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CAPÍTULO 7

ORIENTALISM EVERYWHERE: POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT IN REPRESENTATIONS OF REAL AND IMAGINED VOYAGES

Pedro Malard Monteiro

There was a time, or so the story goes, when people thought the world was flat. There were monsters in undiscovered waters, and sailors imagined their ships would tumble down a void should they go over the edges of the four-cornered world. The world became a disc when the ancient Greek astronomers observed the earth's round shadow on the moon's surface during a lunar eclipse. Now the world is round, like a ball, as any schoolchild will tell you. Schoolchildren have seen pictures of the earth taken from artificial satellites orbiting it, and they can even find their own little corner of the world photographed from space in their smartphones or tablets, without a thought about how much investment in research and development that took. The knowledge that the earth is spherical and blueish comes so early to most people with an internet connection that it seems almost intuitive. A time when people could not fathom this profound truth feels more wondrous than the fact that most of humanity can grasp it so effortlessly now. Nowadays we marvel instead at flat earth societies in the 21st century: don't they have Google Earth, haven't they flown long distance in a jet plane, are they serious or just joking? Even anachronistic stories of Columbus having to convince his contemporaries that sailing East from Portugal would take them to India, as if he were alone in the belief of a round earth, ignore that Plato and Aristotle taught their students that the earth was spherical about two thousand years earlier. But Plato, Aristotle and Columbus could only have relied on clever observational arguments – constellations change positions as one travels south, the masts are visible on the horizon but the lower part of the ships are not. Now we can take pictures from space.

Adults in the 21st century who complain about declining educational standards and increasing disrespect of societal norms by young people are not so different from ancient Greeks in their concern. Kenneth Freeman wrote a dissertation⁷⁸ about education in ancient Greece in which he cites some of the complaints of ancient authors. Aristophanes yearns for “the good old style of education, in the days when Justice still prevailed over Rhetoric, and good morals were still in fashion”, Isocrates complains that “the young did not spend their time in the gambling dens, and with flute-girls and company of that sort, as they do now, but

⁷⁸ Freeman died before completing the work, but it was edited posthumously by M. J. Rendall, who thought the work merited publication.

they remained true to the manner of life which was laid down for them (Freeman, p. 73), and Plato declared that the young expect to be treated like the old and quarrel with them (Freeman, p.73-4). It seems older generations have always complained about the lack of manners and instruction of the younger generation, and there is no reason to think the complaint will not be voiced one thousand years from now. Young people today are less likely to study Homer or Virgil, but they are expected to study Newton and Darwin, which no ancient Greek or Roman of any age could do in their day. The choice of texts given to schoolchildren to read is the main topic of concern here. The epics of Homer and Virgil were key texts that help us understand Greek and Roman culture. Since Greek and Roman culture have exerted such influence in the west in most areas of art and science, these texts are still read and studied so many generations later. The present paper intends to discuss how stories and histories – texts of any kind – shape the way we see and understand the other. When texts are compiled, archived and passed down to future generations, how do they affect the way people understand themselves in relation to the other? How can humorous texts, for example, generate a negative view of an *other* through representations that are interpreted in different contexts? The objective of my analysis is to suggest that reading critically (texts and also images) is not merely an exercise in literary criticism or cultural studies, but an important tool for education. Miseducating people in the internet is a possibility and may seem easy, considering that hundreds of people have joined flat earth societies after reading about them in the web, but one wonders how round earth deniers erase from their mind the thousand images they must have seen of a blue spherical earth revolving in space. Making fun of people that propound different ideas cuts both ways, of course, since one can ridicule people with good as well as people with bad ideas. But humour is effective in generating the kinds of discussion that are important for education and for science.

Let's begin by discussing an episode of *The Simpsons*, an animated series broadcast by Fox network and classified as a sitcom. *The Simpsons* is marketed for an adult audience. The main characters are members of a supposedly typical mid-western family. The series satirises several aspects of American culture, particularly the more conservative and less sophisticated. One of the series episodes, titled "Blame it on Lisa", first broadcast in the United States in March 2002, depicts a trip

the Simpson family take to Brazil. In that episode, the family is mugged by children, the father is kidnapped by a taxi driver, the son watches an inappropriately sexy children's show and is attacked by monkeys in Copacabana beach. Before the show aired in Brazil, the Brazilian Tourist Board, Embratur, made a formal complaint about the show and ended up being ridiculed by the international press. The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, mocks Embratur by adopting a serious and formal journalistic style to say that no tourist has ever been attacked by a monkey in Copacabana⁷⁹. The article in *The Guardian* also states that "the mayor of Rio threatened to sue a weather forecaster who predicted, wrongly, that there would be storms on New Year's Eve". The error supposedly drove many people away from the event. It is expected that Embratur and similar entities, who wish to maintain a high amount of tourists in the region, should worry about negative representations of Rio. It is even possible to imagine that an uninformed American citizen, even one sceptic of vicious monkeys at the beach, could become unduly concerned with safety issues falsely portrayed in the *Simpsons* episode and opt to go to Buenos Ayres instead – thus depriving Rio of some precious dollars. Something like that must surely have occurred to people at Embratur.

A simple example from a North American animation demonstrates how representation and economic power can get entangled. Embratur's reaction shows how some of the theories of representation are not just ethereal talk by philosophers, but something that can have repercussions in the real world of people who depend on tourism. Had the program been produced in Brazil and the main focus of satire been the Brazilian people and their cultural production, I would predict a less extreme reaction, but I could be wrong. A less popular show might produce a lesser impact and might have been dismissed casually by Embratur, in my view. It is worth noting that different incidents that befall the Simpson family in the show can also prompt different types of reaction: the taxi driver who is a kidnapper, the libidinous Kids TV Show Host, the malicious monkeys, the thieving children, and so on. Exaggerated satires are common in *The Simpsons* and the most common target for satire is the American people and their cultural production. The series is an animation that depicts totally absurd situations, beginning with Homer Simpson's workplace: a radioactive

⁷⁹ BELLOS, p. 1.

nuclear power station with no safety whatsoever. There are more realistic representations by the film industry in America. The film *Turistas*⁸⁰ depicts a group of tourists who come to Brazil and end up kidnapped and tortured. I presume one of the intentions behind the film producers is to make money, and in order to do that they cater to an audience that consumes films like *The Chainsaw Massacre*, that is, films depicting violent and sadistic killers who scare and entertain audiences with their antics. Because the film *Turistas* is set in Brazil, it became the target of a boycott campaign, widely circulated by email and social media. American films who portray American psychopaths torturing and killing people are hardly offensive to American audiences, so why the fuss in Brazil? For one thing, the United States can hardly be considered 'the other' when we discuss the film industry. Edward Said's *Orientalism* makes a good case for the way in which fiction and non-fiction produced by imperial powers helped shape the understanding and characterization we have about the orient, the most conspicuous case today being the way the Arabs are represented by Europe and America. Said's book is one of the most influential in post-colonial studies. In it, Said analyses how authors in the West have invented the East. According to Said, the representations created by western authors give us more information about the West and their fantasies of the East than they do about the East and their people. So the complaints about films like *Turistas* and even satires like *The Simpsons* can be motivated not only by the indiscriminate rant of tourist authorities, they can be motivated by presuppositions in the field of literary theory and cultural criticism. Namely, how much of one's view of reality is shaped or affected by images taken from films, TV, books, social media, and so on.

Of course there are texts that promote the economy of a country. These may be non-fictional, but they are not necessarily factual or material. An inventive text produced by Standard & Poor's⁸¹ in 2008 elevated Brazil's bond credit rating to BBB-, which meant that, in the opinion of Standard & Poor's, Brazil had adequate capacity to meet financial commitments, but was more susceptible to economic conditions, and was in the class named "investment grade". The elevation of the credit rating was

⁸⁰ *Turistas* (2006). The Internet Movie Database. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0454970/>. 28/07/2008

⁸¹ Standard & Poor's. "Standard & Poor's eleva rating soberano de longo prazo em moeda estrangeira do Brasil para 'BBB-', grau de investimento; perspectiva estável". <http://www2.standardandpoors.com/portal/site/sp/ps/la/page.article/3,1,1,0,1204835719295.html>. 28/07/2008

celebrated by the government in Brazil because it is known that these ratings can influence the way investors choose how to allocate their resources and where. There probably would be an increase in investment from individuals, companies and other nations that believed this information to be accurate. Though it is difficult to predict the impact of credit ratings on bond prices, the Brazilian authorities in 2008 produced a lot of rhetoric – texts – to inform Brazilians that this was an important event and it reflected how well the country was doing economically. In 2015 the rating dropped to BB+, which meant that now Brazil was not in the 'investment grade' category, but in the speculative grade category. The former president of Brazil, who celebrated the upgrade in 2008, dismissed the downgrade in 2015. BB+ are just letters, after all. The change meant nothing, he said. This is not intended as criticism of the former or current government, it is intended as an analogy of what Edward Said discusses in his book, *Orientalism*. Texts can have a real effect, as in the case of Standard & Poor's credit rating system, and these effects can be cumulative, interfering in the way people talk about and do certain things in the real world. Simply put, Said's argument is that the literary and academic tradition in the West represent the East in a limited, prejudiced and mostly negative way. This tradition informs and interferes in the way people in the West imagine, conceive, interpret and act in the East.

In 2005, the Danish provincial newspaper Jyllands-Posten published some cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. The cartoons were considered insulting by some Islamic groups in Denmark. The representation of Muhammad in Islamic culture is highly controversial. Oral and written representations are usually allowed, but visual depictions are sometimes strictly forbidden. Much was written about the controversy in the newspapers. Television networks also commented extensively on the matter. Both usually framed the issue as a problem of religious freedom versus free speech. But there are a number of very interesting academic papers dealing with the issue, a couple of which I should mention briefly. One by Heiko Henkel gives the background of the events surrounding the controversy and points out a few of the problems the media had in discussing it. He also points out the opportunism of right winged groups in characterising events so as to gain political support. Part of the problem seems to spring from an imagined European identity that is defined in opposition to an imagined Islamic identity. Another paper by Berkowitz and Eko

examines two news sources, one French and one American, and discusses how they both reflect their local paradigms regarding 'the other'. The other, in that case, is the imagined Islamic individual.

In *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen*, Neil Parsons narrates the voyage of three African kings or chiefs from their native land (now Botswana) to Britain in 1895. He is able to tell this story, this history, largely because the three kings collected news clippings taken from various newspapers and these got to be stored in the library of the National Museum of Botswana and in the library of Rhodes House at Oxford University. Parsons' book may be seen as a kind of travel book, and in fact the subtitle of the book claims that it shows Victorian Britain through African eyes. We might choose to disagree with that, claiming that the newspapers are in English and the words of the Kings, originally spoken in their Setswana language, were translated into English mostly by white interpreters, mostly by Rev. William Willoughby, an English missionary who accompanied Khama. Parsons makes it clear that certain words or expressions do not translate so easily into English like, for example, the 'much quoted' petition from Khama: "your petitioners fear very much lest they should be killed and eaten by the Company"⁸², which might have fuelled the imagination of part of the British public, making them think that Khama might be a savage cannibal. Parsons also indicates that Khama was not happy with Willoughby's interpretation of his speeches at all times, and that one of Khama's "most explicit" speeches was translated by his black secretary, Seisa. The newspaper clippings, however, hardly make any reference to the fact that the kings are being interpreted or translated, and when there is any mention of the visitors' language, we can see some prejudice in their negative comments, and perhaps even in their 'positive' comments, such as when Rev. Dr. Parker compared Khama's language to English: "We are foot-caught in our own dictionaries. Our words and modes of speech belong to the decaying aristocracies and fallen pryncedoms in language"⁸³. If the English language is seen as belonging to a "fallen pryncedom of language", the Setswana language might be seen as an uncorrupted language because it is also primitive. But however one chooses to read Parker's comments, we still cannot escape the fact that the news

⁸² PARSONS, p. 60.

⁸³ PARSONS, cited on p. 6.

clippings are all in English and perhaps give us a better idea of how journalists and the British in the late nineteenth century saw Africans, not the opposite.

Most people in England at that time, Parsons tells us, had never seen black people before in their lives. What informs them of black people are accounts they have heard or read, perhaps by what some had seen at Madame Tussaud's wax museum, and even in illustrations, paintings or photographic records—slaves in the United States, 'savage' tribes in Africa, and so on.

One of the texts that might have (in)formed the public opinion about Africa and their inhabitants is *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Parsons mentions the "magical fake memoirs of Baron Munchausen [who] found more gold dust and pearls in the Kalahari than he could carry, as well as a civilized empire in this part of the interior of southern Africa [Bechuanaland]"⁸⁴. Parsons refers to these tales as "satire on accounts of current exploration by Europeans in Africa"⁸⁵. But are these fake memoirs really a satire of the current exploration in Africa? How might we compare the travels of Munchausen to those of Gulliver? How might we compare the satire in Mark Twain's "King Leopold's Soliloquy" and Munchausen's tales? How might these different texts compare to other accounts of travellers and exploration?

Let us say that there is such a thing as Travel Literature, a genre that would comprise, say, 'non-fictional' accounts of travels. Then we would not be able to say that Munchausen, Gulliver or Twain's King Leopold belong to that genre. We would also have to exclude the *Odyssey* (perhaps that would be the first fictional piece of travel literature). If we are to agree with what Said writes in *Orientalism*, we might go on to say that negative Western attitudes towards the Oriental other trace back to the to the notion that a people – the Greeks – had of another – the Trojans. This notion would still be with us today, compounded, modified, recreated in the literature inspired by the great Greek epics. We can say, too, that the *Odyssey* contains accurate information about the Greek islands (some of the descriptions in it make scholars assert the impossibility of Homer being blind) and customs – many things one might say about the way ancient Greeks lived, accurately or not, come from a reading of the *Odyssey*.

⁸⁴ PARSONS, p. 3.

⁸⁵ PARSONS, p. 3.

Perhaps Herodotus could be considered the first person to produce non-fictional travel literature, which contains a lot of what we know about ancient Egyptians and Persians. One might say that Herodotus is as inaccurate describing certain peoples as he is in describing the crocodiles in the Nile⁸⁶. Six hundred years later, Pausanias was carrying on in a similar vein, in his *Description of Greece*. About a thousand years later, travellers' tales describing distant places around the world were not unusual. Some of these tales might have been taken as true accounts even when the traveller claimed to have seen people with heads of dogs in a human body. This type of description might have sounded plausible in the middle ages, when all sorts of fantastic accounts of the other were being given during the crusades. Marco Polo's travel journals might have sounded as (un)believable as some completely fictitious journals.

Soon after the Spanish and Portuguese began exploring the coast of Africa in an attempt to find an alternative route to India, many new travel accounts reached Europe and found a big market. People wanted to know more about the world. After Columbus made an egg stand upright on a table, and claimed to have reached India by travelling west, there was a proliferation of travel literature: explorers, navigators, men of science, all began producing narratives of the new world. The most famous, perhaps, was written Columbus himself: an account which is still included in college anthologies of American literature – perhaps a strange place to find Columbus, since he is not an American writer⁸⁷. Some accounts by travellers of encounters with American tribes still count as the most reliable sources, sometimes the only source, of knowledge about indigenous peoples who disappeared from the American continent. The scribe Pero Vaz de Caminha described Brazilian natives when the country was officially said to have been discovered by Portugal in 1500. Caminha was travelling with Pedro Alvares Cabral in the largest fleet that had ever been assembled at the time in Europe: over twenty vessels with cannons, soldiers—a small army—all going to India to announce the power of the King of Portugal. The Indians in the Asian

⁸⁶ Herodotus's description sounds very vague and inaccurate to me.

⁸⁷ Several editions of the Norton Anthology of American Literature contain Columbus's letter describing his first voyage to the American continent. It is perhaps ironic that the continent is not named after Columbus – it would be called Columbia, if it were – but after Amerigo Vespucci, who wrote a more compelling, if less factual, account of his travels in the continent.

subcontinent had refused to trade with Vasco da Gama because he was commanding a small fleet, only three poorly equipped vessels without many cannons.⁸⁸

Three centuries after Cabral, Europeans were to embark in a new type of imperialism that was made possible in great part, according to Daniel Headrick⁸⁹, due to the invention of new technologies at the time: tools of penetration (quinine and steamboats), tools of conquest (guns), and tools of communication such as railroads and telegraphs.

In the tales of Munchausen, guns play a big part, and the technology that was not yet available to the Europeans was imagined: a formidable chariot, shaped like a giant hazel-nut and pulled by nine bulls, which was able to travel over any terrain, even the ocean. It travelled past the Isthmus of Suez, leaving tracks which were later taken to be “the remains of a canal cut by some of the Ptolemies from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean”⁹⁰. The chariot was also responsible for the present shape of the Table Mountain in South Africa⁹¹. The section which Neil Parsons sees as a satire of the colonial enterprise in Africa seems, to me, more a satire of English and German superiority over the French. The description of Africans as civilized is a joke, a pun, not a satire in the mode of Mark Twain’s text exposing King Leopold’s cruelty to the inhabitants of Congo. Munchausen sees in the Africans a connection with the Scythians (which were cannibals, if we are to believe Herodotus), and acts as a governor of the place (anticipating Rhodes and King Leopold) in an attempt to dissuade the locals from nasty habits, such as eating human flesh and drinking kava, which is actually a drink typical of the Polynesian islands, described to Europeans by the first time by captain Cook, just a few years before *The Travels of Baron Munchausen* were published. Mark Twain’s satirical monologue portraying King Leopold II of Belgium is a condemnation of the actions of the Belgian king in the Congo⁹². The humour in Twain’s work is in imagining how a bloodthirsty European

⁸⁸ BUENO, Eduardo. *A viagem do Descobrimento: a verdadeira história da expedição de Cabral*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 1998.

⁸⁹ HEADRICK, Daniel R. *The tools of empire: technology and European imperialism in the nineteenth century*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1981.

⁹⁰ RASPE, p. 113.

⁹¹ RASPE, p. 120.

⁹² TWAIN, Mark. *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule*. Boston: The P. R. Warren Co., 1905. Second Edition. Disponível em <http://chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/i2l/kls.html>. 28/07/2008.

monarch would be capable of justifying the massacre of millions of innocent African people. Baron Munchausen, in contrast, creates an absurd world in which Africans and Europeans find their roles reversed. It is the Africans who sail to the coast of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and even Cornwall to capture and forcibly take white Europeans “to work like horses all the rest of their lives”⁹³.

The tales of Baron Munchausen, then, almost anticipates some of the explorations that would be told later by the missionaries in Africa. Rather than act as a satire of the whole colonial enterprise, it fuels the imagination of the Europeans and relates a desire to conquer Africa. The only clear satire is directed at Baron de Tott, a real person: a Frenchman who discovered the remains of a canal in the Isthmus of Suez, which prompted the French and the British to make plans to build a canal there. De Tott wrote his memoirs telling Europeans about his incredible adventures. Incredible but non-fictional, hence Munchausen's wish to tell tales that greatly surpass de Tott's feats. The adventures of Baron Munchausen were later collected in one volume and illustrated by Gustave Dore, and they continue to fascinate people perhaps for different reasons than they fascinated 19th Century Europeans. His adventures clearly satirise 'non-fictional' travel literature by suggesting that it is all a fiction. Mark Twain, on the other hand, does more than satire. *King Leopold's Soliloquy* is not simply an attempt to mock a brutal king, though it does so. Mark Twain's piece also acts as a protest: he is divulging the atrocities which were taking place in the Congo, and urging the American people and its government to act.

We have seen how the representation of Rio in *The Simpsons* and of Brazil in *Turistas* can lead us to understand how some of the processes of representation can shape the way we view the other. The analogy with Standard & Poor's credit rating helps us see how texts can actually create effects in the real world. Perhaps this finds an echo with the work of Edward Said in *Orientalism*. This discussion led us to a non-fictional work, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen*, which reveals the problem of representation that is present in texts which supposedly give us factual and unbiased accounts of the other. The term 'objectivity' in journalism is problematic and the clippings from 19th century newspapers are possibly more revealing than clippings taken from last week's newspapers would be. This is not the

⁹³ RASPE, p. 125.

result of a more efficient journalism or more competent professionals, but the effect of temporal distancing: we can see the prejudices of earlier generations much clearer than we can those of our own generation. When we consider the travel literature in the books of Baron of Munchausen, originally created by Rudolf Raspe and recreated, translated and adapted by many other authors, I believe we see a satirical vision of the other which was informed by the orientalist European tradition of inventing the orient as exotic and dangerous. Pero Vaz de Caminha's descriptions of Brazilian natives are as precise as his understanding of what he was seeing. The problem is that Caminha, probably because he does not understand what he sees too well, has to imagine and invent these natives to make them intelligible to the King of Portugal, who is his intended reader. Caminha's text helps us see how anthropological studies characterising distant people are almost inevitably fated to represent them as other, as exotic and savage. This is the case even when anthropologists understand that it is necessary to question their own objectivity about the peoples they study. Leda Cosmides and others⁹⁴ have argued that anthropologists tend to pay more attention at variations and differences in cultural norms, and therefore emphasize and exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures. This practice is, in part, what Edward Said describes as the work done by orientalists.

Reading critically depends on a series of strategies. It is important that students of all ages are taught these strategies during the course of their education, so that they are prepared to understand, question, and make sense of all the information that describes the world. Literature is a supreme example of how texts can be sophisticated, artistic, and creative. It can create alternative universes, conjure people who never were, expose liars of all sorts, present outrageous situations, and yet leave us with something that is true in all its falseness. Literature, even when ostensibly false, can teach students about how all forms of texts work, and how they can manipulate, mock, inform and delight. And literature can also be used in educational contexts to show students how reading is always an act of interpretation, and that different people will bring their own experience and cultural norms to attribute meaning and interpret texts. Many of the texts above touch on that point and they can be used to elaborate it even further, but I will add another example:

⁹⁴ BARKOW, L. COSMIDES, & J. TOOBY, p. 44.

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. In the play, Shylock is a Jewish merchant who lends money to Antonio, a Christian merchant and rival. Shylock demands a pound of Antonio's flesh as security for the loan. When Antonio's ships are lost at sea and he finds himself unable to pay his debt, Shylock demands that his loan be paid. Shakespeare's plot is complex and includes a number of other elements: Shylock's daughter steals from him and converts to Christianity after she falls in love with Lorenzo, who is one of Antonio's friends. A rich and beautiful noblewoman, Portia, disguises herself as a man, acts as a lawyer for Antonio, and manages to reverse Antonio's situation by charging Shylock with attempted murder of a Christian. In the end, Antonio is freed and Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity. The play receives two contrasting interpretations: an anti-semitic reading and a tolerant reading. In the anti-semitic reading, Shakespeare shows the prejudice that was typical of his age and country. England had expelled the Jews in 1290 and they only returned after Shakespeare's death, when Oliver Cromwell came to power. In this reading, Shakespeare's representation of Shylock is seen as negative and in keeping with anti-semitic attitudes in England at the time, and with other contemporary representations, such as Christopher Marlow's play *The Jew of Malta*. In a more sympathetic reading, Shakespeare is seen as an advocate of tolerance. Indeed, some of the most famous lines of the play are spoken by Shylock in act III scene I, and have been read as a call for tolerance: "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?"

The two readings demonstrate not only how interpretations can differ, but also how people in different times and cultures are influenced by their values. Shakespeare is widely considered one of the most important authors in the world, a genius. Our current sensibilities also demand more tolerance and equality, and many people feel it almost their duty to avoid a racist interpretation of *Othello*, a sexist interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, or an anti-semitic reading of *The Merchant of Venice*. The push to see Shakespeare in a positive light is not simply academic

either. It involves actors and directors of theatre and film too. Some theatre directors and actors also feel compelled to change Shakespeare's original text. An Australian production of Shakespeare edited the end of *The Merchant of Venice* to be more accommodating to a sympathetic reading of the play. As expected, critics are divided about any change to the original Shakespearean text. Even though most plays are necessarily edited and shortened for live performance, changing the end is too much in the opinion of many Shakespeare lovers. Even those that consider Shakespeare a man of his time and concede that he may have harboured certain prejudices common in Elizabethan England, posit that history hadn't yet produced the WWII genocides and a wide discussion of anti-semitism that inform our opinions and customs. All of this information is useful in reading critically. Looking for connections and finding different sources of knowledge is part of what it means to be critical.

Now that texts and images are becoming increasingly easy to manipulate and disseminate through social media and the web, it has also become more obvious that there is a genuine need for students to devise strategies to read critically. Reading critically also depends crucially on understanding that certain things in the world aren't easy to understand, that different points of view are bound to emerge, that it is difficult to understand certain complex issues, and possibly too easy to simplify complex relations, such as the ones described in the examples above. There is no solution to the complexity of the world, but there are ways in which we can engage more effectively with all the information we have access to. This engagement with information is what I am calling critical reading, and its strategies include examining the evidence or arguments being presented. Evidence is not always readily available or even possible to obtain, but when it is available, it shouldn't be ignored. Part of the job of reading critically is to think about the information that is missing, or the evidence that is being ignored. Literary criticism and cultural studies can help us develop a healthy skepticism about everything we read. We cannot, for example, escape the notion that there is a cultural bias toward a more sympathetic reading of how Shakespeare saw Jews, particularly in the English speaking world. But it is equally inescapable that the sympathy we feel emanating from Shylock's famous speech is partly the product of the mind of readers who are increasingly more sympathetic and tolerant.

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