Serena Demichelis

Bernard Malamud's Hidden Hypotext?

Reversing Shylock in *The Assistant*

Abstract

My paper focuses on the rewriting of the character of Shylock in Bernard Malamud's The Assistant. *Shylock has attained "archetypal status" (Clayton Lein 1995, 117), as he has transcended the limits of his existence in* The Merchant of Venice*; while becoming a symbol, the Shakespearian Jew has transmigrated into other literary works and has given birth to different characters and diegetic entities. Shylock inspired a rich net of intertextual relations, especially in the works of authors who tackled issues concerning Jewishness and its relationship to the world and literature (Philip Roth's* Operation Shylock*, Howard Jacobson's* Shylock is My Name*, Charles Marowitz's* The Merchant of Venice*). I contend, however, that Shylock's archetypal status made it easy for writers to appropriate a set of meanings and features that are attached to him and to his play. In fact, rewritings often do not necessarily offer explicit quotations or adaptations, but still hold a strong interdiscursive connection. In Malamud's case, rewriting is based on shared themes and has been attained through three mechanisms which I label mirror-overturn, double metonymy and explication, and which are framed within the theoretical fields of transtextuality ("overt" or "undercover") and interdiscursivity. An analysis of such strategies provides the means to investigate both the textual and thematic peculiarities of* The Assistant *and Malamud's relationship to the binomial "Jewish-American writing"—something that he regarded with an attitude spanning from full acceptance of the label to non-alignment (Grebstein in Field and Field 1975).*

Keywords: *Bernard Malamud, Shylock, money, Jewish-American, The Assistant*

1. Introduction

Bernard Malamud, whose relationship with the binomial "Jewish-American writing" is famously complicated (Grebstein 1975, in Field),[1] undeniably produced a singularly

[1] See also *An Interview with Bernard Malamud: A Remembrance*:

> I am an American writer. My major experience is in America. In this country I experienced my growing up as a human being. I had an American education. My parents met in America but they grew up in Russia, in the world of the shtetl ... I am not a Jewish writer. I am interested in Jews. It would be a diminution of myself, of my responsibility (only to be interested in Jews.) I belong to a broader tradition. People want me to be more Jewish than I am. I do not want to be categorized. The term "fiction" describes my work. The paramount

interdiscursive work when he wrote the novel that, according to many, is his masterpiece (De Biasio 1992).

The process of interdiscursivity linking *The Assistant* to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* takes place at levels which can be unfolded in terms going from the thematic to the more strictly textual. This paper shall take into account both ends of this 'continuum' in order to unveil some relevant patterns of similarity and deviation; first, the formative power of money and its connection to morality as a backbone for both the play and the novel are illustrated; then, a closer look at transtextual strategies serves the purpose of reinforcing the argument according to which *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the novel's intertexts—or, more specifically, hypotexts. While Shakespeare clearly wished his characters to reach a 'universal' status, his being very much an author of his times, acutely aware of the sociocultural context he lived in, is undeniable. As far as *Merchant* is concerned, the extent to which Shakespeare was interested in "Jewish Questions" (Nirenberg 2010) has been explored from several viewpoints, trying to locate the playwright's response to "the rapidly changing religious, legal, economic, and poetic landscape of his age, including, of course, the question of [...] Anti-Semitism" (Nirenberg 2010, 80). In this sense, an analysis of *The Assistant* on the basis of interdiscursivity enhances Malamud's collocation within the Jewish-American literary tradition—one that, in fact, the author himself did not seem to be enthusiastic about. Unlike such authors as Philip Roth, who creatively 'exploited' the 'Shylock discourse'[2]—and indeed, the 'Shakespeare discourse'—throughout his career, Malamud never openly admitted to such an influence or 'source,' and included no references to Shakespeare or Shylock in his paratext; some of the elements entwined within the plot and characters of *The Assistant*, however, trigger the critical imagination.

2. *The Assistant*: the tragedy of Morris Bober

"The early November street was dark though night had ended, but the wind, to the grocer's surprise, already clawed. It flung his apron into his face as he bent for the two milk cases at the kerb. Morris Bober dragged the heavy boxes to the door, panting" (1967, 7): these are the opening lines of the novel, published in 1957.

> aim for me is to become a better writer. I have written two novels which have no Jewish background: The Natural and A New Life. They are non-Jewish novels. (1995, 64)

[2] *Operation Shylock* exploits the "sacrificial and messianic" role of the Shakespearian Jew in a logic which has been discussed by Alessandra Marzola in Girardian terms (1996, 12, my translation).

In them, the figure of Morris, the 'core character,' if not exactly the protagonist, is introduced.[3] He is a sixty-year-old grocer of Russian Jewish descent, struggling to make a living out of his tiny local shop in Brooklyn; his wife, Ida, participates in his misfortunes in the role of side-complainer, and the two have a daughter, Helen, endowed with a beauty and refinement which painfully contrast with her background. The tediously hardworking routine of the family is disrupted by an unsettling episode—a robbery that costs Morris his meagre day earning, as well as a blow on the head. While Morris is lying in bed, slowly recovering, a young Italian-American (*Italyener*¸ in the words of the Yiddish-speaking characters), Frank Alpine, takes over the business which, against everyone's expectations, improves. Frank, who, being homeless, had lived for a while as a clandestine in the basement of Morris's shop, earns himself the cautious trust of the old grocer, as well as that of his daughter Helen, who eventually falls in love with him. The presence of Frank represents a divide between two plot lines within the novel, both of which focus on the figure of the assistant. While his love story with Helen develops, a parallel storyline concerning the fortunes and misfortunes of the shop and its owner also carries on. We soon learn that Frank was in fact one of the two gunmen who, together with local criminal Ward Minogue, robbed Morris, and so does the grocer when he understands that the assistant is still (however 'kindly') stealing from him. Frank is dismissed but soon reappears in Morris's life when the grocer gets accidentally intoxicated by a gas leak and the *Italyener* is once more needed in the shop. Through various vicissitudes, the Bobers' business regains a relative wealth, culminating in an offer from Morris's rival, Julius Karp, to buy the shop off the family. While hopeful for the future, Morris falls ill and dies. Frank and Helen reconcile after an unsettling episode of violence, and the assistant eventually converts to Judaism: "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew" (1967, 217).

Morris Bober, with his seemingly endless line of misfortunes, has been almost unanimously labelled a typical *schlemiel*[4] (Pinsker in Field and Field 1975; De Biasio 1992), a silly, inept

[3] I would maintain that *The Assistant* has a rather choral vocation—if not structure. While Morris is indeed the 'core' character, and the one around whom a big part of the diegesis is centered, the novel is entitled *The Assistant* after *Frank*'s role in it, and the *Italyener* indeed maintains a rather preeminent position within the plot. Helen is also granted ample space for development and, aside from simply being Morris's daughter and Frank's lover, is independent in a way which might make her a 'third protagonist.'

[4] "An unlucky bungler" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/schlemiel. Last visited 08/06/2022). It is also possible to apply the *schlemiel* label to Frank, because of his tendency to

person, constantly in trouble. Indeed, this feature—which Morris shares with other Malamudian characters[5]—is suggested by the Rabbi officiating Morris's funeral, and it is often connected to Malamud's general attempt at representing 'the Jew as Everyman.' However, apparently, Malamud was not enthusiastic about this sort of labelling, since it cancelled any trace of humanity from his characters,[6] and tended to decomplexify them by making them adhere to a 'precompiled' set of features. Yet, Morris's righteousness, as shown in his wish to do right even to those who do him wrong, places him in a higher moral dimension, one that turns him into a "secular tsaddik [sic]" (Pinsker 1975, 49), ennobles his suffering and acquires him exemplary value. As Malamud put it: "my heroes are not all professional victims. Morris Bober wanted to live. Morris Bober, Yakov Bok, Frank Alpine[7] wanted to live and become better. Morris in *The Assistant* is a being who believes in life, in the possibility of change despite his age" (1995, 65).

In Morris's funeral sermon, the Rabbi—who did not even know the man—almost makes fun of his good-heartedness, but also highlights his Jewishness in these terms: "Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart. […]. He followed the Law which God gave to Moses on Sinai and told him to bring to the people. He suffered, he endured, but with hope" (1967, 203). Morris's adherence to the Law is not the result of observance—he did not even bring Helen up as 'strictly' Jewish, and it is mentioned in the novel that he does not keep kosher either. However, his moral stance is enough to qualify him as Jewish, and as one who lives in the Law—despite, perhaps, not necessarily knowing it. While this is presented as a 'general attribute' of Morris, the issue of morality and moral standards as specifically 'Jewish' features is also made explicit through a series of thematic axes, along which the story develops; among such axes, that of the relationship between money and morality is core, and it is also one which highlights the possible similarities between *The Assistant* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

make consistently wrong decisions. In this light, Morris's attitude would seem more similar to that of a *schlimazel*, because his choices are dictated by bad luck as much as by ineptitude.

[5] As Levin in *A New Life* (Pinsker 1975).

[6] From *Per me non esiste altro*, a collection of thoughts and opinions on writing and living originally published with the title *Talking Horse* (1997); a selection of the contents was translated into Italian in a volume edited by Francesco Longo.

[7] The protagonists of *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*.

2.1 "The Cost of Living": Acting Around Money in The Assistant

Money and its relation to morality are relevant themes in *The Assistant*. Indeed, the symbolic potential of economic exchanges plays a central role in Malamud's production: everything has a cost, and that cost is hard to pay (Mortara 2021).

That this idea lies at the basis of *The Assistant* is testified by the publication, in 1950, of "The Cost of Living," a short story featuring some of the core character types which will inhabit the novel seven years later. The protagonist, Sam Tomashevsky, is a grocer whose not particularly profitable business is further threatened by the opening of a new store; while it is not made explicit, we can imagine Tomashevsky to be of Russian-Jewish origin—as he emigrated from the (now) Ukrainian town of Kamenets-Podolskiy. We thus know he shares a cultural as well as national background with Bober, and can suppose they also belong to the same religion.[8] Just like the grocer in *The Assistant*, moreover, Tomashevsky is haunted by the thought that he had better sell his store before business collapses, and eventually does, while with a good deal of heartache. Sam is a man of good intentions and no luck, a "fool," in the words of his wife Sura, whose morality and wish to act 'properly' prevent him from pursuing his interest—and in this, he is once again similar to Morris.

In the 1957 novel, the plot is more markedly tragic and characterized by a sense of irreparability, as if 'the cost of living' had exponentially increased in the seven years which elapsed between the two works; Bober's business is indeed already in full collapse and cannot survive the competition with a bigger neighboring store, H. Schmitz's. The thematic core of money and morality is thus further explored, developed and problematized. From the very beginning, the two are connected and, to a certain extent, interdependent. The 'cost of living' is, in fact, to be meant in moral as well as material terms, with bargaining being determined each time by one or the other—material needs are sometimes at the basis of moral choices and vice versa.

Let us take into account the behavior of the main characters: Frank Alpine starts stealing because of poverty—his moral sense is bent by a need that cannot be fulfilled otherwise. At the same time, when the moral price of his choices increases, materiality becomes secondary and is sacrificed in favor of a more righteous living. The ideal situation—*per se* difficult to find and live in—is substantiated in a balance between the two dimensions; in the novel, this only happens when Alpine takes over the management of the shop and, feeling entitled to it, steals only very

[8] Other elements concur to this hypothesis, as it is also mentioned, for example, that Sam's first shop opened in Williamsburg, a neighborhood commonly associated with a relevant Jewish presence since before World War II.

small sums of money to support himself. Such balance is only possible because of a proportionate 'ratio' between the moral and the material: Frank's earnings are meagre, as is the moral cost of the transaction; he feels like he deserves that money and is thus ready to pay the fair price for it. The fairness of the exchange, however, is determined on the basis of Frank's morality alone—and that is not enough to maintain such balance. The picture takes on extreme tones when he rapes Helen: Alpine feels like he can access Helen's body (her 'human capital') freely, without giving anything in return—unlike it happens with Morris instead, who, however unaware of Frank's stealing, benefits from the improved conditions of the shop. Overcome by self-disgust, Alpine establishes a parallelism between stealing and raping ("a single terrible act in the park"), the actions which will seal his destiny forever and which will equally concur to his failure: "hadn't he stolen from the cash register till the minute he was canned? In a single terrible act in the park hadn't he murdered the last of his good hopes, the love he had so long waited for—his chance at a future?" (1967, 174). In a bitterly ironic twist, the death implied in the use of the word *murder* will be Morris's, while Frank's future will be Judaism and married life with Helen. Eventually, nothing short of circumcision can be enough to restore balance: Helen's forgiveness is followed by (if not dependent on) Frank's conversion, his giving up a pound of his own flesh, which significantly closes the book.

How is this connected to the theme of money in *The Merchant of Venice*—and how is this further linked to the macro-theme of cultural identity? "[M]orality begins with what Shylock would call a *bond*" (Critchley and McCarthy 2004, 4). The morals of economy are notoriously central to the Shakespearean play, so much so that the *language* used abounds in mercantile metaphors—to put it as Critchley and McCarthy, "the extent to which [the play's] rhetoric is drenched in the diction of the market simply cannot be overstated" (Critchley and McCarthy 2004, 4). It is equally known that in structuring characters' relationships around money Shakespeare also played on the theme of mercy—one on which the cultural identities of Antonio, Bassanio, Lorenzo, Portia and Shylock are all based.[9] Similarly, personal relationships are describable and definable in economic terms—once again, Critchley and McCarthy speak of "moneying of love" (2004, 9). Thus, interdependency of owning and being, of possessing and acting, of selling and loving, is clearly established in a system of characters which sees the opposition of the Christian merchant to the Jewish usurer, equally definable in terms of how they act around money—just like it happens, with reversed roles, in *The Assistant*. In the novel, firm morality

[9] If mercy is to be meant in mercantile terms, the ways in which characters dispense it are assimilable to money exchanges. At the same time, mercy is a culturally defined notion, with different nuances in the Jewish and Christian systems.

and economic prosperity cannot go hand in hand without trouble; Morris's suffering, his lack of money and, in general, of luck, is strictly connected to his moral superiority. This aspect is so clear that it arose criticism in such writers as Philip Roth, whose famous 1974 article criticizing Malamud's work was at the core of a (temporary) drift in their otherwise close relationship:

> For Malamud, generally speaking, the Jew is innocent, passive, virtuous, and this to the degree that he defines himself or is defined by others as a Jew; the Gentile, on the other hand, is characteristically corrupt, violent, and lustful, particularly when he enters a room or a store or a cell with a Jew in it. (1974, np.)

However harsh Roth's words, we can agree that Morris's zaddiq-like wisdom ironically echoes Shylock's words: "For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe" (2013, I, 3, 107). With reference to this quote, Esther Menascé established a clear relation between the Malamudian hero and Shylock: "what is the reaction of Malamud's Jews to the hostilities of their surrounding environment? They bear them, they suffer" (1974, 272, my translation). However, as mentioned above, the relationship between the two characters (and, as a consequence, between other pairs through the two works) is not developed on a thematic, cultural, and quasi-philosophical level only. I maintain that the net of linkages established between the two articulates according to processes that pertain to a more specific 'textual' reading of the works as well. I decided to label such strategies 'mirror-overturn,' 'double metonymy' and 'explication.' These denominations are all clearly based on an idea of 'doubleness' inherent both to an intertextual reading *and* to the novel and its inner mechanisms per se; as it became clear to the very first reviewers of *The Assistant*, in fact, "There is this kind of dual-leveled, double-working meaning that begins to work through the story until, in the end, Frank himself becomes a Jew after Passover" (Goyen 1957, np.).

The second part of this paper will take these into account, mostly exploring them through a framework built on the concepts of interdiscursivity and transtextuality.

2.2 Terminological note: investigating the relationship between texts

> By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext)* to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext),* upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary. The use of the metaphoric "grafted" and of the negative determination underscores the provisional status of this definition. To view things differently, let us posit the general notion of a text in the second degree. (Genette 1982, 5)

The by now extremely famous distinction, on the part of Genette, of five types of relations among texts ("Five types of transtextuality"), provides a first step towards the analysis of the link

between William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*. The botanical metaphor of grafting allows me to schematize this relationship in terms which see *Merchant* as a hypotextual entity, with *The Assistant* being 'grafted' upon it through a process of "transformation" (Genette 1982, 5).

One issue emerges with apparent strength: apart from the resonance of the 'suffering' theme in the words of Shylock and Morris (Menascé 1974), Malamud does not mention Shakespeare's play nor Shylock explicitly, and much of the work of transformation happens on a level which is almost entirely hidden, subterranean and yet clearly perceived by the reader.[10] Moreover, Malamud's epitext is, in this respect, only indirectly helpful. In the same interview quoted above, when asked about his sources the author stated that "[w]hen I wrote *The Assistant*, I was very much influenced by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov and Frank Alpine, the hero of my novel, follow the same path. I have also been influenced by Chekhov" (1995, 68). Dostoyevsky is, quite undeniably, a strongly Shakespearean author—most relevantly, perhaps, a *hamletian* author.[11] Is there a chance that the Malamudian novel resulted (also) from an indirect Shakespearean filiation?

Given these premises, it would be easy to discard textual terminology in favor of something which sounds more 'comprehensive': *interdiscursivity*, particularly as meant by Segre with his attention to the notion of 'archetype,' could be a convenient concept to rely on. Segre writes: "For all those relations that a text, be it spoken or written, entertains with enunciations (or discourses) recorded and ideologically ordered […] in its corresponding culture, I propose we speak of *interdiscursivity*" (1984, 111, my translation). However, I believe that the intentionally wide spectrum of possibilities laid out by Genette may prove adequately flexible, and therefore better suited, at least as far as terminology goes, to the present case study.

A crucial element which brings me to consider *The Assistant* as a possible hypertext of *Merchant* is, moreover, the novel's ambiguity: "[i]n every hypertext there is an *ambiguity* that Riffaterre denies to intertextual reading" (Genette 1982, 397, emphasis in the original). As he states in the very last pages of *Palimpsests*, Genette does see the hypertext as autonomous and understandable *without reference to the hypotext*—yet, a sufficient understanding is not necessarily "exhaustive" (1982, 397). The case in point, when *The Assistant* is taken into account, would lie in the dubious moral judgment readers can express when faced with a

[10] On the subterranean presence of Shylock in a Jewish author see David Hillman's study of the Shylockean imagery in Sigmund Freud (2013).

[11] In a very recent account of Dostoyevsky's 'translation' of the Shakespearean play and character, Arpi Movsesian gave an overview of the impressive amount of work on the subject spanning from the 19th century to nowadays (2020).

character like Frank Alpine and his path from *goy* to Jew: how relevant is his final conversion, considering the violence he perpetrated against Helen? How are we even to understand the girl, who, while sincerely attached to her parents, is at the same time ashamed of her own social position? I maintain that a hypertextual reading could facilitate an understanding that, while perhaps not exhaustive, could add a further layer of meaning to the whole picture.

3. *The Merchant* as Hypotext

Genette distinguishes "simple transformation" or "transformation," regarded as a derivative process, from "indirect transformation" or "imitation" (1982, 7). Transformative relations include parody, travesty and transposition, while imitative ones include pastiche, caricature, even forgery. It is not always easy, in practice, to distinguish transformation from imitation—and this mainly because both processes imply that a certain degree of difference and similarity coexist. However, as Genette put it, a transformative act *produces new meaning*—while an imitative one maintains the same meaning as its hypotextual counterpart.

In this sense, the processes I identified at work within the relation between *Assistant* and *Merchant* would seem to bend more on the transformative side. All of them imply a state of re-actualizing co-presence, with the consequence of producing new meanings.

3.1 Mirroring overturn

This expression stands for the replication-with-variation implied in the relationship between Helen Bober and Frank Alpine, and more in general in their love affair developing throughout the novel. Mirror-images, in fact, are only apparently the same as their originals, and trick perception with their being—in terms of reference points and directions—the exact opposite.

The affair *per se* is the exact repetition of the union between Jessica and Lorenzo in *Merchant*: a Jewish woman and a Gentile man. The relationship between father- and son-in-law is marked, in both cases, by a more or less evident and violent vein of antagonism: both Shylock and Morris have to come to terms with their daughters' desire to be with a *goy*. However, the situation portrayed in *The Assistant* subverts and overturns some premises which are instead core in *Merchant*.

First of all, while Jessica's desire to move away from her paternal legacy is tainted by shame concerning her religious and ethnic background, for Helen such feelings of inadequacy come primarily from her socioeconomic status, and from the guilt attached to her sexual relationship with Nathan Pearl, which precedes the one with Frank. In this context, Helen's shame is, in a

way, an evolutionary stage of Jessica's, but also a powerful subversion of it. In Helen's world, there is no shame in being Jewish:

> Although she had only loosely[12] been brought up as Jewish she felt loyal to the Jews, more for what they had gone through than what she knew of their history or theology—loved them as people, thought with pride of herself as one of them; she had never imagined she would marry anybody but a Jew. (1967, 119)

And this is exactly what happens in the end, when she ends up in a relationship with a converted Jew—though at this time in the story, Helen of course does not know. The most evident overturn, in fact, can be found in the novel's ending: while Jessica converts to Christianity in order to marry Lorenzo, it is Frank, in *The Assistant*, who willingly decides to become a Jew. Shylock himself, at the end of the Shakespearean play, is forced to convert—while in Malamud's novel Morris dies a Jew and indeed his Jewishness is stressed all the more powerfully at his funeral. The antisemitic subtext of *The Merchant*, whose surface the "Hath not a Jew eyes" monologue can barely scratch, is subverted by a novel in which Jewish characters are markedly morally superior to their gentile counterparts. Indeed, the novel's praise of Morris's morality seems to stem from the same criticism which can be found in *Merchant*'s display of the "economies of mercy" (Marzola 2018). In her compelling article, Alessandra Marzola discusses the "often highlighted" "mercantile value of mercy" (2018, 20) and its relation to the less discussed issue of pity; in *The Assistant*, the divide between a merciful Christian and a merciless Jew is cancelled by the pervasive rule of the market which controls the lives of the characters, something which, according to Marzola, can also be spotted in *Merchant*, and that controls personal lives (including marriages) as well as business. In her words:

> Does Portia's famous address to the Jew's mercy in Act IV point to the Christian ways of forgiveness and redemption from the evil/devil of usurious exploitation? Is then the mercy Portia advocates the blazon of the Christian merchants in whose name she is pleading the Jew? Or is mercy instead a rhetorical construct, the cover of a mercilessness rooted in Christian and Jewish mercantilism alike? In fact, both questions could be answered in the affirmative, for the sublimating function of mercy and pity does not contradict their economic nature or their belonging to the play's economic transactions. (2018, 20-21)

In the Brooklyn milieu in which the story takes place, Morris cannot expect to be helped out by a fellow Jewish man (Julius Karp), who agrees to rent one of his properties to a chain store run by Germans, more than by the *goy* Frank or the criminal Wade Minogue. Yet, he remains "a

[12] Unlike Jessica.

true Jew." This is why critics like Aarons maintain that "what it means to be human, in Malamud's *oeuvre*, is the unshakeable recognition of shared suffering and the redemptive obligation to extend *compassion* to others" (2010, 682, my emphasis); she further claims that "Malamud's work asserts for an ethic of *rachmones*" (2010, 682), the combination of "mercy, pity and empathy"[13] which "lies at the heart of Jewish thought and feeling" (Rosten, quoted in Menascé 1974, 236). The fact that part of Frank's appreciation of Morris *depends* on the grocer's "gentleness" (2010, 79) resonates with these observations, and further reinforces the overturned values of mercified compassion which can be found in the novel, significantly entwined, through a subtle wordplay, with Frank's feelings for Helen: "He was gentle to Morris, and the Jew was gentle to him, and he was filled with a quiet gentleness for Helen and no longer climbed the air shaft to spy on her, naked in the bathroom" (1967, 79).

3.2 Double metonymy

The beginning of Helen and Frank's affair is marked by an episode which functions as a 'revelation' to Helen: the *Italyener* gives her a costly gift, which includes a leather-bound copy of Shakespeare's plays (1967, 101). The Renaissance author thus metonymically enters the scene through his work—and his work through him.

While surely motivated by the girl being an avid reader,[14] the choice of such a classic of English literature as a love token may suggest, and indeed does suggest, further meanings. One of them is explicitly hinted at by Malamud himself: much like Romeo and Juliet, Helen and Frank are "star-crossed lovers," at least at the beginning of their relationship, and when Helen gives the book back to Frank after they break up "[h]e tosse[s…] the box on the bed and the Shakespeare […falls] to the floor. She stop[s…] quickly to pick it up and […is] unnerved to see it […has] opened to 'Romeo and Juliet'" (1967, 102).

Yet, in the plethora of lovers populating Shakespearean plays, those who most evidently mirror the *Assistant* situation are, as discussed above, Jessica and Lorenzo. The significance of Helen's picking up the book and being somehow *touched* by it underlines Steiner's observations about Jewish relations to books and to the Book, their first-person addiction to textuality (2008):

> [Jewish people] testify to the pivot of the speech-act, to a covenant between being and meaning […]. The surprising turn is this: 'voiced' into being, sustained by an uninterrupted vocal commerce with its (*sic*) God, Jews become 'the people of the Book.' Addiction to

[13] https://jel.jewish-languages.org/. Last visited 08/06/2022.
[14] The two start awkwardly hanging out at the neighborhood's library.

> textuality has characterized, continues to characterize, Jewish practice and sentiment. (2008, 95-96)

Something which, while contrasting with Morris's apparent 'independence' from the written Law, reinforces Helen's bond with Jewishness, as well as Frank's.

The decision to label this operation *double metonymy* comes from the chain of relations that link the book to its author and to his play—the collected works, standing for Shakespeare, standing for *Merchant*. While perhaps closer to the Genettian "allusion" (part of intertextuality 'proper'), it has earned a place in the hypertextual net of relations identified by this analysis because it *contributes* to the re-actualization of themes and meanings derived from the specific play, and it does not consist in the 'actual' co-presence of two or more works in the same place.

3.3 Explication

The implications of Shylock's request for the infamous "pound of flesh" gave way to a number of interpretations, many of which centered around circumcision (Greenstadt 2013, 946-7). This inherently religious procedure has been explored in terms which, apart from establishing a *difference* between gentiles and Jewish people, *equalize* Jewish with Jewish, and only do so with males—thus establishing a kind of bond from which women are excluded and enhancing a homosocial view of male kinship. The sexual, "queer" (Greenstadt 2013, 948) subtext of *The Merchant* built on the Shakespearean *topos* of male friendship as 'kinship' resonates in the 1957 novel through a process of "explication": Frank's circumcision is not metaphorical, but very literal, with its good degree of discomforting pain. In this sense, it is an *explicit* version of the symbolic circumcision represented by the pound of flesh. While in *Merchant* the Jewish man is 'left out' of this exchange, for his request is not fulfilled and *he*, on the contrary, is forced to convert, in *The Assistant* things are rather different. The fact that Morris's and Frank's friendship pre-dates the young man's relationship with Helen is not just a matter of 'good mores'—the bond is, by all means, autonomous and prior (as discussed also above). Morris places himself and Frank on the same level during one of the novel's pivotal conversations:

> "Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews."
> "That's what I mean, they suffer more than they have to."
> "If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew don't suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing."
> "What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said.
> "I suffer for you," Morris said calmly.
> Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. "What do you mean?"
> "I mean you suffer for me." (1967, 113)

The specular correspondence between Morris and Frank precedes the grocer's doubts about Frank's ultimate honesty, doubts which make him "drag […] his heart" like a disappointed friend, or lover (1967, 115). Indeed, Frank *did* hurt Morris, and his interest in Helen is a further threat to their alliance/friendship. The scene portraying the discovery of Frank's betrayal reveals the decisive role of the girl in Morris's decision to shut Frank off:

> "Give me one last chance," Frank begged. "Morris, please." His face was gaunt, his eyes haunted, his beard like night.
> Morris, though moved by the man, thought of Helen.
> "No." (1967, 147)

In this sense, Frank's conversion is as much a step towards Helen *and* a way to make it up to Morris (though post-mortem) by accepting his modest teaching on Judaism. Thanks to the sexual implications realized *by proxy* via Frank's love for Helen, the universal brotherhood between Frank and Morris is thus realized; Ida's bittersweet prejudice against Frank (a *goy*) acquires a vein of jealousy and possessiveness when it becomes clear that the *Italyener* might be helping the family business in a way no one had before.

Somehow, while *Merchant* is "a marriage comedy obsessed with the specter of death" (Hillman 2013, 9), *The Assistant* is almost a 'death comedy' haunted by the specter of marriage. This would endorse a vision according to which the novel would stand as an instance of reversion in its own right.

4. Conclusion

The net of linkages between *Merchant* and *The Assistant* is not necessary to the understanding of Malamud's novel, but, once spotted, it enriches the reading experience as well as our conceptualization of the author as belonging to the Jewish-American tradition.

The shared thematic dimension of the economization of morality, indeed, places *The Assistant* and *Merchant* in a dialogue that touches upon similar issues of identity—characters clearly feature different ways to act around money which depend, among other things, and in more or less explicit ways, on their cultural background. However, a simple thematic approach would probably represent too weak a connection between the two works; this is why this paper has presented episodes of transtextual and interdiscursive links that more openly suggest an influence on the part of the play, and a productive re-elaboration of textual and cultural concerns in the novel.

Malamud's relationship to the binomial "Jewish-American writing" stands somewhat in-between a continuum spanning from full acceptance of the label to non-alignment (Grebstein in Field, 1975); while this short case study is by no means exhaustive of the topic, I believe transtextuality ("overt" or "undercover") and interdiscursivity to be phenomena a writer and a critic can rely on when questioning literary and cultural identity of authors.[15] In Malamud's case, the lack of overt quotations and allusions makes it hard to speak of intertextuality *tout court*; however, thanks to a more 'flexible' terminology as the one proposed by Segre, I believe the relationship between *The Assistant* and the cultural and literary discourse originating from Shakespeare's *Merchant* can be discussed on solid enough grounds, even expanding terminological reference to the paradigm proposed by Genette (1982).

Serena Demichelis *holds a PhD in Foreign Literatures and Languages from the University of Verona. She has published papers on Rachel Kushner, Jonathan Littell, Herman Melville and J.D. Salinger's short prose, which was also the focus of her doctoral research. She is part of the editorial staff at* Iperstoria. Journal of American and English Studies *and cooperates as copyeditor with* Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies.

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[15] A recent case in point involving Shakespeare being Paolo Simonetti's 2021 article (quoted above) "'You Dare to Compare Yourself to Shakespeare?' Philip Roth, American Bard."

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