

The Base and Superstructure in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract

Thomas Caryot offers a description of late 16th and early 17th century Venice in detail. The city here appears as an unrivaled metropolitan centre of business and commerce, where Capital comes forward to shape, control and dominate the socio-cultural life. In order to prevail upon the opposite culture, it marks Shylock as ugly capitalist, but eventually itself gets exposed, as the charge against him in the play, is not of practicing usury, but his detachment from it. Even Antonio early in the play, recognizes that Shylock's condition for loan, as far as finance rule is concerned, has nothing objectionable and has to welcome it. The conditions with which, Shylock is finally released from the court, also expose the arrogance of the Christian world. The article finds out Capital to be the chief factor, introducing a dominant cultural hegemony in order to safeguard itself from cross cultural economic challenges and to overcome corresponding resistance.

Keywords:

Capital, shape, control and dominate, opposite culture, ugly capitalist, dominant cultural hegemony, resistance.

I

Thomas Coryat in his travelogue, *Crudities* ¹ has made an elaborate description of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Venice, which with its various aspects, provide a unique socio-economic background behind the making of Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*. The analysis of that background, which is undertaken here, intends not only to reveal the mechanism of the economic context, that gives birth to the dynamics of basic cultural difference between the Christian Merchant and the Jewish Usurer, the central theme of the play, but also to suggest the inevitability of its overwhelming influence upon the playwright, who could but fashion his dramatic superstructure only as per the dictate of the base.

II

Coryat's description offers a grand image of stately Venice, which had been the centre of all commercial and mercantile enterprises of the then Europe. First comes the city in its full glory:

The City is divided in the midst by a goodly fair channel, which they call *Canal* are situated on ... both sides of this chanel [which] are adorned with many sumptuous and magnificent palaces that stand very near to the water and make a very glorious and beautiful show. For many of them are a great height- three or four stories high- most being built with brick and some with fair freestone. Besides they are adorned with a great multitude of stately pillars made partly of white

stone and partly of Istrian marble.

Venice is affluent. Its palaces are sumptuous, magnificent and glorious. They have great height and are adorned with a 'multitude of stately pillars', built with white stone and marble. It is evident that Venice has already acquired a sound financial health and stability, trade and commerce being its steady source of resource. Coryat provides its immediate evidence:

There is only one bridge to go over the great channel... This bridge is commonly called Ponte de Rialto, and is the fairest bridge by many degrees for one arch that ever I saw, read or heard of. For it is reported that it cost about fourscore thousand crowns, which do make four and twenty thousand pound sterling.

Only Venice can venture it, four and twenty thousand pound sterling for a little bridge that jumps over a small canal of forty paces in breadth, on one arch. The jump of the bridge, indeed, symbolizes the jump of Venice into Capitalist economy. Again Coryat's description substantiates this view:

The Rialto, which is at the farther side of the bridge as you come from St. Mark's, is a most stately building, being the Exchange of Venice, where the Venetian gentlemen and the merchants do meet twice a day, betwixt eleven and twelve of the clock in the morning and betwixt five and six of the clock in the afternoon.... In one of the higher rooms which belongeth only to the state, there is kept wondrous abundance of treasure.

This 'wondrous abundance of treasure' then, is the capital and guiding force in Venice, that has already fixed its operational system, and no one, not even the gentlemen and merchants are allowed to disobey it. Like a true metropolitan city, Venice has its cultural variance, diverse people of diverse fashion do meet here, and it is noteworthy that, as Coryat marks, the meeting point is the market place:

The fairest place of all the city... is the Piazza, that is the market place of St. Mark.... Here you may both see all manner of fashions of attire, and hear all the languages of Christendom, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous ethnics, the frequency of people being so great twice a day, betwixt six of the clock in the morning and eleven and again betwixt five in the afternoon and eight that (as an elegant writer saith of it) a man may very properly call it rather *orbis* than *urbis forum*-that is, a market place of the world, not of the city.

Venice is then the meeting point where money, flowing in from four corners, gets accumulated to make the 'wondrous abundance of treasure' which then turns into finance capital and voyages to the horizon in order to rule the world. Of course it does not mean that, capital is less interested to control the home country. Home it rules no doubt, and captures and ravages in divergent ways and processes. It has its own inbuilt operational strategy and sets up the luring traps of consumerism that leads to corruption and Man, in the long run, having been gradually dehumanized, turns into mere slave, yielding under ever increasing grind and pressure more profit and more capital for capitalism. He knows he is getting ruthlessly exploited. But he loses fast his ability to resist, and gradually makes it his habit to endure all. Then he runs by the force of the habit. He gets systematized, as, we shall see later, had been the case of Jessica in the play. Coryat does offer this dark picture of Venice, in his description, when he refers to the boatmen, ferrying in the canal:

There are in Venice thirteen ferries or passage, which they commonly call *traghetti*, where passengers may be transported in a gondola to what place of the city they will....But the boatmen that attend at this ferry are the most vicious and licentious varlets about all the city. For if a stranger entereth into one of their gondolas and doth not presently tell them whither he will go, they will incontinently carry him of their own accord to a religious house [like *Hamlet's* nunnery, evidently a brothel] forsooth, where his plumes shall be well pulled before he cometh forth again.

The boatmen belong to the common working class multitude and his sinful venture after money testifies the deep root of snaring capital in Venetian society. But Coryat has more to describe:

Amongst many other things that moved great admiration in me in Venice, this was not the least-to consider the marvelous affluence and exuberancy of all things tending to the sustentation [sustaining] of man's life. For albeit they have neither meadows nor pastures nor arable grounds near their city (which is a matter impossible because it is seated in the sea and distinguished with such a multitude of channels) to yield them corn and victuals, yet they have as great abundance (a thing very strange to be considered) of victuals, corn and fruits of all sorts whatsoever, as many city, I think of Italy.

The abundance is not only for business, but for consumption as well. Venice consumes, Venice lusts, Venice cheats, -Venice runs in a steady and gradual pace to dehumanization. Coryat completes the conversion:

I observed one thing in Venice that I utterly condemned: that if two men should fight together as sharp openly in the streets, whereas a great company will suddenly flock together about them, all of them will give them leave to fight till their hearts ache, or till they welter in their own blood, but not one of them hath the honesty to part them, and keep them asunder from spilling each other's blood. Also if one of the two should be slain, they will not offer to apprehend him that slew the other, except the person slain be a gentleman of the city, but suffer him to go at random whither he list, without inflicting any punishment upon him.

This is quite normal, for this is the inevitable offshoot of the dynamics of Commerce and emerging capitalism. Venice has no law to prevent this bloodshed. Capital is its law and its judge as well, to determine who will suffer and who will not ('except the person slain be a gentleman of the city...'). It is the nature of capital that on one hand, it constantly instigates man to consume more and more, thus to be enslaved under one's own insatiable, ever expanding demand and lust, without any power to resist. On the other, captivating him in this way into the prison house of his own greed, it makes him the selfish dwarf, detached and careless of the external world and its living, flowing humanism. Man, to capitalism, is important not as man but as a consumer, a purchaser, who in order to enhance his purchasing capacity, continually runs after money and grabs and extracts whatever can be extracted, the surplus,- by hook or crook. The state legislature, administration and Judiciary all get attuned to support this venture of capital, to ensure the domination of the powerful over the weak and powerless. In Merchant of Venice, Antonio is the powerful, extending his dominance over Shylock, the less powerful. Distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism in spatial terms, Ania Loomba comments:

... imperialism or neo-imperialism [is] the phenomenon that

originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Thus the imperial country is the 'metro pole' from which power flows....²

Shakespeare touches the point when Antonio's ships, all full of diverse merchandise, are reported to break the waves in the sea in their venture to make business and whatever else they like, in the outer world. Further development of that issue will be traced in later plays, in *Tempest* for example. In *Merchant of Venice*, the focal point is what happens at home, that is, in the metropolis itself, which is interested in, as Loomba suggests, 'domination and control'. And Antonio, the representative merchant of Venice, the metropolis, begins the play with the acquired advantage of his capital. He is already the Merchant.

Whatever attempt some critics may make³, Antonio cannot be seen as the representative of declining aristocracy, striving desperately to carry on its last battle against Shylock's capitalistic enterprise. His three ships may be in the sea, but by virtue of those which have already returned home, before the beginning of the play, he is a Merchant, and his power and capital continue to rise. At the end of the play, even those three ships return with full wealth. "Shylock, by contrast", as Walter Cohen explains, "is a figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval. Shakespeare's Jacobean tragic villains-Iago, Edmund, Macbeth and Augustus-are all younger men bent on destroying their elders. Shylock is almost the reverse, an old man with obsolete values, trying to arrest the course of history"⁴. His conflict with Antonio should be seen as a special instance of the struggle, widespread in Europe 'between Jewish quasifeudal fiscalism and native bourgeois mercantilism, in which the indigenous forces usually, prevailed'⁵.

That 'native bourgeois mercantilism' does prevail upon opposition culture, and under its guise Capital itself ensures its monopoly, is again substantiated by Coryat in his description of Venice. Power indeed flows from Venice, the Metropolis, to dominate and control the economy of Ghetto, an island, inclosed round about with water, "where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together":

...few of them [the Jews] in Italy are converted to the Christian religion. For this I understand is the main impediment to their conversion: all their goods are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity, and this I heard is the reason-because whereas many of them do raise their fortunes by usury, insomuch as they do sometimes not only shear but also flay many a poor Christian's estate by their gripping extortion, it is therefore decreed by the Pope and other free princes in whose territories they live that they shall make a restitution of all their ill-gotten goods, and so dislog their souls and consciences when they are admitted by holy baptism into the bosom of Christ's Church. Seeing, then, when their goods are taken from them at their conversion they are left even naked and destitute of their means of maintenance, there are fewer Jews converted to Christianity in Italy than in any other country of Christendom.

The Christian world, obviously is at daggers drawn against the Jewish usury and Shylock its banner career is emphatically marked as the embodiment of Capitalism, for his ugly lending business. But it is

interesting to note that so long Shylock's usury did not disturb Antonio, the Venetian Merchant, directly, nothing was specifically said against his business policy, though he, as usual, was spitted and called a dog for being a Jew. Shylock did his business under Venetian law and did trap his defaulters by existing Venetian law. Venice never called this illegal, because it derived huge interest from the Jews. Walter Cohen points out the historical reality behind:

Not only did the Government bar Jewish usurers from the city, it also forced the Jews community to staff and finance low-interest, non-profit lending institutions that served the Christian poor. Funding was primarily derived from the involuntary donations of Jewish merchants active in the Levantine trade. The Jews of Venice, thus contributed to the early development of Capitalism not as usurers but as merchants involved in an international, trans European economic net-work... the public Christian banks on which the Jewish loan houses of Venice were modeled drew most of their assets from interest bearing deposits by the late sixteenth Century.⁶

What is more, when Shylock in *Merchant of Venice* has been challenged, the charge against him is not of practicing usury, but his detachment from it. Usury is generally abhorred as "it computes a charge above the principal from the moment of the loan", whereas even the Christians do not hate interest which "is never due but from the appointed day of payment forward"⁷. Even Antonio immediately recognizes that Shylock's condition for loan, as far as finance rule is concerned, has nothing objectionable and he willingly welcomes it:

Shylock: This kindness will I show:
 Go with me to a notary: seal me there
 Your single bond, and in a merry sport,
 If you repay me not on such a day
 In such a place, such sum or sums as are
 Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
 Be nominated for an equal pound
 Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
 In what part of your body pleaseth me.
 Antonio: Content in faith: I'll seal to such a bond

And say there is much kindness in the Jew. (1, 3, 42-52)⁸

Yet when it happens so that Shylock's design, assisted by fate, entraps Antonio legally in his bond and threats to take revenge against Venice and its Merchant and his accumulated Capital and its vicious and monopolist power play, opposing, uprooting every possible resistance, Venice itself, empowered by that Capital, comes forward in rescue operation for Antonio and somehow manages to put down Shylock and his resistance. For, Portia's rule of no drop of blood, may suffice to appease quarreling children, much in the same way as myth and fairy/folk tale work, but it is so unconvincing and devoid of legal points that it bounces back in simple deconstructive analysis, to expose the hidden noose of Capitalism, its manifold schemes and cunning to mute and muffle resistance. To add insult to the cut, Antonio is asked by the Court to show mercy to Shylock, and he readily grabs the opportunity to reward first the man who stole his [Shylock's] daughter. Then in addition to that he offers two conditions in lieu of the death sentence, passed against Shylock:

- Antonio: Two things provided more: that for this favor
 He presently become a Christian;
 The other that he do record a gift
 Here in the court of all he dies possessed
 Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.
- Duke: He shall do this or else I do recant
 The pardon that I late pronounced here. (4, 1, 397-403)⁹

Quite a number of interesting things occur in these lines. First, the duke's ready agreement to Antonio's proposal shows the real power of Capital over state power. (It is Antonio or his Capital, that determines what is to be done with Shylock. Even Portia, the Savior, is not allowed to decide. Her duty was to save Antonio, to release Capital from the grip of law. Now Capital will make law, and the ruler, along with the lawyers will simply applaud.) Then, Jessica, along with her husband Lorenzo, has been lured to the hope that after her father's death, they will be allowed to consume Shylock's property¹⁰. And finally, it is most interesting that Shylock has not been given the death sentence. No Christ but Capitalism itself showed that pity, for, Capitalism does not consider it wise to kill Shylock. It is more interested to kill his resistance, that is, to convert him forcefully, so that as Coryat's report showed earlier, it will be possible to rob him of everything, to leave him "even naked and destitute of [all]... means of maintenance". Death may be welcome to him, but if he is compelled to offer his everything as 'gift' to the man who particularly, stole his daughter and thus dishonoured not only him but also his fore fathers and his entire race, if he lives but lives helpless, unable to re open his usury business and trouble the Merchant's authority, then only can he get his lesson. No other Shylock then, will ever venture to disturb any other Antonio and his gentlemanliness, his commerce and Capital, dedicated to the *service* of mankind, in general!

III

Only one thing remains left to point out in conclusion that, the mechanism of the plot of *Merchant of Venice* thus, arises not from any fiction but out of the very character and historical reality of 16th century Venice itself, out of its emerging capitalist economy and commercial enterprises. It is embedded in and between the lines of Coryat's '*Description of Venice*'.

Notes

1. The excerpt, "*Description of Venice*" has been taken from this book (London, 1611), and published as an essay in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, 2006, New York: pp.114-121. All subsequent textual quotations of the play are also taken from this edition.
2. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, New York: First Indian Reprint.2007, p.12.
3. See Cohen. Walter, *The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism*, *English Literary History*, 49 (1982), 765-89, reprinted in *New Casebooks, The Merchant of Venice*, ed.by. Martin Coyle, London: 1998, pp45-72.
4. See Cohen, p.51, Barber, p.191, Frye, p.98
5. For fiscalism versus mercantilism see Cohen, p.51, Wallerstein, pp. 137-38 and 149. "Both the characterization and the outcome of *The Merchant of Venice* mark Antonio as the harbinger of modern capitalism. By guaranteeing an honourable reputation as well as a secure and absolute title to private property, the exemption of the Italian merchant-financier from the stigma of usury provided a necessary spur to the

- expansion of the new system." See for details, Nelson, "The usurer and the Merchant Prince", qtd. in Cohen, p. 51.
6. See Cohen, p.50.
 7. Mosse, F2r. Tawney, *Religion*, pp.43-44 elaborates on this point. Consult also W.H.Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, New York: Vintage, 1968, pp.227-28. Auden demands that Shylock does not demand usury.
 8. *The Merchant of Venice*, Norton, p. 16. It is true that, when after all these, Shylock still goes for his demand of a pound of flesh; he seems to behave like a devil. But it is better to see this as Shakespeare's indebtedness to the folk lore sources of the play (see Barber, p. 169). For, when in spite of becoming a money lender, Shylock refuses to free Antonio from his bond in return for any repayment, "No not for Venice", he behaves irrationally and not like the Shylock of this play but like a folk lore Shylock, preferring myth to business.
 9. *ibid*, p.63-64
 10. So that, imprisoned as she will be in her consumption, the seed of revenge or further resistance will never germinate in her bosom.

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P. Raja

If Only There is a Gate...

I have heard of
Gate to Heaven.
Gate to Hell is
Quite familiar to me.
Surely, I know
Where I will go one day.

No one talks of
Gate to sky.
Certainly I have not
Heard of one such gate
When the sky really needs
one.

At night,
Sitting solo in my terrace
And looking up
I see stars countless
Lying pell-mell
Enticingly and winking
Without a break.

Perhaps they need a hug.
My kiss to them
May be soul-gratifying.

Poor me! I do not know
How to reach them.
If only there is a gate...

