The Apotrope Against Atropos

In \textit{The Motif of the Choice of the Caskets (Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl)},\footnote{I} examining the myths, stories and fairy-tales that involve a choice between three women, an ancient theme whose interpretation and derivation he seeks, Freud concludes that the final choice of the most beautiful, the most desirable, the wisest, the most faithful, the best or the most adorable woman is the result of a fiction (\textit{Schöpfung}) produced by desire. Paradoxically operating a double reversal (\textit{Wunschgegeiten}, \textit{Wunschverkehrung}), replacing one thing by its opposite, desire masks the necessity of death. By means of this ruse, reformation (\textit{Reaktionsbildung}), or \textit{apotrope}, desire triumphs over the Invincible, \textit{Atropos}, the third of the three Fates, the Inexorable: ‘Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not the Terrible, but the fairest and most desirable of women.’\footnote{2}

Freud corroborates his regressive interpretation, which reveals a ‘primaeval identity’ which is more or less concealed, more or less distorted, but which never completely disappears from myths or literature, by relying, as ever, on a few revealing details or races (\textit{Resterscheinungen}) which, beyond the differences of races, civilizations and genres, lead towards a hidden universal meaning.

The comparative, or indeed structural, thematic reading undertaken by Freud thus enables him to compare, in an unusual way, the anonymous Greco-Roman myths or stories (the story of the choice which Paris has to make between the three goddesses, the myth of the three Fates), with certain stories from the \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, an Estonian poem, the \textit{Psyche of Apuleius}, the story of \textit{Cinderella}, certain of Grimm’s tales (\textit{The Six Swans, The Twelve Brothers}), the libretto of Offenbach’s \textit{La Belle Hélène}, and finally \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, the starting-point of the analysis, and \textit{King Lear}. These two plays, each in its own way, one of them rather unserious (\textit{heiter}), the other more tragic, each producing a particular effect, one comic, the other crushing, sublime or affecting, or, in Freud’s word, overwhelming (\textit{unheiter}), are also held to take as their essential subject a choice between three women, and to harbour the same universal meaning.

But if, from identical material or an identical motif, one ‘story-teller’ (\textit{Dichter}) may draw very different effects, if all of his art consists precisely in being able to ‘guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another’,\footnote{3} does not isolating one motif from the rest mean losing the essence of art or poetic creation? And how can Freud invoke the ‘primaeval human identity’ to explain the moving dramatic effect of \textit{King Lear} if, arranged and composed in quite a different way, it can produce a quite different effect, a ‘lighter’ one for example?

The answer to this objection consists, for Freud, in tracing the difference in effects – and therefore in genres – back to a difference in degrees of repression of the ‘primitive content’. Of the examples chosen, \textit{King Lear} is seen as the work in which the poignant meaning of the primitive myth, weakened by later distortions, returns, and, by means of the reduction of the distortions, exerts its profound power over us. \textit{The Merchant of Venice} owes its greater ‘lightness’ to a more thorough concealment of the primitive meaning.\footnote{4} That is why, in this case, it takes all of Freud’s ingenuity to discover it or rather, from the distortions of the manifest content, to manage to ‘construct’ the latent content. The postulate of such a method is that one must understand the literary text as one listens to the discourse of a neurotic on the couch, discreetly devoting suspended attention to anything that appears to sound strange if not uncanny, or at least revealing. Thus, with regard to Bassanio, who, in seeking to glorify lead, finds few things to say, and because this ‘is little and has a forced ring’ (\textit{ist wenig und klingt gezwungen}), Freud writes: ‘If in psychoanalytic practice we were confronted with such a speech, we should suspect that there were concealed motives (\textit{geheimzugehaltene Motive}) behind the unsatisfying reasons produced.’

So, listening to \textit{The Merchant of Venice} with a detective’s suspicious ear, armed with the magic wand of the model of the interpretation of dreams, Freud successively strips the manifest (\textit{scheinbar}) content of the text of all of its supposed disguises. This method allows him to dismiss both the most usual astral interpretation\footnote{5} and the one which is most obviously manifest and banal: ‘one should no more trust flattery (a lesson to be drawn from \textit{King Lear}) than appearances (\textit{Schein}).’ Freud therefore acts like the good sultor Bassanio who, in making his choice, is able to resist the brilliance of gold and silver. But, paradoxically, it is by obeying the lesson to be drawn from the manifest text that he precisely distinguishes the manifest meaning from the latent meaning, and rejects the former in favour of the latter, as Bassanio rejected gold and silver in favour of lead. At the very point where he considers it necessary to neglect the manifest text, Freud obeys its...
imperative: far from inventing the distinction of the 'latent' and the manifest, and 'applying' it to literature from without, Freud borrows it from literature, more powerful than psychoanalysis, since it secretes this inherent distinction and consequently also secretes the demand for a certain decoding.

To strip the text of its gold-mail garments which, with all their loud jangling, muffle the leaden silence of the latent content, Freud resorts essentially to dream symbolism. He first resorts to it (a recourse which will bear the entire weight of the interpretation) in order to convert the choice of the three caskets into a choice between three women; a conversion which in itself allows him to include The Merchant of Venice within the thematic series under examination, and particularly to compare it to the Estonian poem and the story from the Gesta Romanorum. This is on condition, however, that he resort once more to the dream model and its process of reversal, since in these latter cases it is a young girl who must decide between three suitors, while in the first case it is a young man who must choose between three women magically replaced by caskets which are supposed to represent them in a symbolic and metonymic fashion. This is a substitution legitimate only for those who see literature as functioning like a dream, a typical dream whose interpretation dispenses with any need to turn to the associations of the dreamer:

If what we were concerned with were a dream, it would occur to us at once that caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself—like coffers, boxes, cases, baskets, and so on. If we boldly assume that there are symbolic substitutions of the same kind in myths as well, then the casket scene in The Merchant of Venice really becomes the inversion we suspected. With a wave of the wand, as though we were in a fairy tale, we have stripped the astral garment from our theme; and now we see that the theme is a human one, a man’s choice between three women.

One detail—neglected by Freud, who almost mechanically resorts to dream symbolism as the key to the text—could confirm this apparently arbitrary reading: the first time Portia mentions the caskets, she uses, as if in a lapsus, the word ‘chest’, which also means a woman’s breast; everywhere else the less polysemic ‘casket’ is used, and this, translated into German as Kästchen, is the only one used by Freud, even in the title of his text. In the course of the interpretation, on the other hand, Freud once more resorts to dreams in a rather ‘forced’ way in order, this time in a way that is crucial to his reading, to equate lead with death, which is constantly symbolized by the third woman, silent, dumb, ‘inconspicuous’, hidden, ‘unrecognizable’, strikingly pale, all characteristics which, as clinical experience has proven—are supposed, from a symbolic viewpoint—to be equivalent. In fact, the substitution of lead for lead is possible only if, on the one hand, with Freud, one decides in favour of one variant of the text, that of the paleness of lead (‘Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence’, 3, ii, 106), the other variant being that of plainness; and if, on the other hand, one ignores the fact that this paleness is also a characteristic of silver: ‘Thou pale and common drudge, Between man and man’ (line 103), as Bassanio says of it.

Finally, one might assert that lead is less ‘loud’ than gold and silver, whose manners are shrill—and that it is therefore really ‘dumb’ like Cordelia who ‘loves and is silent’ and represents death, or like Aphrodite in La Belle Hélène, or discreet like Cinderella—as long as one forgets that the lead, like the gold and the silver, bears a formula, a motto, with at least a double meaning, which is designed to guide or mislead the choice, and is eloquent enough to those who can decipher and interpret it; as long as one also forgets that, like the other two caskets, the leaden casket bears an inscription which contains and sums up the fortune of the person who has chosen it. Strictly speaking, we cannot then say that it is dumb. It will only be seen as dumb by those who hear in Bassanio’s discourse a weird and strange association, when in fact they themselves are following the thread of their own associations and the path of seductive analogies, creating, through this fuse, connections between the most heterogeneous texts.

The Ambivalence of Love

The dream model therefore seems to dictate the entire Freudian reading of the theme of the choice of the caskets. And yet—and as far as I know, no one until now has pointed out the importance of this—at a crucial turning-point of the text, when he cites the dual reversal operated by desire in converting necessity into choice and death into love, Freud, stressing this, abandons this model:

However, contradictions of a certain kind—replacements by the precise opposite—offer no serious difficulty to the work of analytic interpretation. We shall not appeal here to the fact that contraries are so often represented by one and the same element in the modes of expression used by the unconscious, as for instance in dreams. But we shall remember that there are motive forces in mental life which bring about replacement by the opposite in the form of what is known as reaction-formation; and it is precisely in the revelation of such hidden forces as these that we look for the reward of this inquiry. [My italics.]

This operation of a reversal, designed to satisfy our desire—to free man from the inexorable law of death and leave him with the illusion that he is an exceptional creation within nature, ‘an empire within an empire’—is caused, for Freud, by the activity of the imagination (Phantasieärtigkeit) the essential function of which is precisely to satisfy those desires which reality frustrates. However, to substitute for the third of the sisters—death—the goddess of Love or human figurations resembling her, the imagination does not, for Freud, borrow from the unconscious its processes and the technique of reversing something to create its opposite; on the contrary, it uses an old and more or less forgotten truth, an ancient ambivalence of Love, closely related, indeed identical to Death:
Nor was this substitution in any way technically [technisch] difficult: it was prepared for by an ancient ambivalence, it was carried out along a primeval line of connection [Zusammenhang] which could not long have been forgotten. The Goddess of Love herself, who now took the place of the Goddess of Death, had once been identical with her. Even the Greek Aphrodite had not wholly relinquished her connection with the underworld, although she had long surrendered her chthonic role to other divine figures, to Persephone, or to the tri-form Artemis–Hecate. The great mother-goddesses of the oriental peoples, of life and fertility and goddesses of death. Thus the replacement by a wishful opposite [Wunschgegengestalt] in our theme harks back to a primeval identity.

This appeal to ambivalence as the ratio essendi of the splitting and division of a figure is not unique in Freud's work. In The Uncanny, dealing with The Sandman, it is cited as the explanatory principle of the breakdown of the paternal figure into two opposites: a good father and a bad, diabolical father (Coppélia, Coppola-Spahanzani). It is ambivalence yet again which, in A Seventeenth-Century Demollodical Neurosis, is made responsible for the splitting into two figures with opposite and violently contrasted attributes (that of God, that of the devil) of a single personality, God, who, in the beginning, 'in the earliest ages of religion ... still possessed all the terrifying features which were afterwards combined to form a counterpart of him.' In both of these cases, division intervenes to preserve the paternal figure from a mixture which would be made all the more intolerable by being the reflection of Oedipal ambivalence 'which governs the relation of the individual to his personal father'.

So what is original about the Theme of the Three Caskets? On the one hand, in this case, the ambivalence is that of a maternal figure, and, on the other hand, the reason for this ambivalence is no longer Oedipus but the original identity of Love and Death, an identity which is to some degree structural. As the identity of the symbolized and the symbolizer in primitive language is, according to Sperber, the reason for their symbolic equivalence in dreams, as the presumed identity of the two sexes in childhood authorizes their symbolic substitution, so the structural identity of love and death is the real principle and the precondition behind the splittings, divisions, reversals, substitutions and conversions operated under the effect of the intolerance of our desire.

The break with the dream model in favour of the notion of ambivalence — and of a structural ambivalence — strikes me as being of prime importance. With this break, in fact, a logic completely different from that of dreams is established; a logic of paradox which is unlike the oneric or neurotic logic of ambiguity or compromise. While ambiguity, in an equivocal fashion, may equally well signify one meaning or another, ambivalence simultaneously asserts two opposite meanings, sense and non-sense; not love or death but love and death. The structure of ambivalence is the uncompromising structure of a two-faced Janus, precisely that, according to Freud, of the joke.

If, in order to explain the substitution of the figure of Love for that of Death, Freud abandons the oneric model and does not mechanically resort to the process of reversal in dreams, it is because this process does not necessarily refer to an original identity of opposites, since its use can lead to compromise formations permitted by the dream. However, in literature, as in jokes, both eminently social products addressed to the conscious man, the process at work must if possible satisfy — uncompromisingly — both desire which is frustrated by reality and thought which knows reality, in this case the necessity of death. The trick of the imagination — a faculty which, in a traditional way, plays, for Freud, the role of intermediary, of 'binding agent' between the opposites which it reconciles — its technical feat is, paradoxically, that of inventing nothing but rather of exploiting a real relation, the close connection (Zusammenhang) of love and death recognized by thought, in order to magic it away by dissociating them and substituting one for the other: because they are closely linked and interdependent, it allows itself to put one in the role of the other at the risk — and this is what, in its duplicity, it is seeking to do — of allowing the one to be forgotten in favour of the other. In this duplicitous game of the imagination, the winners are both thought which can always, behind the face of love, sense that of death, and desire, which can fail to recognize death because it does not appear in its own guise but in the guise of its double. It is in this simultaneous recognition and misrecognition that pleasure lies: it is always accompanied by a sense of the uncanny, more or less slight, more or less intense according to whether recognition or misrecognition is dominant, according to the degree of distortion of the primitive myth, that is, according to the greater or lesser degree of the success of the 'creative' work, not that of the unconscious in its use of modes of expression from the primary process but entirely that of the double-faced imagination.

If, by means of its 'creations', the latter allows us, on the one hand, to triumph over death, nevertheless on the other hand and at the same time it never ensures the complete success of our desire: the pharmacological function of literature cannot be substituted for that of the dream or of psychosis. Its 'apollonianism' is only the other side and the more or less obvious reflection of its 'dionysiaism'.

In King Lear, the effect of a powerful, e-norm-ous affect which grips the viewer is, for Freud, the sign that the original identity of love and death is more recognized than misrecognized in that play, while in The Merchant of Venice, a lighter play, it is misrecognition that is dominant.

Towards a General Ambivalence

At the end of The Theme of the Choice of the Caskets, as if he is still prey to the overpowering effect of King Lear, and also perhaps because he sees this tragedy as holding the 'truth' and the key of the comedy, Freud seems to have completely forgotten the much more comic Merchant of Venice. This
forgetfulness reveals a sort of theoretical insufficiency, which the reader at least perceives: if the creations of the imagination can do without the modes of expression of the unconscious, might one not read The Merchant of Venice, unlike Freud, without referring to the dream model? The typical dream model which leads to an almost mechanical symbolic decoding of the text and to a thematic reading which isolates one theme from all the rest? Indeed, if one accepts this latter explanation in terms of the ambivalence of love, the theme of the three caskets does not in fact appear to be isolable, but rather to be a simple and perhaps paradigmatic case of the more general 'theme' of ambivalence which is put on display, as we shall see, in The Merchant of Venice.

The ambivalence of Portia and the choice of the caskets

The Freudian interpretation of the scene of the three caskets can be reduced to a statement that the leaden casket, as attested by its pallor and silence, represents death which no one chooses. The unbearable necessity of death therefore, according to this interpretation, is disguised by the choice of the fairest, most desirable, richest and wisest of women, Portia, whose portrait is contained in the leaden casket. It is true that there are many signs in the text which indicate a certain correlation between Portia and death and stress the ambivalence of her figure which permits this substitution: beautiful and intelligent, she is also perfidious and cunning, and is capable of using disguises in order to mislead people as to her sex. Her conquest, compared to that of the golden fleece (Act 1, Scene 1), implies, for all her suitors, a risk of symbolic death, since their possible failure leads to a definitive renunciation of love and marriage. When Bassanio opens the leaden casket and finds the portrait of Portia inside it, he compares her golden hair to a fatal spider's web.

Here, in her hairs
The painter plays the spider, and hath woven
A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men
Faster than gnats in cobwebs. (Act 3, Scene 2)

Are these manifest connections between Portia and death features which, in her, approach the uncanny? Are they revealing details through which the figure of Death reappears behind the figure of Love? Do they not simply indicate the ambivalence of the figure of woman? The fact that the fairest of women is, in the eyes of men, always also the most dangerous, the most castrating woman? But it is precisely this manifest ambivalence of the figure of Portia that prevents her from playing the role of a reassuring figure capable of using the expedient of fiction in order to conquer the fear of the Invincible. Choosing Portia (Love) means manifestly choosing Death, not because, in order to satisfy our desire, the one is substituted for the other, but rather because, as a woman, she is deadly to the man who chooses her.

Similarly, the choice to which the suitors must submit cannot, as such, disguise the necessity of death: choice, by its very essence, implies luck, whether good or bad, and more particularly the risk, as in the golden casket and not the leaden casket) of finding a skeleton in place of love. In any case it implies, once more in a manifest way, the risk of death, the only proof of a real love: that is why the will of the dead father which deprives the will of the living daughter of a free choice (cf. Act 1, Scene 2) in accordance with his wishes, in order apparently to subject her to a random and senseless lottery, is, despite appearances (as the maid Nerissa observes) a virtuous and wise will, because: 'the lottery that he has devised in these three chests of gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love' (Act 1, Scene 2). If Bassanio gets the better of the other suitors — in accordance with Portia's vows and desires — it is because he alone, in making his choice, has been guided by love, his own love and the love of Portia that goes with it: 'If you do love me, you will find me out' (Act 3, Scene 2), she says.

Both the princes of Morocco and Arragon, on the other hand, cite not their love but their merits, and when making their choice they are guided by nothing but blind fortune, which is, however, less blind than they think:

'If Hercules and Lichas play at dice
Which is the better man, the greater throw
May turn by fortune from the weaker hand:
So is Alcides beaten by his page;
And so may I, blind fortune leading me,
Miss that which one unworthy may attain...'
'Come, bring me unto my chance,'
'Good fortune then.'

'Fortune now
To my heart's hope.' (Act 2, Scene 1)

Seen from this point of view — that the choice implies, as proof of a real love, the risk of death — the theme of the three caskets is comparable not so much to those fairy-tales or myths in which a choice must be made between three women, but to the story of Atalanta as told by Ovid. In order to win her hand, Atalanta's suitors must accept the risk of death by taking part in a race in which the only winner will be he who can beat her, the Invincible, on pain of the loss of his life, thereby proving his love: 'he loves me, and thinks it worth while to risk death in order to marry me — for death is the price, if cruel fate deny me to him'. As in The Merchant of Venice, fate favours the suitor towards whom she herself is inclined, Hippomenes, who is only successful thanks to a trick: he throws golden apples into the race-track, golden fruits which, by their brilliance, seduce Atalanta and thrice distract her from the race, allowing Hippomenes to catch up with her. This reflects precisely the way the seduction of the gold and silver of
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the caskets turns the first suitors from the correct choice, that of the leaden casket, thus leaving Bassanio his chance.

Bassanio alone refuses to be seduced, refuses to trust appearances, and therefore conforms to the law secreted within each of the three caskets. Thus, the skeleton’s eye enclosed within the golden casket contains a scroll on which is written the following inscription:

All that glisters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told;
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold;
Gilded tombs do worms infold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Your answer had not been inscrull’d. (Act 2, Scene 7)

The prince of Morocco, however, with his swarthy complexion, knows that his physical appearance is not the sign of a blackness in his heart—and warns Portia not to be taken in ‘by appearances’:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadow’d liver of the burnish’d sun,
To whom I am a neighbour and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus’ fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision for your love,
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

Yet this black prince—dressed all in white—chooses the golden casket, apparently the best, to his cost.

Similarly Arragon, who rejects the golden casket so as not to behave like the ‘fool multitude’, not to associate with vulgar minds in choosing by appearance, still chooses the silver casket, in which he finds not Portia’s portrait but that of a grimacing idiot, his own image which means his dismissal because, not having tempered his judgement seven times as fire tempers silver, he can kiss nothing but a shadow, foolishly trusting ‘silver’d’ surfaces (Act 2, Scene 9).

Bassanio, on the other hand, in his words as well as his actions—the choice of the leaden casket rather than the flashing gold, ‘hard food for Midas’, and the silver, ‘pale and common drudge’/’Tween man and man’—in an entirely Platonic fashion condemns ‘outward shows’ and ‘ornament’, ‘The seeming truth which cunning times put on / To entrap the wisest’, and is able to distinguish Portia’s ‘shadow’, her portrait, from the real Portia of flesh and blood.17

Because he alone has not chosen appearance, his fortune is good and his choice a happy one—as the inscription in the leaden casket which delivers his verdict declares; he makes the right choice, that of Portia: a simple girl, but one who will not be guided by the superficial impression of the outward gaze (Act 2, Scene 1), by skin colour or brilliance of garb, who knows, as she will show, that the habit does not make the monk, since she will disguise herself as a man and in doing so deceive even the most ingenious.

The ambivalence of metals and their convertibility

In his examination of the scene of the three caskets, Freud’s error is the converse of that of the first suitors: his eyes are for the leaden casket alone, which leads him rapidly and ironically to reject the lesson, banal as it may be, that what he calls the manifest meaning of the play, ‘one should not trust appearances’, is inscribed on all three. If one were to go no further than this, one would certainly not go very far; but there is nevertheless no reason to seek a latent content. Focusing one’s attention on the three caskets, or more precisely on the three metals of which they are constituted, one will notice that all three teach the same lesson because they are actually indissociable, all three are profoundly ambivalent; and this ambivalence is the pre-condition of the ‘false appearance’ that they assume, seducing and misleading everyone who misrecognizes it; and also the condition of their convertibility or transmutability.

Despite appearances, gold, flashing and royal, solar and divine, is not the opposite of pale and base lead. Its perfection is the result of a slow gestation, a transformation of low metals. It is only this base origin of gold that explains its symbolic equivalence with the basest thing of all, excrement, and all the efforts of alchemists to convert lead into gold, merely achieving the natural transmutation of the base into the perfect by accelerating this process: to make gold the symbol of perfection, to trust the brilliance of its appearance, is to see only a result while forgetting its genesis.18 It is to forget the time factor in any transmutation: the Age of gold, a mythical and paradisiacal age, is also the age of Saturn, of Time, associated with lead, a revealing association of the profound structural ambivalence of gold, of its two-faced nature, which gives rise to a dual evaluation: on the one hand it is the metal of wealth, of domination, and because it is the result of a slow gestation within the bowels of the earth it is the symbol of esoteric knowledge. A source of light and radiance,19 it is the symbol of fertility, and as a result of this characteristic it is associated with the ram, the emblem of generative potency. The golden fleece is the insignium of the master and of initiation. This is the golden, solar and appollonian face of gold, which also presents, on the other hand, a shadowy, dionysiac, demonic or saturnine face, which makes it the symbol of the perversion and the impure exaltation of desires. No longer a weapon of light, but a burden which breaks your bones and your neck, transforming you, if your choice attaches to it, you who believe you are of divine origin and unperishable, into a base skeleton, perhaps enclosed within a gilded tomb, but no less gnawed by worms than if that tomb were of base lead. This duplicity on the part of gold, its two-faced nature which indicates, to anyone able to decipher it, the ambiguity of the formula designed to guide the act of choice: ‘Who chooseth me shall gain
what many men desire', proves to be the fateful moment of choice, the moment of dramatic 'suspense', the moment of the suspension of time, as Portia is well aware when she seeks to defer the moment when Bassanio will have to make his choice,

'tis to peise the time,
To eke it and to draw it out in length,
To stay [him] from election (Act 3, Scene 2)

This suspense is a prelude to the catastrophic reversal, the conversion of positive to negative, the transition from the euphoric, manic phase to the depressive, melancholic phase, in which the man who could hope that the conquest of the golden fleece would be accompanied by the conquest of immortality is reduced to nothing. The moment of choice is the moment of the convertibility of gold into lead, which is always possible because, far from being its opposite, gold derives from lead; and it is to lead that it owes that very property which enables it, beyond its apparent perfection, to be transmuted into its supposed opposite.

The alchemists, in particular Paracelsus, are actually aware of this: lead is the water of all metals; anyone aware of its content would swiftly have abandoned all other materials to work with lead alone, for white lead implies the possibility of transmuting the properties of one body into that of another and the general properties of matter into the quality of mind. Lead symbolizes the most humble base from which a transforming evolution can emerge. By means of the transmutation of lead into gold, the alchemists sought symbolically to escape individual limitations in order to attain collective and universal values. A 'binding agent' between all metals, it is also and this is its other face – the symbol of unshakeable individuality, and is therefore linked to Saturn, the god of separation whose scythe cuts through all bonds, all ties. Lead, like Saturn, is therefore the condition both of all connection, transformation, creation, and of all mortal separation, division and dissociation. Choosing lead therefore means, as the phrase on the casket says, choosing to 'give and hazard all [one] hath', for it means opting for the choice that involves the risk of catastrophic death, while the choice of gold – or of silver – for anyone who misrecognizes their profound kinship with lead, is an illusory choice of incorruptibility, a refusal of risk and hence a refusal of choice.

Silver, like gold and lead, is also a dual metal – and Arragon's failure is due to his ignorance of this ambivalence. An agent of mediation and exchange between men, it is also an intermediary between gold and lead. Base and pale like lead (which is why the version of the paleness of lead seems to me better than that of its plainness), it nevertheless possesses a certain brilliance, less than that of solar gold, whose female or lunar face it represents to a degree. Like gold, it is subject to a dual evaluation. Pure and divine, it nevertheless gives rise to all forms of cupidity and produces the misfortune of anyone who chooses it through not having taken time to think, through not being aware that silver is also time, through having chosen time (lead) within silver while wrongly, narcissistically, trusting to their own good fortune and merit. Making the right choice primarily means essentially taking one's time as Bassanio does, doubly aided, both by Antonio's recommendations:

Slubber not business for ny sake, Bassanio,
But stay the very riping of the time (Act 2, Scene 8)

and by Portia who, for fear of losing him, attempts to delay his choice, to slow down time, to let Bassanio take his time (Act 3, Scene 2).

Thus, gold, silver and lead are all ambivalent, with an ambivalence that is concealed by their being split into three different, even opposite metals, which disguises their profound kinship, their common derivation from the metal which is supposed to be the most base: lead or Saturn; a split which masks the fact that each of them, and not lead alone, secretes time, the risk of transformation, of deterioration, of transmutation in one direction or the other, and conceals, beneath gilded and silvered surfaces, genesis, development and death. The three metals are therefore structurally homologous to the three Greek Aphrodites of which the third, the chthonic, identical with death, misrecognized and repressed, is present within the other two, the Uranian and the Pandemic Aphrodites. Is this homology on its own enough to allow us, without employing the key of dreams, to join Freud in making the transition from goddesses to caskets? The theme of the choice between three metals cannot actually be replaced by that of the choice between three women because the three metals are not merely components of the caskets, the supposed symbols of women; each of them, with its ambivalence, is embodied in one of the three main characters: Antonio, Bassanio and Shylock, whose dual faces are likewise concealed by division, and because one of them, Shylock the Jew, like lead (although he represents silver), like a real scapegoat, is burdened with all of the baseness.

Antonio/Bassanio, or the Dual Face of Saturn

Antonio and Bassanio, who are each other's doubles, each represent one of the faces of the double-faced Janus, Time.

Janus, close kin of Saturn, is invoked from the very first scene, by Solanio, in order obliquely to express, beyond obvious division, the dual face of all things, the real 'theme' of the Merchant of Venice:

Now, by two-headed Janus,
Nature hath fram'd strange fellows in their time:
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes
And laugh like parrots at a bag-piper,
And other of such vinegar aspect
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile,
Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.
Solanio, in fact, is intrigued by Antonio’s bottomless sadness: nothing can explain it, neither the pain of love nor the loss of money; the sadness of the melancholic, afflicted with *Aecidia*:

I do not know why I am so sad:
It wears me [...]  
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff ’tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.

Antonio represents the ‘sad face’, the face of death\(^{22}\) of all the things he represents:

I hold the world but as the world [...] 
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one. (Act 1, Scene 1)

Bassanio represents the other face; the living, gay and laughing face: in his first words he invites his friends to laugh: ‘Good signiors both, when shall we laugh?’ (Act 1, Scene 1), as he later urges them to put on their ‘boldest suit of mirth’ (Act 2, Scene 2). He is constantly accompanied, as if by his shadow, by Gratiano, who would rather play the role of fool than that of the wise man, and see mirth and laughter wrinkle his face rather than have a reputation, like Antonio, for depth and gravity, at the cost of a stagnant immobility and a leader, deadly silence.

A dual reading of Antonio – the melancholic, Saturnian face with the leaden complexion – is possible, corresponding to the dual evaluation of *Aecidia*. A negative evaluation: melancholy is connected with sadness, the coldness of ice, the immobility of death, solitude, sterility, dryness, a lack of vitality. This is the evaluation provided by Bassanio’s entourage, by Solanio and Gratiano or by Shylock, close to the ‘modern’ psychoanalytic evaluation: Antonio is left with only a ‘shrunkin’ ego because he has unloaded all of his narcissistic and homosexual libido onto his double; he has ‘poured himself from his purse’ and is ready to give his life for Bassanio, the only person who connects him with existence, because he has given him all of his existence: ‘I think he only loves the world for [Bassanio]’, says Solanio in Act, Scene 8:

My purse, my person, my extremest means,  
Lie all unlock’d to your occasions [...]  
And out of doubt you do me now more wrong  
In making question of my uttermost  
Than if you had made waste of all I have. (Act 1, Scene 1)

He is prepared to give him his flesh and his blood, his life, on condition – and, beyond his total, flaunted ‘disinterest’, this reveals his deeper instinctual motivation – that the double be present at the sacrifice, that he see with his own eyes both his love and the payment for his love (Act 3, Scene 4).

Seen from this perspective, which accentuates Antonio’s ‘psychotic’ character (hence his beautiful indifference, his beautiful disinterest), one might say that it is easy for him to agree to the sacrifice of his flesh as demanded by the Jew because he has already accomplished this sacrifice: he has already cut himself, castrated himself to the advantage of his double Bassanio. Saturn’s scythe (associated, as we should not forget, with lead) has intervened – before the Jew’s knife – and cut him off from any interest in material goods, setting him in pursuit of the loss of himself, of his ego and his loves – since by lending Bassanio his money, or at least his credit, he places Bassanio at a distance from himself, allowing him to set off to conquer Portia, who, taking his place from that moment onwards, becomes half of Bassanio (as she emphasizes in a lapsus);\(^{23}\) it also sends him to the loss of his boats and his fortune. From this negative point of view, Antonio represents Saturn’s evil aspect, the man of ill luck and reversals of fortune who, in order to punish himself for some unnamed crime, runs headlong into catastrophe.

However, a different, positive reading is possible, the reading that Bassanio and, to a certain extent, Antonio and his friends give of this character: Antonio is the ‘moral’ man *par excellence*, the man of self-effacement, detachment and disinterested sacrifice, not: through a lack of interest in life and a want of vitality, but through generosity and love; a Christian character, entirely spiritual, the opposite of Shylock the Jew with his basely materialist instincts. While the latter hoards his money to make it bear fruit, cautiously, anally locking it away in its box, Antonio spends and wastes it unreservedly and in conditions that entail risk, having no hesitation in gambling his entire fortune on the sea, that aperetic place *par excellence*.

In his positive traits, notably his prodigality, it could be said that he bears within himself the traces of his double, of the golden, laughing and happy face of Saturn, outwardly projected in the figure of Bassanio.

Bassanio is, in fact, inordinately prodigal. As the euphoric, manic face of time, he represents its devouring and cannibalistic aspect: keen for pleasure, even at the cost of the resources and even the life of his double (and in this he has something in common with Shylock the Jew who at least has the honesty to declare not that he loves Antonio but that he hates him). The euphoric Bassanio is merely the converse of Antonio the melancholic, and the fates of these two divided faces of Time, unbalanced by their very essence, are closely linked. Bassanio’s fortune depends on Antonio: it is only thanks to the credit of his double that he can try his fortune and set off, thanks only to his double, for the conquest of the golden fleece. His happiness finds a strict counterpart in Antonio’s misfortune: at the very moment when Bassanio is winning his prize, Antonio is losing all his ships, as if the happiness of one necessarily involved the ruin of the other. To Gratiano, who announces to him ‘We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece’, Salerio
replies ‘I would you had won the fleece that he hath lost’ (Act 3, Scene 2), and these bad tidings ‘steal the colour from Bassanio’s cheeks’, as they had drawn blood from the body of his friend. This arrival of a messenger announcing Antonio’s misfortune – in the manner of classical drama – is therefore not the astonishing and arbitrary coup de théâtre of some deus ex machina; it is rather a blow dealt by the god Time, two-faced, the condition of all catastrophic reversals, of all conversions of good fortune into ill and vice versa. Thus, at the end, a new ‘reversal’ of fortune allows Antonio’s ships to come safely into port and Antonio to regain his fortune: to regain himself. Here again, the reversal is not arbitrary but is closely linked to the fate of his double: when the latter marries and, moreover, marries a rich woman, the homosexual link breaks down: it is then that Antonio can recover his narcissistic libido, as well as his money, and also reconstitute himself – the return of good fortune is the return of the ships loaded with Antonio’s very life. The play therefore ends ‘happily’ for both doubles: but nothing ensures a ‘definitive’ happiness since with time, as at sea, all risks remain open, and since Gratiano, the fool who is wiser than sad Antonio, has metaphorically predicted, by associating them with one another, a return of both Bassanio’s good fortune in love and Antonio’s in trade:

who riseth from a feast
With that keen appetite that he sits down?
Where is the horse that doth untread again
Hiss tedious measures with the unhaven fire
That he did pace them first? All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy’d.
How like a younger or a prodigal
The scarlet bark puts from her native bay,
Hugg’d and embraced by the strumpet wind!
How like the prodigal doth she return,
With over-weather’d ribs and ragged sails,
Lean, rent, and beggar’d by the strumpet wind! (Act 2, Scene 6)

With and through time, which is fundamentally ambivalent, all conversions remain possible.

The Ambivalent Figure of Silver: Shylock the Jew

This is a lesson that we also learn from Shylock the Jew; Shylock who, contrary to all expectations, while he has a visceral hatred of Christians, finally converts to Christianity (although under duress).

What Antonio is to lead and Bassanio to gold, Shylock is to silver: ‘pale and common drudge / ’Tween man and man’, yet necessary – and this is its other face – among other things, to Bassanio in his conquest of Portia, and to the prosperity of the Doges of Venice, who are forced to treat this dog, the Jew, with due care and to see justice done to him in spite of everything.

Shylock’s kinship with the silver casket is shown obliquely by his attachment to his own casket (using the same word) in which he locks away all his treasures, and whose theft by his daughter Jessica to the advantage of a Christian will lead him to the same despair as the betrayal of his own flesh. As he will proclaim at the end of the trial which opposes him to Antonio, to take his money is to take his life:

Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:
You take my house when you do take my prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live. (Act 4, Scene 1)

The figure of Shylock, which is, like that of silver, ambivalent, is also susceptible to a double reading, although the Christian protagonists stress only its negative side. From their point of view, which opposes him to Antonio, the figure of spirituality and disinterest, he is the absolute embodiment of ‘evil’, a pleasure-seeker, a ‘basely materialistic creature whom lends with interest and who, filled with hate for Christians, would not hesitate, if necessary, like some wretched cur, to feed on their flesh. But, to their accusations of insensitivity, Shylock has no difficulty in replying that his behaviour is in accordance with the figure of the Jew that they themselves have formed, and that it is contradictory of them to expect emotion, feeling or friendship from a dog, to believe that the man whom they have reduced to usury could, duped by their sudden goodwill, agree to dine with them, to enjoy relations with them other than that of creditor and debtor: ‘I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you’ (Act 1, Scene 3). And again:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug.
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, now it appears you need my help:
Go to then; you come to me, and you say,
‘Shylock, we would have moneys:’ you say so;
You that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’ or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondsman’s key,
With bated breath, and whispering humbleness,
Say this:-
‘Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn’d me such a day; another time
You call’d me dog; and for these courtesies
I’ll lend you thus much moneys?’

ANTONIO: I am as like to call thee so again,
To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too. (Act 1, Scene 3)

To the illogicality of the Christians, their contradictions even with regard
to themselves and their faith (which will, for example, lead Bassanio and
Gratiano to break the promises they made to their wives that they would
never part with their rings, while the Jew would not have sold the ring
given him by his wife for all the gold in the world, ‘for a wilderness of
monkeys’ (Act 3, Scene 1), Shylock constantly opposes logic, rationality,
the legitimacy of his acts in accordance with the letter of the law. His acts
conform to the justice of his country (which, thanks to the trickery of Portia,
disguised as an expert lawyer, will push this literalness as far as it will go,
to his cost, in order to triumph over him), and in particular, according to
him, they observe the law of God, the Jewish law which he sees as legitimating
his profits; or ‘his interests’ (Act 1, Scene 3), as the others say, in order
to mock him, failing to acknowledge that God himself commanded men to
increase and multiply, and that this is a law of life and time: the law of
fertility and reproduction which holds goods to be living creatures just as
much as what Antonio, in his own barrenness, wrongly calls ‘the barren
metal’.27 The biblical history of the trick invented by Jacob to derive a
profit from his uncle Laban’s sheep is held to confirm this:

SHYLOCK: When Jacob graz’d his uncle Laban’s sheep,—
This Jacob from our holy Abram was,
As his wise mother wrought in his behalf;
The third possessor: ay, he was the third,—

ANTONIO: And what of him? did he take interest?

SHYLOCK: No; not take interest; not as you would say,
Directly interest: mark what Jacob did,
When Laban and himself were compromis’d,
That all the ewings that were streak’d and pied
Should fall as Jacob’s hire, the ewes, being rank,
In end of autumn turned to the rams;
And, when the work of generation was
Between these woolly breeders in the act,
The skilful shepherd peel’d me certain wands,
And, in the doing of the deed of kind,
He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,
Who, then conceiving, did in eaning time
Fall parti-colour’d lambs, and those were Jacob’s.
This was a way to thrive, and he was blest:
And thrift is a blessing, if men steal it not.

ANTONIO: This was a venture, sir, that Jacob serv’d for;
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But sway’d and fashion’d by the hand of heaven.

For Antonio, this is a diabolical parable which would only help ‘An evil
soul (produce) holy witness’— ‘O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!’
Shylock, ‘a villain with a smiling cheek’, ‘A goodly apple rotten at the heart’, is
behaving, in this story, like the devil citing the Scriptures for his own
ends.

In Shylock’s eyes, it at least justifies the permanent association between
his daughter28—the offspring of his flesh—and his profits, the offspring
of his money, those two most precious ‘goods’ that he will lose simultaneously
when Jessica leaves with his coffer. An association ridiculed by Salanio in
his account of it, mocking the laments of the Jew as those of a madman:

My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
O double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter! (Act 2, Scene 8)

These laments prove that if, unlike Antonio, Shylock is familiar with the
creative face of time, aware that ‘time is money’29—and that anyone
borrowing 3,000 ducats from him should be immediately asked: ‘How long?’—he cannot accept the converse and correlate of this positive face,
the risk of ruin that time also implies, the risk that time, which does not
belong to him and of which he is both trader and thief, does not only cause
his flesh and his money to bear fruit, but can also act against him: that his
offspring can leave him, his daughter can marry, taking his profits with her,
that his own flesh can turn against him. And because he cannot bear to be
cut off from his own flesh, in order to avoid falling into melancholy, like
Antonio, after his double loss, of that which he had until then ‘locked away’
in his caskets without spending it, and of his daughter whom he has always
hoarded and saved at home, all for himself, he seeks more than ever to
avange himself on the Christians:

a diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort!... Two thousand
ducats in that; and other precious, precious jewels. I wish my daughter were
dead at my feet, and the jewels in her ear! would she be hearsed at my
foot, and the ducats in her coffin!... loss upon loss! the thief gone with so
much, and so much to find the thief; and no satisfaction, no revenge. (Act 3,
Scene 1)

Because his flesh has been doubly cut from him he will wish—an eye
for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—to cut the living flesh from Antonio, Antonio
who imprudently risked his entire fortune on the venturous sea, the plaything
of a thousand chances and vicissitudes, permitting Shylock by this very fact,
because of all these risks incurred over three months, to seek a supplementary guarantee of his solvency: the right to take from him – and this will be a matter of the strictest law and justice – a pound of his flesh if the debt is not repaid at term.

From then on one can say that the ‘logic’ of the Jew and his constant reference to the legitimacy of his acts only conceal, with their apparent rationality, a quite different logic: that of desire and compensation, the logic of the fatal supplement and cruelty, a logic of madness, which, no longer relying on strict equivalence and justice, silences all calculation, all reason, and means that Shylock the Jew, despite his assumed avarice, prefers – out of hatred, to everyone’s astonishment, and despite their successive appeals to his cupidity and to the clemency of his heart – a pound of flesh to 3,000 ducats (just as Antonio, for love in this case, and in a reversal of Shylock’s logic but just as ‘unreasonably’, in the terms of the same strange logic, prefers death to life):

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I’ll not answer that:
But say it is my humour: is it answer’d?
What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleas’d to give ten thousand ducats
To have it ban’d? What, are you answer’d yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig:
Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others, when the bagpipe sings in the nose,
Cannot contain their urine: for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes, or loathes. Now, for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be render’d
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a wailing bagpipe; but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg’d hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio... (Act 4, Scene 1)

Shylock prefers the torture of Antonio to his money, for that is the basis of this strange and subterranean logic: watching or causing suffering brings pleasure, and this pleasure is intensified by the fact that the debtor is a master who is hierarchically superior to the creditor who, throughout this unexpected spectacle – the duration of a Saturnalia – can thus, reversing the roles, assume the role of master, assume, that is, a right to cruelty, exert his power over a person reduced to powerlessness and voluptuously enjoy this dish, particularly flavoursome to one who, until that point, has been ridiculed and humiliated, treated more badly than a dog.

In operating this reversal of mastery, Shylock not only fully satisfies his will to power but, in showing that he prefers revenge to money, he reveals his ‘spirituality’ to those who have denied it and, beyond established social and racial differences, proclaims the universality of instincts, notably that of cruelty, and hence the unity of the human species:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humidity? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me I will execute, and it will go hard but I will better the instruction. (Act 3, Scene 1)

In his speech, Shylock thus converts the Christian into a Jew, and the Jew into a Christian, permitting and justifying, in the name of this mutual equivalence in cruelty, his own ‘conversion’, which is ironically announced in Scene 3 of Act 1: ‘This hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind’, a conversion, however, that the modern viewer finds unbearable, since it does not indicate that universality and natural community between men, the condition of all convertibility, and because, imposed under duress, as a punishment, it marks the end of the Saturnalia, a new reversal of mastery in favour of those who have the power; the final humiliation of the Jew, who has not only lost his money and his daughter to a Christian, but finds himself forced to espouse a despised faith, this catastrophic reversal in an extreme dramatic moment is the counterpart of the ‘reversals’ of fortune undergone by Antonio, for whom, in the end, that fickle and two-faced goddess rights her wheel.

A question that has been much discussed is whether The Merchant of Venice is an ‘antisemitic’ play, and because its protagonists reflect ambient antisemitism Shakespeare himself has been held responsible for that antisemitism: however I do not see the author’s ‘sympathy’ as being more with Antonio or Bassanio. He merely reveals the dual face, the ambivalence of each of the characters, the condition of their convertibility, which is the same – and exists for the same reasons – as that of the metals, of gold and silver into lead, and vice versa.

A Baroque Drama

To join Freud in privileging the theme of the three caskets, and to stress only the ambivalence of love, is therefore to misrecognize the more general ‘theme’ of ambivalence, the double face of time, the condition of all conversions, of all reversals. A theme which cannot be substituted for any other,
which is not a theme like any other: it is a structural part of the theatre and of the coup de théâtre, especially in baroque theatre, in which the double face of Saturn is responsible for those catastrophic reversals which, in a moment—a moment of suspense, of choice—turn good fortune to ill and vice versa. Seen from this point of view, The Merchant of Venice—a drama of conversion in all its forms—is not a lighter play than King Lear. Neither a tragedy nor a comedy, but somewhere in between, a baroque drama the conditions of whose possibility The Merchant of Venice puts on show in a paradigmatic way. Using human vanity to express the vanity of all simple oppositions, by the same gesture in which, with his fools, he locates folly in the heart of wisdom and comedy within tragedy. Shakespeare, in The Merchant of Venice, reveals, beyond the divisions carried out by desire, the close interdependence of sadness and laughter, the two faces, melancholic and manic, of Time.

If the Freudian reading had to be salvaged—but has it?—one might still say that the generalization of the theme of ambivalence and hence of conversion is still placed at the service of desire: that it provides a better disguise for the essential thing, the only thing that finally matters to us, the ambivalence of love (its identity with death), exactly as the generalization of anguish makes it easier for us to bear and repress any particular anguish. One might actually say this, but only by impoverishing the text and resorting, in a somewhat forced and unconvinving way, to the oniric model that Freud himself disturbs—and for me this is the major contribution of The Theme of the Three Caskets—by introducing the category of a structural ambivalence, albeit without reaching this conclusion: the invalidation of a psychoanalytical reading of literary texts, at least in the most usual sense of that term.

Notes

1 And not The Theme of the Three Caskets in the Hubback/Strachey translation, or Le Thème des trois coffrets, in Marie Bonaparte’s French rendering, both of which strangely shift the emphasis away from the Freudian reading. G. S. Freud, Das Motiv der Kästchenahle (1913), ‘The Theme of the Three Caskets’, in Art and Literature, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Pelican Freud Library, 1985), pp. 233–47.

2 Translator’s note: This translation has been somewhat modified at the suggestion of Sarah Kofman.


4 If we had to date the latter work in relation to the former, we might be almost certain that it predates it. In Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, Freud uses the criterion of the degree of repression to speculate that the London Cartoon is an earlier work than the St Anne with Two Others. Cf. my The Childhood of Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

5 The interpretation of myths borrowed from O. Rank allows him to dismiss the astral interpretation of E. Stucken: ‘The question is not exhausted, for we do not share the belief of some investigators that myths were read in the heavens and brought down to earth; we are more inclined to judge with Otto Rank that they were projected on to the heavens after having arisen elsewhere under purely human conditions. It is in this human content that our interest lies’ The Theme of the Three Caskets, p. 236.

6 ‘The lottery that he had devised in these chests of gold, silver and lead’ (Act 1, Scene 2, line 27).

7 In other texts, Shakespeare frequently uses the word, coffin, casket or closet, in a metaphorical sense, but this word never represents ‘woman’ or ‘the essence of woman’. In Sonnet 46 it is the metaphor of the heart:

My heart doth plead that thou in him dost lie,–
A closet never pierc’d with crystal eyes,–

The same metaphor appears in Sonnet LII: ‘So is the time that keeps you as my chest’. In Sonnet LXV, it represents time itself, in which death preserves and keeps the jewels which he or she hides away from life:

O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time’s best jewel from Time’s chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

In all these cases the casket is something that guards, hides away and conceals, whether to preserve from death or to preserve from life. Similarly, the three caskets contain either life or death. It is notable that the word ‘casket’ is not used in the Sonnets.

8 In Freud and Fiction (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), I have shown that the idea of Oedipal ambivalence alone cannot explain the infinite multiplication, and not merely by a factor of two, of the figures of evil in The Sandman. And also that ambivalence can only be effective if it encounters, in reality, a more original division which is the condition of its possibility: the double, as a bad father, refers in its possibility to a more original diabolism, the principle of all division and all things negative, which Freud will later call the ‘death instinct’.

9 Cf. Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (Harmondsworth: Pelican Freud Library, 1976), vol. 4, p. 468: ‘Things that are symbolically connected to-day were probably united in prehistoric times by conceptual and linguistic identity. The symbolic relation seems to be a relic and a mark of former identity.’

10 ‘It is true that the tendency of dreams and of unconscious phantasies to employ sexual symbols bisexually betrays an archaic characteristic; for in childhood the distinction between the genitals of the two sexes is unknown and the same kind of genitals are attributed to both of them. But it is possible, too, to be misled into wrongly supposing that a sexual symbol is bisexual, if one forgets that in some dreams there is a general inversion of sex, so that what is male is represented as female and vice versa. Dreams of this kind may, for instance, express a woman’s wish to be a man.’ (ibid., p. 476).

11 In Plato’s Symposium, the dialogue between Diotima and Socrates which sees love as being based on an essential poverty (the mother of Eros is Penia, symbol of aporetic distress and indigence), thus surreptitiously introduces the chthonic Aphrodite, who is identical with death and repressed by Pausanias, who divides this ambivalent figure into two opposing figures, that of the Uranian Aphrodite, entirely valorized, that of the pandemic Aphrodite, whom he disqualifies entirely.


13 Cf. particularly Two Principles of Mental Functioning (Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11), and my The Childhood of Art.

14 In the relationship that he establishes between these two plays and myths and literature, Freud works in an Aristotelian or Hegelian way: the end result contains the key to that which precedes it. On the other hand, however, it breaks with that linear or dialectical model because later development can only reveal the truth of the founding process in terms of a disguise effected by division or repression.

15 'It might be described as the “decoding” method, since it treats dreams as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning, in accordance with a fixed key.' 'The essence of the decoding procedure, however, lies in the fact that the work of interpretation is not brought to bear on the dream as a whole but on each portion of the dream's content independently, as though the dream were a geological conglomerate in which each fragment of rock required a separate assessment' (Freud, Interpretation of Dreams, pp. 171–2).

16 Metamorphoses, Book 10.

17 yet look, how far
The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow
In underprizing it, so far this shadow
Dost liap behind the substance. (Act 3, Scene 2)

18 'Furthermore, everything that is complete and perfect is admired; everything evolving is underestimated... wherever we can see the evolution, we grow somewhat cooler,' F. Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, trans. Marion Faber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 162; see also 145, 252.

19 'The colour gold is the most noble of colours, [Bartolo] says, because light is represented by it; if someone wished to represent the rays of the sun, the most luminous of bodies, he could not do it more properly than by rays of gold; and it is agreed that there is nothing more noble than light', Lorenzo Valla quoted by Michael Baxandall in Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

20 'If you put the sun first, then you ought to make the moon second, and if you call the one golden you should call the other silver and next after the sun, just as silver comes second after gold . . .', (ibid.).


22 In Act 3, scene 2, Portia compares one of her melancholic suitors to Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, and to a death's-head with a bone in its mouth.

23 Bestrew your eyes
They have o'erlooked me and divided me:
One half of me is yours, the other half yours,
Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,
And so all yours. (Act 3, Scene 2)

24 My wind . . .
Would blow me to an ague, when I thought

Conversions: The Merchant of Venice

What harm a wind too great might do at sea. I should not see the sandy hour-glass run. But I should think of shallows and of flats ( . . .), And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks, Which touching but my gentle vessel's side Would scatter all her spices on the stream, Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks; And, in a word, but even now worth this, And now worth nothing. (Salario, Act 1, Scene 1).

25 Here is a letter, lady;
The paper as the body of my friend,
And every word in it a gaping wound,
Issuing life-blood. (Act 3, Scene 2)

26 Time as an all-powerful deus ex machina that allows all catastrophic reversals is put on stage in The Winter's Tale, in which it plays the part of the Chorus at the beginning of Act 4:

I, that please some, try all, both joy and terror
Of good and bad, that make and unmake error,
Now take upon me, in the name of Time,
To use my wings. Impute it not a crime
To me or my swift passage, that I slide
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried
Of that wide gap; since it is in my power
To o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour
To plant and o'erwhelm custom . . .
Your patience this allowing,
I turn my glass and give my scene such growing
As you had slept between.

27 The thesis of the 'barrenness' of metal is not Antonio's own, but is a generally held Christian belief. The condemnation of usury by the Church is based, among other things, on the confusion that the Jew was held to make between living matter and metal.

Saint Thomas said that 'money does not reproduce'. To make money breed is therefore an illegitimate phenomenon that goes against nature. Money on its own is unproductive, infertile. 'Money ... was principally invented for exchange. Consequently it is unjust to receive a price for the use of loaned money, that amounts to usury'. (Summa theologica).

'Usurers sin against nature in seeking to beget money from money as one would beget a horse by a horse or a mole by a mole. Also, usurers are thieves because they sell time which does not belong to them' (thirteenth-century manuscript).

Texts quoted by Jacques Le Goff in La Bourse et la vie (Paris: Hachette, 1986), to which we refer for the position of the Church towards usury in the Middle Ages, a position which, for Le Goff, delayed the advent of capitalism, at least until the Church gave the usurer the hope of escaping hell thanks to purgatory.

The Old Testament, on the other hand, permits loans with interest to strangers (Deuteronomy, 23: 20), and hence to Christians: from this perspective, the position of Shylock is in accordance with Jewish law which only condemns lending with interest to other Jews.

28 This attachment to descent becomes all the more understandable if one bears in mind that for Shakespeare (if we return to the Sonnets), it alone is a means
of obtaining immortality, that is, of truly conquering Time and its scythe: Cf. for example Sonnet XII:

And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

29 As early as the fifteenth century, Leon Battista Alberti defines time as money. Quoted by Le Goff in La Bourse et la vie.

30 Cf. F. Nietzsche: 'the debtor made a contract with the creditor and pledged that if he should fail to repay he would substitute something else that he "possessed", something he had control over... Above all, however, the creditor could inflict every kind of indignity and torture upon the body of the debtor... Let us be clear as to the logic of this form of compensation: it is strange enough. An equivalence is provided by the creditor's receiving, in place of a literal compensation for an injury (thus in place of money, land, possessions of any kind), a recompense in the form of a kind of pleasure - the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless, the voluptuous pleasure "de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire", the enjoyment of violation. This enjoyment will be greater the lower the creditor stands in the social order, and can easily appear to him as a most delicious morsel, indeed as a foretaste of a higher rank. In "punishing" the debtor, the creditor participates in a right of the masters... The compensation, then, consists in a warrant for and title to cruelty', On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 2nd Essay, section 5.


Listening to Jean Oury,¹ it occurred to me that an 'identificatory process' had unconsciously enveloped us, for I intend to deal with a number of the themes which he has touched upon: as if a community of ideas or of clinical concerns had been established without our knowledge. I wondered whether it was not due to a ghost (certainly discussed a great deal, and I too shall return to it but in relation to Shakespeare), the ghost of Lacan and the need which he formulated, to study the notion of identification in terms of the symbolic, and of the paternal function.

In particular that leads us to recall a trait indicated by Freud under the name of primary identification with the 'father in the personal prehistory' (The Ego and the Id), a degree zero of identification which mobilizes affects, instincts and a certain image of the body of the analyst and the body of the patient at the moment of transference and that of counter-transference. To take up Schotte's argument,² it is clearly less the discourse of hysteria or melancholy that is at work here than that of psychotic or so-called borderline identification, which obliges us to re-examine primary identification. This is also true, in a less anthropological and more cultural way, of certain cultural phenomena; the sacred, or indeed our contemporary imaginary realm which, from the psychedelic to modern art, exhibits permanent fluctuations of identification.

I should like first of all to emphasize the necessary intensity that the term identification implies for me. Far from being a simple equivalent of the signifier or of symbolic schemas, it involves the real, and particularly the body. The symptom may be an identification made flesh, through refusing to submit to the demand for identity dictated by frustration and language. An identification such as this is a refusal of identity: it opts for pleasure and denies division, distinctness. A question arises: when the cure has better established identity and has classified identifications, it spares the subject a certain pleasure (jouissance), in favour of the delights of non-being; but is this tolerable, liveable, possible? One thinks, once more, of the 'future', perhaps of the necessity, of illusion. But to return to the topic at hand...
Literary Theory Today
Edited by Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan

This challenging volume is made up of thirteen essays, most of them published here for the first time, that address important aspects of contemporary literary theory. A group of internationally recognized scholars and critics, the contributors treat such topics as the future of deconstruction, the new historicism, reception theory, sociology and literature, modernism and postmodernism, Marxism and literature, feminist literary theory, psychoanalytic literary theory, and the relevance of race and imperialism to the study of literature. Taken together with Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan’s ambitious introduction, the essays demonstrate the continuing vigor of avant-garde criticism as well as its ability to confront and even exploit its perceived limitations.

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Contents

Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan

Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism

PART I
Barbara Johnson

The Surprise of Otherness: A Note on the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man

Peter Bürger

The Problem of Aesthetic Value

Albrecht Wellmer

Metaphysics at the Moment of Its Fall

PART II
Hans Robert Jauss

The Theory of Reception—A Reflection on Its Unrecognized Prehistory

Stephen Greenblatt

The New Historicism

Robert Weimann

Text, Author-Function, and Society:
Toward a Sociology of Representation and Appropriation in Modern Narrative

PART III
Michael Riffaterre

Undecidability as Hermeneutic Constraint

Ann Jefferson

Literariness, Dominance, and Violence in Formalist Aesthetics

Sarah Kofman

Conversions: “The Merchant of Venice” under the Sign of Saturn

Julia Kristeva

Identification and the Real

PART IV
Elaine Showalter

Feminism and Literature

Homi K. Bhabha

Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Post-Structuralism, Marginality, Post-Coloniality, and Value

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