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Shakespeare's Shadow

In an interview, of which also two more extended parts can be read in this program book, Marina Carr quoted by heart – asked for classical references in her writing – the first seven of the lines from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* on the neighbouring page. Before, she had already gratefully mentioned her former English teacher who had implanted in her her love for the English language with that very play. Those lines summon – together with the seemingly far reaching shadow of this great poet of the theatre, who's example Marina Carr is following even in that aspect, that she does not want to write prose for the theatre – the following comparison.

Already part of the quotation are the two clearly visible links between Shakespeare's play and *Portia Coughlan*: The similar names of the main female character (Portia) and the location (Belmont). Beyond that there seem to be no similarities at first sight. Instead, at a closer look, mainly differences are drawing attention, according to the distance in time and history. Finally, however, the comparison shows a complex reference concerning the theme of love and intimacy, which makes it necessary to analyze at first structures relevant to that theme with Shakespeare.

With Shakespeare, Belmont is only one of two locations, between which the action switches constantly. It is set complementarily as a paradise like *locus amoenus* in opposition to Venice as a profane place full of conflict. In Belmont there is music, here is the place where the love of Portia is – in Bassanio's case – successfully courted and here all ends well. As far as the constellation of characters is concerned, Portia seems with Shakespeare at first, as woman, as daughter of a ceased, powerful and rich lord, passive. In the love story's conflict of interests she is the worthy to be loved, the good to be reached (*le bien souhaité*, like all following names for story functions after E. Souriau). In this function she is bound to her father's lottery: Only the suitor who chooses the right one of the three cases labelled differently can win her – in both senses. In changing role and gender, as judge in the argument between Shylock and Antonio, she then of course gets very active, becomes in her other story function as *arbitre de la situation* the one who is in control of the situation. The antipodes Antonio and Shylock as his antagonist (*l'opposant*) form as incorporations of opposite ideals of love in fact the conceptual main axis within the constellation of characters. The title figure Antonio incorporates as *la force orientée* (the aimed force) christian orientation by the ideal of the universal love of Jesus Christ, the *Agape*, in giving love as a gift without conditions and above all without return. In the end he gains everything. Shylock on the other hand, is supporting an egoistic concept of love, which mainly circles around possession. He is guided by selfishness, the fear for loss and the desire for revenge. In the end he loses everything. In between there can be found three, in fact only two, different pairs of lovers. On the one hand Portia and Bassanio, as 'high' and 'proved' lovers, orientated by the example of Antonio, on the other hand Jessica and Lorenzo. Antonio's

ideal of love is here again confirmed in the lottery: love (just in christian sense) means: “who chooseth me must give and hazard all he has”, reads the inscription of the winning case, chosen by Bassanio. This concept of love, however, is proven as real and right above all by the causal connection of the two plots. By giving Bassanio with Shylocks credit the resources needed to be able to win Portia and to free her that way from her passive role as *le bien souhaité*, Antonio himself enables the stepping in of the judge, who finally in a surprisingly brilliant way neutralizes his lethal indebtedness to Shylock, the pawn of one pound of flesh. Nerissa and Gratiano, as servants and couple parallel to Portia and Bassanio, are simply mediating the high discourse about love to the pragmatic. Now, within the constellation of these two couples, the endangerment of love by treason is made the subject of the symbolic game-play with the rings and is that way overcome instructively. Portia and Nerissa are handing over rings to their husbands as symbols of being true and take their promises never to give them away. As judge, his assistant respectively, they demand the rings as reward, to give them – again as wives – anew. At first, to give their partners a healthy shock, with the assertion that they had received them from two other men, the judge and his assistant of course, in return for sexual intercourse. The alternative couple Jessica and Lorenzo is limited to “fancy”, to love as delusion. These lovers are bare of orientation, if not even dammed, what is the subject of the argument between Jessica and the fool Launcelot and is illustrated by quoting all the tragic classical examples during the apparently romantic grove scene at the final act’s beginning.

In the just explained way, Shakespeare stands in cultural history at the beginning of the process of differentiation of love as, after Niklas Luhmann, “symbolically generalised medium of communication” – that means ‘love’ as imaginatively common made means to an improbable form of communication respectively interchange between individuals: the “interindividual interpenetration”. Now Marina Carr awaits us, as it were, at the other end.

Belmont with her is a (as ‘Belmount’ really existing, see map on page 21) village amidst of Ireland, the action takes place in the present. Here there is some *locus amoenus* opposite to the concrete, realistic scene, if at all, only existing internalised in Gabriels singing. With the creation of her Portia-figure Carr takes a poetic motive from the quoted Shakespeare-lines, the comparison with Medea. Like Medea, Portia has got three sons, who she primarily thinks of as sons of her husband. With the violent fantasies breaking out of her during the argument with Raphael at least for one moment the assassination of her children seems possible. In principle, however, Portia is with Carr not only passive but nonviable. She is not free to take the role of the situations male ruler. Is her dead twin the missing male part? As essential element of structure with Carr shows to the one hand the blending of representation of everyday life, within the outward action nearly bare of incidents, with the level of memory and dream to the other hand. These two layers differ above all through the used speech. Everyday life is marked with a condensed collage of commonly juicy idioms, in dream and memory a polished poetic language has its place. Additionally memories are oscillating between reminiscence of quasi-realistic

family hell determined by incest and domestic violence and the biologically impossible construct of the two-sexual identical twins and lovers woven into it as a metaphor for fulfilment in intimacy in the sense of perfect interpenetration. That Portia and Gabriel are identical twins is proved by the statements of Marianne in I/5: “couldn’t tell yees apart in the cradle” and of Damus, related to a photo of the class: “...still can’t tell one of them from the other”. At the end of the last scene with Raphael Portia finally tries for the first and only time to express the strength and special quality of this love as form of communicative penetration: “...and all the world is Portia and Gabriel packed forever in a tight hot womb, where there’s no breathin’, no thinkin’ no seein’, only darkness and heart drums and touch”. The construct of two-sexual identical twins as ideal lovers is, corresponding to the romantic concept of love as the highpoint of the above mentioned process of differentiation, i.e. articulated in Wagner’s Siegmund and Sieglinde. This mutual ‘ego-penetration’ is perfect with Carr, but also inhuman in the sense of nonliveable or rather nonbearable: “... and you’re aither two people or you’re no one. He used to call me Gabriel and I used to call him Portia. [...] We didn’t really like one another that much when it came down to it.”, so Portia in III/3, or rather in III/5: “One of us was goin’, were killin’ each other...”. Treason, the end of this utopian state of fulfilment, of this love as the most improbable form of communication at all, is inevitable: “And when I was fifteen I slept with Damus Halion [...] and Gabriel seen and Gabriel seen and never spoke to me after.”, Portia sums up in III/6, and Marianne remembers in the preceding scene: “Gabriel stopped singin’, Portia, when you stopped talking to him, [...] when you started runnin’ round with Stacia and Damus Halion.”.

Starting with Shakespeare, fulfilment in intimacy was by then in the literary differentiation of love as symbolically generalised medium of communication always formulated as goal that could be reached or not. Marina Carr now intervenes from the other end, by integrating in a poetically elaborate way the utopia in a contemporary context as already come true. She shows Portia as wounded by bliss and the inevitable failure of a love’s utopia come true. So if, like every English writing playwright, Marina Carr is surely standing in Shakespeare’s shadow, the comparison, however, also shows her greatness: that she takes advantage of the shade by getting that way a better look on the things in the present light. While in Shakespeare’s comedy it seems possible to live with fulfilment in intimacy, to solve, in game-play, its conflict and contradictions, Marina Carr puts us in the depths of her tragedy to the ground of the fact: to seek fulfilment in intimacy especially in a defective social context means to flee life itself, not to acknowledge its worth, because to bear, or not to bear it, that is the question.