman. A case in point is Shylock, the Jew, in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1600). Bloom’s classic interpretation of this profoundly ambivalent character of an all-too-human and at the same time constantly dehumanised villain can serve as emblematic of a humanist, as opposed to a critically posthumanist, understanding of the human. The central question in this context concerns the antisemitism of the play, as Bloom explains in opening of his chapter on *The Merchant*: “One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work” (Bloom, 1999: 171). Humanists nevertheless venture either to defend Shakespeare against the accusation of antisemitism (e.g. in arguing that the text is not antisemitist but simply, at worst, ironically and critically reflects a rampant and popular Elizabethan antisemitism, which not only saves, but even ennoble, Shakespeare as an author not of, but in his time), or they attempt to “humanise” Shylock by characterising him as a

largely sympathetic figure and thus willfully misunderstand the text. Bloom is aware of this contradiction and blames the ambivalence in Shakespeare's text on the rivalry between Shakespeare's "arch Jew" and Marlowe's Barabas, in *The Jew of Malta* (1590). How else explain Shylock's bizarre cruelty and his thirst for Antonio's pound of flesh? "Shylock simply does not fit his role; he is the wrong Jew in the right play" (Bloom, 1999: 172). What Bloom is missing in Shylock is the typical Shakespearean sceptical irony. Instead, Shylock impresses through his linguistic precision and expressivity, which constitutes another "contradiction" at the heart of this social outcast – a contradiction which many modern and contemporary stagings have tried to "even out" by giving Shylock a heavy "foreign" accent.⁵

Bloom tries to make a Shakespearean virtue out of Shylock's "vividness" and his extraordinary (human) realism in the face of the barbaric and comic evil he represents, by interpreting Shylock as an example of the fascinating multidimensional character of human nature. Shylock is thus seen to shake "our" fundamental and universal belief in human goodness and confronts them with "our" racist, sexist and religious prejudice. Shylock simply is both, a comic villain and the embodiment of tragic and embattled humanity. In this respect, his final conversion to Christianity must represent a sadistic act of revenge by Antonio. The other main characters of the play also do not escape this interpretation without at least some blame. Antonio is just as curious an outsider as is Shylock. In addition Antonio seems to entertain a homoerotically tinged relationship with his friend and "impoverished playboy", Bassanio. He suffers from the latter's betrayal, namely his decision to woo the rich heiress Portia, to pay off his debtors; however, first Bassanio needs another cash injection from Antonio which, in turn, leads to the whole credit and "pound of flesh" episode. This part of the story is driven by Shylock's hatred of Antonio who has spat

at him in public and dehumanised him by calling him “dog”. Portia, on the other hand, who might even be seen as the real main character of the play, displays some degree of frivolousness in her noble and rather romantic Belmont, while acting rather cunningly and implacably as a dressed-up judge in court. She tricks Shylock who is rather obstinate in his literal interpretation of the bond and has no hesitation to completely reverse the situation by exposing Shylock to ridicule, destitution, capital punishment and ultimately to public humiliation and violence in the form of an imposed conversion to Christianity. Thus it is not only Shylock who is characterised by his human, all-too-human, contradiction but the entire play plays with “our” trust in the “Christian” understanding of “humanity”. Shakespeare’s ambivalence, Bloom believes, “diverts self-hatred into hatred of the other, and associates the other with lost possibilities of the self” (190). And this is where ultimately Shakespeare’s “invention of the human” is located for Bloom, namely in the moral injunction that, in the name of universal humanity, we should not “dehumanise” ourselves by giving in to our self-hatred or hatred of the other based on a projection of difference and alterity. It is probably also in this sense that Bloom’s rather speculative concluding statement needs to be understood: “I close by wondering if Shylock did not cause Shakespeare more discomfort than we now apprehend” (191), for “the playwright, capacious soul, would be aware that the gratuitous outrage of a forced conversion to Venetian Christianity surpasses all boundaries of decency” (191). Mission accomplished, one could say: “man”, in standing up to his very own inhumanity, has been “rehumanised” and, emblematically, in the figure of the Shakespearean genius, has been extracted at least temporarily from the evil mechanism of self-hatred and hatred of the other, and has thus been reinserted into the anthropophile sphere of humanistic self-elevation –

court adjourned – until the next humanist crisis. As last reassurance, Bloom’s final verdict is: “Shakespeare was [merely] up to mischief” (191).

A completely different, namely posthumanist, way of reading is possible, however. In order to demonstrate this alternative, however, let us first look at Catherine Belsey’s essay “Cultural Difference as Conundrum in *The Merchant of Venice*” in her *Why Shakespeare?* (2007), as an example of poststructuralist “anti-humanism” with its undeniable merits but also limitations. In a by now classic move, Belsey shifts the ambivalence of the play onto its linguistic plane and characterises it as “a play that depends so extensively on the instability of meaning and the duplicity of the signifier” (160), which to a large extent is expressed in Shylock’s stubborn “literalness” during the court scene, as far as the bond is concerned. It is this literalness that will be “outdone” by Portia, in the court scene, in order to “undo” Shylock. Unlike Bloom and other humanist interpreters, who see this ambivalence as a pedagogical “task”, or as a moral “admonition” to the reader or spectator, namely to acknowledge and understand their own human nature, Belsey reads it in a deconstructionist vein, namely as an impossible structural necessity of the play and its cultural context: “A prejudice conventional in its own period goes into the composition of *Merchant of Venice*. At the same time, the play includes elements that radically unsettle the prejudice it produces. *It differs from itself*” (161). A central role is played by the contradiction between the untouchable and general nature of the law, on the one hand, and its necessarily linguistic interpretation, on the other – a point that Derrida (2001) makes as well in a similar form, in his reading of the play. Belsey formulates the dilemma as follows:

How, in other words, can the law be just to both Antonio and Shylock? And the answer, of course, is a quibble: flesh is not blood; a pound is not a jot

more or less than a pound. Nowhere is the duplicity of the signifier thrown into clearer relief than in this exposure of the moneylender's worthless bond. Shylock's ultimate antagonist is the language in which his contract with Antonio is necessarily formulated – and he loses. (Belsey, 2007: 162)

The law is necessarily expressed in language (“inscribed in the signifier”); language, however has its own dynamic and is “anarchic” (164). At this point, however, something very interesting happens in Belsey's reading, which, despite all its best intentions and absolutely consistent antihumanist conclusions, finds itself drawn back into Bloom's dialectic of de- and rehumanisation as described above. Belsey uses Derrida's “Monolingualism of the Other” (Derrida, 1998), in which he speaks about his forced exile from his “own” and his “only” native language, French. Being an Algerian Jew under the protectorate of the Vichy regime is described by Derrida in the form of the following “aporia”: “I have only one language; it is not mine” (Derrida, 1998: 15). Belsey uses this to come to a general, almost existential, maybe even “humanitarian” insight: “we none of ‘us’ own the language we speak, which was already there when we came into the world” (163). “In this sense, we are all aliens, all in exile from a state of perfect correspondence between what we want to say, or would want to say if only we knew what it was, and the signifying practices available to us” (163). However, what this disarming, almost humanist-existentialist, “universalism” necessarily downplays is that not all forms of linguistic exile are equivalent. Instead, and this is one of Derrida's main arguments in *Monolingualism*, every linguistic exile depends on a culturally specific power struggle between individuals and institutions, which attempt to control and establish a monopoly over the fixation of meaning and claim “ownership” of language. Shylock becomes implicated within such a power struggle and as an outsider is duly stigmatised. He is

stripped of “his” language (which even more than in Derrida’s sense is not his “own”) and is punished for his cultural difference to safeguard the imaginary homogeneity of Christian society and Venetian law.⁶

The strategy that Belsey uses to “save” Shakespeare from his “own” contemporary culture seems ultimately, despite or maybe because of its diametrical opposition to Bloom’s “liberal humanism”, as humanistically and universalistically motivated as in Bloom: “How surprising, then that the play invests its fantasy-Jew with humanity. It is for this reason, however, that *The Merchant of Venice* does not just reaffirm prejudice, but draws attention to it” (167). If Shakespeare’s text itself undermines or even “deconstructs” the idea of a culturally homogenous identity it can be used as an early modern testimony against any exclusivity in the process of identity construction at any time in history. Belsey’s reading consequently does not fail to engage in a critique of contemporary multiculturalism, at the same time as it justifies the ongoing interest in Shakespeare as a thinker of great humanitarian and existential questions (“the reason why Shakespeare’s play continues to haunt the imagination of the West”): “can a society preserve cultural difference and at the same time do away with social antagonism?” (168). In relation to the contemporary, and especially the Anglo-American, cultural context, the question arises in the following *historically and culturally specific* form, despite its tacit universal assumptions: “While enforced integration generates a justified resentment, our own well-meaning multiculturalism may inadvertently foster precisely the segregation, and thus the hostility, it was designed to prevent” (168). The similarity of the procedure with that of Bloom’s “liberal humanism” in this context is striking. The play opens onto the “abyss” of inhumanity, projected onto the outsider who, in turn, exposes the inhumanity of the entire society of humans. The same dialectic of self-hatred, hatred of the other and

cultural improvement that constitutes the humanist ideology ironically appears to be at work in Belsey's reading as well. Our argument would be that, as long as this dialectic is not questioned a critical posthumanist angle remains invisible.

3. *The Merchant of Venice: Posthumanism and Misanthropy*

Let us therefore briefly return to the "essence" of humanity and look again at Shylock's famous speech in act 3.1, a speech provoked by his previous personal and no doubt traumatic loss of his only daughter, Jessica, and Salarino's mocking reminder of her elopement. Shylock concludes his "humanity speech" with the words: "The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction".⁷ Nothing, in fact, is more effective in unhinging humanism than this phrase, because the dialectic of similarity and difference is here at its turning point. The projected inhumanity, the repressed self-hatred returns, following the basic psychoanalytical logic of the repressed's return, and it begins to haunt the provisionally stabilised self, threatens it and causes it to repress afresh – which could be used to explain to what extent the escalation of inhumanity is an essential aspect of humanity itself, maybe even its engine, drive or "telos". The "humanisation" of history hides its own dehumanising logic. Posthumanism can therefore not simply break with this logic because that would merely constitute a continuation of the escalating dialectic of humanisation and dehumanisation. Instead it is a question of a deconstructive "working through" of humanism's represseds, of the inhuman and unhuman, in a radically different sense.

Scott Brewster summarises this point in his introduction to *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human* (2000):

the inhuman is unsatisfactorily configured as somehow ‘post’ or as a mere *limen* or threshold, much less a crossing of the boundary. Rather it retains a sense of excess (plural potentiality) which continues to disseminate as it always has done and fulfilled an unfulfillable within the continuing ‘technical mediation’ of the human. (9)

This techn(olog)ical mediation of the human, which has to be taken into account in any critical genealogy of the inhuman or the posthuman, testifies to the fact that any “becoming-machine” (i.e. cyborgisation as one, predominantly contemporary, form of posthumanisation) is always already a constitutive factor of being human connected necessarily with an “originary technicity”.

Let us stress again that the prefix “post-” in posthumanism can have a variety of meanings and that it allows for a number of discursive and argumentative strategies. Neither in terms of content nor as far as strategic usage is concerned do the terms “posthuman”, “posthumanity” and “posthumanisation” presuppose any consensus. These terms are politically, radically open, which is the fact that gives rise to the demand for a critical posthumanism in the first place – a critical posthumanism that both takes the issue of the posthuman seriously and problematises, contextualises and historicises it, at the same time.

In this respect this essay is in partial agreement with Halliwell and Mousley’s approach in *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (2003), which proposes to do justice to the complexity of humanism in its many disguises. Halliwell and Mousley distinguish between a romantic, existentialist, dialogic, civic, spiritual, secular, pragmatic and a technological humanism, on the one hand, and, on the other

hand, they also subdivide antihumanism, as a reaction against each of these humanisms, into three phases. The first of these phases lasts from the mid 19th to the beginning of the 20th century and contains important antihumanist precursors like Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Saussure and Weber, who all engage in a critique of anthropocentric metaphysics. The second phase of the 1960s and 1970s is that of the antihumanists proper (Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and Lacan), which leads, finally, within the postmodern context of the 1970s and 1980s, to the third generation of antihumanism in the form of its popularisation. Among the proponents of the third phase Halliwell and Mousley include figures like Catherine Belsey, Geoffrey Bennington, Terence Hawkes, Christopher Norris, Peggy Kamuf, J. Hillis Miller and Paul Rabinow, who expose the “cardinal sins” of “Western metaphysics”: logocentrism, phallogentrism and anthropocentrism. As antidotes they propose the decentering of language, the subject and the liberal humanist world picture in general. Despite the curious anglocentrism of Halliwell and Mousley’s genealogy, their approach successfully problematises the monolithic view of humanism by locating a radical self-criticism already within the humanist tradition and, on this basis, by arguing for a non-normative, “post-foundational” humanism “that refuses to define the human” (9) and thus escapes the “tyranny of naming and quantifying the human” (10). Against the “reduction” of the human in the age of hypermodern, late capitalism, so-called “high theory” and the endless “plasticity of the human” Halliwell and Mousley propose a “grounded humanism” which opposes “alienation, depersonalisation and degradation” (10) of the human and humanity. Despite Halliwell and Mousley’s humanitarian reflex, however, it seems unlikely that the contemporary techno-savvy posthumanisation will have a lot of patience for such an attempt at rehumanising. This is why our standpoint implies a kind of

“alterhumanism”, rather than a rehumanisation, as antidote for some of the undeniably dehumanising tendencies within posthumanisation. However, projecting the inhumanity onto the “system” in order to preserve the principle of human(istic) freedom seems an illusion since “human” and “system” are thoroughly interrelated – humans create systems, which then “reproduce” or form humans as subjects or actors to guarantee the continuity of that system.

One has no choice but face the prospect of posthumanism if one is serious about a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism without giving in to the rehumanisation reflex, which does not really seem prepared to question all humanist foundations. This might be particularly relevant for postcolonial circles and the discussion about how best to deal with ethnic difference and modern racism. The particular concern is that the dissolution of a universalist notion of humanity would foster a return of old racisms in new form. As justified as this concern might be, it cannot lead to a renewal of a leftist radical humanism in the name of a Kantian cosmopolitan tradition as, for example, represented by John Sanbonmatsu (2004), who argues for, what he calls, “metahumanism”:

With the arrival of post-humanism we may fast be approaching the zero hour of the critical tradition. With the subject as such now placed *sous rature* (under erasure), but this time not merely by clever critics but by scientists who *literally* manipulate the stuff our dreams of ourselves are made of, even the poststructuralist project self-destructs, as deconstruction is rendered irrelevant by the *fragmentation* of the ontological unity *Dasein*. This may seem a trivial point, but critical theory is already dangerously in collusion with the final obliteration of all things ‘human’ by capital... Post-humanism

will have to be met forthrightly – with a return to ontology and the grounding of thought in a meaningful account of human being. (207)

A lot could be said about the problematic reference to Prospero in defence of “metahumanism”. Indeed, it would be quite wrong to idealise humanist universalism for the reasons outlined above. The universalist ideal of a common and irreducible humanity that underlies, for example, the legitimisation of any legislation against crimes against humanity has not succeeded in addressing the radical dehumanisation underlying the entire history of colonialism and its current legacy of global migration and multiculturalism (this is Belsey’s motif above). Neither has an essentialist notion of humanity prevented the Holocaust or other genocides since. In our view, the “perversion” of inhumanity is part of the logic of humanism itself. This is why a deconstruction of the humanist tradition has never been more important than today, i.e. in the face of a continued transformation of the human and of the humanistic question as such: what exactly constitutes the humanity of the human? It is precisely the connection between continuity, break and remembering that powers the dialectical drive, within humanism, between dehumanisation and rehumanisation. Only a deconstruction of humanism in its current globalised and technocultural posthumanist form and phase can unhinge this dialectic play and may eventually expose and disrupt it, provoking an opening towards a radically different, non-humanist, post-anthropocentric view.

From its tender beginnings in Greek and Roman Antiquity, to its neoplatonist and Christian early Europeanisation, Renaissance anthropocentrism, the Enlightenment and industrial and rational Modernity, up to the antihumanist phase in the 19th and 20th century and contemporary posthumanist age that includes the radically utopian stance represented by transhumanists, humanism has always

displayed a remarkable resistance and adaptability. It has overcome its theological and religious beginnings in the face of modern developments and challenges (science, evolution, psychoanalysis, existentialism, globalisation and technologisation) and has secularised (French Revolution), politicised (liberalism) and economised (capitalism) itself and has perpetuated itself as “common sense” on an international and arguably global level. In its name, wars have been and are being fought, as much as the world’s poor are being helped. Its educational values underlie the modern institution of the university. Its aesthetic shores up globalised Western culture. Its moral values do not cease to inspire promethean historical accounts of human self-aggrandisement *and* of humility, of good and evil of which the human in all his or her splendour *and* misery is capable and between which he or she constantly has to choose in order to overcome the suffering and the mortality the human shares with all the individuals of the species (and indeed with all known other species). Who could be so unfeeling as to not be touched by humanism’s “heroic” self-account. Nevertheless, it is precisely the humanistic self-indulgence and uncritical complacency that might drive a critical posthumanist towards “misanthropy” – out of care for the human and a future of and for the human, including his or her natural and cultural environment, for “who can fail to realize that the trope of misanthropy is the hope of society” (Cottom, 2006: 150). And this might be a justification for calling Shakespeare a posthumanist *avant-la-lettre*...

Notes:

¹ N. Katherine Hayles’s account of *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) centres on the history of cybernetics and its main metaphor,

information, with its associated “belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates” (1). Hayles traces this history throughout roughly the twentieth century by distinguishing three stages: “how information lost its body... how the cyborg was created as technological artefact and cultural icon... and how the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman” (2). It is the present essay’s and, indeed, the entire volume’s claim that this twentieth-century transformation from human to posthuman via (information) technology needs to be historically challenged and recontextualised.

² Like any other invention, the invention of the human would follow the logic analysed by Jacques Derrida in “Psyche: Inventions of the Other”, trans. Catherine Porter, in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, eds., *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 25-65. It would be impossible to give a short summary of what is a very complex and multilayered argument in Derrida’s essay. The fundamental “aporia” at the heart of the “invention of the new” is that it happens within an essential or “structural” double bind of impossibility and necessity. For an invention to be “new” it needs to happen outside the horizon of subjectivity. On the other hand, for an invention to be recognised and legitimated as such it needs an inventing subject (an “author”). This is why, strictly speaking a radically new invention would only be possible as an “invention of the other”. However, the fundamental undecidability remains: is the other “invented” (for example the inhuman by the human)? Or does the invention in fact come from the unknowable other (is the human the “effect” of a “repressed” and “older” form of alterity)? There is no way to decide. However, Derrida in this essay and throughout his work, shows that this undecidability underlies *and* threatens the entire history of metaphysical humanism. The present essay therefore uses the phrase “invention of the

inhuman” in a “deconstructive” sense to refer to the possibility of an entirely different, i.e. “posthumanist”, understanding of the human even “before” his/her/its “invention”.

³ Cf. Dollimore (1985: 10ff.).

⁴ While Coriolanus’s gradual “mechanisation” is an essential aspect of his tragic downfall, there is also a very strong link to comedy and laughter in “becoming machinic”. The key reference here is Henri Bergson’s *Le Rire – essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1910 [first 1900]). Bergson’s famous definition of the comical – “du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant” (39), a certain mechanicity and inflexibility (“raideur”) that covers the life-force (which, for the vitalist Bergson, is elasticity itself). A prime example of the comic dimension of increasing mechanisation of a character in Shakespeare – or a kind of early modern form of “cyborgisation” – is Shylock, whose discourse throughout acts 3 and 4 becomes increasingly repetitive, “stubborn” and “literal” (cf. below).

⁵ It would indeed be interesting to read Shylock’s Venetian “language memoir” and compare it to Derrida’s “Franco-Maghrebian” experience in France, in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1998), particularly the remarks on the forceful loss of accent and the idea of “hyperbolic purity” (pp. 45-48) Derrida associates with “enter[ing] French literature”. While Derrida’s “monolingualism of the other” refers to a total surrender of “one’s own” language as to that of the other, Shylock seems to speak the language of the other “as if it was his”, which, arguably, leads to his defeat, by language.

⁶ For Derrida, in fact, *The Merchant of Venice* is “the play of translation” as such. In “What Is a Relevant Translation?” Trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27

(2001): 183, Derrida says: “everything in the play can be retranslated into the code of translation and as a problem of translation... At every moment, translation is as necessary as it is impossible. It is the law; it even speaks the language of the law beyond the law, of the impossible law, represented by a woman who is disguised, transfigured, converted, travestied, read *translated*, into a man of the law. As if the subject of this play were, in short, the task of the translator, his impossible task, his duty, his debt, as inflexible as it is unpayable.” It could be said that it is Portia, disguised as Balthazar, who plays the role of the inventor of the inhuman as and within the law, and who “sets into motion the *difference* of the other” (Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other”, p. 61). The law, coded in one specific language, has always already “translated” justice – a “madness” or injustice at the very heart of the law (and language; cf. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 10) that affects both the Christians in Venice and Shylock, the Jew, however, in very different ways, of course.

⁷ *The Merchant of Venice* 3.1.56-57, used edition: *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. M.M.Mahood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 110.

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