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# Shakespeare's Awareness of Emblem and Allegory

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## SHAKESPEARE'S AWARENESS OF EMBLEM AND ALLEGORY

Manfred DRAUDT

Ever since the publication of Anne Righter's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962) and the following vogue of metacritical studies<sup>1</sup> we have become very much aware that Shakespeare is a conscious artist – conscious of his media (language<sup>2</sup> and theatre) and of his profession as poet-dramatist. Shakespeare's plays abound in self-referential allusions<sup>3</sup>, which give evidence not only of his concern with his own profession but also of his unusually ironical stance towards it<sup>4</sup>.

A case in point is the portrait of the Poet in the first scene of *Timon of Athens*. Together with a painter, this Poet seeks the patronage of the noble Athenian, and we meet him while he is intent on composing «some dedication/To the great lord» (19) – possibly not unlike the young Shakespeare, who dedicated his early poetry to a well-to-do aristocrat in the hope of reward.

This Poet describes his verses as «a rough [i.e. unpolished] work» (43), «a thing» which «slipped idly», i.e. carelessly, from him (20). Yet his apparent modesty soon reveals itself as thinly disguised pretentiousness. And his unsolicited flight of fancy is met by incomprehension on the part of the Painter : «How shall I understand you ?» (52), i.e. «What do you mean ?», he asks, almost dumbfounded. The Poet continues by giving a tedious description of the allegory he has written, and this receives a tellingly curt reply from the Painter :

*A thousand moral paintings I can show  
That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune's  
More pregnantly than words (93-95).*

As well as exposing satirically the Poet's fanciful verbosity, this brief passage reminds us that Shakespeare, a poet and dramatist himself, was very much aware of the power of the visual arts in general, and especially of the significance of allegory and emblem. The «moral paintings», whose «eloquence» the Painter praises, are surely meant to be allegorical pictures.

Whereas the great names in painting left little impression on his work<sup>5</sup>

– «that rare Italian master, Giulio Romano» is mentioned in *The Winter's Tale* (V. 2. 97) but mistaken for a sculptor –, Shakespeare appears to have been thoroughly familiar with the popular emblem books of his time, and he undoubtedly shared with his contemporaries their «deep-rooted taste for allegory»<sup>6</sup>. By bridging the gap between «the speaking picture», i.e. poetry, on the one hand, and «the dumb poem», i.e. painting, on the other, the emblem books served as ideal stimuli for Shakespeare's vivid creative imagination. When referring in his plays directly or obliquely to emblematic representations, he could always be sure of his audience's familiarity with allegorical meanings and implications.

His use of emblems ranges from the purely decorative to total integration into, and thus substantial contribution to, a play's meaning. I shall try to illustrate this with four examples. The first of these is from *Twelfth Night*. Viola, who finds herself in the paradoxical situation of serving the man she loves in the (male) guise of Cesario, suffers from unrequited love for Duke Orsino. She thinly disguises her own situation by telling the Duke a story which begins with the words: «*My father had a daughter loved a man*» (II. 4. 106). This «daughter», «*who never told her love, ... pined in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy, / She sat like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief*»<sup>7</sup>.

This image immediately conjures up in the minds of the audience the picture of a lady who attempts to persevere against hardships (symbolized by a rock or a monument) by maintaining a tranquil mind, i.e. by «*smiling at grief*».

The emblem here seems to have little more than a decorative function, yet Shakespeare places it prominently in a context that is charged with dramatic irony. For Duke Orsino, to whom the speech is addressed, is – in contrast to the audience in the theatre – totally unaware that the image of the loving yet patiently suffering young lady is meant to refer to the teller of the tale rather than to the character in the story.

Although it seems to have escaped the attention of editors, the emblem of patience recurs in *Measure for Measure*, where it contributes substantially to the characterization of Mariana<sup>8</sup>. Being a rather shadowy figure with only three brief appearances in the play, she leaves comparatively little impression on the audience. It has gone unnoticed that Shakespeare consistently portrays her as a figure from romance and as an exemplum of long-suffering patience. She has lost not only a «*noble and renowned brother*» but with him her dowry, and hence her affianced husband (see III. 1. 220 ff.); and she has to wait for five long years before she can rightfully claim her knavish husband:

*Noble Prince,...*  
*I am affianced this man's wife, as strongly*  
*As words could make up vows....*  
*He knew me as a wife. As this is true*  
*Let me in safety raise me from my knees,*  
*Or else for ever be confixed here,*

*A marble monument*

(V. 1. 223-32) [my italics].

By suggesting that she will turn into a «marble monument», Mariana, as well as dramatically supporting her plea to the Duke, reminds us that she has endured her lot stoically. However, the emblem which neatly sums up Mariana's virtuous character is not only associated with her in this particular situation but also implicitly underlies the Duke's earlier description of the poor young lady (III. 1. 225-40). Repeated references to her tears and her loneliness underline how nobly she has borne her grief; «*she yet wears [her own lamentation] for his sakes'*» and she «*hath yet in her the continuance of her first affection*» emphasize her constancy, which is another integral aspect of patience. But the familiar emblem is evoked most strongly by the description of Angelo as «*a marble to her tears*», for the stone here again unmistakably symbolizes the hardships against which patience can persevere<sup>9</sup>.

In my third example, with which we return to the beginning of *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare's use of an emblem is also rather complex. As well as characterizing the affectation and wordiness of its teller, the allegorical story of the Poet in *Timon* not only reflects ironically his own situation as petitioner but also anticipates the action of the play. In his verbal picture the Poet describes a happy man, whose «lobbies» (82) are filled with flatterers feeding his illusion of greatness; however, «*when Fortune in her shift and change of mood! Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants... let him fall<sup>10</sup> down, / Not one accompanying his declining foot*». This is a clear foreshadowing of Timon's fate.

Here, as in *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*, the emblem is used for yet another purpose, namely dramatic economy. Since Shakespeare could firmly rely upon his audience's familiarity with emblems, allusions to allegorical levels of meaning served as a kind of dramatic shorthand, recalling in the minds of the audience what we today might call archetypal situations.

In the last and most extended of my examples, the «shorthand», whose full meaning would have been obvious to Elizabethan audiences, has again been obscured by the fact that many twentieth-century spectators – as well as critics – appear to be cut off from the emblematic heritage. A proper appreciation of allegorical implications can, however, contribute substantially to a fuller understanding of the dramatic characters, structures and meaning of a play.

The play that most needs re-examination in the light of emblematic and allegorical levels of meaning is *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>11</sup>. As Graham Midgley points out, «*the problem of the Merchant of Venice has always been its unity, and most critical discussions take this as the centre of their argument, asking what is the relative importance of its two plots and how Shakespeare contrives to interweave them into a unity*»<sup>12</sup>; «*The Jessica plot*», too, has been criticized as «*a perversely extraneous element in [the] story [which] does not serve any useful purpose*»<sup>13</sup>.

There is, however, one particular theme in the play – the allegorical theme of Fortune - which, by its various emblematic associations, provides a strong unifying element, firmly linking the bond story with the casket story and with the Lorenzo-Jessica strand of action. The key to a proper understanding of the comedy seems to lie in the play's main source, Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone*, which is, at least on one level, an allegory of man's quest for Fortune. Giannetto, the model for Bassanio, is determined to «*become a rich man*», and he is «*resolved to seek his fortune elsewhere*». Furnished with «*a very fine ship*», Giannetto is attracted by a «*beautiful lady*», who seems to be intended as a personification of Fortune. She is said to have ruined many men, to reward lavishly those who are able to conquer her, but to wreck others who fail to do so. The name of her place of residence, «*Belmonte*», confirms this identification, because Fortune was widely believed to reside on a beautiful place on a mountain-top. Giannetto cannot resist the temptation of trying his luck with her, yet loses his «*ship and everything in it*»<sup>14</sup>.

The consistent frame of reference to the sea, to the wind and storm, to ships and to shipwreck, all of which are traditional attributes of Fortune, confirms the prominence of this allegorical theme in Ser Giovanni's story – as well as in Shakespeare's play.

We find the typical Renaissance concept of Fortuna, as presented by Machiavelli, for example. She is an attractive but elusive lady, sought after particularly by spirited young men, who pay little attention to safety but with boldness try to master her. Giannetto conforms to this concept: ruining his godfather, «*the greatest and richest of Christian merchants*», he insists on «*venturing forth again*» according to the motto «*I shall not be satisfied until I have regained what I have lost*». Although his risky action involves borrowing ten thousand ducats from a Jew and thus hazarding the life of his godfather, he finally succeeds in conquering the Lady.

The Renaissance idea that a daring man is able to conquer Fortune supplies one of the keys for a proper understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*; and the exceptionally large number of references to «*fortune*», «*hazard*», and «*venture*» surely suggest a deliberate emphasis upon this theme<sup>15</sup>.

Bassanio, who has been blamed by many critics for being a mere «*fortune-hunter*», turns out to be exactly this, but in a different and strictly literal sense. Like his model in the Italian source, who has lost not only his own possessions but also those of his generous benefactor, Bassanio is in «*great debts*», yet persistent and bold enough to try his luck again. The determination of his model in the Italian source characterizes the motivation of Bassanio. His speech in Act One, Scene One, which has been criticized by Quiller-Couch as «*some windy nonsense about shooting a second arrow after a lost one*»<sup>16</sup>, reflects the typical Renaissance spirit in the approach towards Fortune:

*In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft,  
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight*

*The self-same way, with more advised watch,  
To find the other forth ; and by adventuring both  
I oft found both.*

(I. 1. 140)<sup>17</sup>.

Though following his source material faithfully in spirit, Shakespeare altered it to suit his dramatic purposes. Portia, for example, is not simply an abstract personification of Fortune – sought after by suitors from all over the world – but, particularly in the first scenes of the play and in the exchanges with Nerissa and her wooers, a fully characterized heroine, both graceful and witty, clever and tender-hearted. Whereas in the Italian source the Lady herself was the maker of the law to which her suitors are subject, Portia, like her wooers and, indeed, most characters of the play, is also exposed to the caprice of Fortune though «*the bond of obligation to her father*», «*the lott'ry of my destiny! Bars me the right of voluntary choosing*», she complains to Nerissa (II. i, 15-16).

Her various suitors, who all see their wooing in terms of a venture, exemplify characteristically different attitudes towards Fortune. Morocco's vision of Fortune is that of a false and fickle goddess, who «*on account of her perverse nature, ... showers her favors on the undeserving*»<sup>18</sup>. He fears that

*...the greater throw  
May turn by fortune from the weaker hand.  
[And] so may I, blind Fortune leading me,  
Miss that which one unworthier may attain.*

(II. i, 33-37)

Morocco is undeserving, because he is easily blinded by mere appearances and because his interests are purely materialistic :

*...men that hazard all  
Do it in hope of fair advantages.  
A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross ;  
I'll then nor give nor hazard aught for lead.*

(II. vii, 18-21)

The next suitor, Arragon, is similarly egoistic. He not only tries to cozen fortune (II. 9, 38) but also believes that good fortune may be earned by merit, and he is overweeningly confident :

*I will assume desert. Give me the key for this [casket],*

*And instantly unlock my fortunes here.*

(II. ix, 51-52)

What he finds in the casket is, however, not Portia's portrait but that «*of a blinking idiot*». To both Morocco and Arragon, who love primarily for gain or glory, Fortune – or Portia – appears fair but proves foul.

Bassanio's «*humility and search for the truth behind appearances*»<sup>19</sup> contrasts strongly with the presumption of the first two wooers. Bassanio's venture begins under promising auspices ; for the remark that he «*presently will go aboard... [since] the wind is come about*» (II. vi, 64-65) signifies to an audience familiar with allegorical representations of Fortune that the capable man is seizing the occasion, a favourable wind being traditionally associated with good luck. Portia's warm welcome of Bassanio suggests her sympathy and love for him :

*I pray you tarry, pause a day or two  
Before you hazard, for in choosing wrong  
I lose your company. ...  
One half of me is yours, the other half yours,  
Mine own I would say ; but if mine then yours,  
And so all yours.*

(III. ii, 1-21)

This warm welcome culminates in her identification of Bassanio with Hercules. His hazardous choice is thus linked with that of the mythological hero, who successfully conquered Fortune by conquering himself. In contrast to the previous suitors, Bassanio shows not only determination when confronted with the crucial test<sup>20</sup> but also the necessary amount of prudence : «*ornament is but the guiled shore / To a most dangerous sea*» (97-98), he remarks. By combining «*virtù*», i.e. flexibility and boldness, with Opportunity, i.e. with potentially favourable circumstances, Bassanio is ideally equipped for successfully conquering Fortune. Like Hercules, who preferred Virtus to the allurements of Voluptas<sup>21</sup>, he is «*moved*» by the «*paleness*» of «*meagre lead / Which rather threaten[s] than do[es] promise aught*» (III, ii, 104-106). Having «*given and hazarded all he hath*» for his love (even if, as in the source, this «*all*» has been borrowed from a generous benefactor), Bassanio reaps a rich reward both emotionally and materially.

By hazarding all for a stranger and offering her wealth for the rescue of his friend, Portia acts in principle very much like Bassanio, who «*by choosing lead... is doing for love ... What Antonio in his different way has done for him*»<sup>22</sup>. Yet these three characters are by no means the only ones in the play who illustrate the theme of giving and hazarding. Since his «*fortune*» likewise depends upon the casket choice, Gratiano submits to essentially the same risk as his friend ; and Jessica may



be mentioned as yet another pertinent example. She risks everything for the young man who has promised to marry her – her security, her reputation, and her honour – and she literally gives all (including the jewels she took from her father's home). For Jessica and Lorenzo, the seizing of Occasio is of as crucial importance as it is for Bassanio; and their right moment comes when the watchful Shylock has gone out to sup with the Christians: «*if my Fortune be not crost*» says Jessica, «*I have a father, you a daughter lost*» (II. 5. 54).

Even Launcelot Gobbo, another of Shylock's dependants, can be counted among those who "hazard all". Like Jessica, he runs away from the Jew, and like Bassanio, he - metaphorically - chooses lead instead of gold, «*leav[ing] a rich Jew's service to become / The follower of so poor a gentleman*» (II. ii, 136-37).

In the Antonio-Shylock action the theme of Fortune is evoked primarily by emblematic and allegorical allusions. Like Wenceslas Hollar in his engraving of "Fortune as Storm", Shakespeare appears to have identified Fortune with wind and the dangerous sea. Edgar Wind points out that «*the vicissitudes of Chance were so firmly associated with the notion of Storm*» that «*Fortuna appears literally as Storm personified*»<sup>23</sup>. This comment illuminates the opening conversation in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is strongly suggestive of the power and fickleness of Fortune. The vivid images of the "tossing... ocean", of «*shallows and ... flats*», of «*dangerous rocks*» and «*roaring waters*», as well as references to "ventures" and to the «*harm a wind too great might do at sea*» (I. i, 8-36) powerfully evoke an image of the vicissitudes of life, of which men, and merchants in particular, ought to be aware. Antonio's «*denial... of any fear of misfortune suggests his [mistaken] faith in fortune and in the stability of her wandering wheel*»<sup>24</sup>. The same blind trust is obvious in his dealings with his enemy Shylock, particularly in the scene where he seals the bond: «*Why fear not, man*», he consoles Bassanio, «*Within these two months... I do expect return / Of thrice three times the value of the bond*' (I.3.149). Hence Antonio foolishly ignores the manifold risks involved, just as he does the fact that 'all[his] fortunes are at sea' (I. i., 177). Shylock, who, in contrast, dramatically exaggerates these risks («*ships are but boards... and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks*» (I. 3. 21), he argues slyly), regrettably proves to be right in the end.

As the title of the play suggests, Antonio's fall precipitated by his hubris, his ruin caused by the blind trust in the safety of his ships as well as in Shylock's "kindness", is central to action and meaning of the play. It is at the trial, at the moment when both his possessions and life seem to be lost, that Antonio learns to acknowledge the power of Fortune. As a model of true Christian patience he not only humbly endures Fortune's blows but also welcomes death as a liberation from her malevolent caprice: «*Fortune show herself more kind [to me now]*», he says, because «*she doth cut me off... from [the] lingering penance / Of [my] misery*» (IV. 1. 264).

Yet Antonio is by no means the only character whose career is geared to the

wheel of Fortune. Shylock is an even more striking example of hubris leading to nemesis. Displaying overweening pride during most of the trial, he is completely shattered by the end of the scene. Gratiano's sarcastic parody of the Jew<sup>25</sup> focuses our attention upon the principle or peripeteia, of sudden reversal of situation, when Shylock's intended revenge falls back upon himself. The career of the Jew, who appears as a victim of Fortune's caprice, follows the traditional *de casibus* pattern, which is exemplified in comments such as Buckingham's : «*false Fortune when I suspected least / Did turn the wheel*». This unexpected turning of the wheel, which reminds the audience of the precariousness of the human condition, necessarily enlists some sympathy for the victim, so that Shylock, in spite of being the villain of the play, approaches almost tragic stature at the moment of his defeat.

The fundamental similarities in the pattern of the fates of the two antagonists link their lots, as does the fact that both experience misfortune and suffer grievous losses at the very same moment ; the rumour of Antonio's shipwreck coincides exactly with the news of Jessica's flight (III.1. 89).

At the trial scene it seems that Portia, too, implies some kind of identity between the two opponents by her question : «*Which is the merchant here ? And which the Jew ?*» (IV. i, 171). This puzzling detail, which is difficult to explain in an exclusively realistic reading of the scene, sheds an interesting light upon the role and function of Portia. Particularly in relation to Shylock, with whom she seems to play capriciously, initially raising his hopes by taking his part only to cast him down and finally to deprive him of all his possessions, Portia appears as a kind of personified Fortune, or Nemesis. Her temporary inability – or deliberate refusal – to distinguish between Antonio and Shylock might therefore be suggestive of her impartiality, which is a traditional attribute of Fortune<sup>26</sup>.

Not only with Shylock does Portia act the part of personified Fortune ; to Antonio too, who confesses «*You have given me life and living*» (V. i, 286), she appears as a kind of goddess mysteriously controlling the fates of other people. Significantly it is Portia who brings Antonio the unexpected good news that his ships, and hence his wealth, are restored. Welcoming him to Belmont, she tells him of the «*strange accident*» by which «*three of his argosies / Are richly come to harbour suddenly*» (V. 1. 273). The frequent association and identification of Portia with Fortune is corroborated by Shakespeare's emphasis upon the name Belmont. The fact that he retained this name, which he found in the Italian source, strongly suggests that he was very much aware of its allegorical significance as Fortune's dwelling place. The Poet's allegory in the first scene of *Timon of Athens* (referred to above) confirms that Shakespeare himself associated, and possibly expected his audience to associate, Belmont (literally : «*a beautiful mountain*») with the residing place of Fortune. In *Timon of Athens* the Poet explained to the Painter :

*Sir, I have upon a high and pleasant hill  
Feign'd Fortune to be thron'd.*

Not only the Poet but also the Painter in his reply establishes a close link between "*Fortune*" and "*mount*"<sup>27</sup>.

Critics have rightly emphasized that Shakespeare's allusions to the visual arts and to allegorical levels of meaning are sometimes contradictory, inconsistent, and vague<sup>28</sup>; yet by treating these materials «*in a manner farthest removed from the dictates of the academically-schooled mind*»<sup>29</sup>, Shakespeare was able to transform a popular heritage so as to suit his own dramatic and poetic intentions. A renewed awareness of the traditions of allegory and emblem, which formed an integral part of Shakespeare's background, can surely contribute to a fuller understanding of his plays.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Michael Shapiro's review article «Role-Playing, Reflexivity, and Metadrama in Recent Shakespearean Criticism», *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 12, (1981), 145-61.
- 2 See, for example, Keir Elam's *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language-Games in the Comedies* (Cambridge, 1984).
- 3 Compare, for example, Jaques' «*Nay then God buy you, an you talk in blank verse*» (*As You Like It* IV.1. 31), and Fabian's «*If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as improbable fiction*» (*Twelfth Night* III. 4. 121).
- 4 See the description of the poet in *A Midsummer Night's dream*, who is compared by Theseus to «*The lunatic*» and «*The lover*» (V.1.8).
- 5 The only great painter who may have left a trace in his work is Titian; he possibly inspired the following passage from *Venus and Adonis* (811-14):  

*With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace  
Of those fair arms which bound him to her breast  
And homeward through the dark laund runs apace;  
Leaves Love upon her back, deeply distressed.*

(See William S. Heckscher, «Shakespeare in his Relationship to the Visual Arts: A Study in Paradox», *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, ed. S. Schoenbaum, 13-14 (1970-71), 35-56, pp. 6, 22).
- 6 Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London, 1948), p. 1.
- 7 «*But died thy sister of her love, my boy?*», asks the Duke, and he receives as an answer the riddle: «*I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too*».
- 8 It is an interesting detail that her near namesake Marina in *Pericles* is associated with exactly the same emblem. When meeting his yet unrecognized daughter, Pericles expresses his admiration for the noble bearing: «*thou dost look / Like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling / Extremity out of act*» (V. 1. 137).
- 9 For the various aspects of Patience and details of representation, particularly in the visual arts, compare Heckscher, especially pp. 36, 56. He has, however, not identified the emblematic references in *Measure for Measure*.
- 10 See C. J. Sisson, *New Readings in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1956), ii.
- 11 I have more fully developed the following points on *The Merchant of Venice* in «The Unity of *The Merchant of Venice*», *Wiener Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie*, ed. Otto Rauchbauer, 80 (1985-86), 5-26.
- 12 «*The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration*», *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 119-33, p. 119.
- 13 Sigurd Burckhardt, «*The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond*», *ELH*, 29 (1962), 239-62, p. 250
- 14 References are to Appendix I of J.R. Brown's New Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, London, 1955, where the source is printed in full, pp. 140 ff.
- 15 «Hazard» occurs more frequently (eleven times) in *The Merchant of Venice* than in any

other play, the next being *Timon of Athens* (four occurrences) ; and «fortune» appears more frequently than in any other comedy, *The Merchant of Venice* being surpassed in this respect only by two tragedies, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Timon of Athens*.

- 16 Cambridge edition (1969), p. XXIX.
- 17 References are to W.M. Merchant's New Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1967).
- 18 Frederick Kiefer, *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy*, ([San Marino, Calif.], 1983), p. 97.
- 19 Geoffroy Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, i, ( London, 1957), pp. 460-1.
- 20 «Let me to my fortune and the caskets» (III. ii, 39.)
- 21 Compare Raymond B. Waddington, «Blind Gods : Fortune, Justice, and Cupid in *The Merchant of Venice*», *ELH*, 44 (1977), 458-77, pp. 467-69.
- 22 Bullough, p. 460.
- 23 *Giorgione's «Tempesta» : with Comments on Giorgione's Poetic Allegories*, (Oxford, 1969), p. 3.
- 24 Richard Henze, «Which is the Merchant here ? And which the Jew ?», *Criticism*, 16 (1974), 287-300, p. 288.
- 25 «O upright judge ! Mark, Jew. O learned judge» (IV. 1. 310, 314-320).
- 26 Compare Fluellen, who in *Henry V* says that Fortune «*is painted blind*» (III. 6. 31).
- 27 My italics.
- 28 Compare Kiefer, p. 223, and Heckscher, p. 56.
- 29 Heckscher, p. 57.