Summary: Introduction

Written sometime between 1596 and 1598, The Merchant of Venice is classified as both an early Shakespearean comedy (more specifically, as a "Christian comedy") and as one of the Bard's problem plays; it is a work in which good triumphs over evil, but serious themes are examined and some issues remain unresolved.

In Merchant, Shakespeare wove together two ancient folk tales, one involving a vengeful, greedy creditor trying to exact a pound of flesh, the other involving a marriage suitor's choice among three chests and thereby winning his (or her) mate. Shakespeare's treatment of the first standard plot scheme centers around the villain of Merchant, the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who seeks a literal pound of flesh from his Christian opposite, the generous, faithful Antonio. Shakespeare's version of the chest-choosing device revolves around the play's Christian heroine Portia, who steers her lover Bassanio toward the correct humble casket and then successfully defends his bosom friend Antonio from Shylock's horrid legal suit.

In the modern, post-Holocaust readings of Merchant, the problem of anti-Semitism in the play has loomed large. A close reading of the text must acknowledge that Shylock is a stereotypical caricature of a cruel, money-obsessed medieval Jew, but it also suggests that Shakespeare's intentions in Merchant were not primarily anti-Semitic. Indeed, the dominant thematic complex in The Merchant of Venice is much more universal than specific religious or racial hatred; it spins around the polarity between the surface attractiveness of gold and the Christian qualities of mercy and compassion that lie beneath the flesh.

Summary: Synopsis

Summary of the Play

Bassanio, a Venetian nobleman with financial difficulties, wishes to compete for the hand of Portia, a wealthy heiress of Belmont, in order to restore his fortune. He asks his friend Antonio, a successful merchant of Venice, to loan him the money necessary to undertake such an attempt. Antonio agrees, but, as all of his assets are tied up at sea, he will have to use his credit in order to obtain the money for his friend. They go to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and enemy of Antonio’s. Shylock agrees to lend them 3000 ducats, but only if Antonio will sign a bond offering the usurer a pound of his flesh if the loan is not repaid in three months’ time. Despite Bassanio’s misgivings, Antonio assents to the arrangement.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia laments to her serving woman, Nerissa, the terms of her late father’s will. They state that whoever seeks to marry Portia must solve the riddle of the three caskets—one gold, one silver, one lead, each with an inscription—or, failing in the attempt, agree to remain a bachelor for the rest of his days. Various suitors attempt the test and fail, until Bassanio arrives. Portia favors him and is delighted when
he succeeds. His man, Gratiano, also proposes to Nerissa. She accepts.

But all is not well in Venice. Lorenzo, a friend of Bassanio and Antonio, elopes with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. This enrages Shylock, who vows to show no mercy should Antonio be unable to repay the loan. Much to the usurer’s delight, Antonio’s ships become lost at sea, placing him in financial jeopardy. Shylock has him arrested and waits eagerly to make good on the bond.

After Bassanio succeeds at the challenge of the caskets, Jessica and Lorenzo arrive in Belmont seeking refuge. Bassanio simultaneously receives a letter from Antonio, revealing his predicament. Having no time to perform the wedding services, Bassanio and Gratiano depart for Venice, promising to return. Leaving Jessica and Lorenzo in charge of her household, Portia, accompanied by Nerissa, secretly leaves for Venice.

In court before the parties concerned, Shylock appeals to the Duke of Venice for the fulfillment of his bond. The Duke is reluctant, but sees no legal way to prevent Shylock’s claim. Portia and Nerissa, disguised as a doctor of law and his clerk, arrive to help decide the case. Portia initially rules in favor of Shylock; before he can begin to cut, however, she points out that he is not entitled to spill any of Antonio’s blood. She finds him guilty, furthermore, of attempting to take the life of a Venetian citizen. At the mercy of the court, Shylock loses half of his possessions and is forced to convert to Christianity. He leaves in defeat.

In payment for her services, the disguised Portia asks Bassanio for a ring she had given him in Belmont on the condition that he would never part with it. He refuses, and she storms off in pretended anger. Antonio, however, prevails upon his friend to send the ring after the doctor for “his” services to them; Bassanio sends Gratiano, who also gives up the ring Nerissa gave him, with the same stipulation, to the clerk.

Portia and Nerissa arrive in Belmont. Pretending they never left, the two women demand to see the rings they gave their future husbands and feign outrage when they cannot produce them. Portia finally lets everyone off the hook and admits her and Nerissa’s roles in the events in Venice. She also gives Antonio a letter informing him that three of his ships have arrived safely in port, restoring his wealth. The group go to Portia’s house to celebrate.

**Estimated Reading Time**

As a rule, students should equip themselves with a well-annotated edition of the play, in order to smooth some of the friction between Elizabethan English and our own variety of the language. One hour per act is a rough guideline for the first read-through. This will vary, of course: Act V, which consists of only one scene, is obviously a great deal shorter than the rest; Acts II and III are longer than average. Certain scenes, such as Act IV, Scene 1, will command more attention than others, given their length and importance. Use your own discretion and realize that reading Shakespearean English—like encountering any rich and complicated variety of language—becomes easier the more one is exposed to it.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

As is typical of William Shakespeare’s comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* contains three interrelated plots. The merchant of the play’s title, Antonio, has cast his fortune into several ships laden with goods he purchased abroad and now awaits the ships’ return to Venice with some apprehension. When his dear young friend Bassanio asks him for the loan of a large sum of money he can use to impress Portia, a lady of Belmont whom he wishes to court, Antonio can only refer him to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, and offer himself as surety for the loan. Antonio and Shylock have been adversaries for some time; Antonio criticizes the Jew for charging usurious interest rates as he himself lends money without charging interest. Antonio’s antipathy for Shylock extends to mocking his way of life, and heaping insults on the Jew. Nonetheless, Shylock, who likewise expresses his hatred of Christians and their ways, agrees to the loan of three thousand ducats with the
curious condition that if Antonio fails to satisfy the debt when due, he shall forfeit a pound of his flesh.

Bassanio, amply provided with funds sufficient to impress Portia, travels to Belmont in grand style. There, he passes a test involving three caskets that other would-be suitors, including a prince of Morocco and a prince of Aragon, have failed, when he chooses a casket made of lead instead of gold or silver. This victory wins him the Portia’s hand in marriage. His companion, Gratiano, likewise gains the hand of Portia’s lady-in-waiting, Nerissa. A third couple, Antonio’s friend Lorenzo and Shylock’s runaway daughter, Jessica, round out the marriages that Shakespeare’s comedies typically celebrate.

The problematic pairing of Lorenzo and Jessica, whose relationship forms the third thread in the multiplotted play, adds real injury to the insults heaped on Shylock and fuels his resolve to seek revenge on the Christians of Venice. The couple goes to Belmont from Venice at the same time that Salerio, another of Antonio’s friends, travels there, and they all arrive on the very day of Bassanio’s success. Salerio bears a letter from Antonio describing the ruin of his merchant fleet and the necessity to repay Shylock. Thus the three strands of narrative come together and propel further action.

Immediately after the hastily arranged weddings and before they can be consummated, Portia dispatches Bassanio and Gratiano to Venice, offering to pay twenty times the debt on behalf of Antonio. Meanwhile, she has already conceived a plan to disguise herself as Balthazar, a doctor of the laws, sent by her cousin from Padua, the renowned Bellario, with Nerissa disguised as her clerk, to plead Antonio’s case before the Duke of Venice. This gender disguise is another hallmark of Shakespeare’s comedies and serves to heighten the legal contest that Portia, as architect of the plan to save Antonio, will undertake. Even before Portia’s arrival in Venice, Shylock has refused payment, even triple the debt, making it clear that he wants the pound of Antonio’s flesh. In his overwhelming anger at Antonio and those who would assist him, Shylock remains adamant on this point, time and again refusing to consider Portia’s plea for mercy.

When Portia finds in favor of Shylock’s cause, all appears lost for Antonio. As Antonio prepares for the worst, Portia cautions that according to the letter of the bond, Shylock is not allowed to draw a single drop of blood in cutting off his pound of flesh. With the tables turned, in true comic reversal, Shylock declares he will take the triple payment, but Portia declares that the offer is rescinded and that Shylock is entitled only to his bond. Further, since Shylock, an “alien,” seeks the life of a Venetian citizen, half the Jew’s goods are forfeited to Antonio, the intended victim, and the other half to the state, and the offender’s life may be spared only by the duke’s mercy. After the duke, unasked, pardons Shylock and suggests that the half of his fortune due to the state may be reduced to a fine, Antonio mercifully asks that the fine be waived and that, in return for the use of half of Shylock’s fortune while he lives, Antonio will render it unto Lorenzo and Jessica on her father’s death. Antonio further stipulates the conditions that Shylock convert to Christianity and that on Shylock’s death, his entire fortune will go to Lorenzo and Jessica.

As the trial is over, the disguised Portia claims to have pressing business in Padua. Before she leaves, Bassanio offers her a gift. Seeing his ring, Portia claims it, much to Bassanio’s discomfiture, so much so that he first refuses to give it to her and then sends Gratiano after her with it. Nerissa, still disguised as Balthasar’s clerk, likewise manages to get the ring she gave to Gratiano who, like Bassanio, has sworn never to part with his ring. In the play’s final scene at Belmont, Portia and Nerissa return the rings and reveal all, but not without first questioning their husbands about their lost rings and their broken pledges to wear them always. Portia also gives Antonio a letter revealing that three of his ships have arrived home filled with riches, thus concluding the comedy with happy endings for all but Shylock.

Additional Summary: Summary
Bassanio, meeting his wealthy friend Antonio, reveals that he has a plan for restoring the fortune he carelessly spent and for paying the debts he incurred. In the town of Belmont, not far from Venice, there lives a wealthy young woman named Portia, who is famous for her beauty. If he can secure some money, Bassanio declares, he is sure he can win her as his wife. Antonio replies that he has no funds at hand with which to supply his friend, as they are all invested in the ships he has at sea, but that he will attempt to borrow money for him in Venice.

Portia has many suitors for her hand. According to the strange conditions of her father’s will, however, anyone who wishes her for his wife has to choose correctly among three caskets of silver, gold, and lead the casket that contains the message that Portia is his. In case of failure, the suitors are compelled to swear never to reveal which casket they chose and never to woo another woman. Four of her suitors, seeing they cannot win her except under the conditions of the will, depart. A fifth, a Moor, decides to take his chances. The unfortunate man chooses the golden casket, which contains a skull and a mocking message. The prince of Arragon is the next suitor to try his luck. He chooses the silver casket, only to learn from the note it holds that he is a fool.

True to his promise to Bassanio, Antonio arranges to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, a wealthy Jew. Antonio is to have the use of the money for three months. If he finds himself unable to return the loan at the end of that time, Shylock is given the right to cut a pound of flesh from any part of Antonio’s body. Despite Bassanio’s objections, Antonio insists on accepting the terms, for he is sure his ships will return a month before the payment is due. He is confident that he will never fall into the power of the Jew, who hates Antonio because he often lends money to others without charging the interest Shylock demands.

That night, Bassanio plans a feast and a masque. In conspiracy with his friend, Lorenzo, he invites Shylock to be his guest. Lorenzo, taking advantage of her father’s absence, runs off with the Jew’s daughter, Jessica, who takes part of Shylock’s fortune with her. Shylock is cheated not only of his daughter and his ducats but also of his entertainment, for the wind suddenly changes and Bassanio sets sail for Belmont.

As the days pass, the Jew begins to hear news of mingled good and bad fortune. In Genoa, Jessica and Lorenzo are lavishly spending the money she took with her. The miser flinches at the reports of his daughter’s extravagance, but for compensation he has the news that Antonio’s ships, on which his continuing fortune depends, were wrecked at sea.

Portia, much taken with Bassanio when he comes to woo her, will have him wait before he tries to pick the right casket. Sure that he will fail as the others did, she hopes to have his company a little while longer. Bassanio, however, is impatient to try his luck. Not deceived by the ornateness of the gold and silver caskets, and philosophizing that true virtue is inward virtue, he chooses the lead box. In it is a portrait of Portia. He chose correctly. To seal their engagement, Portia gives Bassanio a ring. She declares he must never part with it, for if he does, it will signify the end of their love.

Gratiano, a friend who accompanied Bassanio to Belmont, speaks up. He is in love with Portia’s waiting-woman, Nerissa. With Portia’s delighted approval, Gratiano plans that both couples should be married at the same time.

Bassanio’s joy at his good fortune is soon blighted. Antonio writes that he is ruined, all his ships failing to return. The time for payment of the loan past due, Shylock demands his pound of flesh. In closing, Antonio declares that he clears Bassanio of his debt to him. He wishes only to see his friend once more before his death. Portia declares that the double wedding should take place at once. Then her husband will be able to set out for Venice in an attempt to buy off the Jew with her dowry of six thousand ducats.
After Bassanio and Gratiano depart, Portia declares to Lorenzo and Jessica, who had come to Belmont, that she and Nerissa are going to a nunnery, where they will live in seclusion until their husbands return. She commits the charge of her house and servants to Jessica and Lorenzo.

Instead of taking the course she described, however, Portia sets about executing other plans. She gives her servant, Balthasar, orders to take a note to her cousin, Doctor Bellario, a famous lawyer of Padua, in order to secure a message and some clothes from him. She explains to Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

The duke of Venice, before whom Antonio’s case is tried, is reluctant to exact the penalty in Shylock’s contract. When his appeals to the Jew’s better feelings go unheeded, he can see no course before him but to allow the moneylender his due. Bassanio tries to make Shylock relent by offering him the six thousand ducats, but, like the duke, he meets only a firm refusal.

Portia, dressed as a lawyer, and Nerissa, disguised as her clerk, appear in the court. Nerissa offers the duke a letter from Doctor Bellario, in which the doctor explains that he is very ill, but that Balthasar, his young representative, will present his opinion in the dispute.

When Portia appeals to the Jew’s mercy, Shylock merely demands the penalty. Portia then declares that the Jew, under the letter of the contract, cannot be offered money in exchange for Antonio’s release. The only alternative is for the merchant to forfeit his flesh.

Antonio prepares his bosom for the knife, for Shylock is determined to take his portion as close to his enemy’s heart as he can cut. Before the operation can begin, however, Portia, examining the contract, declares that it contains no clause stating that Shylock can have any blood with the flesh. The Jew, realizing that he is defeated, offers at once to accept the six thousand ducats, but Portia declares that he is not entitled to the money he already refused. She states also that Shylock, an alien, threatened the life of a Venetian citizen. For that crime Antonio has the right to seize half of his property and the state the remainder.

Antonio refuses that penalty, but it is agreed that one-half of Shylock’s fortune should go at once to Jessica and Lorenzo. Shylock is to keep the remainder, but it is to be willed to the couple after his death. In addition, Shylock is to undergo conversion. The defeated man has no choice but to agree to the terms.

Pressed to accept a reward, Portia takes only a pair of Antonio’s gloves and the ring that she herself gave Bassanio. Nerissa, likewise, manages to secure Gratiano’s ring. Then Portia and Nerissa start back for Belmont, to be there when their husbands return. They arrive home shortly before Bassanio and Gratiano appear in company with Antonio. Pretending to discover that their husbands’ rings are missing, Portia and Nerissa at first accuse Bassanio and Gratiano of unfaithfulness. At last, to the surprise of all, they reveal their secret, which is vouched for by a letter from Doctor Bellario. For Jessica and Lorenzo, they have the good news of their future inheritance, and for Antonio a letter, secured by chance, announcing that some of his ships arrived safely in port after all.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act I, Scenes 1-3: Summary and Analysis**

**Act I, Scene 1**

**New Characters:**
Antonio: a merchant of Venice
Salerio and Solanio: friends to Bassanio and Antonio
Bassanio: a young gentleman of Venice, friend of Antonio
Lorenzo: friend of Bassanio and Antonio, loves Jessica
Gratiano: friend of Bassanio and Antonio

Summary
In Venice, Antonio is depressed, though he is uncertain why. Salerio and Solanio try to account for his sadness by suggesting he is worried about his merchant ships sailing in dangerous waters. Antonio denies this, but can suggest nothing in its place. Salerio and Solanio leave as Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano enter. Gratiano and Lorenzo jest with Antonio, lifting his spirits slightly, before departing.

Left alone, Bassanio apologizes to Antonio for owing him a great deal of money. Antonio tells him not to worry about it. Bassanio then informs Antonio of a wealthy heiress in Belmont whom he wishes to court. The trouble is, he needs to borrow more money from Antonio to outfit himself properly, in order to compete with the many wealthier suitors. Bassanio suggests that, with a little more money, he will improve his chances of repaying his debt to his friend. Marrying the heiress will solve all of Bassanio’s financial problems. Antonio readily agrees to this plan; however, as all of his capital is tied up at the moment with his ships, he will be unable to lend money directly. Bassanio instead can use Antonio’s name to obtain credit.

Analysis
This scene is primarily exposition, conversation made to fill the audience in on the various circumstances leading up to the events of the play. The audience learns about Antonio’s generosity and successful business standing, Bassanio’s present financial embarrassments, and the prospect of Portia’s wealth as the solution to the latter’s problems. Crucial financial information about Antonio—which will account for his future predicament—is revealed. His ships are out to sea, tying up his available assets, and this will lead him to seek a loan from Shylock. The news that his ships have been wrecked will make Antonio unable to repay the money.

Act I, Scene 2
New Characters:
Portia: the wealthy heiress of Belmont
Nerissa: her waiting woman

Summary
In Belmont, Portia confides to Nerissa her distaste for the provisions of her father’s will. Portia’s father devised a test for anyone seeking her hand in marriage. A would-be suitor must choose among three caskets (ornamental boxes)—one gold, one silver, one lead—one of which contains permission to marry Portia. The suitor must agree, however, that if he makes a wrong choice, he will spend the rest of his days single. This situation is aggravated by Portia’s complete distaste for any of her potential husbands. Nerissa names them all, while Portia enumerates her particular dislikes of each. She takes heart in the news that each has announced he will return home, fearing the strict consequences of her father’s test. The two women suddenly remember Bassanio, whom they find more appealing; however, they are interrupted in their praise by a messenger who declares that her suitors seek an audience with her, and that a new contestant, the Prince of Morocco, will arrive soon.

Analysis
This short scene primarily serves as the audience’s introduction to the plot of the three caskets, which determines who may marry Portia. The test of the caskets will be performed three times in the play, by Morocco in Act II, Scene 8, Aragon in Act II, Scene 9, and Bassanio in Act III, Scene 2. The audience learns
here of Portia’s inclination toward Bassanio. Her resentment of her father’s will is also significant; Portia is too independent to be told what to do, as becomes clear when, later in the play, she takes matters into her own hands to resolve Antonio’s plight. Apart from these important introductions, the substance of the scene is largely comic, a series of jokes based on various prevailing national and ethnic stereotypes as Portia disdains each suitor in turn. As is the case with much of Shakespeare, this scene is an excuse for the playwright to exercise his linguistic ingenuity in constructing clever sentences, such as “When he is best he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst he is little better than a beast” (lines 86-88).

Act I, Scene 3
New Character:
Shylock: a Jewish moneylender of Venice

Summary
In Venice, Bassanio negotiates with Shylock to borrow three thousand ducats (monetary units) for three months, for which “Antonio shall be bound.” Shylock doesn’t agree immediately, but wishes to speak to Antonio first. Antonio enters, provoking Shylock to vent his hatred of him in an aside. Shylock claims to hate Antonio for being a Christian, for loaning money to people in need without charging interest, and for publicly slandering Shylock’s own business practices. Antonio, despite his customary scruples against usury (moneylending for interest), personally asks Shylock to loan Bassanio the money. Still Shylock hesitates, reminding Antonio of the merchant’s past ill-treatment of him and suggesting Antonio’s hypocrisy in now coming to him for a favor. Antonio is unrepentant, however, claiming that they needn’t be friends in order to do business together.

Shylock then turns the tables on his adversaries, suddenly announcing his intention to loan Bassanio the money out of “kindness,” i.e., without charging interest. There is one catch, however: Antonio must go with Shylock to a notary and sign an agreement stating that if he fails to repay the loan on time, he must allow Shylock to cut off a pound of his flesh. Shylock claims this is “merry sport,” and Antonio readily agrees, treating the whole affair as a gag. Bassanio, however, is alarmed at this arrangement and insists Antonio not enter into the bargain. Antonio is not convinced of any real danger, however, and agrees to meet with Shylock “forthwith” to sign the bond.

Analysis
This is the most complicated scene thus far in the play. Its function is to establish the second major complication of the plot, the bond for a pound of Antonio’s flesh. It also introduces the audience to Shylock, possibly the most engaging character in the play. Beyond these plot considerations, however, the ramifications of this scene are immense.

The appearance of Shylock announces two of the play’s central issues: the relationship between Jews and Christians, and the Venetian—and by association, the Elizabethan—attitude toward usury. The animosity between Christians and Jews is almost immediately established as the scene unfolds, and, although it is Shylock who first calls these matters to the audience’s attention, Antonio confirms that the hostility is mutual. The fact that Shylock is referred to as “the Jew” by the others suggests that their contempt for him is more than merely personal; to them, Shylock represents a group whom they are compelled to dislike for religious and even racial reasons.

It is perhaps impossible for us to decide how much of the animosity between the two Christians and Shylock is personal and how much is based on group identity. Indeed, the characters move between both sets of reasons as if there were no distinction between them, or as if their identities guaranteed the nature of their personal relations. Shylock initiates hostilities in this scene, informing Bassanio that, although he will transact business with him, “I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (lines 34-5). Shylock makes it clear in his speech—with the reference to “pork,” a food many Jewish sects forbid its members to
consume—that even their culinary differences are religious. His initial expression of disgust for Antonio is explicitly religion-oriented: “I hate him for he is a Christian” (line 39).

Shylock’s bitterness, however, next becomes a business matter; Antonio’s interest-free loans to the needy “[bring] down/ The rate of usance” in Venice, affecting the usurer’s profits. His complaint against Antonio then takes a personal turn, as Shylock recalls, “he rails/ Even there where merchants most do congregate,/ On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,/ Which he calls interest” (lines 45-8). The personal tenor of Shylock’s hatred is magnified in a later speech, when he confronts Antonio: “You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,/ And spit [spit] upon my Jewish gabardine,/ And all for use of that which is mine own” (lines 108-10). Clearly the religious dispute has moved to the level of personal insult, even to mild scuffling. Antonio shows no remorse in the face of such accusations, however, justifying his behavior on moral principles.

The issue of usury seems inextricable from the religious bickering. Antonio equally despises Shylock for his moneymaking practices as for his religion and race. It is as if commerce and religion are the same; Antonio’s contempt for Shylock’s usury may stem from his Christian faith, while for Shylock, there is no contradiction between his profession and his religious convictions. There is, obviously, no one interpretation of this scene which can satisfy all of its possibilities. The Elizabethan distaste for usury no doubt inclined the play’s original audience to side with Antonio on this matter. If this is the case, however, we might, along with Shylock, detect a certain hypocrisy in Antonio’s coming to him for a loan in a time of need. His principles bend to practical considerations, much like Elizabethan law, which made usury illegal but left provisions that it wouldn’t be punished if the interest rate was less than 10%. An audience’s feelings about Shylock matter a great deal in this scene, for either he will appear as justifiably resentful of Antonio’s seemingly-unprovoked treatment of him, or else as deserving such treatment for his beliefs and practices.

One final aspect of this scene that has been a source of contention among critics concerns the agreement of a pound of flesh as collateral for the loan. Shylock twice refers to the arrangement as “merry,” as though the whole affair is in no way a serious one. Some readers of the play have taken him at his word; they believe that he only becomes serious in his demand after Lorenzo, Antonio’s friend, runs off with Shylock’s daughter Jessica, who in turn steals some of her father’s money and possessions. Others argue that the entire arrangement is from start to finish motivated by Shylock’s desire for revenge against Antonio.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act II, Scenes 1-9: Summary and Analysis**

**Act II, Scene 1**

**New Character:**
Morocco: an African prince, suitor to Portia

**Summary**
The Prince of Morocco arrives at Portia’s house in Belmont, seeking her hand in marriage. He asks Portia to disregard their racial difference and judge him instead by his personal merits. Portia reminds Morocco that the choice is not hers to make; he, like the other suitors, must face her father’s challenge of the three caskets. She assures him, however, that she regards him “as fair/ As any comer [she has] looked on yet/ For [her] affection” (lines 20-22). Morocco laments that, in spite of his valor, mere chance may deprive him of Portia. Portia refers him to the terms of her father’s will, which he accepts. They agree to perform the test after dinner.

**Analysis**
This short scene introduces the audience to the Prince of Morocco, who will make the first unsuccessful
attempt to pass the test designed by Portia’s father to determine who will marry her. In terms of the play’s themes, its chief interest is its explorations of racial animosity, which we have seen earlier in the encounter between Shylock and the two Christians. Morocco requests that Portia “Mislike [him] not for [his] complexion” (line 1) but rather consider him for his personal worth. Although Portia claims that this is her policy, the sincerity of her claim is later called into question at the close of Act II Scene 7. After Morocco fails the test and departs, Portia says in relief “A gentle riddance…/ Let all of his complexion choose me so” (lines 78-9). Unlike Shakespeare’s contemporaries, who may have endorsed such sentiments, more modern audiences might perhaps have an ugly impression of the attitudes of the Christians in the play. Though Morocco is a minor character, such scenes may inform the audience’s feeling about Shylock and his indictments of Christian hypocrisy.

Act II, Scene 2
New Characters:
Launcelot Gobbo: ex-servant of Shylock
Old Gobbo: Launcelot’s father
Leonardo: servant of Bassanio

Summary
This scene opens with Launcelot Gobbo debating whether or not to leave Shylock’s service. Just as he decides to quit, his near-blind father, Old Gobbo, arrives with a gift for Shylock. Since his father doesn’t recognize him, Launcelot toys with him for a time before revealing his identity. He asks his father to give the gift instead to Bassanio—who subsequently enters with Leonardo—as a means of begging a position in his household. The Gobbos make their pitch and Bassanio accepts, hiring Launcelot on the spot. Bassanio then dispatches Leonardo to prepare his household to receive Antonio for dinner. Gratiano enters and asks Bassanio if he may attend him on his journey to Belmont. Bassanio agrees, but not before cautioning Gratiano to curtail his ribaldry.

Analysis
Little of this scene actually bears much relation to the plot of the play, save the establishment of Gratiano as Bassanio’s attendant. It is more or less an excuse for Shakespeare to indulge his audience with a bit of linguistic comedy, in the form of the Three Stooges-like double-talk spoken by the Gobbos. We should note, however, that even in a scene as light as this one, Shakespeare keeps the issue of racial hostility before his audience. Launcelot’s desire to leave Shylock’s employ stems largely from the fact that his boss is Jewish, coupled with his belief that the Jew “is a kind of devil” (line 24). Significantly, Shylock is never referred to in this scene by name, but simply as “the Jew.”

Act II, Scene 3
New Character:
Jessica: daughter of Shylock

Summary
At Shylock’s house, Jessica, his daughter, bids farewell to Launcelot as he prepares to leave her father’s service. She entreats him to deliver a message to Lorenzo. After he departs, she expresses her desire to marry Lorenzo and become a Christian.

Analysis
This scene sets in motion another important subplot—the romance between Shylock’s daughter and Bassanio’s and Antonio’s friend. Some critics speculate that it is Jessica’s departure with Lorenzo, coupled with her theft of her father’s money and jewels, that pushes Shylock over the edge and provokes him to pursue
the pound of Antonio’s flesh in earnest. (Others, of course, claim that this was Shylock’s intention all along.) The anti-Semitism of the play is fueled here by Jessica’s own self-loathing, i.e., her desire to shed her own religion and become a Christian.

Act II, Scene 4
Summary
Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio, and Solanio prepare for an evening of street festivities. Launcelot arrives to deliver Jessica’s message to Lorenzo. Lorenzo sends Launcelot back with the reply “I will not fail her,” and instructs the messenger to “Speak it privately.” Lorenzo explains to Gratiano Jessica’s plan to flee her father.

Analysis
This is essentially a development of the subplot begun in Act II, Scene 3, confirming the plan on Lorenzo’s end. Lorenzo magnifies the Christians’ dislike of “Jew-for-Jews sake” in the following lines: “And never dare misfortune cross [Jessica’s] foot,/ Unless she [i.e., misfortune] do it under the excuse,/ That she [Jessica] is issue to a faithless Jew” (lines 35-37). In other words, Lorenzo perceives the “flaw” of Jessica’s Jewishness as potentially outweighing her personal merits.

Act II, Scene 5
Summary
Launcelot has come to Shylock’s house to deliver the invitation for the usurer to dine with Bassanio and Antonio. Shylock apparently overcomes his earlier religious scruple against dining with the Christians and accepts. He cautions his daughter against the Christian masquers (street-revelers); she is instructed to keep the house shut tight. Before departing, Launcelot secretly informs Jessica that Lorenzo will come by that night. Shylock quizzes his daughter on what just passed between her and Launcelot, but she throws him off the scent. He expresses satisfaction at having Launcelot leave his employ, and then exits to dine at Bassanio’s house. Jessica prepares to flee.

Analysis
Like the two preceding scenes and the scene to follow, Act II, Scene 5 sets up the circumstances under which Jessica can rob her father and escape with Lorenzo. This scene perhaps fuels the interpretation that only after Jessica’s flight does Shylock become serious in his desire to kill Antonio, as we might well imagine Shylock’s feeling duped by the Christians (as though Bassanio lured him away with the invitation to dinner so Lorenzo and Jessica could elope).

Act II, Scene 6
Summary
Gratiano and Salerio, dressed for the street festivities, stand before Shylock’s house, awaiting Lorenzo. As soon as he arrives, Jessica appears “above” (i.e. on the second level of the Elizabethan stage, presumably the second floor of Shylock’s residence), disguised as a boy. Lorenzo recognizes her and identifies himself. He asks her to come down and be his torchbearer for the revelry, although she is embarrassed at her present appearance. Lorenzo persuades her to descend; on her way out, Jessica pilfers more ducats from her father. Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio depart as Antonio arrives. He detains Gratiano, informing him that the masque is canceled and Bassanio shall sail that evening. This suits Gratiano, and the two men exit to prepare.

Analysis
This scene more or less wraps up the subplot of Jessica’s and Lorenzo’s elopement, though its consequences—primarily consisting of Shylock’s rage—will continue to be felt throughout the play. Jessica and Lorenzo will flee to Belmont, Portia’s region, and will mind her household in her absence.

In many of Shakespeare’s comedies, there are two separate locales, the court, where normal business occurs according to fairly rigid codes, and a more magical realm where rules are suspended and transformation is
possible. In such plays, characters from the first realm visit the second and, on their return to the first, feel renewed. It may be Jessica’s and Lorenzo’s flight to Belmont and the play’s romantic final act which have encouraged some critics to fit The Merchant of Venice into this structural pattern. According to such an outline, Venice would be the narrow rule-bound court while Belmont serves as the enchanted land, just like the forest of Arden in As You Like It or the woods outside Athens in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. But this is an over-simplification of The Merchant, a critical attempt to force it into a pre-ordained pattern rather than attend to the play’s particulars. It ignores, for one, the circumstance of Portia’s father’s will and the challenge of the three caskets. Belmont seems to be as strictly bound by legality and technicality as Venice, and much of the play is devoted to subverting or accommodating the letter of the law in both cities. If anything, The Merchant of Venice might foreshadow Shakespeare’s later, so-called “problem comedies,” such as Measure for Measure, in which the levity is tempered by threats of danger. The possibility exists that Portia could end up with an undesirable husband, and the threat to Antonio’s life according to the terms of Shylock’s bond casts an even darker shadow.

Act II, Scene 7
Summary
Meanwhile, back in Belmont, Morocco prepares to undergo the challenge of the three caskets in order to win Portia’s hand, while the lady in question looks on. The prince surveys each casket and its inscription. The first is made of gold and bears the message “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.” The second, of silver, reads “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.” The third, finally, is made of lead and warns “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” Portia informs Morocco that the correct casket contains her picture, signifying success. The prince then deliberates for some time, weighing both factors: the material of each casket and the message on it. By a process of elimination, he chooses the gold one. Much to his chagrin, it contains a death’s head and a scroll informing him of his error. Upset, the prince makes a graceful but hasty exit, and Portia expresses her relief at his lack of success.

Analysis
This is the first of three scenes (Act II, Scene 7, Act II, Scene 9, and Act III, Scene 2) displaying the challenge of the three caskets in action. The interest these scenes generate is, in some respects, not a dramatic one, for although the fear of an undesirable marriage is a very real one for Portia, it is a great deal less of one for her audience. Indeed, the progressive workings of these scenes are so formulaic that they are almost without any drama at all. Each of the three caskets is successively chosen by each of the three suitors, no choice is repeated, and, of course, the winning casket is the last one picked. By the time Bassanio arrives in Belmont, the audience is well aware of which choice is correct and is simply waiting for him to make it. This contrived inevitability need not be considered a flaw, however; unlike, say, the final scene of a detective drama, where plot and plausibility are of extreme importance, one doesn’t read Shakespearean comedy with such demands. The spirit of comedy here suspends issues of realistic plausibility.

The question then becomes, what is the interest these scenes hold for an audience? (Remember, Shakespeare was a successful and popular showman. He wouldn’t have dropped three such scenes into his play unless they had other, non-dramatic attractions.) The value of these scenes, perhaps, lies in the issues of reading and interpretation which they bring to the foreground. Indeed, the bulk of Act II, Scene 7 (lines 13-60) is devoted to the reasoning process by which Morocco arrives at his choice of the gold casket. What the challenge of the caskets reveals is the flexibility and ambiguity of language, and in this revelation, a reader or theater-goer may find an analogy to his or her own experience of the play. As the need or desire to analyze Shakespeare’s plays has already made us aware, certain displays of language require interpretation in order for someone to be able to act on them or even to decide what to think about them. The suitors of Portia engage in a task not terribly different from the audience’s own, or from the director’s own when he or she decides, for example, how the part of Shylock ought to be acted.
It is important to remember that the choice of the lead casket is only obvious and inevitable in hindsight; Morocco is not to be deemed a fool for his incorrect choice. We might even say that, of all of Portia’s suitors, the Prince is the one most unfairly duped by the process of casket selection. His interpretation of the inscription “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire” as signifying Portia is a sound one, for as he points out, “All the world desires her;/ From the four corners of the earth they come/ To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint” (lines 38-40). The courting of Portia is central to The Merchant of Venice; it sets the entire plot in motion, as Bassanio’s need of additional capital to outfit himself is the reason Antonio becomes indebted to Shylock in the first place. Perpetual chastity—the penalty for choosing the wrong casket—is a highly improbable interpretation of “what many men desire.” It is, indeed, the opposite of desire. Whereas it is relatively easy to imagine the silver casket’s inscription as the wrong choice (i.e., the man in question may not “deserve” Portia and may rather deserve the punishment for his presumptuousness), an audience may very well feel that Morocco has been lied to.

The underhandedness with which Morocco is treated might be, however, in keeping with the racial hostilities permeating the play. As Shylock is automatically excluded by the others for his Jewishness, the Prince is disliked, among other reasons perhaps, for his skin color. Morocco’s first utterance in the play (line 1) is a plea for racial tolerance; he is on the defensive at the outset. Although Portia assures him in Act II, Scene 1 that his race is not a factor in her acceptance—and we must assume this is true, insofar as, by the rules of her father’s will, Portia must marry whoever makes the right choice—her tolerance is called into question at the end of this scene. After Morocco departs, Portia breathes a sigh of relief and says “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (line 79), continuing the theme in the play that one is automatically included or excluded from the circle of favorable people in Christian society according to one’s religion or race. Portia can’t even imagine meeting a black man who could satisfy her and dismisses “all” of them in one sentence.

Act II, Scene 8
Summary
This scene consists entirely of a brief conversation between Salerio and Solanio, aimed at informing the audience of a variety of events which have occurred while the scene in Belmont was taking place. The audience learns that Shylock has discovered his deception, that his daughter has run off with his money and Lorenzo. Shylock is white with rage, much to the amusement of Christian Venice. Salerio reveals that Bassanio’s ship is underway for Belmont. He also reports the news that a Venetian vessel has been wrecked in the English Channel, and worries that it might be Antonio’s. Solanio recalls witnessing Bassanio’s departure, and Antonio’s melancholy at their separation. Salerio and Solanio resolve to seek Antonio out to attempt to cheer him.

Analysis
This is another scene of pure exposition, providing the audience with information crucial to advancing various strains of the plot as they currently stand. Some critics have made much of Shylock’s confused lamentation concerning his daughter and his ducats, ascribing various aspects to his character based upon his equating of the two. One ought to keep in mind, however, that this is a reported speech; the audience doesn’t witness Shylock making such a spectacle, which mitigates the speech’s effect on the audience.

Other critics have suggested the possibility of a homosexual relationship between Bassanio and Antonio, or at least a strong homosexual attachment to his friend on Antonio’s part. It could be argued that Antonio’s general sadness throughout the play stems from the prospect of his intimate friend turning away from their love by entering a heterosexual partnership with Portia. While the evidence of a sexual friendship between Bassanio and Antonio is too scant to insist on, it is clear that the latter’s attachment for the former extends beyond the bounds of simple friendship. Not only does Antonio loan Bassanio money with only a shaky prospect of repayment, but he freely and willingly risks his life for his friend’s happiness. Clearly Bassanio is Antonio’s primary attachment, which makes it no surprise that, in a play that ends with three marriages, Antonio remains conspicuously single.
Act II, Scene 9  
**New Character:**  
Aragon: a prince, suitor to Portia

**Summary**  
The Prince of Aragon undertakes the challenge of the caskets to win Portia’s hand, agreeing to abide by the rules of her father’s will. He dismisses the lead casket immediately, not thinking it worth the “hazard.” He next considers the golden chest, reading its inscription of “what many men desire” as implying a lack of discrimination. Finally, he selects the silver, believing he must “deserve” that which he seeks. Much to his dismay, however, the silver casket contains a fool’s head and a scroll informing him of his error. Aragon leaves. A messenger then arrives, informing Portia that a Venetian lord is on his way to try to win her. Nerissa hopes aloud that it is Bassanio.

**Analysis**  
This is the second of the three casket selecting scenes. Aragon is a bolder, less-subtle reasoner than Morocco and makes his incorrect choice quickly, firm in his belief of his own merit. Yet for that, his justification for choosing the silver casket is an eloquent one and may arouse an audience’s admiration. The casket’s own interpretation of what its selector “deserves” (i.e. the presumptuous man is a fool and deserves to be treated to a fool’s head) is, however, a more justifiable one than that of the gold casket.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act III, Scenes 1-5: Summary and Analysis**

**Act III, Scene 1**  
**New Character:**  
Tubal: a Jewish friend of Shylock

**Summary**  
In Venice, Salerio and Solanio discuss Antonio’s financial state. Salerio has received confirmation that one of Antonio’s merchant vessels was wrecked in the English channel. As the two lament this ill news, Shylock enters. He is bitter with both men for their knowledge of Jessica’s elopement before the fact, but they simply mock him in return. The conversation turns to Antonio, on whom Shylock is intent on wreaking his revenge according to the terms of the bond. Salerio asks Shylock what good a pound of Antonio’s flesh will do him, but Shylock dismisses this line of questioning as irrelevant. He is after vengeance, not reimbursement.

Salerio and Solanio learn from a messenger that Antonio awaits them at his house. As they leave, a friend of Shylock’s, Tubal, arrives with news concerning both Jessica and Antonio. In Genoa, Tubal learned that another of Antonio’s ships was lost coming away from Tripoli. Shylock rejoices at the news, but this is soon tempered by the knowledge that Jessica has been frivolously spending his money. He is dismayed to find that she has traded (for a monkey) a ring given him by his wife, but Tubal comforts him by reminding him of Antonio’s bad luck. Shylock asks Tubal to arrange to have an officer arrest Antonio, and they part, making plans to meet later at their synagogue.

**Analysis**  
The plot thickens for Antonio, threatening to make him a pound thinner. Not one, but two, of his ships, the audience learns, have come to ruin, throwing his finances into chaos and bankruptcy. Shylock already feels he has grounds to detain the merchant, in order to insure his adherence to the terms of their bond. The next time Antonio appears on stage (Act III, Scene 3), he will be in the custody of a jailer.
As is the case in most scenes in which he appears, however, Shylock steals the show here. He utters one of the most famous speeches of the play, if not of Shakespeare generally, the “Hath not a Jew eyes?” monologue (lines 55-69). This speech may initially strike a reader or audience member as an eloquent plea for racial and religious harmony, climaxing in the dramatic lines, “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?” (lines 61-63). There is, however, a sinister undercurrent running throughout the speech; Shylock follows the above lines with “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” (line 63). In this line, the plea for harmony explicitly spills over into the harsher “eye-for-an-eye” sentiments of Mosaic Law. Keep in mind that the tension in this speech is between its forceful eloquence and its purpose as a justification for performing brutal violence against Antonio. The skilled talkers in Shakespeare’s plays—be they as silly as Polonius in Hamlet or as repulsive as Caliban in The Tempest—always command an audience’s attention and consideration. One must acknowledge a certain righteousness in Shylock’s position. He has been abused at the hands of the Christians before, and now he has just cause to suspect Antonio’s complicity in his daughter’s flight.

One interesting detail which perhaps does more than any other to humanize Shylock and enlist audience sympathy is his grief over the loss of a ring given him by his wife (whose absence from Shylock’s household throughout the play may indicate that he is a widower). Shylock’s outrage over his daughter’s theft moves from the economic to the personal, as he wouldn’t have parted with this item for any price. The audience may be more perplexed than ever at the end of this scene, as both Shylock’s venom and his humanity increase.

**Act III, Scene 2**

**Summary**

Act III, Scene 2 contains the first major climactic moment in the play, as one of its two main plots—Bassanio’s quest for Portia and the challenge of the three caskets—comes to a resolution. The scene opens with Bassanio and his attendants at Portia’s house in Belmont. For the first time in The Merchant of Venice, Portia exhibits enthusiasm for her potential suitor. She bids Bassanio to delay his choice, so that, in the event of his failure, they will still have had a chance to spend time together. Bassanio refuses, however, impatient to get the trial over with. Portia makes a speech praising him and wishing him success. A song is sung while Bassanio deliberates in silence.

After the song, Bassanio reasons aloud over the caskets. Unlike his predecessors, Bassanio primarily concentrates on the material of the caskets rather than the descriptions. Distrusting the lure of appearance, he chooses the leaden one, which contains a picture of Portia and a congratulatory note. Bassanio kisses Portia, according to the instructions. Portia proclaims her unworthiness, before giving herself and all of her possessions over to Bassanio. She offers him a ring, with the proviso that if he take it from his finger or lose it, he indicates the end of his love for her. Bassanio swears to keep the ring, till death do them part.

In the mirth which ensues, Gratiano suddenly reveals that he and Nerissa are to be wed and receives permission to do so at Bassanio’s and Portia’s wedding. At that moment, Salerio arrives from Venice, accompanied by the fugitives, Jessica and Lorenzo. Salerio delivers a letter from Antonio to Bassanio. As Bassanio reads, Portia observes that he loses his gaiety, and she demands to know the message. Bassanio reveals to her his indebtedness to Antonio and the fact that all of the latter’s ventures at sea have failed. Salerio informs his friends of Shylock’s absolute refusal to settle for anything less than the terms of his bond (i.e., the pound of Antonio’s flesh).

Perceiving the closeness between her future husband and his friend, Portia offers to pay the debt to Shylock twelve times over. All she requests is that Bassanio marry her before setting out. When she discovers that Antonio’s life is at stake and that he begs to see Bassanio one last time before dying, however, Portia dispatches Bassanio immediately. He promises to return as soon as possible.
Analysis
Act III, Scene 2 is one of the longest and most important scenes in the entire play. Its primary purpose is to show how Bassanio solves the riddle of the caskets and win Portia. Beyond that, it sets up or continues the other storylines which will lead to the resolution of the pound of flesh plot.

The first item of significance in the scene is the fact of Portia’s enthusiasm for Bassanio’s attempt to win her hand. This is unprecedented in the play and, true to the spirit of comedy, Portia obtains her choice even though the terms of her father’s will allow her no choice.

The next major aspect of the scene is Bassanio’s solution to the challenge of the caskets. He announces his logic at the very beginning of his attempt: “So may the outward shows be least themselves;/ The world is still deceived with ornament” (lines 73-4). In other words, he knows the lure of the surface may be misleading and refuses to be taken in by mere appearances. Interestingly, Bassanio eschews the inscriptions of the caskets entirely and this, the audience might feel, is wise. Already we have seen how the same words can be bent to virtually opposite ends. Although it could be argued that the legend on the gold casket is misleading, the silver and lead caskets’ inscriptions could easily be read as invitations or as warnings. This is not to say that Bassanio avoids linguistic matters entirely; far from it. He instead balances his distrust of appearances against the cultural significance of all three metals. By his rationale, the least worthy casket by outward appearances—lead, a metal of no cultural worth—becomes the correct choice. And so it is.

Bassanio’s future marriage to Portia guarantees him financial security and the wherewithal to pay his debts to Antonio. This, we might recall, was ostensibly his motive for seeking Portia’s hand in the first place, though it appears that he and Portia, at this point in the play, are genuinely in love. Paying off Antonio becomes a largely irrelevant concern, in any case. Portia seems to have more money than she knows what to do with; Antonio discharges his friend from his debts as long as Bassanio returns to Venice before his execution; Shylock will never collect on his 3,000 ducat loan in skin or cash. After all these complications, the audience may feel, Bassanio and Portia had better be in love!

As one plot is resolved, another more minor plot is introduced in the form of the ring Portia gives Bassanio to seal their love. Portia ends up generating the remaining portion of the play beyond Act IV, Scene 1 with her mischievous shenanigans involving the ring. Otherwise the play would end after Act IV, Scene 1, once the pound of flesh plot is concluded. The reason for this extra plot perhaps stems from a desire on Shakespeare’s part to thicken the mix of his play with some pure comedy. Though the threat against Antonio’s life ends happily, it may have been deemed too grim a scenario to end the comedy on.

Act III, Scene 3
New Character:
The Jailer: holds Antonio on Shylock’s behalf

Summary
Meanwhile, back in Venice, Shylock encounters Antonio on the streets, albeit in the custody of the Jailer hired to guard him and accompanied by Solanio. Antonio begs a word with the usurer, but Shylock won’t even listen to him. “I’ll have no speaking; I will have my bond” (line 17) he cries before departing. Solanio tries to encourage Antonio, saying the Duke will not permit the fulfilling of the bond, but Antonio is resigned to his death. He knows it is important to law and order (as well as the economy) in Venice that the Duke uphold Shylock’s legal right to have his bond fulfilled. Antonio seems to have reconciled himself to his impending doom, so long as Bassanio returns to Venice to see him one last time.

Analysis
For the most part, this scene serves to put us back in touch with Venice after the previous long scene in Belmont, to assure the audience that things are indeed going as badly as Bassanio and company think they are.
Aside from this, it advances the image of an unyielding, bitter Shylock and a melancholy, resigned merchant of Venice. Antonio’s last lines are interesting, however: “Pray God Bassanio come/ To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!” (lines 35-6). After his magnanimous, even passionate displays towards Bassanio, these lines ring with an almost spiteful bitterness. Perhaps there is some sexual jealousy on Antonio’s part, the way he recalls Bassanio from his future bride’s side in order to tell him, “I would die for you.”

Act III, Scene 4
New Character:
Balthasar: a servant of Portia

Summary
Portia begins this scene in discussion with Lorenzo, during which she commits the management of her household to his and Jessica’s hands. She informs him that she and Nerissa are going to a monastery to pray until her husband comes home. After Jessica and Lorenzo exit, however, Portia instructs her servant Balthasar to deliver a letter to her cousin Dr. Bellario (a lawyer) and bring whatever clothes and instructions he offers to the ferry, where she will be waiting. He goes, and Portia informs Nerissa that they are to travel to Venice disguised as men, for purposes she will explain shortly.

Analysis
From this point in the play onward, Portia takes a central and commanding role. It’s as if, freed from the strictures of her father’s will after Bassanio’s triumph, Portia now seeks to make up for lost time by solving Antonio’s dilemma. Not only is she convinced of Antonio’s worth on the basis of his friendship with Bassanio (as she informs Lorenzo), but also, one might speculate, she feels indebted to him for enabling his friend’s trip to Belmont.

Portia acknowledges the fact that being a woman has kept her sidelined from the action thus far, in a speech which the Elizabethan audience probably would have found humorous, but which more liberal-minded audiences today would no doubt receive with more sympathy. The play is fraught with images of women’s servitude, and their problematic positions as second-class citizens. Clearly, Portia is submissive to her father even after his death, and her wealth and power are transferred to her husband immediately following her marriage. It is important to note that these constraints are placed upon and accepted by the most powerful woman in the play. In even more subtle terms, as the couples pair off in Act III, Scene 2, they wager about who will be the first to have a male child, underscoring the desirability of males over females to the Elizabethans. In an exercise of what little power she has, Portia camps it up with some swagger at the expense of the men in her society, poking fun at their self-aggrandizing bluster and making bawdy references to their anatomy. What Portia and Nerissa are about to do, as the audience will learn shortly (in Act IV, Scene 1), is disguise themselves as a lawyer and his clerk, in order to arbitrate the bond between Antonio and Shylock, in another subtle way showing that in order to move in the Venetian circles of power, they must disguise their gender.

Act III, Scene 5
Summary
Launcelot teases Jessica about her genealogy, claiming that being a Jew, she is damned. On the subject of genealogy, Lorenzo walks in and announces that Launcelot has gotten “the Moor” (i.e., a black woman) pregnant. Launcelot and Lorenzo match wits good-naturedly for a time, before the former departs. Lorenzo and Jessica flirt for a few lines before departing for dinner.

Analysis
This is a gratuitous scene, thrown in solely for laughs rather than plot. It does, however, flirt comically with two of the play’s themes. Jessica’s Jewish ancestry is mocked here, although in a purely light-hearted way. It seems that suddenly, no one takes Jessica’s ethnicity seriously anymore, which is quite a reversal from
previous scenes. Keep in mind that, even for Lorenzo—who is in love with Jessica—the issue of her race at one point threatened to outweigh any of her particular behavioral characteristics.

Also invoked here is the trouble with words, which previously had manifested itself in relation to the challenge of the three caskets. Lorenzo, exasperated with the linguistic displays of Launcelot, laments “How every fool can play upon the word!” (line 43). Lorenzo’s plea to Launcelot—“I pray thee understand a plain man in his plain meaning” (line 57)—is a humorous and perhaps nostalgic wish for language to be fixed in its meaning and not available to multiple interpretations.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act IV, Scenes 1-2: Summary and Analysis**

**Act IV, Scene 1**

**New Character:**
The Duke of Venice: highest authority in Venice

**Summary**
Bassanio and his attendants are back in Venice and wait with Antonio in the presence of the Duke to discover the fate of the merchant of Venice. Shylock enters the court, and the Duke makes a personal appeal to him to not only spare Antonio’s life but also, in light of the merchant’s recent losses at sea, to reduce the amount of the debt. But Shylock will have none of it, demanding that the bond be executed. When questioned on his motives, Shylock responds that he simply hates Antonio and is not obliged to have any particular justification. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the amount of Antonio’s debt, but the latter remains firm. Shylock reminds the Duke that it is necessary to uphold the law in order to maintain Venice’s good standing in international trade.

The Duke declares that he will make no decision until he hears from Bellario of Padua, who he has asked to come decide the matter. Nerissa enters, dressed in men’s clothes, posing as a messenger from Bellario. She gives the Duke a letter, which he reads while Gratiano and Shylock bicker. The Duke reveals that the letter recommends a young doctor (lawyer) to the Venetians to help decide the case. The Duke sends for the man while the letter is read to the court.

This “man” is actually Portia, disguised as a lawyer. She questions Shylock and Antonio on the particularities of their case, and asks Shylock if he would be merciful. He refuses, of course. Bassanio, offering to pay the debt twice over, asks the disguised Portia if they might bend the law in this particular case. Much to Shylock’s delight, however, she declares this cannot be, for it would set a dangerous legal precedent in Venetian law. Portia asks Shylock if he’ll take three times the amount of the debt and spare Antonio’s life, but he refuses to budge. She decrees that the bond must be adhered to. Antonio thus steels himself for death.

Before Shylock can start slicing away, however, Portia points out that although he is perfectly entitled to Antonio’s flesh, he has no claim to spill any of the merchant’s blood. Moreover, should he do so, his “land and goods/ Are by the laws of Venice confiscate/ Unto the state of Venice” (ll. 309-311). Shylock is dismayed by this news and seeing no way to obtain Antonio’s flesh without bloodshed, asks for the money instead. Portia prevents Bassanio from handing over the money, however, insisting that justice must be served. She points out, however, that Shylock will be subject to execution if he takes more or less than a pound of flesh.

Realizing that his sinister jig is up, Shylock attempts to slink away with only the original 3,000 ducats. Portia won’t allow this, however, as he has already “refused it in open court.” Shylock sees he is trapped and is prepared to leave court empty-handed. But Portia produces another law, decreeing that if any foreigner “by direct or indirect attempts/ …seek[s] the life of a citizen,” he loses half his goods to the citizen, the other half to the state, and his “life lies in the mercy/ Of the Duke…” The Christians take great delight in this, and the
Duke spares Shylock’s life though confiscates his wealth.

Embittered, Shylock asks that he be killed, as he cannot sustain himself without his goods. Antonio intercedes, however, and asks the Duke to pardon the state’s portion of the fine, in exchange for the following conditions: Antonio must receive half of Shylock’s goods to use in trust for Lorenzo and Jessica; Shylock must become a Christian; and he must will all his possessions upon his death to Jessica and Lorenzo. The Duke agrees to this arrangement, as does Shylock, who has little choice. Shylock then pleads illness and hobbles away from the scene a broken man.

The Duke requests that Portia dine with him, but she begs off, claiming she must return to Padua. The Duke leaves. Bassanio and Antonio offer to pay the disguised Portia the 3,000 ducats earmarked for Shylock, but she refuses, claiming satisfaction in justice. Bassanio presses, so Portia asks for his gloves, which he gives her, and his ring, which he holds back. He pleads first the ring’s worthlessness, and then his sentimental attachment to it. Portia scorns him in pretended outrage, and she and Nerissa depart. Antonio then persuades Bassanio to let the lawyer have the ring, for the service “he” rendered. Bassanio relents and sends Gratiano with his ring to find the pair.

Analysis
This scene marks the resolution of the second major plot complication of The Merchant of Venice, namely the pound of flesh scenario. There doesn’t seem much point in denying that the play climaxes with this particular scene, and that the remaining scenes constitute little more than some good-natured dénouement. It is also the last scene of which Shylock is part, and so central is he deemed to the play that several productions have ended here, omitting the rest altogether. This is perhaps appropriate, for with Shylock go all the issues which have been preoccupying the audience for the length of the play. The sole remaining concern is the subplot of the rings, which was only introduced into the plot in the preceding scene and is quite extraneous to the major business on stage.

Shylock enters the scene well past the point of reconciliation; he wants Antonio dead, and will accept no amount of money in exchange for foregoing the terms of his bond. The issue of Jewishness comes to a head at this point, as the Christians attribute Shylock’s stubbornness to an inbred racial/religious sensibility. Antonio even asks his friends not to try to change Shylock’s mind, for, he feels, “You may as well forbid the mountain pines/ To wag their high tops and to make no noise/ When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;/ You may as well do any thing most hard/ As seek to soften…/ His Jewish heart” (lines 75-80). Shylock’s rigidity is seen to stem from his constitution. The usurer himself, however, belies this claim, for, we may recall from Act III, Scene 1, Shylock insists he learned this behavior from “Christian example.”

The Christian animosity towards Shylock’s Jewishness is made most apparent, however, in the terms of Shylock’s punishment. The most conspicuous of Antonio’s three conditions for Shylock is the demand that he must convert to Christianity. Some stage productions of The Merchant have given a great deal of weight to this detail, representing it as the crushing blow to the usurer. This is a convincing interpretation, insofar as Shylock appears to take his religion very seriously throughout the play. Moreover, shortly after the demand has been made and agreed to, Shylock must leave the court, pleading illness. It’s as if the idea of conversion is physically repugnant to him. Given his treatment at the hands of the Christians, it may very well be.

An issue somewhat related to these religious matters is the traditional opposition between the letter and the spirit of the law. Some critics have suggested that the dispute between the Christians and Shylock boils down to the latter’s stubborn insistence on formally codified laws as opposed to the spirit in which such laws were written. They further insist that this trait is in keeping with the Elizabethan conception of Jews as cold-hearted exploiters of legal language, a sensibility expressed today in the stereotypes of the lawyer as a shrewd manipulator of language against truth and justice, and as typically Jewish. This binary opposition between Jew/letter and Christian/spirit seems forced, however, when held against the background of Act IV, Scene 1.
The Christians, especially Portia, are brutally clever manipulators of the law, as evinced through their juxtaposing of various laws to transform Shylock from a violated creditor waiting to receive his due, to an impoverished supplicant of the Duke, suing for mercy. Portia proves particularly adept at pulling laws out of her assumed hat of “Doctor.” It is difficult to say how convincing an audience might find her reasoning that the bond doesn’t entitle Shylock to spill any of Antonio’s blood; one could argue that the bond doesn’t exclude it either, or that the idea of spilling blood is presumed in the idea of cutting off a pound of flesh. (The bond doesn’t specifically entitle Shylock to hold the knife with his hand, but it would be difficult to imagine arguing on such grounds.) In any case, it seems petty to fault Shylock for adhering to the letter of the law because, as a Jew in a Christian society, what else does he have to protect him? The “spirit” in Venice is not very friendly to him. The Christians clearly don’t want Shylock to have his way and continue to maneuver until they succeed at circumventing his legal claims, however brutal.

The theme of Antonio’s possible homosexual love for Bassanio perhaps attains its loudest crescendo here. The morbidity and melancholy which Antonio has from time to time exhibited throughout the play reaches new depths, as throughout the scene he demonstrates a peculiar willingness to die. This eagerness might be accounted for if, as Solanio insists in Act II, Scene 8, Antonio “only loves the world” for Bassanio’s presence. Perhaps Antonio feels he has already lost his friend to the world of heterosexual love and would just as soon be killed by Shylock as not. As Antonio steels himself for slaughter, he tells Bassanio, “Commend me to your honorable wife./ Tell her the process of Antonio’s end./ Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;/ and when the tale is told, bid her be judge/ Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (lines 272-6). An actor could deliver these lines with a great deal of spite, as if to suggest Bassanio had a love and, upon Antonio’s death, would no longer have one. In other words, Antonio suggests, no heterosexual relationship could supplant, replace, or even compare with the love he and Bassanio shared.

The last item one might note about Act IV, Scene 1 is the continuance of the subplot of Portia’s ring. Upon Shylock’s quitting the court, there’s no particular reason for Portia and Nerissa to maintain their secret identities. But rather than reveal themselves, the women instead embark upon some gratuitous tomfoolery at the expense of their future husbands. Portia creates the new conflict out of thin air. It’s as if, freed from her father’s will and armed with a new sense of subjective agency, Portia is reluctant to relinquish her new-found power. Perhaps she is sowing her wild oats, given that, according to the custom of the time, all of Portia’s property and possessions will become Bassanio’s upon their marriage, and he will be her lord and master. Rather than go directly from one guardian to another, Portia wishes to prolong her freedom and express herself through her own action. This is offset, however, by the fact that her action remains hidden by her disguise, and at its boldest, remains all in fun; she offers no challenge to this social order, especially in light of the fact that her actions are, in the end, a service to her husband.

It should be noted, finally, that Bassanio initially passes Portia’s test of his devotion by refusing to part with the ring. But rather than reveal herself then, she storms off in pretended anger, giving Bassanio time to cave in. Portia is determined to have her fun, it seems.

Act IV, Scene 2
Summary
Gratiano overtakes Portia and Nerissa as they seek Shylock’s house in order to have the usurer sign the deed willing his properties to Lorenzo. Gratiano offers Portia the ring and an invitation to dinner. She accepts the former and declines the latter. Nerissa, meanwhile, determines to lure Gratiano into the same trap Portia laid for Bassanio, and sets off with Gratiano, ostensibly in search of Shylock’s house, in order to obtain her future husband’s ring.

Analysis
This scene simply serves to advance the ring plot by giving Portia the chance to obtain Bassanio’s ring and allowing Nerissa the same opportunity with Gratiano, in order to complete the comic symmetry.
Act and Scene Summaries: Act V, Scene I: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Stephano: a messenger

Summary
Lorenzo and Jessica are in the garden in front of Portia’s house in Belmont, whispering sweet nothings in each other’s ears. Stephano, a messenger, enters and announces that Portia will soon return. Launcelot Gobbo arrives and makes the same announcement with respect to Bassanio. Lorenzo dispatches Stephano to ready the household for Portia’s return. Lorenzo babbles for a time about the moon and music.

Portia and Nerissa enter and encounter the two mooning lovers, who welcome them home. Portia orders that no one in her household mention her and Nerissa’s absence. Bassanio, Antonio, Gratiano, and their followers arrive. Portia welcomes them home to Belmont and is introduced to Antonio.

The company notice Gratiano and Nerissa quarreling. Portia inquires why, and it is revealed that Gratiano gave away the ring Nerissa had given him, which he promised never to remove from his hand. Portia chastises Gratiano, claiming that her betrothed, Bassanio, would never do such a thing. Gratiano reveals that Bassanio too gave his ring away and pleads that they both sacrificed their rings to the judge and clerk, who would take no other payment. Portia and Nerissa feign disbelief, insisting the men must have given the rings away during some tawdry sexual encounter and vowing never to sleep with their future husbands until the rings are recovered.

Antonio attempts to intercede on his friends’ behalf, promising that never again will Bassanio break his oath. To seal the bargain, Portia produces a ring, which turns out to be the same as the one she gave him in the first place. She claims to have recovered it by sleeping with the doctor. Nerissa also insists that she regained her ring from the clerk using a similar method. Having thoroughly bewildered all parties concerned, Portia reveals that she and Nerissa were the doctor and the clerk. She also gives Antonio a letter, informing him that three of his ships have in fact returned and are laden with riches. Nerissa tells Lorenzo of Shylock’s new will, naming him heir of the usurer’s estate. There is general merriment, and the company goes inside Portia’s house.

Analysis
Act V, Scene 1 is the final scene of the play, and its primary purpose seems to be to restore the comic mood threatened by Shylock’s attempt on Antonio’s life. The frivolous final subplot is resolved here; Portia reveals that she and Nerissa were the doctor and the clerk, and thus that Bassanio and Gratiano simply gave the rings back to their original owners. Clearing away any remaining ill residue from the previous scenes, Portia also reveals that some of Antonio’s ships have returned safe, thus restoring his previous good fortune as a businessman. The spirit of comedy wins the day.

Shakespeare’s primary agenda in this scene, as in so many, is a linguistic one; in other words, much of the dialogue here is aimed at displaying his wit and ingenuity, with a barrage of puns, double-entendres, and metaphors. Lorenzo’s sole purpose in this scene, for example, is to make long decorous speeches, which advance nothing in the play, save its poetry. In particular, Shakespeare milks the humorous potential in Portia’s and Nerissa’s secret activities for as many double meanings as possible. Nerissa’s accusation, that “The clerk will ne’er wear hair on’se face that had [the ring from Gratiano],” for example, has two main senses, one for most of the characters—i.e., Nerissa claims to suspect Gratiano of giving his ring not to a clerk but to another woman—and an extra one for Nerissa, Portia, and the audience—i.e., the clerk, who was actually Nerissa, therefore a woman, will indeed never grow a beard. The chief interest and delight in this scene, one might argue, is the sight of Bassanio and Gratiano squirming, while Portia and Nerissa rattled off string after
string of accusations which the women know are both false and true, depending on how one interprets the words. This ties the last scene into the recurring theme of multiple interpretations of words which runs throughout the play. The difference here is that unlike the scenes involving the three caskets, in which much was at stake depending on how one reads the words in question, the final scene offers us this linguistic play for its own sake—just for laughs, as it were—in a spirit of comedy where several interpretations are available and no one—audience and cast alike—is obliged to settle on a single reading to the exclusion of all others. And such is perhaps the ultimate attraction of Shakespearean comedy.

Themes

As in many of Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* is constructed around opposite value systems or worldviews. One pole of this scale is captured in one of the most famous of the Bard's verse speeches as it is recited, fittingly enough by the epitome of Christian generosity, Portia, during the climactic trial of Act IV, scene i. In borrowed lawyer robes, Portia proclaims:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his own crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above the sceptered sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

(IV.i.184-197).

The speech captures the core of Shakespeare's message, mercy is close to God in both human action (or "flesh") and in spirit. It is love of one's friends, compassion for those in difficulty and a willingness to forgive past wrongs that humanity achieves a humble, reverence for God's will.

The contours of this Christian value system are thrown its strongest relief by the presentation of an alternative outlook on life, and it is through the dark eyes of Shylock that this foil to enlightenment is presented, in flesh and in spirit. Right before Portia's mercy speech, the Duke of Venice highlights the contrast between "Christian" mercy and the moneylender's stance by describing Shylock as "A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, / Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram or mercy" (IV.i.4-6). We, of course, know this, for Shylock (like Shakespeare's Iago, Richard the III, and other villains) has already apprised us of his hard-heartedness and hateful materialism. In Act I, scene iii, when we encounter the Jewish moneylender for the first time, Shylock discloses his hatred for Antonio and his evil nature in an aside that runs:

I hate him for he is a Christian,
But more, for in that low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rates of usance here in Venice.
If I can catch him upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!
(I.iii.41-52).

In his own interpretation of the enmity that he harbors toward Antonio, personal greed and racial/religious bias are intermingled, and so our attention is brought to Shylock as the stereotypical Jew. In a Christian society like Shakespeare's Elizabethan England, Jews, being bereft of baptism and subject to circumcision, were popularly viewed as being outside God's grace. Throughout the play, there are some direct associations between Shylock and the ungodly or Satanic, as in Jessica's first speech where she says that "Our house is hell … " (II.iii.2). As often, and on a meaner note, Shylock is frequently portrayed as a subhuman canine. Thus, for instance, during the trial scene (IV.i), Gratiano calls Shylock a "damn'd execrable dog" and then adds that the Jewish usurer's "curish spirit" is "governed by a wolf" (IV.i.128, 134).

Owing to a wave of anti-Jewish sentiment in late-sixteenth century England, Shakespeare's audiences were familiar with stereotypically evil Jews on stage, these dramatic characters resonating with the Judas figure of medieval Passion Plays. Less than a decade before Shakespeare first staged The Merchant of Venice, his rival, the revenge-tragedy dramatist Christopher Marlowe, wrote The Jew of Malta (1589), a very popular work dominated by the evil Jewish moneylender Barabas. The Merchant of Venice frankly taps into anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish attitudes. Nevertheless, Shakespeare does not endorse racial/religious prejudices, as is plain enough from Portia's acceptance of the dark-skinned Prince of Morocco. More important, there is something to Shylock's complaint about being treated like a dog by the Christians of Venice; Antonio, Gratiano, Bassanio, Salerio and Solano all refer to him as a low, feral beast. In the first scene in which he appears, Shylock responds to Bassanio's request for a loan with the rhetorical questions, "What should I say to you? Should I not say / `Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" (I.iii.120-122). He is right: for all their expressed distaste with Shylock, the Christians (notably Bassanio and Antonio) turn to him for help when they are in need of ready cash, somehow overcoming their qualms about dealing with a dog. Moreover, not too much should be made of Jessica's voluntary conversion to Christianity, which is also a means for escaping a repressive father, nor of Shylock's own forced conversion, which is more a matter of exigency than of epiphany. Finally, it is useful to observe that some famous lines ascribed to Shylock himself in the popular mind are mere caricatures. Thus, for example, Shylock does not actually equate "my daughter" and "my ducats," for the scene of his chagrin is conveyed to us through the highly unsympathetic, satirically-bent Salerio and Solano duo.

Turning to the chest device, it serves as the vehicle for broadening the Christian/Jew dichotomy into universal precepts of surface attraction versus deeper values. When the Prince of Morocco mistakenly believes that, since Portia is of the highest value, the right to marry her must be found in the golden chest, the message that awaits him inside says:

All that glisters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told:
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside do behold:
Gilded tombs do worms infold.
(II.vii.65-69).

The superficial golden object that many men pursue leads them on to death. By the same token, when the arrogant Prince of Arragon select the silver chest, thinking that he deserves Portia's hand, he is faced with the spiritual truth that his pompous egotism is that of a fool. It is in Act III, scene ii, that Bassanio chooses rightly
after considering the leaden chest's inscription that he must risk all and reasoning:

The world is still deceiv'd with ornament,
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being season'd, with a gracious voice
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament.
(III.ii.74-80).

Bassanio proves that he is worthy in seeing Portia as an exemplar of true value that lies beneath even the dull surface of lead. That Portia falls instantaneously in love with Bassanio (indeed, she is smitten by the mere report of him at her gates) confirms his worthiness in the eyes of Christian virtue personified.

Nevertheless, as neat as all this may be, there are problems with the play's male heroes and the relationship between them. Initially, we note a certain pride in Antonio's diversification strategy; and as for his friend Bassanio, his first reference is not to Portia's spiritual or physical beauty but to her great wealth. Within the trial scene, we find a somewhat more puzzling dimension to the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio. Believing that he is about to die, Antonio says to Bassanio:

Commend me to your honorable wife:
Tell her the process of Antonio's end;
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
(IV.i.273-278).

Here, Antonio's comments imply both a respect for Portia and a rivalry between himself and Portia for the distinction of loving Bassanio the most. Then, in response to this profession of brotherly love, Bassanio says that while he is married to a wife who is as dear to him as life itself, "I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / Here to this devil, to deliver you" (IV.i.286-287). To this, Portia in her lawyer's disguise ironically quips, "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (IV.i.288-289). Ultimately, all of this gets caught up in the ring scheme as it is resolved in the play's last scene. There and before she reveals that she, in fact, has the ring she gave to Bassanio, Portia scolds Gratiano for giving Nerissa's ring to the law clerk (Nerissa in disguise):

You were to blame, I must be plain with you,
To part so slightly with your wife's first gift:
A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger
And so riveted with faith unto your flesh.
(V.i.165-169).

This mild chastisement is plainly meant for Bassanio's ears as well. It reminds us that the bond between man and wife presents claims that are more important than those between even the best of friends.

When we again consider the last two lines cited above, with their union of faith and flesh, a final thematic cluster is completed. Not only does Antonio's flesh have a salient symbolic role within the play's central narrative, the subject of "flesh" arises at several junctures in the play, especially in relation to Shylock and Jessica. Midway through the play, Shylock says to Salerio:
"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?"

(III.i.58-64).

This famous diatribe comes right after Shylock's assertion that he and Jessica are of the same flesh and blood, and Salerio's rejoinder that "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers / than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods / than there is between red wine and rhenish" (III.i.32-34). In Merchant, the flesh is inferior to the spirit (as seen in Jessica's ready conversion to Christianity and its salvation); but the flesh remains important, particularly the fleshy bond of husband and wife.

Additional Themes: Christian Themes

The principal Christian theme of mercy as preferable to, or tempering, justice pervades this play. In Act IV, scene 1, Portia makes an argument for mercy against Shylock’s plea for his bond.

The quality of mercy is not strain’dIt droppeth as the gentle rain from heavenUpon the place beneath; it is twice blestIt blesseth him that gives and him that takes’Tis mightiest in the mighty; it becomesThe throned monarch better than his crownHis sceptre shows the force of temporal powerThe attribute to awe and majestyWherein dost sit the dread and fear of kingsBut mercy is above this sceptred swayIt is enthroned in the hearts of kingsIt is an attribute to God himselfAnd earthly power dost then show likest God’sWhen mercy seasons justice.

This argument, one of the most well-known passages in Shakespeare’s works, underscores the conflict between the vengeful Law of Talion and the more merciful Golden Rule. Indeed, a central conflict between the old dispensation of Judaism and the new covenant announced by Jesus of Nazareth rests on the Christian doctrine that salvation comes through the mercy of God (grace) rather than through justice. As the trial between Shylock and Antonio concludes, Shylock becomes the victim of his own desire for justice while the Duke of Venice and Antonio both show him some degree of mercy.

From a Christian perspective, Shylock’s conversion to Christianity would allow him the possibility of salvation. That Shylock does not share this religious view seems insignificant to those in the religious majority, which in the Venice setting was Roman Catholic. In 1290 Jews had been banished from England by a decree of King Edward I, and as a result, Elizabethans knew almost nothing about Jews except perhaps some stereotypes. Those Jews present in England would have conformed outwardly to the Church of England and practiced Judaism in private. Shakespeare’s original audiences would have had direct experience with forced conversions from Catholicism to the Church of England to Catholicism and back to the Church of England because several English monarchs changed the state religion in the sixteenth century. Shakespeare may indeed be using the converted Jew as a metaphor for any member of a minority religion forced to choose between faith and life itself.

Additional Themes: Advanced Themes

Economics is a prime concern in The Merchant of Venice, and one major critical perspective treats the play as a clash between emerging mercantile sensibilities and religious traditions. During Shakespeare's time, usury (lending money for interest) became an accepted business practice as profits became increasingly more
important than religious principles. The rivalry between Antonio and Shylock is often viewed as an example of two conflicting business ethics. Although Shylock represents usury as a pragmatic and legitimate business practice, Antonio embodies a more idealistic perspective of the profession. Following Christian precepts, the merchant generously lends his money interest-free because his wealth and means allow him to do so. This fundamental economic contention, in addition to the two characters' religious differences, establishes their enmity toward one another and creates a rivalry that reaches its climax in the trial sequence (Act IV, scene i). Bassanio's marriage to Portia demonstrates another economic dimension of the play. Due to rising costs during the Renaissance, aristocrats in many cases had to concern themselves with obtaining more wealth to maintain their expected lifestyle, and a generous dowry was considered a respectable means of achieving this end. Many critics contend that even though Bassanio is virtually penniless because of his extravagant spending, his open desire to marry Portia for her money—in addition to her charm and beauty—should not be construed by modern readers as the shrewd enterprise of an unscrupulous fortune hunter. In fact, they continue, an Elizabethan audience probably would have interpreted Bassanio's suit of love as an ordinary and perfectly acceptable arrangement.

Kinds of love and rivalry in love are other important topics in *The Merchant of Venice*. The suitors who vie for Portia all represent different types of love. Arragon and Morocco—the two unsuccessful petitioners—symbolize a shallow and limited form of love. By selecting the silver casket on the basis of its inscription (“Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” [II.vii.7]), Arragon reveals that his concept of love is self-serving and vain. Morocco's choice of the gold casket indicates that his notion of love is based on superficiality (“All that glisters is not gold” [II.vii.65]). However, when Bassanio correctly identifies the lead casket, he demonstrates a superior understanding of love by judging the box on the inner qualities it may possess rather than on its dull appearance. The issue of rivalry in love is evident in the association between Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio. Some critics argue that the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio may be a homosexual one, citing the merchant's unexplained melancholy at the beginning of the play as the result of Portia displacing him as the object of Bassanio's affection. In addition, couples—Bassanio and Portia, and Jessica and Lorenzo—represent two antithetical kinds of love in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio and Portia demonstrate a socially acceptable courtship; not only do they obey her father's request that Portia's suitor successfully endure the casket test, but they also uphold the legal provisions of the test as mandated in the father's will. Jessica and Lorenzo's courtship, however, illustrates a romantic love linked to the great lovers of myth, particularly in the illicitness of their elopement. Unlike Portia and Bassanio's union, Jessica and Lorenzo's defies social traditions because their aspiration to get married causes them to step out of the bounds of the accepted rules of society.

Shakespeare's delicate balancing of the worlds of Venice and Belmont is another central issue in *The Merchant of Venice*. Venice represents the realistic, civilized world that is supposedly governed by Christian values. However, the Christians are shown to be hypocritical in their treatment of Shylock. For all his purported charity and virtue, Antonio discriminates against the Jew, ultimately forcing Shylock to renounce Judaism and embrace Christianity. Shylock and the other Jews contribute a mercenary dimension to the affairs of the city, in which lending money for interest is considered a legitimate business practice and breaches of contract are immediately redressed with legal action. Although accepted by the Venetians on an economic level, Shylock remains an outsider in the city. His actions are governed by Judaic law and the Old Testament rather than imposed Christian values. Shylock's quest for revenge against Antonio is therefore a retributive action sanctioned by his faith. This desire for vengeance is due to the fact that Shylock has never received mercy or charity from the Christians, and, not surprisingly, it is another outsider, Portia of Belmont, who attempts to inspire compassion in the Jew during Antonio's trial. Portia's Belmont presents the counterpoint to Venice by embodying the qualities of an idealistic world, which markedly contrasts with the hypocrisy, revenge, and commercial exploitation which dominate affairs in the city. In essence, Belmont represents a fairy-tale realm where happiness and love flourish and Christian charity and forgiveness hold sway. These benevolent qualities manifest themselves in Portia, whose confrontation with Shylock can be interpreted as a direct clash between the retributive justice ordained in the Old Testament and the mercy and charity advocated
in the New Testament. Shakespeare provides *The Merchant of Venice* with a happy ending by emphasizing the love, joy, and forgiveness that thrives in Belmont; but the reader is nevertheless left with the unsettling impression that hypocrisy and hatred persist in Venice.

**Characters**

**Antonio**

In William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is the Venetian merchant for whom the play is titled. He is Bassanio’s wealthy, loyal, and anti-Semitic friend. Bassanio asks Antonio to help him secure the funds he needs to woo Portia, a wealthy heiress. Antonio agrees to borrow the money on Bassanio’s behalf. The Jewish moneylender Shylock, with whom Antonio shares a mutual animosity, agrees to lend Antonio the money. However, he asks that Antonio forfeit “a pound of flesh” if he defaults on the loan. Antonio’s conflict with Shylock animates the primary action of the play. (Read extended character analysis of Antonio.)

**Bassanio**

Bassanio is the merchant Antonio’s “intimate friend” and the wealthy heiress Portia’s favored suitor. A young nobleman of Venice, Bassanio admits to living beyond his means. This has forced him to borrow money from Antonio on numerous occasions. At the start of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money so that he can travel to Belmont and court Portia as a man of means. Antonio instead suggests that Bassanio secure a loan through a moneylender and offers to be the guarantor for the loan. Antonio indebts himself to the Jewish moneylender Shylock on Bassanio’s behalf. (Read extended character analysis of Bassanio.)

**Portia**

Portia is a beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy heiress from Belmont. Her father’s will stipulates that she can only marry the man who manages to solve a riddle involving three caskets made of different metals. The caskets are made of gold, silver, and lead. The person who successfully chooses the casket with Portia’s portrait in it wins her hand in marriage. Due to her wealth and beauty, Portia has many suitors. However, her father’s will has left her powerless to decide which one she weds. Portia resents this, and subtly helps Bassanio, her favored suitor, solve the riddle so that they can marry. (Read extended character analysis of Portia.)

**Shylock**

Shylock is a wealthy Jewish moneylender from Venice and Jessica's father. He lends Antonio and Bassanio the 3,000 ducats that Bassanio needs to pursue Portia. However, Shylock stipulates that if Antonio defaults on the loan, he will owe Shylock a pound of his flesh. This contract spurs the central plot of the play. When Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock attempts to extract his pound of flesh. However, thanks to Portia’s intervention, Antonio is saved and Shylock is forced to relinquish half of his fortune. He is also forced to convert to Christianity. Shylock is left humiliated after being robbed of his money, his faith, and his dignity. (Read extended character analysis of Shylock.)
Jessica

Jessica is Shylock’s daughter. In a bid to escape her unhappy family home, she elopes with Lorenzo, a penniless Christian. She converts to Christianity as a consequence of marrying Lorenzo. Before leaving Shylock’s house, she steals a chest full of ducats and family heirlooms. Among those heirlooms is a turquoise ring given to Shylock by his late wife, Leah. After eloping, Jessica and Lorenzo travel to Belmont and eventually arrive at Portia’s estate. When Portia leaves to attend Antonio’s trial, she leaves Jessica and Lorenzo in charge of her estate. (Read extended character analysis of Jessica.)

Lorenzo

Lorenzo is a penniless Christian who weds Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. After eloping, Jessica and Lorenzo travel to Belmont. Their marriage is initially unacknowledged by Shylock. However, after the trial, Antonio forces Shylock to formally acknowledge Lorenzo as his son-in-law. Antonio does so by stipulating that Shylock’s entire estate will be transferred to Lorenzo upon Shylock’s death.

Gratiano

Gratiano is Antonio and Bassanio’s friend and Nerissa’s suitor. He accompanies Bassanio to Belmont. Gratiano is described as “wild,” “rude,” and “bold.” He is ill-mannered to the point that Bassanio orders him to behave himself if he wants to come to Belmont. Gratiano is one of the most openly anti-Semitic characters in the play. During the trial in act IV, scene I, Gratiano is hostile towards Shylock, going so far as to tell Shylock to “hang” himself. He taunts and jeers at Shylock as Portia makes her declarations, dispensing with any pretense of the Christian “mercy” that the other characters lay claim to.

Gratiano’s courtship of Nerissa closely mirrors Bassanio’s courtship of Portia. Just as Bassanio privileges his relationship with Antonio over his relationship with Portia, Gratiano also prioritizes other men over his wife. However, Nerissa teaches Gratiano to prioritize his promises to her. After the trial in act IV, scene I, Nerissa, disguised as a male law clerk, asks Gratiano for his wedding ring as tribute. He gives it to her, not recognizing the test he is taking—and failing. Nerissa later teases Gratiano by saying that she has slept with the law clerk he gave the ring to. Gratiano, humbled by his wife’s trick, promises to privilege “Nerissa’s ring” above all else.

Nerissa

Nerissa is Portia’s “woman-in-waiting.” After Bassanio successfully completes the casket test, Nerissa weds Bassanio’s friend Gratiano. Throughout the play, Nerissa serves as Portia’s closest friend, ally, and co-conspirator. She supports Portia’s desire to wed Bassanio and commends him highly. However, Nerissa does not shy away from speaking her mind. When Portia laments the unfairness of the casket test, Nerissa reminds Portia to be grateful that her father cared enough about her future to plan for it.

Much like Portia, Nerissa is playful and manipulative. While disguised as a male law clerk after Antonio’s trial, she asks her husband, Gratiano, to give her his wedding ring. She later reveals the trick and scolds her husband for giving away a symbol of their devotion so easily. This test allows her to assert power over her husband and ensure that he remains faithful to her.

Launcelot Gobbo

Launcelot Gobbo begins the play as Shylock’s servant and ends it as Bassanio’s servant. He is a bright young man who enjoys wordplay. He resents the treatment he receives from Shylock and helps Jessica elope with
Lorenzo. Launcelot’s testimony helps create contrast between Shylock and Bassanio: whereas Shylock is described as miserly and devilish, Bassanio is hailed as a generous and kind master.

**Gobbo**

Old Gobbo is Launcelot’s aged, blind father. He cares deeply for his son, going so far as to bring gifts to Shylock, Launcelot’s master. When Launcelot wants to become Bassanio’s servant instead, Old Gobbo agrees to help him.

**The Duke of Venice**

The Duke of Venice is responsible for upholding Venetian law. Since Shylock’s bond is legally binding, the Duke is unable to deny his right to a pound of Antonio’s flesh. However, he is clearly displeased with Shylock and attempts to convince Shylock to take mercy on Antonio. After Portia dismantles Shylock’s suit against Antonio and accuses Shylock of breaking the law, the Duke makes a show of pardoning Shylock. However, the Duke’s insistence that Shylock humble himself before the court is vindictive and spiteful. Furthermore, by taking Shylock’s money, the Duke takes away his livelihood. This highlights the Duke’s anti-Semitism and his desire to maintain the social status quo in Venice.

**The Prince of Morocco**

The Prince of Morocco is one of Portia’s suitors. He is described as having dark skin, which Portia disdains. During the casket test, he chooses the gold casket after assuming that Portia is what “many men desire.” Upon opening it, he finds a skull with a note that reads “not all that glisters is gold.” Morocco’s incorrect choice represents the tendency of suitors to treat Portia like an object of desire rather than a human being.

**The Prince of Arragon**

The Prince of Arragon is one of Portia’s suitors. During the casket test, he chooses the silver chest because he assumes that he deserves Portia. Upon opening the chest, he finds a picture of a fool. The note attached to the picture disparages Arragon for assuming he deserves anything at all. Arragon’s incorrect choice represents the entitlement of Portia’s suitors, who believe they deserve her based on their wealth or station.

**Salerio and Salanio**

Salerio and Salanio are Venetian merchants and friends of Bassanio and Antonio. They are very materialistic and assume that Antonio’s melancholy stems from worry over the status of his investments. They share Antonio’s anti-Semitism and show contempt for Shylock. They help Jessica and Lorenzo escape from Shylock’s house. After Shylock declares his intent to collect his pound of flesh, Salerio travels to Belmont to deliver the news to Bassanio.

Salerio and Salanio primarily exist to add exposition to the play through their roles as messengers and conspirators in the plot to help Jessica escape. When they report news to other characters, they are also reporting that news to the audience.

**Tubal**

Tubal is a wealthy Jewish man and a friend of Shylock’s. After Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, Tubal follows the couple to Genoa. He reports back to Shylock about their activities. Tubal also informs Shylock of Antonio’s
impending bankruptcy.

**Balthasar**

Balthasar is one of Portia’s servants. Portia sends Balthasar to Padua with a letter for her cousin Bellario, a lawyer. Balthasar delivers the letter and returns with disguises for Portia and Nerissa to use in court. Portia adopts Balthasar’s name while in disguise as a lawyer.

**Leonardo**

Leonardo is one of Bassanio’s servants.

**Stephano**

Stephano is one of Portia’s servants.

**Characters: Antonio**

Extended Character Analysis

In William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is the Venetian merchant for whom the play is titled. He is Bassanio’s wealthy, loyal, and anti-Semitic friend. Bassanio asks Antonio to help him secure the funds he needs to woo Portia, a wealthy heiress. Antonio agrees to borrow the money on Bassanio’s behalf. The Jewish moneylender Shylock, with whom Antonio shares a mutual animosity, agrees to lend Antonio the money. However, he asks that Antonio forfeit “a pound of flesh” if he defaults on the loan. Antonio’s conflict with Shylock animates the primary action of the play. Antonio, a devout Christian, is positioned as a Christ-like figure, readily sacrificing himself for Bassanio’s happiness. However, Antonio’s virulent anti-Semitism surfaces during his interactions with Shylock, complicating his seemingly virtuous character.

One of the primary questions concerning Antonio is whether to read his claims to martyrdom as straightforward or subversive. By reading Antonio’s sacrifice as straightforward and noble, the play takes on an anti-Semitic cast. By this reading, Antonio is the virtuous Christian, and Shylock is the merciless Jewish villain. Under this interpretation, Antonio embodies the selfless Christian martyr: He sacrifices himself so that the spendthrift Bassanio can find love and happiness. In Christ-like fashion, he absolves Bassanio of his debts and his involvement in taking out the loan. The Christian notion of mercy is evident in his decision not to take half of Shylock’s wealth in the aftermath of the trial decision. Antonio instead stipulates that Shylock must leave the money to his Christian son-in-law and convert to Christianity himself. If read from a Christian viewpoint, Antonio’s requests are meant to save Shylock’s soul.

However, Antonio’s embattled history with Shylock and his hypocrisy suggest that his supposed martyrdom may be read as a criticism of Christian prejudice against Jewish people. Though Antonio displays generosity and nobility in agreeing to guarantee Bassanio’s loan, he also takes a foolish risk by agreeing to give a pound of his flesh in the first place. Furthermore, by taking out a loan with interest, he breaks his own stated principles. Rather than being unjustly persecuted, Antonio’s misfortune is the result of his taking out an irresponsible loan. Shylock is within his rights to seek legal reparations.

By Shylock’s admission, his vendetta against Antonio is largely born from Antonio’s past mistreatment of him. From Shylock’s perspective, their positions are reversed: Antonio is the aggressor, and Shylock is the valiant avenger. Furthermore, while Antonio claims to be taking mercy on Shylock by forcing him to convert
to Christianity, he is actually inflicting even greater cruelty. He effectively steals both Shylock’s faith and cultural identity. While Shylock is the villain of Antonio’s story, Antonio is the villain of Shylock’s, blurring the line between righteousness and evil.

The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio has also been a source of intrigue for Shakespearean scholars. The obvious depth of devotion between the two invites several different interpretations. By one reading, Antonio is a paternal figure to Bassanio. His devotion stems from his desire to see his younger friend prosper. Antonio’s financial support of Bassanio positions Antonio as an indulgent father who funds his spendthrift son’s schemes in the hopes that he will someday mature. The apparently unconditional love that Antonio has for Bassanio is that of a parent for a child. Bassanio’s assertion that he would sacrifice anything to save Antonio’s life reflects the filial devotion expected of Elizabethan sons.

Another reading positions Antonio and Bassanio as close friends who share a great Platonic love for one another. In Elizabethan England, Platonic male friendships were often privileged over spousal bonds. Most marriages between nobles were either arranged or formed for practical reasons. As such, married people often turned to their friends for the companionship and intellectual fulfillment that their marriages lacked. Bassanio’s declaration that he would sacrifice his marriage and “all the world” for Antonio speaks to the initial shallowness of his marriage to Portia. However, Portia challenges the idea that male friendships should be prioritized over spousal ones. Instead, she asks Bassanio to prioritize her over Antonio.

Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship can also be read as romantic. Antonio at times presents himself as a rival to Portia for Bassanio’s love. Though unable to offer Bassanio the comforts of marriage, Antonio offers him everything else he has to give—including his life. This culminates in his request that Bassanio “commend” him to Portia after Antonio’s death. He asks Bassanio to let her judge whether Bassanio “had not once a love.” Bassanio seems ignorant of Antonio’s romantic affections, pursuing Portia and exhibiting none of Antonio’s melancholy. However, Bassanio’s declaration that he would sacrifice “life itself, [his] wife, and all the world” in order to save Antonio’s life suggests a degree of mutual devotion. After Portia saves Antonio’s life, he is forced to relinquish his hold on Bassanio. Portia has Antonio pass the ring from her to Bassanio, symbolically asking Antonio to sanction Bassanio and Portia’s marriage.

One of the central motifs in The Merchant of Venice is the use of legal and financial language to describe interpersonal relationships. Bassanio begins the play indebted both emotionally and financially to Antonio. He pursues Portia in the hopes of paying off those debts. In order for Portia to secure Bassanio’s devotion for herself, she first has to disrupt Antonio’s claim on him. To do this, she must discharge Bassanio’s debts to Antonio. If Antonio died for Bassanio, then the debt between them could never be settled. So, Portia must save Antonio’s life. After Antonio is freed, both Antonio and Bassanio are indebted to Portia. At the end of the play, Portia, Antonio, and Bassanio form a new agreement: Bassanio will never again “break faith” with Portia, and Antonio’s soul will be the “surety” of the deal. This establishes the primary bond between Portia and Bassanio, with Antonio acting as the guarantor that Bassanio now belongs wholly to Portia.

**Characters: Bassanio**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Bassanio is the merchant Antonio’s “intimate friend” and the wealthy heiress Portia’s favored suitor. A young nobleman of Venice, Bassanio admits to living beyond his means. This has forced him to borrow money from Antonio on numerous occasions. At the start of William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money so that he can travel to Belmont and court Portia as a man of means. Antonio instead suggests that Bassanio secure a loan through a moneylender and offers to be the guarantor for the loan. Antonio indebts himself to the Jewish moneylender Shylock on Bassanio’s behalf. Using the money, Bassanio
travels to Belmont and successfully wins Portia’s hand in marriage.

Though impulsive and financially irresponsible, Bassanio is kind and loyal to his friends. Despite needing the loan to pursue Portia, Bassanio says that he would “rather dwell in [his] necessity” than let his friend Antonio accept such a dangerous bond. During Antonio’s trial, Bassanio offers up “[his] hands, [his] head, [his] heart” in place of Antonio’s pound of flesh. Though he is reckless enough to gamble with money, Bassanio is not willing to gamble with his friend’s life. Ultimately, though he is immature, Bassanio’s better qualities win him the affections of Portia and Antonio.

At the start of the play, Bassanio is an immature, opportunistic man who pursues Portia for her beauty and money. A spendthrift by his own admission, Bassanio has accumulated many debts in Venice. By marrying the wealthy Portia, he hopes to pay off those debts. He describes her in terms of “value” and “worth,” treating her as more of an investment than a wife. Furthermore, he approaches his marriage to Portia as though it is a legal contract rather than a bond of love. After selecting the correct chest, he asks Portia to “confirm,” “sign,” and “ratify” their relationship. During Antonio’s trial, Bassanio privileges his friendship with Antonio over his marriage because his marriage lacks true depth of feeling. He even gives away the ring that Portia gave him as a symbol of marriage, effectively forfeiting their bond.

However, Portia teaches Bassanio to prioritize his marriage and properly appreciate her. When Portia gives Bassanio the ring the first time, she symbolically gives herself to him. By giving it away, Bassanio effectively gives Portia herself away. In order to earn the ring back, Portia makes Bassanio promise his “soul” to her. In doing so, Portia gains equal power within their relationship, as now she and Bassanio both belong to one another. In marrying Portia and listening to her perspective, Bassanio learns to value his wife beyond her wealth and genuinely love her.

**Characters: Portia**

**Extended Character Analysis**

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is a beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy heiress from Belmont. Her father’s will stipulates that she can only marry the man who manages to solve a riddle involving three caskets made of different metals. The caskets are made of gold, silver, and lead. The person who successfully chooses the casket with Portia’s portrait in it wins her hand in marriage. Due to her wealth and beauty, Portia has many suitors. However, her father’s will has left her powerless to decide which one she weds. Portia resents this, and subtly helps Bassanio, her favored suitor, solve the riddle so that they can marry. Though Portia is constrained by her father’s will and her gender, she does not allow these hindrances to prevent her from manipulating situations in order to achieve her desired outcome.

Portia is one of the most clever heroines in William Shakespeare’s plays. Her cunning and intelligence is most clearly showcased during Antonio’s trial. Posing as a young, male lawyer, Portia successfully defends Antonio from Shylock’s gruesome retribution and saves Antonio’s life. While doing so, she showcases an impressive understanding of Venetian law. As opposed to Bassanio’s call for the rules to be ignored and Antonio’s melancholic resignation to his fate, Portia is able to work within the constraints of the court system to save Antonio’s life. This ability to work within constraints is also present when she helps Bassanio choose the correct casket by having her musicians play a song containing hints in the lyrics. Though still adhering to her father’s will, she subtly manipulates her surroundings to secure her own happiness.

Though Portia’s father’s test is allegedly designed to protect her from unworthy suitors, it actually robs Portia of her agency. By making Portia’s hand in marriage a prize to be won, the courtship test renders Portia an object rather than a person. Rather than needing to win Portia’s affections, her suitors simply need to pass her
father’s test. Though Portia does exert control over her future by offering Bassanio hints, it is unclear if she truly loves him or if he is just the best option amongst her suitors. *The Merchant of Venice* presents love in terms of economics. In Bassanio’s eyes, Portia is a prize to be won so that he can pay off his debts. For Portia, Bassanio may be an investment in her own future. By this reading, Portia and Bassanio’s marriage is not founded on love—at least not initially. Instead, it seems to be based on mutual convenience: Bassanio gains access to Portia’s fortune, and Portia is freed from her father’s will. However, rather than contenting herself with a marriage of convenience, Portia works to win Bassanio’s love as well.

Portia’s efforts to turn Bassanio into a good husband are initially thwarted by Bassanio’s love for his friend Antonio. Antonio’s willingness to take out a dangerous bond has allowed Portia and Bassanio to marry. However, it has also indebted Bassanio to Antonio in such a way that he cannot give all of his love to Portia. After witnessing Bassanio’s declaration that he would sacrifice his marriage for Antonio, the disguised Portia drolly remarks that Bassanio’s wife would not appreciate that. Indeed, though Portia does seem to have some altruistic motivations, her true effort to save Antonio does not come until after Bassanio stakes his life on Antonio’s.

One of the primary motifs in the play is the idea of relationships being transactional and based on debt. Bassanio begins the play deeply indebted to Antonio. If Antonio were to die for Bassanio’s happiness, then Bassanio would never truly be able to pay back that debt. So, Portia leverages the outcome of the trial so that both Bassanio and Antonio are indebted to her instead of each other. Furthermore, through her trick with Bassanio’s wedding ring, she introduces equality into her marriage. After Bassanio successfully completes the casket test, Portia promises herself and all of her belongings to him. However, Bassanio is not asked to do the same for her. In giving away his wedding ring, Bassanio essentially forfeits his bond with Portia. In order to reclaim that bond, Portia forces Bassanio to pledge his soul to her as well. Now, both Bassanio and Portia belong to one another and are mutually indebted. Their marriage is one between equals.

Yet, for all of Portia’s virtues, she exhibits prejudice and hypocrisy while dealing with Morocco and Shylock. She disparages the Prince of Morocco on account of his dark skin and hopes that all men with his “complexion” also choose the wrong casket. She also proves to be just as much of an anti-Semite as Antonio. Though Portia extolls “mercy” as a virtue during the trial, she shows none after gaining the upper hand against Shylock. Bassanio is willing to pay back Shylock’s 3,000 ducats. However, Portia declares that since Shylock initially refused the payment, he gets nothing. Furthermore, even when Shylock is ready to leave without his money or his pound of flesh, she continues to degrade him. Though Shylock is a resident of Venice, Portia uses anti-Semitic rhetoric to paint him as an “alien.” By casting Shylock as an outsider, she robs him of his fortune, his dignity, and his faith.

### Characters: Shylock

#### Extended Character Analysis

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is a wealthy Jewish moneylender from Venice and Jessica's father. He lends Antonio and Bassanio the 3,000 ducats that Bassanio needs to pursue Portia. However, Shylock stipulates that if Antonio defaults on the loan, he will owe Shylock a pound of his flesh. This contract spurs the central plot of the play. When Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock attempts to extract his pound of flesh. However, thanks to Portia’s intervention, Antonio is saved and Shylock is forced to relinquish half of his fortune. He is also forced to convert to Christianity. Shylock is left humiliated after being robbed of his money, his faith, and his dignity. Shylock is one of William Shakespeare’s most controversial characters, because he is undeniably based on anti-Semitic stereotypes. However, he is also an eloquent speaker with genuine motivations for his actions.
Central to Shylock’s character is the historical role of Jewish people in 17th-century Europe. Jews were expelled from Britain in 1290 CE, so Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience would likely never have encountered an openly Jewish person. In 17th-century Venice, moneymaking was one of the few professions available to Jewish people. Christians viewed charging interest as sinful and giving out interest-free loans is unprofitable. So, once Jewish people filled this financial niche and made profitable loans, Christians began to characterize them as materialistic and greedy. This view is frequently espoused by Antonio, who also undermines Shylock’s business by giving interest-free loans. These harmful stereotypes further fueled the already rampant discrimination against Jewish people.

Shylock’s character and historical context are complex. Though the play casts him as the villain, he can also be interpreted in terms of different roles. By reading Shylock as a straightforward villain, he becomes an anti-Semitic caricature. That he charges interest on his loans at all would have already made him immoral in the eyes of most Elizabethan Christians. On top of that, however, Shylock is shown to be materialistic, a negative stereotype that Elizabethans wrongly associated with Jews. After Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, elopes and steals a chest full of ducats and expensive items, Shylock seems more concerned with the loss of his money than with his daughter. He goes so far as to wish she were dead at his feet if it meant that his ducats were decorating her corpse.

Shylock is also frequently associated with the “devil.” Both Jessica and Launcelot compare Shylock’s house to “hell.” For Shakespeare’s predominantly Christian audience, the association of a Jewish character with the devil would have been a familiar trope. Furthermore, Shylock’s antagonistic pursuit of revenge against the martyr-like Antonio evokes the persecution of Jesus Christ. By this reading, Shylock’s refusal to show Antonio mercy is indicative of his lack of Christian grace. By this deeply anti-Semitic reading, the Christian characters attempt to save Shylock’s soul by forcing him to convert to Christianity.

However, despite being the antagonist of the play, Shylock can also be read in a more sympathetic light. He is given opportunities to speak eloquently about the abuse he has experienced at the hands of the Christian characters. In his “hath not a jew eyes?” speech in act III, scene I, Shylock argues that Jewish people deserve respect since they are just as human as Christians. Though the revenge he plots against Antonio is cruel and gruesome, it is not entirely unjustified. Even Antonio acknowledges that he has frequently abused Shylock and undermined his business.

In 16th-century Venice, Jewish people had few economic opportunities. As Shylock claims at the end of the trial, taking away his wealth is akin to killing him. So, even if Shylock is sometimes materially fixated, it is not without reason. However, his alleged greed is subverted on several occasions, such as when he finds out that Jessica sold the turquoise ring. Rather than lamenting its loss in terms of monetary value, he reflects on the sentimental value it held: it was a gift from his late wife, Leah. This lament humanizes Shylock and implies that he and Leah had a loving relationship. Shylock’s caring about more than material wealth is also evident when he turns down the 6,000 ducats Bassanio offers him during the trial. If Shylock only desired money, so many ducats would have been a welcome profit. However, his refusal to accept anything other than his pound of flesh suggests that Shylock is operating on principle and emotion.

Shylock’s principles are perspicuous in his speeches. He frequently cites scripture and, more so than any of the Christians, adheres to his faith. Shylock is incredulous after hearing Bassanio and Gratiano claim that they would sacrifice their wives for Antonio. This reaction, combined with his anguish over Jessica’s selling of Leah’s ring, suggests that he was a loving and honorable husband. Shylock also refuses to eat with the Christians since his faith bars him from eating unkosher foods. The Christians use their faith to assert superiority over others. Shylock adheres to his religious principles in spite of adversity. This makes his forced conversion all the more obscene, as a conversion without conviction is meaningless. Though superficially “merciful,” the Christians actually rob Shylock of the foundation of his morality and identity.
Of additional note is that Shylock fits the tragic hero archetype. He begins the play as a wealthy and prominent moneylender who is secure in his faith. However, after years of suffering abuses from Christians, his thoughts turn to revenge, thereby setting his downfall into motion. In his fervor to see Antonio answer for his abuse, Shylock becomes cruel and single-minded. As a result, he loses everything: his wealth, his dignity, and his faith. Shylock leaves the court a defeated man, humbled by both injustice and his own misguided pursuit of revenge.

The controversies surrounding Shylock have no simple resolution. His views on human nature are profound and eloquent. His motivations are based on rectifying the injustice inflicted on his people by Christians. He is principled and adheres to his faith despite the social repercussions. However, he also embodies harmful anti-Semitic stereotypes, and his defeat in the trial is treated as a triumph for the Christian protagonists. Ultimately, to discredit either reading is to miss what makes Shylock fascinating: he represents a deeply flawed portrayal of a very human character.

**Characters: Jessica**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Jessica is Shylock’s daughter in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In a bid to escape her unhappy family home, she elopes with Lorenzo, a penniless Christian. She converts to Christianity as a consequence of marrying Lorenzo. Before leaving Shylock’s house, she steals a chest full of ducats and family heirlooms. Among those heirlooms is a turquoise ring given to Shylock by his late wife, Leah. After eloping, Jessica and Lorenzo travel to Belmont and eventually arrive at Portia’s estate. When Portia leaves to attend Antonio’s trial, she leaves Jessica and Lorenzo in charge of her estate.

Jessica primarily serves as a contrast for Portia. Portia is a dutiful daughter who begrudgingly obeys her father’s will. In contrast, Jessica abandons Shylock and steals from his fortune. Portia’s marriage is symbolically sanctioned by her father because she upholds his will. In contrast, Jessica’s father is forced to acknowledge hers after being threatened with death in court. Both women are strong-willed and independent. However, Portia works within the restrictions of her circumstances, whereas Jessica breaks free from restrictions.

This contrast also subtly comments on the double standard between Christians and Jews in Elizabethan England and Renaissance Italy. Readers are invited to view Portia’s adherence to her father’s will as admirable and virtuous because her father was a respected Christian. However, Jessica’s betrayal of her father is also portrayed as admirable, because she is fleeing her Jewish family and converting to Christianity. The implication seems to be that filial devotion is only virtuous if one’s parents are Christians. Jessica distances herself as much as possible from her father, referring to herself as a “daughter to his blood” but not “to his manners.”

Both of the primary Jewish characters in the play convert to Christianity. However, whereas Shylock’s conversion to Christianity is forced, Jessica’s conversion is enthusiastic. Jessica’s decision to convert can be interpreted in different ways. By reading her conversion as advantageous, her soul is saved as a result of falling in love with Lorenzo. Rather than adhering to her father’s traditions, Jessica instead escapes from Shylock’s control and marries the man she loves. Christianity is portrayed as the path to salvation and freedom for Jessica. She escapes from her “hell”-like house and gains a new “father” in the form of the Christian God.

However, her conversion can also be read as a means of spiting her father. By this reading, her conversion is more of a byproduct of her marriage to a Christian than it is a quest for Christian salvation. Jessica openly
admits that she is “asham’d to be [her] father’s daughter.” She also says that her father’s “house is hell.” As she leaves, she steals several thousand ducats from Shylock. Many of her actions seem designed to spite Shylock, such as when she sells Leah’s turquoise ring. By converting to Christianity, she also prevents Shylock from having any legitimate Jewish heirs to his fortune. This forces him to either acknowledge his Christian son-in-law or allow his fortune to die with him.

If read from Shylock’s perspective, Jessica has committed the ultimate betrayal of both her faith and her father. Shylock has suffered verbal and economic abuse from the Christian merchants for years. However, it is not until his daughter is “stolen” by the Christians that he truly fulfills his intention to follow through on Antonio’s bond. Furthermore, when Shylock hears that Jessica has sold the turquoise ring he received from his late wife, he seems genuinely emotional. By this reading, Jessica is not an aspirant Christian fleeing an abusive father. Instead, she is a materialistic spendthrift who sells an item that her allegedly greedy father would not have sold for “a wilderness of monkeys.” Like so many of the characters in The Merchant of Venice, Jessica’s attributes and motivations are interwoven with the wider world of the play.

Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

The following paper topics are based on the entire play. Following each topic is a thesis and a sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

Topic #1
Much of the plot of The Merchant of Venice is generated by contractual obligations. These take the form of legally binding contracts, such as the bond between Antonio and Shylock, as well as less formal arrangements, such as the ring given by Portia to Bassanio. Examine the way the individual will is forced to negotiate with external demands.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: One of the major conflicts illustrated in The Merchant of Venice is the struggle of the individual will against the imposed obligations of society. This struggle is primarily manifested through the various contracts characters must fulfill throughout the course of the play.

II. Act I
A. Bassanio owes Antonio money and seeks to repay his debt by marrying Portia, a wealthy heiress.
B. Portia must marry whoever can solve the riddle of the three caskets, as specified in her late father’s will.
C. Many of Portia’s suitors give up their attempt to win her hand, unwilling to abide by the strict consequences of her father’s will.
D. Antonio, in the past, has helped people escape the consequences of their contracts with Shylock, the usurer, by lending them money at no interest.
E. Antonio must sign a bond promising to sacrifice a pound of his flesh to Shylock, so that the usurer will lend Bassanio money for his quest.

III. Act II
A. Morocco objects to the terms of Portia’s father’s will, because it doesn’t allow the individual to succeed on his own merits.
B. Gratiano must agree to curb his usual behavior if Bassanio is to allow him to join his expedition.
C. Morocco must leave Portia and remain a bachelor for the rest of his life, for failing to solve the riddle of the three caskets.
D. Aragon suffers the same fate as Morocco for failing in his choice.
IV. Act III
A. Shylock intends to have Antonio arrested for being unable to repay the loan on time.
B. Portia desires Bassanio to wait before attempting to solve the riddle, knowing that, if he fails, she won’t be permitted to see him.
C. Bassanio wins Portia by fulfilling the terms of her father’s will.
D. Portia gives Bassanio a ring which he must wear to prove his love for her.
E. Gratiano, whose proposal was contingent on Bassanio’s success, becomes engaged to Nerissa.
F. Antonio’s life is in danger as he has failed to repay his debt to Shylock on time.
G. Antonio absolves Bassanio of all debt, on the condition that the latter comes to Venice immediately, before the merchant’s death.
H. Antonio has been taken into custody so that he cannot escape from Shylock.

V. Act IV
A. The Duke feels he cannot stop Shylock’s quest for Antonio’s flesh without breaking the law.
B. Shylock insists the Venetians must allow him to fulfill the terms of his bond, otherwise Venice will lose its good international standing.
C. Portia, disguised as a doctor of law, informs Bassanio that “There is no power in Venice/ Can alter a decree established.”
D. Portia informs Shylock that, although entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh, he has no legal right to spill any of the merchant’s blood.
E. Portia decrees that, according to Venetian law, Shylock is liable to a fine and possible execution for attempting to harm a citizen.
F. Shylock is forced to sign a deed, willing his possessions upon his death to Lorenzo and agreeing to become a Christian.
G. Portia, disguised as the lawyer, demands Bassanio’s ring in payment for her services, but Bassanio must refuse, due to his prior agreement with Portia.
H. Bassanio breaks his agreement with Portia by giving the disguised Portia her ring.
I. Gratiano breaks a parallel agreement with Nerissa.

VI. Act V
A. Portia and Nerissa censure their future husbands for violating their agreements about the rings.
B. Portia reveals that she and Nerissa provoked the violation.

Topic #2
Much is made of differences between races and religions in The Merchant of Venice. Explore the various, sometimes inconsistent attitudes toward, and behaviors based upon, these aspects of culture as they are exhibited in Shakespeare’s play.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: In The Merchant of Venice, characters display an impulse to categorize one another on the basis of religious and racial characteristics, but this is frequently complicated by certain characters’ actual behavior.

II. Act I
A. Portia and Nerissa discuss the former’s suitors on the basis of their national/racial characteristics.
B. Shylock refuses to dine with Bassanio and Antonio for religious reasons.
C. Shylock tells the audience that he hates Antonio “for he is a Christian…”
D. Antonio, in the past, has publicly scorned Shylock for both his religion and occupation.
E. Antonio thinks that Shylock has overcome some of his Jewish characteristics when he lends the merchant the 3,000 ducats.
III. Act II
A. Morocco, on meeting Portia, asks her to “Mislike [him] not for [his] complexion” (i.e. to not hold their racial differences against him).
B. Portia assures Morocco that his race cannot be a factor in her decision to wed.
C. Launcelot Gobbo decides to terminate his employment with Shylock because Shylock is a Jew.
D. Launcelot believes Jessica may yet marry a Christian, despite being Jewish.
E. Jessica regrets her Jewish blood and hopes Lorenzo will make a Christian out of her.
F. Lorenzo worries that Jessica’s personal merits might not prove sufficient to offset her Jewishness.
G. Shylock decides to dine with the Christians, despite their religious differences.
H. Shylock expresses contempt for the Christians’ street festivities.
I. When Morocco departs after failing to solve the riddle of the caskets, Jessica expresses relief that she will not have to marry one of his “complexion.”
J. Shylock, it is reported, is outraged that his daughter has fled with a Christian.

IV. Act III
A. Salerio claims that there is a vast difference between Shylock and his daughter, despite their blood relationship.
B. Shylock makes an impassioned speech denying an inherent difference between Christians and Jews, though also claiming that his desire for revenge is not inborn malice but rather behavior learned from Christians.
C. Launcelot teases Jessica that she is damned for being a Jew.

V. Act IV
A. Antonio claims it is pointless to reason with Shylock because he is a Jew.
B. Shylock points out that the Venetians keep slaves who are not allowed to mix with Christian society.
C. Portia, disguised as the young judge, informs Shylock that he is not allowed to spill “Christian blood.”
D. The Duke attributes his own mercy toward Shylock to “the difference of our (i.e., the Christians’) spirit.”
E. Shylock is forced to become a Christian as punishment for his deeds.

Topic #3
In The Merchant of Venice, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon the interpretation of ambiguous phrases. Contrast the lighthearted play with ambiguity as embodied in the character of Launcelot Gobbo with either the more purposeful and consequential scenes of the three caskets or the trial scene pitting Portia against Shylock.

Outline
I. Thesis statement: Shakespeare presents two types of ambiguity in The Merchant of Venice, one which the audience is invited to enjoy for its comic merits, the other which the audience recognizes to have serious—perhaps even deadly—consequences. This can be illustrated by contrasting the scenes involving Launcelot Gobbo with those concerning __________.

II. Launcelot Gobbo.
A. Launcelot often mispronounces or mis-selects his words, lending them an inappropriate or even opposite sense to what he intends to convey.
B. Launcelot evades responsibility for his impregnating “the Moor,” by transforming her—through a series of verbal twists and turns—into a linguistic display, involving puns on “much,” “more,” “less,” and “Moor” (Act III, Scene 5).
C. Launcelot manages to shirk his minor household duties by reinterpreting the commands into senses inappropriate to the particular context.
III. The Riddle of the Three Caskets.
A. Whoever correctly interprets the inscriptions in order to solve the riddle of the three caskets wins Portia’s hand.
B. Whoever fails to interpret correctly the inscriptions in order to solve the riddle of the three caskets must leave Portia and also may never marry anyone else.
C. Morocco is tricked into choosing the wrong casket by a very improbable interpretation of the inscription on the gold casket.
D. Aragon misinterprets the inscription on the silver casket through his own conceit.
E. Bassanio correctly interprets the riddle by concentrating not on the slippery language of the inscriptions but rather on the materials from which the caskets are constructed.

IV. The Trial Scene to Decide Antonio’s Fate.
A. Shylock insists on a strict, unambiguous interpretation of the law, in order to allow him to claim the pound of flesh Antonio has signed over to him.
B. Neither Bassanio nor the Duke can think of an interpretation of the law or Shylock’s bond which would allow for Antonio’s escape.
C. Portia, disguised as the doctor of law, insists that the bond must be adhered to and that Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh.
D. Shylock insists that nowhere in the bond does it specify that he must declare his motives, or demonstrate mercy, or provide a surgeon to prevent Antonio from dying from his wounds.
E. Portia reinterprets Shylock’s bond by widening its context. In other words, she brings up factors not accounted for in the words of the bond, and rules that Shylock is not allowed to spill blood because the bond doesn’t provide for it. There is, of course, no way for Shylock to cut Antonio without making him bleed.
F. Portia invokes other laws in conjunction with the case at hand, to demonstrate that Shylock has broken the law and is subject to financial penalties and possibly death.
G. The Christians draft a new deed, dictating Shylock’s future behavior.

Topic #4
Various characters in The Merchant of Venice undergo transformations during the course of the play, but none more dramatically or substantially than Portia. Discuss Portia’s transformation from her role as the submissive daughter at the beginning of the play to her position as manipulator of events by the end.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: The character of Portia may be seen as one who moves from a submissive to a domineering role over the course of events in The Merchant of Venice. In doing so, Portia sheds the role traditionally allotted to women in her society and assume a position of power usually reserved for men. This is best exemplified in the trial scene, in which Portia literally assumes a male position in her disguise as a young doctor of law.

II. Act I
A. Portia is bitter over the terms of her father’s will, which stipulates that whoever solves the riddle of the three caskets wins her hand in marriage, leaving her no choice in the matter of her husband.
B. None of Portia’s present suitors appeals to her, but she must let them attempt to solve the riddle.

III. Act II
A. Portia informs Morocco that “In terms of choice [she is] not solely led/ By nice direction of a maiden’s eyes./ Besides, the lott’ry of [her] destiny/ Bars her the right of voluntary choosing.”
B. Portia expresses great relief when Morocco fails to solve the riddle of the three caskets, as she didn’t want to marry him but would have been unable to refuse had he succeeded.
C. Portia tells Aragon that “If [he] choose[s] that [casket] wherein [she is] contained,/ Straight shall [their] nuptial rites be solemnized.”
D. Portia refers to herself as “worthless,” due to her inability to control her destiny.

IV. Act III
A. Portia begs Bassanio to wait before attempting to solve the riddle, telling him: “I would detain you here some month or two/ Before you venture for me. I could teach you/ How to choose right, but then I am foresworn./ So will I never be. So may you miss me.” She expresses frustration as she finally has a suitor she esteems but cannot marry if he should fail to solve the riddle.
B. Portia is freed from the tyranny of her father’s will when Bassanio makes the correct choice.
C. According to the custom of her day, Portia “commits [herself] to [Bassanio’s will] to be directed,/ As from her lord, her governor, her king.”
D. Portia offers to pay off Antonio’s debt, in order to relieve his plight at the hands of Shylock.
E. Portia decides to disguise herself and Nerissa as men—a doctor of law and his clerk—in order to prevent Antonio from losing a pound of his flesh at the hands of Shylock.

V. Act IV
A. Portia is introduced to the Venetian court as Balthazar, “a young doctor of Rome,” and is enlisted by the Duke of Venice to help settle the dispute between Antonio and Shylock.
B. Portia questions Antonio and Shylock on the particulars of the case, supporting her judgments in reference to Venetian law.
C. Using her knowledge of Venetian law, Portia turns the tables on Shylock, so that he is at the mercy of the court and Antonio is freed from the threat of death.
D. Portia, still disguised, tricks Bassanio into giving her the ring that he earlier promised her he’d never part with.

VI. Act V
A. Portia arrives in Belmont ahead of Bassanio and informs her household not to reveal her absence.
B. Portia grills Bassanio over his loss of the ring, declaring they cannot be together faithfully unless the ring is restored.
C. Portia brings the play to a happy conclusion. She reveals her role in the trial of Antonio, letting Bassanio off the hook for giving up her ring, and she informs Antonio that some of his ships have arrived safely, restoring to him much of his lost fortune.

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Act I, Scenes 1-3
1. Compare and contrast Antonio’s situation in signing the agreement with Shylock, with Portia’s situation of being held bound to her father’s will.

2. Contrast Antonio’s loans to Bassanio with Shylock’s loan to Antonio and Bassanio

Act II, Scenes 1-9
1. What is the relationship—both structurally and thematically—of the Jessica/Lorenzo subplot to the main plots of The Merchant of Venice?

2. Compare and contrast Morocco’s reasoning during the selection of caskets with Aragon’s speech during the same test.
3. Aside from the obvious one of comic relief, what function might Launcelot Gobbo be seen to have in the play?

**Act III, Scenes 1-5**

1. Compare and contrast Bassanio’s deliberations over the three caskets with those of his rivals.

2. Discuss Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech in relation to the various attitudes toward race demonstrated throughout the play.

3. How does Portia’s character develop over the course of Act III?

**Act IV, Scenes 1-2**

1. What factors motivate Antonio’s resignation in Act IV, Scene 1? Discuss this in relation to his ambiguous position of both envying his friend’s new relationship and yet sacrificing himself to make it possible.

2. How does the plot of the rings relate to the other contractual obligations dramatized in the play?

3. Consider and discuss the process by which Portia turns the situation in the court from Shylock’s advantage to Antonio’s.

**Act V, Scene 1**

1. Trace the development of Portia from a daughter bound by her father’s will to a behind-the-scenes manipulator of events.

2. How do Lorenzo’s speeches concerning the moon and music suggest other themes previously explored in The Merchant of Venice?

3. What purpose does the parallel romance of Gratiano and Nerissa serve in terms of an audience’s evaluation of the relationship between Bassanio and Portia?

**Criticism: Overview**

Frank Kennode

[Kennode presents a concise overview of The Merchant of Venice, initially examining Shakespeare’s punning of the term "gentle" and discussing the word's various meanings throughout the play. The critic identifies two readings of "gentle" which have a significant bearing on the drama: the sense of "gentleness" as in civility or an improved nature; and the notion of "Gentile," or Christian, which stands in contrast to Shylock and Judaism. In addition, Kennode asserts that justice is a primary theme of the drama, noting that while the Christians stress mercy, love, and charity, Shylock advocates the letter (rather than the spirit) of the law, hate, and vengeance. The Merchant of Venice, the critic concludes, is about "judgment, redemption, and mercy; the supersession in human history of the grim four thousand years of unalleviated justice by the era of love and mercy."]

We are not likely, whether or no we share his high opinion of Shakespeare as a comic writer, to fall into Johnson's error when he dismissed the reiteration of the word 'gentle' in The Merchant of Venice as only another example of Shakespeare's weakness for this 'fatal Cleopatra', the pun. 'Gentleness' in this play means civility in its old full sense, nature improved; but it also means 'Gentile', in the sense of Christian, which amounts, in away, to the same thing. Here are some of the passages in which it occurs:
Hie thee, gentle Jew.
The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind.
[I. iii. 177-78]

If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven,
It will be for his gentle daughter's sake.
[II. ii. 33-4]
(Jessica is also called 'gentle' in 1. 19)

Now, by my hood, a Gentile [gentle] and no Jew
[II. vi. 51]

... to leave a rich Jew's service and become
The follower of so poor a gentleman
[II. ii 147-48]

The Duke urges Shylock to be merciful; asking him not only to
loose the forfeiture,
But, touch'd with human gentleness and love,
Forgive a moiety of the principal ...
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.
[IV. i. 24-33]

Other 'gentle' objects are Antonio's ships, and Portia, many times over; and Portia speaks of mercy as a 'gentle rain'.

There is a straightforward contrast between gentleness, the 'mind of love', and its opposite, for which Shylock stands. He lends money at interest, which is not only unchristian, but an obvious misdirection of love; Antonio ventures with his ships, trusts his wealth to the hand of God (and so they are 'gentle' ships). It is true that a Jew hath eyes etc.; this does not reduce the difference between man and man, when one is gentle and the other not. To make all this clear, Shakespeare twice inserts the kind of passage he later learned to do without; the kind which tells the audience how to interpret the action. It is normal to cut these scenes in acting texts, but only because these plays are so grossly misunderstood. The first such is the debate on Genesis, xxxi. 37 ff. (Jacob's device to produce ringstraked, speckled and spotted lambs) which occurs when Antonio first asks for the loan [I. iii. 61 ff.]. The correct interpretation of this passage, as given by Christian commentators on Genesis (see A. Williams, The Common Expositor, 1950), is that Jacob was making a venture ('A thing not in his power to bring to pass, / but sway'd and fash-ion'd by the hand of heaven'; compare Faerie Queene, V. iv). But Shylock sees no difference between the breeding of metal and the breeding of sheep—a constant charge against usurers ... Later, in II. viii, we have a pair of almost Spenserian exemptra [examples] to make this point clear. First Solanio describes Shylock's grief at the loss of daughter and ducats; he cannot distinguish properly between them, or lament the one more than the other. Then Solario describes the parting of Antonio and Bassanio; Antonio urges Bassanio not even to consider money; the loss of Bassanio is serious, but he urges him to be merry and not to think of Shylock's bond. When love is measured out, confused by the 'spirit of calculation' (R. B. Heilman's phrase in his discussion of the errors of Lear [II. ix. 21]), the result is moral chaos.

Bassanio's visit to Belmont is frankly presented as a venture, like Jason's for the Golden Fleece; and the theme of gentle venturing is deepened in the scenes of the choice of caskets. The breeding metals, gold and silver, are to be rejected; the good lead requires that the chooser should 'give and hazard all he hath' [II. ix. 21]. Morocco (II. vii) supposes that Portia cannot be got by any casket save the golden one, tacitly confusing her living worth with that of gold, the value of gentleness with that of the best breeding metal. Arragon (II.
ix—the intervening scene contains the lamentation of Shylock over his daughter-ducats) rejects gold out of pride only, ironically giving the right reasons for despising the choice of the 'many', that they are swayed not by Truth but by Opinion, a mere false appearance of Truth, not Truth itself. (In this sense the Jews are enslaved to Opinion.) He chooses silver because he 'assumes desert', another matter from trusting to the hand of God; and his reward is 'a shadow's bliss' [II. ix. 67]. After another scene in which Shylock rejoices over Antonio's losses and again laments Jessica's treachery, there follows (III. ii) the central scene of choice, in which Bassanio comes to 'hazard' and 'venture' for Portia. The point of the little song is certainly that in matters of love the eye is a treacherous agent, and can mistake substance for shadow. Bassanio, rejecting the barren metals which appear to breed, avoids the curse of barrenness on himself (for that is the punishment of failure); and he finds in the leaden casket Portia's true image. The scroll speaks of the 'fortune' which has fallen to him. Portia, in her happiness, speaks of Bassanio's prize as not rich enough, deploring the poorness of her 'full sum'; and Gratiano speaks of the forthcoming marriage as the solemnization of 'the bargain of your faith' [III. ii. 193]. Bassanio the merchant has 'won the fleece' [III. ii. 241]; but at the same moment Antonio has lost his. Bassanio is 'dear bought', as Portia says; but Antonio will not have him return for any reason save love: 'if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter' [III. ii. 321-22].

At this point the conflict between gentleness (Antonio's laying down his life for his friend) and a harsh ungentle legalism becomes the main burden of the plot. Shylock demands his bond; this is just, like Angelo's strict application of the law against fornication in the hard case of Claudio [in Measure for Measure]. It is, in a way, characteristic of Shakespeare's inspired luck with his themes that Shylock in the old stories will take flesh for money. There is no substantial difference: he lacks the power to distinguish gold, goat's flesh, man's flesh, and thinks of Antonio's body as carrion. The difference between this and a 'gentle' attitude reflects a greater difference:

DUKE: How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?
SHYLOCK: What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?
[IV. i. 88-9]

There is no need to sentimentalize this; as Shakespeare is careful to show in Measure for Measure the arguments for justice are strong, and in the course of Christian doctrine it is necessarily satisfied before mercy operates ... Shylock has legally bought his pound of flesh; if he does not get it 'there is no force In the decrees of Venice' [IV. i. 102]. But as heavenly mercy is never deserved, it is an adornment of human authority to exercise it with the same grace:

... earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this.
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation.
[IV. i. 196-200]

But this plea does not work on the stony unregenerate heart; Shylock persists in the demand for justice, and gets it. Like any other human being, he must lose all by such a demand. In offering to meet the demands of strict justice (in accordance with the Old Law) Antonio will pay in blood the price of his friend's happiness; and it cannot be extravagant to argue that he is here a type of the divine Redeemer, as Shylock is of the unredeemed.

Shakespeare's last act, another 'thematic' appendix to the dramatic action, is motivated by the device of the rings. It begins with a most remarkable passage. Lorenzo's famous 'praise of music'. In this are treated 'topics' which, as James Hutton shows in an extremely important study ['Some English Poems in Praise of Music', English Miscellany II (1951)], are all evidently the regular parts of a coherent and familiar theme—so familiar
indeed, that Shakespeare permits himself to treat it 'in a kind of shorthand'. The implications of this 'theme' are vast; but behind it lies the notion, very explicit in Milton's 'Ode at a Solemn Musick', of the universal harmony impaired by sin and restored by the Redemption. The lovers, in the restored harmony of Belmont, have a debt to Antonio:

You should in all sense be much bound to him.  
For, as I hear, he was much bound for you.  
[V. i. 136-37]

In such an atmosphere the amorous sufferings of Troilus, Thisbe, Dido and Medea are only shadows of possible disaster [cf. V. i. 1-14], like the mechanicals' play in Midsummer Night's Dream; Antonio on his arrival is allowed, by the contretemps [inopportune and embarrassing occurrence] of the ring-plot, to affirm once more the nature of his love, standing guarantor for Bassanio in perpetuity, 'my soul upon the forfeit' [V. i. 252]. The Merchant of Venice, then, is 'about' judgment redemption and mercy; the supersession in human history of the grim four thousand years of unalleviated justice by the era of love and mercy. It begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love. And all the time it tells its audience that this is its subject; only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of The Merchant of Venice.


E. F. C. Ludowyk

[Ludowyk offers a brief synopsis of the main characters in The Merchant of Venice, emphasizing the attributes which involve them in situations of trial or test. The critic considers Antonio a virtuous and generous Christian merchant, who is also "mysteriously and romantically tinged with melancholy." Bassanio is a romantic hero, Ludowyk asserts, albeit one whose life of extravagance has left him penniless. Shakespeare probably did not intend to depict him as "a mercenary fortune hunter"; rather "he is the ideal man to attempt to win the fairy princess," Portia. Shylock is the evil outsider, the critic continues, a Jew despised by Christians, and as evil as Antonio is good. Portia is the fairy-tale princess of Belmont, Ludowyk maintains, the prize for which the heroes contend. She also embodies divine grace and demonstrates an angelic quality by miraculously appearing in Venice to save Antonio from Shylock's bond.]

The material of [The Merchant of Venice] has often been likened to a fairy tale. Enchanting though it may be, ... the play touches on matters of seriousness, so that there is something to be taken away from it besides the very satisfying impression of romance.

Shakespeare took his story from the Italian. It differs only in its ratio of romance to reality, a reality Elizabethans would understand, from all those stories of love and adventure, which they were eagerly reading in translation—such stories as those of Romeo and Juliet, of Othello, and so on. Whether Shakespeare got his story directly from some Italian source, or from an earlier play, we do not know, nor does it matter greatly. All sorts of fairy-tale material are used in this play, some of it not originally Italian but of very ancient Oriental provenance, as for instance the story of the caskets, and of the pound of flesh. The wealth of story-telling in Eastern, particularly Indian, cultures had given rise to classical Greek, Latin and Islamic analogues, so the story Shakespeare used may have existed in various forms. What is important is the use he made of a well-known tale.

The special stamp Shakespeare gave his material is that of the suggestion of something serious, and real, in addition to the romance or the fairy-tale. We ... notice throughout The Merchant of Venice how everything in the play has a double character: a connection with the externals of romance, and at the same time an allusion to, or some link with, undoubted moral seriousness. In most of his comedies we find a similar tendency—that
of evoking through the gaiety, even the light-heartedness, of its situations the suggestion of something more serious and grave.

In the popular theatre there were no strict rules by which plays had to be written, and Shakespeare's form is often a concoction of various materials. Tragedy could be the story of a great man who came to an unhappy end. Comedy could be a story ('historie') with a happy ending, and it could include something other than, or even opposed to, the pleasurable lightness usually associated with comedy today. We ... see in *Twelfth Night* how the two—the grave and the gay—are blended. There is the same process here. The theatre to Elizabethans was often like the pulpit in the sound morality it preached. And to all people at that time the business of literature and the arts was to teach.

So the romantic story of the extreme situation of Antonio, who is saved from the ogreish Shylock by Portia, the fairy-princess whom Bassanio wins as his bride, and all its other stories have a serious undertone. The impossibility of the 'historie' is based on a moral reality which poses such questions as were the subjects of moral interlude.

The structure of the play depends on a number of situations of trial or test. At various points in the action a character is tested, or a trial takes place. These tests are based on moral criteria such as how should one decide between three offered choices (the casket test), or in the great trial scene which is better: Justice or Mercy? And often everything seems to turn on deciding between appearance and reality, (pp. 118-20).

[By examining] the way in which [the characters] are described and presented we can see how naturally and easily they come to be involved in the situations of trial or test in which they figure.

*Antonio*. To take Antonio first, the merchant of Venice. He is what the Duke calls a 'royal merchant'. This is Gratiano's description of him too [III. ii. 239]. He is not only wealthy, but also a person of a royal or kingly disposition. As a man of great wealth Antonio is in a prominent position; in most cultures, certainly in Eastern cultures, the possession of wealth would entitle him to respect, for with it went responsibilities and duties. So in the East the man of wealth is often given an honorific title. Not so long ago in India the wealthy Zamindar was often a Rajah; and in Malaya and China there are special terms of respect to designate the rich man. Such men were expected to be generous, to be spenders of their wealth, and not to be miserly but charitable. Antonio is a man of this kind. He gives all, even his life, to help his friend, the poor man Bassanio, with whom he is, in the way of these romances, linked. That Antonio uses his wealth to help others, we know from [III. iii. 21ff.]

He is also mysteriously and romantically tinged with melancholy. It may be that Shakespeare in shaping his materials interposes a hint of what is to follow. He gives Antonio a premonition of his fate. His melancholy would be due, too, to his loss of Bassanio. That he loves Bassanio so devotedly would not make him specially romantic in Elizabethan eyes, for it was a commonplace that two men could be so devoted to each other. In an early play of Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* we have Proteus and Valentine who are sworn brothers, and ... in *Twelfth Night* ... the sea-captain, Antonio, risks his life to follow Sebastian only because of his great attachment to him.

But there is something else. Antonio is not only the fabulous merchant, of an interesting melancholic turn of mind. He is a Christian. This is the first remark made of him by his enemy Shylock. In describing him as a Christian Shylock calls him 'fawning publican', which recalls the type of person Christ preferred to the self-righteous Pharisee. Antonio, in the use of his wealth, comes near to the prescription given to the rich young ruler whom Christ advised to sell everything that he had. The rich young ruler did not do as Christ recommended, but Antonio's pledging of all his wealth to help a friend and his generosity should be contrasted with Shylock's miserliness, and be reckoned part of his 'royal', Christian disposition. In Shylock's own words Antonio was wont to lend money 'for Christian courtesy' [in. i. 49]. Of him Salerio says 'a kinder
gentleman treads not the earth' [II. viii. 35], where 'kind' would mean not only of a kindly disposition, but also full of what should be natural to human beings—feeling for others. ('Kind' is a word with the two senses of which Shakespeare often played.) To Bassanio he is

the kindest man
The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies.

[II. ii. 292-941]

We shall see in the central scene in the play with what Christian virtue Antonio bears himself.

Round this romantic merchant prince of true Christian virtue are a group of characters of whom we can say little, because the dramatist evidently intends them simply as the train to Antonio. As Morocco is attended by a train, as Bassanio goes on his quest similarly attended, so Antonio is given his Solanios and Salerios. If their number was mistakenly increased and a third by name Salerino invented through confusion between Solanio and Salerio, it all goes to show how unimportant they are as persons in the play. They have no function but as frame to Antonio—in his glory and in his distress.

Bassanio. Bassanio is another romantic character—the young man without means beloved by the merchant prince. Shakespeare makes him a figure recognizable to the Londoners of his time—the young man who through extravagance (as Bassanio confesses 'somewhat showing a more swelling port Than my faint means would grant continuance' [cf. I. i. 124-25]) has no money. But this weakness of the young should not be held against him, since he shows as much by his attitude as by what is reported of him, that though young and foolish in the past, he is in the play the ideal man to attempt to win the fairy princess. We should not think of him as a mercenary fortune hunter, since social institutions then made the desire of a young man for a wealthy bride perfectly regular. Arranged marriages where the dowry of the girl is an important consideration are well known both in the East and the West. Bassanio, when he first speaks of Portia, describes her as a 'lady richly left' [I. i. 161] (she has inherited wealth from her father), but he goes on to speak of her as 'fair', and

fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues.

[I. i. 162-63]

He compares her with Brutus's Portia, and then proclaims her the fabulous object of desperate adventure—the golden fleece after which Jason sailed [cf. I. i. 165-72].

Bassanio is, in Nerissa's words which gain Portia's approval, a 'scholar and a soldier ... of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, the best deserving a fair lady' [I. ii. 113ff.]. And most important of all, we shall see in the first of the great trials with which this play is concerned, how nobly he bears himself, and how rightly he chooses. To Portia in [III. ii. 60] he recalls the demi-god Hercules who rescued the Trojan maiden. Shakespeare gives Bassanio the character of a man of virtue. We should, remembering the test, judge Bassanio not by the outward show but by what lies within.

He is attended by Gratiano, who is, according to his description in the play and in numerous Italian comedies, some of which Shakespeare might have seen in London, a comical figure who always will be talking. In the lists of characters in Italian comedy there is often a Dottore Gratiano, a pompous talker.

Shylock. Shylock is the contrast to the good Antonio. Romance likes to work in black and white, and he is black to Antonio's white. If explanation were needed of his ogreishness, then we should have to say that he is a Jew is reason enough. Christian Europe reviled the Jew, and portrayed him as a hateful monster. If we are inclined to flatter ourselves that we are better in this respect, we need only pause for a moment to consider our
own record in this century, when racial hatreds have involved not only Jews but countless others of all races in shameful treatment from people like our own enlightened selves. Shakespeare's reaction to Shylock as a Jew is likely to have been that of his time. We can understand and condemn it, but we need not consider that it detracts seriously from the quality of *The Merchant of Venice*, for in the play Shakespeare is not concerned with teaching his audience, or ourselves, how Jews should be treated. If this had been his object then we could feel that there is something gravely at fault with the play as a manual of ethics. Shylock's vengefulness, not his Jewishness, is the centre of the play, and it is not written by a dramatist who felt Shylock's wrongs or those of his race deeply.

If we read the famous lines Shakespeare gave Shylock in [III. i. 53ff.], we shall see that they do not suggest that a Jew, because he is as much a human being as any Christian, should therefore be treated accordingly. Their intention is to prove that as Jews and Christians are both human beings, it is natural for them both to revenge wrongs done them—a point of view which would seem damnable both to orthodox Christian opinion and Jewish. Shylock is not asking for our tears, he is putting forward the point of view of a detestable ogre. The desperateness of Shylock's evil intentions would, to the audience of that time, have been adequately accounted for by his religion. The trial and execution of the Jewish physician Roderigo Lopez in 1594 for plotting to assassinate both Queen Elizabeth and the claimant to the Portuguese throne, would have made audiences the more ready to accept the conventional notion that such dastardly conduct came naturally to his co-religionists. We should not forget, too, that Shylock is a 'stranger'—strange in his religion, his dress, his manner of speech probably (certainly his Old Testament allusions give his language a colour of its own). He could quite easily be taken as that figure in the community who by his difference from the rest has to incur hostility. It is easy to remember how strongly emotions could be stirred against shopkeepers of another race who include money-lending as part of their business activities.

Shylock is presented to us by the dramatist not only as Jew, but more importantly and significantly as 'dog', wild beast and devil. There are several references to him which insist on his 'currish' disposition. In this matter, too, Shakespeare would seem to the humanitarians of our time in need of reprimand, for he always associated with the dog traits which were dangerous and contemptible: dogs always fawned and nattered; they were to be seen in great households licking at sweets—a messy and disgusting habit. It was their nature to snarl and bite, which may seem absolutely contradictory to the fawning, but what seems to be clear is that the image of dog suggested to Shakespeare what was contemptible.

Shylock is time and time again referred to as 'dog'. He himself reports that this is how Antonio had addressed him and treated him. We might ask whether we should think the worse of Antonio on this account. This was the treatment conventionally accorded to Jews, and we shall see, in the most significant scene of the play, how Antonio behaves towards Shylock. His generous attitude to Shylock immediately after he has been saved by Portia is Shakespeare's own invention, and should be taken as characteristic. To the other characters in the play Shylock is 'the villain Jew' [II. viii. 4], 'the dog Jew' [II. viii. 14], an 'impenetrable cur' [III. iii. 18], and Gratiano in execration of him thinks of him as both dog and wolf, with perhaps a reference to Lopez whose name was derived from the Latin *lupus*—*wolf*. Shylock himself states ironically 'since I am a dog beware my fangs' [III. iii. 7].

As the opponent of the good Antonio, Shylock is thought of as devil. The conflict of the good man with the devil was a simple Christian fable, and the writer without intending to be explicitly moral can give his work a simple moral point of view.

So we can see Shylock as devil, the natural adversary of Antonio. Indeed he is often pictured as such in the play. Antonio himself, in a warning to Bassanio of which he himself fails to take heed, looking at Shylock on the stage lost in his reckonings and mutterings and remembering his reference to the biblical story of Jacob and Laban, says 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose' [I. iii. 98]. To Lancelot his master is, 'God bless
the mark' [II. ii. 24], as he puts it, because some obscene phrase is to follow, 'a kind of devil' [II. ii. 24]. To Solanio in [III. i] he is throughout the devil. To Bassanio in [IV. i. 287] he is 'this devil'. And the situation facing Portia, as she sees it in [III. iv. 20-1], is that of

Purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty.

This we might take as the substance of the serious side of the play seen in miniature. To the Duke in the trial scene Shylock is an 'inhuman wretch', a term which unites both the suggestions of 'dog' (animal and not human) and 'devil' (wretch being the person expelled and driven out as the devil was from heaven).

Portia. Portia in the romance is the fairy-princess, the rich prize for which the heroes contend. To win her they have to undergo a test or trial, a familiar legend both in the East and West. With Portia are associated all the images of rich treasure and fabulous adventure. Many critics of the play have contrasted Belmont, where she lives, with the mart of Venice, to which she goes only to rescue Antonio. Her house is associated with music and harmony, while the world outside is 'naughty' or full of wickedness.

In the eulogy pronounced by Morocco in [II. vii. 38ff.] she is the world's wonder. To Portia herself her situation, waiting to be won by the champion, resembles that of Hesione saved from the sea-monster by Hercules, the force of classical fable adding its colour to the poet's presentation of her.

On all these scores she is the fairy-princess of romance. The caskets by which she is to be won, the ring she wears and which she presents to the hero who wins her, and what happens to it—all these are its familiar ingredients. Romantic, too, is the mode of her entry into the Duke's court in the disguise of a young lawyer.

But like all the major characters in the play she is associated with things of deeper seriousness. She is not only the princess of romance, she is thought of as divine and a saint. At the very opening of the play Bassanio, in Antonio's words, has sworn 'a secret pilgrimage' to her [I. i. 120]. Her suitors have to swear a solemn oath at a temple or chapel accepting the conditions in which they are permitted to take the test. Morocco thinks of Belmont of a place of pilgrimage where from the four corners of the world the devout come to kiss the shrine of the saint [II. vii. 39-40]. To him Portia is an angel, as he puns on the comparison with the English gold coin, the angel [II. vii. 55ff.]. To Bassanio her portrait is like that of a goddess. When she sets out with Nerissa to the rescue of Antonio, she goes and returns to the accompaniment of suggestions of some religious exercise or retreat in which she is taking part. To Jessica in [III. v. 73ff.] the winning of Portia must be to Bassanio the equivalent of finding the joys of heaven on this earth. And at the very end of the play, to Lorenzo, she is like God who drops manna from heaven on those he pleases to help.

Her role in the main section of the play resembles that of the angel of the Lord who saved Isaac in the nick of time when he was bound on the altar of sacrifice. She comes mysteriously from Belmont to help Antonio, she meets the devil Shylock on his own ground and discomfits him. She departs just as mysteriously, but not without extracting some token by which her miraculous descent into the law-court of Venice is to be made known. Typical of her is the music associated with her home, which she commands at the fateful moment of the test. Music is characteristic of concord, love and the triumph of good over the discordant forces of evil, and it is, on earth, the counterpart of the music of the spheres of which Lorenzo speaks [V. i. 60-5]. This heavenly music, in popular belief, was produced by the motion of the heavenly bodies as they circled round the earth. Human ears could not hear it, but immortal souls ... could.

Persons such as these could be involved in situations which are the stock in trade of romantic tales, if we overlooked the serious side in them. The play could be looked at as a series of romantic and impossible tests; it could also be seen to turn on important moral decisions. The latter seems stronger than the former as a mode of approach to the play, for to Elizabethans a comedy which had some moral to enforce would be in a familiar
tradition.


**Criticism: Usury**

**John W. Draper**

[Draper provides historical background on English Jews and the practice of usury (money-lending for interest) as they existed in Shakespeare's time to prove that the chief concern of The Merchant of Venice is conflicting economic ideals rather than race or religion. The critic argues that Shylock hates Antonio not only because he lends money interest-free, but also because he denigrates Shylock's profession and thwarts his business. According to Draper, Shakespeare is merely representative of his age when he ideistically compares Antonio's Christian business ethic with Shylock's more rigid and unforgiving value system. This fundamental distinction, the critic concludes, reflects "the difficult transition from the medieval economic system to modern capitalism" which was occurring in Elizabethan England.]

The character portrayal of Shakespeare shows the widest human sympathy, but Shylock is an exception. He is an object of loathing and contempt; he is depicted as unprincipled in business and unfeeling in his home. In the end he pays a terrible penalty, even more severe than does his prototype in Pecorone, the probable source of the play, or indeed in any of the other versions of the old folk tale; and no one, not even the kindly Antonio, says a single word in his favor: the dramatist apparently expected his audience to be even more unsympathetic toward Shylock than toward the notorious Richard III, whose overthrow had brought to the throne the glorious House of Tudor. This unwonted saeva indignatio [furious indignation] of Shakespeare is usually attributed to an anti-Semitism inherited from the Middle Ages and kept alive by the illegal presence of Jews in London and especially aroused at the time by the alleged attempt in 1594 of Lopez, the court physician, to poison the Queen. As a matter of fact, however, the prejudice of the Middle Ages must have been dying out, even in clerical circles, for under Cromwell the Jews were permitted to return; moreover, such few Spaniards of Jewish descent as lived in London had long since been converted to at least outward Catholic conformity, and so were indistinguishable from other Spaniards; and the cause celebre [celebrated case] of Lopez, though perhaps the occasion for one or two anti-Jewish plays, is too far removed both from Shakespeare's character and from his plot to have furnished the chief motive for either. Shylock, the Machiavellian Jew, would seem, indeed, to have been a study not in Elizabethan realism but in Italian local color; for Italy, especially Venice where the Jews were go-betweens in the Turkish trade, had become, since their expulsion from Spain, their chief refuge in Western Europe. Merely as a Jew, therefore, Shylock could hardly call forth the contemptuous abhorrence manifest in the play, for that side of his character was the stuff of exotic romance; and, furthermore, Shakespeare's one appeal to the sympathy of the audience for Shylock is the latter's defense of his race and religion: "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dementions.... ?" [cf. III. i. 59-60].

The conflict between Shylock and Antonio is not so much a matter of religion but rather of mercantile ideals, as Shylock declares in an aside at the entrance of Antonio:

I hate him for he is a Christian:
But more, for that in low simplicitie
He lends out money gratis, and brings downe
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
[I. iii. 42-5]

The audience is amply informed that Shylock hates Antonio because the latter has called him "Usurer," and spat upon him, and "thwarted" his "bargaines"; and Antonio openly glories in having cast such slurs. Upon the
Rialto he has railed at Shylock, not for religion, but for usury—as Shylock puts it, "all for use of that which is mine owne" [I. iii. 113]. In the crucial third act, Shylock twice reiterates this theme; and Antonio himself assures the audience:

He seekes my life, his reason well I know;  
I oft delivered from his forfeitures  
Many that have at times made mone to me,  
Therefore he hates me.  

[III. i. 21-4]

Race and religion, then, are not the main theme of the play; it is rather conflicting economic ideals. In Elizabethan parlance, "usurer" meant anyone who took even the lowest interest on money. Antonio follows the medieval ideal, and, like Chaucer's Merchant [in The Canterbury Tales], is supposed "neither to lend nor borrow" [cf. I. iii. 61] at interest; and Shylock, like the modern capitalist, makes interest the very basis of his business.

Again and again, in Shakespeare, this allusion to usury recurs, and commonly with a fling at its un-Christian ethics and its bitter consequences. It is "forbidden"; and the usurer is a simile of shame; the citizens in Coriolanus are outraged that the senators pass "edicts for usury to support usurers" [Coriolanus, I. i. 82]; and Timon is full of attacks upon the system as undermining the Christian virtues and the state. In other Elizabethan dramatists also the usurer is a common object of hatred shading into contemptuous ridicule. Partly classical, partly medieval in origin, he is often, like Vice in the old Morality plays, both wicked and comic: Shylock is clearly in this tradition, and follows directly upon Marlowe's Barabas [in The Jew of Malta] who also combines money-lender and Italianate Jew. The widespread currency of this theme and the intensity of emotion that it aroused suggest that it could not have been purely a dramatic convention, and that it struck closer home to the Elizabethans than a mere medieval tradition or a bit of Venetian local color. Like the miles gloriosus [boastful soldier], the Elizabethan usurer owes something to Latin comedy; but, like Falstaff, Shylock is more than a classical survival: if not a characteristic London type, he at least exemplified an immediate and crying problem, the iniquity of English usurers and the interest that they charged; and this theme in The Merchant of Venice can hardly be the accidental petrified remains of Shakespeare's "clerical predecessor," the author of the lost play The Jew; for it is too prominent both in this and in other plays by Shakespeare.

Indeed, the question of the moral and the legal justification of interest came close to home to every Elizabethan, and was crucial in the transition from feudal society to modern capitalism. The hardships of this transition appear in the "misery and squalor" of the age. Gold was pouring into Europe from America; prices were rising, and merchants grew rich, but classes with fixed incomes suffered intensely. The rural aristocracy, whom political life was drawing to London, could no longer live directly off the produce of their estates, but required ample supplies of ready money, which they had to borrow at an interest inflated by competition with the merchants who could afford to pay exorbitant rates. Even miners, weavers, and other classes of artisans worked on small loans often at ruinous interest. The increasing need for large capital, both in industry and in commerce, required similar large-scale organization of finance; and the devolution of the medieval guilds, begun by the exactions of Henry VII and continued during the sixteenth century, put much of this business into the hands of almost unregulated individuals or of new organizations. The players themselves sometimes had reason to be bitter at the demands of [Rose Theatre manager Philip] Henslowe and others who supplied them with buildings and furnishings; and thus both audience and actors had personal motives for hating the usurer, (pp. 37-41).

Shakespeare ... took the regular attitude of the 1590's. Indeed, most revelatory of the dramatist's point of view are the excuses that Shylock gives for his trade ... Like the devil, he quotes Scripture to his purpose, though the audience doubtless had by memory more than one text that forbade it. He parodies Aristotle's attack on

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usury as if it were an argument in favor [cf. I. ill. 76-90]. He declares that he is unjustly hated "all for use of that which is mine owne" [I. iii. 113]; and anyone would have told him that since a usurer's goods were got by a sort of theft, they were not his own. Of course, it was this feeling on the part of the audience that justified the treatment of Shylock at the denouement. He calls Antonio a "prodigall," though the term is clearly misapplied; for usurers preyed on the youthful heirs of noble families, and so, to the horror of the age, brought ruin on ancient houses. He hates Antonio for reducing the rate of interest "here with us in Venice" [I. iii. 45], and so upholds the extortionate charges of the day. With a callous presumption, he publicly demands "justice" for his compounded iniquities; he calls upon his oath in a "heaven" whose law he flouts; and he claims the support of the Venetian commonwealth, whose well-being his practices were supposed to undermine. To the Elizabethans all this was mordant casuistry; and, by making Shylock himself call up almost every argument against his own way of life, Shakespeare, with keen dramatic irony, implies that not one honest word can be said in his favor. For Shylock the Jew, there is no such rationale of bitterness; and so utter and thorough a phillppie [tirade] must surely have been intentional.

Not only does The Merchant of Venice reflect the Elizabethan attitude toward interest, but the details of the play constantly refer to current business customs. Such a "merry bond," signed under pretense of friendliness, was not without precedent in actual fact. Bassanio, to seal the bargain, follows the usual etiquette of asking the lender to dine; and later Shylock actually goes to a feast, like a true usurer, to help use up the borrowed sum and so insure a forfeiture ... Shylock, moreover, carefully avoids the term "usury," is insulted at being called a "usurer," and, with an exquisite delicacy, objects even to having his "well won thrift" [I. iii. 50] described as "interest"—though this euphemism was commonly allowed by contemporary money-lenders. London usurers—perhaps because they had risen from poverty by extreme penuriousness—were supposed to run their households in a stingy, not to say starvling, expenditure; and Shylock and Gobbo mutually complain of each other in this regard. Usurers regularly wished the forfeiture rather than the repayment of the loan; and in [Thomas] Lodge's [Looking-glass for London and England], the young gentleman, like Bassanio, offers much more than the nominated sum; but the money-lender, like Shylock, refuses and demands the forfeiture. Contemporary London, therefore, would seem to have supplied both the commercial decorum and the business trickery of Shakespeare's Venice; and this suggests that the dramatist intended to bring before his audience with immediate realism his economic theme.

Even the idealized Antonio reflects Elizabethan London. He "was wont to lend out money for a Christian curtsie" [III. i. 49], according to the highest ethics of the age ... The comparison of Antonio to a "royal Merchant" suggests England as well as Venice; for the London merchants had grown rich, and in their "comely entertainment" were not to be "matched by any foreign opposition." Hunter, on Shylock's word, declared that Antonio condemned interest "through simplicity," and that, as Shylock says, he was a "prodigal" wasting an ample patrimony [in The Merchant of Venice, ed. H. H. Furness]; but the dramatist clearly expects us to admire his probity rather than condemn his ignorance and waste ... As a matter of fact, Antonio knew well the exactions of usurers, and realized that if he would accommodate his friend, he must accept hard terms. Elsewhere he appears as a skilful merchant who does not risk his "whole estate Upon the fortune of this present yeere" [I. i. 43-4]; and, like a shrewd man of affairs, he does not seem over-anxious early in the play to divulge his business secrets. He is, indeed, the ideal merchant, very much as Othello and Henry V are the ideal of army life; and, just as Shakespeare heightened his effect by contrasting Hotspur and Prince Hal with the poltroonery of Falstaff [in Henry IV], so, in The Merchant of Venice, he put Shylock and Antonio side by side as comparative studies in business ethics.

Shylock the Jew was merely exotic local color; Shylock the usurer was a commentary on London life. The money-lender had been hated for centuries; and, in Shakespeare's day, the difficult transition from the medieval economic system to modern capitalism especially subjected both rich and poor to his exactions. Efforts to find realism in Shylock have generally looked to Venice or the Orient—regions of which Shakespeare knew none too much and the groundlings even less: the crux of the play is nearer home; and it reflects the current uses of commercial life and the current attitude toward them. Nevertheless, The Merchant
of Venice is not strictly a problem play like All's Well, or even mainly one as is Othello, for it is written exparte [from a one-sided point of view]; to Shakespeare there is but one answer, and so there is no problem; and, moreover, the old stories upon which it is founded dictated a happy ending that forbade the logical conclusion of the theme and kept the play a romantic comedy; but, to the Elizabethans, it had a verve and realism that is lost upon the present reader. Just as the stories of the romances were changed and reinterpreted century by century, so Shakespeare gave timely significance and telling vividness to his borrowed origins; and this intensified reality is perhaps his chief contribution to Elizabethan drama. Usually the matrix from which his play developed was a plot, as in King Lear; sometimes both plot and character, as in Henry V; and, on this matrix, he built a drama that, almost certainly in details of setting and style and often in motivation and theme, shows the immediate impress of his age. Julius Caesar is full of English setting; the background and motives of Desdemona [in Othello] are thoroughly Elizabethan; in Twelfth Night he transplanted an English household and staff of servants to the confines of Illyria; the character of Falstaff is a realistic foil to the romantic wars of chivalry; and, in Merry Wives, even the plot would seem to have been borrowed from common contemporary situations. The Merchant of Venice is a romantic comedy built of old folk material, to which has been added a realistic theme and motivation; and this theme, although Shakespeare has not yet learned to make it entirely implicit in his plot, obviously portrays the downfall of hated usury and the triumph of Christian charity in the person of a princely merchant.


**Criticism: Dualities**

Marvin Felheim

Felheim identifies several dualities in The Merchant of Venice, including joy and sadness, Venice and Belmont, Jew versus Christian, and Old Testament justice against New Testament mercy. According to the critic, the play opens with inexplicable sadness, primarily present in the characters of Antonio and Portia. Bassanio, Salerio, and Solanio interrupt the initial seriousness of the dramatic action with some mirth, Felheim continues, but for the most part a strain of melancholy pervades the play. Perhaps the most concrete example of this duality is embodied in the contrasting worlds of Venice and Belmont. Sadness is the prominent emotion in Venice, the critic notes, where the characters are exposed to usury and legal proceedings; but in Belmont, the "world of candlelight and music," happiness reigns. The oppositions of Jew and Christian as well as of Old Testament and New Testament attitudes are uncovered in the initial rivalry between Antonio and Shylock, increase the dramatic tension in the "pound of flesh" episodes, and culminate in the trial scene (Act IV, scene i). Shakespeare develops this opposition between Old Testament and New Testament values in the characters of Shylock, who represents law and vengeance, and Portia, who signifies love and mercy. Felheim also examines three significant episodes in The Merchant of Venice—the bond plot, the casket plot, and the ring plot—describing their significance to the overall structure of the play.

Certainly The Merchant of Venice is one of the most challenging of Shakespeare's plays. At first glance, the great court scene with Portia's justly famous speech on mercy and the lovely concluding act, so full of good will and magnificent poetry, seem to give the play its core of meaning: Christian charity and human love will and should triumph; three joyous couples and the merchant of Venice himself are at Belmont to celebrate victory and weddings.

But, on reflection, there are many disturbing elements to upset this all-too-easy view. For one thing, the play opens with inexplicable sadness; for another, the three principal characters—Antonio, Portia and Shylock—are shown more in seriousness than in joy; finally, their seriousness is tinged with a most unsettling kind of melancholy. In the very opening line, Antonio tells us: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" [I. i. 1]. He then rejects the suggestions of Salerio and Solanio who offer conventional explanations: worry over his
"merchandise," love, and "because you are not merry" [I. i. 48] (a "humourous" explanation). True, Antonio seems to emerge from his melancholy with the appearance of his friend and relative, Bassanio. But we must note that Bassanio confronts him not merely with the face of friendship and kinship but with serious financial problems. So, his change of mood is prompted in large part by the need for his services as financier as much as (more than?) his position as friend and kinsman. Throughout the play, moreover, we never see Antonio in what might be called a merry mood, for almost immediately troubles, in the form of loss of his argosies and the resultant law suit, beset him. And the final moments of triumph are not really his: the saving of his life in Act IV is subordinated, dramatically, to Portia's success as a disguised Doctor of Laws, to the sentencing of Shylock, and to the exchanging of the rings; indeed, at the very moment when his life has been saved, Antonio must turn his attention to thanking Balthazar (Portia) and to persuading Bassanio "to let him have the ring" [IV. i. 449]. Then, in Act V, Antonio is by no means either the central figure or the most joyous. Portia apologizes for her seeming lack of courtesy and hospitality—

Sir, you are very welcome to our house.
It must appear in other ways than words.
Therefore I scant this breathing courtesy—
[V. i. 139-41]

only to become embroiled at once in the question of the rings; again, Antonio must pledge himself for Bassanio, only this time he binds his "soul" rather than his flesh to assure Portia that her husband "Will never more break faith advisedly" [V. i. 253].

Lastly, in the distribution of favors, Portia discloses that she has "better news in store" for him than he expects and she gives him a "letter."

There you shall find three of your argosies
Are richly come to harbour suddenly,
[V. i. 276-77]

but she adds, enigmatically,

You shall not know by what strange accident
I chanced on this letter,
[V. i. 278-79]

a curious, somewhat callous attitude which belies the very assertion of friendliness and hospitality she had made earlier. Antonio's reply, less than half a line, is "I am dumb" [V. i. 279]; he even has difficulty in squeezing these three simple words in between Portia's disclosures and Bassanio's and Gratiano's amazement at their wives' virtuosity. To cap his pleasure, Antonio is finally permitted three more lines:

Sweet lady, you have given me life and living;
For here I read for certain that my ships
Are safely come to road.
[V. i. 286-88]

Thus the role of the merchant of Venice is concluded. One feels that perhaps Salerio was correct in his original diagnosis: that Antonio's sadness was because his "mind is tossing on the ocean" [I. i. 8]. At any event, in this comedy labelled The Merchant of Venice one must agree that the merchant himself has rough sailing, that he opens the play a man wearied and sad, that he endures great tribulations and a serious trial in which his life is nearly taken, that his survival is merely a part of more exciting goings-on and that his eventual triumph is simply the inexplicable return of his ships. Indeed, he seems doomed, as he states initially:
But how I caught it [sadness], found it, or came by it,  
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn.  
[I. i. 3-5]

This notion appears to have had its origin in his (typically Shakespearean) philosophy:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,  
A stage where every man must play a part,  
And mine a sad one.  
[I. i. 77-9]

Thus isolated, the merchant appears a pathetic figure. I have not questioned here his goodness, his willingness to help others and his mercy to Shylock; presumably these qualities could provide him with a kind of quiet glow. But there is no indication that his initial unexplained sadness is ever mitigated or that the similarly unexplained return of his merchandise at the conclusion will do much to make him happy, for as he predicted

... such a want-wit sadness makes of me  
That I have much ado to know myself.  
[I. i. 6-7]

Antonio is not alone in proclaiming his sadness, however. Portia's first speech picks up the theme: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world" [I. ii. 1]. As in the case of Antonio, her statement suggests a kind of cosmic condition. And like Salerio and Solanio, Nerissa offers an explanation: that Portia has an "abundance" of "good fortunes," that she is simply too rich, surfeited and bored. But the Lady of Belmont rejects her maid's "good sentences." Her sadness has another cause: her father's will which has effectively "curbed" her choice of a husband. It is a mark of Shakespeare's subtle art that he puts these speeches of Portia and Nerissa in prose, just where one would expect poetry, whereas the opening speeches on "A Street. Venice" are in poetry. The purpose is not only to contrast the different types of melancholy in scenes one and two, but to establish, as well, the contrary nature of this play and to suggest that both a mingling of poetry with the business world of Venice and a prose basis for the beauty of Belmont are necessary conditions.

Finally, sadness is also typical of Shylock. The elopement of his daughter with a Christian, the loss of money and the punishments he suffers in court are calamitous episodes in his pathetic life. Clearly, then, a strain of melancholy pervades this comedy and conditions the over-all tone of the play. In this connection I feel that the concluding act, too, despite its apparent joyousness, has overtones of despair, even bitterness. As the last act begins, Jessica and Lorenzo are discussing love and nature: "The moon shines bright In such a night as this" [V. i. 1] lovers have enjoyed ... what? Well, Troilus "mounted the Troyan walls, / And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents" [V. i. 4-5]; This-by did "fearfully o'ertrip the dew, / And saw the lion's shadow..., / And ran dismayed away" [V. i. 7-9]; Dido stood "Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love / To come again to Carthage" [V. i. 10-12]; and Medea "gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew old Aeson" [V. i. 13-14]. Hardly a happy couple among the four. These lines, full of melancholy accounts of tragic loves and lovers, have been much praised, but most critics have failed to note that neither the subject matter nor the love affairs referred to give us a felicitious picture of love; on the contrary, the content of the lines is at odds with the situation itself (although Jessica and Lorenzo include themselves in the list of lovers) and casts a disturbing, howbeit lovely, tone over the moonlit scene. This mood, after an interlude on the nature of music, gives way to the workings-out of the ring plot. And so the act which began with reminiscences about unhappy loves and lovers concludes with the cynical resolution of the ring story.

Counter to all this sadness there is mirth, and there are joyous characters. Bassanio, Salerio and Solanio are consistently optimistic and cheerful, Bassanio of course runs smoothly, without a hitch. Portia, herself, has
periods of intense happiness (in Bassanio's success in choosing the correct casket), of witty triumph (over the unsuccessful suitors) and of joyful satisfaction (both in court and in the final confrontation at Belmont). This beautifully maintained balance is characteristic of *The Merchant of Venice*; indeed, in this play, contrast is the primary dramaturgical method.

The setting provides the most obvious contrast: the Rialto and Belmont, the world of Venice, of usury, of the court, and the world of candlelight and music that is Belmont. We note that certain characteristics of the former place, the Rialto, are present in the latter; there are commercial and material aspects to Belmont, too; the dead, but legal, hand of a wealthy father lies heavily upon this rich world, the prize gem of which is Portia herself, the lady of the "sunny locks" which "Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" [I. i. 170]. Her riches, her beauty and her virtue are, in truth, like the rocks which shipwreck so many Venetian argosies. Even at the moment of Bassanio's triumph over the riddle of the caskets, the speeches of the lovers are replete with commercial terms; he says:

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Fair lady, by your leave;
I came by note, to give and to receive,
[III. ii. 139-40]
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but he cannot be sure of his success

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Until confirm'd, sign'd, ratified by you.
[III. ii. 148]
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She replies, in part,

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That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
Exceed account But the full sum of me
Is sum of something ...
[III. ii. 156-59]
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By introducing into Belmont these symbolic elements from the commercial world of Venice, Shakespeare fuses two aspects of life; they are not separate, the Rialto and Belmont, however much they may be geographically distinct. Bassanio is the "arrow... adventuring" from one world into the other; in return, Portia brings wisdom, judgment, and poetry to Venice. The significant linkage of the two in marriage indicates the extent to which the two must be joined in order to exist; each is dependent upon the other and insofar as this is true this comedy presents us with the ultimate in realism: the acknowledgement that these worlds not only coexist but must coexist; this is the human condition, pictured without unnecessary sentimentality, with the romantic elements occupying their proper place, coordinated with the other elements, neither isolated nor superior but equal. The result is what can be called Shakespeare's comic vision, as steady a view of life as is possible, a world of sorrows and joys but essentially human, where even wedded love must wait upon more pressing obligations, where disguise, deception and cynicism can live side by side with sweeter qualities, where contrast and combination are the essential reality.

The delicate balancing of these contrasting elements is Shakespeare's great dramatic skill. And this device pervades the play. For example, there are the human contrasts between parents and children, specifically fathers and children, and between masters and servants. In the later category fit, for instance, Portia and her servants, Nerissa and Balthasar; when Portia disguises herself as a lawyer, to preach the gospel of charity, it seems significant that Shakespeare gives her the name of her servant, Balthazar. Shylock, on the other hand, speaks slightly of the way Venetians treat some of their servants, those who are "purchas'd slaves," which
He sets up, as he always does, an absolute of behavior, an Old Testament absolute, against which the action plays. He carries the argument to an extreme: masters become owners, servants slaves. Our sympathies, as usual, are engaged by his characteristic manner. And we realize that he has made a telling point: that he also wants what is his, what he has bought and paid for. But his example also has the effect of setting up the opposite, the ideal, the world beyond Venice (an aspect, perhaps, of Belmont) where there are neither owners nor slaves. What inevitably happens when Shylock talks is that we are confronted with an ideal situation—where there would be no discrimination, no hatred or fear, no cruelty or inhumanity. But such a condition is always predicated in terms of opposites and in almost strictly legal terms, a world, on the one hand, where there is legal usury or, on the other, none at all. Reality—the world of legal usury which must be tempered by human charity—is the world Shylock rejects (or which rejects Shylock). (pp. 94-8)

All these contrasts, whether of physical settings or of human characteristics, have a common basis in the central moral contrast of the play. This contrast is variously embodied, but is nowhere more clear than in the confrontation of Shylock and Portia, specifically in the way in which each suggests one aspect of the Bible, Shylock appropriately the Old Testament and Portia aptly the New. For Shylock the world exists in terms of absolutes, in terms of justice, in terms of Old Testament morality. This approach is most interestingly summarized in his story of Jacob and Laban's sheep:"... thrift is blessing, if men steal it not" [I. iii. 85]. Or, as he tells Jessica, "Fast bind, fast find"—[II. v. 53]. For Shylock there can be no compromise: "all the eanlings which were streak'd and pied / Should fall as Jacob's hire", [I. iii. 79-80]; this is the rule. Human beings are subservient to law, to an absolute code. So he sets up his frame of reference. What makes Antonio evil in Shylock's eyes is that "He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy" [III. i. 49]; Antonio was a man who behaved contrary to the customs of the Rialto (could this possibly be the cause of his sadness? his capacity to see the human condition and yet to act independently in terms of friendship and courtesy? Is his a cosmic sadness?). And what should be done about him? Shylock, the Jew, the avenging arm of Jehovah, would act: "revenge," both in terms of Old Testament standards and in light of Christian behavior; "The villainy you teach me I will execute" [III. i. 71-2]. Such a philosophy knows no compromise: "I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood" [III. i. 37] asserts Shylock (Jessica has already added the human corollary: "Though I am a daughter to his blood I am not to his manners" [II. iii. 18-19]): further, rather than adjust to the world he insists "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear; would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin" [III. i. 87-90]. This explains, too, his concern for his money, which, like his daughter, like Jacob's sheep, is his and his alone. He exists only on this level. "I crave the law" [IV. i. 206], he cries: "I am a Jew" [III. i. 58], he states. Could anything be more clear?

As usual, Shakespeare does not stop here. For one thing, he has the advantage of writing at a time when the Jew's place in society was enigmatical, so, in the social sense alone, the role of a Jew cannot be seen simply from a one-dimensional point of view. The Jew, in the Renaissance world, was hedged about with restrictions and superstitions, so that neither his role nor his place in society were clear-cut; Shakespeare has all the advantage of this complex situation. Further, Shylock is, in a dramatic sense, a type character; he is the Old Vice, he is the "humour" character. He evidences this role, for example, in a typically Shakespearean way, in his attitude toward music and gaiety. For, when he learns that there are to be "masques" he warns Jessica against "the drum / And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife" [II. v. 29-30], and orders her

Let not the sound of shallow fop'ry enter
My sober house.
[II. v. 34-5]
His dislike for music marks him as a "villain," had not Salerio and Solanio already used the term to abuse him. But it remains for his new son-in-law, Lorenzo, to put the situation into proper philosophical and poetic terms. As he tells Jessica,

> The man that hath no music in himself,  
> Nor is mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,  
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.  
> [V. i. 83-5]

How like Shakespearre to give us both the theory and the reality.

Opposing Shylock is Portia. She stands for Christian charity and mercy—with some human variations (she can, for example, be most caustic about her suitors). Shakespeare shows us her essential character in two significant scenes, one when Bassanio chooses the lead casket and the other in the court in Venice. Like other comic heroines, particularly Rosalind and Viola [in As You Like It and Twelfth Night], Portia is no demure, passive lady. Forced by the provisions of her father's will to wait for her true lover, she knows in advance whom she wants. In answer to Nerissa's inquiry—"Do you remember, lady, in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier?" [cf. I. ii. 112-13].—she blurts out, "Yes, yes, it was Bassanio" [I. ii. 115], before her maidenly reserve prompts her to add "as I think, so was he call'd" [I. ii. 115-16]. And when Bassanio arrives, decked though he may be in borrowed garments, she begs him to "tarry" awhile.

> I could teach you  
> How to choose right  
> [II. ii. 10-11]

she proposes, then withdraws her offer (it would be perjury) only to proclaim:

> One half of me is yours, the other half yours.  
> [III. ii. 161]

Then, she orders:

> Let music sound while he doth make his choice  
> [II. ii. 43]

(for Morocco and Arragon there had been only a "Flourish of Cornets"). And when, at last, Bassanio makes the right choice,

> And here choose I. Joy be the consequence!  
> [II. ii. 107]

her speech rises to the proper pitch, for she is

> Happy in this, she is not yet so old  
> But she may learn; happier than this,  
> She is not bred so dull but she can learn;  
> Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit  
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,  
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.  
> [III. ii. 161-66]
Shakespeare preserves the human equilibrium by having her conclude this speech with the giving of the "ring," thereby setting up the somewhat lewd but earthly antithesis to all this lofty eloquence. But it is in the courtroom that Portia reaches the apex; here, she truly embodies the spirit of Christian charity; for, as she makes clear,

... earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

[IV. i. 191-92]

Ironically, it is not she ("He shall have merely justice" [IV. i. 339] she decides) but the Duke and Antonio who practice what she has preached. But, here again, Shakespeare shows his great wisdom, his sense of decorum and reality, which allows the head of the state, the Duke, to be the God-like dispenser of mercy; Portia having served as the agent of justice, reverts to the clever, somewhat niggling young heroine, concerned about her "ring." It is certainly notable, too, that Shakespeare chooses to present the voice of mercy in disguise. True enough, he had convention (the boy actor) and his source (Ser Giovanni's Pecorone) as a basis for so doing. But the fact that the words urging divine mercy are uttered in Venice under the cloak of a disguise is still significant. Is Shakespeare saying that mercy cannot come into the real world except it be protected by disguise? One remembers, as well, that Jessica and Lorenzo, two of the symbols of love in this play, cannot live and love in Venice, but must also resort to disguise in order to escape the realities of the city. Apparently only in Belmont can love and mercy exist without false faces, like the candle's beams ("So shines a good deed in a naughty world" [V. i. 91]), but here, too, we recollect, is the lead casket which contains a golden treasure and here, too, are the "rings," symbols of physical love. So the total picture is inevitably complex. And the motto for all might well be the lines spoken by Bassanio as he gazes at the caskets:

The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?

[III. ii. 74-80J]

There is another device which serves Shakespeare as a variation to his either/or presentation of comedy, a trinitarian concept. Superimposed upon the basic contrasts or duality, there are innumerable threesomes. There are three young women, two Christians and a Jew; consequently, three pairs of lovers, Antonio and Bassanio have three friends, the pair, Solanio and Salerio, and Gratiano. There are three Jews, Tubal and Chus. in addition to Shylock. Portia has three suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, and Gratiano. There are three Jews, Tubal and Chus. in addition to Shylock. Portia has three suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, who fail, and Bassanio, who succeeds. Further, the whole play is based on three plots: bond, casket, rings. The bond is for three thousand ducats for three months. There are three caskets, of gold, silver and lead. Later, Bassanio has three reasons for giving away Portia's ring ("to whom ... for whom ... for what ..."), which arguments Portia parries with three of her own. In addition, in the last act, Portia has three letters which bring knowledge and rewards.

But this concept of trinity is most noticeable in the phrasing. Antonio, speaking of his sadness, knows not "how I caught it, found it, or came by it" [I. i. 4]. Solanio and Salerio, as has been pointed out, offer in turn three "causes." Portia, "thrice-fair lady" is, to Bassanio, a trinity: rich, fair, virtuous. Just so, Jessica, according to Lorenzo, is "wise, fair, and true" [II. vi. 56]. Shylock hates Antonio for three reasons, because he is a Christian, because "he lends out money gratis" [I. iii. 44] and because "he hates our sacred nation" [I. iii. 48]. Morocco has a scimitar which slew "a Persian prince / That won three fields," [II. i. 25-6], whereas Arragon enunciates the "three things" he and other suitors are "enjoined by oath to observe" [II. ix. 91]. In a climactic scene Portia "commits" herself to Bassanio, "her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 165]. Bassanio later offers a "forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart" [IV. i. 212] if Shylock will accept his offer to save Antonio.
Even Launcelot refers to himself as "your boy that was, your son that is, your child that shall be" [II. ii. 85]. This constant use of triads lends both a consistency and a rhythm to the play. As a result of the playing of triads against a basic pattern of one-for-one contrast a rich and varied counterpoint emerges. (pp. 99-102)

A few final words remain to be said about the overall plotting, for in this regard, too, *The Merchant of Venice* is an unusual play. For a comedy, the themes of this work are extraordinarily serious and profound; they plumb the depths of human behavior and human character. The enigmatic nature of Shylock, himself, to say nothing of, for example, Jessica or Gratiano, who frequently seems simply a loud-mouthed oaf, has troubled many readers. The play's wonderful poetry, some of it among the best Shakespeare ever wrote, sets it apart from other early and middle comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Much Ado about Nothing*. Yet after all its superiorities have been enumerated, *The Merchant of Venice* remains in some ways a crude effort. The over-all machinery consists of three obvious, somewhat vulgar plots: the bond plot, the casket plot, the ring plot. All have been much handled, and Shakespeare manipulates them rather mechanically.

The bond plot, resulting from Antonio's willingness to help Bassanio but his inability to meet the practical need other than through Shylock, is established first. It can be said to begin in Act I, scene i, and yields precedence only to the theme of sadness. The bond plot is resolved in the court scene, Act IV, scene i, except that one of its by-products (the "deed of gift" [IV. i. 394] for Lorenzo and Jessica) carries over into the final act of the play. This plot concerns mostly Antonio and Shylock; the latter disappears from the action, unwell, at the conclusion of the courtroom scene; Antonio "hangs" around through Act V, not completely cured of his melancholia, a figure of Venice, somewhat out of place in the festive world of Belmont.

The casket plot begins, interestingly, in Act I, scene ii. Although Bassanio has, in scene i, approached Antonio with a request for three thousand ducats to enable him "to hold a rival place" [I. i. 174] among Portia's suitors, he does not mention that his success will hinge upon a "lott'ry," as Nerissa calls it. So not until we meet Portia and Nerissa in scene ii is the casket plot fully set forth. From that point on, until Act III, scene ii, when Bassanio chooses correctly, the scenes developing this story, all set in Belmont, more or less alternate with those connected with the bond plot. In a technical sense, the casket plot could be considered the main plot since it is the one which terminates or is resolved in what is traditionally the climactic act, III. The casket plot has a number of interesting overtones. For one thing, the whole situation vis-a-vis the caskets is based upon the will of Portia's dead father. Certainly she chafes a bit under its restraints: "so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" [I. ii. 24-5], she remarks; one may even conjecture that her sadness is the result of this confinement although Nerissa, probably more correctly, attributes her "sickness" to "surfeit." One wonders, incidentally, why Portia suffers when it would seem reasonable to suggest that her legal acumen should enable her to get around the provisions; at any event, she doesn't suffer long; moreover, she balances whatever unpleasantness does exist with a degree of levity and a certain amount of vituperative cynicism at the expense of the suitors themselves. One particular requirement of the will carries a certain threat with it—that is, the requirement that the suitor if he "choose wrong" must agree

Never to speak to lady afterward
In way of marriage.
[II. ii. 41-2]

The casket plot builds mechanically to its conclusion, from the scene when Portia reviews the demerits of the present group of aspirants, through the two unsuccessful attempts of Morocco [II. vii.] and Arragon [II. ix.] to the third trial, the success of Bassanio. To heighten the mechanistic aspects of this plot, Shakespeare uses at least one external device, sound effects. For Morocco and Arragon, there is a "Flourish of Cornets" [II. vii. and II. ix.]; for Bassanio, there is music, the lovely song, "Where is fancy bred?" [III. ii. 63ff.]. Bassanio's character and chances are presumably enhanced by this tribute. At one point, too, during the interview with the Prince of Arragon, the "three things ... enjoin'd by oath" [cf. II. ix. 9] upon all suitors are enumerated (as a possible parallel with the details of the bond?):
First, never to unfold to any one
Which casket 'twas I chose; next, if I fail
Of the right casket, never in my life
To woo a maid in way of marriage:
Lastly,
If I do fail in fortune of my choice,
Immediately to leave you and be gone.
[II. ix. 10-16]

These requirements do, indeed, smack of the harsh commercial world of the Rialto; they certainly establish a kind of absolute mood over Belmont and its "golden fleece."

The ring plot takes up exactly where the casket one ends, for with Bassanio's success [III. ii.], Portia not only cedes to him herself and her fortune, but "I give them with this ring" [III. ii. 171] and then she adds three (again magic?) restrictions

Which when you part from, lose, or give away
Let it presage the ruin of your love.
[III. ii. 174-75]

The working out of this story is accomplished in two subsequent actions: the first at court and immediately afterwards on "a street" in Venice, and the second at Belmont. The situation is not actually resolved until the final lines of the play itself. If the bond plot sets up the central contrast of the play (justice versus mercy) and if the casket plot establishes the quality of love necessary for a happy marriage, the ring plot certainly undermines some of the ideals of the play. It allows bawdryness, even on the part of Portia; it reduces the marriages and victory at court to a series of double entendres on the nature of chastity in marriage; it puts an extremely realistic, even cynical, conclusion onto a play in which many kinds of problems and many kinds of people have been exposed to searching poetic analysis.

The mechanistic aspect of this plotting suggests that The Merchant of Venice might best be analyzed in light of the Bergsonian theory of comedy: the notion of men as puppets, manipulated by a higher power. This idea stresses that comedy results from our perception of the limitations placed upon mankind. Such an awareness seems to underlie Nerissa's couplet:

The ancient saying is no heresy:
Hanging and Wiving goes by destiny.
[II. ix. 82-3]

This concept may also be found in the conclusion of The Merry Wives of Windsor where we find Ford's couplet:

In love, the heavens themselves do guide the state;
Money buys lands, and wives are sold by fate.
[IV. v. 219-20]

In The Merchant of Venice sacred things, such as marriage and justice, are turned into subjects for or causes of merriment, and human beings are seen as the victims of destiny. The mixture here is what, finally, seems to me significant. For the parts all add up to a complex comic vision in which the unifying theme (and method, too, as I've tried to demonstrate) is realism. Hence Shakespeare's willingness to see all the facets of life and to present them with honesty and understanding. The main thrust of the comic elements in these early plays seems to me to be substantially realistic; even the romantic qualities, as I see them, are a part of this larger
Criticism: Bond and Choice

William Leigh Godshalk

Godshalk discusses the unity of the The Merchant of Venice in terms of the Pound of Flesh story and the Story of the Three Caskets, emphasizing in particular the elements of "bond" and "choice." According to the critic, the characters are bound to each other and to different courses of action in many ways. Aspects of bondage in the play include: the legal bond between Antonio and Shylock; the provision in Portia's father's will that binds her fortune; the suitors' binding oath forsaking marriage if they fail the casket test; the spiritual bondage of Portia and Bassanio, Jessica and Lorenzo, and Nerissa and Gratiano to the institution of marriage; and the bonds of friendship and society. Godshalk also examines "choice" as an extension of the "bond" issues, noting that even though the characters are bound by legal constructs, religious vows, and social obligations, they are free to determine into which bonds they enter. Such elements of choice in the play include: the option of three caskets; Jessica's choosing to elope with Lorenzo; and Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh in the trial scene (Act IV, scene i). The critic maintains that both the Story of the Three Caskets and the Pound of Flesh story begin with a character legally bound and later released through the choice of another. The casket plot represents a suit of love, Godshalk continues, where Bassanio's faith in love is rewarded when he chooses the lead casket and wins Portia. The trial episode is a suit of revenge in which Shylock's merciless demand for justice only leads to his downfall. The critic concludes with a discussion of the ring scene (Act V, scene i) in which Shakespeare ironically dramatizes the issues of "choice" and "bond."]

Graham Midgley states in his "The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration," Essays in Criticism X (1960)]: "The problem of The Merchant of Venice has always been its unity, and most critical discussions take this as the centre of their argument, asking what is the relative importance of its two plots and how Shakespeare contrives to interweave them into a unity." The two plots are, of course, the Pound of Flesh Story and the Story of the Three Caskets, and the successful critic must account for Shakespeare's success in molding the two divergent stories into one whole. The strategy of the present study will be to examine both plots to ascertain their basic elements—what these two stories at bottom involve—and then to show how these elements interpenetrate the play as a whole.

The Pound of Flesh Story is found in The Merchant's Italian source, Il Pecorone, and in outline it is the same in both. In the source and the play, an older man is bound to a Jew so that a younger can obtain enough money to seek an heiress. Shakespeare, however, emphasizes two points not found or emphasized in Ser Giovani's tale. First, Shylock and Antonio are known to each other, and their relationship as financial enemies seems to be an old one. Their enmity stems from an ideological conflict over the morality of usury. Shylock, if you will, is a capitalist, Antonio a socialist; and both claim religious sanction for their economic positions. Second, the bond is emphasized. In the first minutes of his negotiations with Shylock, Bassanio says, "Antonio shall be bound" [I. iii. 4-5]. Throughout the scene, "bound" is used three times and "bond" seven. As Shylock prepares to exit, Antonio assures him, "I will seal unto this bond" [I. iii. 171]. Apparently Shakespeare is at pains to underline the concept of the bond here, and the words "bound" and "bond" echo through the play. Thus, it may be suggested that the Pound of Flesh Story as it is presented in The Merchant embodies two basic ideas: personal relationships (enemy to enemy as well as friend to friend) and bondage. And further, uniting the two ideas, we may see that the story is, at very bottom, about the binding of one man to another, with a consequent limitation on complete freedom of action. "And Antonio bound."
The Caskets are not found in *Il Pecorone* and may well have been taken from Robinson's translation of the *Gesta Romanorum*. Here the Emperor asks a young maiden to prove herself worthy of marrying his son by choosing among three caskets of gold, silver, and lead. The same procedure is, of course, used in *The Merchant*, where to prove himself worthy of Portia, the lover must make, under the influence of his love, the proper choice. Both in the source story and in the play, 'choice' is the basic idea in the Casket Story. If one would have that which one desires, one must choose, and in so choosing, one reveals something of one's true self.

In the two basic stories out of which the play grows, there are, then, two underlying ideas: bondage and choice. The theme of the bond in various manifestations proliferates throughout the play and even penetrates the Story of the Caskets. For the characters are bound to each other and to different courses of action in many ways. Most apparent in the play is the legal bond, the bond that gives Antonio to Shylock. But if Antonio is legally bound to the evil will of Shylock, Portia is also legally bound, bound by the last will and testament of a perceptive and loving father. She may complain that "the will of a living daughter" is "curb'd by the will of a dead father" [I. ii. 24-5], but Nerissa is quick to remind her that her "father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations" [I. ii. 27-8]. Later Portia's words, that her father "hedg'd" her "by his wit" [II. i. 18], suggest that she acknowledges the protection implicit in her bondage. She is protected from her own fancy as well as from external coercion to marry.

Portia's suitors are also bound. She tells Morocco that he must

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{swear before you choose, if you choose wrong} \\
\text{Never to speak to lady afterward} \\
\text{In way of marriage.} \\
[II. i. 40-2]
\end{align*}
\]

And they go "forward to the temple" [II. i. 44] so that Morocco may take his oath, and later Arragon takes the same oath [II. ix. 2] before he too comes to make his choice of caskets. In the oaths of the suitors, the legal bond modulates into the religious bond. Again the bondage is formal and the terms are clearly set forth [II. ix. 9-16]. And moreover, the oaths of the suitors adumbrate the self-imposed religious oath of Shylock. He tells Antonio: "I have sworn an oath, that I will have my bond" [III. iii. 5]; and in the trial scene, when Portia asks him to accept "thrice thy money" [IV. i. 227], he replies: "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven,— / Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?" [IV. i. 228-29]. The juxtaposition and inversion of values is ironic, and the point is that Shylock has bound himself religiously to a course of irreligious action.

In contrast, the lovers are bound by their religion in the rites and oaths of marriage. Jessica and Lorenzo are presumably married sometime between their elopement [II. vi] and their arrival in Belmont with Salerio [III. ii]. After choosing the right casket, Bassanio marries Portia. Speaking of herself in the third-person, she says to Bassanio: "her gentle spirit / Commits itself to yours to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 163-65]. "Go with me to church, and call me wife" [III. i. 303], and Gratiano and Nerissa accompany them. The bonds of marriage are symbolized by the rings which the ladies present to their respective spouses and of which we shall hear more later. For the moment, however, we may marvel how many people in the play are bound by law or by religion.

At the same time, it should be realized that the bondage extends in *The Merchant* beyond the formal limits of oath and legal contract. With Cicero, the Renaissance playgoer would have felt that there are "the bonds of human society", a "principle which knits together human society and cements our common interests" [*De Officiis* I. 5, 7; Cicero was a first-century B.C. Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher]. The principle maybe called the bond of humanity, and within the play it assumes many forms. On one level, it is the close bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio. In our post-Freudian, sexually-oriented era, this friendship becomes latently homosexual—and possibly in many minds, worse. But rather than invoking Sigmund Freud,
we may better look at Sir Thomas Elyot, who, in his Boke Named the Gouernour discusses "amitie or frendeshyp". Elyot feels that "Sens frendeshyp can not be but in good men, ne may not be without vertue, we may be assured, that therof none euyll may procede, or ther-with any euyl thyng may participate". Purity or virtue rather than sexual attraction is the keynote of a Renaissance friendship ... It is because of this spiritual bond of friends that Antonio is willing to bind himself legally to his enemy Shylock for the sake of his friend Bassanio. Bondage begets bondage.

Metaphorically, from this bond between Antonio and Bassanio, the social bondage spreads and grows, and is emphasized in the pattern of allusions to eating. When Lorenzo and Gratiano leave Bassanio in the first scene, they promise three times to meet him again at "dinner-time" [I. i. 70, 109, 105]. Trying to gain the financial services of Shylock, Bassanio naturally asks him "to dine with us" [I. ill. 32]. Later, Gratiano promises Bassanio that his friends will be with him "at supper-time" [II. ii. 206]. As Jessica prepares to leave her home, Lorenzo urges her to hurry, for they "are stay'd for at Bassanio's feast" [II. vi. 48]; and while they are the master and mistress of Belmont, they playfully "go to dinner" [III. v. 86]. Having saved Antonio's life at the trial, Portia is entreated by Gratiano to give Bassanio and Antonio the pleasure of her "company at dinner" [IV. ii. 8]. To survive, all men must eat, but the pattern seems to suggest more than common necessity. It points to a stronger bond of love and good fellowship—"for we have friends / That purpose merriment" [II. ii. 202-03]. On the social level, it is equivalent to the Communion Table.

In contrast, Shylock denies the social bond implied in the convivial dinner ... Answering Bassanio's request that he eat with the Venetians, Shylock replies:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into: 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.
[I. Hi. 33-81]

The denial seems absolute, and the linking of eating with praying is perhaps to be taken as an indication of the spiritual separation which Shylock feels. However, his denial is only apparent, for he later tells Jessica:

I am bid forth to supper Jessica, ...
I am not bid for love, they natter me.
But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon
The prodigal Christian.
[II. v. 11, 13-15]

Thus Shylock subverts the whole idea of social unity implicit in the supper and introduces the rather grotesque element of cannibalism, which again appears in his assurance to Salerio that Antonio's flesh "will feed my revenge" [III. i. 54]. In his outrageous hints at eating human flesh, in his disgust at dining with his neighbors, Shylock demonstrates his lack of the essential feeling of unity which ties one man to another. In effect, he refuses to take part in the communal aspect of the social feast; he does not recognize the social bond. And one may well think back to the denial of humanity underlying the cannibalistic feast which ends Titus Andronicus.

Nevertheless, in the same scene in which he promises to feed his revenge with a pound of human flesh, Shylock makes what has been interpreted as a meaningful plea to the Christians for the acknowledgement of his common humanity:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food ... as a Christian is? ... if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge?
[III. i. 58-67]
Shylock appeals to the bodily feelings and appendages which all normal humans have in common; but his final appeal, unfortunately, is not to a universal bond of mercy or justice, but to a universal inhumanity: revenge. His whole plea for inclusion is vitiated by the final, ironic twist. Through his own will and desire, he excludes himself from the general bond of brotherhood which holds society together (pp. 89-94).

Discussing the bonds of human society, Cicero notes [in Nicholas Grimald's 1596 translation, Marcus Tullius Ciceroes Three Bookes of Duties] that the principle which knits us together has "two parts: Justice is one, in which is the greatest brightnesse of vertue, whereof good men beare theire name, and to this is joyned bountyfulnesse, which same we may tearme eyther gentlenesse, or liberalytye." It may be suggested without straining the point unduly that the bonds in The Merchant follow the same dichotomy, though it is restated in basically Christian terms: Justice and Mercy, Law and Charity. The bondage of the play, broadly viewed, falls into these categories. Though the basic intentions are different, the bonds which tie Antonio and Portia to certain agreements are strictly legal. The bonds of marriage and of religious oath seem to form a middle ground in which legality and charity (or, at least, religious emotion) coexist. And finally, there are the extra-legal bonds which hold society together, and these are firmly based on charity. Thus the pattern of bondage embodies the play's chief thematic dichotomy.

Of course, the bonds may be categorized in various ways, and possibly from the most general point of view, they may be seen as the bonds of love and the bonds of hate. Although most of the characters are bound together in what may be called 'love', the initial relationship between Antonio and Shylock must be described in different terms. It becomes immediately apparent that hate, dislike, and repugnance are as binding in their way as charity, though the negative bond is ultimately destructive, and must either be dissolved or replaced. One may compare Portia's initial reaction to her many suitors, or Jessica's reaction to her father's manners. Again, this broad categorization of the bonds fits neatly with what E. K. Chambers feels is central in the play. "The theme of The Merchant of Venice", he writes [in his Shakespeare: A Survey], "... is readily to be formulated as a conflict. It is a conflict in the moral order, between the opposing principles of Love and Hate."

Opposition of principles in the moral world presupposes the element of moral choice; for the concept of moral action is closely related to the idea of free will. To be truly moral, one must have the opportunity of being otherwise. Thus, at this point in our discussion of The Merchant, it will be expedient to return to the basic element in the Casket Story: choice. If the characters of the play are bound and their actions are determined by certain legal contracts, religious vows, and social obligations, they are also free, as all moral beings must be, to determine the bonds into which they will enter.

It may be objected, of course, that all drama, to have any dramatic force, must be based on the idea that its protagonists have freedom of action, that choice is essential to drama. Without arguing against this possible objection, I would like to suggest that in The Merchant the element of choice is emphasized far beyond the point needed to maintain the requisite tension. It is doubly underlined in the Story of the Caskets.

Portia introduces the idea rather forcefully, "O me the word 'choose'!" [I. ii. 22-3], and goes on to explain, in a passage we have examined before, that her choice has been curbed by her father's will. In turn, Nerissa explains that the suitor "who chooses" her father's meaning and thus the right casket "chooses" Portia also [I. ii. 30-1]. The word echoes throughout the scene. Later, as the several caskets are revealed to Morocco, Portia commands him: "Now make your choice" [II. vii. 3], and he and Portia discuss how he will know if his choice is correct. When Arragon stands facing the caskets, he notes that the word "many" may suggest "the fool multitude that choose by show" [II. ix. 26], and decides that he "will not choose what many men desire" [II. ix. 31]. After Bassanio arrives, Portia tells him that she could teach him "How to choose right" [III. ii. 11]. But to continue with illustrations at this point is a work of super-erogation. By the mere repetition of the words "choose" and "choice", Shakespeare forces the idea on the playgoer's consciousness.
Out of this central myth of choosing, the idea of choice radiates through the play. Presented with Shylock's alternatives, either signing the note with a pound of flesh as forfeiture or getting no money, Antonio chooses to "seal unto this bond" [I. iii. 171], even though Bassanio is suspicious. More agonizing is the choice of Jessica:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood
I am not to his manners.
[II. iii. 16-19]

To end her inner strife, she chooses to elope with Lorenzo, becoming a Christian. Her situation and choice form an effective contrast to Portia's. Portia, bound by her father's will, freely chooses to abide by its rules. When Nerissa asks her if she will marry the drunken young German should he choose the correct casket, her answer—"I will do anything Nerissa ere I will be married to a sponge" [I. ii. 98-9]—seems to bar the natural solution of refusing to obey her father's will. Later, drawn by her love of Bassanio to show him the proper choice, she decides that she cannot betray her father's trust. Jessica, given a similar choice between father and lover, chooses Lorenzo. (pp. 94-6)

Although we have seen that 'the bond' and 'the choice' are basic elements in The Merchant, we must now examine how they fit into the play's larger patterns of action. There is a parallel, we have noted, between Antonio bound to the "will" of Shylock [IV. i. 83] and Portia bound to the will of her father; and from this starting point, we may distinguish two major movements in the play (movements which have some correspondence to the source stories). We may call them the suit of love—Bassanio's winning of Portia—and the suit of revenge—Shylock's pursuit of Antonio. Both suits culminate in a trial centering upon a choice which is, indeed, a test of the moral fiber of the chooser.

The first movement, the suit of love, is the least complex of the two. The audience watches the wrong choice of Morocco, who, making an equation between human worth and physical wealth, takes the golden casket [II. vii. 59-60]. He is followed by Arragon whose choice is governed by his own price: "I will not jump with common spirits" [II. ix. 32], and he picks silver. Thus by the time Bassanio comes to choose, the playgoer is fully aware of the correct choice, and Bassanio, not "deceiv'd with ornament" [III. ii. 74], makes the proper choice of lead, and by hazarding all (as his friend Antonio has done for him), he gains his heart's desire. In the realm of love and personal attachment, to gain everything one must hazard just as much.

The second movement, which we have called the suit of revenge, and which actually runs concurrently with the first, grows out of the suit of love; for Antonio binds himself to Shylock so that Bassanio may have the necessary wealth to court Portia. And in the end, love dominates and destroys revenge, though the victory is not an easy one. Through a series of mishaps, Antonio's several fleets do not arrive in Venice, and the bond is forfeit. Shylock thereupon demands that the pound of human flesh be paid, and a day of trial is set. Shylock, it appears, must have his will of Antonio, just as, in a wholly different context, Bassanio has won Portia.

The trial scene, at first, seems not to offer a direct parallel, since ostensibly the trial is not of the suitor, Shylock, but of Antonio, and therefore cannot mirror Bassanio's trial at the choice of caskets.

However, if we can take advantage of our knowledge of the outcome, we see that the trial of Antonio has, in one way, a foregone conclusion; for Portia is already armed with the quibble that will cause Shylock to break off the suit, and she already knows the forgotten law which will put Shylock in Antonio's place, in danger of his life. It is not then the trial of Antonio; he readily admits that the bond is forfeit; but it is the trial of Shylock, who is presented by Portia with a series of moral choices. First she comments:
Of a strange nature is the suit you follow,
Yet in such rule, that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed,

[IV. i. 177-79]

suggesting that Shylock has complete freedom of will to act as he wishes. After finding that Antonio
confesses the bond, however, she insists: "Then must the Jew be merciful" [IV. i. 182]. Mistaking the moral
imperative for the physical Shylock asks, "On what compulsion must I?" [IV. i. 183], and Portia launches into
her eloquent speech on the quality of mercy. Shylock is given the free choice between Justice and
Mercy—with a strong incentive in Portia's speech to be merciful—and the choice seems quickly and
confidently made: "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law" [IV. i. 206]. Nevertheless, Portia does not give
up her testing and shifts her examination to different grounds. The next choice Shylock must make is between
"thrice thy money" [IV. i. 227] and the pound of flesh. But even material wealth will not divert his suit of
revenge, and his choice suggests the quality of the man. Since his choices are not in accord with the play's
scheme of values, he does not gain the object of his desires—which is, rather grotesquely, Antonio's heart.
The latter part of the trial scene gives both Antonio and the Duke of Venice a chance to make the proper
choice, and they are merciful. Thus both the suit of love and the suit of revenge follow the pattern of 'bond'
and 'choice'.

Ironically and comically, both elements are used again at the play's end. The comedy of rings, which are
begged from Bassanio and Gratiano by then-disguised wives, runs through the end of Act IV and into Act V,
recapitulating and mirroring Antonio's bondage to Shylock; for the rings, which the husbands swear so
faithfully to wear, are the symbols of the marital bond. The point of the comedy lies beneath Antonio's words
to Bassanio:

My Lord Bassanio, let him [i.e., Portia as Balthazar] have the ring,
Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement.
[IV. i. 449-51]

In different terms, Bassanio is presented with the same choice as Shylock: shall he follow the spirit of charity
or the letter of the law? His choice is doubly hard because the ring is the physical symbol of the bond between
Portia and himself, but charity wins, and Gratiano is sent after the disguised Portia with Bassanio's ring.

The comedy of Bassanio's aside: "Why I were best to cut my left hand off, / And swear I lost the ring
defending it" [V. i. 177-78], at the discovery of his ring's loss sets the tone of the final trial; and the bawdy
lightness of the accusation levelled against the recreant husbands by their apparently indignant wives suggests
that Portia and Nerissa have interpreted the loss in the proper spirit. The rings are merely physical signs of a
bond which is, of necessity, spiritual. Perhaps the suggestion is that all bonds between man and man—or man
and woman—are of this nature. But the final binding of the play is Antonio's:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.
[V. i. 249-53]

Portia accepts the new bond and seals her renewed faith by returning Bassanio's ring. The episode ends in
laughter—with Gratiano's quip concerning Nerissa's ring—though the words of Antonio fall more seriously
on the ear. Once more he binds himself for his friend, with his soul this time, not a pound of flesh, in the
balance. The flesh has given way to the spirit, and, though in a higher key, the play ends on the same note upon which it began: 'I dare be bound again' [V. i. 251]. (pp. 97-100)


**Criticism: Aspects of Love**

**Lawrence W. Hyman**

[Hyman maintains that the primary action of The Merchant of Venice centers on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's affection, or the competition between friendship and marriage. Viewed in this manner, the critic continues, Antonio's bond with Shylock represents the merchant's attempt to retain Bassanio's love. Hyman then discusses the Elizabethan context of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship, asserting that it does not necessarily suggest homosexual yearnings on the merchant's part, rather, it reflects a close, platonic association that was quite common in Shakespeare's day. From this issue, the critic contends, Shakespeare creates dramatic tension in the trial scene (Act IV, scene i) not merely between the adversarial relationship of Antonio and Shylock, but also through the rivalrous nature of Portia and Antonio's love for Bassanio. According to Hyman, Antonio's willingness to submit to Shylock's bond reflects his desperate attempts to maintain his relationship with his friend, even though he has already been partially displaced by Bassanio's marriage to Portia. The climax of the play, the critic declares, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio. Not only does she thwart Shylock's revenge, but by rescuing Antonio with a legal technicality, she also severs the bond which holds her husband emotionally accountable to the merchant. Even though Antonio loses the contest for Bassanio's affections in the trial scene, Hyman concludes, he nevertheless makes one final attempt to retain his friend by urging Bassanio to give his ring to the disguised Portia. Portia demonstrates her supremacy over Antonio, however, when she presents the forfeited ring to her husband in the final act and forgives him for breaking his oath.]

Aside from the powerful impact which Shylock makes upon us, the readers and critics of this play have been most impressed by the remarkable way in which Shakespeare has woven together the stories of the caskets, the bond, and the ring. And, although interpretations naturally differ, the unity that the critics have found in the play is usually based on a contrast between Portia and Shylock, Belmont and Venice, love and hatred, or mercy and strict justice. John Russell Brown [in his introduction to The Merchant of Venice], for example, although he notices quite clearly the similarity between usury and love (as well as the contrast), still finds a moral principle coming through at the end: It is "that giving is the most important part--giving prodigally, without thought for the taking."

More recently Sigurd Burckhardt [in his "The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond," ELH XXIX] has found greater unity in this play by emphasizing the interdependence between Venice and Belmont, particularly between Shylock's insistence on maintaining the bond and Portia's loosening of this bond. Burckhardt's initial assumption that the bond is "the play's controlling metaphor" is an important advance in unifying this play. But no critic, as far as I am aware, has seen the full metaphoric meaning of the bond as a link between Antonio and Bassanio, rather than as merely a link between Antonio and Shylock. The very genius of Shakespeare, which was able to transform Shylock from a comic dupe into an almost tragic figure, has prevented us from seeing that in terms of the structure of the play Shylock is a minor character. We shall ignore him, for the most part, in order to focus our attention on Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio. And once we make this simple step, we will see that the main action of the play is centered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's love.

To arrive at such an interpretation in which the rivalry over Bassanio is dominant, rather than the struggle to overcome Shylock, it will be necessary to see the action more as a metaphor than as a literal rendition of
human behavior. Such a reading will not only allow us to see a greater degree of unity in the play but also remove the need to justify the actions of this strange play as being credible in naturalistic terms. Since the metaphoric nature of the caskets is made explicit in the play, and the metaphoric nature of the ring is implicit, we need go only a little further in order to see that the forfeited bond, with its pound of flesh, is only incidentally a bond between the two merchants. Essentially, that is in terms of Antonio's intention and in relation to the main theme of the play, the bond represents Antonio's attempt to hold on to Bassanio's love.

To call Antonio a lover of Bassanio is not strange in Elizabethan language; nor need it be considered unusual even to a modern audience. Elizabethan scholars and modern psychologists could be quoted to help define this relationship; but for our purposes, which are strictly literary, and not historical or psychological, all we need assume is that Antonio feels rejected when he sees that his friend is determined to marry. Some readers might insist that Antonio has some unconscious sexual feeling for Bassanio that he would never reveal even to himself. But such an assumption is neither necessary nor relevant to our understanding of his actions. All that we need assume is that Antonio knows that he should be happy in his friend's normal attempt to find a wife and is nevertheless unhappy at losing him. Because of this ambivalent feeling he is telling the truth when he opens the play with his complaint: "I know not why I am so sad" [I. i.1].

This ambivalence in Antonio's feeling is made clear when Antonio offers to stretch his credit to supply the money for Bassanio's suit. Consciously, Antonio's intentions are genuine; he loves his friend enough to want Bassanio to win the lady who is described in such glowing terms. But in offering to put himself into debt for his friend (his credit will be "racked, even to the uttermost" [I. i. 181]), Antonio is also revealing the depth of his own feeling for Bassanio.

In a purely literal sense there is no good reason for Bassanio's wanting a large sum of money to carry on his suit. It is not the pretense of being rich himself that enables him to win Portia. What is credible and what is essential to the development of the play is that from the very beginning—even before the bond literally turns to blood—Antonio's money is seen as a counterpart to the "golden fleece" that hangs on the temples of Portia. The emphasis on Portia's wealth can also be understood in the light of Antonio's rivalry. Taken literally, Bassanio's insistence on her fortune might jar somewhat the romantic atmosphere which envelops his courtship. But when we realize that Antonio's wealth which he puts at his friend's disposal is a means of holding on to Bassanio's love, we can see that Portia's wealth makes more emphatic her role in displacing Antonio.

All this is made clear in Scene iii when Shylock demands, as security for his loan, "an equal pound / Of ... fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" [I. iii. 149-51]. The interconnections between Antonio's love represented by his offer of money, and the love of a woman which, naturally enough, is drawing Bassanio away from Antonio to Portia, is now given dramatic as well as symbolic force. We learn later that the bond, as actually written, calls specifically for the flesh "Nearest his heart" [IV. i. 254].

Although Shylock refers to the forfeit of the pound of flesh as a joke or "sport", Bassanio is shocked at this monstrous proposal. To him the friendship is best represented by a monetary loan which could be easily repaid with the money he would gain by marrying Portia. But to Antonio the link between the money that could be returned and the feeling "nearest his heart" (that unfortunately could not be returned by Bassanio) is not so clearly separated. And without hesitation Antonio consents: "Content, i' faith. I'll seal to such a bond / And say there is much kindness in the Jew" [I. iii. 152-53].

In the light of Shylock's motives the word "kindness" is ironic, and despite Shylock's use of the word "sport", Antonio's reply is barely credible. But in connection with Antonio's feelings at this point, as a rival lover, the eager acceptance of the bond is understandable. Antonio is offering his heart—figuratively but nevertheless with a vivid concreteness—as a means of counteracting the love which he fears Portia will soon offer to Bassanio. The bond legally and literally binds Antonio to Shylock but on a deeper level it binds Antonio to
Bassanio. To break this bond, the bond between the lover and his friend, we need not only a clever judge, but Portia herself.

The woman who is to receive the love which Antonio is about to lose is introduced to us in a phrase reminiscent of her rival: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world" [I. ii. 1-2]. And like her rival, her sadness is also caused by Bassanio. She, of course, wins Bassanio, and the Casket Scene will be discussed later. But her victory is not complete. Before the marriage can be consummated, we learn of Antonio's losses and the forfeiture of the pound of flesh. The bond which binds Bassanio to his friend now severs his relationship to his wife. Antonio's letter, which "steals the color from Bassanio's cheeks" [cf. III. ii. 244], is described "as the body of my friend / And every word in it a gaping wound, / Issuing life blood" [III. ii. 264-66]. No dramatist who is also a poet could be expected to give a blunter indication of Antonio's role as a rival lover to Portia.

Shylock's action is brilliantly presented by Shakespeare in such a way that we can be both shocked at his cruelty and moved by the circumstances that provoke his monstrous revenge. But, without reference to the rival lovers, there is still something fantastic, even if it is dramatically effective, about the situation. Could such a bond really be enforced in a court of law which was created to facilitate the commercial life of a great city? Would not the fear of personal revenge combined with his greed serve to make Shylock relent? These questions can be answered negatively; and we are not arguing that the situation is literally impossible. But improbable possibilities are not the best material for great drama. The effectiveness of these scenes can be accounted for and their integral relationship to the rest of the play enhanced by seeing Antonio as a rival lover. The demand for the pound of flesh should be seen as the culmination not only of Shylock's hatred for all Christians (including Jessica), but of Antonio's desperate love for Bassanio.

Antonio's love, at this point, faces death in every sense. And at the Trial Scene [IV. i], his final speech (or what he believes will be his final speech) indicates that he is aware that he will undergo more than one kind of death beneath Shylock's knife:

Give me your hand, Bassanio, fare you well!  
Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you, ....  
Commend me to your honorable wife.  
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,  
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,  
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge  
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.  
Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,  
And he repents not that he pays your debt,  
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,  
I'll pay it presently with all my heart.  
[IV. i. 265-81]

The bravery and devotion of Antonio which we feel as we see him submitting to the cruel demands of Shylock are not in question. Virtues are not, or need not be, explained away by rooting them in the needs and desires of men. Antonio's action is no less brave or sympathetic, but simply more understandable and more interesting, when it is seen as a desperate attempt to equal Portia's love for Bassanio. Nor is Portia any different in this respect. For she too tries to counteract her rival. Just as Antonio first tries to win Bassanio with money and later with his heart's blood, so Portia, naturally enough, wins Bassanio first as a woman and later, when she hears of Antonio's plight, with her money. Again her generosity is no more in question than is Antonio's bravery. But, metaphorically, she too is substituting her money for the sexuality which she (for very different reasons of course) cannot offer to Bassanio at this time. The juxtaposition of money and love, blood and gold, daughters and ducats, as many readers have noticed, runs throughout the play.
The climax of the play, Portia's turning the tables on Shylock, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio. She not only saves his life but also prevents him from proving to Bassanio that his love could not be surpassed. The Biblical phrase about the "greater love" would certainly have applied to the man in this context. Nor does Antonio fail to recognize, even if many critics have, that Shylock's defeat is also his. For there now seems to be nothing to prevent Portia from giving her body to her husband in what may be called another kind of death, one that is naturally enough much more welcome to Bassanio. Antonio, however, is not yet ready to give up entirely; and to see his rivalry we must now leave the bond and look at its successor, the ring.

It will be remembered that it is Portia, in her disguise as the clerk, who asks for the ring. And this seemingly perverse action on her part will be explained later when we deal with the caskets. But her entreaty is not sufficient to make Bassanio give up the ring. It is only when Antonio reminds him that this "clerk" saved the life of his friend that Bassanio consents to remove the pledge of his love for Portia. The ring, as Burckhardt has pointed out, is "like the bond ... of a piece with the flesh ..." In this context it represents Antonio's final attempt to separate his friend from Portia. Since we know that the clerk is really Portia we know in advance that the attempt is futile. Dramatically the play moves to a lower key. Thematically, however, the final joke concerning the ring is a continuation of the rivalry between Antonio and Portia.

To read the final scene merely as a trick which is used to end the play on a light note is quite possible. We are always made aware by Portia's lines that Bassanio is in no danger. But such a reading would imply that Portia is not only very clever but also very cruel. What woman who could display the tenderness that Portia does in Act III, Scene ii, would be so cruel to her husband a few hours after he had witnessed the near death of his best friend? Only, it seems to me, a woman who is still fighting to break the last remaining bond that holds her husband to a former love. That this former love is another man, and is thus not a real rival, allows Portia to fight her battle in the form of a joke. Neither the woman she attributes to Bassanio nor the man she claims as her lover is real. But her jealousy is, and so is the pain suffered by Bassanio in this final scene.

Of course the term jealousy has to be qualified to fit this situation. It is not the jealousy of Othello or of Cleopatra. As we have mentioned earlier, Antonio never blames his friend for wanting to marry; nor could he in his own conscious thoughts blame Portia for anything that she did. In the same way, Portia could hardly blame Antonio for what is an almost passionate friendship. And in no sense could she blame her husband for responding to the greater love that would lay down life for a friend. What we are concerned with is not a matter of right or wrong conduct, but with the insistgent but altogether natural desire of a woman to possess her lover completely coming into conflict with the desire of Antonio to hold on to the love of his friend. We need not concern ourselves with the question as to whether Antonio's desire is equally "natural". For our purposes all we need recognize is that his desire is equally strong.

Portia knows of course that Bassanio really gave the ring to her, and that her accusation is false. But the false appearance in Shakespearian comedy is seldom a mere trick. Just as Viola's disguise [in Twelfth Night] and Hero's "seduction" [in Much Ado About Nothing] serve not only to conceal but to reveal certain truths, so in this play Portia's pretense that she has been wronged (and that she has in turn betrayed Bassanio) reveals a truth that could not be expressed in any other way. The love between Antonio and Bassanio which caused her ring to be removed was just as strong, and was consequently just as much of a threat to her complete possession of her husband, as a rival mistress. There is an obvious truth in her remark that no man would be "so much unreasonable" [V. i. 203] as to desire the ring, since she was the man. But there is a more significant truth in that phrase insofar as the love of Antonio, which was the real cause of Bassanio's action, is comparable to the love of a woman. That she treats Antonio's feelings for her husband as being equivalent to a woman's is made more explicit a few lines later when she plays with the word ring or "jewel" so as to suggest her own sexuality.
The trick has its effect not only on her husband but more importantly on her rival as well. Antonio, seeing that he is "the unhappy subject of these quarrels" [V. i. 238], finally recognizes that his love for Bassanio is, under the circumstances, too strong, and that the love for a woman must inevitably displace all but the memory of the love between the two friends. Antonio acknowledges that if it were not for Portia he himself would not be alive. And, as if to make explicit in action the complete victory that Portia has won, he himself hands over the ring to Bassanio. Antonio is now, as the play ends, no longer a rival but a willing accomplice in his friend's marriage.

But the placing of Portia's ring on Bassanio's finger is more than the conclusion of the rivalry. The ring was first put on Bassanio's finger in the Casket Scene, and its recurrence should bring to a conclusion not only the story of the bond but also the story of the three caskets. Coming as it does from another source, the choice of a casket is not so explicitly related to the rival lovers as are the bond and the ring. But since the metaphoric meaning of the caskets is explicit, there is no difficulty in reading the whole scene metaphorically, and so relating it to the main action of the play.

The inscriptions on the caskets make clear to us from the beginning that Bassanio's actions are not a matter of chance but a reflection of the nature of love. And Bassanio's love is generous, he would "give and hazard all he hath" [H. vii. 9J. It is interesting to note, however, that this inscription is on the outside of the leaden casket, and that when Bassanio opens this casket, some scenes later, the motto reads quite simply: "You that choose not by the view, / Choose as fair, and choose as true!" [III. ii. 132]. A relationship can be established between the two moral maxims. But the first and more significant statement links this scene with the preceding action of Antonio. For it is he, not Bassanio the fortune hunter, who has shown his love by giving all that he has; indeed he has hazarded his fortune to the sea and the wind, while hazarding his heart to his enemy.

Bassanio, in one sense, has done the opposite. He has looked for and found a "lady richly left" [I. i. 161], and a friend who is willing to put his entire fortune at his disposal. Portia, too, gives herself to him by wishing herself "A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times / More rich ..." [cf. III. ii. 154] for his sake. So far it is only Antonio and Portia who give and hazard; Bassanio has only taken.

When, immediately after the marriage, we learn that Antonio is about to lose his life for his friend, the irony of the slogan becomes sharper, and as so often in Shakespeare, the action makes a mockery of morality. By giving and hazarding Antonio seems to have lost everything; whereas by taking all that he can get, his friend is on the verge of getting as much beauty, wealth, generosity (and as he soon learns), intelligence, as could be found in any woman. But we must emphasize the words "seems" and "is on the verge of." Shakespeare does not replace moral maxims with cynicism. Bassanio must give up this beautiful wife in order to go to Venice, and is prepared to give up Portia's wealth in order to ransom his friend from imminent death. Conversely, by giving all he has, Antonio has succeeded in displacing Portia, for the moment at least, as the chief interest for Bassanio. Just as Antonio will eventually place Portia's ring on Bassanio's finger in the conclusion, so here his rival must step aside:

First go with me to church and call me wife.
And then away to Venice to your friend.
For never shall you lie by Portia's side
With an unquiet soul.
[III. Ui. 304-06]

The statement on the leaden casket thus becomes more than either a copybook maxim or a cynical reminder that the world does not usually reward generosity. It is a warning to Bassanio that if the leaden casket contained gold, the golden world that he gained can quickly turn again into the harsh world represented by Shylock. But it is the ring, rather than the caskets and the bond, which brings out the true significance of what
is implied by giving and hazarding all that one has. We have seen both Antonio and Portia risk all that they have because of their love for Bassanio. It now remains for Bassanio to carry out the maxim.

His opportunity to give and hazard all that he has comes about when his friend and his wife, from different motives, both act to make him give up the ring. It is appropriate that Bassanio, who has so far been accustomed only to taking, has to be urged to part with the symbol of "all that he hath". And it is also appropriate that in giving all, he is really giving nothing, since Portia's ring is received by Portia. But Bassanio does not know this, and the pain which he suffers makes him feel what his friend had experienced earlier in the play—that a moral maxim may be much better as an inscription than it is in practice. For if Antonio's greater love almost results in laying down his life for his friend, Bassanio's "greater love" ... almost results in his laying down his wife for his friend. The conclusion of the play parallels and develops earlier scenes; yet, as so often in Shakespeare, with no sense of repetition but of continual development in action, character and theme.

A sense of the thematic unity, amidst the bewildering actions, can also help us account for the miraculous return of Antonio's fleet, which Portia announces to him after he has given her ring back to Bassanio. On a literal level this restoration of his ships is both incredible and unnecessary. (Antonio is not concerned with his wealth.) But to Portia the return of the ships is important in removing the last sacrifice that Antonio has suffered for Bassanio. And it brings us back to the Casket Scene in that it fulfills the prophecy implied in the leaden casket, that he who gives and hazards will eventually receive what he desires and perhaps even what he deserves. Or, to use Shakespeare's own images, the lead turns to gold for Antonio as well as for his friend.

But as even Shakespeare and his contemporaries suspected, alchemy is, at least in part, a trick and an illusion. And the happy ending here, as in most of Shakespeare's comedy, depends on our accepting the illusion. Under the surface of the golden world, as Portia's unsuccessful suitors learned, there is often a harsher reality. It is therefore quite in keeping with the ironic current of the play, as well as the tragic undertone, that the conclusion should see Bassanio come so close to the precipice at the very moment when he too gives and hazards all that he has.

Many readers have found a golden world in Belmont in contrast to the cruel business world of Venice. But those critics who have examined the play more closely have usually seen how interdependent the two worlds are. Lorenzo's beautiful description of the harmony of the spheres is interrupted by Jessica's remark that she is never merry when she hears music. Nor should we forget how intimately this love affair is bound up with a more earthy gold than is found in the heavenly spheres. To see the play as a unified action is to realize that there is no clear separation between generous love and selfish love, between those who take and those who give, between the lead and the gold. Bassanio, it is true, is neither a jealous nor a possessive lover, like Antonio and Portia. But then he never has to be. And with all their possessiveness and jealousy, Antonio and Portia can never be accused of refusing to give all for love.

None of the leading characters have to be justified or condemned, only understood. And when we do so we will see not what ought to be by our own standards or by some hypothetical construction of what the "Elizabethan audience" expected, but what human beings actually do when driven by their loves, hates, hopes, and fears. It is not that mercy, generosity, justice, and pity are unreal, or that they are only masks to conceal emotions. On the contrary, the analysis presented here should indicate that these high-sounding virtues are given greater reality when they are grounded in the desires, both conscious and unconscious, of passionate men and women. To see The Merchant of Venice as a play about rival lovers is not only to unify the diverse actions but also to give depth and complexity to what is often seen as a clever dramatization of a fairy-tale morality. (pp. 109-16)

Helen Purinton Pettigrew

Pettigrew argues that Shakespeare portrays Bassanio as an ideal Elizabethan lover, a character whose "apparent faults were to the Elizabethans mere conventional commonplaces arising from the economic conditions of the age." Marrying for money was not unusual during Shakespeare's time, the critic asserts, and often expected due to the rising cost of living during the Renaissance and the falling fortunes of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, Pettigrew states that the playwright went to great pains to make clear that not only Portia's wealth, but also her intelligence and beauty attract Bassanio. Furthermore, Portia reveals a typical Elizabethan attitude toward marriage in her remarks about suitors and husbands, and once she and Bassanio are wed, she shows no concern when he immediately assumes the right to use her fortune. Ultimately, the critic determines that based on traditional Elizabethan courtship and marriage practices, Bassanio is a romantic hero, not a scheming opportunist.

In spite of the "absurdities" of its plot, The Merchant of Venice is sometimes called the best of Shakespeare's comedies; love is one of its primary themes, and the somewhat ambiguous Bassanio is unquestionably the chief lover. Some commentators give him a qualified praise; and a few, indeed, eulogize him as a "romantic lover," even the "ideal" lover such as [Baldassare] Castiglione celebrated. Many more scholars, on the contrary, form a sort of accusatory chorus against Bassanio: he is, they say, the intellectual inferior of Portia, even "dull in capacity"; he is a peevish, weak spendthrift, both selfish and prodigal—a very "profligate"; he is a mercenary, predatory creature, only the "seeming lover" of Portia, a man "imprudent, impudent and mean"; he is, indeed, a "downright fortune hunter," tolerable to the reader only because, in a romance, we accept a character at the author's evaluation. And yet Shakespeare clearly intended Bassanio for a hero. If these charges be true, the playwright must have bungled—more, indeed, than some commentators would believe he bungled in the character of Proteus [in The Two Gentlemen of Verona]—for to this same Bassanio he gives that pearl of great price, the "radiant" Portia, called by many readers Shakespeare's loveliest woman. In truth, Bassanio's behavior, for a hero, does seem rather odd: though expressing distrust of Shylock, he accepts Antonio's offer to jeopardize himself for friendship's sake; he uses the borrowed money to give a Gargantuan bachelor feast, and to provide himself with a richly appointed entourage, so as to arrive impressively in Belmont; he frankly admits that he hopes to retrieve his lost fortunes by a rich marriage: he chooses among the caskets wisely, to be sure, but, in the song, "Tell me where is Fancie bred" [III. ii. 63-72], Portia may have warned him how to choose. When Antonio's difficulties reach a climax, Bassanio hastens back to Venice; but after he has arrived, he does nothing but stand by ineffectually, while Portia rescues his friend. As a husband, Bassanio's only acts are to use Portia's money as freely as his own, and later to break his word to her, and then to lie about the ring. All in all, Bassanio seems to be but a poor thing; and Shakespeare, in his delineation of these two lovers, would appear to have disregarded the cardinal principle of dramatic justice. This is a serious indictment against the world's greatest dramatist, in one of his greatest plays; and surely every effort should be made to examine the indictment. (pp. 296-97)

Not only does Shakespeare's revision of the story, from his sources show a tendency toward realism, but so also does the detail of the action and dialogue of both Portia and Bassanio, in their miscellaneous social relationships. Portia's pleading of the case before the Duke, according to Lord Campbell [in his Shakespeare's Legal Acquirements], shows a considerable realism: her use of legal phrases and her court procedure are Elizabethan. Her relationship with Nerissa, moreover, foreshadowed by that of Julia and Lucetta in The Two Gentlemen, and looking forward to that of Olivia and Maria in Twelfth Night, reflects a very common status in Elizabethan England—the friendship between a noblewoman and her lady-in-waiting, who is also of gentle birth. In Portia's dialogue, too, outside the love scenes, occur incidental realistic touches. In discussing with Nerissa her various suitors, she reflects actual customs, opinions, and events of Shakespeare's time: the French Lord, she maintains, "will fence with his own shadow" [I. ii. 61-2], the young Englishman, though lamentably ignorant of foreign languages, incongruously combines in his dress various Continental fashions; the Scotchman has "borrowed a boxe of the ear of the Englishman and swore he would pay him again when hee was able" [cf. I. ii. 80-1]—a debt for which "The Frenchman became his suretie" [cf. I. ii. 82]; and the German nobleman is a drunken sot. She later makes fun of the braggart, a common English type; and she
alludes to her coach—an innovation that occasioned much discussion in Elizabethan London. Bassanio's actions also show a realistic coloring: although his indebtedness to Antonio is not Shakespeare's but belongs to the sources, his essential realationship to Antonio, as changed from the originals, illustrates the Renaissance ideal of the excellence of friendship between men: for Bassanio is willing to sacrifice even his new wife, if need be, in discharge of the obligation to his friend. His relationship to Shylock is, again, governed by the sources, but Shakespeare, by making him distrust the Jew at once, gives him a greater realism than in these sources—greater, indeed, than Antonio's. Bassanio's relations with Gratiano and the other young wits is also realistic, for they are typical Elizabethan men-about-town, gay, clever, somewhat cynical; enjoying themselves in the accepted Renaissance way, with a procession accompanied by torch-bearers, a bachelor dinner, and much merriment. Bassanio's long speech in the Casket Scene, furthermore, shows touches of contemporary realism: he comments upon the "many cowards, whose hearts are all as false as stayers of sand" [cf. III. ii. 83-4], who go about wearing "the beards of Hercules and frowning Mars" [cf. III. ii. 85], but who have "lyuers white as milk" [cf. III. ii. 86]; and he thrusts, in passing, at the Elizabethan fashion of wearing wigs: "So are those crisped snakie locks ... Vpon supposed faireness, often knowne To be the dowrie of a second head" [cf. III. ii. 92-5]. If, then, Shakespeare made Bassanio and Portia realistic in their general social relationship's and dialogue, surely in the wooing, which is the main substance of Bassanio's part in the action, one might reasonably expect to find important elements of realism.

Indeed, Bassanio, as Portia's accepted suitor, surely must have been more satisfactory to the Elizabethans than he is to us: perhaps his apparent faults may have their root in the fact that his courtship and marriage exemplify the peculiar creeds and customs of Shakespeare's age, and are therefore, in spite of all they owe to the sources, realistic. Although some readers find Bassanio lacking in friendship toward Antonio, the greater charge against him grows out of his conduct as lover and husband. As a lover, he has suffered in the opinion of critics because he is mercenary, for one of his chief motives in seeking Portia is, indubitably, a desire for a large dowry; and he has suffered further because, as critics declare on the basis of mere inference, he is supposed to have wasted his patrimony in riotous living. An Elizabethan gentleman, however, had to live well: generous spending was a social obligation; and if, as one may suppose, Bassanio's family fortunes had largely diminished with the rising prices of the Renaissance, he might, indeed, have become bankrupt merely through the needful expenditures of a young man of good birth. Elizabethan England, furthermore, did not condemn a mercenary marriage; in fact, a dowry was the chief, if not the only, inducement for a young gentleman to marry. The double standard of morals, regularly accepted in that day, encouraged a young man to delay marriage, economic pressure, on the other hand, operated otherwise. A gentleman, forced to live in the luxury of Elizabeth's court, on a private income or small family allowance, and almost completely debarred from the now overcrowded and rapidly deteriorating professions of serving-man and soldier, usually regarded a marriage for wealth as the only honorable means of recouping his fortunes and of maintaining himself in the social and economic status quo. Bassanio's situation seems to be of this unenviable sort:

_Bas._ Tis not unknowne to you Anthonio
How much I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Then my faint means would grant continuance.
[cf. I. i. 122-25]

Not only in his motives, but in the conduct of the wooing, Bassanio is thoroughly Elizabethan. He suggests to Antonio that, had he "but the meanes to hold a rivall place" [cf. I. i. 174] with the other suitors of the "Lady richly left" [I. i. 161], he "should questionless be fortunate" [I. i. 176]. Finally, the betrothal is solemnized in the proper contemporary fashion, by means of a ring, with which, as Portia says, she gives herself and all her goods,—a ring

_Which when you part from, loose, or give away,_
_Let it presage the mine of your love,_
And be my vantage to exclaime on you.
[cf. in. ii. 172-74]

Bassanio, too, recognizes the importance of this ring:

_Bas._ ... but when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence.
O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead.
[III. ii. 183-85]

The significance of the ring, out of which grows the action of the fifth act, would be instantly plain to an Elizabethan audience, accustomed to the almost invariable exchange of rings in both betrothal and marriage ceremonies. Portia, too, reflects in her attitude the typical Renaissance courtship. She expresses to Nerissa what was doubtless the average Elizabethan gentlewoman's plaint in regard to the prearranged marriage:

_Portia._ ... O mee, ... I may neither
choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I
dislike, so is the wil of a living daughter
curb'd by the will of a dead father.
[cf. I. ii. 23-5]

In the Casket Scene, she reiterates the same sentiment, and bemoans "these naughtie times" [cf. III. ii. 18] that "Puts bars betweene the owners and their rights" [cf. III. ii. 19]. She conforms, on the other hand, with Elizabethan theory in her speech to Bassanio on feminine subservience:

_Portia._ Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits it selfe to yours to be directed,
As from her Lord, her Govemour, her King.
[cf. m. ii. 163-65]

She further illustrates an Elizabethan attitude, when she refers to a husband's social responsibility for his wife:

_Portia._ Let me giue light but let me not be light,
For a light wife doth make a heavie husband.
And never be Bassanio so for me.
[cf. V. i. 129-31]

Apparently, then, the courtship of these two lovers contains some definite elements of contemporary realism which might well reconcile Shakespeare's audience to a situation distasteful to the modern reader. The playwright carefully makes clear, moreover, that Portia's money is not her only attraction for Bassanio; for the "faire speechlesse messages" [cf. I. i. 164] exchanged between them before the opening of the play indicate a mutual interest dating from a time perhaps before Bassanio's financial stringency arose, and the reciprocal emotions shown in the Casket Scene should satisfy the devotee of high romance. Bassanio as a lover, thus conforms with Elizabethan conditions and customs, and even with the more practical Elizabethan ideals. As a husband, he has scarcely time to show his mettle, except that he assumes the right, immediately, to use his wife's money ... Elizabethans, however, would expect him to do that very thing: indeed, the fortune became automatically his through the act of marriage—perhaps Shakespeare's audience would even assume that, before his frantic departure to Antonio, the marriage was hastily performed chiefly to make that money legally his to offer for his friend. Bassanio's other act as a husband, the giving away of Portia's ring, has never been seriously held against him: the incident, taken almost wholly from Shakespeare's source, is usually regarded as the dramatist's means for lightening and softening the bitterly tragic mood of the Court Scene; and
Bassanio’s part in it is clearly involuntary and unavoidable, if he is to remain a generous-spirited Renaissance gentleman; for liberality was, perhaps, the prime characteristic which, during the Renaissance, distinguished the nobility. Portia, moreover, seems to represent the marriageable Elizabethan gentlewoman, like Olivia [in *Twelfth Night*], in unusual circumstances, created through the death of her parents. Ordinarily, a young woman of good family was betrothed by her father, although by the reign of Elizabeth, more or less importance had come to be attached to the girl’s own preference; in theory, however, it still was thought a shocking thing for a girl to take matters into her own hands and elope: Elizabethan conduct books are full of admonitions to children to obey their parents, and to fathers to provide suitable early marriages for their daughters, who might otherwise grow impatient and marry themselves off. Portia’s being an orphan might be supposed to give her more freedom than most Renaissance English girls would enjoy; but her father, like a conscientious Elizabethan gentleman, has left for her protection and guidance, in lieu of himself, a last testament that enjoins her from marrying as she pleases, and attempts to exercise a wise choice among her prospective suitors. No Shakespearean playgoer would consider, as some modern critics do, that Portia was ill-used in her father’s will, or that, having educated her highly, he has wronged her by depriving her of free choice in matrimony. As a matter of fact, the present writer finds in the play no evidence that Portia had received an unusual education for an Elizabethan lady of quality. To be sure, when talking to Bassanio in the Casket Scene—and, perhaps, naturally enough, attempting to impress him—she refers to Greek mythological history: but only as any quick-witted, keenly perceptive person might pick up such allusions while listening to the learned: even Chaucer’s Partlet could muster up a little classical lore. Indeed, Portia’s description of herself to Bassanio as “an unlessoned girle, unschool’d, unpractiz’d [cf. III. ii. 159], may well be, not a mere exhibition of the humility of love, but the almost literal truth: despite a few notable exceptions, Elizabethan women were not given a liberal education; they were, however, taught practical household management, and Portia’s “unusual” education may have been merely an extraordinarily thorough preparation for handling her extensive fortune. Her whole bearing toward Bassanio, moreover, much as it irks some critics in this age of feminism, is typically Elizabethan: her desire to abase and to immolate herself in his interests would seem to Shakespeare’s audience only the natural duty of an ideal wife—as various contemporary books on conduct stipulate—to sink her personality in that of her husband; and the very fact that ... women sometimes disregarded the conduct-books and became unpleasantly independent, would stimulate this preponderantly masculine audience to a greater admiration for the gentle Portia. That lady, foreshadowing a Beatrice, a Viola, and a Rosalind [in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*], is perhaps more sprightly in speech and more resourceful in action than the ideal Elizabethan wife; but her fundamental relationship to Bassanio is, first and last, an exemplification of the Elizabethan theory of the “weaker vessel.” Indeed, the dramatist’s departure from his source, in giving the power to choose among the caskets to the man lover rather than to the woman, would seem to bespeak in Shakespeare a belief in the man’s greater importance and responsibility in courtship. The poet evidently saw no incongruity in Portia’s subservience to the “wastrel” Bassanio; the author, indeed, seems to admire both lovers equally: apparently, therefore, Bassanio’s unlovely qualities have been largely read into his character by modern interpreters unfamiliar with the courtship and marriage customs of the time; and a study of these customs would seem to establish Bassanio as a realistic Elizabethan gentleman in love—a high-spirited, noble-hearted gentleman, quite worthy of the incomparable Portia.

On the basis of two, or possibly more, Romantic stories, Shakespeare develops in *The Merchant of Venice* a realism to contemporary economic and social life: Bassanio must have money for his wooing and for his future livelihood, and Portia rejoices to supply his needs. Thus the playwright gives his diverse and disunified originals the significant coherence of great drama. This realism appears in the action and dialogue of the two lovers, not only in their miscellaneous relationships to the other characters, but also most significantly in relation to each other as lovers and as man and wife. Bassanio’s apparent faults were to the Elizabethans mere conventional commonplaces arising from the economic conditions of the age. As far as the peculiar circumstances allow, he conducts his courtship according to Elizabethan propriety and custom; thus he is not a mere mercenary wooer but a typical Elizabethan entirely worthy of Portia’s hand. Such an interpretation of Bassanio should be significant to an understanding of the play as a whole: the Shylock motif presents one...
aspect of Elizabethan economics—money-lending: If, then, Bassanio chiefly exemplifies the economics of marriage, *The Merchant of Venice* is, in its entirety, a drama of economic theme—perhaps the first in English literature. This economic problem arises from the social necessity that Bassanio must have ample funds to court with proper circumstance and pomp; and the love-plot, therefore, is the motivating force and is the alpha and omega to the piece. The play would seem to be Shakespeare's first significant and realistic treatment of the theme of love; and one need not wonder that, from his own experience, the economic side of the problem was the first aspect to engage his serious attention. *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, is not only a great comedy, but also a crucial step in Shakespeare's career as a dramatist; for it is probably the first in which he attempts any serious working-out of those causes and effects, economic, social, and political, that governed contemporary Elizabethan life. (pp. 298-306)


**Criticism: Key Scenes**

**John Dover Wilson**

[Wilson examines three key scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*: the casket scene (Act III, scene ii), the trial scene (Act IV, scene i), and the Belmont scene (Act V, scene i). The critic maintains that the casket scene was probably treated as humorous entertainment by Elizabethan audiences, who enjoyed folk tales focusing on the difference between appearance and reality. Wilson then discusses various aspects of the casket plot, particularly the meaning of the mottoes, the dramatic setting for Bassanio's choice, and the possible implications of the song that is played while Bassanio considers his selection. As a result of the trial scene, the critic continues, Shylock should be regarded as a tragic, not comical, figure. In Wilson's opinion, while Shylock is "the inevitable product of centuries of racial persecution," Shakespeare did not necessarily mean to present the Jew as a moral example. Although the playwright never takes sides in his dramas, the critic asserts, surely he would advocate the mercy Portia offers as "the only possible solution of our racial hatreds and enmities." Since the trial scene is unusually serious for a comedy, the critic concludes, Shakespeare added the Belmont episode to send his audience home in a happy mood. Wilson concludes that the music and moon offer twin themes of reassuring harmony in Portia's domain, mediating Elizabethan concerns about the impending dissolution of the universe by reaffirming their world view with the vision of Belmont.]

*In sooth I know not why I am so sad.*

[1. i. 11]

The very first line of *The Merchant of Venice* is ominous—a line uttered by Antonio, a figure of great dignity, much graciousness, and an air quite different from that usually breathed in the world of comedy. So alien is he to that world that when he has to move therein, as he does in the last Act, and not till then, we feel he is quite out of his element. And Shakespeare clearly feels so too, for he keeps him in the background as much as possible and gives him little to say. And in the opening scene he is deliberately contrasted with shallow-pates like Salerio, Solanio, and Gratiano, so that we may have no excuse for doubting his seriousness right from the outset. 'Gratiano', we are told, 'speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them they are not worth the search' [I. i. 114-18]. Thus Shakespeare dismisses the laughing wit-mongers who had formed the staple of his comedy in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

In *The Merchant* he is going to try a new dramatic experiment—to discover how near he can come to the true note and authentic thrill of tragedy without allowing the tragic wave to break and swamp the comic finale. In 1580 or thereabouts ... Sir Philip Sidney was condemning 'mungrel tragy-comedies'. Some fifteen years later Shakespeare set himself to produce the finest specimen of the kind in our language, perhaps in any language.
For *The Merchant of Venice* is a great play, let us make no mistake about that. Alas, that it has been staled and hackneyed for so many readers by the treadmill methods of the classroom where the dull brain of the pedagogue perplexes and retards. (pp. 94-5)

[Let] us glance at the plot of the play and consider in particular the casket-plot, ... of which Portia is the central figure. For there are ... two main plots: the casket-plot and the bond-plot. It is known that two stories 'representing the greediness of worldly choosers and the bloody minds of usurers' had already been combined in one play long before Shakespeare handled them. But as this old play is lost, we cannot tell how much Shakespeare invented himself and how much he simply took over from his unknown predecessor. Anyhow, whoever was responsible for it, the master-stroke was the combination of the two plots by means of the device of disguise; and there is no happier or more striking example of the serviceability of this Elizabethan dramatic convention than the impersonation by the Lady of Belmont of the lawyer called in to give judgment between the merchant and the usurer. That impersonation is the pivot of Shakespeare's play; the only occasion on which his two principal characters, Portia and Shylock, confront each other. Moreover, as everyone knows, in addition to these main plots there is a comic underplot, that of an exchange of rings which follows on the trial-scene and is the occasion of much laughter at the end of the play.

From the point of view of plot technique, *The Merchant of Venice* is a masterly production. It is a play, too, of wonderful poetry, most wonderful perhaps in the finale, though reaching greater heights of intensity in the mouth of Shylock. And it contains three magnificent scenes: the casket-scene, the trial-scene, and the last and loveliest of all, at Belmont. (p. 96)

**The Casket-Scene**

To speak of the casket-scene is to betray a modern standpoint and to wrong Shakespeare; for no less than five scenes are concerned with the caskets and four are almost entirely devoted to them. Spectators are inclined to find the whole business just a little silly, and modern producers cut freely into this part of the play, huddling what remains into a couple of brief episodes introducing the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon, without which the scene when Bassanio makes his choice becomes hardly intelligible. But the casket theme was of a kind well calculated to suit the Elizabethan palate, and I do not doubt that all five scenes were popular in Shakespeare's day ... But the story of the great lady, mistress of much wealth, whom the world sought in marriage; of the strange will devised by her father so as to test the character of successive suitors; the speeches of these suitors, speeches sententious after the true Renaissance fashion; and finally the eloquent discourse of Bassanio himself on the favourite topic of the day, the problem of Judgement by Appearances, and the difference between Seeming and Reality, a topic of which the whole casket-plot is itself an exposition—all this would be very much to men's taste at that period. (p. 97)

We can be sure, too, that the mottoes that stood upon the three caskets, mottoes which seem to pass almost unnoticed by modern readers and commentators, meant much to the proverb-loving Elizabethans. Morocco thus declares them:

*The first, of gold, who this inscription bears,*  
'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'  
*The second, silver, which this promise carries,*  
'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves'  
*This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt,*  
'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'.  
[II. vii. 4-9]

The meaning of the first motto is patent enough, since it has direct reference to the metal of which the casket is composed, namely what Romeo calls 'saint-seducing gold' [*Romeo and Juliet* I. i. 214] and later speaks of to the apothecary from whom he purchases his poison,
There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls
Doing more murders in this loathsome world
Than these poor compounds that thou mayst not sell.
I sell thee poison; thou hast sold me none.

[Romeo and Juliet V. i. 80-3]

As to the second, 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves', we may go to Hamlet for comment. Says the Prince to Polonius: 'Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed; do you hear, let them be well used,' etc. [Hamlet II. ii. 522 ff.]. To which Polonius replies, 'My lord, I will use them according to their desert', and Hamlet rejoins, 'God's bodkin, man, much better! use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?' [II. ii. 528-30].

The third motto brings us to the last of the casket-scenes, in which Bassanio makes his choice. It is a scene still fresh and full of delight for us, both on account of all that happens within it and because of the noble verse in which it is written. Yet I think we miss much that Shakespeare intended us to see there.

What, for example, is the dramatic setting for Bassanio's choice? His success, to be effective, must seem at once (a) natural, i.e. not just the result of chance, and (b) morally satisfying to the audience. Notice, then, the following points: (1) Shakespeare lets us hear the other two suitors argue the matter out, and their arguments reveal some flaw of character or imperfect sense of values which shows them to be undesirable mates for the Lady of Belmont. (2) But when he comes to Bassanio, the scene is arranged differently. We are allowed to hear only the conclusion of his reasoning. The great speech which begins

So may the outward shows be least themselves—

[III. ii. 73]

tells us that the speaker has already made his choice before he opens his mouth. (3) In place of the reasoning itself we are given a song, sung at Portia's command, 'the whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets to himself' [s.d., in. ii. 62]—as the Quarto, that is Shakespeare's, stage-direction has it. And have you, my reader, ever examined this song closely? If so, you may have noticed some interesting things about it. Here it is:

Tell me where is Fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
ALL. Reply, reply.
It is engend'red in the eyes,
With gazing fed, and Fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
Let us all ring Fancy's knell...
I'll begin it—Ding, dong, bell.
ALL. Ding, dong, bell.

[III. ii. 63-72]

Mark the rhymes first of all: bred, head, nourished—and then medially, engend'red and fed. Can one think of any apter rhyme than lead? And if the rhymes of the first half of the song almost cry out the word lead, what about the second half with its talk of Fancy dying 'in the cradle where it lies' and of the tolling of the funeral bell? Would not that, to an Elizabethan, suggest lead also, seeing that in those days corpses were commonly wrapped in lead before interment? Mind you, I am not proposing, as some have done, that in her desire for Bassanio's success Portia is playing a trick upon her dead father and had the song sung in order that her lover might learn the secret before he makes his choice. 'I could teach you', she had said to him,
How to choose right, but then I am forsworn,
So will I never be—
[III. ii. 11-12]

and Portia was a woman of her word. To imagine that she was forsworn would so detract from her moral stature as seriously to impair the beauty of the play. What then? The song, I take it, though sung at Portia’s command (because she is the lady of the house, and all the music therein) is intended to represent, in distillation, so to speak, the thoughts that are passing through Bassanio's mind as he 'comments on the caskets to himself' [s.d. III. ii. 63]. In other words, it is symbolical rather than dramatic, a function which Shakespeare's songs very often perform, as a matter of fact, and perform far more delightfully than the symbolical Dumbshows and Presenters' Expositions with which his rival dramatists commonly sprinkled their plays. And if it be granted that the song gives us the clue to Bassanio's thoughts, the meaning of its words at once becomes plain. The theme is Fancy, by which Shakespeare and his contemporaries understood both what we now call sentimentality and, as the word still signifies, a passing inclination or whim. Originally a contraction of fantasy, the meaning of 'illusion', 'error', or 'unreality' yet clung to it, especially when the word was used in connection with Love ... Fancy, then, is not true love; it springs from the head, that is, from calculation, not from the heart. It is engendered in the eyes; it feeds upon mere appearances; it has no roots in reality, but dies almost as soon as it is born. And what applies in the sphere of love is equally relevant to inclination and choice in other respects—for example in the choice between the caskets, two of them glittering in gold and silver, the third plain lead with no attractions for the eye whatever but bearing the motto

Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.
[II. vii. 9]

Thus Bassanio quite naturally, as if the song had expressed his own thought, continues that thought in the opening words of his speech:

So may the outward shows be least themselves—
The world is still deceived with ornament—
[III. ii. 73-4]

and then, after further elaboration of the same topic, unhesitatingly selects the right casket. His choice is guided not by any trick of Portia’s, but by the genuineness of his own nature and (which is part of the same thing) by his very real love for Portia, a love ready to give and hazard all, which comes out in the plainness (which moves us more than eloquence) of his simple but direct reply to Portia's lovely speech of self-surrender:

Madam, you have bereft me of all words,
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins.
[III. ii. 175-76]

Yes, the final casket-scene merits far more attention than it has hitherto received. Its workmanship is more delicate and its implications deeper than most people realize in these crude modern times in which we live; for I have little doubt that 'the judicious' among Shakespeare's own audience took his points readily enough.

But if Bassanio is Portia's true love—the one genuine suitor among the throng of self-seeking egoists who prate of their own worth or claims, as they make their choice at Belmont—which it was surely Shakespeare's business as a popular dramatist to represent him, how does this reading of his character agree with what we learn about him elsewhere in the play? Here we come upon a strange misconception on the part of some critics. Let me quote two of my own masters. To begin with Herbert Grierson [in his Cross-Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century]:

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Of all the suitors who come to Belmont, Bassanio best deserves the title of a 'worldly chooser'. The others have apparently as much to give as to receive; but Bassanio, like Lord Byron when he proposed to marry Miss Milbanke, was a suitor in order to be able to pay his debts and generally settle himself ...

Here he echoes [Arthur] Quiller-Couch, who writes [in his Shakespeare's Workmanship]:

If one thing is more certain than another, it is that a predatory young gentleman like Bassanio would not have chosen the leaden casket.

Finally, he quotes from Bassanio's soliloquy the well-known passage:

The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text?—
[III. ii 74-9]

and is moved to interrupt:

Yes, yes—and what about yourself, my little fellow? What has altered you, that you of all men start talking as though you addressed a Young Men's Christian Association?

As Mistress Quickly says to Pistol, 'By my truth, these are very bitter words' [cf. 2 Henry IV, II. iv. 171]. Yet they are quoted by Grierson, who finds 'a strange moral confusion' in The Merchant of Venice. In truth, the only confusion in this matter of Bassanio is a critical one in the mind of his modern interpreters. For what are the grounds upon which they condemn him—or rather condemn Shakespeare for making him so badly? Q's [Quiller-Couch's] exposition of them is too long to meet point by point. But the burden of it is just this: That Bassanio is an extravagant youngster, that he hopes to pay off his debts by marrying Portia, that in order to make the necessary show at Belmont he is forced to borrow still more money from his friend Antonio, and finally that in order to persuade Antonio to put his hand once again into his pocket, he represents his suit to the wealthy Lady of Belmont as more or less of a safe investment, wilfully concealing the fact that his success stood upon the hazard of being lucky enough to choose the right casket.

It is this last point which gives the whole case away. For consider: in order to get his double plot to work at all, Shakespeare has to make Bassanio borrow money from Antonio to pursue his courtship, since that is the reason why Antonio in his turn borrows money from Shylock. And when one man goes to borrow money from another, even his best friend, he likes to be able to offer him some hope of repayment. Bassanio therefore speaks of Portia's wealth and of her obvious interest in himself, saying however (as a young man would) less of his own love for her. All this is surely very natural and it would seem even more natural in Elizabethan days, when most matches were what Q calls 'predatory'; i.e. for business reasons. That Bassanio should stress Portia's wealth, then, so far from reflecting on his character, merely shows him to be acting on principles of common caution; and that he should speak of their mutual attraction shows that, unlike most suitors of the age, he intends a love-match. But what about his deception? What excuse has he for concealing the casket-lottery from his friend? One might answer that the deception is not his but Shakespeare's; that the dramatist is careful to tell the audience nothing about the caskets until the second scene of the play. Bassanio's petition to Antonio and the latter's consent provide enough interest for Scene i. To have introduced the casket theme into that conversation would have distracted attention from the main point of the borrowing incident and would have raised an awkward issue—the very issue indeed that Q raises. No spectator would notice its
absence; and when it is referred to in Scene ii no spectator would remember that it should have been mentioned by Bassanio in Scene i. As a matter of fact I do not believe that anyone before Q has seen that the story involves a small difficulty here. In short, dramatically speaking—and Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a novelist or a historian—the difficulty is not there.

So one could argue and the reply to Q would be valid enough. But no such reply is needed in fact at all, since if one follows the text it becomes clear that Shakespeare intended us to realize that when Bassanio speaks with Antonio in Scene i, he himself knows nothing whatever of the casket lottery or even of the will of Portia's father, for the simple reason that when he last visited Belmont the father was still alive. This is made clear in Scene ii at the first mention of Bassanio. From Portia's complaint that owing to her father's strange will she is allowed no freedom of choice in marriage, from the description of all the suitors who have so far come to Belmont and from the news Nerissa gives that hearing of the caskets they were all packing up to return home unless they can win her 'by some other sort' [I. ii. 102], we gather that Portia's father is only recently deceased, and the contents of his will become known. Thus when Nerissa goes on to ask, 'Do you not remember, Lady, in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither in company of the Marquis of Montferrat?' [I. ii. 112-14], Shakespeare leaves no doubt in the mind of those who attend to what he writes that Bassanio had not yet come as a suitor and could have known nothing of the will.

And what is true of this matter holds good also for the whole question of Bassanio's character. Whatever he may seem to modern eyes poring over a book, on the stage he is always as he was meant to be, an honest young lover. Shakespeare does not develop him very much; he is in the main a lay figure, whose dramatic function is to choose the right casket and to bring out the more important characters with whom he has to do, namely Antonio and Portia. But the references to him by others leave no doubt of his attractiveness. He is announced at his first entry as 'most noble'; and though sly Nerissa in the second Scene knows of course that praise of him will sound welcome in Portia's ears, when she declares that he 'of all men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady' [I. ii. 117-19], the audience is assuredly expected to accept her words as the truth.

The Trial-Scene
But 'this flaw in characterization' which Q discovers in Bassanio goes, he says [in his introduction to the New Shakespeare edition of the play],

right down through the workmanship of the play, for the evil opposed against these curious Christians is specific: it is Cruelty; and, yet again specifically, the peculiar cruelty of a Jew. To this cruelty an artist at the top of his art would surely have opposed mansuetude, clemency, charity, and specifically Christian charity. Shakespeare misses more than half the point when he makes the intended victims as a class and by habit just as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock's passionate excuse.

This passage Sir Herbert Grierson again quotes and endorses, generalizing it in one of his own which begins:

What puzzles one in Shakespeare's plays is that not infrequently while presenting the story and characters so faithfully and vividly that it is difficult for the reader to avoid passing moral judgment on it, Shakespeare himself seems willing not only to omit comment, but to acquiesce in a view that is to us repellent, to accept standards of which his own vivid telling of the story affords the most effective condemnation.

With these statements of the strange case of Shylock and his creator we may turn now to the trial-scene and to the most baffling character-problem, after that of Hamlet, in Shakespeare.
First of all, then, there is no doubt that modern audiences and readers—I stress the word modern—tend to be left at the end of the play with a feeling of frustration or discomfort. The classical expression of this, as will be remembered, is the story told by [Heinrich] Heine [in his Sammtliche Werke], himself a Jew, which runs:

When I saw this Play at Drury Lane, there stood behind me a pale, fair Briton, who at the end of the Fourth Act, fell to weeping passionately, several times exclaiming, 'The poor man is wronged!'

She was referring, of course, to the judgment of the court. But the wrong, be it noted, comes in reality not from Portia or the Duke; for despite Q's words, Shylock, a would-be murderer, is let off remarkably lightly. And though the compulsory conversion is repugnant to our notions, it would have appeared an enforced benefit to the Elizabethan and medieval mind. Some however have argued that Portia's invalidation of the bond on the grounds that while speaking of a pound of flesh it mentions no blood, is a mere quibble; that she does in fact what Bassanio implores her to do, namely

Wrest once the law to your authority—
To do a great right, do a little wrong.
[IV. i. 215-16]

Yet her conduct of the case, though it may appear strange in the eyes of modern law, is quite in the manner of Elizabethan trials, and in all likelihood excited no comment whatever from an audience which consisted partly at least of law students. For example, the quasi-legal quibbling of the grave-digger in Hamlet on the subject of suicide by drowning—'If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself' [V. i. 16-19]—and the rest of it, is an almost exact reproduction of real arguments used at a well-known case of 1554 and probably repeated regularly by counsel on similar occasions later. Portia's law seems reason itself by comparison. No, the wrong to Shylock that we are conscious of is done by Shakespeare and not the court that tries him. The dramatist seems to have excited our interest in and our sympathy for this Jew to such a degree that we find the levity after his exit intolerable and the happiness of the last Act heartless.

It is the fashion among some critics today to say that this feeling is based upon a misunderstanding; that Shakespeare really intended Shylock as a ridiculous villain; that he was so played up to the end of the eighteenth century; and that first [Edmund] Kean and then [Henry] Irving sentimentalized him; in a word, that our interest and sympathy spring from a humanitarianism which is quite modern and of which Shakespeare himself was totally unconscious.

It is possible, I admit, to sentimentalize Shylock; and I think it has been done. Certainly, if [W. C] Macready and Irving raised him, in the words of Edmund Booth [quoted in E. E. Stall's Shakespeare Studies], 'out of the darkness of his native element of revengeful selfishness into the light of the venerable Hebrew, the martyr, the avenger' they did something which Shakespeare never intended. But a 'comic Jew'? 'a comical villain'? Is not that label equally misleading? No doubt he was got up to look grotesque; a typical old Jew would be grotesque to an Elizabethan audience, while Shakespeare makes Gratiano the mouthpiece of the ordinary citizen's attitude.

There are, however, good reasons, I think, why we ought to regard Shylock as a tragic and not a comical figure:

(i) If he is merely comical, the play assuredly loses a great deal dramatically, and it is a sound principle to view with suspicion any critical interpretation which involves dramatic loss—Shakespeare may generally be relied upon to make the greatest possible capital out of his material.
(ii) *The Merchant of Venice* is not the only play of the period containing a detailed study of Jewish character. [Christopher] Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* preceded it, had been (and still was) an exceedingly popular play on the London stage, and belonged to the Admiral's Men, the rival company to Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's Jew would, therefore, inevitably be compared with Marlowe's, and Shakespeare would have striven to the utmost to excel his predecessor. What kind of character, then, was the Barabas of Marlowe? He was, like all Marlowe's heroes, 'conceived of on a gigantic scale ... a very terrible and powerful alien, endowed with all the resources of wealth and unencumbered by any Christian scruples' [H. S. Bennett in his introduction to *The Jew of Malta*]. Is it likely that Shakespeare would have set up a ludicrous Shylock to outbid this Barabas? Surely he would have desired, especially with [Richard] Burbadge at his elbow also desiring to outdo Edward Alleyn, to create a figure equally terrible, but human and convincing at the same time, which Marlowe's Jew never succeeds in being?

(iii) And my third reason is that a ridiculous villain is un-Shakespearian. Can you find such a villain in any other of his plays? Is Iago, or Macbeth, or Edmund [in *King Lear*], or even Richard III in this sense comical? But these, it may be said, come from the tragedies, and therefore do not count. Very well, where in the comedies is he to be seen? There are plenty of such villains in Ben Jonson. The Jonsonian comedies are full of them; they are his chief stock-in-trade. Indeed, that is one of the main differences between his conception of comedy and Shakespeare's. Villainy is never comic with Shakespeare; and Shylock is not to be fitted into the formulae of Bergson or George Meredith. He does not belong to what is called 'pure comedy' at all.

Yet, if he is not comical, he is not a mere villain of melodrama like Barabas either. He is a 'tragic' villain, i.e. he is so represented that we feel him to be a man, a terrible and gigantic man enough, but with 'hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions—fed with the same food, hurt by 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' [III. i. 59-64]. Shylock is a far greater character than Barabas, not because he is less blood-thirsty—his lust for blood is more awful because more convincing—but because he is one of ourselves. And, as he goes out, what we ought to exclaim is not (with Heine's fair Briton), 'The man is wronged', but 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'. (pp. 97-108)

It is, of course, just this common humanity, which Shakespeare brings out and insists upon in stroke after stroke, that the Christians of Venice deny (like the Nazis of modern Germany). And if Shylock is a villain, an awful and appalling human being, who made him such? People like Antonio. Antonio, we are told by one of his friends, is the perfect Christian gentleman,

The kindest man,
The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies;
[III. ii. 292-94]

yet, when the Jew reminds him

You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine ...  
You that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur.
[I. iii. 111-12, 117-18]

he raps out:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
But Shakespeare, we are told, shared the prejudices of his age against Jews; he would himself have applauded Antonio's action, might even have imitated it. Shylock excites our modern sympathies because Shakespeare allowed his imagination to run away with him. The humanity of the Jew was an unconscious by-product of his dramatic genius.

For myself, I think we have heard more than enough of the vegetable Shakespeare, of the impersonal, almost witless, imaginative growth, exfoliating plays and poems without premeditation or reflection, as a gourd-vine produces pumpkins. No doubt, as with all the great novelists and poets, once the theme seized upon him, it was liable to take him in charge, so that he could never tell at the beginning exactly how a play might work out. Yet, as he fell under the spell, he must have retained consciousness of his direction, and when all was done, he surely, if he had a mind at all, saw his achievement as a whole and assessed it at its proper worth. Shylock may have taken him to some extent by surprise, but Shylock was the child of his imagination and his intellect, and it seems to me absurd to suppose that the sympathies of such a father can have been wholly on the side of the spitting Antonio. (pp. 108-10)

The Jew is allowed no defendant in the court to plead for him as a fellow human being and a defenceless alien. There is no one to speak for him except himself... I have no doubt at all that Shylock was intended by Shakespeare to be a comment upon the treatment of Jewry throughout the Christian dispensation.

Why does he not say so? Why did he not even, as Q says he should, oppose to the cruelty of Shylock, clemency, charity, and specifically Christian charity?... Would he not depict the ferocious assassin in all his dire ferocity, and yet contrive to imply, for those who had ears to hear, that there was another side to the question?

This is no rhetorical flourish. The actual position of Shakespeare when he wrote *The Merchant* was not unlike that I depict in imagination. Shortly before the play was first staged, the London crowds, from whom he drew his audience, had watched in their thousands, and with howls of gleeful execration, a venerable old Hebrew, Dr. Lopez, falsely accused of attempting to poison the Queen, done to death with the hideous ritual of hanging and disembowelling before their blood-lustful eyes. There is even I believe an allusion to the event in the play itself. You remember that strange image which Shakespeare places in the railing mouth of Gratiano:

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thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf, who hanged for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest In thy unhallowed dam.
Infused Itself in thee.
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[IV. I. 133-37]

What does it mean? A wolf hanged for human slaughter, who ever heard of such a thing? This wolf was no quadruped, it was a Jewish animal, in other words it was Lopez himself, who is commonly called Lopus or Lupus in the literature of the time.

And there was still more involved. Not only would the groundlings in the audience at the play be inflamed with anti-Semitism at the time, the great ones who might be found among the judicious spectators were in a like mood. Lopez had unhappily incurred the hatred of the all-powerful Earl of Essex, who was the main instrument in bringing him to the gallows; and the earl's bosom friend was another young lord, the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's own patron and in all likelihood his intimate.
Such were the perilous circumstances in which the compassionate Shakespeare was compelled to write his Jew play. I say compelled, for the rival company to his own had revived Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* for the occasion, and were drawing large houses, while his friends at court would doubtless look to him for a Jew-baiting spectacle in the theatre. Well, he gave them what they asked, he gave them an appalling Shylock and the coarse-grained storm-trooper Gratiano to express their sentiments about him; he even represents the best man in the story, spurning him like a dog and bespitting him—would not his friends the earls have done the same?

But he did more, by making Shylock a suffering human being, he revealed 'the mountanish inhumanity' of the behaviour of Christians towards the Hebrew race, and in the speech on Mercy, at the very centre and climax of the play, he revealed his own standpoint. Portia's speech, one of the greatest sermons in all literature, an expression of religious thought worthy to set beside St. Paul's hymn in praise of Love, is of course addressed to the Jew. It is for Jews alone. The very fact that it is based throughout upon the Lord's Prayer, which would mean nothing to a Hebrew, suggests that it was composed to knock at Christian hearts.

When Q accuses Shakespeare of not setting up the ideal of 'clemency, charity and specifically Christian charity', to oppose that of Cruelty and Revenge, he strangely forgets 'the quality of Mercy' [IV. i. 184]. And Shylock, as I have said, is let off very lightly. He loses the money he had made by usury—that was only right and proper. He is compelled to become a Christian—that was only an enforced benefit. But he was not hanged, drawn and quartered as Dr. Lopez was—much to Gratiano's disgust. Shylock is a terrible old man. But he is the inevitable product of centuries of racial persecution.

Shakespeare does not draw this moral. He merely exposes the situation. He is neither for nor against Shylock. Shakespeare never takes sides. Yet surely if he were alive today he would see in Mercy, mercy in the widest sense, which embraces understanding and forgiveness, the only possible solution of our racial hatreds and enmities.

**Belmont**

But the exit of Shylock is not the end of the play. The cloud which had been gathering since the opening scene and looked so black for Antonio, instead of breaking, passes over, leaving him unharmed and even the villain himself with only a light punishment. And so the tension is relaxed for the audience. The trial is followed by an amusing interview between the disguised women and their lovers, together with the surrender of the rings, which promises further fun to come.

Is the incident ... too trivial, too light to counterbalance the stress of emotion from which we have just emerged? Only if our sympathies have been with Shylock the man, rather than Jewry; and as I said, we misapprehend Shakespeare the dramatist if they are. Certainly, Shakespeare knew that the audience for which he wrote would have no sympathy with Shylock; and it is just because he knew that, that he could afford to exhibit his humanity.

Yet the crisis of the trial scene was unusually serious for a comedy. That he knew also; and realized that all his efforts would be needed to send his spectators home in the mood he wished to leave with them. And so, we have the scene at Belmont—the gayest, happiest, most blessed scene in all Shakespeare. Suddenly we are caught away from Venice, from its scorns, its hatreds and revenges, and transported to a world of magic in which men and women live like gods, without care, without toil, without folly, and without strife—except such folly and strife as lovers use one with another. Belmont is not heaven, because there is much talk of marrying and giving in marriage, and withal a roguish touch of [Giovanni] Boccaccio now and again. Rather it is Elysium, a Renaissance Elysium, a garden full of music under the soft Italian night, with a gracious and stately mansion in the background.
Shakespeare paints the scene with all his wonderful artistry. Observe, for instance, the part the moon plays in it, how she rides in and out of the shifting clouds as the action goes forward—at one moment it is bright as day, at the next

The moon sleeps with Endymion
[V. i. 109]

so that Lorenzo cannot see Portia's face.

Music and the moon are the twin themes of this final movement:

Sweet soul, let's in, and there expect their coming.
And yet no matter: why should we go in?
My friend Stephano, signify, I pray you,
Within the house, your mistress is at hand,
And bring your music forth into the air. . . .
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears—soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony ... 
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls!
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it ...
[cf. V. i. 49-65]

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted ...
Mark the music.
[cf. V. i. 83-7]

After Mercy—Harmony!

Grossly closed in by our muddy vesture of decay, it is difficult—perhaps impossible—for us poor mortals to hear it, and missing it we, Jew or Christian, grow 'fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils', and our 'affections dark as Erebus', the Erebus which Shylock and Jew-baiter alike inherit; but the music is there all the while.

Some day, one blessed day we shall not live to see, perhaps the world may come to Belmont and be moved not with internecine hatred and racial scorn, but 'with concord of sweet sounds'.

And if there be any reader to ask what connexion there can be between music and politics, between our woeful discords and the touches of sweet harmony', I do not need to refer him to the Republic of Plato, but to a disciple of Plato who had never read his book. I mean Shakespeare himself, who in Henry VIII. ii. 180-83] tells us that
government, though high and low, and lower,
Put into parts, doth keep in one consent,
Congreeng in a full and natural close,
Like music.

Is the world capable of such music? That is the political problem of our time and, if we cannot solve it, he prophesies in *Troilus and Cressida*, I. ill. 110-24:

Hark, what discord follows! ...
Force should be right; or rather right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Thus everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself
(pp. 112-17)

The prophecy seems nearer fulfilment in 1962 than it did in 1938.

The impending dissolution of the universe ... was never far from the mind of Shakespeare and his contemporaries; and Prospero supplies a calmer because more contemplative account of it in his famous epilogue after the masque in *The Tempest*. The Prospero, however, who gave us the vision he called *The Merchant of Venice* had no wish to trouble us at Belmont with thoughts of doomsday or any apocalyptic imaginings. And even our memories of cruel Venice begin to fade when we hear Lancelot winding his mock postman's horn in and out among the trees to announce to Lorenzo and Jessica and to us, the audience, that the travellers are about to return home. And presently, when we return home, or shut our books, the characters themselves begin to fade and melt into thin air, as we realize that Bassanio the young lover, his bosom friend Antonio, Portia the great lady and learned judge, yes, even the fierce Jew himself, rushing with uplifted knife upon his victim—all are spirits, the creatures of dramatic art.

Yet if we are to go home happy, the characters, all but Shylock, must first of all be given happiness. How was this to be accomplished for Antonio, who though saved from the knife was still a ruined merchant? It was Portia who saved him; it was given to her to restore his fortune. But mark how she does it,

Antonio, you are welcome,
And I have better news in store for you
Than you expect; unseal this letter soon,
There you shall find three of your argosies
Are richly come to harbour suddenly.
You shall not know by what strange accident
I chanced on this letter.
(V. i. 273-78)

That three of Antonio's argosies should be 'richly come to harbour suddenly' would be unbelievable if Shakespeare had allowed us a moment to ponder it, yet not more difficult of credence than the 'strange accident' by which Portia chanced upon the letter that told it. It is all a little piece of Shakespearian legerdemain ... (pp. 117-18)
And while all this has been passing, the moon has sunk and every thicket around Belmont has begun to thrill and sing of dawn. Portia lifts a hand:

   It is almost morning.
   Let us go in.
   [cf. V. i. 295-97]

And so the comedy comes home. 'Pack, clouds away! and welcome, day!' [Thomas Heywood, Pack, Clouds, Away]. (p. 118)


**Criticism: Shylock**

**Bernard Grebanier**

Grebanier examines the five scenes in which Shylock appears in The Merchant of Venice in an attempt to determine the nature of his character. In essence, the critic finds Shylock's desire for vengeance against Antonio motivated by the merchant's lending money interest-free, lessening Shylock's customers, and hence, his profits. Further, Shylock hates Antonio because, according to the Jew, the merchant has repeatedly denigrated his race and religion. Grebanier points out, however, that in keeping with his virtuous character Antonio probably did not belittle Judaism, rather Shylock himself, an issue the usurer confused with racial discrimination.

These are the forces at work in The Merchant of Venice: the bountiful grace and liberality of Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, and their friends, who are determined that money shall be a prop to those enrichments of life, not the death of them; and the suppression of all grace and liberality on the part of Shylock, who is convinced that money by itself is the only measurement of joy in life. (p. 184)

But Shakespeare could not know that the world would choose, of the two paths open to it, the one in which money became the destroyer of love and friendship. Only Shylock, in his play, prefers that road. Shylock is isolated from love and friendship, and insulated against them, because he has nothing of himself to spare for them. Whatever affections he owns are expended upon the accumulation of money and the making of money from money. He bullies his daughter and starves his servant. Shakespeare, never the creator to put the case weakly, makes this greed for money all the more deplorable in that Shylock is a man of no mediocre qualities. He has dignity, strength, purposefulness, tenacity, courage, an excellent mind, a cuttingly wry sense of humor. It is a great injustice to the man Shakespeare has depicted to imagine him "servile and repulsive," "fawning" or "sneaking and underhanded"—as many commentators and actors have depicted him. It is an equally grave injustice to him to conceive him, as so many others have done, as suffering from racial persecution. He is too strong-minded, too conscious of personal dignity for that. It is he who looks down upon the Christians, not they on him. He stands on too much of an eminence to feel persecuted, and he who does not feel persecuted, is not persecuted. Shakespeare has so presented him that we are bound to feel the great waste that such a man, framed for noble ends, should be debased by his ruling greed. Without the disease of greed, it is easy to imagine Shylock as walking like a king among men. But this one, terrible obsession channels all his best traits into the service of villainy. And for that he comes to grief in the end. The gods are just, Shakespeare always feels, and of our vices make instruments to plague us.

I am aware that to assert so unconventional an interpretation of Shylock entitles me to no more credence than is to be accorded the time-honored views of him as a pathetic, comic, or conventionally villainous Hebrew, without the proof. The proof is in the play.
Shylock appears in but five scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*. Let us trace what Shakespeare shows us of him, step by step, from the beginning. One of the chief causes of confusion concerning his character comes from the failure of commentators to consider Shylock's speeches in the order in which they occur. If I commence by seizing upon the "Many a time and oft" [I. iii. 106] and "Hath not a Jew eyes?" [III. i. 59] passages, I might convincingly enough make out Shylock to be a tragic representative of his race. On the other hand, if I choose to commence with Gratiano's slurs in the trial scene [IV. i. 364, 379, 398], I might convincingly enough make out Shakespeare's purposes to be anti-Semitic. But if I honestly wish to discover Shakespeare's intentions, I will begin with no preconceptions concerning Shylock's character, and start gauging him from the moment we first meet him in the play. If we are to understand him, we must be patient; we shall be wise to take the advice of the King in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

We first meet Shylock in I. iii. (His name has been said, variously, to be a transliteration of Shalach or Shelach ([Genesis X, 24]), "cormorant," or of Shiloh, the sanctuary of Jehovah ...) Bassanio has already broached the subject of the loan. From the very outset we see the money-lender standing firm and as unyielding as solid rock. Bassanio is edgy, Shylock absolutely non-committal: he may lend the money and then again he may not. In these lines which open the scene, it is Shylock who is in control of the situation:

*SHYLOCK.* Three thousand ducats. Well.
*BASSANIO.* Ay, sir, for three months.
*SHYLOCK.* For three months. Well.
*BASSANIO.* For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
*SHYLOCK.* Antonio shall become bound.
Well.
*BASSANIO.* May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?
*SHYLOCK.* Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
[I. iii. 1-10]

Shakespeare, as ever, is remarkable in his ability to cause us to hear the very tone in which his characters speak: the calm, deliberately unemotional voice of Shylock, giving not the slightest intimation of his intentions, and the nervous, high-strung anxiety of Bassanio. Nor does Shylock do anything to make Bassanio more comfortable: he is enjoying too much keeping him dangling:

*BASSANIO.* Your answer to that.
*SHYLOCK.* Antonio is a good man.
[I. iii. 11-12]

There is something in his voice so arrogant that Bassanio hotly demands:

Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
[I. iii. 13]

To which Shylock rejoins, with the loftiness of an adult quieting a child:

Ho, no, no, no, no!
My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.
And then he begins to enumerate the risks, with the precision and carefulness of the man who is used to counting every penny—the risks of ships, seas, human fallibility, pirates, winds, rocks; and ends, once more without in any way hinting that he will oblige:

The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient.
Three thousand ducats; I think I may take his bond.

That he deliberately stresses the "may" to embarrass Bassanio further is proved by the latter's next line:

Be assured you may.

Which only calls forth a further piece of haughtiness from Shylock:

I will be assured I may, and that I may be assured, I will bethink me.

In other words, Don't try to rush me; I mean to think this over.

We have progressed only 30 lines from his first appearance, and it is already too late for us ever to expect a cringing, fawning, imposed-upon Shylock. Whatever we hear him say later, we are bound to interpret in terms of the Shylock we already know.

It is now that Bassanio invites him to meet Antonio over dinner, and that he replies haughtily in words that have been so much and so blindly overinterpreted: he will not go to smell pork.

These certainly sound like the words of a pious Jew. But how seriously are we to take them? Presently we shall learn that he does indeed go to eat and drink with the Christians, and for reasons which do him no credit. Since he has no intention of refusing the invitation, how are we to take his words? In the same spirit as everything else he has thus far said: to make Bassanio uncomfortable.

Here Shylock expresses his burning hatred for Antonio for the first time. He would like to pretend to himself that that hatred is based upon lofty, religious grounds. But the truth will out in spite of him:
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
[I. iii. 42-7]

(How, after these words, is it possible to construe, as some critics have amiably done, the bond later proposed as really offered in the spirit of friendship?)

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!
[I. iii. 48-52]

I have italicized the pertinent passages to show that underneath all his pretenses to himself, it is only Antonio's disdain of interest which rankles. Shakespeare is here, as always, fascinating in his psychological presentation.

See how Shylock twists and turns, trying to posture to himself as indignant on grounds purely impersonal and larger. Antonio, according to him, hates the Jews. How does he show it? Not by railing against them but by railing against Shylock. What does he rail against Shylock for? His religion? No. For his taking of exorbitant interest—and, at that, where other merchants can hear. All this Shylock chooses to construe as an insult to all the Jews, and on those grounds he vows vengeance. But, for all that, the real basis for his fury has revealed itself. A perfect example of an all-too-human self-justification.

It is part of Shakespeare's profundity that Shylock should not accurately know himself. What miser ever faced the truth about himself, or failed to call his penuriousness by some better-sounding name like thrift or self-restraint? That is why the greed of a Jonsonian miser is not really credible, and Shylock's is. This inability to face what he really is will make itself dramatically vocal when we meet him for the last time, in the trial scene.

Now Shylock forces Bassanio to press him again for an answer, pretends still to be mulling over the loan, and then feigns seeing Antonio for the first time—Ah, how do you do? We were just talking about you. ("Your worship was the last man in our mouths" [I. iii. 60].) Still the condescending Shylock.

Up to this point in the play Antonio, when we have met him, has had nothing to say about Shylock. It is in this scene that we are first given to know how he feels about the money-lender. He speaks to him coldly; this is merely a business matter, and he is quite prepared to pay the interest he disapproves of, since Shylock, of course, will ask for it. His voice is neither friendly nor hostile; Shylock, in responding, lines his words with irony:

\[\text{ANTONIO. Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow} \]
\[\text{By taking nor by giving of excess,} \]
\[\text{Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,} \]
\[\text{I'll break a custom, (to Bass.) Is he yet possess'd} \]
\[\text{How much ye would?} \]
\[\text{SHYLOCK. Ay, ay, three thousand ducats.} \]
\[\text{ANTONIO. And for three months.} \]
\[\text{SHYLOCK. I had forgot; three months; you told me so.} \]
[II. iii. 61-5]
But he still refuses to indicate whether or not he will lend the money. Moreover, this is too good an opportunity to miss. I thought, says he, you make it a practice never to ask or give interest on a loan? I never do, Antonio replies.

Now that he has Antonio at a disadvantage, Shylock cannot let slip the occasion to justify the taking of interest. By citing the enterprise of Jacob while serving Laban, he attempts to confute the Aristotelian argument that money, being inanimate, is put to unnatural uses when it is employed only to multiply itself. Again Shylock demonstrates the characteristic precision of his mind: This Jacob was the third in line from Abraham—let's see, wasn't he? Yes, he was the third. Antonio, knowing his man, cuts in: Did Jacob take interest? Shylock does not like such a forthright question:

No, not take interest, not, as you would say, Directly interest.  
[I. iii. 76-7]

But Jacob was not above a little trickery to insure his own welfare; it was a way to profit, and profit is a blessing when it isn't stolen. Antonio blasts through the sophistry: was the Scriptural passage written to justify the taking of interest,

Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?  
[I. iii. 95]

Shylock answers him and Aristotle wryly:

I cannot tell; I make it breed as fast.  
[I. iii. 96]

Antonio seems well aware that Shylock is a religious hypocrite; in disgust he observes that the Devil knows how to cite Scripture for his purpose:

O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!  
[I. iii. 102]

Unperturbed, Shylock goes back to considering the loan. No hint from him whether it is to be granted. No, not yet—let them wait. Thus, Antonio is compelled to ask again: Will you lend this money? It is here that Shylock delivers one of his celebrated speeches. It is odd that despite its fame, it has never been seen to reveal Shakespeare's psychological cunning.

Shylock has intimated nothing of his intentions concerning the ducats asked for. First he must make Antonio—him who condemns interest—smart, now that he comes asking for a loan. So, for the hated one's benefit, Shylock cloaks himself in the dignity of race. But again, in despite of himself, he reveals that he is not complaining of persecution, only justifying his taking of interest. Many a time and oft Antonio has berated him on the Rialto (where merchants most do congregate!)—about what? His religion? No:

About my moneys and my usances.  
[I. iii. 108]

But this Shylock deliberately confuses as though it were an insult to all Jews:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,  
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
We may well imagine that Antonio, no fool, is experiencing a queasiness at this smug sanctimoniousness. Shylock, thoroughly enjoying himself at the others' discomfort, now accuses Antonio of having spat upon his "Jewish" gaberdine. For what? His religion? No, despite his intention of capitalizing on the persecution of the Jews, Shylock finds himself saying:

And all for use of that which is mine own.
[I. iii. 113]

It is the need of justifying his greed which rankles in him. And having a first-rate intelligence and great powers of expression, he hurls at his enemy one of the loftiest pieces of sarcasm ever penned:

Well, then, it now 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 bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this:
"Fair sir, you spat 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"?
[I. iii. 114-29]

The indignation is superb, and it is a callous audience that will fail to be overwhelmed by it. But coming after what has preceded it, it can have but one purpose in Shylock's mind. He has been doing his best to make Bassanio and Antonio squirm. This speech is his crowning effort to humiliate them.

But at this point we have a difficulty. He has charged Antonio with spitting upon him because of his taking interest. Scholars have hastened to ascribe to that contemptuous and contemptible behavior of Antonio the cause of Shylock's hatred. Yet, when we shall presently consider Antonio's character traits, we shall find nothing in his behavior which could possibly be consonant with such conduct. He is at every point a gentle, mild, loving, and modest man. Nowhere up to the very trial scene (Act IV) does he ever say a single thing that is vaguely anti-Semitic about Shylock—not even after he has been taken into custody and his life is in peril. It will not do to say that Antonio's spitting upon Shylock would in that age have been no blot upon his character. That explanation would do very well for a rather vulgar man like Gratiano. Shakespeare proves himself in the play totally alien to bigotry: why should he not have made his hero above it? (pp. 189-93)

Of the world's dramatists, no one believed more firmly than Shakespeare in having characters reveal themselves by what they do. For instance, in the scene we have been examining, the salient fact about Shylock is that he has kept Antonio and Bassanio in suspense, has done all he could to aggravate their embarrassment in having to come to him for a loan, and has refused to alleviate their discomfort by even a hint that he might lend the money. This, as far as we have progressed in it, is the basic action of the scene. Now Shylock has said that Antonio has spit upon him. But if we were asked to believe that this is the truth, it would be Shakespeare's
practice to show us Antonio conducting himself elsewhere in the play in a manner consistent with such an act. (p. 194)

Now, since we nowhere see Antonio behaving in a way that would make it possible for us to think of him as spitting on anyone, is it not possible that Shylock is making the charge against him—just as Iago makes his charge against Othello—without really believing a word of it, only to erect a false justification for himself, and, most of all, because he gauges that Antonio's pride will not permit the merchant to defend himself?

If, for the sake of argument, we grant that this is indeed the case—if Antonio is aware of what Shylock is up to, trying further to annoy him—should we expect Antonio to deny hotly, "When did I ever spit on you?" If your enemy approached you and accused you of committing incest with your sister, and you were, moreover, an only child, would you be behaving with any dignity to exclaim, outraged, "Why I haven't got a sister!" Would it not be more consonant with manly pride to answer coolly, "With which sister do you mean?"

It is in a similar spirit that I understand Antonio's making response to the charge. At the moment he is revolted at Shylock's attempts to ennable the taking of interest; he is disgusted at being kept dangling—after all, he and Bassanio have not come to ask a favor but to engage in a distasteful commercial transaction. We may be sure that if this loan were for his own needs, not his friend's, he would have turned on his heel before this. Instead, he masters his ire, and answers coldly and with unconcealed contempt for Shylock's brazen hypocrisy: Very well, I'll do the same things all over again; for we are not talking as friends; we ask for a loan at your usual rates; when did a friend ever ask interest for a loan?

I am as like to call thee so again,  
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.  
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not  
As to thy Mends; for when did friendship take  
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
[I. iii. 130-34]

There is no point, Antonio is implying, in your talking to me as though we were meeting as intimates. Your attitude toward taking interest makes this purely a matter of business: let's keep it on that level.

But lend it rather to thine enemy,  
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face  
Exact the penalty.  
[I. iii. 135-37]

Shylock is satisfied that he has pushed Antonio to the limits of annoyance, and so his tone swiftly changes: But why do you take on so? I'm perfectly willing to be your friend, lend you the money, and not take a cent of interest. My offer is kind. (Up to this moment he has made no offer!)

Bassanio who, though silent, has necessarily been more upset by the talk than Antonio could be, since he is the cause of it all, with relief cries, "This were kindness" [I. iii. 143].

And now Shakespeare comes to the knottiest problem in the plot ... Stipulating for the illusion of flesh-and-blood reality in his plays, how was he to make it credible that Antonio would sign a bond which places his life in jeopardy? His solution was brilliant. Some sort of consideration will be necessary to make the contract legal. Shylock refuses any financial security, since he is acting as a friend. Well then, let us mention as the consideration something absolutely absurd, just to show my complete confidence in your word. Let us make it something as ludicrous as, say, a pound of your flesh. What is important in this speech is that the bond is framed "in a merry sport" [I. iii. 145], as he puts it. (pp. 194-96)
Innocently Antonio accepts the terms as framed in a merry sport, and is ready to believe that Shylock desires to be friendly. He considers the offer very decent of Shylock ("there is much kindness in the Jew" [I. iii. 153]). Naturally, Bassanio, oversensitive because of his role in this affair, expresses alarm. But Antonio reassures him: No need for alarm; my ships come back laden a good month before the money is due. Shylock, gleeful at the success of his ruse, feigns shock at Bassanio's suspicions in a tone which is anything but humble: What creatures these Christians are, who judge others by their own unfeeling ways! Tell me, what should I do with a pound of his flesh, if I seriously hoped to have it? (With mixed insolence and ever-present greed) he says further: a pound of man's flesh

> Is not so estimable, profitable neither,  
> As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.  
> [I. iii. 166-67]

I'm willing to act like his friend: let him take the offer or leave it. But in all fairness, don't do me the injustice of ascribing sordid motives to what I am willing to do generously.

Antonio is unworried, and Shylock once more emphasizes that this is to be a "merry bond." Antonio's farewell acknowledges that Shylock's behavior is princely:

> Hie thee, gentle Jew.  
> [I. iii. 177]

Before we meet Shylock again, we learn interesting things about him. His household is a joyless one, and he wishes it to be so. Launcelot Gobbo, his poor idiot of a servant, is becoming skin and bones from starvation. This amiable halfwit is the only companion Shylock's daughter is permitted to have; at the prospect of his leaving Shylock's employ she is unhappy:

> I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so.  
> *Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil,*  
> Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness.  
> [II. iii. 1-3]

That she does not exaggerate will be evident enough in a scene which shortly follows. But apparently the little pleasure she can have in talking to Launcelot must be snatched in secret too. She cuts short their conversation with:

> And so farewell. I would not have my father  
> See me in talk with thee.  
> [II. iii. 8-9]

In a handful of lines Shakespeare has vividly sketched the gloomy and prison-like atmosphere of Shylock's home.

Jessica turns out to be something less than an ideal daughter, satisfactory as she is in her devotion to Lorenzo. But there is no reason why she should love her father. It is clear from the outset that she has never known tenderness or love from him. (pp. 196-97)

The next time we meet Shylock [II. v] he is before his house. He assures poor Launcelot, him whose ribs are showing from hunger, that he will not be able to gobble up everything in sight at Bassanio's, as he has done at Shylock's household. (In Shylock's diseased mind every scrap of bread is begrudged his servant.) Shylock is about to go to Bassanio's for dinner. The very invitation shows that Antonio and Bassanio are ready to accept
his proffered friendship. And Shylock means to go, despite his earlier high-sounding talk about not eating with Christians. His reason for going? The more he eats of Bassanio's feast, the less Bassanio will have. ("I'll go in hate to feed upon the prodigal Christian" [II. v. 14-15].) How well Shakespeare understood every aberration of human nature! Though extreme, Shylock's point of view is of one piece with his embracing the philosophy of cut-throat competition: the less others have, the richer he himself can feel.

But he has a premonition of something unpleasant in the stars: he dreamt last night of money-bags, and is "right loath to go" [II. v. 16]. Launcelot, appropriating the lofty airs that he feels are owing to his new uniform, says grandly, misusing "reproach" for "approach":

I beseech you, sir, go. My young master doth expect your reproach.
[II. v. 19-20]

Shylock seizes upon the malapropism, and retorts with concentrated malice masked as wry humor:

So do I his.
[II. v. 21]

This quibble is like a sword-thrust: it should be enough to raise goose flesh. It means only one thing: Shylock has every intention of collecting the pound of flesh, and has a plan for making sure he will have it.

Now foolish Launcelot emits what is meant to be a hint to Jessica, but might easily have prevented her intended elopement if Shylock had had any notion of it: there's going to be a masque tonight. At the very mention of purposed merriment, Shylock's hatred of all that is delightful and gay is aroused:

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica. Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife, Clamber not you up to the casements then, Nor thrust your head into the public street To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces, But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements. Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter My sober house.
[II. v. 28-36]

He has no use for music. He does not want even the echo of it to penetrate his house. Obviously Shakespeare will later mean us to take quite seriously Lorenzo's dictum:

The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils ... Let no such man be trusted.
[IV. i. 83-8]

It certainly applies to Shylock. And luckless Jessica! She is not to dare watch the fun in the streets by looking out the window or even from behind it. Her eyes and ears are to be sealed against the most innocent pleasure. Small wonder that she will leave her father's house without regret.
Launcelot goes off, and Shylock reflects that he is glad to be rid of such a huge feeder (poor, starved Launcelot!); he is, moreover, delighted to think of how he will now help to waste Bassanio's substance. Then, before he himself departs, he threatens Jessica: she had better obey every article of his commands:

Perhaps I will return immediately.
[II. v. 52]

Clearly her life under her father's roof is an endless series of commands and warnings against disobedience—not the sort of existence to evoke love or even duty.

This scene demonstrates how far from the point those stray who insist that it is only Jessica's elopement which turns a benevolent Shylock into a hating one. She has not yet eloped, and we have seen him full of malevolence against Bassanio and Antonio, most of all in that blood-chilling "So do I his." (pp. 199-201)

Before we meet Shylock again ..., the elopement has taken place. I suspect that neither the dramatist nor his audience understood her taking money and jewels with her to be conduct as heinous as modern interpreters have construed it. Her life with Shylock has been a stunted one; what she has appropriated has not left him impoverished. Even today Europeans generally expect that when a girl of means is married, her father will provide a suitable dowry. It is more than likely that we were intended to feel that Jessica has done little more than take with her the marriage-portion that ought to have been hers. (In the probable source for the Jessica-Lorenzo story ... the girl in that tale also helps herself to her father's possessions when she elopes.)

After the elopement we hear Salario and Salarino discussing the effects of it upon Shylock. Their picture of his running through the streets shrieking

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,
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.
[II. viii. 15-22]

is deliberately grotesque. But it has some of the ring of truth in it too. The emphasis upon the ducats and the stones sounds like the Shylock we know. Likewise does his wish, not so much to have his daughter back for herself, but to find her so that he can retrieve his ducats and his jewels.

In the scene in which we next meet Shylock [III. i], there is more talk of ships wrecked at sea and the possibility that they could be Antonio's (the talk began in II. viii. 25-32). Shylock comes in, and he is in a terrible rage:

You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight,
[III. i. 24-5]

he storms at Salanio and Salarino. The latter tries to moderate Shylock's fury: Shylock must have been aware that Jessica was of an age to think of marriage. But he will not be mollified:
My own flesh and blood to rebel!
[III. i. 34]

Salarino denies that Jessica is a replica of her father, and does so in language that exonerates him from any charge of anti-Semitism:

There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and rhenish.
[II. i. 39-42]

He changes the subject to ask whether Shylock has heard anything of Antonio's ships. The question but adds fuel to Shylock's passion:

There I have another bad match. A bankrupt a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar, that was us'd to come so smug upon the mart; let him look to his bond ... He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to his bond.
[III. i. 44-50]

In wine and in wrath the truth will out. Shylock's list of Antonio's offenses this time significantly omits any reference to spitting on Jewish gaberlines or to insults against the Jews. No, in his fury it does not occur to him to mask the real sources of his fury: Antonio's elegant appearance, Antonio's wasting of money, Antonio's lending money without interest. These are the crimes for which he hates the merchant.

When Salarino asks of what use the forfeiture could be to Shylock, Shylock responds in a way that again is a tribute to Shakespeare's psychological insight. Now that he has been called on to state his grievances, Shylock once more tries to pass off the reasons for his thirst for revenge as better than they are. But, in spite of his tone of injured innocence, he reveals that it is only matters of money which cause his hatred:

He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laugn'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains ...
[III. i. 54ff.]

The reference to his "nation" is almost parenthetical—as though he had thought of something that must be slipped in to justify the rest. Again, despite himself, Shylock makes it plain that the only thing Antonio has done to injure him has been to lend out money gratis.

From the indictment he soars into one of the most movingly written orations ever penned:

And what's his reason? 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 humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
As we have already said, the author who composed these lines must of necessity have stood far above all possibility of nurturing anti-Semitic feelings—else how could he have conceived the passage? It is noble, manly, superbly convincing. But when we have recovered from the power of its appeal (which Shylock fully intended to be powerful) and ask ourselves why Shylock has said all this and why just now, we are forced to realize that it is all an elaborate piece of self-justification for villainy intended. His accusations of injustices visited upon the Jews by Christians in general are meant by implication to apply to Antonio in particular, even though we have not seen Antonio wrongdoing anyone or revenging himself on anyone. By the very force of his eloquence Shylock is convincing himself (and has convinced many critics!) that he proposes to take reprisals for the persecutions of his people.

Antonio's friends leave, Tubal comes in, and we are witnesses to a wonderfully written scene. Tubal has just arrived from Genoa; he has often heard of Jessica but did not encounter her. Shakespeare now fortifies our previous knowledge of Shylock's inner drive. Shylock is talking to an intimate (we cannot think of his having a true friend, nor does Tubal behave like one), and he speaks without pretense:

Why, there, there, there, there! A diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! The curse never fell upon our nation till now. I never felt it till now.

At last the whole truth. Shylock has never felt hurt before. But any wrong to him is a wrong to all Jews. What are the injustices meted out to his co-religionists compared with the loss of two thousand ducats by him? He goes on, and his diseased passion for accumulation vents itself with increasing violence:

Two thousand ducats in that; and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the Jewels in her ear! Would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!

These shocking sentiments are scarcely in harmony with the long-suffering and loving paterfamilias of the sentimental school of critics. They are among the most horrifying sentences in literature. Confronted with them even the critic who finds Shylock molto simpatico [very likable] would be compelled to admit that it is not that he loved Jessica less but loves his ducats more. And he continues to lament his losses—though surely the bulk of his vast hoard has remained untouched:

No news of them? Why so? And I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! the thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief ...

Not a word about missing his beloved daughter, but much on the subject of missing his ducats. And why is it, he cries, that I am the only man to have all this misfortune? Tubal raises his spirits by beginning to say that he has heard in Genoa of Antonio's ill luck. Eagerly Shylock demands to know more. Yes, Tubal says, Antonio is said to have lost a fleet coming from Tripolis. "I thank God, I thank God!" Shylock cries with exaltation. He
laughs with delight:

    Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Here in Genoa!

[III. i. 105-07]
(pp. 201-05)

Unless we are willing to conceive that Shylock originally suggested taking a pound of Antonio's flesh purely as a gesture of friendship—an interpretation in violence with his first soliloquy and everything he had been thinking before Jessica ever eloped—we must surely feel that a man of his particular purposefulness would never have stipulated for such terms if he had merely hoped or had left it to chance to bring Antonio within his power. At the time the bond was signed, there was not even a wisp of doubt that Antonio could comfortably repay the money long before it was due ... [There] is something terribly ominous about Shylock's turning Launcelot's malapropism. "My young master doth expect your reproach" [II. v. 19-20], with a wry, "So do I his" [II. v. 21]. Nobody ever depended less than Shakespeare upon accident for dramatic effect. His leading characters are always people either of strong will or wilfulness; and his strongest strokes as a storyteller are always closely related to character-traits of the persons involved, not to external, accidental influences. (Even Morocco and Arragon make a choice of the wrong caskets and Bassanio of the right one, because of their own temperaments.) It would be most unlike Shakespearean practice that Shylock, once he has proposed a contract with such terms in it, win power of death over Antonio through the operation of fate.

At the end of the play [V. i. 276-77] it turns out that Antonio's ships have come safely to port richly laden, after all. What has happened to Antonio, then, in the interval between his signing of the bond and Shylock's bringing him to trial?

Obviously, it chanced that nearly all of Antonio's ready money, at the time Bassanio asked for a loan, was invested in his ventures abroad, else there had been no need of borrowing the money from Shylock. What could Shylock do, under these circumstances, to insure his collecting the forfeiture? Only one thing: ruin Antonio's credit. In II. viii. Salarino reported talking with a Frenchman, who had told him of an Italian ship wrecked in the English Channel. Shylock has seized upon this piece of gossip, attributed the loss to Antonio, and broadened it to include the rest of Antonio's ships ... I therefore take his exulting cry, "Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Here in Genoa!" to mean, "So at last! These rumors have at last reached Italy, near home!"

To continue with the scene: Tubal, apparently unable to allow Shylock his moment of joy, cuts in with the information that

    Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard,
in one night four-score ducats.

[III. i. 108-09]

The very thought of which brings Shylock back to his misery over his losses:

    Thou stick'rt a dagger in me, I shall never
see my gold again. Four-score ducats at a
sitting! Four-score ducats!

[III. i. 111-12]

This amusingly inscrutable Tubal continues to play on Shylock as on an instrument: Antonio, he learns from the creditors, is sure to become bankrupt. Once more Shylock rejoices: he is very glad of it; he will plague and torture Antonio. Once more Tubal turns aside Shylock's pleasure:
One of them showed me a ring that he had
of your daughter for a monkey.
[III.i. 118-19]

Shakespeare does not deal in monsters, and he here gives Shylock the one softening touch allotted him in the whole play:

   It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when
   I was a bachelor. I would not have given it
   for a wilderness of monkeys.
   [cf. III. i. 121-23]

It is a wonderfully simple human touch, and it reminds us that Shylock, before he gave in to his passion for accumulating money, was once a human being too. Tubal goes back to Antonio's losses, and Shylock eagerly looks forward to his pound of flesh: to be sure of it he arranges a fortnight in advance that an officer arrest Antonio on the day the bond is due.

In the next scene [III. ii] we are in Belmont, and rejoice to watch Bassanio's choosing the right casket. But he and Portia have barely time to revel in the happy fulfillment of their wishes when news comes from Venice that Antonio's ships have been lost and his credit has been ruined. His friends have managed to get together the money owing, but Shylock refuses to accept it, now that the day of repayment is past. Twenty merchants, the Duke of Venice, and leading citizens have pleaded with him in vain; Shylock refuses to accept anything but his pound of flesh. No one can drive him from his malicious stand that he will have only the forfeiture—which he calls demanding justice.

It takes a little time to get a large sum of money together. No one has seriously expected that Shylock would insist upon the terms of the bond. On but one day after the contract's expiration, we are to suppose, Antonio's friends have approached Shylock with the money, and he has refused them on the technicality of the date. No one, naturally, was prepared that he take such a position, particularly when he is notorious for his love of gold. But Jessica tells the others that she has often heard her father say

   That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
   Than twenty times the value of the sum
   That he did owe him.
   [III. ii. 286-88]

(We do not like Jessica for saying this. On the other hand, we should like her less if she approved of her father's murderous intentions; she has chosen to be human rather than dutiful.)

In the next scene [III. iii] we are back in a street of Venice. Antonio, in the custody of the Gaoler, and Salarino are pleading with Shylock to be merciful. But he will allow them to speak hardly a syllable. He is absolutely intransigent. Now that he has Antonio completely in his power, now would be the time, if there were any truth in his allegations that he has endured indignities at Antonio's hands, to speak them out. With what crushing force could he now hurl at Antonio that business of spitting upon him and kicking him out of doors—if that had been the truth. But it was not the truth; he seems even to have forgotten his inventions. In his adamantine sense of power he does not try to conceal his motives as other than they are:

   Gaoler, look to him; tell not me of mercy,
   This is the fool that lent out money gratis!
   [III. iii. 1-2]
After a few words of scornful abuse, he leaves. Antonio is well aware that Shylock hates him only because he has often rescued people who were in debt to Shylock. He is also fairly convinced that the bond is legally unassailable.

We come now to the great scene of the play, the Trial Scene [IV. i], the last in which Shylock appears. Before Shylock's entry, the point is made again that the Duke has done all he could to urge Shylock to accept the sum of money he advanced and renounce the forfeiture, but without success. The Duke now realizes that the money-lender is

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy.
[IV. i. 4-6]

Shylock comes into court, and the Duke goes out of his way to speak gently and without animosity to him, in the hope of softening his cruelty. We all really believe, he says, that you are only pretending to claim the forfeiture so that at the last minute your mercy and pity will appear all the greater; we expect you not only to renounce the stipulation but also to overlook a portion of the sum due you, considering Antonio's losses; surely you will not behave as only Turks and Tartars do; we all expect a civilized answer to what I ask. But the Duke has underestimated his man. Shylock is like rock, and challenges the city to deny its legal processes.

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats.
[IV. i. 40-2]

This sounds like a prologue (an arrogant and insulting one, to be sure) to a rehearsal of wrongs suffered as Antonio's victim. Now is the time, if ever there was time, for him to justify what he wishes to do, to tell the whole world of his injuries and persecutions. What a triumphant moment for him to do himself justice! But he has nothing to say of the old charges of anti-Semitism. He has nothing to say because they were false.

Moreover, no one has asked him why he chooses a pound of flesh rather than accept three thousand ducats. It is his own intelligence which makes him realize the enormity of his choice in the world's eyes. Perhaps this is the first time he has asked himself the question. Well, and what is his explanation? He has none.

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?
[IV. i. 42-6]

His insolence to the Duke would be astonishing in anyone other than this proud, strong, powerful man, who has never in his life known what it is to fawn or cringe. There is not even a hint of respect for the Duke's authority in what he says, as he continues: Some men can't stand roasted pig, some can't tolerate cats, some can't listen to the sound of bagpipes without becoming ill,

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?
His last line adds sarcasm to his insolence. But again, despite himself, Shylock declares the truth: he can give no reason and therefore will give no reason for wishing to kill Antonio.

Now, it might be asked: If indeed Shylock has so overpowering a greed for money as has been thus far depicted, why has he not accepted the offer of Antonio's friends to pay him a liberal amount in addition to the money he has loaned the merchant? Why will he refuse Portia's offer of thrice the amount of the loan? Why would he rather have, as Jessica has reported, Antonio's flesh than "twenty times" the sum?

The answer to these questions lies in the very nature of hate. The genesis of Shylock's hatred for Antonio was money. But hate is a cancer that grows and feeds on a man until it devours all of him. When hate becomes an obsession, its origin becomes forgotten, and only the hate itself becomes real. (pp. 206-11)

Shylock, eaten up with hate, can really give no reason for desiring Antonio's death. This cancerous hatred, nourished by greed, is all that is left of him.

And here we shall leave Shylock ... Presently he, creature of cold hate and greed, bolstering that hate and greed with a demand for the strict letter of the law, will have to confront his great opponent, Portia, the personification of all he despises in life—generosity, warmth, compassion, and love—Portia, with whom mercy is to be preferred far above mere justice.

In Shakespeare's play generosity, compassion, love, and mercy will triumph, as Shakespeare was convinced that they could and should triumph in life.

They could have triumphed, no doubt. Money need not have poisoned the wellsprings of human existence if Christ's teachings had meant anything to Christians.

Alas! in the course of time it is not Portia and Shakespeare, but Shylock who has won out. Nowadays if a man, pillar of his church, synagogue, or mosque, lends his brother a hundred dollars, he will probably expect him to pay him six per cent interest. "Why shouldn't he pay it to me?" he will say in self-justification, "since he will have to pay as much if he goes to a bank? Business is business."

Yes, most of the world has adopted Shylock's philosophy, which is the philosophy of banks. No one expects compassion from a bank. (pp. 212-13)


Warren D. Smith

[Smith considers Shylock a villain based on his profession as a usurer rather than on his race. He examines Elizabethan beliefs concerning both Jews and usury, maintaining that Shylock is branded a villain because of two important historical facts: first, as a Jew he is an unbeliever in the Christian faith; second, as a usurer he practices an unpopular vocation. Modern anti-Semitism is not present in The Merchant of Venice, Smith continues, and Shylock's evil is inherent by nature of his humanity rather than by his Jewishness. Shylock is merely a miserly evildoer, the critic contends, who uses his faith not only as a veil for his nefarious schemes, but also as an expression of his indignation at being discriminated against. Based on this observation, Smith disputes the conventional reading of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech in Act III, scene i, maintaining that it reflects Shylock's "use of religion as a cloak of villainy."

The common assumption that Shakespeare's Shylock was created to compete with Marlowe's play, The Jew of Malta, in pandering to a wave of anti-Semitism greeting the arraignment and execution for treason in 1594 of
Elizabeth’s Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, becomes untenable upon examination. The evidence seems to indicate that through Shylock Shakespeare is really not satirizing Jews as such but is attempting to depict a usurer, by vocation a villain, who hypocritically conceals his evil designs behind the mask of a religion he himself does not believe in. (p. 193)

Then why did Shakespeare decide to make Shylock a Jew as well as a usurer? Either that the usurer in the source is Jewish or that Shylock as a Jew would be more of a villain is, I believe, only part of the answer. For though [Philip] Stubbes [in his Anatomy] and Thomas Wilson [see J. L. Cardozo's The Contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan Drama] have the grace to condemn usurers as worse than Jews, early in the Middle Ages the Jew became closely associated with the wicked profession of usury in the public mind. And little wonder since usury for Jews was encouraged by both the Church and the State. According to [Joshua] Trachtenberg [in his The Devil and the Jews], in the twelfth century the words Jew and usurer had become almost synonymous. So that a reappraisal of what Shakespeare was attempting to accomplish in his portrayal of Shylock demands that three historical factors be kept in view: (1) that there were no practising Jews in England to be satirized at the time of the composition of The Merchant of Venice and that "New" Christians were as acceptable to Elizabethans as other Christians; (2) that nonetheless a kind of anti-Semitism, purely religious rather than ethnic, based on condemning the Jew as an unbeliever and the slayer of Christ, was an active bias; and (3) that the usurer was by definition a villain in the public mind and the term Jew was frequently made equivalent to usurer. Most pertinent is what ties all three factors together: the interesting fact that in 1290 the Jews were expelled from England, as some Elizabethans should have recalled, on two counts—as unbelievers and as usurers.

Thus on two historical condemnations, as both an unbeliever and a usurer, Shylock is branded a villain upon his first appearance in the play. The pound of flesh episode is merely a demonstration of the innate evil in the man, or, possibly more important, the trap with which to ensnare the inventor. But anti-Semitism as we know it today, prejudice against personal traits called "Jewishness", is not present in the Merchant of Venice. Shylock, in contrast to his daughter (who willingly turns Christian for Lorenzo), is a stubborn infidel; Shylock, again in contrast to his daughter (who on her first appearance gives Launcelot a ducat and is lavish in bestowing her dowry on Lorenzo as well as in giving away a valuable ring for a monkey), is a miser. It is only poetic justice, then, fitting the spirit of comedy, that at the end of his performance the Jew is made to undergo two transformations for the good of his soul: he is converted to Christianity and is forced to give up usury when his wealth is taken from him. Small wonder his name is not mentioned in Act V: since he is no longer a villain, no longer either an unbeliever or a usurer, there is no reason to express animus against him. But it should be emphasized that though the fact that Shylock is a Jew may have been held against him by the Elizabethan audience, throughout the first four acts he is never made the victim of anti-Semitic prejudice by the other major characters in the play. He claims he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian" [I. ill. 42], but his assertion that Antonio mistreats him because "I am a Jew" [III. i. 59] has no foundation in the text. What Shakespeare is really trying to do through Shylock is to depict a character who rationalizes his villainy as a usurer by projecting his own ethnic group prejudice onto the shoulders of his innocent opponents. As Romeo and Juliet condemn the stars for what is actually the evil emanating from the family feud, as Hamlet mistakenly blames his difficulties on the fact that "the time is out of joint" [Hamlet, I. v. 188], as Lear excuses his own inordinate pride by attacking the pride of Cordelia and Kent, so Shylock, though not so innocently, attempts to excuse his own villainy by emphasizing what the Christians in the play do not emphasize, the fact that he is a Jew.

But being a villain, Shylock is not nearly so blind to reality as are the tragic protagonists. On his first entrance he offers the obtrusively weak rationalization of usury as "well-won thrift" [I. ill. 50], calling on what he must have realized was a completely irrelevant analogy from the Bible of Jacob's behavior towards Laban to defend his own nefarious profession. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" [I. iii. 98] is the appropriate remark of Antonio. But though Antonio and Bassanio reveal their awareness of Shylock's real deficiencies in this scene, there is no indication of anti-Semitism. In addressing Shylock Antonio uses a term of respect, "sir"
[I. iii. 91] instead of "sirrah". Bassanio gives Shylock an earnest invitation to supper, which the latter refuses on the spurious ground that he is a devout Jew and therefore will not eat pork. Later he is perfectly willing to "feed upon the prodigal Christian" [II. v. 14-15] despite the ominous dream of money-bags he has experienced the previous night. In the lengthy aside delivered on the entrance of Antonio, Shylock gives the audience what he later refuses to confess to the Duke and Portia in Act IV, the real reasons why he hates Antonio: "for he is a Christian" [I. iii. 42]—"But more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [I. iii. 43-5]. In the court scene we hear of neither of these reasons from Shylock. Instead we are treated to a barrage of rationalizations about the pound of flesh which he seeks from the heart of Antonio: it is Shylock's "humour", nothing more than a "lodg'd hate and a certain loathing /I bear Antonio" [IV. i. 60-1]; what if his house is troubled with a rat and he chooses to give ten thousand ducats to have it banned; if the Venetians will not free their slaves and marry them to their heirs, then Shylock cannot be expected to free Antonio; he has taken an oath in "heaven" to have the pound of flesh; and so on. Not a word is spoken about Antonio's being a Christian nor about the merchant's discouraging habit of lending money without interest.

After the Jacob-Laban controversy between Shylock and Antonio, which is an argument purely about usury with no anti-Semitism entering into it, Shylock again uses his religion as a guise for his villainy. He complains that the Christian merchant has often berated him upon the Rialto and "spot upon my Jewish gaberdine" [I. iii. 112], calling him "misbeliever, cut-throat dog" [I. iii. 111], which leads the Jew to ask defiantly, "Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" [I. iii. 123]. Antonio's rejoinder—"I am as like to call thee so again, / To spot on thee again, to spurn thee too" [I. iii. 130-31]—has frequently been criticized as jarring in its anti-Semitism, But as a representative hero of the times, who himself lends out money gratis, Antonio would be expected by the audience to mistreat a usurer, whether he was also an unbeliever or not. Again, with the plaintive—"For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe" [I. iii. 110]—Shylock uses his religion as a mask, for though sufferance may be typical of the oppressed Jewish people as a whole, it is not a characteristic of the speaker, who at the very moment is plotting vengeance against Antonio. That the vengeance is not really against Antonio's alleged expressions of anti-Semitism but his enmity to usury Shylock slips into admitting, when he says that the merchant has berated him "All for use of that which is mine own" [I. iii. 113], the "All" being a dead giveaway. Antonio is fully alive to the real issue because he says, "If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not / As to thy friends—for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?" [I. iii. 131-33] That Antonio's animus against Shylock has all along been based upon his dislike of usury is demonstrated in the merchant's favorable reaction to the Jew's offer of a loan without interest.

The next time we see Shylock we have already been introduced to his daughter. Though in all previous discussions the dramatic function of Jessica has been hurriedly glossed over, to me a reminder of it is necessary to a clear understanding of what the dramatist is attempting to accomplish. Like another Jew in the play, she is very evidently a foil character to her villainous father. As he is covetous, she is generous; as he is anti-Christian, she is pro-Christian; as he blames his suffering on being a Jew, she blames hers, much more honestly, on Shylock's having made their house a hell. No one in the play holds her being a Jewess against Jessica. Yet commentators have taken Jessica severely to task for stealing her father's ducats and jewels (actually the dowry owed to her) and for eloping with a Christian against her father's will. Surely to an audience who had everything against usurers and nothing against New Christians, her giving the ducats and jewels to her future husband would be, in contrast to the behavior of her miserly father, an act of commendable generosity, and her turning Christian for Lorenzo would be a saving grace. The same audience doubtless experienced keen satisfaction later in the play when her father is forced, under penalty of death, himself to give away all his wealth and to turn Christian. The Christians in Venice treat Jessica as an equal, and Portia and Nerissa in Belmont welcome her as a sister. The dramatist gives her a beautiful poetic scene with Lorenzo to open the final act, and she is treated as one of three heroines at the end of the play. Her presence in the play is ample proof that the plot is not aimed at Jews as such (there were none in England to satirize) but rather at a villainous usurer who hides behind what he calls his religion to carry out his nefarious
schemes.

For though Shylock is perfectly willing to use the Jewish faith as a cloak, he is not presented by the dramatist as a truly religious Jew. Not only does he willingly go to sup with the Christians after having told Bassanio he would not "smell pork" nor "eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into" [I. iii. 33-5], but on one or two other occasions he reveals how little he really reveres the Jewish religion. When he learns from Tubal that Antonio has lost all his argosies, Shylock names the synagogue as the place to plot his vengeance on the undone merchant. He tells his compatriot the truth about why he wants the life of Antonio: "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit; for, were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will" [in. i. 127-30]. In short, the synagogue, the place reserved for holy worship, is to be misused as headquarters for a scheme of vengeful murder concocted to eliminate the chief impediment to Shylock's sinful usury. Later, in the court scene, the Jew blasphemes that "by our holy Sabbath" [cf. IV. i. 36] he has sworn to have Antonio's life though he is more than willing to discard the oath made "in heaven" as soon as he realizes he is in danger of losing his property and his life. Finally, after the elopment of Jessica, Shylock has the nerve to cry out to Tubal: "Why, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankford! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now" [III. i. 83-6]. He rates the centuries of suffering by the Jews below the personal loss of two thousand ducats.

Yet much sympathy has been expended on Shylock for the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech which he delivers in the first scene of Act III [III. i. 59ff.]. Though a few unsentimental commentators have declared the passage to be nothing more than an avowal of vengeance, the majority opinion has sentimentalized it to the exalted plane of an impassioned appeal to humanity, an example of magnificent martyrdom, a moment of tragic pathos, a defense of a whole race, a trenchant appeal for tolerance. If the speech had originally been intended to scale such heights, then surely Shakespeare, in accord with his usual custom, would have cast it in poetic verse rather than in prose. Taking all the other evidence into consideration, I think it evident the passage is meant to be a specious piece of rationalizing on the part of the speaker, possibly the most obtrusive example in the play of the use of religion as a cloak for villainy. That Shylock himself is perfectly aware of the real reason for Antonio's hatred is revealed in the wording of his own introduction to the speech: "He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, ... thwarted my bargains, ... " [III. i. 54-7], yet he has the temerity to add, "and what's his reason? I am a Jew" [III. i. 58]. As Shylock proceeds to point out, of course a Jew has eyes, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions—but, more pertinent, so does a villainous usurer. Certainly a Jew is 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 summer and winter as a Christian is—but, again, so is a villainous usurer. The passage is irrelevant to the real issue and specious in essence; it proves nothing beyond the obvious fact that evil men are human. Based on the false premise—"(because) I am a Jew" [cf. III. i. 58]—it must have been greeted with ridicule by the Elizabethan audience for the patent rationalization it really is. For both Shylock and Antonio are vividly aware of the real issue between them throughout the play. In the first scene in which he appears, as we have noted above, the Jew had said, "I hate him ... more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [I. iii. 42-5]. In the same scene he had addressed Antonio with the complaint: "In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances" [I. iii. 107-08]. In the first scene of Act III he says to Solanio and Salerio, after hearing of Antonio's losses, "Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call usurer. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian cursy. Let him look to his bond" [III. i. 47-50]. In the third scene Shylock admonishes Antonio's jailer with the words: "Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy. / This is the fool that lent out money gratis. / Jailer, look to him" [III. iii. 1-3]. And after the exit of Shylock, Antonio himself reiterates to the jailer the real reason the Jew seeks his life: "I oft deliver'd from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me. / Therefore he hates me" [III. iii. 21-4].

I think it can safely be concluded that Shakespeare's Shylock is a villain throughout the four acts in which he appears. To the Elizabethan audience, with their traditional religious bias against Jews, his birth may have
been enough to arouse suspicion of his motives. But to the dramatist, surely, he was above all a hypocrite who concealed his innate evil behind the mask of a religion he himself did not believe in. (pp. 195-99)


**Criticism: Portia**

Anne Parten

[Parten discusses Portia's character in relation to the ring scene (Act V, scene i). According to the critic, the ring episode "acts as a focus for the unresolved—and potentially explosive—issue of the heroine's power." In essence, the ring scene signifies the resolution of Portia's threat to the comic world of *The Merchant of Venice*. Parten maintains that Portia is a discordant element in the comic resolution of the play by virtue of her superiority over all the male characters. Such a situation is unacceptable in Shakespeare's comic world, the critic contends, where the proper hierarchy of men dominating women must be affirmed. Further, Shakespeare uses the cuckoldry theme in the ring episode to initially depict Portia as a strong character capable of dominating Bassanio, the critic continues, but then eliminates it, thus removing "the prospect of permanent female rule from this comedy of temporary female ascendancy." Literally, a "cuckold" is a man whose wife is unfaithful; here, Parten uses the term to represent a social act which symbolizes "women's ultimate weapon and ultimate assertion over men."

The ring episode, the last and least of the three interlocking movements of *The Merchant of Venice*, has generally, with some justification, been considered too slight a business to be given the critical attention accorded the earlier phases of the play. The matter of the troth-plight rings and the migrations they make among the various characters is overshadowed by the actions involving the three caskets and the pound of flesh. The established view seems to be that Portia's gift of a "new" ring in the fifth act restates the theme of mercy set out in the fourth, echoing playfully both the usurer's implacability and the generosity of the triumphant Christians. This is certainly true, as is even the somewhat reductive view that the controversy about the rings is designed merely to provide laughter ... The business of the rings, however, has a dramatic function beyond mirroring the main action or providing comic counterpoint. It also serves as an important element of the play in its own right, in that it acts as focus for the unresolved—and potentially explosive—issue of the heroine's power. The ring episode of *The Merchant of Venice* represents Shakespeare's resolution of the threat to the comic world that Portia herself embodies.

In supporting this argument, I will be covering three main points: first, my reasons for seeing Portia as a discordant element in the comic resolution; secondly, the traditional connotations of cuckoldry that account for Shakespeare's choice of it as the central theme of the scenes that deal with achieving that resolution; and finally, the way in which the rings themselves serve as highly significant tokens and emblems in the dramatic commentary on the relationship between the sexes.

It is a donne [known fact] in Shakespearean comedy, and in Elizabethan comedy in general, that the final scenes of the play will present a society to which order and harmony have been restored after a revitalizing interval of saturnalia. The basis for this new and healthy stability is the re-establishment of the ordered social hierarchy: during the earlier stages of the comedy, the normal pattern of relationships between masters and servants, men and women, and parents and children can go wildly askew, but the conclusion of the play sees each figure restored to his or her proper role. If children are not brought back into the position of subordination to their parents that they held at the beginning of the play, it is only in order to allow them the freedom to move on into the properly ordered marriages that will provide the future generations that will in turn endorse and preserve the same social forms.
The triumphant Portia of the courtroom scene ... is not a piece that can easily be made to fit this conservative pattern, particularly the aspect of it that makes a concluding harmony contingent upon feminine submission. Her conquest of Shylock does eliminate one evil that threatens the comic society, but, from another perspective, she herself is almost as much of a threat to the re-establishment of order. The comic world will remain in its unresolved and inverted state for as long as she stands in such easy and conspicuous superiority to all the men around her, including her husband.

Portia, after all, represents Shakespeare's first effort to create a comic heroine capable of controlling and directing the action that develops around her, and it is arguable that—at least from the Elizabethan point of view—he overplayed his hand, producing a figure too powerful to be credible as a future wife. In constantly demonstrating her ability to beat men at their own games, Shakespeare allows Portia to emerge as a more potent character than any of her masculine companions. (pp. 146-47)

If one considers the particular focus of the Venetian milieu in which the action of the comedy takes place, the aspect of Portia that is potentially most intimidating is her financial power: she is fabulously wealthy in a society in which wealth is the \textit{summum bonum} [highest good]. Bassanio, on the other hand, comes to her peniless. Though the conventions of the fairy-tale present the pauper-princess alliance in the most positive light, it was not a variety of marriage that the Elizabethans regarded complacently. Contemporary treatises on domestic relations warned constantly against the dangers of financial mesalliances, especially those in which the wife was wealthier than her husband. One such tract, \textit{The Flower of Friendshippe}, phrases that warning in terms that seem especially relevant to the threatened inversion of roles in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}:

\begin{quote}
a riche woman, that marieth a poor man, seldome, or never, shake off the pride from her shoulders. Yea Menander sayth, that suche a man hath gotten in steed of a wyfe, a husband, and she of him a wyfe, a straunge alteration, a wonderfull metamorphosis.
\end{quote}

Nor is the allusion to metamorphosis in this case necessarily mere rhetoric: influential older literary traditions may have supplied an element of justification for taking such a fear seriously. Ovid's \textit{Metamorphoses}, for example, contains the story of a young woman whose success in passing in disguise as a man is divinely rewarded with true and permanent masculinity [Ovid was a first-century A.D. Roman poet. His \textit{Metamorphoses} was a primary source for Greek and Roman myth and legend.]. The particulars of Portia's case—showing, as they do, her triumph over the masculine world, rather than the mere capacity to be assimilated by it—link her with yet another tradition that dealt with the possibility of the metamorphosis of female into male. Medieval authorities on science and medicine had expressed the opinion that a female's vanquishing her mate could actually lead to somatic change of sex. Vestiges of those beliefs may still have been available to an Elizabethan consciousness, adding to a general underlying anxiety about the problem of reconciling Portia's past actions and accomplishments with her projected assumption of the feminine role of wife.

It is within this context that the function of the ring episode in \textit{The Merchant of Venice} becomes clear. Shakespeare, rather than ignoring that anxiety-provoking element or declaring a happy ending by fiat, creates a dramatic situation in which the imbalance of power between the sexes is exaggerated, and drawn to the audience's conscious attention. For the theme of the last dramatic business before the final harmony of the play is restored, he chooses the social act traditionally seen as women's ultimate weapon and ultimate assertion of power over men: cuckoldry. By making the threat of a breach in the sexual order explicit, and then by dispelling that threat, he eases a dangerous underlying tension in the play.

In order to examine the technique Shakespeare uses to allay anxiety that his competent woman will turn into a dominant wife, it is necessary to review briefly the literary tradition that deals with the domestic horrors that result when women fight their way out of their subordinate position in the marital hierarchy. Alice of Bath [in Chaucer's \textit{Canterbury Tales}], whose use of psychological warfare and physical violence in her struggles for
“maistrie” suggests the standard policies of these wives, alleges that she intimidated her fourth husband merely with the suggestion that she was cuckolding him. Other shrews of her sect exhibit no such restraint. The fifteenth-century carol that contains in its refrain the first recorded use of the idiom "to wear the breeches" is part of a genre that celebrates the two principal ways a dominant wife signifies her power over her husband: by beating him, and by making him a cuckold. The literature of the period suggests that the three—domination, husband-beating, and cuckoldry—are intimately related, and that the practice of the one implies the practice of the others.

The frightening prospects that are associated with cuckoldry—loss of one's manhood, one's chattels, and one's place in the familial hierarchy—are capable of arousing very deep-rooted, almost atavistic fears in men. The traditions that treat cuckoldry as pie, is made into a grotesque and pitiful figure, one whom an audience of men can reject with its laughter. This laughter at cuckoldry evolves into a social reflex, an automatic and unconscious exorcism of a particularly disturbing specter.

Shakespeare, in his introduction of the theme of cuckoldry into *The Merchant of Venice*, is tapping an established source of both deep anxiety and ready laughter. The laughter, of course, is a boon to any comic author, but Shakespeare is able to make an even more significant use of the fear. Since the idea of cuckoldry is so intimately bound to the idea of feminine ascendancy, Shakespeare is able to adopt that anxiety-provoking image as a compact symbol of all the vicissitudes associated with female domination. By introducing the threat of cuckoldry and then eliminating it, he is able to exorcise the prospect of permanent female rule from this comedy of temporary female ascendancy. Shakespeare's demonstration that Portia will not become a dominant wife is worked out with almost mathematical logic. A mannish, aggressive shrew i't a woman who makes her husband a cuckold; briefly, this is precisely what Portia pretends to have done. But when the cuckoldry is shown to be unreal, the other side of the equation loses its force as well. Portia's game is shown to be only a game; the episode gives her, in effect, an opportunity to tell the audience explicitly that she would never really cuckold her husband. The rest of the triad follows: she will not beat him, and—more importantly—she will not dominate him.

In order to appreciate the serious side of the final comic clash between the wives and husbands, it is necessary to examine the way in which the emblematic force of the rings is put to use in the play. Portia's ring, in particular, is associated with two separate but constantly interacting issues, her independent power and her sexual identity. The shifting ownership of the ring reflects corresponding shifts in characters' control over these two factors.

The link between the ring and her autonomy is one that Portia herself makes explicit in the speech in which she acknowledges Bassanio as her husband:

```
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring ...
[II. ii. 166-71]
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She specifically makes the ring a token of her submission to her new husband. Above all, it symbolizes her agreement to submerge her identity in Bassanio's, in accordance with the principle that man and wife are one flesh ... Portia warns Bassanio that his loss of the ring will occasion her reproach, but in practice the penalty threatens to be far greater. The ring itself is seen almost as the embodiment of the right to control Portia's actions: to forfeit the one is to forfeit the other, and as the gift of jewelry is transferred, so is the gift of self.
It is not necessary to turn to the works of the psychoanalytic commentators on *The Merchant of Venice* to document the association between Portia's and Nerissa's rings and their sexuality. The connection is one that can be established by reference to the bawdy quibble in the final couplet of the play itself ... [Any] man who possesses a married woman's ring controls her sexuality. When Bassanio breaks his vow to Portia that he will not part with the ring, it might of course be argued that in delivering the token to his "other self," he has no more broken faith than Portia has in sleeping with the doctor of laws. But ultimately, it is this rather paradoxical matter of variably fusing and separating identities that is at the center of the major statements that the play makes about the relationship between the sexes. In order to understand them it is necessary to explore somewhat more fully the role played by the epicene figure of the young lawyer Balthasar in the action of the comedy as a whole.

Unlike Shakespeare's other disguised heroines, who adopt boys' clothing chiefly as a measure of self-protection, Portia disguises herself as Balthasar for the express purpose of gaining an entree to the man's world. In this world she intends to perform a single, specific action; when the action is complete, one might assume, the masculine character that she has conjured up for the purpose would cease to exist. But Bassanio's failure to keep his word disrupts this pattern. It seems almost as though Bassanio's rejection of the token that makes him one with Portia causes, in addition to the break with her, a secondary fission, enabling the figure of the lawyer to assume a shadowy life of his own.

In returning his wife's ring, Bassanio is in effect surrendering the talisman that Portia's own words have invested with power over her and hers. But the Portia who stands in front of him is a double entity: the disguised woman whom the audience sees co-exists with the capable young man seen by Bassanio. It is to this two-sexed figure that Bassanio yields the token of Portia's independent power and physical love. One could predict the logical result of such a transfer even without reference to the remainder of the play: the woman whose autonomy had been restored would assert her independence, both personal and sexual; the masculine figure who had been given the woman's ring would emerge as a sexual rival to the husband. The events of the fifth act bear this prediction out: Portia browbeats Bassanio, and the doctor of laws "cuckolds" him.

In a very abstract way, Portia's request of the ring from Bassanio represents a comic re-enactment of the casket trial, but this time it is a trial that Bassanio fails: he chooses saving face and preserving his masculine honor over keeping his vow to Portia in this trial, as in the first, the penalty for failure is enforced celibacy. But where there it was fairy-tale, here it is farce: "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ringl" [V. i. 190-91]. Bassanio, sensing the impending storm of female wrath, murmurs, "Why, I were best to cut my left hand off / And swear I lost the ring defending it" [V. i. 177-78]. It is a marvelous aside, and it does much to humanize the elegant Bassanio, but it also savors somewhat of incipient cowardice in the face of henpecking. The meaning-charged rings in their possession, women are quick to press their advantage: the declaration of female independence, and independent female sexuality, is brought to a more and more highly menacing pitch. From the promise of withholding their sexual favors, they move to threatening to cuckold their husbands:

*Portia.* Now by mine honor which is yet mine own
I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow.

*Nerissa.* And I his clerk.
[V. i. 232-34]

And from there they go on to present the cuckoldry as a fait accompli [accomplished fact]:

*Portia.* Pardon me, Bassanio.
For by this ring the doctor lay with me.

*Nerissa.* And pardon me, my gentle Gratiano.
For that same scrubbed boy, the doctor's clerk,
In lieu of this last night did lie with me.
[V. i. 258-62]

It is only for a moment that the men are allowed to taste the full farcical horror of their situation: the return to wifely duty that the new gift of the rings implies lags only an instant behind the actual re-delivery, in that moment, however, as Portia and Nerissa lay down their high cards, they stand in absolute mastery of the situation, Bassanio is stunned into silence, but Gratiano yelps in indignation, "What, are we cuckold's e'er we have deserved it?" [V. i. 265]. The word is allowed to resonate with its full set of unpleasant connotations; the prospect of masculine subjugation and female ascendancy is set before the eyes of characters and audience alike.

If, as one critic suggests, bawdiness in Shakespeare is associated with anarchic and dissident impulses, Portia's sudden rejection of the topic in hand is illuminating. She meets Gratiano's outburst with curt propriety: "Speak not so grossly" [V. i. 266]. In the one short phrase she rejects both the bawdy language and the anarchic image of female rebellion that inspired it, her reassertion of womanly modesty signalling her return to un-threatening femininity. She suddenly reveals herself to be not a horn-giving shrew, but rather the embodiment of the Elizabethan ideal virtuous wife ... (pp. 147-53)

In summary, I would say that although The Merchant of Venice may be the best of Shakespeare's early comedies, it is nonetheless one with a central figure that an Elizabethan audience might have found faintly disturbing. Portia is strong and self-sufficient in both the feminine and masculine roles: she seems neither to need nor, perhaps, to be likely to submit to a husband's guidance. Traditionally, a wife who is stronger than her husband makes him a cuckold; no less traditionally, an outside male who is more clever or more powerful than a husband—again—makes him a cuckold. Portia of the double identity seems more than capable of fulfilling both roles. Unless she is determined to be loyal to the bond of marriage. Bassanio is doomed.

The sharp focus on this potential cuckoldry gives Portia (and behind her, Shakespeare) a chance to demonstrate that the future the comedy points to is in no way threatened by Portia's super-human and super-feminine gifts. The ring episode at the end of The Merchant of Venice is indeed introduced to provoke the audience's laughter, but a context is created in which this can be laughter at the mere thought that such an action as cuckoldry should be performed. Because the threat can be laughed away, it is no longer a threat. One can laugh at danger only from a position of security: laughter at the thought that order could be broken is a sure sign that order has been restored. Bassanio ... finishes his story with the all-important ring back on his finger ... [He] and the audience have Portia's promise and Shakespeare's dramatic proof that that promise will be kept. (pp. 153-54)


**Criticism: Antonio**

Lawrence Danson

[Danson examines Antonio's character and discusses his melancholy. He notes that Shakespeare's audience probably would have attributed Antonio's sadness to his economic activities. The critic also compares the merchant's profession with Shylock's, observing that to Elizabethans, who were generally suspicious of mercantile fortunes, money-lender and merchant were "not entirely separate." Antonio is a perfect Christian, the critic argues, in his charitable and unworldly nature, although his treatment of Shylock conforms to that of his fellow Christians rather than scripture. Danson also comments on the homosexual interpretation of Antonio's melancholy, noting that while this explanation may account for the character's verisimilitude, it is inconsistent with the structure and thematics of Shakespeare's play.]
The opening dialogue of *The Merchant of Venice* takes us simultaneously inward and outward. In, to a psychologically troubled world ("In sooth I know not why I am so sad" [I. i. 1]), out, to a busy and dangerous world where great trading ships, "Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood," "do overpeer the petty traffickers" [I. i. 10. 12]. The two movements—the inward and psychological, the outward and public—are closely related: "Your mind is tossing on the ocean" [I. i. 8]. By his imagistic joining of the world's ocean with the ocean of the mind, Salerio (whose explanation this is for the merchant Antonio's mysterious sadness) creates at least a provisional reconciliation of opposing principles. And this reconciliation is delicately premonitory of other achieved harmonies with which *The Merchant of Venice* abounds. (p. 19)

The play's opening lines pose something of a riddle. Antonio's sadness, wearisome though he claims it is to all involved, immediately offers an invitation to begin searching for answers:

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In sooth I know not why I am so sad,
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn:
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.
[II. i. 1-7]
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What follows, however—the attempt by Salerio and Solanio to solve the apparent riddle—should warn us to proceed with caution. Salerio and Solanio have not fared well at the hands of critics: "the two bland little gentlemen," C. L. Barber calls them [in his *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*]; and the first item in any bill of indictment ought to be their easy confidence that they can clear up the mystery of Antonio's sadness. (pp. 21-2)

There is one further attempt within the scene to explain away Antonio's sadness: Gratiano's "You have too much respect upon the world" [I. i. 74]. Or perhaps this is not so much a third explanation as a summary of the previous two; both the mercantile and the amorous explanations in effect accuse Antonio of having too much concern for the things of this world. They are the thoughts of "worldly choosers." The reproof sounds especially ironic coming from Gratiano, whose babbling levity, while it places him at an opposite extreme from Antonio, is not the sort of joyful noise unto the Lord commended by the Psalmist. Solanio, Salerio, and Gratiano, with their confident and curiously repetitive explanations for Antonio's sad state, begin to sound like Job's three comforters. Antonio, at any rate, rejects Gratiano's more comprehensive explanation as decisively as he has the previous ones:

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I hold the world but as the world Gratiano,
A stage, where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.
[I. i. 77-9]
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The terms of Antonio's response here are especially interesting. The idea that all the world's a stage was a poetic commonplace long before Shakespeare began to realize its lively potential. And generally the effect of the trope is to open out fresh imaginative prospects. Here, however, the effect might seem to be the reverse: since Antonio is a character in a play, his world indeed merely a stage and his part a sad one, his self-conscious admission of a fictive status appears to rule out any more guessing about his melancholy's motives. His sadness, he seems to be saying, is merely a donnee [known fact], and there will be no use searching anywhere for its roots except, perhaps, in the literary and dramatic history of the convention of the Melancholy Man.
Or so it might seem. The fact this commonsensical, literary-historical approach—the sort of approach once used (for instance) by E. E. Stoll to explain away any ambiguities in Shylock's character [in his *Shakespeare Studies*]—is no more valid than the psychologizing guesswork indulged in by the play's own characters, Salerio, Solanio, and Gratiano. The world may be a stage where every man must play a part, but the world of *The Merchant of Venice* is a very special world, governed by laws (dramatic and judicial) as curious as, but not identical with, the laws that govern "the great globe itself" [*The Tempest*, IV. i. 153]. The way to understand the problems raised by Antonio's sadness is to understand the special laws that govern the conditions of dramatic life in *The Merchant of Venice*, and therefore to understand such thoroughly interdependent factors as the play's modes of characterization, the disposition of its fable, and what matters are relevant and what irrelevant to its interpretation.

Of the two explanations offered for Antonio's psychological state, the mercantile would no doubt have seemed to many in Shakespeare's audience an especially plausible one. (Modern audiences have been more attracted to the amorous explanation.) Living at a time when previously unimaginable fortunes were to be made, or suddenly lost, in overseas trade, the Elizabethan audience would easily understand how a man might be sorely weighed down by business worries; and when that man was a Venetian merchant—the most splendid embodiment of that boundless wealth available to one who would dare the hazards of such trading—the audience might well be suspicious of his disclaimers. How could such a man, to whom the wealth of the world indeed lay as perilously open as did the golden fleece to the venturesome Jason, not be made "sad to think upon his merchandise" [I. i. 40]?

There were further reasons to be suspicious of Antonio. Elizabethan attitudes towards the idea of a "merchant of Venice" were complex, compounded in part of admiration, in part of jealousy, but also in part of moral disapproval ... A deep suspicion still attached to these merchants, Italian or English, whose fortunes were made less through the sweat of their brow than through the manipulation of money itself. The ambiguity sometimes felt to reside in Shakespeare's title is no mere undergraduate misunderstanding. The Venetian money-lender and the Venetian merchant were not entirely separate in the Elizabethan mind. (pp. 23-6)

Our first glimpse of Antonio, however, may convince us that he, of all men, is least in danger from the moral precariousness of the mercantile life. We have not only Antonio's own disclaimers; more importantly we are quickly granted an extravagant demonstration of Antonio's unmerchantlike charity or love. (pp. 29-30)

Antonio has said that he counts the world as nothing more than it is, "A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one" [I. i. 78-9] ...; but in his response to Bassanio's need we see Antonio's conception of his role more extensively displayed. His use of the world, and all the things of the world, appears to be all unblameworthy; everything he has or can get (for he must borrow in order to meet Bassanio's needs) is at the service of his friend. And as the action of the play progresses, that original phrase, "My purse, my person, my extremest means /Lie all unlock'd to your occasions" [I. i. 138-39], gathers to itself deeper resonance, until the doomed Antonio's plight may bring to mind the words of Christ, "Greater love than this hath no man, when any man bestoweth his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Thus Shakespeare plays with his audience's expectations, giving them a merchant who is (apparently) so far from being guilty of a lack of charity that he comes perilously close to completing literally an *imitation Christi* [imitation of Christ]. But although a man of sorrow, Antonio is in fact no more a "Christ-figure" than is any man who acts with charity. And indeed in this first reversal of ordinary expectations Shakespeare has prepared the way for a further and more subtle reversal. In one extraordinary, vital instance, the imputation of un-charitableness will still come back upon Antonio, but in a way far different from what the comfortable audience would initially have expected ... Antonio's un-Christ-like but quite merchant-like failure involves his fellow merchant, that insidious doppelganger, Shylock.
Antonio's self-righteously unrepentant answer to Shylock at their first appearance together, that "I am as like to call thee [dog] again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" [I. iii. 130-31], is shocking to modern ears. No doubt it would have shocked some in Shakespeare's audience; others, familiar with a literature which treated Jews in such a way as to make Shakespeare's creation of Shylock seem remarkably forbearing, might have applauded Antonio's openly expressed hatred. Shakespeare's own judgment on the matter is suggested at the start by Antonio's melancholy and confirmed by the lesson of the trial. Critics who search along a naturalistic bias to find the reason for Antonio's sadness generally condemn Antonio's treatment "of Shylock without seeing that the two facts—his sadness and his treatment of Shylock—are intimately related. Antonio's melancholy, I suggest, is his emotional response to a moral failure. Elizabethan ideas about the usury Shylock practices complicate the issue but do not alter the fundamental point: that the Christian is obliged equally to hate the sin but not the sinner.

The purposeful ambiguity in the play's title, and the numerous felt similarities between Shylock and Antonio—each one, as the play opens, an odd-man-out—help to make the point. The malice with which Antonio has, in the past and now, publicly reproved and humiliated Shylock, convicts him of being, in this instance, himself spiritually a "Jew" ... , In treating Shylock as he has done, Antonio violates—and has, apparently, repeatedly violated—one of the more difficult spiritual directives given in The Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1). Later in the play, in Portia's curious courtroom—a place as much for moral instruction as for legal judgment—Antonio and the audience will have an opportunity to render another kind of judgment, one which rejects the flesh desired by the inner "Jew" and accepts instead the spiritual circumcision of the heart.

By the end of the fifth act, characters and audience have been granted intimations of that music of the heavenly spheres which is too fine for our crude mortal perception. The idea of musical harmony has by then become a dominant metaphor for the play's actions, and the attitudes of the characters to music has become an important means of knowing them. Jessica, a newcomer to the courtly Belmontese society, is uneasy about her own esthetic response: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" [V. i. 69], she confesses to her Christian husband. But Lorenzo, more native to the musical place, takes it upon himself to instruct Jessica: "The reason is your spirits are attentive" [V. i. 70]. Far from showing a lack of responsiveness, the fact that Jessica is not "merry" when she hears the music shows that she has an appropriate listening attitude: she is prepared to "mark the music" [V. i. 88], and to hear in it faint echoes of the spiritual music of divine harmony. Jessica's is a norm of appropriate attentiveness against which we can measure the attitudes of other characters—of Bassanio, for instance, who so carefully marks the music when it accompanies his choice of Portia's leaden casket.

At an opposite extreme is the capering Gratiano, whose delight in "mirth and laughter" [I. i. 80] overflows into an ugly sort of joy at Shylock's defeat. And Shylock, of course, is clearly identified as an untrustworthy man who "hath no music in himself, / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds" [V. i. 83-4]. At the trial, Shylock, whose rigid adherence to a literal law rules out the mollifying effects of music, and Gratiano, with his excessive levity, will produce between them a cacophony of lovelessness.

The musical metaphor tells us about Antonio, too. Antonio's melancholy shows that he is out of tune; that despite his spontaneous charity to his beloved Bassanio, his malice towards Shylock—his enemy but therefore, because of his malice, a spiritual kinsman—keeps him from being fully a part of the ideal harmony. But to Portia's challenge at the trial, "What mercy can you render him Antonio" [IV. i. 378], Antonio responds differently than either Gratiano or Shylock. In his response, which goes beyond love of a neighbor to reach as well the love of an enemy, Antonio shows himself to be at last in tune. In his melancholy, Antonio was incapable of fulfilling the Psalmist's injunction to "Sing unto the Lord a new song" (Ps. 98); but when he extends his love beyond the circle that includes Portia and Bassanio, reaching outwards with charity for Shylock as well, his gesture makes the "new song" of spiritual love. (pp. 30-4)
I want to consider the other explanation beside the mercantile one that has been advanced for Antonio's melancholy. For the opinion that Antonio is in love continues to be widely held, all his "fie, fies" notwithstanding. Not cranks, but some of the play's most eminent interpreters, both academic and theatrical, perceive a homoerotic disturbance as the basis of Antonio's sadness. (p. 34)

For instance, E. M. W. Tillyard writes [in his Shakespeare's Early Comedies] that "Antonio suffers from a self-abnegating passion that quenches the springs of vitality in him and makes him the self-chosen outcast from society ... Antonio now sees himself as useless. Before Bassanio left him for Portia, his life had some direction; now it has none." ... [Of] even greater interest is the rhetoric of Tillyard's conclusion: "I do not think Antonio a study of homosexuality; but Shakespeare presented him as essentially a lonely figure, strikingly different from all the sociable folk he has to do with, except Shylock." The force of that "but" implies that Antonio's loneliness and his difference from "all the sociable folk" make him like a homosexual, even if he is not "a study in homosexuality." Thus Antonio's homosexual attachment is made to explain his sadness, and his sadness to prove his homosexuality. The logic (by no means uniquely Tillyard's) is as curious as the implication that loneliness and a striking difference from sociable folk are characteristic of homosexuals.

Now this explanation for Antonio's melancholy seems to me quite wrong: its implied consequences (as I will explain shortly) are not coherent with the play's overall shape and tone. And it is important to stress that this reason, rather than any a priori [presumptive] theoretical objection, is the basis for rejecting the psychosexual interpretation: for what is at issue here is not only Antonio's sexual preference, but the nature of Shakespearean characterization. The possible extremes are these: that Antonio, as Shakespeare created him, is merely a bundle of personified dramatic conventions—melancholy, generous, unlucky; or (at another extreme) that he is a psychologically "realistic" character in whom it is proper to discover submerged psychosexual motivations. And the difficult fact—the very heart of this Shakespearean matter—is that Antonio is not wholly the one sort of character or the other, but a richly impure mixture (like the play itself) of both dramatic tendencies. We need to give due weight to all that is uniquely Elizabethan and "conventional" in Antonio's characterization—and that means, among other things, recognizing him as a figure capable of standing for "abstract" ideas, of representing moral qualities. But the necessity to hold on to both sides of Shakespeare's characterizing variousness also makes it important to reaffirm—even in rejecting the idea that Antonio is primarily motivated by a sexual attachment to Bassanio—the character's actual degree of psychological "realism." (pp. 34-6)

The Merchant of Venice is a play in which harmonies are discovered where only discord had seemed possible, and its dominant figure (whether in details of imagery or in the implied shape of the fable as a whole) is the circle, ring, or round. The love of Antonio and Bassanio chimes in that harmonious round, as does the love of Bassanio and Portia. But to suppose a competition between Antonio and Portia introduces a discord more intractable to resolution than that of Shylock, the unmusical man, himself. So it is not the realism nor the humanness, but the consequent introduction of this irreconcilable competition, that leads me to reject the psychosexual explanation for Antonio's sadness. (pp. 38-9)

It is conceivable, I suppose, that one could have a homosexual Antonio without any consequent irreconcilability between Bassanio's two lovers. But then, of course, Antonio's sadness remains inexplicable. And in critical practice, a competition between Portia and Antonio seems the inevitable result of the assumption. According to one account, for instance, friendship is relegated "to a subordinate place" by the end of the play, and Antonio is taught that "there is room for friendship within the house of love, but love holds the upper and controlling hand" [Anne Barton, in her introduction to The Merchant of Venice in The Riverside Shakespeare, edited by G. Blakemore Evans]. This shrewish love, however, conflicts with all that Portia says about the nature of her relationship to Bassanio when he wins her in the casket test, when "her gentle spirit / Commits itself to [his] to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 163-65]. And it conflicts with the actual result of the ring episode, which is (in part) the reaffirmation of Antonio's loving loyalty to both Bassanio and Portia:
I once did lend my body for his wealth.
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.
[V. i. 249-53]

The love of Antonio and Bassanio (whether or not it dares to speak its name) is a textual fact; but a sexual competition between Antonio and Portia is not, and to invent one raises more problems of interpretation than it solves. (pp. 39-40)


**Essays: A Character Study of Shylock**

Shylock is one of the most confusing characters in all of Shakespeare's plays. On the surface, he is a villain only concerned about money and revenge. Some critics, however, argue that Shakespeare takes this "stereotypical" Jew much further, making him a complex character whose sufferings at the hands of racists motivate his anger. While Shakespeare gives no definitive answer as to how Shylock should be viewed, he does make important points in support and in denial of this antagonist.

It should be noted prior to any analysis of Shylock that the idea of a villainous "Christianized Jew" may possibly stem from an incident involving the Elizabethan court in 1594. Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Christianized Jew who worked as the royal physician, was convicted of attempting to poison the Queen, despite questionable evidence. He was executed for his crime, all the time insisting that he loved the Queen as much as Jesus Christ himself. The Elizabethans found this statement humorous and the event in general interesting, prompting one acting troupe to revive Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* for several performances. It is widely believed that this incident may have provided the inspiration for Shylock.

Shylock first appears in the play in Act I, scene iii, when Bassanio attempts to borrow money from him in Antonio's name in order to pursue Portia. Through Shylock's aside in lines 37-47, we learn that, although Shylock has never met Antonio, he already hates him. The first reason is racial in nature—Shylock hates Antonio because he is a Christian. For this reason, Shylock will not associate with Antonio, Bassanio, or their friends beyond their business dealings:

> 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 (ll. 32-34).

This comment becomes ironic by the end of the play, as Shylock will have done all of what he says he will not. Shylock also makes a comment in this scene about the "hard dealings" of Christians, which teach them not to trust anyone. While this may be true of Antonio and Bassanio, it is also true of Shylock, who loans money at interest in order to make a profit. The racist part of Shylock's hatred makes him no different from the Italians, who hate and mistreat Shylock for his religious beliefs.

Antonio makes disparaging remarks to Shylock throughout the play, despite his compromising situation. In Act I, scene iii, Antonio compares Shylock to the devil, who can "cite Scripture for his purpose" (l. 94), and readily admits to calling Shylock a dog in the Rialto. Antonio not only lacks any remorse for his treatment of Shylock, but he even insults Shylock directly in this scene despite the fact that he is attempting to borrow money from him: "I am as like to call thee so again./To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (ll. 126-127). Although Antonio should not insult Shylock if he expects to borrow money from him, he does so anyway
because of his racism and his disagreement with Shylock's business practices. Despite these comments, Antonio appears to relent at the end of the scene, saying that there is "much kindness in the Jew" and referring to Shylock as "gentle Jew." These terms, however, are condescending. Antonio equivocates kindness with Christianity: "The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind" (l. 174). This parallel also relates to the Christian mercy/pagan revenge concept later on in the play. Antonio's attitude and treatment of Shylock in this scene is characteristic of many characters in the play, and is one of the sources of Shylock's resentment of Antonio and his friends.

However, racist treatment is merely the surface of Shylock's dislike. During his aside in Act I, scene iii, Shylock mentions the deeper reason for his hatred of Antonio: "But more, for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis and brings down/The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (ll. 89-91). Although Shylock's racism does affect his impression of Antonio, it is clear that Shylock is more concerned with Antonio's effect on his business. This is consistent with his reaction to events later on in the play. Shylock's resentment of Antonio's business dealings and religion lead him to thoughts of revenge in this scene, before the means of revenge have even appeared. While it is unclear if Shylock realistically hopes to gain a pound of Antonio's flesh (He knows that Antonio has had financial problems recently, but does not know the depth of the situation), he clearly intends revenge in this scene mainly for the damage Antonio has done to Shylock's business.

Shylock's prejudices and the results of the treatment he has received through his dealings with Antonio and his friends combine to motivate Shylock's revenge in Act III. After lamenting the misfortunes of Antonio, who has apparently lost all of his ships, Salerio and Solanio tease and insult Shylock over the loss of Jessica and his ducats, having assisted the elopement in Act II. These insults lead to one of the more famous of Shakespeare's speeches, in which Shylock justifies his reasons for wanting revenge against Antonio:

He hath disgraced me and hind'red
me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my
gains, scorned my nation...—and what's his reason?
I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?...
if you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us,
do we not laugh?...And
if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (ll. 47-58).

In this speech, Shylock reminds Salerio and Solanio (and the audience as well) that he is human, just as Antonio is. While Shylock cannot and does not justify his hatred of Antonio, he correctly points out in this passage that there is no reason for Antonio's ill treatment of Shylock, either. This speech gives Shylock's character a depth not traditionally associated with stock villains, and makes his character much more complex.

The courtroom scene of Act IV, scene i, crystallizes all of the significant aspects of Shylock's character as well as the treatment he receives. Prior to Shylock's entrance, the duke describes Shylock as "a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, Uncapable of pity, void and empty/From any dram of mercy" (ll. 3-6). This is a reminder of the Christian mercy/pagan revenge dichotomy that begins in Act I, scene iii. The duke's racism in this statement is reflected in the derogatory comments of Antonio and Gratiano later in the scene. Once Shylock enters, the duke does make one last attempt to reason with him by expecting Shylock to show mercy. As the duke has previously pointed out, however, Shylock does indeed lack any sense of mercy for Antonio, and insists on his bond. He cannot give any reason for this insistence, save that he does not like Antonio, and they have a contract. While this is seen as cruel, Shylock has already pointed out that no one in the play has justified ill treatment of him, and that their dislike is the only motivation for it.
The concept of Christian mercy becomes paramount as Portia arrives to judge the case. Just prior to Portia's arrival, the duke asks Shylock how he expects to receive mercy from others (and primarily God) if he does not show mercy, and Shylock's reply is simple: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (l. 89). Shylock's response to why he will not show mercy is that he is following the law by abiding with the terms of the contract, which means that he has broken no rules. What Shylock does not account for, however, is the fact that while he might not be breaking any laws by expecting the fulfillment of the bond, he may break other laws or rules later, and as a result may need mercy from God or someone else. Shylock does not think ahead to a time when he may make a mistake—he is only concerned with his rights at this particular moment. It is this error that makes Shylock reject Portia's plea for mercy and demand "the penalty and forfeit" of the bond, not realizing that the penalty and forfeit will be his own.

Shylock's demand that the bond be followed word for word is what brings about his downfall. The language of the bond does not provide for either blood or more or less than one pound of flesh, a fact that Shylock does not take into account but merely assumes. Because of his insistence of the exact language of the contract, he places himself in the untenable position of having to extract the exact pound of flesh without taking blood or risk losing his life. When Shylock attempts to take Bassanio's money and be "merciful," Portia reminds him that he will not receive anything but the penalty and forfeit of the bond that he has demanded. The penalty, of course, is the law which forces Shylock to give up his entire fortune and life to the state of Venice for having sought the death of a Venetian citizen. The only thing that prevents this is the Christian mercy of the duke and Antonio, which they "grant" by allowing Shylock to live and keep half of his goods if he becomes Christian and if he wills all of his possessions to Lorenzo at his death. While this decision is merciful in that Shylock will live and keep at least some of his money, it is rather unmerciful as well. Shylock must now part with the two things that mean the most to him, his money and his religion, which were the two things that began his hatred of Antonio in the first place.

Some critics have suggested that Shylock's defeat in Act IV, scene i, makes this play a tragedy. This seems to be corroborated by Jessica's anger and depression in Act V. However, the light mood at the end of the play does not suggest that we should understand Shylock to be a tragic hero. The other couples resolve their problems, Antonio discovers that all of his ships have come to port, and it appears that everyone except Shylock will live happily ever after. This seems to contradict the idea of this play as a tragedy. However, dismissing the character of Shylock as a clown and buffoon that lacks depth and development appears to contradict the play as well. Despite his nefarious bond and his lack of mercy, the character of Shylock possesses a great deal of depth and motivation, making him one of Shakespeare's most complicated and problematic characters.

### Essays: Analysis of Act IV, Scene i

Act IV, scene i of *The Merchant of Venice* not only provides the climax of the play but also encapsulates all of its major themes. In this scene, the concepts of racism and justice combine to create the play's final results and to reinforce the points made through previous scenes.

Racism is apparent in the scene from its inception. The duke, who is in pretrial conversation with Antonio, calls Shylock "a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, Uncapable of pity, void and empty/From any dram of mercy" (ll. 4-6). Shylock's inhumanity stems from his religion, and the implication throughout the scene is that, if Shylock were Christian, he would be more "human." This idea is continued by Antonio when he begs everyone to stop pleading with Shylock:

> I pray you think you question with the Jew.  
> You may as well go stand upon the beach  
> And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf,
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb
You may as well do anything most hard
As seek to soften that—that which what's harder?—
His Jewish heart (ll. 70-80).

Through the wave and wolf metaphors, Antonio clearly depicts Shylock as something less than human because of his "Jewish heart," and renders him incapable of pity or understanding.

The character who is most vociferous in his racism against Shylock is Gratiano. Because of his anger and resentment at Shylock's lack of mercy, Gratiano hurl several insults at Shylock, ranging from "harsh Jew" to "inexecutable dog." He also extends Antonio's comparison between Shylock and a wolf: "Thy currish spirit/Govern'd a wolf…for thy desires/Are wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous" (ll.133-138). Because of his anger and racism, Gratiano is the only person in the courtroom who urges both the duke and Antonio to have Shylock put to death immediately once the scene is resolved.

It should be noted here that although it is never specifically mentioned in Act IV, scene i, Shylock has racist opinions as well. We know from Act I, scene iii, that from his first entrance into the play, Shylock hates Antonio because he is a Christian, a point which helps to motivate Shylock to revenge. Mentioning this in court would not be advantageous to Shylock in his suit, which is the reason that he never expresses his racist opinions (save the one about Christian husbands), but those opinions matter very much in the scene.

Another theme that dominates Act IV, scene i is mercy and justice. Shylock's reason for claiming his pound of flesh is that he demands the justice that should be provided to him through the bond. When the duke asks Shylock how he can ever expect to have mercy if he does not give it, Shylock responds that he does not need mercy because he has justice on his side: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (l. 89). In this scene, Shylock demonstrates the view that justice and mercy are at odds with each other. For Shylock, having mercy means that he relinquishes justice, which he is not willing to do. This separation is marked as pagan; Shylock believes this because he is Jewish and not Christian. The Christian characters in the scene, however, believe that justice and mercy are not separate but must be linked, as evidenced by Portia's speech on the quality of mercy.

When Shylock asks Portia why he must be merciful, Portia replies that mercy cannot be compelled because of its divine nature and its greatness. This nature enjoins justice and mercy, just as it links the one who gives mercy and the one who receives it (ll. 184-185). In lines 186-190, Portia explains that not only does mercy have a divine nature, but it is also what makes monarchs (such as the duke) great. This happens, Portia explains, because:

It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice (ll. 193-195).

In the Christian perspective represented by Portia, mercy is not only a part of justice, but it is its main aspect because God shows mercy in His justice. Justice without mercy, then, becomes tyranny because it goes against divine nature. Portia makes a final point about mercy at the end of her speech:

Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea (ll. 195-201).

In this section of the speech, Portia reminds Shylock that no one deserves salvation, and as such would never receive it without God's mercy. Because we hope and expect to receive mercy, then, we should render it to others. Unfortunately for Shylock, he refuses to accede to these arguments, and continues to demand "justice."

When Portia sees that her warning to Shylock will go unheeded, she proceeds to provide the interpretation of justice to everyone in the courtroom, whether or not they agree with it. Portia awards the consequences of the deed to Shylock, despite Bassanio's plea to "do a little wrong" in overturning Venetian law. Portia does not do this because it will provide a dangerous precedent for other legal proceedings, which may result in unjust judgments later. However, when Shylock attempts to take his pound of flesh, Portia informs him that the bond makes no provision for blood or for mistakes in measurement. If Shylock takes blood (which he must), or either too little or too much flesh, he will die because of the terms of Venetian law. Portia also informs Shylock that he has violated Venetian law by seeking the life of a citizen, and Shylock's life, lands, and goods are now forfeit to the state and to the victim Antonio. This ironic situation occurs because Shylock demands the letter of the law without the mercy that should accompany it, and his deeds are now "upon his head," as he wished them to be earlier in the scene.

Although the duke and Antonio can now take vengeance for Shylock's malicious attempt to take Antonio's life without giving mercy, the concerns of Christianity mitigate their actions. Upon hearing Portia's judgment that Shylock's life and goods are at the mercy of the state, the duke takes a much different tack than Shylock:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's;
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine (ll. 366-370).

The duke pardons Shylock even though Shylock has not asked for his mercy because of the duke has learned Portia's lesson about the greatness of mercy. The duke also does not take half of Shylock's property out of mercy (although Shylock does not interpret it as such at the time). Antonio, however, does not render mercy to Shylock, but instead to his daughter Jessica and her husband Lorenzo. Instead of keeping his half of Shylock's property, he gives it to Lorenzo. He also asks the court to make Shylock convert to Christianity and to will his property at the end of his life to Lorenzo. Antonio, then, does punish Shylock for his paganism and malicious actions, but does so in a way that assists Jessica and Lorenzo and furthers the Christian theme of the play.

**Essays: Portia's Boxes: Love in The Merchant of Venice**

The sentimental storylines in *The Merchant of Venice* often get lost amid the play's more prominent themes. Although the idea of love appears only through the play's subplots, Shakespeare does make the theme prevalent enough to warrant attention. The play demonstrates that love exists in many forms, and is selfless and not self-serving. It also clarifies the importance of romantic vows and the nature of the marital relationship.

The first idea of love that is presented in the play is that it comes in many forms. Antonio demonstrates his love for his kinsman Bassanio throughout their relationship and even before the action of the play begins. From Bassanio's exposition in Act I, scene i, it is clear that Antonio has often assisted Bassanio in the past, and Bassanio owes Antonio a great deal of money, which he has not been asked to repay. Antonio does this
because he loves Bassanio and is willing to sacrifice his fortune for his kinsman. It is this love that motivates Antonio to enter into the agreement with Shylock that will jeopardize his life:

Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well!
Grieve not that I am fall'n too this for you;
Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
And he repents not that he pays your debt (ll. 263-277).

Antonio is willing and ready to sacrifice everything that he has, including his life, for the benefit of Bassanio. Bassanio's love is equally strong—he immediately responds with a desire to sacrifice everything that he has, including his love Portia, to save Antonio. This deep love between friends was seen by the Elizabethans as a precursor to romantic love. If a man could demonstrate love for his friends, then he was capable of maintaining love for a woman.

Romantic love also appears in the Jessica/Lorenzo and Portia/Bassanio subplots. While the relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo has already been established by the beginning of the play, we know that their love is strong enough to overcome the racism that both would be taught as members of different ethnic and religious groups. Their love is also strong enough to cope with the secrecy that accompanies the relationship until the elopement. Jessica sacrifices not only her father's love but her religion as well in order to marry Lorenzo:

Alack, what heinous sin it is in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child.
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou but keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife (ll. 16-21).

While Jessica shows dislike for her father's actions in this speech, she also clearly states that the situation has been extremely difficult, and that she is determined to be with her lover. Jessica's love also helps her to overcome the embarrassment of dressing as a boy in Act II, scene vi: "I am much ashamed of my exchange./But love is blind, and lovers cannot see/The pretty follies that themselves commit" (ll. 35-37). Love and marriage, however, do not come without problems for Jessica and Lorenzo, who fight at the beginning of Act V, scene i. This indicates that marriage is not necessarily "happily ever after," and spouses will have disagreements and problems once they have found the way to each other.

Portia and Bassanio exemplify the idea that there are obstacles to romantic relationships both before and after the wedding, but love will find a way to overcome these problems. The first issue that Portia and Bassanio must overcome in the progression of their romantic relationship is the problem of the caskets. The caskets symbolize different views about love, and Bassanio must demonstrate his understanding of the true nature of love in order to win Portia. The gold casket bears the inscription "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." In choosing this casket, Morocco confuses desire with love. Love requires understanding of one's partner, while desire merely stems from attraction to surface appearance. Desire also leads to death, because when one only caters to their wants, they will fight with others over them, causing war and destruction. This is the reason for the picture of death in the gold casket. Bassanio, however, realizes that "[t]he world is still deceived with ornament" and rejects gold because he refuses to mistake appearance for reality (l. 74).

Bassanio must then avoid the trap of the silver box, which promises that "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The mistake with this casket is that people in love often believe that they deserve more than they actually do and should, therefore, be rewarded. Such people do not try to understand the person they claim to love because they become complacent in the relationship after they have been rewarded with the person's presence. This foolish notion of love is the reason why Aragon finds the portrait of the blinking idiot
in the silver casket instead of Portia's picture. Both the gold and silver caskets are wrong because they promise rewards for love, whether it is in the form of fulfilling desires or "just deserts." People who enter into love expecting a reward do not understand love's true nature, which is to give instead of receive.

Bassanio chooses the lead box, engraved with the warning "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," because he refuses to fall for the promises of the glittering gold and silver boxes. In his speech in Act II, scene ii, Bassanio rejects gold and silver after comparing them to the false covers of law and religion (foreshadowing the issues in Act IV, scene i), which often masks evil in the pretty package of fancy language. He suspects the gold and silver caskets of doing this with their engraved statements. He chooses lead instead (with a few hints from Portia) because it clarifies rather than hides:

But thou, thou meagre lead  
Which threaten'st rather than doth promise aught,  
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;  
And here choose I. Joy be the consequence! (ll. 104-107).

Bassanio is then rewarded for his knowledge that love must be willing to sacrifice—a lesson he has learned from Antonio, who has sacrificed everything for him.

In Act IV, scene i, however, it appears that Bassanio has learned the idea of love as sacrifice a bit too well, as has his friend Gratiano. When Antonio says his farewell to Bassanio, Bassanio replies that he would sacrifice everything that he has in order to save Antonio, just as Antonio has done for him:

Antonio, I am married to a wife  
Which is as dear to me as life itself;  
But life itself, my wife, and all the world  
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.  
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all  
Here to this devil, to deliver you (ll. 280-85).

Bassanio demonstrates here that although Portia means a great deal to him, Antonio is still more important. Gratiano repeats this sentiment as well, even going so far as to wish his wife Nerissa dead so that she can intercede with the powers of heaven on Antonio's behalf. These comments even draw the attention of Shylock, who wishes that his daughter had not married a Christian if Christian husbands all have this attitude about their wives. Unfortunately for Bassanio and Gratiano, Portia and Nerissa are there to hear their comments, prompting them to reply that their wives would not be happy with either of them and to design a form of punishment for their husbands.

Portia and Nerissa decide to teach their husbands a lesson on the importance of marital vows and love by taking the rings. Bassanio and Gratiano originally promise to keep the rings throughout their lifetimes as a symbol of their devotion to their wives, but they hesitantly sacrifice them in order to pay the "judge" and the "clerk" for saving Antonio. Once again, Bassanio and Gratiano have placed their friend above their wives by abandoning their oaths and giving up their rings, which Portia criticizes in Act V:

If you had known the virtue of the ring,  
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,  
Or your own honor to contain the ring,  
You would not have then parted with the ring (ll. 199-202).

Portia and Nerissa then tease their husbands by threatening to sleep only with the judge and the clerk. Both wives eventually forgive their husbands and return the rings because both Bassanio and Gratiano have learned
to value their wives and their oaths, thus resolving the problems that have occurred even after both couples have made their marriage vows.

**Essays: The Merchant of Venice: A Directoral Approach**

In preparing for a production of *The Merchant of Venice* the director is faced with several problems. Among the choices which are basic to picking a directoral approach are deciding what the play is about (the main theme), and how to enhance that choice through the physical setting. A key to both of these decisions is found in the definition of the character of Shylock.

The easiest, or readiest, interpretation of Shylock is that which paints him as a cantakerous, miserly old man. Filling Shylock’s role in this way we immediately set up a good/evil split between him and the other characters which allows the play to be produced as a simple love story with a particularly strong antagonist. Thus, the play might be about the victory of love over greed and revenge. But, such an interpretation is overly simple and leaves Shylock short of his due.

There seems little doubt that while this character of Shylock fills an antagonist's role he is by far the most completely drawn, most complicated, and most interesting character in the play. Evidence of this is the fact that the role is always filled by the star of the production. Basically, the other characters are all fitted to the classical Amarati mold and are in pursuit of only love for fulfillment. Brassiano must go to the length of getting a large favor from a friend so that he might follow his heart; likewise his friend Gratiano seeks his fortune in love by sharing Brassiano’s adventure; Lorenzo is driven to "stealing" his love away from her father. The women are all the picture of temperance, beauty, and duty, with Portia, perhaps, showing a bit more depth through her wisdom (a trait not always bestowed upon the ladies). But, it is Shylock and Shylock alone who is torn emotionally in a multiplicity of directions, including the hardship of being a member of a hated religious community. Here is a man who is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't: he will be the butt of jokes and slurs which are readily hinged on both his successes and his failures. Here is a character who is successful in the vital businesses of the community and is condemned for non-conforming religious beliefs. And, here is a man who loses not only his only daughter but much of his worldly riches which she steals from him.

Certainly, then, the director's production choices hinge on his decisions about Shylock. Shakespeare would not have taken the time to make him so interesting had the play not been about him. It is not usual to make the villain more human than the hero.

Perhaps, then, the play is about a man's struggle to share love in a hostile world. Could it not be that Shylock makes his bond with Antonio in good faith but only resorts to revengeful behaviour upon the loss of his daughter which is compounded by the fact that everyone else thinks this loss a wonderful thing? The director taking these conclusions to be true must create his scenes in such a way as to show that Shylock is fighting heavy currents in all his activities. All those scenes which involve him should be played on the stage in such a way that he is outnumbered and physically not in control; they should be arranged so that he attains focus through being overbalanced by his opponents and constantly being on lower ground.

Which brings us to the set. The play takes place in two places, Venice and Belmont. Venice is primarily a place which connotes activity, business, and typical urban discordant feelings. Belmont is the setting for leisure, ladies, and affairs of the heart. Or, Venice is "coarse" while Belmont is "tender." Thus, a single set production must be able to express these contrasting places through differences in plane and visual texture. If Shylock is to be presented as oppressed, then his lodgings or environs should be placed in the stage left area, it being the weakest visually, and should be juxtaposed by a Belmont area on stage right that is visually more pleasant (color, line, etc.) and on a higher level (the use of steps and platforms). This type of a configuration...
will keep Shylock visually lower, or "beneath" his mentors, and we can set up his struggle to get out from under their ridicule.

The director should temper his knowledge of the situation of Elizabethan Jews with modern day understanding of people's differences through a production which emphasizes the human needs being dealt with rather than opposing dogmas. While Shylock's adversaries think they are doing him a favor by ordering him to become a Christian can we not bring out the misconceptions of their ways as well as his? Can they not be attempting to share love in a hostile world as well? This can be achieved through a thorough effort to acknowledge Shylock's humanity and a clear picture of the total situation.

**Critical Essays: The Merchant of Venice**

The opening scene establishes the play’s dominant theme--the Renaissance concept of friendship, which takes precedence even over romantic love. Antonio, a merchant of Venice, loans his bankrupt friend Bassanio money to woo Portia, the heiress of Belmont. To get the money, Antonio himself has to borrow it from Shylock, a usurious Jew who hates him and makes the collateral a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

A dark figure of contrast, Shylock puts money above human values. He is so grasping and hardhearted that first his servant leaves him, then his daughter, Jessica. Jessica runs off with a Christian, taking jewels and ducats. Shylock is equally hysterical about losing Jessica and the ducats.

Bassanio journeys to Belmont and, by passing a shrewd test designed by Portia’s dead father, wins Portia’s hand: From gold, silver, and lead caskets, he chooses the one containing her portrait. Meanwhile, however, Antonio is forced to default on the loan, and Shylock demands his pound of flesh.

In a climactic court scene, Portia, disguised as a young judge, settles the case. Her learned decision, satisfying Shylock’s call for strict justice, frees Antonio and condemns Shylock, but the court shows mercy by mitigating Shylock’s harsh penalty and forcing him to become a Christian.

Even though Shylock seems to bring his troubles on himself, modern audiences have tended to see the treatment of Shylock not as a demonstration of Christian virtue but as hypocrisy and anti-Semitism. Similarly, they have tended to see Shylock as a character who began as a stereotype, captured the author’s sympathies, and almost stole the show.

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**Critical Commentary: Act I Commentary**

**Scene i**: Scene I introduces one of the major plot points of the play as well as several of the key characters. When Antonio, Salerio, and Solanio enter at the beginning of the scene, they are in the midst of a discussion about why Antonio is depressed. This “sadness,” which Antonio claims to not know the source of, becomes clear when he reveals to Bassanio that all of his fortunes are tied up to his ships out at sea. It should also be noted that Antonio lies to Salerio and Solanio, who both assume that Antonio is worried about his trade until Antonio reassures them that "My ventures are not in one bottom trusted/Nor to one place...Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad" (ll. 42-45). Antonio is well aware that the practice of placing all of one's fortunes on sea trade is treacherous, and because of this is unwilling to admit his situation to anyone but Bassanio.

Antonio's willingness to admit his troubles to Bassanio also indicates the closeness of their relationship. Antonio not only confides in Bassanio, but he often reciprocates by helping Bassanio with his problems, especially the financial ones:

"To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe" (ll. 130-134).

Bassanio, then, has depended on Antonio several times before for both financial and emotional support. It is because of this history that the main plot of the play is set into motion. Bassanio comes to Antonio in this scene in order to borrow more money so that he can pursue Portia. Unfortunately, Antonio has no money to give him, but tells Bassanio to borrow upon Antonio's credit to get the sum that he needs. This is the first example of Antonio's willingness to sacrifice himself for Bassanio, and it is what leads Antonio into the bond that jeopardizes his life.

**Scene ii**: There are some key comparisons between characters that are made in this scene. Like Antonio in scene 1, Portia begins the scene by discussing her "sadness," which is attributed to her marital situation. Another parallel between the two characters is that, like Antonio, Portia cannot take action—she must accept the suitor who chooses the right box, much like Antonio can do nothing but wait until his ships return. Portia also shows a preference for Bassanio, whom she has seen once before. However, unlike Antonio, Portia displays a good deal of wit in this scene in order to alleviate her sadness, and while she is distressed at the situation, she also takes the opportunity to ridicule her suitors. Her insults show her great intelligence, a trait that will become critical in Act IV, scene 1, and her playfulness, which also appears later on in the play. Also, Portia's desire to act, which is in direct contrast to Antonio's sad resignation to his situation, gives her the impetus to solve the problem of the bond.
Another character parallel that occurs in this scene is that of Nerissa and Gratiano. In scene 1, Gratiano gives a great deal of advice to Antonio to cheer him up, and Nerissa does the same in order to comfort her mistress. Nerissa's advice, much like Gratiano's, do not necessarily make much sense, and we begin to see by the end of the scene why it is that these two characters will become engaged by the end of Act II.

Scene iii: Shylock, the antagonist of the play, makes his first appearance in this scene. Bassanio, in an effort to secure the 3,000 ducats he needs in order to woo Portia, resorts to borrowing from Shylock. The Christian community of Venice hates Shylock because he is a Jew and because he charges interest when he lends money. Antonio in particular demonstrates a great deal of contempt for Shylock in this scene, despite the fact that Bassanio is attempting to convince Shylock to lend him money. When Shylock reminds Antonio that Antonio has insulted him frequently in the Rialto, often calling him a dog, Antonio replies:

"I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends...
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty" (ll. 126-133).

Antonio's dislike of Shylock, although they have never met until this scene, will not be abated even if Shylock agrees to lend money to Bassanio. This hatred of Jews by Christians was typical in Shakespeare's day, and would not have been questioned by an Elizabethan audience.

The religious prejudice in this play is not, however, one-sided. Shylock also hates Antonio, as he reveals in an aside in the scene:

"I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (ll. 37-41).

Shylock, then, has two reasons for hating Antonio—his religion and, more importantly to Shylock, his status as a competitor. Antonio's refusal to lend out money for interest has damaged Shylock's business, which is why Shylock hopes to use this opportunity to avenge himself upon Antonio. With that vengeance and the insults of Antonio in mind, the bond proposed in this scene becomes extremely problematic. Shylock proposes that Antonio give him a pound of flesh if he fails to fulfill his part of the contract—a proposition which horrifies Bassanio but amuses and relieves Antonio. It is not clear whether or not Shylock actually intends to exact this payment at this point in the play. Shylock wants revenge for the damage to his business and for the ill treatment he receives, and he knows that a good deal of Antonio's wealth is at sea, which can be a great risk. However, Antonio does have three months to repay the debt, and Shylock does not know that all of Antonio's fortunes are dependent upon his sea trade. This topic is also complicated by the evolving ideas of the role of Shylock over the centuries. Shylock has been portrayed as a buffoon and stock character, but has more recently been seen as a victim of racism and cruelty. Critics who support the latter view have often argued that it is unlikely that Shylock expects that Antonio would forfeit the contract at this point. However, if Shylock is a buffoon, then he may most certainly expect to secure a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shakespeare, of course, does not give us a clear answer on the subject.
Critical Commentary: Act II Commentary

Scene i: The Prince of Morocco, who is African, begs Portia to not be prejudiced against him because of his complexion. While Portia indicates that she does not dislike him any more than any of the other suitors who have come to call, we know from her statements in Act I, scene 2, that she does not like any of the suitors so far, making this a misleading statement that will become clear later in Act II.

Scene ii: This scene functions as comic relief. Launcelot Gobbo, who is about to leave Shylock's employment and attempt to work for Bassanio, first argues with himself as to whether or not he should run away from Shylock. He decides to follow the "fiend" and run, despite the loyalty that he should owe to his master. On the way to Bassanio, Launcelot encounters his blind father and decides to trick him by telling him that his son is dead. These two actions show that although Launcelot, although Christian, does not necessarily act like one. However, since he is one of the clowns of the play, he will not be condemned for it.

Meanwhile, the other "clown" of the play, Gratiano, begs Bassanio to take him along on the trip to Belmont. Bassanio, knowing Gratiano's temper and playfulness, warns him that he had better behave and not interfere with Bassanio's pursuit of Portia. This is another example of the comic Christian who, although he does not behave the way he is expected to, will not be punished because he is a clown.

Scene iii: This scene introduces Jessica, Shylock's daughter, who is about to elope with Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio. This scene demonstrates some aspects of Shylock's character as well as furthering the subplot of the Jessica-Lorenzo relationship. Jessica expresses both her sorrow at losing Launcelot and her hatred of living with her father by commenting that her home is "hell" and that Launcelot alleviated some of the problems with his humor. She also reveals that she is ashamed to be her father's daughter and that she is nothing like him. All of this would indicate that the Venetian dislike of Shylock is justified, because his own daughter does not like him. Jessica even goes so far as to plan on becoming Christian when she elopes with Lorenzo.

Scene iv: The plans for the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo are solidified in this scene. Lorenzo, while planning with Gratiano, Salerio, and Solanio, receives Jessica's letter from Launcelot, which explains how to get her out of the house. The irony of the plan is that Jessica must break some rules in order to succeed: she must dress as a torchbearer (or cross dress, as torchbearers are male), and she will participate in a masque, which her father will forbid her to even watch in the next scene. Jessica, then, will act like a Christian in order to marry and actually become one.

Scene v: This scene draws contrasts between the Jewish mindset, as represented by Shylock, and the dominant Christian behaviors in Venice. Shylock, who prefers not to dine with Christians, has agreed to eat with Bassanio and Antonio in order to seal the bond. Shylock, who believes in omens, has a dream about moneybags, which he considers bad luck, and does not want to go to dinner, although he chooses to. Meanwhile, Shylock orders Jessica not to participate in the masque that will come, and to lock herself away from the Christians, because he wants to maintain a "sober" house, as opposed to the Christian frivolity about to occur. Not only is Jessica planning on participating in the frivolity, as we know from the previous scene, but she will become a member of the community by marrying Lorenzo.

Scene vi: Love is not always as devoted as it should be in this scene. Lorenzo, who has ordered his friends to meet him at Shylock's house, is late, which Gratiano notes as odd because lovers are usually early. Jessica, on the other hand, tests Lorenzo's love one last time before leaving. She also is embarrassed to be seen as a boy, which should not be her primary thought while she is eloping with her lover. However, both get underway despite this with a good deal of Shylock's money and jewels.
Scene vii: In this scene, the prince of Morocco makes his choice of the caskets. The inscriptions on the caskets display what love means to different people. To some, love is gaining one's desire, and this is embodied in the gold casket. However, desire is not necessarily love, and those who confuse the two are doomed to unhappiness. It is for this reason that gold is the wrong choice, and Shakespeare warns us with this casket that we should not be fooled by appearances, nor should we be led by our desires, which will only bring death and corruption.

Portia's last comment in this scene is critical. When the prince leaves, Portia says: "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go./Let all of his complexion choose me so" (ll. 78-79). This statement shows Portia's racism, which she attempted to hide in scene 1. Although Portia is arguably the most intelligent and rational character in the play, she is also prejudiced. However, this would have been accepted as normal in Shakespeare's day.

Scene viii: Racism and concern for their friend color this conversation between Salerio and Solanio. Solanio makes fun of Shylock by mimicking his cries for his daughter and his money, and even remarks that the boys of Venice mimicked him as well. It is clear that Solanio and Salerio believe that what bothers Shylock most about the situation is the loss of his money, not his daughter. Because of this, both characters know that Shylock will avenge himself upon Antonio if he can. Salerio and Solanio also recount the parting of Antonio and Bassanio. In their descriptions of the event, both note that Antonio loves Bassanio tremendously, even so far as to "only love the world for him" (l. 50). Expecting Antonio to be depressed once again, the two go off in order to cheer him up.

Scene ix: It is now the Prince of Aragon's turn to choose one of Portia's caskets. He immediately disregards the gold one for the reasons discussed in scene 7. Aragon instead chooses the silver casket, which is engraved with the words "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The problem with this casket is that people too often assume that they deserve more than they actually do, especially in cases of love, where intense feelings often override good judgment. This is the case with Aragon, who believes that he deserves to be rewarded with Portia's hand. His foolishness in believing that he deserves more than he has received is reflected in the blinking idiot's picture found in the casket. Aragon's mistake has provided Portia with the answer to the caskets, which she can then "guide" the right suitor (Bassanio) toward.

Critical Commentary: Act III Commentary

Scene i: Act III is typically the turning point of Shakespeare's plays, and this play is no exception. Scene 1 is the turning point in the Antonio-Shylock plot. The first part of the scene is an exchange of insults between Salerio, Solanio, and Shylock. Salerio and Solanio, like Antonio, feel no need to spare Shylock's feelings over the loss of his daughter and part of his fortune, and take the opportunity to tease Shylock over his misfortunes. This is typical treatment for Shylock in the Venetian business world because of his religion. Shylock bemoans this treatment in one of the famous speeches from this play:

"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... If you prick us, do we not bleed? And If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you In the rest, we will resemble you in that" (ll. 51-59).

Shylock expounds the hypocrisy of the Christian treatment of Jews, who are just as human despite being of a different faith. Salerio and Solanio's reminder to Shylock of Antonio's misfortunes at sea provide Shylock with the means of revenge for the ill treatment that he has suffered in the name of his religion.
Shylock is not, however, completely sympathetic in this scene. Upon receiving the report from Tubal about Jessica, Shylock fervently wished that his daughter were dead instead of spending his money. Although the loss of his daughter appears to hurt Shylock, it is clear in this scene that the loss of his jewels and money bothers him more. Enraged at the report and sustained by Tubal's news of Antonio's last ship becoming shipwrecked near Tripoli, Shylock chooses to arrest Antonio and exact his forfeiture as his revenge for his losses.

**Scene ii**: This scene is the turning point in the Portia-Bassanio plot of the play. Having spent time with Bassanio, Portia, who is now in love with him, begs him to delay his choice so that she may spend more time with him. Bassanio, however, lives "upon the rack" in a state of impatience, partially because he is in love with Portia and longs to have the matter resolved once and for all, but also because he knows he must repay Antonio as quickly as possible.

During Bassanio's examination of the caskets, Portia provides her lover with a vital clue to the correct box through the song. The song's meaning indicates that love should not be an issue of appealing to the senses, but something internal. While this may have been good enough to provide Bassanio with the correct answer, Portia gives him more direct clues through the sounds of the song. The first two lines of the song, which end in "bred" and "head," both rhyme with "lead," which is the correct casket. The mention of the bell in the last line is also meant to recall the idea of lead, which is what bells are made of. This line is repeated in order to reinforce the idea of lead.

Bassanio does indeed choose the lead box, as he determines that appearances or empty promises should not fool him. The lead box, which threatens that "He who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," is the definition of true love. Love is the willingness to sacrifice oneself for someone else, without the expectation of a reward. Bassanio has learned this lesson twice in the play, not only from Portia's song, but from the actions of Antonio as well. Bassanio lays claim to his nervous love, who then gives him a ring. Portia then exacts a promise from Bassanio that he will never lose the ring, unless he intends to signal the end of their love. This promise will become important at the end of Act IV.

**Scene iii**: Antonio's arrest in this scene displays more of both his and Shylock's characters. Although Antonio attempts to speak to Shylock, Shylock refuses to hear any of what Antonio has to say. Shylock's excuses for this are that he has sworn an oath on the Sabbath to have the bond, and that, since Antonio has always referred to him as a dog, he will simply fulfill Antonio's expectations. During this exchange, Shakespeare creates a link between Christianity and mercy. The suggestion here is that if Shylock had been Christian, he would have had mercy on Antonio. Since he is not, he will not "yield to Christian intercessors" (ll. 15-16).

Antonio's character is further developed in this short scene as well. Antonio first assumes that the only reason Shylock insists on the bond is that Antonio has hurt him financially in the past. He does not see that his treatment of Shylock influences Shylock's motives in any way. Antonio also gives up on the idea of living in this scene, and allows his depression and resignation to take over. It is Antonio's friends (especially Portia) who save him, as he will do nothing to save himself.

**Scene iv**: Portia and Nerissa choose to assist in the problems of Antonio in this scene. Like Jessica in Act II, they will both cross dress in order to accomplish what they desire, but unlike Jessica, Portia and Nerissa are not in the least embarrassed about it. Portia especially chooses to put herself at risk in order to help the person who has helped her fiancé.

**Scene v**: After all of the seriousness of the Antonio-Shylock plot, Shakespeare arranges for more comic relief in this scene. Launcelot teases Jessica by insisting that she is damned for the sins of her parents, especially her father. While he is most certainly joking, Launcelot's comments are typical of the Elizabethan attitude toward non-Christians. However, Jessica has become Christian by marrying Lorenzo, which is a vast "improvement,"
although it will raise the price of pork.

There is also a small hint of the issue of racism in this scene. Lorenzo informs Launcelot that one of the servants, a Moor (African), is pregnant with Launcelot's child. Instead of being concerned, Launcelot laughs and jokes about the situation. The intimation here is that he need not take the Moor's pregnancy seriously because she is African.

**Critical Commentary: Act IV Commentary**

**Scene i:** This is the climax of the play. Although every character in the room, except Antonio, attempts to persuade Shylock to be merciful, the treatment of Shylock is no better than it has been throughout the entire play. Gratiano constantly insults him, Bassanio criticizes him, the Duke constantly refers to him as "Jew," and even Antonio, who needs Shylock's mercy, calls him hard-hearted. In fact, the only character in the scene that treats Shylock in a respectful manner is Portia.

Respectful or not, Shylock is determined to have his bond. When Shylock explains why, he merely says that it is what he desires because he does not like Antonio and the law is on his side. He has no other reason for demanding the pound of flesh, nor does he feel that he needs further justification. When the duke asks him how he dares to expect mercy when he gives none, Shylock's response is that he has done nothing wrong:

"What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?...
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it" (ll. 89, 99-100).

Shylock's argument, then, is that he has the law on his side, and he does not need to concern himself with issues of morality or the true nature of justice. Shylock's error here is that he insists on the law as words, but not intent. He also rejects the notion of mercy, which will become problematic for him later on in the scene.

When Portia determines that the only way out of the bond is for Shylock to be merciful, she delivers another of Shakespeare's famous speeches. Shylock asks why he must be merciful, and Portia replies that mercy cannot be compelled, but must be given freely, as it is given freely by kings and by God because it is a royal attribute. Portia also points out that although Shylock asks for justice, he should consider that if God only considered justice and not mercy, no one would ever be saved. Because of this, we should show mercy as well. However, Shylock is bent upon revenge, and refuses to hear Portia's arguments.

Without the mercy of Shylock, Portia must find a legal way to help Antonio out of his predicament. When Bassanio begs her "to do a great right" in releasing Antonio by doing "a little wrong" by bending the law, Portia refuses because it will set a precedent that could destroy the Venetian legal system. She then carefully examines the bond, and stalls by allowing Antonio to say farewell to his friend. This gives Portia time to notice that the bond does not mention blood (although Shylock intended to have blood along with the flesh), nor does it allow for more or less than one pound of flesh. Because Shylock insists on the letter of the law, Portia insists upon it as well, and Shylock is incapable of exacting his penalty because he cannot do so without taking blood or cutting exactly one pound. Then, in accordance with the law, Portia informs Shylock that any alien seeking the life of a citizen loses all of his possessions and his life is forfeit. Thus Portia's warning about being merciful for the sake of needing mercy comes true, and it is Shylock who requires mercy by the end of the scene.

The last section of the scene might be viewed as Portia's revenge for a comment Bassanio makes about her. When Antonio makes his farewell speech to Bassanio, Bassanio states that he would sacrifice Portia in order to save Antonio, clearly showing that his affections for Antonio are stronger than those for his wife. Portia, as
the judge, asks for the ring she gave Bassanio in Act III, scene 2 as a reward for helping his friend. This is a test of Bassanio's love for Portia, and he fails it by giving up the ring at Antonio's behest. Portia will use the ring to teach Bassanio a valuable lesson about love in Act V.

**Scene ii:** While Portia finishes the final paperwork for the case, Nerissa decides that she will test her husband, Gratiano, by attempting to gain his ring from him, which he promised to keep just as Bassanio had done. During the previous scene, Gratiano expressed a wish that his wife were dead so that she could ask God to help Antonio—a comment that Nerissa did not appreciate. Nerissa decides to join in on Portia's, and does succeed in obtaining Gratiano's ring.

**Critical Commentary: Act V Commentary**

**Scene i:** This final scene, which is often viewed as comic because of the resolution of the rings, begins with Jessica and Lorenzo, who appear to be in the middle of a disagreement. Jessica is upset and depressed, and claims that Lorenzo stole her soul with false vows. A messenger comes to temporarily disrupt this argument to notify Lorenzo of Bassanio's impending return. However, even when Lorenzo orders music, Jessica's spirits are still not lifted, and her last comment in the play is that she is not merry when she hears music. The last impression of Jessica, then, is one of depression and anger, which does not fit with the lightness of the rest of the scene.

Once the other characters enter, the mood shifts. Bassanio arrives and introduces Portia to Antonio. The ring plot then comes to the surface when Nerissa and Gratiano fight over the loss of Nerissa's ring. Gratiano first attempts to dismiss the situation by calling the ring worthless and trite, but Nerissa dismisses that by reminding him that it is not the material value of the ring, but the emotional value, that is important. She then insists that a girl has it (which we know to be true). Portia then blames Gratiano for the quarrel, stating that she knows that her husband would never make the same mistake. Of course, Gratiano tells Portia that Bassanio has given up the ring, most likely to absolve himself of some of the blame. After some jokes about the ladies sleeping with the so-called "doctor" and "clerk," Bassanio and Gratiano learn their lesson and promise to properly value their wives. Antonio finds that his ships have come to harbor, and everyone, except the Jews of the play, have a happy ending.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Through the years, *The Merchant of Venice* has been one of William Shakespeare’s most popular and most frequently performed plays. The work has an interesting and fast-moving plot, and it evokes an idyllic, uncorrupted world reminiscent of folktale and romance. From the opening description of Antonio’s nameless sadness, the world is bathed in light and music. The insistently improbable plot is complicated only by the evil influence of Shylock, and he is disposed of by the end of act 4. However, Shakespeare uses this fragile vehicle to make significant points about justice, mercy, and friendship, three typical Renaissance virtues. Although some critics suggest that the play contains all of the elements of tragedy only to be rescued by a comic resolution, the tone of the whole play creates a benevolent world in which, despite some opposition, things will always work out for the best.

The story, based on ancient tales that could have been drawn from many sources, is actually two stories in one—the casket plot, involving the choice by the suitor and his reward with Portia, and the bond plot, involving the loan and the attempt to exact a pound of flesh. Shakespeare’s genius is revealed in the way he combines the two. Although they intersect from the start in the character of Bassanio, who occasions Antonio’s debt and is a suitor, they fully coalesce when Portia comes to Venice in disguise to make her plea and judgment for Antonio. At that point, the bond plot is unraveled by the casket heroine, after which the fifth act brings the celebratory conclusion and joy.
The most fascinating character to both audiences and critics always has been Shylock, the outsider, the anomaly in this felicitous world. Controversy rages over just what kind of villain Shylock is and just how villainous Shakespeare intended him to be. The matter is complicated by the desire to absolve Shakespeare of the common medieval and Renaissance vice of anti-Semitism. Some commentators argued that in Shylock Shakespeare takes the stock character of the Jew—as personified in Christopher Marlowe’s Barabas in his The Jew of Malta (1589)—and fleshes him out with complicating human characteristics. Some went so far as to argue that, even in his villainy, Shylock is presented as a victim of the Christian society, the grotesque product of hatred and ostracism. Regardless of Shakespeare’s personal views, the fact remains that, in his treatment, Shylock becomes much more than a stock villain.

The more significant dramatic question is just what sort of character Shylock is and what sort of role he is being called upon to play. Certainly he is an outsider in both appearance and action, a stranger to the light and gracious world of Venice and Belmont. His language is full of stridency and materialism, which isolates him from the other characters. He has no part in the network of beautiful friendships that unites the others. He is not wholly a comic character, for despite often appearing ridiculous, he poses too much of a threat to be dismissed lightly. However, he is too ineffectual and grotesque to be a villain as cold and terrifying as Iago or Edmund, or one as engaging as Richard III. He is a malevolent force, who is finally overcome by the more generous world in which he lives. That he is treated so harshly by the Christians is the kind of irony that ultimately protects Shakespeare from charges of mindless anti-Semitism. Still, on the level of the romantic plot, he is also the serpent in the garden, deserving summary expulsion and the forced conversion that is both a punishment and a charity.

The rest of the major characters have much more in common with each other as sharers in the common civilization of Venice. As they come into conflict with Shylock and form relationships with one another, they act out the ideals and commonplaces of high Renaissance culture. Antonio, in his small but pivotal role, is afflicted with a fashionable melancholy and a gift for friendship. It is his casually generous act of friendship that sets the bond plot in motion. Bassanio frequently comments on friendship and knows how to accept generosity gracefully, but Bassanio is not only a model Renaissance friend but also a model Renaissance lover. He is quite frankly as interested in Portia’s money as in her wit and beauty; he unself-consciously represents a cultural integration of love and gain quite different from Shylock’s materialism. When he chooses the leaden casket, he does so for precisely the right traditional reason—a distrust of appearances, a recognition that the reality does not always correspond. Of course, his success as suitor is never really in doubt but is choreographed like a ballet. In any case, it is always the third suitor who is the successful one in folktales. What the ballet provides is another opportunity for the expression of the culturally correct sentiments.

Portia, too, is a heroine of her culture. She is not only an object of love but also a witty and an intelligent woman whose ingenuity resolves the central dilemma. That she, too, is not what she seems to be in the trial scene is another example of the dichotomy between familiar appearance and reality. More important, she has the opportunity to discourse on the nature of mercy as opposed to strict justice and to give an object lesson that he who lives by the letter of the law will perish by it.

With Shylock safely, if a bit harshly, out of the way, the last act is an amusing festival of vindication of cultural values. The characters have had their opportunity to comment on the proper issues—love, friendship, justice, and the disparity between appearances and reality. Now all receive their appropriate reward in marriages and reunions or, in the case of Antonio, with the pleasantly gratuitous recovery of his fortune. There is no more trouble in paradise among the people of grace.

**Disembodied Letters and The Merchant of Venice: Introduction**
The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.

—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

In recent years the practices and ideologies of modern textual criticism have come under significant review and critique. Our understanding of the linguistic instability of texts, informed by post-structuralism, together with recent re-theorizations of modern subjectivity, have produced a concern for the material or, more to the point, the textual nature of culture and its productions—what Jerome McGann recently has called "the textual condition." The practices of this new textual criticism have been theorized in McGann's project, begun with Romantic Ideology (1983) and continued in A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism (1983) and The Textual Condition (1991), which is in part intended to heal "the schism between textual and interpretive studies, opened so long ago." McGann's call for a reimagining of the bibliographical study of texts is predicated upon the identification of texts as "fundamentally social rather than personal." This identification retrieves texts from both the misguided essentialist (and humanist) fiction of the wholly autonomous author and the related discourse of intentionality that are thought to determine the production of texts outside or beyond both culture and history.

The field of Renaissance studies has proven to be fertile ground for such inquiry. In particular, revisionist work on Shakespearean texts offers us powerful ways to theorize the question, "What is a text?" (even before we can begin to formulate answers to it); new ways of understanding the multiple, often divergent and yet nevertheless equally authentic texts we do have; fresh insights into the materiality of texts and textual production (printing house practices, for instance); and increasingly thorough and sophisticated accounts of early modern conceptions of publishing, collaboration, and the complex issues of authorship. These newly articulated critical and theoretical interests and inquiries have served to redefine the nature of textual criticism. This practice of "unediting," as Randall McLeod and Leah Marcus have called it, has produced a long list of recovered texts—texts (quartos, copies) that traditional textual theory and criticism have consistently dismissed as "bad," "corrupt," or otherwise inferior to their own texts: the two versions of King Lear, or the equally valid versions of the much-disputed Doctor Faustus, to name two prominent examples.

My use here of the terms "produced" and "recovered" is somewhat ironical: it has been the object of traditional textual criticism to produce authoritative texts in the absence of authorial script, which is itself imagined as recoverable because final authorial intention resides in the extant texts, even if it becomes visible (present) only in reconstructed texts, or, more frequently, in texts that are more or less hypothetical. "Unediting" produces no new texts, and can even be said to resist the entire notion of such production. Rather, "unediting" insists upon the integrity of textual productions without recourse to claims for the authorial status of these texts, and therein cannot be said either to produce or to recover texts—at least not in the conventional senses of these terms as they come to us through traditional textual criticism.

In discussing the composite nature of the two versions of Doctor Faustus, Leah Marcus argues that while both can claim aesthetic integrity on their own perhaps divergent terms, neither can claim a greater proximity to "the absent authorial presence we call Marlowe":

It is time to step back from the fantasy of recovering Marlowe as the mighty, controlling source of textual production and consider other elements of the process, particularly ideological elements that the editorial tradition has, by the very nature of its enterprise,
suppressed. I would like to second [Michael] Warren's call for a separation of the two texts of
Doctor Faustus, but carry his argument further by contending that for Faustus, and for
Renaissance drama more generally, a key element of textual indeterminacy is ideological
difference.6

Marcus argues that "we can learn something about the vagaries of Renaissance authorship and mark out new
areas for interpretation if we wean ourselves from the ingrained habit of regarding textual 'accidentals' as
insignificant,"7 and asks us to reconsider "accidentals"—such as the A text's "Wertenberg" and the B text's
"Wittenberg"; A's empty stage at the play's end and B's stage littered with the fragments of Faustus's body—as
significant in establishing markedly "different configurations of religious experience" in the two plays.8
"Accidentals" such as those reflecting divergent religious experience are in fact substantial and consequential
elements of both plays, attributable to revisions—Marlovian or post-Marlovian—of the play in history.9

As has been suggested above, the case for reconsidering our editorial determinations concerning texts and
their relative authority has gone a long way in helping create the very possibility of this argument: in our
relationship to texts we are no longer so strictly bound to the desire to recover—or, for that matter, the very
faith in—the lost original. Indeed, as post-structuralist theory has taught us, the idea of the original is not only
misleading, but wholly illusory; "we have no originals," Jonathan Goldberg reminds us, "only copies."10

Marcus's discussion of "accidentals" allows us access to nonauthorial elements that survive in or help to
determine play-texts—evidence, as it were, for textual (and bibliographical) traces of nonauthorial agency. At
the same time, however, Marcus's argument—while perhaps controversial in its revisionist claims for the two
texts of Faustus—is nevertheless dedicated to the discussion of agency within texts, whether that agency is
authorial or non-authorial, and as such offers only a restricted critique of textual criticism and traditional
practices of editing. This is analogous to what Jonathan Goldberg has identified as "the combination of textual
audacity and critical conservatism" to be found even in as bold an intervention in Shakespearean studies as
The Division of the Kingdoms:

There are two King Lear, we are told, but we are assured that the Quarto derives from
Shakespeare's manuscript and that the Folio represents an authoritative revision. The kingdom
has been divided, but Shakespeare reigns supreme, author now of two sovereign texts.11

As audacious as it is, Marcus's argument—perhaps like that of The Division of the Kingdoms—returns in the
end to texts as instantiations of agency. I would like to extend the radical critique of traditional textual
criticism and the traditional practices of text-editing implicit in the project of "unediting" by suggesting that
while texts have historically been understood as instruments of agentiality par excellence, they nevertheless
embody traces of nonagential writing. Goldberg argues that the "Shakespearean text is a historical
phenomenon, produced by ongoing restructurings, revisions, and collaboration; by interventions that are
editorial, scribal, theatrical; by conditions that are material, occasional, accidental."12 New textual theory and
practice, such as Marcus's, have indeed revised our notions of these material and occasional conditions.
Following Goldberg's extension of the radical instability of the text to include "the typographical character"
that stands as "one further sign—literally, a reminder of the compositor—that points to the composite nature
of every Shakespearean text," however, and his explicit call ("since it is all that we have") for a "return to the
letter," I propose to focus here on the accidental conditions of Shakespearean textuality, and to suggest that
there are ways in which we can understand these significant traces of non-agency, these "accidentals" that are
precisely accidental. 13 To argue for the value of true textual accidents (misspelled words, evident
compositor's errors, textual obscurities or incoherences) and their availability to critical inquiry is to offer a
fundamental revision of the philosophical underpinnings of traditional textual criticism that is founded upon
the suspect epistemology of presence, and as such constitutes an elaborate discourse of causality: a complex
set of theories and practices dedicated to the description and reconstitution of texts.14 Traditional textual
criticism, then, is nothing less than a form of historiography, fundamentally conservative in nature and
essentially narrative in form, dedicated to the preservation of presence and historical continuity, and in which the text is construed as the site where historical progress is believed to be materially evident.

In his *Critique*, McGann discusses this notion of the text in history, especially as it is reflected in the ideas of the copy-text and the critical edition produced through the practice (I will want to say the historical practice) of collation, and the critical apparatus that "displays the 'history' of the text." These practices, it is important to note, are both produced within an entirely historical epistemological framework and at the same time are intended to reproduce the text in its historical development. And yet, the effect of the critical text that has so thoroughly given itself over to the historical reconstruction of a hypostatized originary presence, is to evade history, to posit its own existence as transcendental, beyond temporality and outside history: "The critical edition embodies a practical goal which can be (within limits) accomplished, but it equally embodies an illusion about its own historicity (or lack thereof)."

McGann finds the terms of this understanding problematical, especially as the long history of modern textual criticism is predicated upon the notion of development or progress:

This view of scholarship and program of general education are based upon a paradigm which sees all human products in processive and diachronic terms. The paradigm has controlled the work of textual criticism from its inception, and it operates to this day.

Like McGann, I want to return the text more fully to history. But unlike McGann, however, I do not understand history to be fully meaningful, or wholly caused. My desire is to renounce the Hegelian philosophy of history that determines historicism in the model of traditional bibliographical or textual studies. Textual study has always been informed by an implicit philosophy of history, even when it claimed to be managing a wholly positivistic set of operations and maneuvers. One of the explicit premises of this study is that the textual criticism it advocates is thoroughly historical and resolutely non-Hegelian. I will not argue that any current embodiment of a particular text represents the culmination of its teleological evolution, but rather that the text can be said to exist only within history so long as it (the text, our relationship to the text, history itself) is not merely inserted in a narrative that presupposes a paradigm of progress. I hope by this to extricate the following discussion of texts and textual embodiment from the appropriative claims of traditional textual criticism that imagines the text as existing for us; I want to argue, instead, that texts—like history—exist in spite of us.

In the first part of the essay I turn to *The Merchant of Venice* and its narratives of reading and writing—the first of a series of such narratives that extends from Shakespeare to the practitioners of traditional textual criticism. These narratives are predicated upon an implicit science of presence-in-writing and are, moreover, conceived as progressive and wholly inscribed within the world of essential agency. The metaphysical notions of writing, editing and textuality that authorize modern editorial practices indeed underlie *Merchant*, a play in which presence (body) is imagined as immanent in the letter. But the actual text (or texts) of *Merchant* and recent critiques of the practices of textual criticism belie these assumptions. Scenes of reading and writing, as Goldberg argues,

do not allegorize a notion of the text itself. Rather, they point to a textuality that is radically unstable, upon which plots move, characters are (de)formed, language and observation is (improperly) staged. They point, that is, to historical and cultural demarcations, to what passes for essences, desires, knowledge, and the like.

Presence-in-writing is always merely the dream of writing (even if an enabling dream), and texts do not finally exist in an entirely deterministic universe void of accidents; accidents abound, and they are meaningful precisely because they are uncaused. Accidents are signs forever detached from any system of signification, but the meaning of accidents is specific and absolute: accidents "mean" the absence of meaning. But this is an
argument against which *Merchant* offers its considerable resistance.

The particular textual accident I will discuss in the essay's second part is the problem involving the characters Solanio, Salerio and Salarino, and the editorial decision (suggested by John Dover Wilson in the 1926 Cambridge edition and adopted almost universally by subsequent editors) to consider the name "Salarino" as simply an error, a textual mistake that should be replaced by "Salerio." Wilson's evidence supporting his emendation, however, is problematical, especially as it is generated by the idea of a unitary and authoritative text that depends upon a science of presence that produces both the notion of the authorial text and the unmistakable anxiety manifest in certain readers occasioned by its apparent aberrations and incoherences. Wilson's decision to eliminate Salarino offers a striking instance of a wilful intervention of nonauthorial agency into the Shakespearean text (however we construe that term) precisely at a moment in which the text marks an instance of nonagentiality.

The essay concludes with a discussion of the matter of textual accidents and the imperative evident in traditional textual criticism to over-write them. It is against these practices (of textual criticism and of a certain historicism) that a theory of radical unediting must stand.

**Disembodied Letters and The Merchant of Venice: I**

A letter from Antonio is brought to Bassanio. In this letter, writing is understood as both an act of inscription and as an act of incision, as an act of construction and of destruction, as a hopeful act of preservation and at the same time as an act of absolute violence:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and (since in paying it, it is impossible I should live), all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure,—if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.  

Here is the hope for presence-in-writing, the hope for the body made immanent in the letter. And yet, at the same time—and as Bassanio understands—this is the letter that kills:

> Here is a letter lady,  
> The paper as the body of my friend,  
> And every word in it a gaping wound  
> Issuing life-blood.  

(3.2.262-65)

Writing's dream of presence always inscribes its double: erasure. Commenting on the verse line, "Your penknife as stay in left hand let rest," that prefaces *A Booke Containing Divers Sortes of Hands*, Jonathan Goldberg discusses this double-nature of writing:

> "Stay" suggests that the knife is the support of writing (it keeps the place, marks the line, sharpens the quill, smooths the paper: there can be no act of writing without the knife); but "stay" also suggests that the knife impedes the quill (erasure lies within its domain). As Derrida has argued, what is true of the knife is true of the quill: these are the writer's weapons for a scene in which the production of script also effaces such production to produce the writer's hand—to produce the illusory presence of writing. "Stay" remarks the double structure of the mark, and the scriptive domain that (dis)locates the writer.
Antonio is similarly (dis)located by the letter he has sent to Bassanio. In the letter he identifies his imminent death as embodied in the bond to Shylock; he also both proclaims and rejects Bassanio's debt to him, and uses the letter to request, indeed virtually to command, Bassanio's presence, even as he rejects the notion of such efficacy in a mere "letter": "if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter." This is precisely Antonio's predicament in his forfeited bond (the letter) that situates him even as it guarantees his erasure: he stands, as he says, prepared to die.

This assertion—that Antonio's letter manifests both the desire for and the impossibility of presence-in-writing—is also clear on a material level in the Hayes Quarto. Dover Wilson recognized that the letters and scrolls in Merchant are "bibliographically speaking, textually distinct" from the rest of the play-text. While I disagree with Wilson's argument that such distinctness serves to identify the letters as either scribal or playhouse additions, their bibliographical distinctness does stand as a material manifestation of the impossibility of the dream of presence-in-writing: these texts that seek to embody or to locate characters are themselves radically disembodied and dislocated from the surface of the play-text. Antonio's letter (which we can now see was mis-quoted above) actually appears in the 1600 Quarto thus:

[Por.] But let me heare the letter of your friend.
Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my Creditors growe cruell, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jewe is forfaite, and since in paying it, it is impossible I shouldlive, all debts are cleerd betwenee you and I if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure, if your love do not perswade you to come, let not my letter.
Por. O love! dispatch all busines and be gone.

The text of Antonio's letter is clearly distinct from the rest of the passage: it stands materially apart from the rest of the text most obviously by virtue of its use of italic typeface. At the same time, it separates itself from the rest of the text—and from the rest of the text's normal grammar—by virtue of being unassigned: Portia is given a speech tag both before and after the text of the letter, and there is no speech tag for the letter itself.

In his discussion of Hamlet's letter to Claudius, especially the signature that either does (in the Folio) or does not (in the second quarto) accompany it, Jonathan Goldberg discusses a similar instance of a letter and its typographical relationship to the rest of the play-text in which it occurs:

In the Folio [as compared to the second quarto], Hamlet's signature is printed in the same type as the rest of the text of the play and the same type as the names "Horatio," "Rosincrance," and "Guildensterne" that appear in the letter; save for them, the entire body of the letter as well as the subscription is in italics. Do italics therefore mark the letter as not part of the play, or not part of the script produced by the hand that wrote the rest of the text? But in that case, to whom does the letter belong when the signature is not in the same hand as the letter, but instead marked the same way as the hand that produces the rest of the text?

Unlike the Folio Hamlet's letter, Antonio's letter is both unassigned and unsigned; it has no voice (that Portia or Bassanio voices the letter on stage is either purely conjectural or merely convenient), and the signature that would authorize it exists only under erasure. Though this is the letter that claims to be the body of its author, it is, finally, the letter that inscribes instead the impossibility of presence-in-writing. This is the disembodied letter.
The appearance of Antonio's letter represents a violent eruption of tragedy into the scene of romance surrounding Bassanio's choice. But before we see Portia's Belmont as wholly idyllic, it is important to recognize the ways in which Portia's world is in fact organized around a central but unstaged scene of writing/violence: her father's will mandating the test of the three caskets—the very thing that introduces further instances of violence or its implicit threat.

If we can speculate on the nature of this specular scene of writing/violence—as indeed the play invites us to do, particularly in those moments in which Portia herself contemplates her father's mandate (his will and his writing) and its effects on her: "I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" (1.2.22-25)—Portia's father's will stands as an exemplary instance of a profound faith in the metaphysics of writing, its supposed ability to figure the presence of the body as immanent in writing itself.

There is little doubt that Portia's father's will has more to do with Portia's father than it does with Portia herself, as is clear in Nerissa's early comment on the test of the three caskets: "Who chooses his meaning chooses you" (1.2.30-31). What is at stake, then, in the suitor's choice is the father's meaning—and the father's wealth, all of which Portia gives over to Bassanio, "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.166-67). Portia signifies in this economy of male desire merely as the embodiment of wealth and as heir to her father's seemingly limitless fortune, as Bassanio's prioritized list of Portia's characteristics perhaps intimates: "In Belmont is a lady richly left, / And she is fair" (1.1.161-62). To the materialistic Bassanio (or Morocco, or Arragon), the correct casket holds the license to assume the position of the father, as well as his possessions marked by the representation of its "real world" signifier: Portia's portrait. The logic of Portia's father's will is predicated upon an informing faith in the myth of presence-in-writing executed across the figure of Portia as its signifier. It is this logic (with which I take exception) that was read so influentially by Freud in his famous essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets."

Freud read well the intentions informing Portia's father; he understood, that is, that the caskets really do for him represent Portia herself. But there is no reason that we need to see the same thing in the three caskets. The caskets can be said to hold different versions of the preserved paternal will—that is, different versions of that will, or, even, of the father himself. What is more (and quite unlike the caskets in the source tale of the Gesta Romanorum), these caskets contain two sorts of material representations of the suitors's fates: the death's head, the "portrait of a blinking idiot," and Portia's portrait constitute the first sort, while writing constitutes the second.

Morocco had earlier announced another test to determine true from false love, the worthy from the unworthy:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,
To whom I am a neighbour, and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
And let us make incision for your love,
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.
(2.1.1-7)

Morocco's boast (and it is perhaps more than a mere boast; it may speak earnestly to the very prejudice of which Portia seems to be a mouthpiece—"Let all of his complexion choose me so" [2.7.79], she says upon Morocco's "thus losers part") displays an understanding of the ways in which truth is aligned with writing, or, as he says, inscribing. Much as a writer cuts into a page with the quill/knife, Morocco imagines that the resolution of the racial obstacles he faces lies in incising his body, in a writing both on and of the body—a writing that will embody or make present a truth (his virtue as equal to and deserving of Portia) symbolized
for him in the redness of his blood.

It is a faith in real bodies, and their persistence even in absence—their immanence, that is, in the dream of presence-in-writing—that motivates Portia's father and his will. At the same time, a faith in real bodies motivates Shylock's passionate pursuit of the forfeiture of the bond, underwriting, as it were, Shylock's much-discussed adherence to "the letter of the law." Shylock very clearly understands there to be an intimate relationship between the body and writing, even as he hopes to kill Antonio by inscribing upon his body the costs of both the forfeited bond and the wages of Antonio's anti-semitism. At the same time, Shylock understands that there is an equally intimate relationship between the body and the state, which are mutually dependent and discursively figured: Antonio's fate lies in Shylock's hands to the extent that Venice as a political entity lies embodied in its laws, hence Shylock's repeated appeals to law and justice. The Duke necessarily finds this argument compelling and is left no choice but to endorse what he thinks is the young doctor's sentence against the merchant. Antonio, for his part, seems to accept the inevitability of his death at Shylock's hands; in fact, Antonio recognizes that Shylock's execution of the forfeiture constitutes a writing on his body that will inscribe a specific meaning:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death,—the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me;
You cannot better be employ'd Bassanio,
Than to live still and write mine epitaph.

(4.1.114-18)

For Antonio, the antidote to death is a kind of immortality in writing: his epitaph. He later invokes this imagined presence in his farewell to Bassanio:

Commend me to your honorable wife,
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death:
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love:
Repent but you that you shall lose your friend
And he repents not that he pays your debt.
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart.

(4.1.269-77)

Antonio's faith in presence-in-writing, like Portia's father's and Shylock's, construes the body as the ultimate ground of writing, whether that writing literally occurs on the body (Morocco's incision, Antonio's pound of flesh) or is understood as immanent in writing itself (Portia's father's will, Shylock's bond). In both instances, writing promises presence in absence and articulates its promise on the level of letteral configurations within the play.

Another significant instance of this is Portia's embodiment as Balthazar, the young doctor of laws. Portia's disguise as Balthazar is of particular interest because it is, like Jessica's and Nerissa's corresponding changes, a cross-gender embodiment: by virtue of the letter (first Portia's letter to Bellario and then, in turn, Bellario's letter to the Duke), Portia and Nerissa will both appear as men ("accomplished / With what we lack" [3.4.61-62]) before the Venetian court.27

In her transformed shape, Portia manifests a profound ability to exploit the hypostatized relationship between the body, writing, and the state by recasting the narrative of embodiment Shylock and the others have
imagined. Portia intervenes in Shylock’s narrative (and Antonio’s, too, as he projects his embodiment in Bassanio’s epitaph) by appropriating Shylock’s linguistic practice: he has insisted upon the letter of the law (the logic, that is, of presence-in-writing) and it is precisely this literalism (“letteralism”) that Portia turns upon him:

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’:
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

(4.1.302-8)

While the outcome perhaps startles—it is Shylock and not Antonio who will die by the violence of the letter—the logic of that violence is no surprise as it has in fact underwritten the entire play, even here in the moment of its evident reversal.28

Portia draws the play toward its conclusion with a final letter telling Antonio of the safe return of his ships.29 But if this letter represents the moment of comic closure in which even the failure of Antonio’s merchant venture (by now perhaps a moot issue) is recuperated, it also represents a profound mystification of the letter and all that it is held to signify:

Antonio you are welcome,
And I have better news in store for you
Than you expect: unseal this letter soon,
There you shall find three of your argosies
Are richly come to harbour suddenly.
You shall not know by what strange accident
I chanced on this letter.

(5.1.273-79)

Though this final letter carries a certain signifying and sensational content, like Antonio (and perhaps like Portia) we cannot account for its presence. The play forecloses any such accounting; the letter simply exists as the final sign of comic resolution. While this letter may stand emblematically for the various operations of the letters we have encountered throughout the play—particularly the desire for presence-in-writing upon which they are founded—this letter comes from nowhere and from no one’s hand. It serves, then, to destabilize the very philosophy of the letter and its epistemology of presence; it betrays the mystical or, more aptly, the theological nature of the letter. In the end, the letter inhabits the realm of the conjectural, not the contractual, and our confidence in the letter is actually our profound and desperate faith in it. Rather than serving to guarantee desire and anchor it in the material, the mystical letter affords only the vision of such grounding always just beyond reach. And its only pleasures are the pleasures of the dream of immanence that the letter inscribes as the condition of its, and perhaps our own, ontology.

Disembodied Letters and The Merchant of Venice: II

This dream informs Merchant in another instance of the conjectural letter—or conjectural letters—and a putative relationship to presence. The critical textual moment for the Salerio/Salarino/Solanio issue occurs
within the play's most important staging of the scene of reading—in 3.2, the moment (discussed above) just after Bassanio has made the correct choice of the lead casket, and a character arrives carrying Antonio's letter. It is the identity of this character that has caused considerable debate. The 1987 New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, edited by M. M. Mahood, identifies the three characters in its "List of Characters" thus:

Solanio
   gentlemen of Venice, and companions
   with Bassanio
Salarino

Salerio, a messenger from Venice

The entry for Salarino is noted at the bottom of the page: "He may very probably be the same character as 'Salerio'," and we are asked to consult the "Textual Analysis" that supplements the text. In the pages of the "Textual Analysis" devoted to a discussion of these characters, Mahood offers a careful review of the parameters of this textual problem and the solutions to it offered by various editors:

Earlier editors of the play were reluctant to believe that Shakespeare, after naming two characters "Salarino" and "Solanio" … would have made confusion worse confounded by bringing on a third character called "Salerio." To have created so superfluous a character would have violated "dramatic propriety," put the actors to unnecessary expense, and shown a singular lack of inventiveness in the choice of names. … In the New Shakespeare edition of 1926, [John Dover] Wilson concurred with Capell in making Salarino and Salerio one and the same person but decided that Shakespeare's name for him must be "Salerio" since this occurs five times in the dialogue. He therefore substituted "Salerio" for "Salarino" or its variants in all previous stage directions and speech headings. All subsequent editors have followed Wilson in this, and Salarino has not put in an appearance for the past sixty years. On a number of grounds, I have restored him to the text of this edition. (M, 179)

Mahood argues there is "no prima facie case against Shakespeare having had three different personages in mind. On the other hand, the positive evidence in favour of three characters is admittedly slight" (M, 179). After a lengthy discussion of the various arguments both for and against the eliding of Salarino and Salerio, Mahood decides to maintain the distinction between these characters within the text, while noting in the textual apparatus the possibility that this decision may be untenable. This decision is underwritten, however, not by an argument for one character over the other, but is instead guaranteed by an appeal to a reputed authorial intention or the (lost, conjectural or—at the very least—the specular) authorial script:

It is always open to the director to identify Salarino with Salerio, thereby economising on minor parts and very probably fulfilling Shakespeare's final intention into the bargain. But the printed text must, I believe, retain three Venetian gentlemen with similar names because, whatever his intentions, Salarino, Solanio, and Salerio all figured in the manuscript that Shakespeare actually gave to his actors as The Merchant of Venice. (M, 183)

Embedded within this final comment are a number of crucial issues. To begin with, Mahood accepts a fundamental distinction between the play as it is performed and the play as a text: in the first instance, the textual stand taken vis-à-vis Salarino/Salerio simply doesn't signify; in the latter, the textual becomes occasion for taking a stand. In other words, this textual matter finally doesn't matter if the play is imagined in performance—as spoken language—, but matters a good deal more if it is instead imagined as a text—as written language.
This constitutes a performative version of the logocentrism described by Derrida: spoken language is imagined as prior to and more immediate than the written, with the consequences in this particular instance being that in production the play is substantially different in such a way as to allow an editorial emendation that in print would be inadmissable. At the same time, Mahood suggests that whatever the decision in performance, in print the three characters must nevertheless still appear. The performed play, then, enacts yet another splitting, reifies the posited distinction between performed and textual play, as an actor may be—in performance—Salerio while in print he may (still) be Salarino.\textsuperscript{31}

There is another issue at stake in Mahood's double-vision of a single version of the play, and it is an issue relevant to our understanding of \textit{Merchant} more generally. In the above paragraph Mahood identifies the three characters as "three Venetian gentlemen," while in the "Textual Analysis" she suggests that their status as "gentlemen" is perhaps open to some question, and that, moreover, Salerio may not be a gentleman at all, as his nomination "a messenger from Venice" may well suggest:

\begin{quote}
\textit{a messenger from Venice} (3.2.218 SD) could imply that not only is Salerio not to be confused with the two men-about-town, but that his social status is rather different. Gratiano's "My old Venetian friend Salerio " (218) need not imply equality; it can be a condescending form of address and also an explanatory phrase such as the audience would not need if it had met Salerio four times already. Salerio … can be seen as a kind of state functionary … . This would accord with his role in the trial, where he is a kind of gentleman usher. (M, 181-82)
\end{quote}

But Salerio's social status is not the only one at stake: while the "social nuances of four hundred years ago are not … something on which we can speak with confidence today," Mahood suggests, "it would be quite easy to make out a case, in the play's first scene, for a social difference between Solanio and Salarino on the one hand and Bassanio's more immediate group of friends on the other" (M, 182). Mahood clearly brings certain notions of class and class distinction to the play, and just as clearly suspects Shakespeare to have done so as well.

While Mahood's decision to retain Salarino seems to depend in part upon his presumed class-based differences from Salerio, it is in fact underwritten by an unquestioned adherence to the tenets of traditional textual criticism—particularly the faith in authorial intentionality. In this regard, then, Mahood's inclusion of Salarino is effectively no different from Wilson's exclusion of him.

Wilson's discussion of what he calls "the muddle of the three Sallies" (W, 100) is a careful analysis of this textual problem and has stood as the almost universal "resolution" reproduced by every editor of the play until Mahood. Wilson's argument—that "Salarino" is a repeatedly misrecognized or misprinted version of "Salerio"—is heavily indebted to a complex textual genealogical argument in which the copy-text for the 1600 Hayes Quarto is believed to have been pieced together not from prompt-books or manuscript (the latter is the argument favored by recent editors), but from what Wilson calls "secondary theatrical manuscripts" (W, 105). Wilson finds corroborating evidence for this conclusion in a number of the play's more striking textual characteristics: the evident addition of texts into the play—specifically, the letters read aloud in 3.2 and 4.1 and the three scrolls of the casket scenes—, the play's stage directions, the related matter of the "three Sallies," and what Wilson deems the evident playhouse additions to the play.

Wilson notes the curious textual features associated with the letters and the scrolls—that they are bibliographically "marked off" within the Quarto, and that for each a speech heading is missing. This bibliographical distinctness, Wilson claims, is "a textual fact of capital importance":

\begin{quote}
For the absences of prefixes before the letters and the duplication of prefixes in the speeches afford clear evidence that both letters and scrolls are, bibliographically speaking, textually distinct from the rest of the copy, or in other words, insertions … . Any text, therefore, in
\end{quote}
which letters, songs or scrolls are seemingly insertions, is to be suspected of being derived, not from the original "book," but from some secondary theatrical source, composed of players' parts. (W, 97-98)

The "frequent vagueness" of entry directions ("Enter Bassanio with a follower or two" [2.2.109], one of whom later turns out to be Leonardo; the entry for the "man of Portia's" whom we later learn is Balthazar, and the "Messenger" [5.1.24] who "is discovered four lines later to be Stephano, one of Portia's household") prove that, as Wilson had argued earlier in the New Shakespeare edition of The Comedy of Errors, "the dialogue had been copied out (from the players' parts) by one scribe and the stage-directions supplied by another … who possessed very vague ideas of the text he was working on" (W, 100). It is precisely this "scribe responsible for the stage-directions" whom Wilson holds accountable both for the "muddle of the three Sallies" and for the general textual state of the entire Quarto.

In his argument for resolving the Salerio/Salarino crux, Wilson lays the responsibility for the problem entirely at the hands of the scribe, reconstructing, based upon his sense of evidence, what must have happened in the scribe's production of the text:

Whence then came this curious "Salarino"? If we assume, as we have already found ourselves entitled to assume, that the text before us was made up of players' parts strung together, transcribed and then worked over by a scribe who supplied the stage-directions, the reply is not difficult. … This scribe had before him at the outset, we must suppose, a transcript from the parts containing only the bare dialogue and the abbreviated prefixes, so that he would be obliged to rely upon his memory of the play upon the stage for the full names of those characters which were not mentioned in the dialogue itself. Now the form "Salarino" is found, apart from the stage-directions, nowhere in the dialogue and in only one prefix, which occurs at 1.1.8. The prefix "Salari" (which is of course a variant spelling of "Saleri") is, on the other hand, fairly frequent. The beginning of all the muddle, we suggest, was that the scribe found the prefix "Salari" in his text at 1.1.8, took it as a contraction for "Salarino," added "no" to it, and framed his entry-direction accordingly. It accords with this theory that the only time we get the erroneous "Salanio" in the prefixes is at 1.1.15 … . Clearly, we think, the meddling scribe made the two changes at the same time. (W, 103-104)

From this description of an imagined scene of scribal intrusion and disruption of the Shakespearean text, Wilson constructs an entire narrative of the scribe's work and his absolute consistency in his erroneous and meddling ways:

"Salarino" (or "Salerino") marches happily along in the stage-directions hand in hand with "Salanio" (or "Solanio") up to the end of 3.1, by which time the former name had become such a habit with the scribe that when he comes upon "Salerio" in the dialogue of 3.2 he quite fails to recognize his identity and puts him down as "a messenger from Venice." (W, 104)

The final evidence for Wilson's theory of the "assembled text" is what he identifies as the playhouse additions to the play itself, arguing that "texts derived from secondary theatrical manuscripts are likely to preserve traces of actors', or at least of playhouse, additions." Wilson identifies an early section of 5.1 as such a trace—a "piece of 'fat,' as the modern actor would call it, [that] has clearly been inserted in the text": the prose lines introduced by Lancelot's repeated "sola's" and concluded with what Wilson conjectures is the misassignment of "sweete soule" (W, 105). In his analysis of the significance of the textual irregularities he finds in this brief passage, Wilson has recourse to the assistance of W. W. Greg ("whose authority on matters of this kind is unrivalled" (W, 106)); when asked by Wilson what he made of the "sweete soule" matter, Greg theorized a version of the assembled text argument:
I think it is pretty clear that the preceding passage was an insertion in the margin, or more probably on a slip, ending up, as was usual, with a repetition of the following words to show where it was to come. The sense shows that the insertion must have begun with the Messenger's words: "I pray you is my Maister yet returnd?" I suppose that the printer finding the words repeated in the MS, omitted the second occurrence. The compositor would not be very likely to do this, but a proof-reader might—or there may have been an intermediate transcript. (qtd. in W, 106)

Authorized by Greg's words, Wilson continues his argument by wondering why there should be this addition at all—especially as "the passage … might be omitted without any injury to the context." The answer, Wilson declares, is simple: "to give the clown who played Lancelot an opportunity of making the theatre ring with his 'sola!'" "Evidently," Wilson concludes, "the clown in Shakespeare's company, Will Kempe presumably, was fond of caterwauling tricks" (W, 106-7).

Let us for a moment consider the rhetoric of this derisive passage which manifests a certain ideological bias brought to bear not only on the passages under review, but to the editing of the entire play, and, moreover, to that play's meaning. In this passage Wilson makes the small but serious mistake of referring to Will Kempe not as the comedian of Shakespeare's company, but as its clown. To confuse or conflate the two is to eradicate any distinction between actor and the part an actor might play upon the stage; the consequences of this confusion are significant. In Wilson's rhetoric, Kempe literally is a clown, and as such occupies the same position in the space of the social world that a clown does in the space of the theater. So Kempe's addition here—his "piece of 'fat'"—is pure clowning, but clowning with serious ramifications. For Wilson, Kempe's addition represents nothing less than the eruption of chaos and disorder into the otherwise decorous and high-aesthetic world of the Shakespearean play. Kempe becomes the sign of both social and aesthetic disruption and literal (letteral) textual corruption.

Wilson's vision of Kempe as the figure of radical instability does not end here, however, for as Wilson says, "if an addition was made to this 'assembled' prompt-book at one place, why not at others?" (W, 107); the text stands hopelessly vulnerable to the pernicious effects of Kempe as the socially and aesthetically disenfranchised figure of instability and subversion. Wilson identifies a second "prose-patch, this time of a ribald nature," in 3.2:

It is pretty certainly a textual addition, and we suspect that it was made by the same hand as wrote the 'sola' slip. Indeed, we are inclined to go even further and to attribute a whole scene to this unknown scribe. (W, 107)

The passage under review here—the opening 59 lines of prose—including Lorenzo's famously obscure charge, "the Moor is with child by you Lancelot!" (3.5.35-6), and ends when Lancelot exits to prepare dinner. Wilson argues that not only is this so-called prose-patch an addition, but that the entire scene was (again) instigated by Kempe:

It is the verse with which the scene closes that seems to provide the clue we are seeking. The first five and a half lines of this verse are a tribute to Lancelot, or rather to the actor who played him, while the reference to "A many fools that stand in better place" is obviously intended as a hit at some successful rival. In a word, we suggest that Shakespeare had no hand whatever in the composition of 3.5, which might be omitted altogether without loss to the play; that it was added to the "assembled" prompt-book at the same time as the insertions at 5.1.39-49 and 3.2.214-18; and that while 3.5.60-5 was written by some second-rate poet as a compliment to William Kempe, Kempe himself may have been responsible for the very dull fifty-nine lines of prose with which the scene opens. (W, 108)
Wilson concludes his discussion of the copy for the Hayes Quarto by suggesting that Kempe not only presumed to write in Shakespeare's hand, but, also that it was he who was the "unknown" and "meddling" scribe Wilson's theory of the text had posited:

To sum up, our contention is that the manuscript used as copy by Roberts' compositors in 1600 contained not a line of Shakespeare's handwriting, but was some kind of prompt-book made up from players' parts, to which a theatrical scribe (maybe Kempe himself) had added stage-directions and additions of his own devising. (W, 108)

For Wilson, Kempe's intrusive and radically disruptive acts of destabilizing self-promotion are complete, but at a material cost to the integrity of the Shakespearean hand and text. Wilson's theory of the production of Merchant attributes virtually everything that is of uncertain authority and authorship—and therefore everything that is deemed aesthetically bankrupt—fully to the hands of Will Kempe.33

These suspicions of Kempe's destabilizing presence in Merchant betray Wilson's fundamental distrust—not to say fear—of the lower class of which Kempe is made to stand as the embodiment. Wilson's "aristocratic" position, in turn, stands in steadfast opposition to such a disruption, as it seeks to guarantee the "sovereignty" of the Shakespearean texts against dissent, disruption or subversion "from below." This is precisely the sort of political and critical conservatism Terence Hawkes has so brilliantly analyzed in Dover Wilson's career as a "social" writer on Russia and its revolution, and as a literary critic.34 Hawkes describes Wilson's conservatism (like Tillyard's) as "a version of what, by the time of the second world war, had become a standard British response to national crisis: the construction of longpast, green, alternative worlds of percipient peasants, organic communities, festivals, folk art, and absolute monarchy to set against present chaos."35 Such a vision imposes a radical reconstruction of "peasant" and "folk" culture as happily acquiescent to the absolute monarch. This is an Edenic vision of folk culture that fails to see in it any potential source of subversive energy, any potential for misrule.

But this vision is not imagined, however, as necessarily natural. In fact, it takes the very deliberate and careful intervention on the part of people such as Wilson (and their appropriation of figures such as Shakespeare) to produce it, to identify potentially disruptive people such as Will Kempe, and recreate them as docile (royal) subjects. This is achieved, in Wilson's view, through both a well-regulated and maintained aesthetic and nationalistic education.36

Wilson's political conservatism (like his critical and editorial conservatism) is dedicated to the preservation of so-called traditional values: Nation, high-aesthetic value, and the sovereign individual—whether that individual is Shakespeare or Tsar Nicholas II. And these transcendental values are themselves underwritten by a Hegelian philosophy and historiography that understands human activity not merely as diachronic, but as processive and, finally, teleological.

It is precisely against this teleological or exclusively linear model that Hawkes offers Telmah. For Hawkes, Hamlet is structured on the model of recursivity: events, words and phrases appear and then are replayed again. Hawkes warns us, however, not to be deceived by this recursivity and its symmetries:

It would be wrong to make too much of "symmetries" of this sort, and I mention them only because, once recognized, they help however slightly to undermine our inherited notion of Hamlet as a structure that runs a satisfactorily linear, sequential course from a firmly established and well defined beginning, through a clearly placed and signaled middle, to a causally related and logically determined end which, planted in the beginning, develops, or grows out of it.
Like all symmetries, the ones I have pointed to suggest, not linearity, but circularity: a cyclical and recursive movement wholly at odds with the progressive, incremental ordering that a society, dominated perhaps by a pervasive metaphor of the production line, tends to think of as appropriate to art as to everything else.  

The metaphor of the production line bespeaks a deeprooted notion of (historical) progress and it is this philosophy of progress that authorizes and determines Wilson's editorial practices and produces his version of *Merchant*. Moreover, this philosophy of progress and the epistemology of presence together have powered traditional textual criticism, regardless of local responses to textual problems. Mahood's decision, for instance, to retain or restore Salarino to the play is a good one, though I disagree with her traditionally-determined reasons for doing so. Our current understandings of (Shakespearean) textuality no longer require or endorse the appeal to authorial intention or authorial script. My argument is more concerned with the untenable nature of traditional editorial practice typified by Wilson than with evidential weight behind retaining Salarino. In fact, it seems to me not much to matter how there came to be three characters with such names in the Hayes quarto, but simply that there came to be these three "letteral" configurations we have decided to call characters. The matter of the three Sallies is important here not because it stands as yet another site for our intervention in the attempt to solve a textual crux, but rather precisely because it marks the eruption—inexplicable and yet undeniable—of the accidental.

In the anticipated aftermath of the collapse of traditional textual criticism, can we theorize a textual practice and a theory of textuality not determined by a Hegelian processive philosophy?

**Disembodied Letters and The Merchant of Venice: III**

To the interpreter, texts often appear as images of time; to the makers of texts, however, they are the very events of time and history itself.

—Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition*

I begin this concluding section with the above quotation in part because it strikes me as an apt characterization of the various ways in which the relationship between texts and history is frequently construed: for some readers and critics, texts often are imagined as fully self-present representations of the past, while for their creators texts simply are, one might say, "the stuff of history." In criticism texts are typically implicated in history only to the extent that they either 1) represent (embody) a particular historical moment, or 2) can themselves stand as historical fields. The latter is precisely what happens in traditional textual criticism that posits the eclectic text as its interpretive paradigm. The model of the eclectic text (the text produced historically) construes the text as a historical field, the place of history, and, moreover, as the site of historical evolution and progress—that "homogeneous, empty time" Benjamin identifies as the "foundational" conceit so much in need of what we might today call deconstruction.

To imagine the text not in time but as time; this is the tendency of traditional textual criticism, powered, as it is, by an underlying Hegelian conception of history as the gradual exfoliation of a master-narrative. Thus traditional editorial practice emerges as a kind of historiography predicated upon an essentially teleological model of progress. For Dover Wilson, it is the progressive narrative of an aristocratic or monarchical political and class conservatism that seeks in archaic forms of absolutism the redemption of traditional aesthetic and national value against the threat of proletarian political struggle and revolution. Wilson's is a redemptive vision of the social place of high literary culture: it is in this high literary culture, Wilson suggests, that we can find transcendent liberation and salvation.
The appeal to these putative redemptive and salvational powers has been characteristic of our cultural appropriation of Shakespeare, and literary and aesthetic "genius" more generally. But if it is true that texts do not necessarily embody or imply a politics of redemption or liberation, what, then, can texts be said to embody?

In truth, this is a misleading question. Since embodiment as a textual property depends on the manifestly untenable hope of presence-in-writing, we cannot legitimately say that texts embody anything. We can say, however, that texts occur, and as such they stand not as objects but rather as events. As McGann suggests, "Properly understood … every text is unique and original to itself when we consider it not as an object but as an action." Texts happen in a way analogous to the happening of events (historical, social, political, accidental) outside our anachronistically imposed narratives of authorship, textuality, causality, diachronicity, history, nationalism, liberation, and so on. This is a way of reading that goes entirely against the grain of a play such as Merchant, which articulates the very faith in and philosophy of presence-in-writing and embodiment I have tried to critique here. In place of this theory of reading predicated upon the metaphysics of presence, let us put in place a non-appropriative theory and practice of reading and historiography that allows the texts to exist more purely in history, rather than as latter-day reconstructions of our own self-interested narratives.

And what of accidents?

To the extraordinary extent that they are routinely subjected to narrative strategies dedicated to the explanation or discovery of meaning (the establishment of chronology, the articulation of significance—in short, the demonstration of absolute causality and accountability), textual and historical accidents (the two seem almost indistinguishable) have always been subjected to a reactive practice of over-writing. Corrected, emended, or re-defined out of existence, accidents have almost universally been construed as sites for the contestation of the subject (the author, or—more likely—the critic) against error, confusion, and meaninglessness, and seldom as mere instances of the uncaused—that great bugbear to systems of the production of meaning. Accidents are important precisely because as accidents they mark eruptions of phenomena for which we simply cannot account. It is the accident that gives the very notion of causality the lie, and as such accidents can be said to delimit the domain of agency. Traditional textual criticism (like most other forms of historiography) is motivated by a relentless desire to articulate—in some instances, to manufacture—causality, and as such is dedicated to the description and, more importantly, the extension of the domain of agency. We can see this is the paradigm of the eclectic text in which every word is entirely caused, and in which nothing is allowed to remain accidental. To clean up accidents in a text is to construct a narrativized world of total causality and accountability, a purely rational world in which everything is under control. This is Dover Wilson's practice, for example, in his construction of a wholly meaningful text of Merchant, or in his meaningful description of Russian absolutism. And there are accidents within the narrative of Merchant that the play clearly attempts to over-write: the "accident" of a Jew's domination of a Christian that Portia overwrites, for example, or the accident of the loss of Antonio's merchant ships which is redeemed through the mystification of the letter. And there are legion over-writings of accidents in criticism of the play—whether textual or interpretive in nature.

The three Sallies, then, are certainly part of the play. Or, to be more precise, the multiple Sallies are all of them part of the play: the quartos and Folio present, Wilson remarks, not only Salerio, Solanio, and Salarino, but "Salerino," "Salari," and "Saleri," and Mahood lists the cornucopic variety of textual incarnations of these "characters": Salaryno, Salino, Slarino, Salerino, Sala, Salan, Salanio, Salarino, Salanio, Salar, Sola, Sal, Solanio, Sali, Saleri, Sol. Mahood's list of the Sallie "characters" is emblematic not only of the radical instability of the text, or the proliferation of accidents in that text, but also of our sheer inability to account for these "characters," our inability to construct a narrative (of a story or of a text) in which they all have a truly meaningful place.
Unediting, then, of the most radical sort—unediting, that is, dedicated to the domains of both agency and non-agency—returns the text more fully to history, and at the same time understands texts as more fully historical, and as such demonstrates the limits of agency. In spite of our collective insatiability for meaning, there is, as it happens, a world apart—an accidental world.

Notes

1 Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991): "Both the practice and the study of human culture comprise a network of symbolic exchanges. Because human beings are not angels, these exchanges always involve material negotiations. Even in their most complex and advanced forms—when the negotiations are carried out as textual events—the intercourse that is being human is materially executed: as spoken texts or scripted forms. To participate in these exchanges is to have entered what I wish to call here 'the textual condition'" (3).


3 McGann (note 2), 8.


6 Marcus, "Textual Indeterminacy" (note 5), 3.

7 Marcus, 24.

8 Marcus, 12. Marcus also notes, "The A text could be described as more nationalist and more Calvinist, Puritan, or ultra-Protestant, the B text as more internationalist, imperial, and Anglican, or Anglo-Catholic—but each version places the magician at the extreme edge of transgression in terms of its own implied system of values" (5).

9 Marcus discusses these revisions: "The 1602 revisions worked to keep *Doctor Faustus* on the thrilling/unnerving edge of transgression by inscribing the play with a new set of national priorities and anxieties. A theatrical company and its hired 'hack' writers transformed what was then extant as 'Marlowe' in order to keep the 'Marlowe effect' alive, to keep Marlowe sounding like himself even decades after his physical demise. In the curious case of *Doctor Faustus*, nonauthorial revision functioned to heighten, not to destroy, an aura of authorial 'authenticity' in the theater" (15).
Jonathan Goldberg, "Textual Properties," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 214. Goldberg continues, "the historicity of the text means that there is no text itself; it means that a text cannot be fixed in terms of original or final intentions. At best, Shakespearean practice authorizes the dispersal of authorial intention" (214). De Grazia and Stallybrass (note 4) also discuss the illusory nature of the "original": "Return to the early texts provides no access to a privileged 'original'; on the contrary, for the modern reader it bars access. The features that modernization and emendation smooth away remain stubbornly in place to block the illusion of transparency—the impression that there is some ideal 'original' behind the text" (256).


Goldberg, 215.

Goldberg, 216.

Goldberg discusses the Shakespearean text in which, now, "no word … is sacred." Moreover, he continues, with this "radical instability" of the Shakespearean text, "all criticism that has based itself on the text, all forms of formalism, all close reading, is given the lie" (215).


McGann, 93-94.

McGann, 119.

Goldberg, "Textual Properties" (note 10), 217.

*The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1955), 3.2.314-20. All references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in text by act, scene and line.


*The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1926), 97. Subsequent references to Wilson appear parenthetically in the text in the text and are cited by W.


There are two further differences between the modern and the Quarto versions of the letter and its physical/material presentation. In our modern editions we are accustomed to the addition of two linguistic items not found in the Quarto text: the parentheses around "since in paying it, it is impossible I should live," and the insertion of a comma after the phrase "all debts are cleared between you and I." In the first instance, the addition of the parentheses serves to make Antonio's recognition of the cost of the forfeiture subordinate to the act of forgiveness within which it occurs, a highly intrusive editorial decision that alters the sense of the passage. As punctuated in the Quarto, the passage makes perfect sense, though not the sense we have ascribed to it (or to Antonio, for that matter) in our modern editions. The letter may well want to register linguistically the equivalence of Antonio's death and Bassanio's debts; the subordinating effect of the parentheses suppresses such a reading. In the second instance—the instance of the comma—the Quarto's syntax makes rather explicit that there is a causal relationship between the forgiveness of the debt and Bassanio's appearance at Antonio's death: the former is more explicitly conditional upon the latter. The editorial addition of the comma serves to mitigate the force of Antonio's determination. Again, such an editorial decision is intrusive
and in a way revises the sense of the letter.


25 This is the same faith that can be said to underwrite drama as a genre: a belief in presence-in-writing is given the extraordinary dimension and expression in the representational embodiments of characters in the figures of the actors who portray them on stage before our very eyes. Drama is, perhaps, the expression of the metaphysics of writing *par excellence*.

26 Freud's essay begins by reading the caskets as symbols for women: if the scene of the three caskets from *Merchant* appeared in a dream, Freud says, "it would at once occur to us that caskets are also women, symbols of the essential thing in woman, and therefore of a woman herself, like boxes, large or small, baskets, and so on" ("The Theme of the Three Caskets," in *Sigmund Freud: The Collected Papers*, ed. Joan Riviere, 5 vols. [New York: Basic Books, 1959], 4:245-56). Then, by way of a circuitous path through various national mythologies, folk-tales, and *King Lear*, Freud arrives at his perhaps predictable conclusion that the theme of the three caskets allegorically represents "the three inevitable relations man has with woman": "That with the mother who bears him, with the companion of his bed and board, and with the destroyer. Or it is the three forms taken on by the figure of the mother as life proceeds: the mother herself, the beloved who is chosen after her pattern, and finally the Mother Earth who receives him again" (256).

27 In a discussion of letters and their circulation in Shakespearean texts, "Shakespearean Inscriptions: The Voicing of Power" [in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 116-137], Jonathan Goldberg argues that Portia's position in court and her ultimate success there—and in the fifth act drama of the ring—depend upon the sheer impossibility of the "selfsameness" of the letter: "The 'turn' that Portia takes calls into question the differences upon which the play rests, male and female, Jew and Christian, letter and spirit, for the lewdness of the play that she initiates—sending the letter and donning the disguise (the device)—rests upon equivocations within the letter, differences within the self-same. Portia's 'whole device' involves filling a place—the place of Bellario, the place of the law—through an act of replacement that calls into question the possibility of duplication (the repeatability and self-sameness upon which the law rests)" (122).

28 This reversal also manifests the play's fundamental dependence upon Christian historiography that posits two related phases of post-lapsarian history—the Mosaic or Old Testament articulation of life under the law, and the New Testament life of the spirit. In this vision of history, the Christian progresses from the first phase to the second in a movement that is suggested by Christ's example and guaranteed by virtue of the spirit's redemption of the law and its letter. Portia leads the Christians of the play in this progress toward redemption and salvation; Shylock, on the other hand, is its clear victim.

29 Portia's and Nerissa's taunting of Bassanio and Gratiano over the matter of the rings has special significance as well, in part because their laughter—and their husbands' initial consternation—are explicitly linked to the politics of embodiment and textuality. Portia can assure Bassanio that she will welcome the doctor to her bed ("Know him I shall, I am well sure of it" [5.1.229]) because of her embodiment as both "herself" and as "the doctor." In fact, the moment Portia produces the ring—"I had it of him: pardon me Bassanio, / For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (5.1.258-59)—she stands, as it were, as both herself and the doctor. This crisis is averted not simply with Portia's announcement that she was the doctor and Nerissa the clerk, but only when she produces the letter as evidence:

    you are all amaz'd;
    Here is a letter, read it at your leisure,—
    It comes from Padua from Bellario,—
There you shall find that Portia was the
doctor,
Nerissa there the clerk.

(5.1.266-70)

30*The Merchant of Venice*, ed. M. M. Mahood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 56. Subsequent references to Mahood occur parenthetically in text and are cited by M.

31 Jonathan Goldberg discusses a similar manifestation of logocentrism in Shakespeare's second tetralogy: "The subsequent plays are haunted too by what is put on deposit in the deposition scene [of Richard II]: the alliance of kingship with the repression of textuality, and the ways in which the play both supports that logocentrism and undermines it." ("Rebel Letters: Postal Effects from Richard II to Henry IV," *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 19 [1988]: 10).

32 It is interesting to note that in the 1939 Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge (later published as *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare: A Survey of the Foundations of the Text*, 2d ed. [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951]), Greg rejects both the conclusions drawn by Dover Wilson on the textual genealogy of *Merchant* and its production from assembled prompt-book, and his own evident participation in the argument: "I do not regard the presentation of the prompt-book for registration [in the Stationers' Register] as involving its use as copy. Like Chambers 'I see no clear reason why the copy used ... should not have been in Shakespeare's hand'—and foul papers at that, at least in the technical sense, for the text itself is remarkably good ... . A prompt copy would surely have straightened out the tangle of ambiguous prefixes that according to Wilson led to the creation of a ghost character in Salarino. *It appears that I once argued that a passage at the foot of sig. 12 was an insertion probably written on a separate piece of paper.* Wilson and Chambers allow the possibility: but the addition might have been made in foul papers as easily as in the prompt-book" (123; emphasis added).

33 In Goldberg's discussion of the important textual crux in *1 Henry IV* regarding the identity of the character that actually reads aloud the paper taken from the sleeping Falstaff's pocket, he discerns a similar classbased agenda on the part of traditional textual critics: "Dover Wilson and Bowers indulge fantasies about restoring Shakespeare's lost original text ... . Bower's elaborate argument about stage history and its role in shaping Q1 is quite clearly bent on saving Hal from being sullied with low companions like Peto ... . The Petos of the world, Bowers insists, cannot read without being risible. Shakespeare cannot originally have wanted the Prince to have ended the scene in his company. Modern editors, on the whole, are willing enough to leave Peto there, and reading, as he does in F1; but they, too, share similar suppositions. The Prince must not read. And perhaps the editorial emendation in F1 is a result of the ideological construction of scenes of reading in the play; rebels read, but royalty do not" ("Rebel Letters" [note 31], 23).

34 Hawkes identifies Dover Wilson's political conservatism in his renunciation of the Bolsheviks and his explicit endorsement of Tsarism in the article, "Russia and Her Ideals," in which he writes: "[Autocracy] still has a long life before it and much work to perform in Russia. It is therefore wiser to face the facts and to recognize that the Tsardom is after all Russia's form of democracy ... . it is the kind of government the people understand and reverence, and it is their only protection against the tyranny of an aristocratic clique ... . when the will of the autocrat is clearly and unmistakably expressed, it has always been found to correspond with the needs of the people" (quoted in Hawkes, "Telmah" [note 27], 323).

35 Hawkes, 324.

36 Hawkes discusses Dover Wilson's participation in this pedagogic regime as it was articulated in the famous Newbolt Report of 1921 (*The Teaching of English in England*). Wilson's contribution falls into the category of "Literature and the nation," asserting, Hawkes suggests, that "teaching literature to the working class is a kind
of 'missionary work' whose aim is to stem the tide of that class's by then evident disaffection." In this manifestly political vision, "literature is offered as an instrument for promoting social cohesion in place of division": "The specter of a working class, demanding material goods with menaces, losing its national mind, besmirching its national character, clearly had a growing capacity to disturb after the events of 1917, particularly if that class, as Dover Wilson writes in the Newbolt Report, sees education 'mainly as something to equip them to fight their capitalistic enemies.' … To Dover Wilson … the solution lay quite clearly in the sort of nourishment that English literature offered: the snap, crackle and pop of its roughage as purgative force of considerable political power" (Hawkes, 326-27).

37 Hawkes, 311-12. Hawkes offers the curtain call—“that complex of revisionary ironies”—as yet another theatrical practice that marks the emergence of the counter-current of recursive movement: "Here [in the curtain call] … any apparent movement in one direction of the play halts, and it begins to roll decisively in the opposite direction (if only towards the next performance, when its 'beginning' will emerge from these smiling actors). In short, the sense of straight, purposive, linear motion forward through the play—the sense required by most 'interpretations' of it—evaporates at the curtain call, and we sense an opposing current" (313).

38 McGann, The Textual Condition (note 1), 183.

39 Mahood (note 29), 180-81.


How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist: Introduction

How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist

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It has been recognized for a long time that The Merchant of Venice is experienced as insulting by Jewish people, who constitute a minority in Western Europe and North America. So powerful, though, is the reputation of Shakespeare's all-embracing 'humanity' that this scandal has often been set aside. Nevertheless, in 1994 a newspaper article entitled 'Shylock, Unacceptable Face of Shakespeare?' described how directors were acknowledging that the text requires radical alterations before it can be produced in good faith. 1 David Thacker at the Royal Shakespeare Company was changing some of Shylock's most famous lines and moving scenes around. And Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire Playhouse was presenting a Portia ready to embrace racist attitudes in her determination to be worthy of her father and a Jessica weeping inconsolably at the end as she laments her loss of her Jewish heritage.

For some commentators, it is sign of the deterioration of our cultures that minority out-groups should feel entitled to challenge the authority of Shakespeare. Christopher Booker, writing in the Daily Telegraph in 1992, complained bitterly about an English Shakespeare Company production of The Merchant set in 1930s Italy, with Shylock as a suave, sophisticated modern Jewish businessman confronted by fascists. 'In other words,' Booker writes, 'the producer had given up on any distasteful (but Shakespearean) idea of presenting Shylock as an archetypal cringing old miser. He really had to be more sympathetic than the "Christians".' To Booker this was 'bleatings about racism', whereas 'Shakespeare so wonderfully evokes something infinitely more real and profound . . . a cosmic view of human nature which is just as true now as it was in his own day' (Booker 1992).
The problem is not limited to Jewish people. The Prince of Morocco is made to begin by apologizing for his colour—'Mislike me not for my complexion,' he pleads (II. i. 1), taking it for granted that Portia will be prejudiced. And he is right, for already she has declared her distaste: 'if he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me' (I. ii. 123-5); and after Morocco has bet on the wrong casket she concludes: 'Let all of his complexion choose me so' (II. vii. 79). And how might gay men regard the handling of Antonio's love for Bassanio, or the traffic in boys that involves Launcelot, the disguised Jessica, the disguised Nerissa and the disguised Portia?

The question of principle is how readers not situated squarely in the mainstream of Western culture today may relate to such a powerful cultural icon as Shakespeare. In a notable formulation, Kathleen McLuskie points out that the pattern of 'good' and 'bad' daughters in King Lear offers no point of entry to the ideas about women that a feminist criticism might want to develop; such criticism 'is restricted to exposing its own exclusion from the text' (McLuskie, 1985: 97). This challenge has caused some discomfort: must exclusion from Shakespeare be added to the other disadvantages that women experience in our societies? But it has not, I think, been successfully answered. In this essay I pursue the question as it strikes a gay man.

How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist: I Antonio vs. Portia

As W. H. Auden suggested in an essay in The Dyer's Hand in 1962, the The Merchant of Venice makes best sense if we regard Antonio as in love with Bassanio (Auden 1963; see also Midgley 1960). In the opening scene their friends hint broadly at it. Then, as soon as Bassanio arrives, the others know they should leave the two men together—"We leave you now with better company. . . . My Lord Bassanio, since you have found Antonio / We two will leave you' (I. i. 59, 69-70). Only Gradano is slow to go, being too foolish to realize that he is intruding (I. i. 73-118). As soon as he departs, the tone and direction of the dialogue switch from formal banter to intimacy, and the cause of Antonio's sadness emerges:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage—
That you to-day promis'd to tell me of?

(I. i. 119-21)

Bassanio moves quickly to reassure his friend and to ask his help: 'to you Antonio /I owe the most in money and in love' (I. i. 130-1). The mercenary nature of Bassanio's courtship, which troubles mainstream commentators who are looking for a 'good' heterosexual relationship, is Antonio's reassurance. It allows him to believe that Bassanio will continue to value their love, and gives him a crucial role as banker of the enterprise.

Whether Antonio's love is what we call sexual is a question which, this essay will show, is hard to frame, let alone answer. But certainly his feelings are intense. When Bassanio leaves for Belmont, as Salerio describes it, he offers to 'make some speed / Of his return'. 'Do not so,' Antonio replies:

And even there (his eye being big with tears),
Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
And with affection wondrous sensible
He wrung Bassanio's hand, and so they parted.

(II. viii. 37-8, 46-9)
The intensity, it seems, is not altogether equal. As Auden observes in his poem 'The More Loving One', the language of love celebrates mutuality but it is unusual for two people's loves to match precisely:

If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.

(Auden 1969: 282)

Antonio the merchant, like Antonio in Twelfth Night and the Shakespeare of the sonnets, devotes himself to a relatively casual, pampered younger man of a higher social class.

In fact, Antonio in the Merchant seems to welcome the chance to sacrifice himself: 'pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not' (III. iii. 35-6). Then Bassanio would have to devote himself to Antonio:

You cannot better be employ'd Bassanio,
Than to live still and write mine epitaph.

(IV. i. 117-18)

As Keith Geary observes, Antonio's desperate bond with Shylock is his way of holding on to Bassanio (Geary 1984: 63-4); when Portia saves Antonio's life, Lawrence W. Hyman remarks, she is preventing what would have been a spectacular case of the 'greater love' referred to in the Bible (John 15:13), when a man lays down his life for his friend (Hyman 1970: 112).

That theme of amatory sacrifice contributes to an air of homoerotic excess, especially in the idea of being bound and inviting physical violation. When Bassanio introduces Antonio to Portia as the man 'To whom I am so infinitely bound', she responds:

You should in all sense be much bound to him,
For (as I hear) he was much bound for you.

(V. i. 135-7)

At the start, Antonio lays open his entire self to Bassanio:

be assur'd
My purse, my person, my extremest means
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.

(I. i. 137-9)

Transferring this credit—'person' included—to Shylock's bond makes it more physical, more dangerous and more erotic:

let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.

(I. iii. 144-7)
In the court, eventually, it is his breast that Antonio is required to bear to the knife, but in a context where apparent boys may be disguised girls and Portia's suitors have to renounce marriage altogether if they choose the wrong casket, Shylock's penalty sounds like castration. Indeed, Antonio offers himself to the knife as 'a tainted wether of the flock'; that is, a castrated ram (IV. i. 114).

The seriousness of the love between Antonio and Bassanio is manifest, above all, in Portia's determination to contest it. Simply, she is at a disadvantage because of her father's casket device, and wants to ensure that her husband really is committed to her. The key critical move, which Hyman and Geary make, is to reject the sentimental notion of Portia as an innocent, virtuous, 'Victorian' heroine. Harry Berger regards her 'noble' speeches as manipulations: 'Against Antonio's failure to get himself crucified, we can place Portia's divine power of mercifixion; she never rains but she pours.' Finally, she mercifies Antonio by giving him back his ships (Berger 1981: 161-2; see Hyman 1970; Geary 1984).

Antonio's peril moves Bassanio to declare a preference for him over Portia:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

Portia, standing by as a young doctor, is not best pleased:

Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer.

(IV. i. 278-85)

It is to contest Antonio's status as lover that Portia, in her role of young doctor, demands of Bassanio the ring which she had given him in her role of wife. Antonio, unaware that he is falling for a device, takes the opportunity to claim a priority in Bassanio's love:

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring,
Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement.

(IV. ii. 445-7)

The last act of the play is Portia's assertion of her right to Bassanio. Her strategy is purposefully heterosexist: in disallowing Antonio's sacrifice as a plausible reason for parting with the ring, she disallows the entire seriousness of male love. She is as offhand with Antonio as she can be with a guest:

Sir, you are very welcome to our house:
It must appear in other ways than words,
Therefore I scant this breathing courtesy.

(V. i. 139-41)

She will not even admit Antonio's relevance: 'I am th'unhappy subject of these quarrels', he observes; 'Sir, grieve not you,—you are welcome not withstanding', she abruptly replies (V. i. 238-9). Once more, self-sacrifice seems to be Antonio's best chance of staying in the game, so he binds himself in a different
I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

(V. i. 249-53)

Portia seizes brutally on the reminiscence of the earlier bond: 'Then you shall be his surety' (V. i. 254). Antonio's submission is what she has been waiting for. Now she restores Bassanio's status as husband by revealing that she has the ring after all, and Antonio's viability as merchant—and his ability to return to his trade in Venice—by giving him letters that she has been withholding.

A gay reader might think: well, never mind; Bassanio wasn't worth it, and with his wealth restored, Antonio will easily find another impecunious upper-class friend to sacrifice himself to. But, for most audiences and readers, the air of 'happy ending' suggests that Bassanio's movement towards heterosexual relations is in the necessary, the right direction (like Shylock's punishment, perhaps). As Coppélia Kahn reads the play, 'In Shakespeare's psychology, men first seek to mirror themselves in a homoerotic attachment . . . then to confirm themselves through difference, in a bond with the opposite sex—the marital bond' (Kahn 1985: 106). And Janet Adelman, in a substantial analysis of male bonding in Shakespeare's comedies, finds that 'We do not move directly from family bonds to marriage without an intervening period in which our friendships with same-sex friends help us to establish our identities' (Adelman 1985: 75). To heterosexually identified readers this might not seem an exceptional thought, but for the gay man it is a slap in the face of very familiar kind. 'You can have these passions,' it says, 'but they are not sufficient, they should be a stage on the way to something else. So don't push it.'

To be sure, Kahn points out that 'it takes a strong, shrewd woman like Portia to combat the continuing appeal of such ties between men' (1985: 107). And Adelman remarks the tendency towards casuistical 'magical restitutions' and the persistence of 'tensions that comedy cannot resolve' (1985: 80). So heteropatriarchy is not secured without difficulty or loss. None the less, when Adelman writes 'We do not move directly from family bonds to marriage without an intervening period in which our friendships with same-sex friends help us to establish our identities' (Adelman 1985: 75). To heterosexually identified readers this might not seem an exceptional thought, but for the gay man it is a slap in the face of very familiar kind. 'You can have these passions,' it says, 'but they are not sufficient, they should be a stage on the way to something else. So don't push it.'
ones we experience today, but they may throw light upon our circumstances and stimulate critical awareness of how our life-possibilities are constructed.³

In *The Merchant*, the emphasis on the idea of being bound displays quite openly the way ideological structures work. Through an intricate network of enticements, obligations and interdictions—in terms of wealth, family, gender, patronage and law—this culture sorts out who is to control property and other human relations. Portia, Jessica and Launcelot are bound as daughters and sons; Morocco and Arragon as suitors; Antonio and Bassanio as friends; Gradano as friend or dependant, Nerissa as dependant or servant, and Launcelot as servant; Antonio, Shylock and even the Duke are bound by the law; and the Venetians, Shylock rather effectively remarks, have no intention of freeing their slaves (IV. i. 90-8).

Within limits, these bonds may be negotiable: the Duke may commission a doctor to devise a way round the law, friendships may be redefined, servants may get new masters, women and men may contract marriages. Jessica can even get away from her father, though only because he is very unpopular and Lorenzo has very powerful friends; they 'seal love's bonds new-made' (II. vi. 6). Otherwise, trying to move very far out of your place is severely punished, as Shylock finds. It is so obvious that this framework of ideology and coercion is operating to the advantage of the rich over the poor, the established over the impotent, men over women and insiders over outsiders, that directors have been able to slant productions of the *Merchant* against the dominant reading, making Bassanio cynical, Portia manipulative and the Venetians arrogant and racist.

The roles of same-sex passion in this framework should not be taken for granted (I use the terms 'same-sex' and 'cross-sex' to evade anachronistic modern concepts). For us today, Eve Sedgwick shows this in her book *Between Men*, homosexuality polices the entire boundaries of gender and social organization. Above all, it exerts 'leverage over the channels of bonding between all pairs of men'. Male-male relations, and hence male-female relations, are held in place by fear of homosexuality—by fear of crossing that 'invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line' between being 'a man's man' and being 'interested in men' (Sedgwick 1985: 88-9; see Dollimore 1992: chs 17-18). We do not know what the limits of our sexual potential are, but we do believe that they are likely to be disturbing and disruptive; that is how our cultures position sexuality. Fear even of thinking homosexually serves to hold it all in place. So one thing footballers must not be when they embrace is sexually excited; the other thing they mustn't be is in love. But you can never be quite sure; hence the virulence of homophobia.

If this analysis makes sense in Western societies today, and I believe it does, we should not assume it for other times and places. As Sedgwick observes, ancient Greek cultures were different (1985: 4). In our societies whether you are gay or not has become crucial—the more so since lesbians and gay men have been asserting themselves. An intriguing thought, therefore, is that in early modern England same-sex relations were not terribly important In *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, homoeroticism is part of the fun of the wooing ('Ganymede', the name taken by Rosalind, was standard for a male same-sex love-object); but it wouldn't be fun if such scenarios were freighted with the anxieties that people experience today. In Ben Jonson's play *Poetaster*, Ovid Senior expostulates: 'What! Shall I have my son a stager now? An engle for players? A gull, a rook, a shot-clog to make suppers, and be laughed at?' (Jonson 1995:I. ii. 15-17).⁴ It is taken for granted that boys are sexual partners (engles) for players; it is only one of the demeaning futures that await young Ovid if he takes to the stage. Moralists who complained about theatre and sexual licence took it for granted that boys are sexually attractive.

'Sodomy' was the term which most nearly approaches what is now in England called 'gross indecency'; it was condemned almost universally in legal and religious discourses, and the penalty upon conviction was death. Perhaps because of this extreme situation, very few cases are recorded. Today, staking out a gay cruising space is a sure-fire way for a police force to improve its rate of convictions. But in the Home Counties through the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I—sixty-eight years—only six men are recorded as having been indicted for sodomy. Only one was convicted, and that was for an offence involving a five-year-old boy.⁵
In his book *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, Bruce R. Smith shows that while legal and religious edicts against sodomy were plain, paintings and fictive texts sometimes indicate a more positive attitude. This derived mainly from the huge prestige, in artistic and intellectual discourses, of ancient Greek and Roman culture where same-sex passion is taken for granted (Smith 1991: 13-14, 74-6 *et passim*). Smith locates six 'cultural scenarios': heroic friendship, men and boys (mainly in pastoral and educational contexts), playful androgyny (mainly in romances and festivals), transvestism (mainly in satirical contexts), master-servant relations' and an emergent homosexual subjectivity (in Shakespeare's sonnets). Within those scenarios, it seems, men did not necessarily connect their practices with the monstrous crime of sodomy—partly, perhaps, because that was so unthinkable. As Jonathan Goldberg emphasizes, the goal of analysis is 'to see what the category [sodomy] enabled and disenabled, and to negotiate the complex terrains, the mutual implications of prohibition and production' (1992: 20; see Bray 1982: 79). The point is hardly who did what with whom, but the contexts in which anxieties about sodomy might be activated. So whether the friendships of men such as Antonio and Bassanio should be regarded as involving a homoerotic element is not just a matter of what people did in private hundreds of years ago; it is a matter of definition within a sex-gender system that we only partly comprehend.

Stephen Orgel asks: 'why were women more upsetting than boys to the English?' That is, given the complaints that boy-actors incite lascivious thoughts in men and women spectators, why were not women performers employed—as they were in Spain and Italy? Orgel's answer is that boys were used because they were less dangerous; they were erotic, but that was less threatening than the eroticism of women. So this culture 'did not display a morbid fear of homosexuality. Anxiety about the fidelity of women, on the other hand, does seem to have been strikingly prevalent' (Orgel 1989: 8, 18). Leontes and Polixenes lived guiltlessly together, we are told in *The Winter's Tale*, until they met the women who were to be their wives (I. ii. 69-74). The main faultlines ran through cross-sex relations.

Because women may bear children, relations between women and men affected the regulation of lineage, alliance and property, and hence offered profound potential disruptions to the social order and the male psyche. Same-sex passion was dangerous if, as in the instance of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, it was allowed to interfere with other responsibilities. Otherwise, it was thought compatible with marriage and perhaps preferable to cross-sex infidelity. The preoccupation, in writing of this period, is with women disturbing the system—resisting arranged marriages, running off with the wrong man, not bearing (male) children, committing adultery, producing illegitimate offspring, becoming widows and exercising the power of that position. In comedies things turn out happily, in tragedies sadly. But, one way or the other, Shakespearean plays, as much as the rest of the culture, are obsessively concerned with dangers that derive from women.

'Ve'll play with them the first boy for a thousand ducats', Gradano exclaims, betting on whether Nerissa or Portia will bear the first boy-child (III. ii. 213-14). As Orgel remarks, patriarchy does not oppress only women; a patriarch is not just a man, he is the head of a family or tribe who rules by paternal right (1989: 10). To be sure, women are exchanged in the interest of property relations in Shakespearean plays, as in the society that produced them. But the lives of young, lower-class and outsider men are determined as well. In *The Merchant*, as everywhere in the period, we see a traffic in boys who, because they are less significant, are moved around the employment—patronage system more fluently than women. Class exploitation was almost unchallenged; everyone—men as much as women—had someone to defer to, usually in the household where they had to live. The most likely supposition is that, just as cross-sex relations took place all the time—Launcelot is accused, in passing, of getting a woman with child (III. v. 35-6)—same-sex passion also was widely indulged.\(^6\)

Traffic in boys occurs quite casually in *The Merchant*. Launcelot is a likely lad. He manages to square it with his conscience to leave his master, Shylock, but it is unclear where he will go (II. ii. 1-30). He runs into his father, who indentured Launcelot to Shylock and is bringing a present for the master to strengthen the bond.
Launcelot persuades him to divert the gift to Bassanio, who is providing 'rare new liveries', for the expedition to Belmont (II. ii. 104-5). The father attempts to interest Bassanio in the boy, but it transpires that Shylock has already traded him: 'Shylock thy master spake with me this day, / And hath preferr'd thee' (II. ii. 138-9). Nor is Launcelot the only young man Bassanio picks up in this scene: Gratiano presents his own suit and gets a ticket to Belmont conditional upon good behaviour. And when Jessica assumes the guise of a boy, the appearance is of another privileged young man, Lorenzo, taking a boy into his service and giving him new livery: 'Descend, for you must be my torchbearer. . . . Even in the lovely garnish of a boy' (II. vi. 40, 45). When the young doctor claims Portia's ring from Bassanio for services rendered, therefore, a pattern is confirmed.

My point is not that the dreadful truth of the *Merchant* is here uncovered: it is really about traffic in boys. Rather, that such traffic is casual, ubiquitous and hardly remarkable. It becomes significant in its resonances for the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio because Portia, subject to her father's will, has reason to feel insecure about the affections of her stranger-husband.

**How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist: III Friendly relations**

Heroic friendship is one of Smith's six 'cultural scenarios' for same-sex relations (1991: 35-41, 67-72, 96-9, 139-43). In Shakespeare, besides the sonnets, it is represented most vividly in the bond between Coriolanus and Aufidius in *Coriolanus*:

> Know thou first,  
> I lov'd the maid I married; never man  
> Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee here,  
> Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart  
> Than when I first my wedded mistress saw  
> Bestride my threshold.

(IV. v. 114-19)\(^7\)

Unlike Portia, Aufidius's wife is not there to resent him finding his warrior-comrade more exciting than she.

In his essay 'Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England', Alan Bray explores the scope of the 'friend' (Bray 1990). Even as marriage was involved in alliances of property and influence, male friendship informed, through complex obligations, networks of extended family, companions, clients, suitors and those influential in high places. Claudio in *Measure for Measure* explains why he and Juliet have not made public their marriage vows:

> This we came not to  
> Only for propagation of a dower  
> Remaining in the coffer of her friends,  
> From whom we thought it meet to hide our love  
> Till time had made them for us.

(I. ii. 138-42)

On the one hand, it is from friends that one anticipates a dowry; on the other hand, they must be handled sensitively. Compare the combination of love and instrumentality in the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio: the early modern sense of 'friend' covered a broad spectrum.
While the entirely respectable concept of the friend was supposed to have nothing to do with the officially abhorred concept of the sodomite, in practice they tended to overlap (see Bray 1990). Friends shared beds, they embraced and kissed; such intimacies reinforced the network of obligations and their public performance would often be part of the effect. So the proper signs of friendship could be the same as those of same-sex passion. In instances where accusations of sodomy were aroused, very likely it was because of some hostility towards one or both parties, rather than because their behaviour was altogether different from that of others who were not so accused.

The fact that the text of the Merchant gives no plain indication that the love between Antonio and Bassanio is informed by erotic passion does not mean that such passion was inconceivable, then; it may well mean that it didn't require particular presentation as a significant category. What is notable, though, is that Portia has no hesitation in envisaging a sexual relationship between Bassanio and the young doctor: 'Tu have that doctor for my bedfellow', she declares, recognizing an equivalence (V. i. 33). She develops the idea:

Let not that doctor e'er come near my house—
Since he hath got the jewel that I loved,
And that which you did swear to keep for me.

(V. i. 223-5)

The marriage of Bassanio and Portia is unconsummated and 'jewel' is often genital in Shakespearean writing: the young doctor has had the sexual attentions which were promised to Portia. 'Ring', of course, has a similar range, as when Gratiano says he will 'fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring' (V. i. 306-7; see Partridge 1955: 135, 179). Portia's response to Bassanio (allegedly) sleeping with the young doctor is that she will do the same:

I will become as liberal as you,
I'll not deny him anything I have,
No, not my body nor my husband's bed.

(V. i. 226-8)

Notice also that Portia does not express disgust, or even surprise, that her husband might have shared his bed with a young doctor. Her point is that Bassanio has given to another something that he had pledged to her. Nor does she disparage Antonio (as she does Morocco). Shy lock, for the social cohesion of Venice, has to be killed, beggared, expelled, converted or any combination of those penalties. Same-sex passion doesn't matter nearly so much; Antonio has only to be relegated to a subordinate position.

Bray attributes the instability in friendly relations to a decline in the open-handed 'housekeeping' of the great house. Maintaining retinues such as those Bassanio recruits—young men who look promising and relatives who have a claim—was becoming anachronistic. So the social and economic form of service and friendship decayed, but it remained as a cultural form, as a way of speaking. The consequent unevenness, Bray suggests, allowed the line between the intimacies of friendship and sodomy to become blurred (1990: 12-13). Don Wayne, in his study of Ben Jonson's poem 'To Penshurst' and the country-house genre, relates the decline of the great house to the emergence of a more purposeful aristocracy of 'new men' who 'constituted an agrarian capitalist class with strong links to the trading community'; and to the emergence, also, of 'an ideology in which the nuclear, conjugal family is represented as the institutional foundation of morality and social order'. We associate that development with the later consolidation of 'bourgeois ideology', but 'images and values we tend to identify as middle class had already begun to appear in the transformation of the aristocracy's own self-image' (Wayne 1984: 23-5).
*The Merchant of Venice* makes excellent sense within such a framework. Portia's lavish estate at Belmont is presented as a fairy-tale place; in Venetian reality Bassanio, an aristocrat who already cultivates friends among the merchant class, has to raise money in the market in order to put up a decent show. At the same time, Portia's centring of the matrimonial couple and concomitant hostility towards male friendship manifests an attitude that was to be located as 'bourgeois'. This faultline was not to be resolved rapidly; Portia is ahead of her time. Through the second half of the seventeenth century, Alan Bray and Randolph Trumbach show, the aggressively manly, aristocratic rake, though reproved by the churches and emergent middle-class morality and in violation of the law, would feel able to indulge himself with a woman, a young man or both.8

If I have begun to map the ideological field in which same-sex passion occurred in early modern England and some of its points of intersection in *The Merchant*, I am not trying to 'reduce' Shakespeare to an effect of history and structure. I do not suppose that he thought the same as everyone else—or, indeed, that anyone thought the same as everyone else. First, diverse paths may be discerned in the period through the relations between sexual and 'platonic', and same-sex and crosssex passions. These matters were uncertain, unresolved, contested—that is why they made good topics for plays, satires, sermons and so on. Second, playtexts do not have to be clear-cut. As I have argued elsewhere, we should envisage them as working across an ideological terrain, opening out unresolved faultlines, inviting spectators to explore imaginatively the different possibilities. Anyway, readers and audiences do not have to respect closures; they are at liberty to credit and dwell upon the adventurous middle part of a text, as against a tidy conclusion (Sinfield 1992: 47-51, 99-106). As Valerie Traub remarks, whether these early comedies are found to instantiate dissidence or containment is a matter of 'crediting either the expense of dramatic energy or comedic closure' (1992b: 120; see Smith 1992).

Generally, though, there is a pattern: the erotic potential of same-sex love is allowed a certain scope, but has to be set aside. The young men in *Love's Labour's Lost* try to maintain a fraternity but the women draw them away. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mercutio has to die to clear the ground for Romeo and Juliet's grand passion. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Benedick has to agree to kill Claudio at his fiancée's demand. *As You Like It* fantasizes a harmonious male community in the forest and intensifies it in the wooing of Orlando and Ganymede, but finally Rosalind takes everyone but Jacques back into the old system. Yet there are ambiguities as well. In the epilogue to *As You Like It* the Rosalind/Ganymede boy-actor reopens the flirting: 'If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not' (V. iv. 214-17; see Traub 1992b: 128). And Orsino in *Twelfth Night* leaves the stage with Viola still dressed as Cesario because, he says, her female attire has not yet been located. Even Bassanio can fantasize: 'Sweet doctor', he says to Portia when she has revealed all, 'you shall be my bedfellow,—/When I am absent then lie with my wife' (V.i.284-5).

And why not? Was it necessary to choose? Although the old, open-handed housekeeping was in decline, the upper-class household was not focused on the marital couple in the manner of today. Portia welcomes diverse people to Belmont; Gradano and Nerissa for instance, whose mimic-marriage reflects the power of the household. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* starts with the disruption of friendship by love for a woman, but ends with a magical reunion in which they will all live together: 'our day of marriage shall be yours, / One feast, one house, one mutual happiness' (Shakespeare 1969: V. iv. 170-1). In a discussion of *Twelfth Night* elsewhere, I have suggested that Sebastian's marriage to a stranger heiress need not significantly affect Antonio's relationship with him (Sinfield 1992: 73). They might all live together in Olivia's house (as Sir Toby does); she may well prefer to spend her time with Maria and Viola (who will surely tire of Orsino) rather than with the naive, swashbuckling husband whom she has mistakenly married. So Antonio need not appear at the end of *Twelfth Night* as the defeated and melancholy outsider that critics have supposed; a director might show him delighted with his boyfriend's lucky break.

This kind of ending might be made to work in the *Merchant*. R. F. Hill suggests it, and Auden reports a 1905 production which had Antonio and Bassanio enter the house together (Hill 1975: 86; Auden 1963: 233). However, Portia plays a harder game than Rosalind and Viola. She doesn't disguise herself, as they do, to
evade hetero-patriarchal pressures, but to test and limit her husband. When disguised as a boy she does not, Geary observes, play androgy nous games with other characters or the audience (1984: 58). Antonio is invited into the house only on her terms.

Overall in these plays, Traub concludes, the fear 'is not of homoeroticism per se; homoerotic pleasure is explored and sustained until it collapses into fear of erotic exclusivity and its corollary: non-reproductive sexuality'—a theme, of course, of the sonnets (Traub 1992b: 123, 138-41). The role of marriage and child-(son-)bearing in the transmission of property and authority is made to take priority. If (like me) you are inclined to regard this as a failure of nerve, it is interesting that the Merchant, itself, offers a comment on boldness and timidity. 'Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath'—that is the motto on the lead casket (II. ix. 21). Bassanio picks the right casket and Portia endorses the choice but, as Auden points out, it is Shylock and Antonio who commit themselves entirely and risk everything; and in the world of this play there are penalties for doing that (Auden 1963: 235).

How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist: IV Subcultures and Shakespeare

Traub notes a reading of Twelfth Night that assumes Olivia to be punished 'comically but unmistakably' for her same-sex passion for Viola. But 'to whom is desire between women funny?' Traub asks (1992b: 93). This was my initial topic: must Shakespeare, for out-groups such as Jews, feminists, lesbians, gays and Blacks, be a way of re-experiencing their marginalization? I have been trying to exemplify elements in a critical practice for dissident readers. Mainstream commentators on the Merchant (whether they intend to or not) tend to confirm the marginalization of same-sex passion. Lesbians and gay men may use the play (1) to think about alternative economies of sex-gender; (2) to think about problematic aspects of our own subcultures. But (the question is always put): Is it Shakespeare? Well, he is said to speak to all sorts and conditions, so if gay men say 'OK, this is how he speaks to us'—that, surely, is our business.

With regard to the first of these uses, the Merchant allows us to explore a social arrangement in which the place of same-sex passion was different from that we are used to. Despite and because of the formal legal situation, I have shown, it appears not to have attracted very much attention; it was partly compatible with marriage, and was partly supported by legitimate institutions of friendship, patronage and service. It is not that Shakespeare was a sexual radical, therefore. Rather, the early modern organization of sex and gender boundaries was different from ours, and the ordinary currency of that culture is replete with erotic interactions that strike strange chords today. Shakespeare may speak with distinct force to gay men and lesbians, simply because he didn't think he had to sort out sexuality in modern terms. For approximately the same reasons, these plays may stimulate radical ideas about race, nation, gender and class.

As for using The Merchant as a way of addressing problems in gay subculture, the bonds of class, age, gender and race exhibited in the play have distinct resonances for us. The traffic in boys may help us to think about power structures in our class and generational interactions. And while an obvious perspective on the play is resentment at Portia's manipulation of Antonio and Bassanio, we may bear in mind that Portia too is oppressed in hetero-patriarchy, and try to work towards a sex-gender regime in which women and men would not be bound to compete. Above all, plainly, Antonio is the character most hostile to Shylock. It is he who has spat on him, spurned him and called him dog, and he means to do it again (I. iii. 121-6). At the trial it is he who imposes the most offensive requirement—that Shylock convert to Christianity (V. i. 382-3). Seymour Kleinberg connects Antonio's racism to his sexuality:

Antonio hates Shylock not because he is a more fervent Christian than others, but because he recognizes his own alter ego in this despised Jew who, because he is a heretic, can never belong to the state. . . . He hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has
come to identify symbolically as the Jew.

(Kleinberg 1985: 120)

Gay people today are no more immune to racism than other people, and transferring our stigma onto others is one of the modes of self-oppression that tempts any subordinated group. And what if one were Jewish, and/or Black, as well as gay? One text through which these issues circulate in our culture is *The Merchant of Venice*, and it is one place where we may address them.

Notes


2 For a reply to her critics by McLuskie, see McLuskie 1980: 224-9, and for further comment see Dollimore 1990.

3 Another way is blatantly reworking the authoritative text so that it is forced to yield, against the grain, explicitly oppositional kinds of understanding; see Sinfield 1992: 16-24, 290-302.


7 See Sinfield 1994b: 25-37; and Sinfield 1992: 127-42 (this is an extension of the discussion of *Henry V* published first in Drakakis 1985), and 237-8 (on *Tamburlaine*).


9 See the suggestive remarks in Goldberg 1992: 142, 273-4.


**Shylock: The Infamous Secret Jew: Introduction**

**Shylock: The Infamous Secret Jew**

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**Shylock: The Infamous Secret Jew: I**

Despite its deliberate failure to meet the Victorian vogue for spectacular theater, 1 Henry Irving's Lyceum production of *The Merchant of Venice* set "a record without precedent in the annals of the stage" (L. Irving 356). Mounted and rehearsed in the space of three weeks—Irving having opted to avoid "hampering the natural action of the piece with any unnecessary embellishment" (H. Irving, *MV* preface)—the production, which opened on 1 November 1879, ran for seven straight months, or two hundred and fifty consecutive
performances. During the course of that season it was estimated that "330,000 people had visited the Lyceum," generating receipts amounting to some fifty-nine thousand pounds (L. Irving 357). Subsequently, Irving revived the production "nearly every season, took it on every tour, played it perhaps a thousand times, and was still playing it the week he died, more than twenty-five years after the first night" (Hughes 227). On 14 February 1880 the fact that The Merchant had "for the first time in history [been] played for a hundred nights in succession" (Theatre 1/3/80, 188) was celebrated with dinner for three hundred at the Lyceum at a cost of six hundred pounds (L. Irving 357). And nearly ten years after it opened, the production still had enough cachet that Irving was summoned by the Prince of Wales to perform the trial scene from The Merchant of Venice along with The Bells (also a play about a Jew) on a specially prepared stage at Sandringham. With one minor exception it was the only theatrical entertainment that Queen Victoria had attended in the twenty-eight years since the death of Prince Albert (512).

Undoubtedly, Irving's star status contributed to the success of the production, but there seemed to be more to it than that; the favorable reception of Irving's Shakespearean offerings was by no means assured. He had had only middling results with both Coriolanus and Twelfth Night (Hughes 226) and was widely considered to have failed outright with Macbeth (E. M. Moore 209). Yet, with The Merchant of Venice, Irving "made Shakespeare [truly] popular—an achievement of which but few of his predecessors . . . could boast" (Theatre 1/12/79, 292). Thus, the phenomenon seems to be one that cannot be accounted for by cult of personality alone. Moreover, the fact that the production "provoked a controversy" over which both Irving's supporters and detractors "took up extreme positions" (Hughes 225) suggests that something else lay at the heart of it all. That something else, without a doubt, was Irving's treatment of the figure of Shylock, for in Henry Irving's Lyceum production of The Merchant of Venice, in all but the most literal of senses, Shylock wins the trial.

While aspects of Irving's Shylock were recognizably indebted to theatrical predecessors such as Charles Macklin and Edmund Kean, Irving was considered to have utterly redefined the role. In popular terms he was widely perceived to be "the first star actor to play Shylock for sympathy" (Maude 172). In an earlier age the part of Shylock had been a two-dimensionally villainous one; as a sort of stock evil buffoon, Shylock was traditionally fitted out with a grotesque red wig and made exaggerated gestures meant to convey the immeasurability of his inhumanity and greed. Moreover, in performance a farcical piece entitled The Jew of Venice was actually favored over The Merchant from the time of the Restoration until 1741, when "Macklin persuaded the management of Drury Lane to restore Shakespeare's text in place of George Granville's adaptation" (J. R. Brown 187). Challenges to this long tradition of farce had been made by sophisticated interpreters who realized that to play the role entirely in this spirit was to diminish its dramatic interest. But Irving had taken this idea further than anyone before him, moving beyond the difference in degree to effect a striking difference in kind. Irving's Shylock

was venerable, lonely, grieved, austere: he moved with pride and grace; his humour was coldly cynical, rather than sardonic; his thought was meditative, not sullen, and his anger was white and tense; in defeat he called forth pity and awe. (194)

In other words, under Irving's direction The Merchant of Venice had ceased to be a comedy and, as one worried critic noted, "foster[ed] the delusion that the play is a tragedy" (Athenœum 8/11/79, 605), with Shylock emerging "as something very like a tragic hero" (Hughes 226). To viewers of the Lyceum production, "as in the writing, so in the acting of the play, the first and highest merit . . . [was] the presentation of its tragical element" (E.R.R., "Henry" 16).

It is sometimes suggested that Irving's sympathetic portrayal of the Jew was opportunistic in that he had no choice but to dispense with the traditional histrionic reading of Shylock, since he was not particularly robust and therefore had "not sufficient physical force for such clamorous exhibitions" (Cook 224). An observer at rehearsals for the production once claimed that, although Irving "'shot' for Shakespeare's Shylock," he found that "at least two of the scenes were beyond his powers," forcing him to "develop . . . a 'Shylock' he could
compass" (Barnes 104). This seems unlikely at best. There were plenty of dramatic moments in living's repertoire which required physical force, and discussion of his intentions for the role of Shylock was ongoing for years after the production first opened.3

Similarly, claims that Irving's sympathetic Shylock "grew less sympathetic over the years" may be dispatched (J. Gross 141).4 A review of the 1887 London revival of The Merchant confirms that, in the long term, Irving stood his ground. "Mr. Irving's view of the character of Shylock and his subtle appeals for sympathy on the Jew's behalf," the reviewer wrote, "remain of course unchanged. Right or wrong, his is a noble ideal of the part, and he is not likely in any way to lower it" (review [Enthoven]). Indeed, at times Irving's determination to play Shylock as he had developed him at the Lyceum was cause for consternation. On his American tour of 1883 Irving felt that, though the critics consistently applauded his performance, audiences were somewhat taken aback.5 Joseph Hatton has noted that American spectators expected "in his Shylock a very hard, grim, and cruel Jew":

Many persons hinted as much to him before they saw his impersonation of this much-discussed character . . . Singularity sensitive about the feelings of his audiences, and accustomed to judge them as keenly as they judge him, he fancied . . . [they] were not stirred as they had been by his other work in response to his efforts as Shylock. (262-63)

Irving himself expressed the fear that the audiences were not with him:

I always feel, in regard to this play, that they do not quite understand what I am doing. They only responded at all . . . where Shylock's rage and mortification get the better of his dignity. (Qtd. in ibid. 263)

Hatton sought to reassure Irving by pointing out that audiences were so strongly accustomed to a histrionic Shylock that they were "probably a little disappointed" by a "view of the part [which] forbids anything like . . . the strident characteristics of most other Shylocks" (263-64). Irving was unwavering in his reply:

I never saw Kean's Shylock, nor Phelps's, nor, indeed, anyone's. But I am sure Shylock was not a low person; a miser and usurer, certainly, but a very injured man . . . I felt that my audience to-night had quite a different opinion, and I once wished the house had been composed entirely of Jews. I would like to play Shylock to a Jewish audience. (264)

Yet, while the production was an unprecedented popular success, for Irving's antagonists there was still plenty to fault. It was suggested, for example, that the physical mannerisms and affectations of speech displayed by Shylock were not the product of inspired interpretation but were, in fact, simply Irving's own. Both Irving and Ellen Terry, one critic observed, "have strange mannerisms; they never divest themselves of them, and hence . . . are successful where the parts . . . they play lend themselves to mannerisms . . ." (Truth 6/11/79, 568). Punch's theater critic liked the production and so "dismissed" Mr. Irving's peculiarities of gait and utterance with . . . [the] remark that they are [at least] less noticeable in Shylock than in any part in which I have hitherto seen him" (Punch 15/11/79, 225). While George Bernard Shaw, not a fan, summed up the general objection by saying that "the truth is that he [Irving] has never in his life conceived or interpreted the characters of any author except himself (Shaw, Dramatic Opinions 56). The most strenuous objections to Irving's Merchant of Venice, however, were reserved for his editorial treatment of the text.

Irving's acting version of the play reduces Shakespeare's text by approximately 25 percent, cutting nearly six hundred lines. Some critics have argued that this was a conventional and logistically motivated editorial intervention, that Irving's text was simply based on Charles Kean's published version of 1858, and that all Irving did was reduce the number of scene changes and eliminate material that failed to advance the plot significantly (Hughes 227). Some of Irving's detractors, however, have argued to the contrary that the cuts he
made to the text of *The Merchant of Venice* were anything but superficial. Irving "does not merely cut plays," it was said, "he disembowels them" (Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions* 55). And in this case what Irving's antagonists claimed he did was excise "passages [and]—indeed, whole scenes—which tended to discredit Shylock" (E. M. Moore 203). While these objections to Irving's textual alterations are often questionable insofar as they take the form of ad hominem attacks on a man arrogant enough to have tampered with Shakespeare's text, they do nevertheless raise an interesting question. In isolation, eliminating gratuitous remarks about Shylock's evil nature or reducing the amount of raving about the loss of his ducats would not be gestures drastic enough to alter the play radically. But, in combination with a staging strategy that made Shylock the center of attention and a use of stage business which mitigated the conventional crudity of many of his remaining lines, these cuts can be seen as part of a systematic transformation of the text. Whether one approves or disapproves of Irving's editorial conduct, its overall effect was, clearly, to tender an account of Shylock which valorized the character's sufferings rather than confirmed his status as an object of scorn.

The two most obvious alterations Irving made to his acting version of *The Merchant of Venice* were that, first, he consolidated the scenes involving Portia's suitors, pretty clearly in order to reduce the number of scene changes; and, second, predictably, he edited out virtually all references to sex. The first group of changes has no obvious effect on Shylock's part unless one considers that cutting back on Portia's speeches increases proportionally the amount of time given over to Shylock, while the second eliminates only the small handful of insults against the Jew which are bawdy in addition to being racial. But several outstanding alterations fall into neither of these categories and, for a number of reasons, suggest that something more than directorial pragmatism or prevailing standards of good taste may well have been at stake. For, although they are extremely limited in terms of the number of lines they constitute and could hardly be described as essential to the narrative, these passages, as I shall argue, could have attacked the very foundations of Irving's monumental success. All three of these passages concern Shylock's relationship to his daughter, Jessica.

In order of their appearance the relevant omissions consist of all of act 2, scene 3, which is only twenty-one lines long and includes a brief exchange between Jessica and the clown Launcelot Gobbo; act 2, scene 8, lines 12-24, which is a conversation between two minor characters; and act 3, scene 1, lines 22-37, which is a continuation of this same conversation, which by this time includes Shylock. The impact of the absence of these lines, however, is best appreciated if the passages are considered in terms of their content rather than their chronology, so I will begin by considering the latter two passages first.

The first part of the conversation between Salerio and Solanio (friends of Antonio) recounts Shylock's discovery that he has been robbed and abandoned by his daughter:

*Solanio:*
I never heard a passion so confused,  
So strange, outrageous, and so variable  
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:  
"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 sealèd bag, two sealèd bags of ducats,  
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!  
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,  
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!  
She hath the stones upon her and the ducats!"

*Salerio:*
Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,  
Crying his stones, his daughter, and his ducats.
Of this exchange Irving retains only the first six lines, therefore editing out both the belabored farce of Shylock's apparent inability to distinguish between his ducats and his daughter and Salerio's description of the spectacle of the anguished Shylock taunted and pursued by "all the boys in Venice." The effect of this is, arguably, considerable, since, by ending the exchange as he does, Irving effectively replaces a raving burlesque with the cynical reporting of what now appears to be a comparatively sympathetic, rational, and not unwarranted call by Shylock for "Justice! The Law! My ducats and my daughter!"

The second passage follows from the previous exchange but now includes the presence of Shylock, who confronts the two men about their having known of his daughter's intended flight:

*Shylock:*
You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.

*Salerio:*
That's certain. I for my part knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

*Solanio:*
And Shylock for his own part knew the bird was fledged, and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.

*Shylock:*
She is damned for it.

*Salerio:*
That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.

*Shylock:*
My own flesh and blood to rebel!

*Solanio:*
Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?

*Shylock:*
I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.

*Salerio:*
There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish.

In this instance Irving cuts everything after Shylock's exclamation "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" and moves directly to the discussion of Antonio's losses at sea which follows. While the excised material might seem merely to prolong the already well-established exchange of hostilities between the Venetians and the Jew, it becomes apparent under scrutiny that the omission of the half-dozen lines significantly alters the exchange. For to end on Shylock's lament for his faithless daughter is to construct the issue as one of female disobedience, as a crisis of gender, while to end on Salerio's denial of the legitimacy of Shylock's paternal claim—"There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish"—is to introduce the question of race.

If we look to the final omission from the text, the matter becomes even more explicit, as Jessica considers the twin evils of female disobedience and racial disavowal and in so doing raises the prospect of something more harrowing than either, namely, miscegenation:
Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child.
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife.

Whatever the personal intentions of a theatergoer at the time, the experience of watching Irving's *Merchant of Venice* could hardly do less than bring to mind two of the most prominent social crises of the day. The first, as we saw in the previous chapter, is embodied in the figure of Portia and concerns the increasing claims of women over their futures and their social mobility. The second, embodied in the figure of Shylock, evokes the specter of race—the stranger in our midst. The importance of Jessica, as these omissions from the text show, is that she is the figure in which these crises of race and gender are most provocatively manifest for being most perilously entwined. And yet Jessica is an extremely difficult character to pursue, from a historical perspective, because the evidence of attitudes toward her tends to be circumstantial rather than direct. Nevertheless, I would argue, she is pivotal in many ways, and appreciating her importance means that we need to understand not just what people were saying about her but also why they were saying so little when they were saying anything at all.

One obvious difficulty in approaching the character of Jessica is the extent to which she is overshadowed, legendarily, by her larger-than-life father but even more so by the cult of Portia, a difficulty considerably compounded by the popular association of the two characters with figures as charismatic in their own rights as Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. Indeed, in Irving's production the sidelining of Jessica was clearly reinforced by the casting of the role. For at the Lyceum the part was played by an actress named Alma Murray, who was apparently so young and undistinguished that a reviewer for *Blackwood's Magazine* complained of its having been "regarded of as so little importance as to be intrusted to . . . [a young lady] who would be weak in the smallest of comediettas" (12/79, 651). As we shall see, this marginalization of Jessica served a particular function in relation to Irving's production, but the character's diminished status was by no means limited to that context alone.

In a literary culture so heavily dominated by character criticism, for example, Jessica was seldom the focus of substantial interest in her own right. Partly this was due to the prevailing conventions, which tended to focus on leading roles, and partly to the associated bias in favor of characters who lent themselves to the endorsement of an exemplary nature. Thus, when she is acknowledged, it is often just in passing or in an aside as the lesser party in an unfavorable comparison with Portia. Anna Jameson's reference to Jessica simply as one of "the other female characters of 'The Merchant of Venice'" who deserves our notice, primarily because "something of the intellectual brilliance of Portia is reflected on [her]" is fairly typical (39). It's not that Jessica is seen to be utterly unworthy of attention. Indeed, "in any other play," Jameson consoled her readers, and,

in any other companionship than that of the matchless Portia, Jessica would make a very beautiful heroine of herself . . . Nothing can be more . . . elegant than the scenes between her and Lorenzo . . . Every sentiment she utters interests us for her . . . And the enthusiastic and generous testimony to the . superior graces and accomplishments of Portia comes with a peculiar grace from her lips. (39-40)

The most commonly held perception of Jessica, then, was that, if she were herself short on virtue, at least she could detect it in others. "One of the things we like best in Jessica," one commentator wrote, "is her genuine admiration of Portia . . . It augurs the development of her own character . . . into something ampler and more responsible" (Verity xxxiii). Helena Faucit held a similar view. That Jessica can, "despite her training, appreciate goodness and virtue," she wrote, "may be inferred from what she says of Portia" (Martin 36).
Occasionally, Jessica would be acknowledged for other reasons, but this was usually done with considerable resentment—much as one would acknowledge the winner of a door prize—for being the character who gets to have the beautiful poetry of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice* spoken to her, although she has done nothing special to deserve it. As one particularly peeved reviewer put it, Jessica was someone "to whom one always grudges the loveliest lovelines ever spoken" (qtd. in Hughes 232).

Where we do find evidence of a less backhanded interest in Jessica, suggestively, the emphasis is often placed on the utility of her part rather than on its moral content or iconic significance. In a society intent on emphasizing the structural perfection of Shakespeare's plays, in other words, one way of dealing with Jessica was clearly to relegate her to a role that, if morally treacherous, was at least structurally recuperable for linking the casket and bond stories together or for providing the contrast needed to develop other characters. Thus, the Jessica-Lorenzo plot was seen as "assisting" the main plot by "bridging over the three months' interval between the signing of the bond and its becoming due" or by "occupy [ing] some of the superfluous characters of the Merchant's story" (Barnett 10). Similarly, its relation to the "main drift of the drama" was explained in terms of its furnishing "a contrast to the graver love-story of Bassanio and Portia" or illuminating the character of Shylock, giving greater insight into his "avarice," his "motive in pressing for the execution of the bond," and showing him "in his domestic relations, which we would not otherwise see" (Verity 119).

On all counts, then, it was difficult for Jessica to compete. She could hardly command the interest of a Portia or a Shylock, and, however key she might appear with hindsight, from a late Victorian perspective she was notable mainly for her failings, "properly kept subordinate" (Jameson 39) and recuperable only through her structural utility and awareness of the superiority of those around her. But, this being said, there is evidence that points in another direction and which suggests that there were aspects of the character that could not be so easily dismissed. For, despite her obvious and deliberate marginalization in popular attitudes, in pedagogy and literary scholarship, but especially in Irving's high-profile theatrical production, there is a palpable anxiety about Jessica which far outweighs her ostensible lack of importance.

One place we immediately get a sense of this is in discussions of Jessica which take place in the notes accompanying school editions of *The Merchant of Venice*, possibly because this is a forum in which moral issues would be difficult to ignore. And here we begin to get a sense of the true depth of feeling associated with the character and of the terrible dilemmas her situation must have posed for a late Victorian audience. Specifically, one is struck by the resonant and highly contested way in which the theme of public accountability extended beyond the parameters of Shylock's story to encompass that of his daughter, the notion of judgment figuring centrally throughout. "Jessica's conduct stands at the bar of judgment," wrote one editor. "Although she describes her home as a hell, and from Shylock's nature that can well be believed, there could not be baser ingratitude in a Jewess than to steal her father's jewels and money, and take flight with a Christian" (Crook lv-lvi). Or, contrastingly, "Jessica is not to be judged by any present-day standard of morality," wrote another:

> The poet himself evidently intended her failings to be regarded with much leniency, and we must endeavour therefore to view her in the light of a . . . lively young girl, driven to rebellion by the oppression of her father and the joylessness of her life at home. Otherwise we shall be unable to justify such glaring transgressions as the appropriation of her father's ducats and her desertion of him in his old age. (Wood, Manuals 16-17)

Clearly, the difficulty with the story of Jessica was that it presented a litany of what to a late Victorian audience would have been highly charged moral concerns in an uncomfortably complicated set of relations to one another—female disobedience, racial and religious disloyalty, the effects of an unsuitable domestic environment, premeditated deception, conversion, and, of course, miscegenation. And, like the question of Portia's feminism or lack of it, it thus occasioned substantial disagreement about Shakespeare's intentions in representing the character and her actions as he did.
Sometimes, Jessica's disregard for family loyalty is seen to be mitigated by her genuine feeling for her lover, so that, while she is censured for not even making the "pretence of being a dutiful daughter to the Jew, whom she deceives with the lightest conscience," she is redeemed for being genuinely in love with Lorenzo" (Wood, Manuals 16-17). But at other times no such allowance is made, and, despite "all her . . . love of Lorenzo," she is declared to be "but a heartless beauty" (Meiklejohn 4). Likewise, while Jessica's Jewishness is in some cases seen to be enacted through her disobedience, at others it is an attribute made tragic by actions declared to be uncharacteristic of this normally loyal race. Thus, we are told in one instance that "there could not be baser ingratitude in a Jewess than to steal her father's jewels and money and take flight with a Christian" (Crook lv-lvi), while in another we are assured that "to rob her father of his ducats and precious stones . . . was a touch of Judaism too much for Christian forgiveness" (Meiklejohn 4). In another still, Jessica's mercurial racial identification itself becomes the key to her redemption, since, it is claimed, "she is not a Jewess in heart and feelings . . . and will readily become a Christian when she marries her lover" (Wood, Manuals 16-17).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Henry Irving opted to sever rather than untangle the Gordian knot of racial and domestic affiliations which Jessica brings to the text of The Merchant of Venice. For it is harder to imagine anything that would more immediately provoke a late Victorian audience than the suggestion that a faithless daughter could become a faithful wife; that the endowment of manners could be distinguished from the inheritance of blood; that a Jew of discreditable family could become a Christian; and, perhaps most disturbingly, that, in spite of it all, Jessica was a serious marriage prospect by virtue of her dowry, regardless of how it was obtained. What is crucial to recognize here is that in this marginalized and, as we have seen, easily excised character, whose own shortcomings serve primarily to endorse our adoration of the heroine, is constituted a site of significant struggle. And what I am arguing about Henry Irving's Merchant of Venice is that its fantastic attractions must be understood in terms of the conflicts and social anxieties it strategically excised when it selectively redefined the representation of Shylock's relationship to his daughter.

Irving's phenomenally successful bid for Shylock as tragic hero is substantially underwritten by his portrayal of the character as a benevolent patriarch betrayed by his thankless child. Audiences saw a Shylock who was "tenderly attached to his daughter" (Hawkins 194), a father who loved Jessica "with no ignoble love" and "feels bitterly her desertion of him and her renunciation of the old faith" (F. Marshall, "Introduction" 251). In order to gain this effect Irving had to play quite deliberately against the text, even after having excised so many lines. And he apparently did so without reserve:

after Shylock's outburst in III, i, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot," etc. (lines 88 ff.), Irving paused, hid his face in his hands, and murmured an anguished "No, no, no, no!" . . . in the subsequent self-pitying lines on his losses, he opened his robe and smote himself continually, slowly, and heavily on his bare breast . . . after Jessica's elopement . . . the curtain . . . rose on Shylock silently walking in the moonlight across the bridge and deserted streets to his home. Originally, the curtain fell as he reached his door, later only after he had knocked several times. (E. M. Moore 201-2)

While the gender politic is thus exploited in order to gain sympathy for Shylock, the racial element is, for the same reason, deliberately downplayed. Irving all but eradicated any suggestion of the Jew's conventionally anticipated obsession with money. Indeed, "to one alert listener at an early performance . . . [Shylock] spoke 'with the reflective air of a man to whom money means very little.' " This was apparently more than Irving had intended, and he was compelled to amend his reading of the character in order to convey at least the fact that money was indeed important to Shylock "as a shield against persecution" (Hughes 230). This greatly modified relation of the character to money was something that many viewers were moved to comment upon. Rather than endorse the customary view that Shylock's greed was an inevitable manifestation of his racial identity and a quid pro quo for the play, commentators sought, instead, the mitigating circumstances that had led Shylock to be so. "His avarice," it was argued, was "a vice forced upon him by circumstances" (Hawkins,
"Shylock" 194). And, they said, "that it was not personal avarice is . . . proved when Shylock scorns thrice his principal proffered to cancel his bond" (Conway 836). Moreover, the sort of reading which sought and found in the character an impressive display of family feeling further identified Shylock as the jealously maligned self-made man. According to some, Shylock cared about money not for the pleasures it can purchase for him, nor with that narrow-minded vanity in the sense of possession which the mere miser feels; but rather because it is the evidence of his own thrift and industry, the . . . witness, in one respect at least, to his superiority over the Christians who despise and persecute him. (Marshall, "Introduction" 251)

We can see, then, the extent to which Irving's sympathetic portrayal of Shylock depends on a disavowal of race mobilized by the vilification of Jessica. To have allowed the racial question to stand would have been to engage the single element most liable to undermine Irving's carefully wrought appeal. The stage having thus been set, the tragic hero was now free to play out his final moments of glory in the trial scene. For the Jew, safely divested of all but the most sentimental attributes of race, was now eligible to occupy high moral ground.

Drawing on Charles Kean's conception of a diagonal staging, "the design for the trial scene fulfilled the major function of centring the action on Shylock" (Foulkes, "Staging" 317). It was here that Irving was most liberal with his use of innovative stage business, introducing "a crowd of Jews . . . to emphasize the . . . persecution theme" (E. M. Moore 202), and that the originality of his performance was at its most striking. "Unlike other Shylocks, Irving made his strongest effects in the Trial Scene. Here his dignity had its full scope" (J. R. Brown 194):

At the end of Portia's verdict he dropped the scales and stood as though mesmerized . . . his lips murmured incoherent words as his whole body resumed a dreamy, motionless attitude. When Shylock grasped the severity of his sentence, his eyelids became heavy as though he was hardly able to lift them and his eyes became listless and vacant. The words "I am not well . . ." were the plea of a doomed man to be allowed to leave the court and to die in utter loneliness. But Gratiano's ill-timed jibe governed Shylock's exit. He turned. Slowly and steadily the Jew scanned his tormentor from head to foot, his eyes resting on the Italian's face with concentrated scorn. The proud rejection of insult and injustice lit up his face for a moment, enough for the audience to feel a strange relief in knowing that, in that glance, Shylock had triumphed. (L. Irving, qtd in. E. M. Moore 202-3)

The strength of Irving's performance in the trial scene was so overwhelming that it generated difficulties for the other actors and, in particular, for his co-star, Ellen Terry. Terry's own popularity had been greatly enhanced by her debut performance of Portia in the Bancroft's production of The Merchant of Venice four years earlier. Visually stunning but otherwise undistinguished, the production had been praised mainly for Terry's performance, and, undoubtedly, this was something audiences had in mind when they purchased their tickets for the Lyceum Merchant of Venice. But Irving's Shylock was heroic to the extent that it necessitated a radical revision of Ellen Terry's carefully thought out and established interpretation of her role. In effect, Irving's Shylock made Ellen Terry's Portia impossible. "I am," she wrote, "of the mind that Portia in the trial scene ought to be very quiet... But as Henry's Shylock was quiet, I had to give it up. His heroic saint was splendid, but it wasn't good for Portia" (qtd. in Taylor 191).

Another objection arising out of Irving's portrayal of Shylock in the trial scene was that the representation of the Jew so altered people's expectations of the play that it became virtually unrecognizable. Although his Shylock was "undoubtedly a great piece of acting," it was seen to be "un-Shakespearian if not anti-Shakespearian" (Jones, qtd. in Sprague, "Irving" III). "There was no question . . . of a bad Shylock or a good Shylock . . . when . . . [Irving's] own creation came into conflict with Shakespeare's he simply played in
flat contradiction to the lines and acted Shakespeare off the stage" (Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions* 56). As one anonymous reviewer put it, "Before a persecuted Hebrew prophet for hero, a dull ill-mannered Christian for villain, and an incomparable Portia flinging in her lot with the might-is-right party. Shakespeare retired discomfited" (qtd. in Taylor 191). These sorts of opinions were far from quibbling. Where you stood in relation to Irving's Shylock was a matter upon which people staked their personal reputations. And on at least two notable occasions prominent members of the audience went to extreme lengths to dissociate themselves from Irving's reading of the play.

The first such incident actually took place at the dinner celebrating Irving's one hundredth performance of *The Merchant*. Lord Houghton, known as an after-dinner speaker and seated to Irving's right, had been asked, according to custom, to propose a toast. Rather than inviting the assembled guests to join him in celebrating the achievements of Irving and his company, however, Lord Houghton reprimanded Irving "for following the example of some contemporary historians in white-washing and rehabilitating the established villains of the drama." "He for one could not accept Shylock as 'a gentleman of the Hebrew race with the manners of a Rothschild " (qtd. in L. Irving 354-55).

Even more striking, perhaps, was a comparable incident involving John Ruskin. After attending a performance of *The Merchant*, Ruskin had been invited to meet Irving backstage. At that meeting Ruskin praised Irving's performance, describing it as "noble, tender, and true." The compliment was somehow relayed to Clement Scott, editor of *Theatre* magazine, and found its way into the pages of that publication a short time later. By the next day, however, Ruskin had decided that he had only praised Irving out of politeness and thus wrote to the actor in order to express his views "with more accuracy and frankness." What those views consisted of, primarily, was the belief that Irving's Shylock was, precisely, un-Shakespearean, or, as Ruskin put it, "not . . . in harmony with his [Shakespeare's] design" (L. Irving 346). But this retraction was conveyed too late to stop the compliment he had paid Irving from appearing in the pages of *Theatre*, and Ruskin was so vexed by this that he once again felt compelled to reply. Here the story becomes truly baroque, for, while Ruskin was clearly incensed about being represented as approving of Irving's *Merchant of Venice* and was accordingly anxious to retrieve his reputation, he suddenly declared himself to be in poor health, too ill to carry on the debate, and so engaged a Mr. Laister to continue the correspondence with Irving on his behalf. In the event Laister wrote to Irving, communicating Ruskin's views, and it is worth noting here the more specific meanings that the phrase "not in harmony with Shakespeare's design" began to reveal once Ruskin had handed over the disagreeable task of being specific on the subject of Shylock to someone else. "You are probably aware," Laister wrote,

that the Play in question, as revived, has given rise to a vast deal of public teaching, the moral of which Mr. Ruskin and others greatly deplore; and he naturally desires to correct any wrong impression which the unqualified publication of the paragraph in *The Theatre* might create.

(Qtd. in L. Irving 348)

Ruskin had told Laister about the original letter he had sent to Irving and directed him to request that "the whole of that letter" be published in the *Theatre* as a retraction. Irving's response, not surprisingly, was to "decline to enter into correspondence with a stranger" and to inquire why "Mr. Ruskin . . . does not write to me in person . . . if he has any communication to make to me" (349). Despite these considerable difficulties, a version of Ruskin's letter finally did appear in *Theatre*, allowing him to have his say. And what he actually did say at that point was: "I entirely dissent (and indignantly as well as entirely) from his [Irving's] general reading and treatment of the play." Furthermore, Ruskin went on to suggest that anyone interested in a fuller rendering of his views on Shakespeare's meaning in *The Merchant of Venice* should consult his essay "Munera Pulveris," in which he argued that "[the inhumanity of mercenary commerce] is the ultimate lesson which the leader of English intellect meant for us" (*Theatre* 1/3/80 169).
Such incidents are telling, particularly in light of the fact that, for most of the hundreds of thousands of spectators attending the Lyceum production, Irving's *Merchant of Venice* was a triumph and Shylock's exit from the trial scene "the crowning glory" of the play; for most it was the ultimate tragic exit, "and many of the audience actually wept" (Hughes 238). At one point during the opening run Irving cut the entire fifth act, thus ending the play with Shylock's exit from the trial. While the piece was only acted in this form for two months, in order to allow Ellen Terry to star in a one-act version of *Iolanthe* appearing on the same bill, the gesture gave rise to an apocryphal legend. Whenever Henry Irving played *The Merchant of Venice*, people liked to believe, he played it that way.

But even more powerful than the objection that Irving's Shylock was un-Shakespearean was the fear that it was not. For, if Irving were right, then the bard of Avon might indeed have written the play as a plea for toleration toward the Jews. Moreover, once the conventions governing dominant representations of Jews had been exposed and the possibility raised that Shylock was neither grotesque nor merely a clown, the attention of the Victorian public was forced away from the artificiality of the theater to the world outside its doors. The problem with Irving's sympathetic Shylock was that it tended to dispel Victorian nostalgia for the Elizabethan age, leaving nothing in its wake but the threat of internationalism and the increasing pressures of modernity. It admitted the presence of Jews in modern English society and asked, in a way that could not be ignored: If Shylock were not the loathsome and primitive buffoon he had long been held to be, then who was he? How did he get here? And where did he come from?

The simplest and perhaps, for that reason, one of the most popular answers to these questions was that Shylock had come from "somewhere else." The character was declared to be manifestly un-English, the invention of foreigners, undoubtedly having gained entry into England by unconventional means like a dangerous foundling taken in by an unsuspecting English couple. "The Germans have started a theory," one critic wrote,

that in Shylock Shakespeare wished to portray a sort of noble and dignified martyr to popular prejudice, and this nonsense has been still further elaborated by some of our own critics, who ask us to believe that the Jew of Venice is the embodiment of the spirit of toleration. (*Truth* 6/11/79, 569)

Another line of argument contested the sympathetic Shylock by construing him as a logical impossibility, in effect, as an anachronism whose admission to the realm of possibility invidiously altered the terms of the debate. "To say that . . . [Irving's] was the Jew that Shakespeare drew," wrote one commentator, "would be to quote Pope's doggerel inopportune." Rather, he argued, "it was the Jew idealized in the light of the modern Occidental reaction against the Judenhetze, a Jew already conscious of the Spinozas, the Sidonias, the Disraelis, who were to issue from his loins" (Walkley 136). The un-Shakespearean Shylock altered the balance of power in ways that, up to this point, had been inconceivable, and he rudely exposed the extent to which the inner sanctums of politics and finance had been penetrated by Jews. In the words of one of Irving's first reviewers:

Irving has . . . impart[ed] to his impersonation . . . the ruling feelings of a Jew such as Shakespeare has drawn... [and] these... reveal a lofty consciousness such as once manifested to an English constituency by a candidate "descended from a line of Jewish merchants who had . . . told the electors that his ancestors had been princes and statesmen when theirs were staining their bodies with woad." (E. R. R., "Henry" 16)

Yet another response to the question "Who is Shylock, and where did he come from?" was generated in literary-historical circles in which the matter was taken up as a question of genealogy seeking out the origins of Shylock. But, while, in one sense, this was simply the predictable academic response to Henry Irving's "admirable impersonation" of Shylock and the interest it rekindled in a subject that "had long been a bone of
contention among critics" (Lee, "Original" 185), in other ways it was more than just another round of debate about literary representations of Jews. As we shall see, the ostensibly editorial task of locating the "original of Shylock" became a search for origins in a number of far-reaching and unforeseen ways, suggesting—at least to a contemporary cultural historian—that the critical exigency here lies not with discovering the historical origins of Shylock but, rather, with examining the motivations of late-nineteenth-century Shakespeareans.

Shylock: The Infamous Secret Jew: II

A Jew, in the dictionary, is one who is descended from the ancient tribes of Judea, or one who is regarded as descended from that tribe. That's what it says in the dictionary; but you and I know what a Jew is—One Who Killed Our Lord . . . All right. I'll clear the air once and for all, and confess. Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in my basement. It said: "We killed him. signed, Morty." And a lot of people say to me, "Why did you kill Christ?" . . . We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him. (Bruce 40-41)

Ruy Lopez, a Jewish Portuguese doctor and personal physician to Elizabeth I, was accused of conspiring to poison the monarch, found guilty, and publicly hanged in June 1594. The affair was widely considered to have inspired both the figures of Shylock and of Marlowe's Barrabas, since it was believed to be roughly contemporaneous with the first productions of both The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta. While it now seems possible that Lopez was indeed involved in espionage and had, in fact, intended an attempt on the queen's life, what is at issue here is not Lopez's demonstrable innocence or guilt but, rather, the manner in which his story, as it was understood at the time, seized the attention of a number of critics and historians in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. I shall return to those accounts of the Lopez affair later on. For the moment, however, it will be helpful to define the story's parameters and to provide a basis for understanding why it was that people, three hundred years later, wished to find in Lopez a prototype of the figure of Shylock.

Lopez is believed to have settled in England in 1559. He "rapidly reached the highest places in the medical profession in London [and] was the first to hold the office of house physician at St. Bartholomew's Hospital." By 1575 he was listed as one of "the chief London doctors" and shortly afterward served as physician to the household of the Earl of Leicester. In 1586 he was appointed personal physician to Queen Elizabeth, who, in addition to bestowing the honor of his appointment, granted Lopez "a monopoly for the importation of aniseed and sumach into England" (Lee, Lopez 132-33). Lopez's success excited a considerable degree of envy, a fact witnessed by the derisory accounts of his rise to public prominence set out in the pamphlets of the day. Gabriel Harvey described him as a man who "by a kind of Jewish practis hath growen to much wealth and sum reputation as well with ye queen herself as with sum of ye greatest Lordes and Ladyes" (qtd. in Lee, Lopez 133). One of these lords was the Earl of Essex, whose increasing animosity toward Lopez seems to have been central in contributing to his demise.

Essex attempted to engage Lopez in gathering political intelligence about Spain. Lopez declined, however, and compounded Essex's irritation by disclosing details of his activities to the queen. The intrigue that ensued is unimaginably complicated and cannot be entered into here, but, in briefest outline, a plot was hatched in which Spanish spies in London were alleged to be conspiring to poison both Queen Elizabeth and Don Antonio of Spain. As alleged conspirators were arrested and made statements under torture or threat of torture, Lopez was brought under suspicion. Essex "insisted on his guilt," and Lopez was imprisoned and tried. "The prosecution was conducted by Sir Edward Coke . . . who described the prisoner as 'a perjured and murdering villain and Jewish doctor, worse than Judas himself". After Lopez's conviction the queen "delayed signing the death-warrant for three months" but was ultimately unable to prevent his execution. Even in death, however, to those at court Lopez appeared to maintain his privileged vicinity to the center of power; "the queen is said to have worn at her girdle until death . . . [a] jewel given to Lopez by Philip of Spain" (Lee, Lopez 134).
There are two powerful metaphors at work in the story of Dr. Lopez which merit particular attention. One is the metaphor of Marranism, or the secret profession of Judaism, to which I will return. The other is the metaphor of the Jewish doctor in an otherwise Jewless state.

At the time that Lopez was appointed personal physician to Queen Elizabeth, England had been, technically speaking, Jewless since the year 1290, when the Jews were expelled by King Edward I. In fact, Jews had been secretly settling in England at least since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. More to the point, however, as Gil Harris has noted, in acquiring a Jewish doctor for the monarch, England was participating in a long-standing if "seemingly inexplicable tradition" of popes and Christian rulers "receiving care from Jewish physicians" (8). This custom posed more than just the obvious paradox of entrusting the well-being of the head of state or the head of the church to an individual whose entire race had been banished for political and spiritual undesirability. For, renowned as they were for their skills in curative medicine, Jews were also commonly believed to be experts in the art of poisoning; and Jewish physicians, it was assumed, participated in a secret but nonetheless somehow universally acknowledged program of "diabolical revenge against Christianity."11 "The Vienna Faculty of Medicine believed that a private code adhered to by Jewish physicians obliged them to murder one patient in ten [while,] according to Spanish authorities, the figure was one in five" (7). The very Jewishness of the physician was seen to embody "semi-magical properties" (8) so that, absurdly, the attraction of the Jewish court physician was precisely the danger he or she brought to bear. Harris's analysis of the phenomenon is persuasive. The point in employing a Jewish doctor, he says, was that, "as in a modern-day vaccination," the presence of a Jewish physician at court enacted a regulated exposure of the body politic to a toxic substance (9). If Jews could not be hermetically excluded from the state, then at least their secret and powerful presence within it could be harnessed and controlled. When England purged Dr. Lopez from its body politic, it reasserted the integrity of its political boundaries, expelling what was undesirable while appropriating the doctor's seemingly ominous powers for itself.

The issues surrounding Lopez's Marranism are similarly intriguing. Marranos were enforced Jewish converts to Christianity. Yet, though these people were, strictly speaking, fully Christian, in practice the term was perceived to be "synonymous with the secret profession of Judaism" (Lipman I), and the case of Dr. Lopez typifies the Marranos' habitual fate. For, while he had "been baptized, and was a professing member and communicant of the Church of England," according to his enemies "he was said to be no Christian at heart" (Dimock 440-41). On the scaffold Lopez protested his innocence, affirming, up until the moment of his death, his loyalty to church and queen. Yet, though

with his last words he emphatically insisted that he had loved his mistress better than Christ Jesus . . . coming from one believed to be in secret a Jew by religion as he was by race, this did but excite the derisive laughter of the multitude. (469)

Of all the ways in which Lopez's story prefigures the institutional anti-Semitism of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators on Shakespeare, it is the issue of his Marranism, I would argue, that comes closest to providing a root metaphor for it all. It is a metaphor that I would now like to explore.

In Spain during the Middle Ages Christians, Muslims, and Jews coexisted successfully, if at times uneasily, for centuries. With the Catholic reconquest of Spain, however, the social position of the Jews became increasingly difficult to resolve. For, while Jewish participation in the consolidation of the Catholic state was, on the one hand, considered to be crucial, on the other, it was an enduring point of convergence for popular resentment. On the most basic level the allegiance of the Jews had to be secured in order to ensure that they did not side with the Muslims, but their position was considerably more complex than that. Barred from certain trades and professions, Jews had tended, historically, to earn their living by the provision of services and, as a result, possessed administrative and diplomatic skills that the state was anxious to deploy on its own behalf. Moreover, as occupants of the cultural space between Muslims and Christians, Jews were particularly well placed to serve as "intermediaries" in the adaptation of Muslim institutions to Catholic forms of
administration (Poliakov 110). But this Jewish participation in the unification of the Catholic state, effective as it was, gave rise to a dilemma. For, the more successful the mediation and thus the stronger and more unified the state, the more conspicuous became the position of Jews as infidels outside the Catholic Church. And, the more pronounced the infidelity of the Jews seemed, the more it appeared that there was something nefarious about their influential position within Spanish society. Over time perceptions of the social position of Spanish Jews deteriorated into the classic anti-Semitic trope that conveyed the belief that Jews constituted a privileged urban economic caste who exercised a disproportionate influence within the nation, "earning their living without much labour while sitting on their bottoms" (Bernández, qtd. in Kamen, *Spanish* 10). And, not surprisingly, the long-standing oscillation between tolerance toward the Jews and discrimination against them eventually degenerated into one of the most protracted catastrophes in Jewish history, culminating in the Inquisition and the expulsion from Spain.

The mounting hostility toward the Jews in Spain expressed itself in conventional ways. Jews were prohibited from participating in trade and commerce, their social mobility and literal freedom of movement were severely restricted, and they were subject to massacres and innumerable smaller-scale physical attacks. Some official efforts were made to ensure the safety of the Jews, but these were effective only in limited ways and in the short term. Significant numbers of Jews converted to Christianity over the years in order to escape persecution, but, as they tended to maintain their associations with unconverted Jews, it was felt that the menace to the Catholic state endured. Many of the converts "lived close to the Jewish quarter to which they still felt a cultural affinity; they retained traditional characteristics in dress and food . . . [and] some returned actively to the practice of Judaism" (Kamen, *Spanish* 27). In 1492 the situation was declared to be intolerable, and it was decreed that the presence of Jews in Spain would no longer be allowed. In July of that year an ultimatum was issued: submit to conversion or be expelled. Hundreds of thousands of Jews fled, initially mainly to Portugal, where they enjoyed a brief period of security. Unfortunately, this only lasted for five years as one of the conditions of a marriage, negotiated between King Manoel of Portugal and Isabel, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, was that the Jews of Portugal convert to Christianity or face expulsion. The Marranos were those who, rather than suffer the terms of exile, chose to convert to Catholicism and stay in Spain.

Once a Jew had become a convert and was no longer subject to political and religious disabilities, there was nothing to impede his or her progress in Spanish society. Understandably enough then, given that they were now free of long-standing restrictions, converts rapidly made their way into the professions, especially law and medicine, the political and financial administration, the municipal councils, the legislature, the army, the universities, and even the church (Roth 21). Moreover, "commercial agility and a . . . disposition to mutual help . . . put them in the vanguard of the new urban bourgeoisie and, in the next century, of the protocapitalist and entrepreneurial class that was then budding in Spain and Portugal" (Yovel 16-17). But, while this successful absorption of the Marranos into every aspect of life should, at least in theory, have satisfied the terms of the act of homogenization which the Spanish state had so forcefully sought, in fact, it merely recast ancient hostilities. For, where once the objection to their presence lay in the question of religion, it now came to be expressed in terms of blood. The Marranos, it was said, were tainted, inferior, impure.12 And, like the unconverted Jews before the expulsion, they were considered to be exercising an undue influence over Spanish affairs.

By the mid sixteenth century, for example, "it was reputed that most of the Spanish clergy resident in Rome in search of preferment were of Jewish origin" (Kamen, *Spanish* 22) and that a considerable number of Spanish bishops were, in reality, converted Jews. Wealthy Marranos "intemarried with the highest nobility of the land . . . [so that] within a couple of generations, there was barely a single aristocratic family in Aragon, from the royal house downwards, which was free from the 'taint' of Jewish blood" (Roth 21). The Marranos, or New Christians as they were sometimes called, appeared to have finessed their way "into the heart of Christian society, into the ranks of the aristocracy and the Church" (Kamen, *Spanish* 22). And, willfully blind to the role that the enforced conversions had played in creating this situation, popular prejudice held that an alien
infestation was hollowing the nation out from the inside.

What the Marranos found themselves confronting was the paradox of assimilation in its most overt form. For, in choosing to submit to conversion in order to avoid expulsion or death, the Marranos had responded to the tacit assurance conveyed by the state's ultimatum: "Become like us—abandon your difference—and you may be one with us." But assimilation is, precisely, a paradox, and the offer of undifferentiated acceptance is thus, by definition, always falsely tendered. "The more you are like me," says the dominant culture, "the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider" (Oilman, Jewish 2).

While the church could not officially sanction the shunning of Marranos, since the mass conversions had been undertaken at its behest, and to deny their legitimacy would be to deny its own jurisdiction, in practice there was little if any distinction maintained between Marranos and unconverted Jews. The Franciscan Alfonso de Espina gave voice to a widespread belief when he declared that "there were two types of Jews, public Jews and hidden Jews, and that both had the same nature" (Poliakov 181). Unconverted Jews suddenly seemed preferable, since there was at least little doubt about their identity. The problem with the Marranos was that they claimed to be Christians, which, of course, they were—except that everyone knew that they weren't. Jews outside the church were infidels, but they had been dealt with, expeditiously, by the general expulsion. False Christians, which is to say secret Jews inside the church, however, were heretics, and this was by far the greater menace. It was a situation that only the Inquisition could resolve.

The methods of the Inquisition are well documented, and there would be no point here in reiterating the fate of the Marranos at its hands. What is germane to this discussion, however, is the question of how the Inquisition identified its subjects, for deciphering the secrecy of the Jews and learning to deal with their "inherent duplicity" was, as we shall see, a preoccupation that the Inquisition shared with a great many cultures, late Victorian literary society among them.

Historiographically speaking, the secret life of the Marranos is a subject of considerable debate, but, for the time being, the traditional account of their existence is the one that matters here and runs as follows. Publicly, the Marranos lived as Christians, and while there were some "who had not been over-sincere in their attachment to Judaism, and did not find much difficulty in accommodating themselves . . . to their new religion . . . the vast majority," it was believed, "had accepted Christianity only to escape death, and remained at heart as completely Jewish as they had ever been" (Roth 19):

Outwardly they lived as Christians. They took their children to church to be baptized, though they hastened to wash off the traces of the ceremony as soon as they returned home. They would go to the priest to be married, though they were not content with the ceremony and, in the privacy of their houses, performed another to implement it . . . Their disbelief in the dogmas of the Church was notorious, and . . . not always concealed. They kept all the traditional [Jewish] ceremonies, in some instances down to the last details. They observed the Sabbath so far as lay in their power; and it was possible to see, from a height overlooking any city, how many chimneys were smokeless on that day . . . they married exclusively amongst themselves . . . In race, in belief, and . . . in practice, they remained as they had been before conversion. They were Jews in all but name, and Christians in nothing but form. They were moreover able to transmit their disbelief to their children, who, though born in the dominant faith and baptized at birth, were as little sincere in their attachment to it as their fathers. (20)

The problem with the Marranos, then, was considered to be twofold, a fact that is evident in the twin discourses that arose antagonistically around them and engaged, in tandem, notions of racial predisposition and of the pernicious exploitation of the private sphere. Jews can never be anything other than Jews, it said. Their race is the most important thing about them; they cannot form alliances or make commitments as
anything other than Jews. No matter what they say or do in public, in the privacy of their homes they will revert to their innate identity. Their participation in public ceremonies and their declarations of loyalty to persons or institutions outside their own ranks mean nothing, since at home they will simply wash away any trace of these commitments and cease to be their public selves. Jews only marry other Jews. Jews have Jewish children, to whom they communicate, by both biological and social means, the essence of deceit.

The reputed cunning and boundlessness of the Marrano conspiracy set the Inquisition a special challenge, for it found the greatest perils in the greatest semblance of order and the truth to be indistinguishable from lies. Thus, the more mundane and normal the behavior of a Marrano, the more likely he or she was to be brought under suspicion. "Edicts of Faith" were issued which "summoned the faithful to denounce to the authorities any person guilty of heretical offenses" (Roth 99-100). But, as these offenses were necessarily secret, and therefore might not appear to be heretical at all, the edicts included detailed descriptions of the sorts of behaviors true Christians ought to look out for. Some of these behaviors constituted forms of religious observance which would, indeed, identify a practicing Jew, but others, like the smokeless chimneys on Saturdays, were not overt acts but merely absences or actions so commonplace that it was only in the Inquisitorial imagination that they could have significance at all. People were denounced for not eating hare, cuttlefish, or pork; for "putting on clean or festive clothes"; and for "cleaning their houses on Friday." Adherents to the Edicts of Faith were solemnly informed that Jews had a tendency to wash their hands (100-101), creating a social climate in which the "mere regard for personal cleanliness might be enough to convict a person of secretly practising Judaism . . . and so cost him his life" (105).

I will return to the question of how late Victorian commentators on Shakespeare approached the Marrano Lopez and the matter of his relation to the figure of Shylock. But, before doing so, it will be helpful briefly to clarify several points of historiography.

The story of the Marranos is, as I have indicated, a traditional narrative that presents an epic of steadfast belief in the face of insuperable adversity, but, as Miriam Bodian has argued, the tendency to locate the problem of Marranism so firmly within the sphere of religion is reductive on several counts. The overemphasis on religion tends to discount questions of commercial and economic interest and to ignore the complexities of social and familial relationships and of self-perception and definition in a context in which people were subject to protracted and contradictory pressures. Thus, the Marranos are unified into a coherent group and the ineffable complexities of their Marranism reduced to a matter of religious fidelity or infidelity and, occasionally, even further to one of personal sincerity or insincerity.

Even more worrisome, however, is the extent to which the traditional account of the Marranos and their secret faith replicates the logic of Inquisitorial paranoia. For, although historians such as Cecil Roth embrace the cause of the Marranos, valorizing their crypto-Judaism, in order to do so they must leave intact the notion of the racial predisposition of Jews to duplicity. To put it another way, the concept of the Marranos' unshakable loyalty to Judaism is as tied as the tropes of the Inquisition are to the belief that Jewishness is a function of biology or of social characteristics so profoundly embedded that they are effectively quasi-biological. So, while these narratives champion rather than denounce the Marranos, they nevertheless participate in a discourse about Jews which attributes their social and political behavior to their race. More recent work has moved away from this presentation of crypto-Judaism as a coherent phenomenon.

Increasingly, for example, it has been recognized that "patterns of converso behaviour did not simply emerge from some primordial Jewish stratum of consciousness" and that Marrano identity, therefore, needs to be understood "as a changing cultural construction evolving over many generations and answering a variety of needs" (Bodian 50-51). Rather than secretly returning to Judaism at any cost, and with biologically programmed inevitability, Jewish converts to Catholicism displayed a wide range of responses to their respective situations, responses that varied tremendously, from generation to generation and from individual to individual, even among members of a single family. Moreover, compounding these differences were the
relative levels of acceptance or rejection which Marranos experienced within their social and religious communities of resettlement and the variety of their relationships with the Jews and Gentiles they encountered outside the Iberian Peninsula. Most profoundly, however, as Yirmiyahu Yovel has argued:

people do not discard their past simply because they make new decisions or embark upon a new course; a being endowed with consciousness and memory cannot simply return to the point of departure, even when reverting to a position once held in the past and then abandoned. The Marranos had lived among Christians for generations, partaken of their mores and education, practised their customs—at least outwardly—and internalized the same symbolic universe and mode of thinking. (41)

Thus, whether they believed themselves to be true Christians, Christians in name only, or once and forever Jews, the Marranos clearly bore with them enduring confusions of identity which made them, at best, the subjects of benign curiosity and, at worst, of opprobrium and oppression. Only by recognizing these complexities can we begin to appreciate the enduring fascination and treacherous promise attached to figures such as Ruy Lopez and the Shylock he may or may not have inspired.

Shylock: The Infamous Secret Jew: III

The question of the Lopez affair and its relation to the figure of Shylock drew the attention of a number of critics and historians in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. These accounts portray Lopez's treachery, his influence on the design of Shylock, and Shakespeare's intentions in representing the Jew. The study 1 would like to focus on, however, is the one that addressed itself most directly to the Victorian Shakespeare establishment and which was, most obviously, part of the wave of response to Irving's Merchant of Venice, appearing as it did in the Gentleman's Magazine in February 1880, about halfway through the production's opening run. Moreover, the essay, entitled "The Original of Shylock," deserves particular notice here not only for "attract[ing] . . . the attention of Shakespearean scholars" (SSL 3) but also for its part in launching one of the Victorian era's most distinguished literary careers. The eighteen-year-old undergraduate author of the essay went by the forenames Solomon Lazarus. But, for the sake of his career he changed his name, it is popularly believed, on the advice of Oxford's Benjamin Jowett, ironically, a man who had himself been accused of excessive displays of religious radicalism. As an eminent Shakespearean, editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, first biographer of Queen Victoria, fellow of the British Academy, founding member of the English Association, and member of the Athenaeum Club, to name only a few of his distinctions, Solomon Lazarus was better known to the world as Sidney or, more fully, as Sir Sidney Lee.

In his search for the original of Shylock, Sidney Lee posits four categories of evidence pertaining to the putative links between Shylock and his historical prototype. In outline he argues that the date of composition of The Merchant of Venice more or less coincides with the date of the alleged conspiracy and its aftermath; that the text of The Merchant contains topical references; that Shakespeare's protagonist, the merchant Antonio, was likely drawn with the protagonist of the Lopez affair in mind; and that Shylock and Lopez display similarities of character too great to be coincidental. As general categories of evidence, these seem fair enough, and, indeed, at the time of the article's publication they greatly impressed established authorities in Elizabethan studies such as J. O. Halliwell-Phillips and F. J. Furnivall. In the context of this study, however, the evidence that Sidney Lee offers with regard to Lopez and his relation to Shylock is compelling primarily in ways that the author and his contemporaries probably did not intend. Rather, what is remarkable from this vantage point is the extent to which the perception of a significant relation between the two figures is, effectively, inevitable, as are the particular narrative formulations mobilized in telling the story of Lopez and Shylock. It was a story that had been told before.
Sidney Lee's most straightforward argument is that pertaining to The Merchant's date of composition, his claim being that the play "appeared for the first time not much more than three months after Lopez's famous execution" (Lee, "Original" 198). But, while it seems unlikely that Shakespeare—or, for that matter, anyone living in London at the time—would have been unaware of so public an event as the execution of the queen's personal physician, Lee's dating of the play and his connection of the two events is largely speculative. Nonetheless, at the time this would have constituted a scholarly argument. His remaining points, by way of contrast, display increasingly prominent elements of fantasy amid the learned speculation.

Lee's identification of topical references, for example, suggests that the connections he was arguing for were, in some imaginative sense, already in place. A conventional allusion to "the rack," which occurs as part of an exchange between the lovers Portia and Bassanio, is taken, without question, to allude to the fate of those implicated in the plot against Elizabeth, while an anachronistic reference to trial by jury—a procedure not known in Venice during the time in which The Merchant is set—leads him directly to conclude that it must have been intended to suggest "the way in which an English court of law would treat a Jew" (Lee, "Original" 199). As far as the link between the protagonist of the play and the protagonist of the Lopez affair is concerned, somewhat fantastically, Lee's evidence here consists of little more than the fact that they were both called Antonio. Pointing out that "the name Antonio . . . was very common among the Portuguese"—the protagonist of the Lopez affair was Don Antonio, pretender to the Portuguese throne—it is not "by any means," Lee argues, "so ordinary an Italian one as Lorenzo or Ludovico" (197). It is difficult to know how to respond to this assertion, especially considering the stir it caused in the Shakespearean academic community at the time. To respond insofar as possible in the spirit of the author, however, one can only point out that, with the exception of certain "Citizens," "Servants," "Soldiers," "Ladies," "Gentlemen," and "Ghosts," Antonio is, as a matter of record, the single most commonly occurring name in all of Shakespeare's oeuvre.

Finally, there is Sidney Lee's claim that the similarities of character between Lopez and Shylock are too great to be coincidental. While Lee concedes that not much can be said definitively of Lopez's character, since his "extant correspondence is very incomplete, and gives us only glances here and there of his characteristics," he is nevertheless willing to comment, with authority, on points of character. Firstly, although he doesn't say why, Lee asserts "with some probability" that "the spirit of revenge in the doctor's case was similar in calibre to that in Shylock's." Even more to the point, however, he commits himself with "certainty" to the following claim:

In their devotion to their family the two Jews closely resemble each other. Neither Lopez nor Shylock, in good fortune or in bad, fail to exemplify the Jewish virtue of domesticity. Lopez excused his attendance at court on the ground that the illness of his wife detained him at home. His Dutch correspondents never omit to send his family affectionate remembrances from his Jewish friends in Holland, whatever be the subject of the letter, and he never omits to return them. Similarly, Shylock's love for his daughter and for his wife Leah, whose memory he piously cherishes, are touches of character which theories of dramatic art only incompletely explain. (Lee, "Original" 198-99)

There are two chronically recurring narratives at work here, the first of which is the story of "the Jewish virtue of domesticity," a virtue that, as we have already seen, necessarily connotes hidden vice. The fact that Lopez's correspondence includes conventional greetings and inquiries after the welfare of friends abroad or that, as a husband and doctor, he should have attended his wife in illness is to Sidney Lee, as they would undoubtedly have been to the Inquisition, signs of the innately suspect nature of Jews. Here, as everywhere else, Jewish participation in the commonplace is a sign of secret goings-on. Thus, the fact that Shylock loves his daughter and reveres the memory of his dead wife cannot possibly be taken at face value. They are enigmatic signifiers, "touches of character which theories of dramatic art only incompletely explain."
The second narrative at work here is one that Sidney Lee authored but did not, in any ordinary sense, write. For, like a man holding up a mirror while looking in the mirror, Sidney Lee, in rooting out the story of Lopez embedded in the figure of Shylock, manifested yet again the infinitely regressive life of the secret Jew. The story of Lee's own life is the story of a great public figure, a man who made his way, by virtue of his talent and industry, to the top of the Victorian intellectual establishment; it is the story of a man deemed fit to write the life of the queen. Considering the accomplishments he could list by the time he died, one would hardly remember that what had launched his career was nothing more than an essay exposing the relation of an infamous Jewish villain to a secret Jew, a great public figure who, like Lee himself, had made his way, by virtue of his talent and industry, to the top of the Elizabethan establishment and who, until he was found out, had been deemed fit to guard the life of the queen. Even less would it be remembered that until he had written that essay, as a young man, Sir Sidney had gone by another name.

Notes


2 The dominance of Irving's interpretation is further indicated by the fact that no notable production of the Merchant which did not feature Irving in the role of Shylock was mounted in London until 1905. For a complete list of notable productions and revivals, see Freda Gaye, ed., Who's Who in the Theatre (London: Pitman, 1967), 1434. For a more general overview of Jews on the late Victorian stage, see Shearer West, "The Construction of Racial Type: Caricature, Ethnography, and Jewish Physiognomy in Fin-de-Siècle Melodrama," Nineteenth Century Theatre 21.1 (1993): 4-40.

3 Irving's first public defense of his Shylock appeared in Theatre on 1 Dec. 1879 (254-55), as part of a symposium on the character. For a lengthy reassertion of his original intentions several years into the history of the production, see Joseph Hatton, Henry Irving's Impressions of America, vol. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1884), 262-75.

4 John Gross's claim that "it is generally agreed that his [Irving's] interpretation grew less sympathetic over the years" (141) is unsupported by any convincing evidence. Virtually the only critic to express this view was William Winter, a notorious American theater critic and by Gross's own admission an extremist, who was known as an arch-conservative and a bigot, consistently antagonistic toward non-Anglo-Saxon foreigners on the American stage (Oxford Companion to the Theatre 897). Winter's account of Irving's Shylock, in Shakespeare on the Stage, appears to be Gross's source. But what Gross fails to take into account is Winter's own reading of The Merchant by which he then measures the legitimacy or illegitimacy of subsequent interpretations of Shylock's role. The lurid language Winter uses to describe his ideal of a convincing Jew, coupled with his belief that "the true Shylocj of Shakespeare" must be "hard, merciless, inexorable, terrible" (178), strongly suggests that Irving's softening of the role did not sit well with Winter's own feelings about Jews. The two men were friends for many years, and it is likely that Winter was reading into Irving's performance what he wished were there but, as other evidence would suggest, manifestly was not.

5 For a selection of reviews of Irving's American tour of 1883, see Mr. Henry Irving and Miss Ellen Terry in America: Opinions of the Press (Chicago: John Morris, 1884).

6 Edward Moore, in his essay "Henry Irving's Shakespearean Productions" (Theatre Survey 17.2 [1976]: 201), says, for example, that Irving "cared nothing about realizing a play as written, but only about making his effects; and splendid as these no doubt were, most of us would rather have Shakespeare's."
On the importance of conversion as a cultural motif and of the father-daughter relationship in this context, see Michael Ragussis's compelling *Figures of Conversion: "The Jewish Question" and English National Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

Robert Hichens, in his essay "Irving as Shylock" (in *We Saw Him Act*, ed. H. A. Saintsbury and Cecil Palmer [London: Hurst and Blackett, 1939], 168), remarks on how unforgettable this bit of stage business was.

For an example of just such a discussion, see Frederick Hawkins, "The Character of Shylock;" *Theatre* (1 Nov. 1879): 191-98; and the roundtable discussion involving numerous commentators, including Irving himself, the following month (*Theatre* [1 Dec. 1879]).


On changing perceptions of Marranism, see Miriam Bodian, " 'Men of the Nation': The Shaping of *Converso* Identity in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present* 143 (1994): 48-76.


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*Bassanio:*
Let me choose,
For as I am, I live upon the rack.

*Portia:*
Upon the rack Bassanio? Then confess
What treason there is mingled with your love.

*Bassanio:*
None but that ugly treason of mistrust
Which makes me fear th'enjoying of my love.
There may as well be amity and life
'Tween snow and fire, as treason and my love.

*Portia:*
Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack,
Where men enforced do speak anything.
Bassanio:
Promise me life and I'll confess the truth.

Portia:
Well then, confess and live.

(III.ii.25-39)

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**The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): Introduction**

**The Merchant of Venice**

*The Merchant of Venice* is often identified by modern critics as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays," in that it raises moral dilemmas it does not resolve. The major problematic areas that are frequently the focus of critical debate include the discrepancy between the values professed by Christians in the play and their own apparently contradictory actions, the conflict between male friendship and marriage, and the issue of Shakespeare's arguably anti-Semitic portrayal of Shylock. In addition to these unresolved issues, there is much criticism that focuses on other aspects of the play—such as the issue of gender identity and the language of economics and exchange that permeates the play.

By the end of the play, the Jewish money-lender Shylock has been stripped of his possessions and the right to practice his religion, while the Christian characters—Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia—have lost nothing, and have in fact gained money and love. Despite this favorable outcome for the Christians, they are often accused of failing to practice Christian mercy, among other professed beliefs. Many critics have suggested that the actions of the Christians—the way they speak about and to Shylock, and the way they treat him—speak self-condemningly for themselves. Other critics have argued that Christian virtues are emphasized in the play. Raymond B. Waddington (1977), for example, contrasted the actions of Portia and Bassanio on behalf of each other and Antonio with the actions of Jessica and Lorenzo to maintain that the Christian values of trust and faith are stressed in the play. Waddington also suggests ways in which Antonio's actions toward Shylock might be regarded as merciful. Similarly, Leo Kirschbaum (1962) has asserted that the Christian virtue of faith in Providence is demonstrated through the character of Antonio and the risks he takes.

Other critics have opted for another religious approach to the play, examining Shakespeare's stance on Judaism rather than Christianity. Like many scholars, Kirschbaum seeks to understand what the terms "Jew" and "Christian" meant to Elizabethan audiences. Kirschbaum and others have pointed out that there were no Jewish communities in England in Shakespeare's time, and that the playwright's attitude toward Jews was based on the stereotypical Jewish figure as portrayed in earlier works; this figure served primarily as an anti-Christian scapegoat. Kirschbaum further argues that Shakespeare's Shylock resembles the Elizabethan Puritan, in that the Puritan was often stereotyped as a sober, economically aggressive kill-joy—a projection of Anglican hatred for traits which were contradictory to conventional sensibilities. D. M. Cohen (1980) on the other hand, has argued that the play is indeed anti-Semitic, and not simply in the portrayal of Shylock. Cohen cites the number of times and ways in which the term "Jew" is used in the play and maintains that Jewishness is equated with wickedness. Furthermore, Cohen states, Jews are characterized as inhuman throughout the play until the end, where Shakespeare demonstrates Shylock's humanity. Cohen finds this particularly
troubling, asking that if Shakespeare believed that Jews were humans with their own strengths and weakness, why then would he indulge the use of the stereotypical inhuman, evil Jew throughout the play? Finally, other critics have examined the character of Shylock from a different angle entirely. James Shapiro (1996) focused his analysis on Shylock's threat to remove a "pound of flesh" from Antonio. Shapiro suggests that Elizabethans understood this threat to be one of circumcision and examines the implications of this threat to a Christian audience in Elizabethan England.

Another area of interest to scholars is the play's language of exchange, economics, and finance. Lars Engle (1986) explored the use of such language and notes that all the relationships in the play are characterized in some way as economic or legal, not simply emotional or erotic. Engle argues that in discussing the plot in financial terms, the historical implications of the credit market and the marriage market are revealed and can help one to better understand the play. Similarly, Karen Newman (1987) stated that the exchange of goods—including both merchandise and women—colors the play's action. Newman examines the many exchanges of Portia's ring and demonstrates that despite the ring's symbolic nature of Portia's submission to Bassanio, Portia achieves power and prestige through her actions.

One way in which Portia attains power in the play is through her disguise as the doctor of law, Balthazar. Portia's use of male disguise is often the focus of critical discussions regarding the issues of gender identity and gender roles and relations in the play. Coppèlla Kahn (1985) has noted that the ring plot, which hinges on Portia's giving of her ring to Bassanio and her later acceptance of it as Balthazar, highlights the conflict between male friendship (between Bassanio and Antonio) and marriage (between Portia and Bassanio). Keith Geary (1984) has also analyzed Portia's disguise, however, he distinguishes her disguise from that of Shakespeare's other heroines. He notes that Portia's male transformation is complete and free of examinations of the psychological consequences of masquerading as a male. Her identity is wholly different and wholly masculine, further emphasized, Geary reminds, by the fact that in an Elizabethan production a male would be portraying Portia/Balthazar. Geary concludes that Shakespeare uses Portia's disguise to highlight the struggle between heterosexual love and homosexual love found within the love triangle consisting of Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio. This conflict between homosexual and heterosexual love, Geary also notes, is an adaptation of Shakespeare's "romantic love versus male friendship" theme. Michael Shapiro (1996) has also examined what he refers to as "cross-gender disguise." Shapiro argues that in contrast to Shakespeare's other disguised heroines, Portia chooses to take on a male disguise herself; she is not coerced to do so by her circumstances. Additionally, Shapiro contends, by adopting the role of Balthazar, Portia positions herself in a place of authority over men and that this authority is highlighted by the less powerful roles taken on by both Jessica and Nerissa. Finally, in another approach to the issue of gender roles and identity, Marianne Novy (1984) explored the differences between Antonio's self-denial throughout the play and Portia's self-assertion and her acceptance of sexuality. Novy argues that to Elizabethans, both women and Jews were symbols of "absolute otherness," and were associated with impulses related to the flesh rather than the spirit, including sexuality, aggression, and acquisitiveness. Claiming that The Merchant of Venice demonstrates the divided attitude of Elizabethans toward such qualities and toward women, Novy purports that Portia represents the favorable aspects of such traits, as Portia uses her aggressiveness to solidify her loving relationship with Bassanio, whereas Shylock is representative of the negative side of the traits, in that his ambition is self-directed.

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): Overviews

D. J. Palmer (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: "The Merchant of Venice, or the Importance of Being Earnest," in Shakespearian Comedy, Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1972, pp. 97-120
In this overview of the play, Palmer examines the "overt sententiousness" of the play and argues that the action of the play frequently contradicts the morals apparently being emphasized.

I

'The Merchant of Venice is the simplest of plays,' wrote Harley Granville-Barker, 'so long as we do not bedevil it with sophistries.' And so it is, provided also that we do not take its moralizing too seriously, for the sophistries are already there. In the two climactic scenes of the play, for instance, Bassanio wins Portia by turning sententious rhetoric against itself,

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?

(III. ii. 73-80)

while Portia succeeds in the trial scene by proving herself a better equivocator than Shylock.

This is the most sententious of all the comedies before the problem plays. Moral issues stare us in the face, so that, as Frank Kermode has observed, 'only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of The Merchant of Venice'. However the theme or moral argument of the play is formulated, as the conflict between justice and mercy, or the antithesis of prodigality and usury, or the use of riches spiritual and material, it is based on the opposing values of Belmont and Venice. Yet Shakespeare's treatment of the theme is not 'obvious' in the sense that led Stephen Gosson to exempt the old play called The Jew from his general censure of the stage in 1579, for its edifying representation of 'the greedinesse of worldly chusers and the bloody mindes of Usurers'. The themes are very similar, but whether or not Shakespeare was indebted to The Jew for the double plot of the caskets and the bond, The Merchant of Venice resists the simple categories of a morality play. Those critics who have felt, for instance, that the powerful characterization of Shylock upsets the balance of the dramatic structure are right at least in their perception of forces that complicate and cut across the moral alignments of the theme. Our sympathies are too often divided, and action too often contradicts avowed principle, to allow us to feel secure in those symmetrical antinomies of value set up between Belmont and Venice. If Shylock were merely a conventional stage-Jew, if Jessica did not 'steal' from her father in every sense of the word, if the quality of Christian mercy towards Shylock were less strained, Bassanio's 'worth' more in evidence and Antonio's self-righteousness less so, then the moral issues would be more clearcut but the play correspondingly less interesting.

The play's overt sententiousness serves a dramatic purpose similar to that which T. S. Eliot found for 'meaning' in poetry: 'to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog'. Our attention is often held by moral arguments of one kind or another, while a different order of awareness and response is being solicited by other dramatic means. Thus in I. iii there is a contention between Shylock and Antonio on the rights and wrongs of usury, in which Shylock grounds his justification for lending money at interest on scriptural authority, citing as precedent the account in Genesis 30 of how Jacob earned his hire as shepherd to his uncle Laban:
Mark what Jacob did:
When Laban and himself were compromis'd
That all the eanlings which 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 pill'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 blessing, if men steal it not.

(I. iii. 72-85)

But the issue of usury is only a pretext for insinuating other analogies between the story of Jacob and the dramatic situation. Like Jacob, Shylock is a worm that eventually turns, and his identification with Jacob's cunning in getting the better of this bargain prefigures his own use of the 'merry bond' for revenge upon Antonio. Antonio, on the other hand, exonerates Jacob from deception while convicting Shylock of casuistry: 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.' It is indeed a scene bedevilled with sophistry, for as Antonio shifts the moral issue from usury to an ad hominem attack on Shylock's false-seeming, it is clear that the antagonism between them runs far deeper than a business rivalry or a theological dispute. The story of Jacob's manipulation of animal passions is itself a mirror of the equivocal way in which both Antonio and Shylock try to gain the moral advantage from an antipathy that is seated in the blood. Shakespeare is not concerned to present the case for or against usury itself.

In this 'simplest of plays', the true simplicity resides in the primacy of natural feeling. Like Jacob's 'fulsome ewes', the characters behave according to the laws of 'kind', not according to the precepts and doctrines of the moralist. As Shylock says,

affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes,

(IV. i. 50-52)

and opposing extremes of excess and deficiency in temperament, in the 'senses, affections, passions' of the blood, create the possibilities for tragic or comic resolution which are kept open until the climactic passions of the trial scene. If Jacob is a figure of the power to control and direct natural feeling, that power is conspicuously denied to the moralist in an action which bears ample witness to Portia's observation that 'the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree' (I. ii. 15). The eloquence of moral deliberation and exhortation, 'good sentences, and well pronounc'd' (I. ii. 9), finally gives way to the ultimate simplicity of silence in which 'the touches of sweet harmony' (V. i. 57) are heard.

While Stephen Gosson approved The Jew for its morality, the spirit of Shakespeare's play is closer to Sir Philip Sidney's reply to Gosson in An Apology for Poetry:

Wherein, if we can, show we the poet's nobleness, by setting him before his other competitors, among whom as principal challengers step forth the moral philosophers whom,
me thinketh, I see coming towards me with a sullen gravity, as though they could not abide vice by daylight, rudely clothed for to witness outwardly their contempt of outward things, with books in their hands against glory, whereto they set their names, sophistically speaking against subtlety, and angry with any man in whom they see the foul fault of anger.

'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?' The moralist, traditional enemy of the comic spirit, not only bedevils us with sophistries, but fails where the poet succeeds in moving the affections:

For suppose it be granted (that which I suppose with great reason may be denied) that the philosopher, in respect of his methodical proceeding, doth teach more perfectly than the poet, yet do I think that no man is so much philo philosophs as to compare the philosopher in moving with the poet.

And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well nigh the cause and the effect of teaching. For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught? and what so much good doth that teaching bring forth (I speak still of moral doctrine) as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach?5

In the play as a whole, the story of Jacob, 'the skilful shepherd', has another significance: like T. S. Eliot's 'imaginary burglar', it is a figurative analogy to Shakespeare's own art, which deceives with 'outward shows' to move us through feeling to imaginative conception.

Jacob is not the only magician-figure in The Merchant of Venice. When Bassanio describes Portia in terms of the myth of the Golden Fleece at the end of the play's first scene,

For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her,

(I. i. 168-72)

the allusion associates her with Medea, who fell in love with Jason and used her necromantic arts to help him win the Golden Fleece. Medea is the central figure in Ovid's version of the myth (Metamorphoses, Book VII), which Shakespeare must have had in mind, for Ovid pursues her subsequent career as the play does in its later reference to the legend:

In such a night
Medea gathered the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Aeson.

(V. i. 12-14)

Aeson was Jason's father, and after Medea has betrayed her own father by marrying Jason and returning with him to Greece, she employs her skills to restore Aeson to youthful vigour by opening his veins with a knife and replacing his aged blood with the juice of 'the enchanted herbs'. The rest of Medea's story takes a more sinister turn, as she uses her magic in treachery and murder. Thus 'with hir suttle guile / Of counterfeited gravitie' (as Arthur Golding translated it, Book VII, lines 398-9), she persuades the daughters of King Pelias that his life can be renewed as Aeson's had been, and so lures them into cutting their father's throat. Her
wickedness reaches its peak in the murder of her own children (again with a knife) and in the attempt to deceive her second husband Aegeus into poisoning his son Theseus.

What begins as a romantic love story therefore turns into tragedy, but there is a logic in this progression, for each of Medea's crimes, directed against the ties of kinship, is a repetition of her original betrayal of her father in helping Jason win the fleece. Significantly for Shakespeare's purposes, Ovid begins his tale with Medea's struggle between moral restraint and unbridled passion:

Aetias daughter in hir heart doth mightie flames conceyve.
And after strugling verie long, when reason could not win
The upper hand of rage: she thus did in hir selfe begin:
In vaine, Medea, dost thou strive: some God what ere he is
Against thee bendes his force. For what a wondrous thing is this?
Is any thing like this which men doe terme by name of Love?
For why should I my fathers hestes esteeme so hard above
All measure? sure in very deede they are too hard and sore.
Why feare I lest yon straunger whome I never saw before
Should perish? what should be the cause of this my feare so great?
Unhappie wench (and if thou canst) suppresse this uncouth heat
That burneth in thy tender brest: and if so be I could,e,
A happie turne it were, and more at ease then be I shoulde.
But now an uncouth maladie perforce against my will
Doth hale me. Love persuades me one, another thing my skill.
The best I see and like: the worst I follow headlong still.

(Book VII, 11. 10-25)

A few moments after Bassanio has linked her with the legend of the Golden Fleece, we find Portia at the beginning of the second scene in Medea-like conflict between loyalty to her father and the natural desire to choose her own husband, echoing the last of the lines quoted above:

It is a good divine that follows his own instructions; I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father. (I. ii. 12-22)

Yet here the differences between Portia and Medea begin. Portia is not in love with any of the 'strangers' who have come Jason-like to Belmont, as she makes clear by mocking at their eccentric dispositions. And since they refuse to accept the conditions of her father's will, she can unlike Medea gladly vow loyalty to her father: 'If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will' (I. ii. 95). Portia is contrasted rather than identified with Medea, but the parallels are there in the play to intensify the sense of possible disaster. From Ovid's tale Shakespeare has appropriated the related and recurrent significance of 'blood' as the physical basis of passion and of kinship. As Medea rejuvenated her husband's father, Portia will restore the life of her husband's friend, by means of deceptive arts; but Portia's lawful magic prevents the knife from shedding a single drop of blood. It is Jessica instead who betrays her father by marrying a stranger,
Alack, what heinous sin it is in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners,

(II. iii. 16-19)

Like Ovid, Shakespeare opens the action with an 'uncouth [i.e. strange, unknown] maladie'. Antonio's sadness reflects the wayward motions of 'affection, / Mistress of passion', for critics who try like Salerio and Solanio to discover the cause of this sadness are wilfully ignoring its dramatic point: 'In sooth, I know not why I am so sad'. Antonio has of late, but wherefore he knows not, lost all his mirth, and this sadness, which gives him 'much ado to know myself, sets him apart from those who know him best, his friends. Later in the play, Portia describes friendship as a communion of similar spirits:

```plaintext
for in companions
That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit.
```

(III. iv. 11-15)

The virtually interchangeable names and speeches of Salerio and Solanio suggest just such a shared identity, in contrast with Solanio's reaction to Antonio's distemper:

```plaintext
Now, by two-headed Janus
Nature hath fram'd strange fellows in her time:
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes,
And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper;
And other of such vinegar aspect
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile
Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.
```

(I. i. 50-6)

Antonio's sadness divides the 'equal yoke' of friendship; as Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano approach, Salerio and Solanio take their leave so abruptly that Bassanio feels there is something wrong:

```plaintext
Good signiors both, when shall we laugh? Say when.
You grow exceeding strange; must it be so?
```

(I. i. 66-7)

Friends become strangers, and the encounter between Antonio and Gratiano is just such a contrast of opposing temperaments as that between the 'strange fellows' Solanio described. If Shakespeare confused 'two-headed Janus' with the masks of tragedy and comedy, the image is also picked up in Antonio's assertion that he holds the world as 'A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one', to which Gratiano replies, 'Let me play the fool' (I. i. 78-9).

Antonio's sadness sets in motion the forces of division and disharmony which will take the play to the brink of tragedy before it is retrieved as a comedy. His loss of inner equilibrium produces that sense of things drawing
apart into opposite extremes which this first scene develops through the talk of contrasting excess and deficiency, though the emphasis upon differences of temperament between friends who should be united by sympathies of feeling, and through the sequence of departures as in turn each of Antonio's friends leaves him.

Shakespeare has adapted to his own purposes Medea's 'uncouth maladie' that turns her affections to a 'stranger'. After the estranging effects of Antonia's sadness upon himself and his friends, in the second scene we hear from Portia about her suitors, who are 'strange fellows' both in Solanio's sense and as foreigners. This prepares us for Shylock's entry in the following scene, since Shylock is essentially the stranger, by temperament and race. Indeed, since it is 'blood' that determines both, Shylock's Jewishness and his disposition are related. The antipathy between himself and Antonio is not only absolute and unqualified, it has its roots in a repugnance that is physical before it finds moral or religious grounding. Shylock's refusal to eat with Antonio, the intensity of his desire instead to 'feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him', matches the extraordinary violence of Antonio's behaviour to him:

You that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur.

(I. iii. 112-13)

This is not merely ideological bigotry: they respond to each other through their bodies, in a savage, primitive way, and the essence of such a response is that neither regards the other as a fellow man. With this strong physical feeling between them, it is not surprising that Shylock should propose as forfeit for his bond 'an equal pound / Of your fair flesh'.

'Mislike me not for my complexion': the Prince of Morocco's enjoinder to Portia at the opening of the next scene (II. i) is a fitting comment on the mutual antipathy between Antonio and Shylock. Morocco refers to his black skin, but the Elizabethan word 'complexion' also meant the disposition of the humours in the blood which were believed to determine temperament. Melancholy, choleric, sanguine and phlegmatic humours, mixed in different proportions, make up Nature's 'strange fellows'. Differences of race, by which Morocco and Shylock are identified as 'strangers', are also in the blood, while in yet another sense this blood signifies our common humanity, as Morocco implies when he compares himself to 'the fairest creature northward born':

And let us make incision for your love
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

(II. i. 6-7)

'So may the outward shows be least themselves'. Morocco's challenge, by anticipating Shylock's attempt to 'make incision', also reminds us that the affections of liking or loathing are rooted in the blood. 'Mislike me not for my complexion' is thus an appeal which extends in the play far beyond its immediate context.

Shylock's most powerful appeal for our sympathies also gathers its force from physical imagery, paradoxically arguing from 'kind' to the justification of most unkind cruelty:

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.
In its reduction of moral argument to the terrible logic of the blood, Shylock's passionate eloquence illustrates the sense in which this is 'the simplest of plays'.

II

In Elizabethan usage 'sad' could mean 'serious' as well as 'melancholy'. Thus the merry Gratiano finds Antonio's sadness akin to the grave disposition of the moralist:

There are a sort of men whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
And do a wilful stillness entertain,
With purpose to be dress'd in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit;
As who should say, 'I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips let no dog bark'.
O my Antonio, I do know of those
That therefore only are reputed wise
For saying nothing.

Gratiano 'speaks an infinite deal of nothing', as Bassanio observes behind his back, and between these two extremes of excess and deficiency differences of natural disposition are reflected in the use of language. In the unfolding action characters are given ample opportunity to play the moralist: the choice between the caskets is performed by each of Portia's suitors as an exercise in high-minded eloquence, while Shylock and his enemies exchange speeches of self-righteous recrimination. But 'wisdom, gravity, profound conceit' are, as Gratiano suggests, the 'outward shows' of attitudes determined by temperament and the inner motions of the blood; conversely, the rhetoric of sententious deliberation and exhortation, the appeals to precept and doctrine, fail to move the affections to their purpose. Moral argument gives way to equivocation, as 'good sentences and well pronounc'd' are wasted upon the currents of natural feeling.

After Portia's reflections in the second scene on the opposition of a 'hot temper' and a 'cold decree', the clown Gobbo takes up this conflict between moral restraint and natural inclination in a parody of the 'serious' action:

My conscience says 'Launcelot, budge not'. 'Budge' says the fiend. 'Budge not' says my conscience. 'Conscience' say I 'you counsel well.' 'Fiend' say I 'you counsel well.' To be rul'd by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who—God bless the mark!—is a kind of devil; and, to run away from the Jew, I should be rul'd by the fiend, who—saving your reverence—is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation; and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel. I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment; I will run.

The sententious arguments of Portia's suitors as they deliberate before the caskets are hardly to be taken more seriously than this. The means which Portia's father has devised for selecting a husband show him to have been both a moralist and an equivocator, the author of riddling inscriptions on the caskets and sententious little rhymes on the scrolls within. This is a kind of guessing game which each of the suitors tries to solve by
the processes of reason, but which really works by testing their temperament and affection to Portia rather than their judgement. Morocco chooses gold for the perfectly good reason that only the most precious metal is worthy to contain 'so rich a gem' as Portia, but the hyperbolic imagery rather than the logic of his speech shows that it is the spirit of emulation which sways his choice:

'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'.
Why, that's the lady! All the world desires her;
From the four corners of the earth they come
To kiss this shrine, this mortal-breathing saint.
The Hyrcanian deserts and the vasty wilds
Of wide Arabia are as thoroughfares now
For princes to come view fair Portia.
The watery kingdom, whose ambitious head
Spits in the face of heaven, is no bar
To stop the foreign spirits, but they come
As o'er a brook to see fair Portia.

(II. vii. 37-47)

Morocco's own 'ambitious head' attracts him to the golden casket, because to win her would be to triumph like another Tamburlaine over 'all the world'. Arragon, on the other hand, disdains 'the fool multitude that choose by show', a sentiment of admirable integrity, were it not for his motives:

Because I will not jump with common spirits
And rank me with the barbarous multitudes.

(II. ix. 32-3)

Thus as he turns to the silver casket his otherwise unexceptionable moralizing is discounted by his vanity (his very name suggests 'arrogance'):

'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves'.
And well said too; for who shall go about
To cozen fortune, and be honourable
Without the stamp of merit? Let none presume
To wear an undeserved dignity.
O that estates, degree, and offices
Were not deriv'd corruptly, and that clear honour
Were purchased by the merit of the wearer!

(II. ix. 36-43)

'I will assume desert': with this claim Arragon's affection is shown to be more toward himself than to Portia.

Interspersed with these scenes in Belmont is the parallel action by which Lorenzo successfully steals Jessica from her father's house. 'It is a wise father that knows his own child': Gobbo's line serves to point the contrast between Portia's father and Shylock. Jessica's elopement is to take place during the revelry of the masques, and Shylock's attitude to the 'prodigal' and merry-making Christians is that of a strict puritanical sobriety:

But stop my house's ears—I mean my casements;
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
My sober house.

(II. v. 33-5)

Yet here, too, the moralist's stance is determined by a bias of temperament, for Shylock betrays an intense physical repugnance to 'the vile squealing of the wryneck'd fife', while his reiterated instructions to lock up the house suggest that his wise precept ('Fast bind, fast find—A proverb never stale in thrifty mind') is really an emblem of the heart that is closed to human sympathies.

It is more surprising to find Gratiano turning moralist. Bassanio has granted his 'suit' to go to Belmont, on condition that Gratiano will 'allay with some cold drops of modesty / Thy skipping spirit', and Gratiano has promised to

put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely.

(II. ii. 175-7)

But for the night of masquing Bassanio has specifically entreated him 'rather to put on / Your boldest suit of mirth'. The clothing imagery of these exchanges relates to the 'outward shows' of masquing and to the disguise in which Jessica will deceive her father, but while this elopement is played as romantic comedy between Jessica, Lorenzo and their friends, the scene begins with a curiously solemn exchange between Salerio and Gratiano:

All things that are
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd.
How like a younker or a prodigal
The scarfed 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.

(II. vi. 12-19)

Such moralizing seems out of keeping not only with Gratiano's character but with the revelling spirit which has been anticipated. Moreover it predicts a turn of events which does not come about, as far as the 'prodigal' lovers are concerned. Lorenzo and Jessica are never to return, while Bassanio and Gratiano will return having won 'the golden fleece'. So comedy will avert the moralist's forebodings, but meanwhile, if Gratiano's sententiousness is out of place, so too is the lightheartedness with which Lorenzo and Jessica steal from Shylock. Lorenzo jests about playing the thief for a wife, and Jessica is coyly 'much asham'd' of her boy's disguise, though not abashed to take her father's ducats: 'Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains.' The contrast with the casket scenes in Belmont provides the perspective in which we see these 'pretty follies'.

Lorenzo's praise of Jessica,

For she is wise, if I can judge of her,
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
And true she is, as she hath prov'd herself,

(II. vi. 53-5)
is in ironic juxtaposition with Portia's description of her suitors as 'deliberate fools' who 'have the wisdom by their wit to lose'. Wisdom and judgement are subject to the affections, for as Portia declared in the second scene of the play, 'this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband'.

III

When Bassanio arrives at Belmont, we expect him to win Portia because they love each other. In this 'simplest of plays', the movement of their affections to each other is as primary and absolute as the antipathy that divides Antonio and Shylock. We now also know which of the three caskets Bassanio must choose, having seen the other two opened by Morocco and Arragon. The great mystery, or rather the magic secret, is the process by which Bassanio makes his choice.

Like the previous suitors, he treats his task as an exercise in moral judgement, and he makes a long speech of sententious deliberation. Yet this is neither a debating competition nor a lottery of 'hazard'. Portia tells Bassanio 'If you love me, you will find me out'. In the requirements of a good husband, love would seem to come before eloquence or wisdom. Bassanio's choice will vindicate the 'good inspiration' of Portia's father for posthumously disposing of his daughter in marriage, but what has love to do with an excellent if somewhat platitudinous and lengthy speech on the dangers of false appearance? Portia's love, as Bassanio told Antonio in the opening scene of the play, has already declared itself in 'fair speechless messages' from her eyes.

Unlike his unsuccessful predecessors, Bassanio has music while he works, and the song that is played at first seems to have little to do with the situation:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head,
How begot, how nourished?

Reply, reply.
It is engend'red in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.

(III. ii. 63-9)

We can dismiss the suggestion that Portia is cheating in arranging for a song with enough '-ed' rhymes to give even Bassanio a clue to 'lead'. Not only has Portia renewed her pledge of loyalty to her father's will at the beginning of the scene, but Bassanio would have no reason to pretend for nearly forty lines that he hadn't grasped such a clue; in any case, astuteness is not a prominent feature of our hero's charm. However, the song does provide him with the theme of his speech; if 'fancy' is 'engend'red in the eyes', 'So may the outward shows be least themselves'. Fancy and judgement are opposed, like the heart and the head, and so Bassanio launches into his moral deliberation.

But the speech is shot through with ironies and contradictions that Bassanio seems unaware of. He begins, for instance, by denouncing the very rhetorical arts he uses so well, the 'gracious voice' and 'sober brow' that conceal truth beneath eloquence. This penniless prodigal then rejects gold and silver, and finally, after a most ornamental and highly-wrought argument decrying ornament and artifice, he chooses the leaden casket because its plainness moves him 'more than eloquence'! Bassanio warns us, 'in a word', against

The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest.
Bassanio's reasoning cannot be taken at face value any more than the 'outward shows' he inveighs against. The irony is increased as he now opens the casket, finds 'fair Portia's counterfeit', and in his extravagant admiration of the painter's art contradicts all he has previously spoken against 'seeming truth':

Here in her hairs  
The painter plays the spider, and hath woven  
A golden mesh t'entrapt the hearts of men.

The moralist's condemnation has become the artist's praise.

Bassanio is 'entrapped' by the song in a process that has more to do with 'fancy' than with judgement. Portia creates the mood in which his affections will respond, not to the words of the song, but to the power of the music. It is a solemn mood, not only of dramatic suspense, but of lyrical beauty, in which words themselves melt into the music of pure feeling:

Let music sound while he doth make his choice;  
Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,  
Fading in music. That the comparison may stand  
More proper, my eye shall be the stream  
And wat'ry death-bed for him. He may win;  
And what is music then? Then music is  
Even as the flourish when true subjects bow  
To a new-crowned monarch; such it is  
As are those dulcet sounds in break of day  
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear  
And summon him to marriage.

We shall be told more later in the play about 'the sweet power of music', but as this scene is performed in the theatre we can feel its spell directly. Unlike the other suitors, Bassanio does not ponder each casket in turn, but his speech suggests that he is drawn without foreseeing it to his conclusion at the leaden casket. His gravity and inteniveness of spirit are conditioned by the music, by a continuous swell of harmony moving beneath and blending with his speech. In this way Bassanio's judgement is subject to the movement of his affections, and he utters not wisdom but poetry.

The tone of the scene is one of high seriousness, in keeping with the prevailing spirit of the play, but unlike the sadness of Antonio or the grim humour of Shylock, this graceful solemnity is not inimical to the comic spirit. From the tension of nervous excitement in the dialogue at the beginning of the scene, suspense grows into a sense of wonder and mystery as the ceremony begins, and after Bassanio's unhurried deliberation the climactic moment of the opening of the casket also releases pent-up feelings in the high tide of Portia's outburst,

O love, be moderate, allay thy ecstasy,  
In measure rein thy joy, scant this excess!  
I feel too much thy blessing. Make it less,  
For fear I surfeit.
The language of the moralist becomes an expression of passionate joy, and this overwhelming intensity of emotion is sustained through Bassanio's hyperbolic praise of Portia's picture and its artist, through the contrasting simplicity with which the flesh-and-blood Portia offers herself,

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am,

until feeling, always primary to eloquence, eventually outstrips the power of words altogether:

Madam, you have bereft me of all words;
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins;
And there is such confusion in my powers
As, after some oration fairly spoke
By a beloved prince, there doth appear
Among the buzzing pleased multitude,
Where every something being blent together,
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy,
Express'd and not express'd.

To gain such an admission from the eloquent Bassanio is no mean achievement, though to put into words the inexpressible language of the blood is an even greater triumph of art. Only the ultimate simplicity of silence can follow this, but the moment passes as Gratiano and Nerissa intrude to share the joy, which turns, or descends, into brief merriment before this mood in turn is suddenly dashed with the news of Antonio's mortal danger.

IV 'How every fool can play upon the word! I think the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence, and discourse grow commendable in none but only parrots' (III. v. 38-40): Lorenzo's reflection upon the clown's quibbles comes between Portia's departure from Belmont and the trial scene itself, in which words are strained to their limit. Shylock's obduracy ('I'll have no speaking; I will have my bond') as Antonio is led to prison (III. iii. 17) also ominously anticipates the failure of 'good sentences' to move 'the blood' in the play's climactic scene.

Like Bassanio's choice between the caskets, the trial scene is in outward show an appeal to judgement. Shylock has the letter of the law on his side: if the devil can cite Scripture, it seems he is equally well versed in judicial procedure. The Duke, the court's presiding officer, and Antonio's friends take their stand on the moral law, according to which Shylock is

an inhuman wretch,
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy.

Shylock's cruelty is condemned as unnatural, against the law of 'kind' but Shylock grounds his case on a different conception of what is natural, on the arbitrary but fundamental compulsions of our physical being:
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
Some that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others, when the bagpipe sings i’ th' 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 rend'red

Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a woollen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So I can give no reason, nor will I not,
More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio.

(IV. i. 47-61)

The legal, moral and temperamental attitudes are therefore in conflict with each other, or rather they are three
different ways of regarding the situation in court, each at cross-purposes with the other two.

To this state of affairs comes Portia, in her disguise as Balthazar. Her eloquent appeal for mercy is probably
the best known speech in the play, a set oration of great legal, moral and passionate force. But the dramatic
point of this speech seems to be its virtual irrelevance; it is a piece of superfluous rhetoric, since it achieves no
effect whatsoever:

There is no power in the tongue of man
To alter me.

(IV. i. 236-7)

Shylock's deafness to such eloquence reflects on the powerlessness of words, however just and reasoned, to
move his affections; and later in the scene we have cause to wonder whether the speech has had much effect
on its other hearers either.

Portia's disguise is unlike that of Shakespeare's other comic heroines. It is not a means of extending or
displaying her true nature, but rather the assumption of a completely different identity. The 'unlesson'd girl,
unschool'd, unpractis'd', as she described herself in the caskets scene, is simply not the learned and magisterial
figure of the trial scene; even her visit to the aged lawyer Bellario, brief as that must have been, can scarcely
be supposed to have produced this transformation. Her acquisition of the arts that she practises in this scene is
as magical as Bassanio's choice of the right casket. This disguise contrasts with Jessica's: it is an outward
show without moral deception, since Portia is not acting out of self-interest. Balthazar's part in the trial is
performed with immaculate professional disinterestedness; 'he' is not tainted by those passions which make a
mockery of legal procedure not only in Shylock's behaviour but in that of the prisoner's friends and in the
presiding Duke's lack of impartiality. Portia's disguise is an expression of that selfless love and shared identity
which she described when she first resolved to assist her husband's friend:

this Antonio,
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty!

(III. iv. 16-21)

As Antonio stands surety for Bassanio, hazarding his own body for his friend, Portia assumes a surrogate body to save him. There is therefore a particular resonance in her command to Antonio: 'Lay bare your bosom.' Antonio's nakedness and Portia's disguise complement each other in giving theatrical expression to the nature of love.

The Shylock who remains unmoved by all the rhetoric of persuasion and vituperation, thus rendering words powerless, is also ironically the Shylock who insists upon the words of his bond: 'nearest his heart, those are the very words', and no surgeon to stop Antonio's wound, because it is not 'so nominated in the bond'. With supreme poetic justice, therefore, he is undone by his own faith in the word:

Tarry a little; there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood:
The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'.

(IV. i. 300-302)

And how fitting it is that the vital but missing word, and so the hinge upon which the play turns from tragedy into comedy, is 'blood'.

The judgements that are then delivered upon Shylock, sequestering half his estate and forcibly converting him to Christianity, give a new twist to this play of 'good sentences, and well pronounc'd'. Gratiano's vindictive triumph ('A halter gratis; nothing else, for God's sake!'), gross as it is, sounds less appallingly self-righteous than the calculated humiliation which is Shylock's 'pardon'. Shylock ends his part in the play not merely thwarted but utterly crushed in spirit:

Portia: Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?
Shylock: I am content.
Portia: Clerk, draw a deed of gift.
Shylock: I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;
I am not well; send the deed after me
And I will sign it.

(IV. i. 388-92)

With the simplicity of these understatements, Shylock's part is over: the rest is silence, as far as he is concerned. The effect of this exit needs no underscoring by such melodramatic business as Irving added, having the broken man falter and collapse on his way out. The unemphatic tone which Shakespeare has secured at this point is precisely the secret of its dramatic impact, and as the play immediately shifts into the light, almost casual, comedy of the rings, Shylock is never mentioned again—a silence that reverberates through the remaining scenes.

V

The main action of the play is now over, and what remains is like an epilogue, in which there is no more to do but 'converse and waste the time together'. Set in Belmont, the final scene opens with what is surely the play's
most striking, and most daring, transition of feeling:

The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise—in such a night,
Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls,
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressida lay that night.

(V. i. 1-6)

This opening duet performed by Lorenzo and Jessica turns the bitter conflict and equivocations of the trial scene into sweet harmony and tranquillity. We have entered a world of poetic beauty, in which, although the mythological lovers invoked are all tragic (Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, Medea and Jason), their griefs are distanced by being framed in art and overlaid by lyric charm. The 'silence of the night' and the recollection of past tragedies in present happiness establishes a mood of serenity which is deepened by the playing of music:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.

(V. i. 54-7)

Like Bassanio in the caskets scene, Lorenzo is moved by the music to philosophical gravity. 'Is it not strange,' as Benedick remarks in Much Ado About Nothing, 'that sheeps' guts should hale souls out of men's bodies?' And indeed the music that transports the soul through the senses is the counterpart of that unheard music of the heavenly spheres and of the harmony in 'immortal souls' of which Lorenzo now speaks:

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(V. i. 64-5)

This silent music is the highest plane of harmony, on which, according to the Platonic doctrine Lorenzo cites, the souls of the lovers are united. On this plane, the body is no more than a 'muddy vesture of decay', but, as in Donne's poem, 'The Extasie',

So must pure lovers soules descend
T'affections and to faculties
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

and from what Donne calls the 'soul's language' of silent harmony, the lovers now descend to the plane of their affections.

Jessica finds that the music induces a kind of sadness in her disposition: 'I am never merry when I hear sweet music' 'The reason is your spirits are attentive,' replies Lorenzo, and he then describes 'the sweet power of music' over the passions and 'the hot condition of the blood':

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Therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods;
Since nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.

(V. i. 79-82)

The music of Orpheus stands for Shakespeare's own art, both as a fiction feigned by 'the poet', and as an archetype of the poet's skill in moving the passions. To the Elizabethans the Orpheus myth signified the moral function of poetry, and Shakespeare makes the same use of the myth as Sidney had done, or as Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie*:

And *Orpheus* assembled the wilde beasts to come in heards to harken to his musicke, and by that meanes made them tame, implying thereby, how by his discreeete and wholsome lesions uttered in harmonie and with melodious instruments he brought the rude and savage people to a more civili and orderly life, nothing, as it seemeth, more prevailing or fit to redresse and edifie the cruell and sturdie courage of man than it.⁶

Castiglione, too, writes in *The Book of the Courtier* that music
doeth not onely make sweete the mindes of men, but also many times wild beastes tame: and who so savoureth it not, a man may assuredly thinke him not to be well in his wits.⁷

So Lorenzo concludes his speech with a reference to

> The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds.

(V. i. 83-4)

As Shylock is remembered here, the whole speech is retrospective in its bearing upon the play's concern with hot tempers and cold decrees. The failure of the moralist to persuade with his 'good sentences', appealing to reason and judgement, is now set in contrast with the poet's claim to be a teacher and law-giver by virtue of his power over the unruly passions. The art of Orpheus with wild beasts recalls that of Jacob, the 'skilful shepherd', who exercised quasi-magical control over the primal passions of the blood. Only the memory of Shylock, who does not savour music, strikes a discord in the lyrical harmonies of this scene; but even as Lorenzo speaks of the man whose affections are as 'dark as Erebus', Portia makes her entrance. Portia, who has subdued just such a man through her skill in counterfeiting, therefore extends the analogies with Shakespeare's own art, and she is associated as a benevolent Medea with the magic of Jacob and Orpheus.

The counterfeiting of Portia and Nerissa over their husbands' rings now shifts the tone of the scene from lyrical enchantment to jesting, as we descend from the spiritual harmonies with which the scene began to the mock-quarrelling of the lovers. And as the spirit of mirth finally supplants the solemnity of silence and 'sweet harmony', the play ends with Gratiano's exuberant bawdiness:

> But were the day come, I should wish it dark,
> Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.
> Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing
> So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

(V. i. 304-7)
It is an obvious lowering of the tone, in every sense, for like Donne’s ‘Extasie’ the scene has moved downward from the plane of the soul, through that of the affections, to the ultimate simplicity of the body’s appetites and 'the doing of the deed of kind':

To our bodies turn wee then, that so
Weake men on love reveal’d may looke;
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.

VI

The structure of Shakespearian comedy reflects a principle of Elizabethan aesthetics that 'oftentimes a dischorde in Musick maketh a comely concordaunce'. Duke Theseus asks in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and the answer lies not only in the characteristic action of the comedies, leading through confusion and conflict to clarification and reconciliation, but also in their blending of contrasting tones and moods. Shakespeare’s development in comedy could be traced in terms of the increasing subtlety with which disparate elements of tone are brought into concordance with each other, from The Comedy of Errors with its fusion of romantic and Plautine motifs, to the complex and precarious harmonies of Twelfth Night.

The Merchant of Venice occupies a special place in this progression, as a play in which the discords are so powerful that it almost becomes a tragedy. In Love’s Labour’s Lost, the fragile and artificial comedy is shattered at the end by the sombre entry of Mercade, bringing news of death; The Merchant of Venice, on the other hand, establishes a keynote in its opening lines which suppresses the comic spirit of mirth and merriment. There is little playful laughter and not much wit, until they break out in the conclusion. Instead the prevailing tone is serious, and this current of feeling is modulated from Antonio's sadness, through the grim conflict between Shylock and his enemies, and the solemnity of the casket scenes, to the gravity which attends even the lovers in their ecstasy: they are never merry when they hear sweet music.

The seriousness of comedy is itself a paradox, a discors concordia. Yet the comic seriousness of The Merchant of Venice lies deeper than its potential for tragedy or its moral themes; the play operates at the fundamental level of feeling, as its action stresses the primacy of the affections, and after the tragic and moral conflicts are over, the serious spirit is transmuted into the effect of music at Belmont. 'Nothing is good, I see, without respect,' says Portia sententiously as she hears this music:

How many things by season season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection!
Peace . . .

(V. i. 107-8)

The harmony is sweeter in the silence of the night, and also after the discords of the preceding action; this comic resolution reduces the passions to a serene contentment which is still serious in tone, but from which the play can come to rest in a relaxed good humour. Among the happy lovers as they leave the stage, Antonio is the odd man out, the discord that 'maketh a comely concordaunce', for his part remains 'a sad one'.

Notes

1 Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare (Second Series, London, 1930), p. 68.
Almost obligatorily, critics of *The Merchant of Venice* split into warring camps. Generally the schism arises between those readers who, emphasizing allegory and Christian themes, treat the Christian characters of the play in largely positive and approving terms and those who, noticing that commerce, wealth, and financial speculation as thoroughly preoccupy the Venetians as they do Shylock, see the play ironically exposing the failure of the Christians to practice the beliefs which they profess. The issue of Christian commerce surfaces most conspicuously in the almost obsessive recurrence of a related set of words denoting financial speculation—*venture, hazard, thrift, usury, fortune, advantage*. Remarking upon this phenomenon, Ralph Berry concludes, "The formal principle of *The Merchant of Venice*, then, I take to be a series of mutations of 'venture.'" And A. D. Moody voices his reservations about the appropriateness of such commercial venturing for Christians: "But to be committed to the pursuit of worldly fortune is to be subjected, in the medieval view of things, to the whims of the fickle goddess Fortune; at the most serious level it is to forfeit the redemptive influence of Providence for the chances and reverses of Fortune's wheel."²

There can be no question that the issues of risk, venture, hazard, and so commitment to fortune are crucial to the meaning of the play. But whether commitment to fortune means abdication of Christian values is another question, one that cannot be settled without respecting the play's distinctions between the business activities of Antonio (*venture* and *hazard*) and those of Shylock (*advantage, thrift, interest*) and trying to comprehend their implications. In short, whereas Berry believes that *venture and fortune* are "fluid" terms with "no really firm basis of meaning,"¹ I will argue that we can understand the play best by recourse to the traditions accruing to these terms, reading *in* Shakespeare's intellectual backgrounds and reading *out* our own.

Let us first review the commercial connotations of *venture* or *adventure*. E. M. Cams-Wilson comments, "The epithet 'merchant venturer' or 'merchant adventurer' came into use only toward the end of the fifteenth century. But the conception of a merchant venturer, or at least of a merchant venture, goes back far beyond this. A
venture (aventure, auenture, or auntre, in Middle English) was a risk. To venture was to take a chance, to hazard one's life or one's goods in an enterprise that might bring a worthwhile reward.\(^4\) By Shakespeare's time the term "Merchant Adventurer" had, of course, taken on a far more specific meaning; the aggressive and powerful Merchant Adventurers' Company maintained a virtual monopoly upon foreign trade.\(^5\)

Despite the entrenched security of the Merchant Adventurers, the term retained its earlier well-defined connotations of high risk and high reward enterprise. Sir Walter Ralegh so explained the motive of his Guiana voyage in 1596: "If I had knownen other way to win, if I had imagined how greater adventures might have regained..... I would not doubt but for one yeare more to holde faste my soule in my teeth, til it were performed."\(^6\) In Shakespeare's dramatic vocabulary the connotation of trade is always present (e.g., 2\(\ H\ IV\ II.iv.63-65\)); yet the element of high risk gets strong emphasis. Baptista Minola, having second thoughts about the sudden marriage contract between Kate and Petruchio, remarks, "Faith, gentlemen, now I play a merchant's part, / And venture madly on a desperate mart" (Shrew II.i.326-27). And high risk inevitably shades into high—and romantic—reward. Romeo, rashly venturing into the garden of the Capulet house, assures Juliet, "I am no pilot, yet, wert thou as far / As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea, /I should adventure for such merchandise" (Romeo II.ii.82-84).

In The Merchant of Venice the idea of venturing and its consequences is initiated immediately as Antonio enters protesting, "In sooth I know not why I am so sad / ... / And such a wantwit sadness makes of me, / That I have much ado to know myself (I.il, 6-7).\(^7\) Salerio and Solanio assure him that his "mind is tossing on the ocean" with his argosies, the fear of "misfortune to [his] ventures" causing the sadness. Surely underlying their vivid images of the dangers to his ships is the ancient topos of the sea of fortune.\(^8\) Antonio, however, denies the major:

Believe me no, I think my fortune for it—
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

(I.i.41-45)

If not fortune, then love, conjectures Solanio, which Antonio also denies. A neutral referee may record a palpable hit, nonetheless; with Bassanio's entrance we learn that the lady to whom Bassanio "swore a secret pilgrimage," and so the probability of separation from his loving friend, occupies Antonio's thoughts. In explaining how, by risking more of Antonio's money to recoup his previous debts, he proposes to court the fair heiress Portia, Bassanio provides the first definition of a venture:

In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight
The self-same way, with more advised watch
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both
I oft found both: I urge this childhood proof
Because what follows is pure innocence.
I owe you much, and (like a wilful youth)
That which I owe is lost, but if you please
To shoot another arrow that selfway
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
(As I will watch the aim) or to find both,
Or bring your latter hazard back again,
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.
Although Bassanio's earlier reference to his "plots and purposes" may momentarily lend the impression that he is a calculating schemer, the "pure innocence" of the hazard rests on intuition: "I have a mind presages me such thrift / That I should questionless be fortunate" (I.i.175-76).

Since "all [Antonio's] fortunes are at sea," the venture must be financed on credit by borrowing from Shylock, to whom Antonio's business practices are irrational: "... he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies, I understand moreover upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squand'red abroad,—but ships are but boards, sailors but men" (I.ii. 15-20). More than just rashness, however, Shylock's enmity sparks from Antonio's whole attitude toward money: "... in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice. / ... / He hates our sacred nation, and he rails / (Even there where merchants most do congregate) / On me, my bargins, and my well-won thrift, / Which he calls interest" (I.iii.37-40, 43-46).

The opposition of venture and interest climaxes in the opposed interpretations of Jacob's scheme for obtaining the best lambs from Laban (Genesis XXXI: 37-43). Shylock offers the story as a justification of interest and thrift. Antonio retorts, "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" (I.iii.86-88). Arnold Williams' study of the Renaissance commentaries on this episode indicates that Shakespeare has assigned Antonio the orthodox position on the matter: "The 'hand of Heaven' is clearly responsible for the outcome ... and Jacob is merely following divine guidance in taking a way of recovering his own property of which Laban had defrauded him."

Fortune or the "hand of heaven"? How can we determine which governs the ventures of this play? Howard R. Patch has documented the many similarities between the goddesses Ventura and Fortuna; however, Patch also traces the tradition—figuring importantly in Boethius, Dante, Chaucer—of a Christianized fortune. Fortuna becomes servant to Divine Providence, following a pattern of order normally hidden from the eyes of man. Hamlet, for instance, who spends so much time inveighing against the "strumpet" Fortune is dispatched to his death in England, literally voyaging upon the sea of fortune, when the hand of Heaven intervenes. He discovers the commission for his murder, alters and reseals it ("even in that was heaven ordinant. / I had my father's signet in my purse"), just in time to be plucked away and returned to Elsinore by the pirate ship. Thus Hamlet learns "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" and a "special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (Hamlet V.ii.10, 48-49, 219-20). The lesson which Hamlet received so dramatically was Renaissance Christian commonplace: "nothing is done at adventuere." As Calvin put it, "... nothyng commeth by chauce, but what soever commeth to passe in the world, commeth by the secrete prouidence of God." If all hazard is directed by Providence, the ultimate adventurer is Christ himself. In Piers Plowman William Langland wrote, "And after auntearde god hymself, and tok Adams kynde."

It is not insignificant that the strongest statement for the pagan view of fortune—that is, fortune as random chance—comes from a character of pagan origin, the Prince of Morocco. Unlike the godless Aaron of Titus Andronicus or the convert Othello, Morocco's religious beliefs are not specified for us. Such ostensibly Christian vocabulary as he uses—"this shrine, this mortal breathing saint," "heaven," "angel," "damnation"—is entirely directed to Portia, explainable both as the conventional language of Petrarchan compliment and as recognition of her embodiment of Christian virtues. Morocco himself would seem to be just what he appears, an erring Barbarian and, as prince, a supporter of the Muslim faith. Portia's explanation that "the lott'ry of my destiny / Bars me the right of voluntary choosing" (II.i.15-16), provokes his disquisition on fortune:

But alas the while!
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 unworthier may attain,
And die with grieving.

(II.i.31-38)

The assurance that only by making his "hazard" can he compete for Portia at all draws his supplication, "Good fortune then, / To make me blest or cursed'st among men!"

Immediately after this anticipatory scene of the hazard in Belmont, we shift to Launcelot Gobbo's case of conscience. Act II, scene ii—which presents the clown deciding to flee from Shylock's service, his deception of and reconciliation to his blind father, his transferral to Bassanio's service—offers itself as a comedic microcosm of the play's themes. Launcelot's conflict between natural inclination and restraint of conscience, for instance, picks up Portia's initial ambivalence (I.ii) about the inflexible method by which the identity of her husband will be decided; his determination to run from his "devil" master anticipates the succeeding action in which Shylock's daughter Jessica runs away from the "hell" of her father's house; Launcelot's line "it is a wise father that knows his own child" certainly evokes the entire theme of father-child relationships in the play, both Shylock's blindness about Jessica and the far-sightedness of Portia's father; and one can accede to René Fortin's suggestion that the entire scene offers an "oblique commentary on tensions between Judaic and Christian traditions."14

This largess, however, has not prevented the scene from being misread. Fortin, for example, writes that "The encounter [between Launcelot and Old Gobbo] takes place immediately after Launcelot's decision to leave the service of his Jewish master and seek service with the Christian Bassanio."15 In fact Launcelot says nothing about seeking Bassanio's service prior to old Gobbo's entrance. He simply concludes that he will bolt, in much the same aimless way that Jessica and Lorenzo elope. Old Gobbo enters and Launcelot's first impulse is to deceive the blind man by concealing his identity. In other words, he would deny the bond of filial relation just as he has decided to break the bond of relation to his master. At this point he has a change of heart, finding himself unable to sustain the deception:

Launc. Do you not know me father?
Gob. Alack sir I am sand-blind, I know you not.
Launc. Nay, indeed if you had your eyes you might fail of the nowing me: it is a wise father that knows his own child.
Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son,—[Kneels.] give me your blessing,—truth will come to light, murder cannot be hid long, a man's son may, but in the end truth will out.

(II.ii.70-77)

We observe that the Jacob and Isaac prototype, discerned by several readers,16 has become contrastive: rather than obtaining his father's blessing by false identity, Launcelot does it after revealing his true identity. Only after the parent-child bond is renewed does Launcelot articulate the scheme to change masters lawfully by having Old Gobbo petition Bassanio to obtain his release. "O rare fortune! here comes the man, to him father" (II.ii.106-07). They make their fumbling petition to find that it has already been granted: "... thou hast obtain'd thy suit,—/Shylock thy master spoke with me this day, / And hath preferr'd thee" (II.ii. 137-39). Assured of new service and "guarded" livery, Launcelot exits complacently reading his palm—that is, telling his own fortune—and reflecting, "well, if Fortune be a woman she's a good wench for this gear" (II.ii. 157-58).
The prevailing tendency is to read the scene ironically; Moody remarks "we don't judge [Launcelot] as a Christian soul, but simply as a sly rogue with an eye for the main chance." And Fortin, the only reader to see a serious thematic function in Old Gobbo's blindness, turns it to an ironic interpretation: "... the scene insists upon the mutual blindness of father and son, the involuntary blindness of Gobbo—and by extension, of the Jewish tradition—and the willed blindness of Launcelot—and by extension of the Christian tradition, which chooses to ignore its indebtedness to the older tradition. ..." Much more simply, and perhaps more pertinently, I suggest that Old Gobbo is a comic embodiment of that Blind Fortune invoked by Morocco in the preceding scene. As Fluellen, that gifted explicator of the obvious, put it, "Fortune is painted blind, with a muffler afore his eyes, to signify to you that fortune is blind" (Henry V III.vi.30-32). There is, however, one important difference between Old Gobbo and the Blind Fortune of Fluellen and Morocco: this quasi-symbolic scene illustrates the difference between the Christian and pagan notions of fortune, why it is that Bassanio wins and Morocco loses. The lesson to be developed in both the casket and trial scenes is that we "hazard all" by remaining true to bonds, thereby obtaining release from them. The hazarding, in this sense, is an individual act of blind faith or implicit trust in God, Hamlet's "the readiness is all." Launcelot, even in his shallow way, commits such an act of faith by refusing to bolt and acknowledging his bonds. He is rewarded on the spot with good fortune. To quote Fluellen once again, "Fortune is an excellent moral."

The three caskets, gold, silver, and lead, which control access to Portia contain their own morals. Morocco studies the inscription of the leaden casket—"Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath"—and finds it ominous:

This casket threatens—men that hazard all
Do it in hope of fair advantages:
A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross,
I'll then nor give nor hazard aught for lead.

(II.vii.18-21)

Forgetting his own sensible appeal to Portia not to value him by his complexion, Morocco chooses the golden exterior and learns, "All that glisters is not gold." The Prince of Arragon, too, regards the choice of caskets as action under the aegis of fortune (see II.ix.15, 19, 38, 52). He spurns the hazard of lead because it promises insufficient reward, then snobbishly chooses the silver and is exposed as a fool. In both instances choice is a revelation of character with nothing random about the result. Progressing from approval of the silver casket's appearance to scrutiny of its inscription, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves," Arragon had observed, "And well said too; for who shall go about / To cozen Fortune, and be honourable / Without the stamp of merit?" (II.ix.37-39). The idea of "cozening Fortune" epitomizes the difference in attitude toward the lottery exhibited by Morocco and Arragon, on the one hand, and Bassanio on the other. Neil Carson has remarked, "The contrast ... is between the 'cozeners' who think that good fortune may be earned by merit or endeavour, and the 'hazarders' whose recklessness is a token of their faith in God's divine providence." Arragon's departure is saluted by Nerissa's "ancient saying" that "Hanging and wiving goes by destiny" (II.ix.83). Her proverb echoes Portia's earlier comment on "the lottry' of my destiny" (II.i.15), albeit now with somewhat different connotations. In Shakespeare's private lexicon destiny seems closely linked to providence, suggesting a conception similar to the Boethian one wherein the aspect of Providence controlling the visible, mutable world is called destiny and fortune administers the decrees of destiny which affect men. In The Tempest, for instance, the good characters directly attribute causation to "Providence divine" and Ariel describes himself as a "minister of Fate" (III.iii.61), directed by "Destiny, / That hath to instrument this lower world / And what is in't" (III.iii.53-55). Similarly here, attitudes toward hazard and fortune reveal the degree of a character's awareness of providential design. Man's will is free, but his character, his willingness to risk, determines choice in a way which God foresees and uses. In this respect Shakespeare's reworking of the casket mottoes from his probable source, the Gesta Romanorum, illuminates his intention. Whereas he merely
switches the inscriptions of the gold and silver caskets, with the lead he alters the overtly providential "Who so chooseth mee, shall finde that God hath disposed for him" to "Who Chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath." With the direct reference to God's will effaced, the emphasis shifts from the chooser as passive recipient to active seeker of God's will, his readiness to hazard all on faith in imitation of the first Christian adventurer.

Just as Bassanio conceived of the courtship as a "venture" and a "hazard," so Portia describes the choice of caskets in the same words:

\[\text{I pray you tarry, pause a day or two} \\
\text{Before you hazard . . .} \]

\[\text{I would detain you here some month or two} \\
\text{Before you venture for me. I could teach you} \\
\text{How to choose right, but then I am forsworn,} \\
\text{So will I never be,—so may you miss me,—} \]

(III.ii.1-2, 9-12)

She, too, will risk all by respecting the bond of obligation to her father. Beyond the common propensity to speak of courtship in terms of venturing, readers have remarked that the commercial language of Venice carries into Belmont with the image of the Golden Fleece. Bassanio thus described Portia to Antonio: " . . . her sunny locks, / Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" (I.i. 169-70). John Russell Brown notes:

\[\text{The golden fleece was a symbol of the fortunes for which merchants ventured; . . . Sir Francis} \\
\text{Drake returning from his voyage round the world was said to have brought back with him} \\
\text{"his goulden fleece." That the phrase was used of merchants' ventures, gives point to} \\
\text{Gratiano's boast:} \]

\[\text{what's the news from Venice?} \\
\text{How doeth that royal merchant good Antonio?} \\
\text{I know he will be glad of our success,} \\
\text{We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece.} \]

(III.ii.237-40)

Brown is entirely correct in reminding us that the Golden Fleece was a common descriptive image for the rewards of merchant adventuring; but the comparison of Drake to Jason bringing back the golden fleece, which occurs in Whitney's A Choice of Emblems (1586), is suggestive in another way. The motto of the emblem is Auxilio diuino; the picture shows "the hand of Heaven" guiding Drake's ship by a celestial bridle; and the verse enumerates circumnavigational hazards, concluding: "but, GOD was on his side, / And through e them all, in spite of all, his shaken shippe did guide. / And, to requite his paines: By helpe of power dettine" The associations in Whitney's emblem were enduring ones; the Jason and the Golden Fleece myth was used in Lord Mayor's Pageants designed by Anthony Munday in 1614, 1615, and 1623, and by Thomas Middleton in 1621 and 1626. In the last of these Middleton commemorated Drake as "England's true Jason." For the assumption of Providential guidance we might consult the venturers themselves. Both Drake and Sir John Hawkins left verses spelling out their belief that venturing, undertaken in the proper spirit, partakes of divine guidance. As William Pelham argued, "For where the attempt, on vertue dooth depend: / No doubt but God, will blesse it in the ende." Against this background we may see that the implication of the Jason and Golden Fleece analogy is not that Portia is commercial booty; rather it is that in romantic venturing, as in commercial venturing, one risks all to gain all, succeeding only "by helpe of power deuine."
We need not go overboard on Jason’s voyage, however. Shakespeare's use of myth in this comedy is iconic, not narrative. He will focus upon a single facet of a mythic character or episode of his career to inform an action or illuminate a motive; he does not sustain a continuous, mythic pattern. Those critics who, following out the Jason story, associate Portia with Medea make an association which Shakespeare refused. The tragic overtones of Jason and Medea as lovers are so strong that they can be permitted to enter the play only in the catalogue of unfortunate lovers recited by Lorenzo and Jessica (V.i.1-22).

Indeed, Jason is not the primary mythological referent for the character and role of Bassanio; upon Bassanio's arrival in Belmont that assignment shifts to Jason's better-known shipmate from the Argo, Hercules himself. The idea of hazarding the choice of caskets as a Herculean action had been anticipated by Morocco’s analogy of Hercules and Lichas playing at dice. It is reintroduced by Portia's description of Bassanio:

Now he goes
With no less presence, but with much more love
Than young Alcides, when he did redeem
The virgin tribute, paid by howling Troy
To the sea-monster: I stand for sacrifice,
The rest aloof are the Dardanian wives,
With bleared visages come forth to view
The issue of th' exploit: go Hercules!
Live thou, I live—with much much more dismay,
I view the fight, than thou that mak'st the fray.

(III.ii.53-62)

Portia's exuberant "Go Hercules!" will echo in a later comedy, As You Like It. There Rosalind first tries to dissuade Orlando from challenging Charles, the Duke's "wrestler": "If you saw yourself with your eyes, or knew yourself with your judgment, the fear of your adventure would counsel you to a more equal enterprise" (I.ii. 175-78). But, since Orlando persists in his adventure, she cheers him on. "Now Hercules be thy speed, young man!" (I.ii.210).

The Herculean label, in one sense, simply identifies the two young men as heroes, both of whom, of course, are successful in their ventures. Nevertheless, the prototypes for their Herculean actions differ. Whereas Orlando's triumph is modeled upon the conquest of Antaeus, Bassanio's hazard goes outside the labors. The method here is "By indirections find directions out." Morocco's reference to Hercules and Lichas dicing reflects his mistaken notion of hazard as blind fortune; Portia's analogy of Hercules rescuing Hesione is a partial truth, reflecting her personal anxieties. By repeating the Hercules association and requiring us to discard inappropriate actions from his career, Shakespeare nudges us toward recognizing the correct one. The game is virtually given away in the linkage of act, choice, and actor, Hercules: Bassanio's hazard is a reenactment of the choice of Hercules, that pivotal event wherein the young hero, by choosing Virtus over Voluptas—the lifestyle represented by the sober maiden rather than the fleshy seductress or, alternatively, the high, hard path instead of the broad and easy one—conquered Fortune.

Shakespeare's handling of Bassanio's choice of caskets reflects this very popular tradition in several aspects. First, the number of options is effectively reduced from three to two. This is accomplished by framing the choice as opposition between essence and appearance. Silver thereby becomes merely a variant kind of deceptive appearance, an appendix to gold with the same objections obtaining, and can be dismissed in an additional one and a half lines. Second, the concentration upon the issue of false appearance—"outward shows," "fair ornament," "outward parts," "supposed fairness," "seeming truth," are Bassanio's phrases—evokes the tradition of Voluptas as the seeming fair of sensual allurement or of the deceptive, downward path as the apparently easy and attractive one. Sigurd Burckhardt has observed that Arragon and
Morocco fail the choice of caskets because ". . . they try to interpret the lines inscribed on the caskets rather than the substance . . . The noteworthy thing about Bassanio is that he disregards the inscriptions; he lets the metals themselves speak to him (quite literally: he apostrophizes them as speakers).” Apostrophizing the metals as speakers would seem a heritage of the prototypic choice tradition in which the opposed values or lifestyles are personified as women.

The suggestion is more than latent here. Bassanio muses,

Look on beauty,
And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight,
Which therein works a miracle in nature,
Making them lightest that wear most of it:
So are those crisped snaky golden locks
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind
Upon supposed fairness, often known
To be the dowry of a second head,
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.
Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea: the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest.

(III.ii.88-101)

His comparisons are complex. The "crisped snaky golden locks" are a demonic version of his own description of Portia's "sunny locks / Hang[fing] on her temples like a golden fleece." The "guiled shore / To a most dangerous sea" reminds us of the opening descriptions of Antonio's ships risked to the sea of fortune, while the veiled "Indian beauty" evokes a fusion of romantic and mercantile venturing. Bassanio has seen the risks in appearance, stakes his hazard that Portia's beauty is substantial, essential, and he deserves the implicit claim to Herculean courage when he observes that cowards "... wear yet upon their chins / The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars, / Who inward search'd, have livers white as milk" (III.ii.84-86). The significance of the Choice of Hercules is that the hero, by choosing correctly, reveals that he has conquered himself. Coming to understand himself, he has properly ordered his own mind, passions, appetites; it is only then that he can conquer others.

With his usual efficiency Shakespeare had established this theme at the very outset; Janus-minded Antonio, divided in his love for Bassanio, has "much ado to know myself." That Bassanio knows himself the casket scene puts beyond dispute. He dismisses the gaudy of golden Voluptas, whether wigged in snaky curls or veiled as the Indian beauty: "but thou, thou meager lead / Which rather threaten'st than doest promise aught, / Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence, / And here choose I" (III.ii. 104-07). Unlike Lear who opts for the golden speech of Goneril and Regan to reject the threatening plainness of Cordelia's bond, Bassanio remains unmoved by mere eloquence. It is the hazard of meager and threatening lead which, as Virtus moved Hercules, moves Bassanio to trust his blind intuition; and, by risking all, he wins all.

Hercules, as Book V of The Faerie Queene reminds us, was a "Champion of true Justice"; and in establishing the reign of justice over himself, in the sense of his own temperance, as a prerequisite to his public career as administrator of justice, Hercules only follows a paradigm going back at least to the Nicomachean Ethics. A similar progression is evident in the movement from the casket choice of Act HI to the trial scene of Act IV. Portia matches Bassanio's successful hazard by giving all in her own way: "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted" (III.ii.166-67). Converted to Bassanio, in Act IV she plays the role of judge,
literally wearing a man's costume, that was his in Act III, while Antonio "stand[s] for sacrifice" as she did earlier.

Samuel Chew first observed in the trial scene the presence of the conventional iconographic attributes of Justice, the sword and scales. Shylock whets his knife on the sole of his shoes as he anticipates the pleasure of cutting the pound of flesh from Antonio and weighing it upon the scales (see IV.i. 120-26 and 255-56). The perversion of the sword of Justice to Shylock's knife shocks and revolts as deliberately as does the reduction of the scales, traditional symbol of equity, to a butcher's measure. But, if Shylock represents—in Chew's words—"a travesty of Justice," the goddess Justice herself appears to re-establish her honor. When Portia enters as "Balthazar," the young doctor of law, she says something rather curious; the Duke inquires whether she is acquainted with the issue, and she replies:

I am informed thoroughly of the cause,—
Which is the merchant here? and which the jew?

(IV.i.169-70)

Insofar as the line has been noticed, it has been used to support the modernist interpretation that Shylock and Antonio are interchangeable, faceless merchants in business suits with equally corrupt motives. This is to ignore the careful distinction of Shylock's costume, "my Jewish gaberdine" (I.iii.107), from the more splendid appearance of the gentile merchant prince. If Portia cannot distinguish between the two, it is her way of announcing that she will judge the case on its merits, impartially, without respect to the persons involved. She is acting as Blind Justice.

Renaissance commentators generally divide justice into three topics: absolute justice, in which the letter of the law is rigidly maintained; equity, which considers the particular circumstance of the individual under the general law; and mercy or clemency. These three topics structure the progression of the trial scene. Portia first seems to concede the claim of absolute justice as Antonio admits the obligation of the bond (IV.i.177-78) and she rebuts Bassanio's appeal to the duke to bend the law:

It must not be, there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established.
Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state. It cannot be.

(IV.i.214-18)

Shylock may lawfully claim the penalty, so she can only entreat him to be merciful, as she does in the "quality of mercy" speech and, again, when she admits the legality of the forfeiture: "be merciful, / Take thrice thy money, bid me tear the bond" (IV.i.229-30). Portia presses the consideration of equity; the practical effect of administering the letter of the bond will be an unspecified personal consequence, the loss of Antonio's life. "Have by some surgeon Shylock on your charge, / To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death" (IV.i.253-54). Shylock, however, refuses to recognize the principle of equity: "tis not in the bond."

Portia then reverses the procedure with Shylock, instead of Antonio, the focus of the examination. He is exposed to the rigors of letter-of-the-law, absolute justice: "This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood, / The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh': / . . . If thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate / Unto the state of Venice" (IV.i.302-03, 305-08). Next, the claim of equity is invoked negatively as Portia informs Shylock that the law authorizes confiscation of his
estate and puts his own life in jeopardy for having conspired against the life of a Venetian citizen (IV.i.343-59). Justice having been satisfied, both the duke and Antonio are afforded the opportunity to extend Shylock the mercy which he could not find in the bond. He looked in the wrong place; it exists only in the heart's core.

The trial scene is a fine example of what Rosalie Colie has called "unmetaphoring." Shakespeare has created a dramatic literalization of the Protestant Reformers' legalistic theory of the Atonement—surely for Christians the ultimate source of all Justice-Mercy considerations—with their characteristic law-court terminology, distinctions, and atmosphere. In such a context, doubts about the efficacy of Shylock's forced conversion seem hardly relevant. Portia's lesson, "That in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation" (IV.i.195-96), makes the familiar point that we are all guilty under the Old Law. Indeed, Shylock's illness (IV.i.392) and Gratiano's shouted insistence that the Jew be given a halter to hang himself (IV.i.360-63, 375), are, perhaps, less "realistic" strokes than reminders that the sinner brought to a full consciousness of his guilt under the Law will be reduced to a state of suicidal despair. Gratiano professing the halter, even in his choice of instruments, performs as conventional an action as do the giants named Despair in The Faerie Queene and Pilgrim's Progress?

Shylock loses really because he loses faith; he cannot trust absolutely in his own bond, in the law he has insisted upon. As Burckhardt has suggested, Portia's decision to trust the absolute justice of the bond is a magnificent hazard. Enacting the inscription of the leaden casket, she had given all to Bassanio and now risks all, because of course Shylock has the option of saying, "Yes, I will take my pound of flesh whatever the consequences." Instead, there is a failure of nerve; in Burckhardt's phrase, he "... turns apostate to the faith he has so triumphantly forced upon his enemies." Shylock's function, then, is primarily contrastive. Where the gentle Portia hazards all, he hedges his bet, unwilling to move beyond the usurer's principles of "advantage" and "thrift." Where Shylock will grant no mercy to the gentle Antonio, the merchant can and does extend mercy to the usurer. Antonio's previous behavior had been characterized equally by his kindness toward Shylock's gentile victims and his brutal contempt for the moneylender himself, earning Shylock's sneering epithet, "fawning publican" (Liii.36) an apparent allusion to Matthew V:46, "For if ye loue them, which loue you, what rewarde shal you haue? Do not the Publicanes euen the same?" Christ's lesson from this passage in the Sermon on the Mount is central to the entire trial scene, not merely Portia's pleas for mercy:

But I say vnto you, Loue your enemies: blesse them that curse you: do good to them that hate you, and praye for them which hurt you, and persecute you, The ye may be the children of your Father that is in heauen: for he maketh his sunne to arise on the euil, and the good, and sendeth raine on the iuste, & vniuste.

(Matthew V:44-45)

That Antonio has absorbed the spirit of the lesson is evident in his conversion from a stoic resignation to death—"herein Fortune shows herself more kind / Than is her custom" (V.i.263-64)—to actively Christian behavior, a conversion effected by his providential salvation. Not Fortune, but the hand of Heaven.

Antonio's education to a state of fuller self-knowledge concludes with the ring trick of Act V, an action designed to expose and reduce the tensions between love and friendship. The ordeal of the trial had revealed both Antonio's jealousy of Bassanio's new wife and Bassanio's willingness to value Antonio's life even above that wife. When "Balthazar" demands as reward for his services the ring with which Portia had pledged her love, Bassanio at first demurs, but is persuaded by Antonio: "My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring, / Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement" (IV.i.445-47). With the ring trick, as Anne Barton has argued, Portia resorts to "... a test which forces Bassanio to weigh his obligations to his wife against those to his friend and to recognize the latent antagonism between them." Portia plays the part of a comic Shylock, harping on the letter of the ring-bond, until she achieves her purpose.
Bassanio admits the wrong and renews his pledge: "Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee" (V.i.247-48). Antonio recognizes that he has been the cause of dissension and removes the impediment by underwriting the venture anew: "I dare be bound again, / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly" (V.i.251-53). The progression of the play is underscored by the movement from physical to spiritual bonds, a progression in which the idea of faith figures significantly. The point to all of the fifth-act bawdy jokes about marital infidelity is simply that marriage, as much as Providence or Justice, is a matter of unswerving, blind faith in the bond.

An illuminating exchange between Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind has taught us that during the Renaissance the image of Blind Cupid could carry divergent connotations. The more common tradition interprets the blindness as random, unreasoned, physical attraction; but, more particularly in the current of Renaissance platonism, the blindness could be employed as a symbol of supra-intellectual transcendence, a condition beyond reason perhaps analogous to the way in which Bassanio is "moved" by the lead casket. We know from Midsummer Night's Dream that both kinds of blindness in love interested Shakespeare at this stage of his career. Cupid first insinuates his presence into this play when Bassanio describes his romantic venture in terms of Cupid's favorite activity: shooting an arrow to see what it hits. The god gains direct entrance, however, in Act II, scene vi, with Jessica's elopement. Pausing as she throws down to her lover a casket full of Shylock's money and jewels, Jessica is momentarily abashed, but for social rather than moral reasons. She finds it indecorous to appear publicly in boy's clothing:

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see  
The pretty follies that themselves commit,  
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush  
To see me thus transformed to a boy.

(II.vi.36-39)

The relationship of Jessica and Lorenzo to the primary lovers, Portia and Bassanio, consistently is contrastive and negative: they undergo no tests of character or faith; they are obedient to no bonds; they take all, rather than giving all; they hazard nothing. It is right, therefore, that Jessica should here associate their love with the negative variety of blindness, just as later they will add their names to the catalogue of famous, unfortunate lovers. Reading by contraries, it is appropriate also to associate with the renewed bond of Portia and Bassanio the higher sort of blind love, a Christian relationship based on total trust and faith. Discussing the plot, the bond, and the ring as the controlling metaphors of the play, Sigurd Burckhardt concludes:

The Merchant is a play about circularity and circulation; it asks how the vicious circle of the bond's law can be transformed into the ring of love. And it answers: through a literal and unreserved submission to the bond as absolutely binding.

Within the circular pattern of this play, which the platonic musical overture to Act V reveals as a dance to the music of time, the three blind deities—Fortune, Justice, and Cupid—like three unexpected Graces, move us to the end of the measure.

Notes

1 Ralph Berry, Shakespeare's Comedies: Exploration in Form (Princeton, 1972), pp. 113-14. For the most influential allegorical reading, see Barbara K. Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in The Merchant of Venice;" SQ, 13 (1962), 327-43.

3 Berry, pp. 114-15, 137.


7 I quote from *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown, New Arden (Cambridge, Mass., 1955); for all other Shakespeare quotations I have used *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974).


15 Fortin, p. 265. For other misreadings, see, e.g., Berry, pp. 113-14; and John F. Henney, "Launcelot Gobbo and Shylock's Forced Conversion," *TSLL*, 15 (1973), 406.

16 The parallels to Genesis XXVII were first noted by Dorothy C. Hockey, "The Patch is Kind Enough," *SQ*, 10 (1959), 448-50; see also Norman Holland, The Shakespearean Imagination (New York, 1964), p. 107.

17 Moody, in Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 104.

18 Fortin, p. 267.


See De Consolatione Philosophiae, especially IV.vi—V.ii. The word providence, of course, does not occur in The Merchant of Venice; but cf. the traditional connotations of Portia's metaphor for mercy, "It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath" (IV.i. 181-82), and Lorenzo's "Fair Ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people" (V.i.294-95).


Brown, Merchant, p. iv. The verbal complex of "venturing" or "hazarding" for the "Golden Fleece" was familiar enough that Marlowe could subvert the romantic idealism wittily by attaching it to a man: "His dangling tresses that were never shorne, / Had they beene cut, and unto Colchos borne, / Would have allu'rd the vent'rous youth of Greece / To hazard more, than for the Golden Fleece" (Hero and Leander 1.55-58).


See Richard Knowles, "Myth and Type in As You Like It," ELH, 33 (1966), 3-5.


Berkhardt, p. 217.

See Nicomachean Ethics V.xi.9 and V.i. 15-20; and, for the temperate Hercules, see Aptekar, p. 181, and Waith, pp. 40-43.


As Erwin Panofsky has remarked, the figure of Blind Justice "... is a humanistic concoction of very recent origin," stemming from the vogue for Egyptian hieroglyphics, but one that quickly obtained wide circulation. See Studies in Iconology (1939; New York, 1962), p. 109 and n.


39 Burckhardt, p. 234.


Michael Ferber (essay date 1990)


[In the following essay, Ferber surveys the play from an ideological standpoint and examines how several varying ideological discourses inform the play's issues and themes. An early version of this essay was presented in 1979 to the Marxist Literary Group at Yale.]

Nearly all recent discussions of The Merchant of Venice have agreed with Auden that the play is a "problem play," filled with gaps, strains, seams, ironies, silences, subversions, and symptoms of discomfort. The last word on the play's unity and "harmonies" seems already to have been said, and the reigning spirit of literary criticism today is skeptical, analytical, deconstructive, relentless in its search for ironies. The inconsistencies and paradoxes that have been turned up, however, often seem arbitrary, either because they are not folded back into a general assessment of the play or, more important, because they are not traced to the ideas and practices of Shakespeare's historical moment.

The exceptions, I think, are those discussions that invoke ideology as a concept mediating the work itself and its contemporary social ground, context, or totality. Although the concept is used in other theories, Marxists have recently made the most ambitious and most plausible use of the concept to comprehend The Merchant of Venice in its entirety. (The two most important Marxist critics of the play, so far as I am aware, are Walter Cohen and Michael Nerlich.) In what follows I will try to reconstruct the play along ideological lines, while also trying to give a more satisfactory sense of the whole than we have had.
Ideology

The play's general problem, the congruence of spiritual or moral values with the exigencies of the real world, may be adumbrated in its title. It is easy to imagine a play about the friendship of two men put to the test (perhaps over a woman, as in *The Winter's Tale*), in a plot where practical, worldly concerns are not at issue, and it is easy to imagine a play that entangles the two friends in the unfriendly world of loan sharks. They might both be soldiers of fortune like Bassanio, devoted comrades-at-arms now on leave in the bewildering, sophisticated city. But Antonio, this Nisus to Bassanio's Euryalus, happens to be a merchant. As the traditional and perhaps universal story takes on the ballast of specific contemporary meanings it lists and threatens to capsize, Shakespeare makes Antonio a hero, but the strain is evident. In the tradition of great friendship he is ready to sacrifice everything for Bassanio, but he does not resist his fate in heroic soldierly fashion; if anything he seems to collaborate in it, and among the reasons he does so, it has been suggested, is his full complicity in the way things are done in Venice, even by his enemy Shylock. Shakespeare increases the complexity of Antonio by superimposing on him the theme of Christian self-sacrifice, assigning him aristocratic virtues, and attributing to him a mysterious sadness. But we can see that Shakespeare's audacity in elevating a merchant to heroic station works a change not only on the idea of the hero but equally on the idea of the merchant. One result is a distinctive version of an ideology emergent in Shakespeare's day, which Nerlich has named the "bourgeois ideology of adventure."

"Ideology," the crucial term of this essay, may seem well-enough defined if we are speaking only of "Elizabethan mercantile ideology" or "emergent bourgeois ideology," although to specify it in each case may not be easy. I want to use the term in some extended senses, however, and to apply various pressures to it. These extended senses are familiar to readers of Althusser, Jameson, Eagleton, and the "New Historicists," but their work has also set the term adrift upon a sea of varying definitions, some of them so general as to include its usual antonyms. It is worth a little time at the outset, then, to make my understanding of "ideology" explicit.

I think it makes sense to say that all literature has an ideology, although it may be preferable to say that it produces or induces an ideology in its audience. All literature has a design on us, whether palpable or not, and that design has social bearings, however remote. Perhaps certain highly self-conscious works make an exception to this rule, although it might be truer to say that such works project an anti-ideological viewpoint that is itself, in part, ideological. One might argue that while the many narrative stances and styles in Joyce's *Ulysses* seem to sweep away all privileged standpoints from which to comprehend the world, the careful continuity of its "realistic" level beneath all the devices, and the coming to the surface of that level in the seemingly artless soliloquy of Molly at the end, endorse the standpoint after all of "life," of empathy, of realism, of decency, which has ideological features of its own.

I use "ideology" in the singular advisedly, though it is sometimes argued that a work of any complexity is better described as a field across which several ideologies are at play, or at war. To leave it at that, however, is to abandon interpretation too soon. It may not be so simple an affair as, say, calculating the resultant vector of several component vectors—gaps and seams and silences will remain—but gaps and seams and silences belong almost by definition to a "single" ideology as well. I think we are obliged to try to state, with whatever provisos, the work's overall meaning and dominant ideological effect.

By the ideology of a work I do not mean the ideology of the author, about which in Shakespeare's case we know very little anyway. Nor do I mean the ideology of Shakespeare's social class, or of the social class of his audience or his patrons, though all of these, intersecting in complex ways, certainly entered into the production of the final text and its performance on stage. For one thing, these ideologies are mediated by what we can call an aesthetic ideology, or more specifically an ideology of form or genre. A major genre like comedy, for example, with its many conventions of plot, characterization, levels of style, stagecraft, and so on, will transform the ideologies of its content. This is a complex but in principle a specifiable process; it is
nothing so vague as the elevation of a particular content by a universal form, or the purging of historical particulars in the fires of transcendent literary archetypes. The generic ideology of comedy, in its "scape-goat" subgenre, works now with and now athwart the Christian, aristocratic, and mercantile ideologies of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Even if we assume, moreover, that it makes sense to speak of an aesthetic and generic ideology, I do not want to suggest that this play or any work is "all ideology" or reducible to a conjuncture of ideologies. By various means virtually all works of art, and comedies not least, may be distanced from all values and beliefs. No matter how realistic, art is not reality, and in that difference or distance lies what Sartre calls its appeal to our freedom and Marcuse and Adorno call its negative and Utopian dimension. They may underestimate the extent to which art may seduce us and put to sleep our critical powers, but they are surely right that it does not overwhelm us and force us to emergency ideological defenses, as "reality" often does. Even a Marxist with so wide a definition of ideology as Althusser's may grant that art lets us see, by an "internal distance," the very ideology in which it is held.

Indeed Althusser and his followers expand the meaning of "ideology" until it embraces nearly every pattern of thought or experience including those once held to be its opposite. They subsume under ideology our "lived relationship" to our social and material conditions, an unconscious structure that determines how we perceive and conceive the world. There is no escaping it; it will persist even in a classless egalitarian society. Its opposite is not a truer or more inclusive set of beliefs and feelings but the "science of ideological formations" itself, an abstract science of abstract structures that has nothing to do with experience. Under such a global definition, we slide from the useful if controversial idea that everything in a literary work has an ideological bearing to the nearly useless (but no less controversial) idea that everything is in essence ideological.

My notion of ideology is akin to Marx and Engels', even though they are not always consistent. An ideology is a set of related ideas, images, and values more or less distorted by the social or material interests of those who believe and propagate it. It gives "the form of universality" to a particular bias, ignoring certain facts while privileging others, and defining certain unequal social relationships as natural or divinely ordained. It is a part that pretends to be a whole, a false totality. In determining the ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*, then, we must try to refer its plot-structure, main themes, "world," and meanings to several ideologies current in England and, to a lesser extent, the social and economic structure without pretending to exhaust their full significance or effect. That two men and a woman may increase their mutual love by risking their lives and their wealth for one another—we may not be able to assign this to an ideological formation. That one of the men is a merchant adventurer who despises usury, the other a soldier of fortune, and that the woman is an heiress "richly left" anchor what may be a universal human theme to a particular historical milieu. That something of the patina of universality remains makes the story all the more powerful in its ideological effect.

**Aristocratic Virtues and Mercantile Interests**

No theme in *The Merchant of Venice* is more prominent than friendship. Not only is the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio the premise of the main plot, but Venice seems full of friends. Salerio, Salanio, and Gratiano all try to cheer up Antonio; they and Lorenzo and Bassanio are always about to spend the evening together and whenever they meet they rail cheerfully at each other like schoolboys. Even Shylock has a friend or two.

The ideal of friendship, although it might seem in principle to pertain to all men and women, arose in an aristocratic warrior and clan culture, where oaths of blood-brotherhood, initiation rites, communal property, and homosexual bonds served as its institutional basis. In the ancient cities, where it received its classic expression in Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, the ideal was nourished by a vigorous public life, while love for women was denigrated and confined to the private sphere. Aristotle would not have comprehended *philia* among the poor, slaves, or women; the only friendship worth mentioning is found among the good, the noble, the "free." To be generous and liberal with one another, as the etymologies of both adjectives suggest, friends
must be noble in rank. During the Renaissance a more "liberal" version of friendship gained ground, according to which one might choose friends among lower ranks or even women—for "virtue is the true nobility"—but the association of friendship with high rank and wealth remained strong.

Friends must be secure enough materially to lend to one another without thought of return, to take risks as if they were not risks, to rise above the cares of the world and have an "unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies" (3.2.292-93). This nonchalance corresponds to the "graceful negligence" or sprezzatura recommended in books of etiquette for courtiers: beneath the display of one's skill at sonnets or fencing lies a gesture of conspicuous largesse. It is of course the opposite of the calculation and curiositas associated with the poor and especially with merchants. Antonio dismisses Bassanio's archery precedent as needless, even insulting, "In making question of my uttermost" (1.1.156). When Portia, who in the liberal atmosphere of this play acts the friend as well as beloved—for indeed the play scarcely distinguishes "love" from "friendship"—when she learns that Bassanio's friend is in trouble over the three thousand ducats, her response is prompt and bounteous:

What no more?
Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond:
Double six thousand, and then treble that,
Before a friend of this description
Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.

(3.2.297-301)

Bassanio also displays the instant generosity of a noble friend:

Gratiano: Signior Bassanio!
Bassanio: Gratiano!
Gratiano: I have a suit to you.
Bassanio: You have obtained it.

Nobility, however, demands generosity to social inferiors as well; Bassanio's granting of Launcelot's suit to join his household is an exemplary act of noblesse oblige.

To these aristocratic virtues we may add another: the capacity to make promises and keep them. One must be autonomous and confident, as Nietzsche claimed, to make a promise; one's word as a gentleman is sufficient, and a symbolic act like exchanging rings will confirm an oath. Only base-born mistrusters of nobility demand a written contract. So Faust says to Mephistopheles: "So, you pedant, you demand something down in writing? / Have you never known a man, or a man's word?" The basis of the ring-plot in Acts Four and Five is the conflict between two "noble" deeds: Bassanio's extravagant promise to keep the ring—"when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence"—and his fit of generosity (at Antonio's prompting) in giving it away.

In the midst of so much reckless magnanimity we almost forget that Antonio, and presumably all the other Venetians but Bassanio, are not landed aristocrats at all but merchants. Antonio may be "one in whom / The ancient Roman honour more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy" (3.2.293-95), but he makes his living buying cheap and selling dear. Or so we must believe. In fact we never see Antonio do anything mercantile except negotiate a naive deal with Shylock, and we hear only that he never charges interest on his many loans. In the real Venice, it is true, "signiors and rich burghers" were the same people: the noble families in the closed Venetian oligarchy were nearly all "royal merchants." On the other hand, these same oligarchs, whether in their commercial, political, or military affairs (and there was often little difference among these) were renowned for their gravity, caution, and hard bargaining. They were not Antonios, and
Shakespeare, to summarize, has superimposed distinctions drawn within several incompatible ideological discourses: (1) between the landed aristocracy, who have the virtues we have been discussing and "Whose liberal board doth flow, / With all that hospitality doth know" (in Jonson's famous lines from "To Penshurst"), and the merchant class generally, who have the vice of greed; (2) between true merchants, who take risks to provide useful goods and may therefore claim profits, and the money-lenders, who risk nothing (because of bonds and collateral) and contribute nothing to the wellbeing of others; and (3) between the Christian doctrine of mercy or forgiveness and the "Jewish" doctrine of legality and vengeance. Not only the Venetians, of course, but real English noblemen invested money and time in merchant adventures; the second distinction, too, was not well founded, as most merchants in Venice as well as England also lent money at interest. But strong contrasts between these ideal types were a staple of the several conservative discourses prevalent in Shakespeare's day. Shakespeare wanted Antonio to have noble virtues, however improbable his calling makes them, and the resulting oddity is only partly concealed by making Antonio inexplicably "sad." One might take his sadness as a sign of his foundering under the burden of so much heterogeneous ideological cargo.  

Another class-biased discourse nascent in the sixteenth century has been described in Albert O. Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*? It was a capitalist critique of such destructive "passions" as avarice, ambition, and pride, and it argued for their social control by pitting them against one another. Part of its strategy was to disparage the passions as violent and futile, and to reduce legitimate human motives to "interests," at first broadly conceived to include one's power and honor but inevitably narrowed to material wealth. One calculated one's interest and governed one's passions. We can see here, as Nietzsche might have said, the outlook of the ignoble little townsfolk scurrying to get rich in the spaces allowed them by the great lords of the earth, fearful of the lords' passionate and arrogant energy and wishing only to be left alone. "Interests" became nearly synonymous with "prudence," almost with "reason." If Shakespeare encountered this ideology among London burghers, his play seems almost a reply to it. For the great imprudent passions of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia lead them not only to greater life and happiness but, thanks to comic providence, to greater wealth as well. Shylock, who always looks to his interests and his interest, is made the villain, and his downfall begins, ironically, when for once he waives interest and succumbs to his master passion, his inveterate hatred of Antonio.

**Christianity**

The third of the ideological discourses Shakespeare grafts together, Christianity, with its stress on charity, self-sacrifice, contempt of worldly things, and communal sharing (at least in some ideal communities), can absorb fairly well the ideals of friendship and generosity we began by discussing, but some theologians predictably saw worldly dangers, even the sin of idolatry, in the excesses of friendship. If Antonio only loves the world for Bassanio, so much the worse, for the world does not deserve love. The worldly wise, of course, also distrusted friendship, for the opposite reason. There appears to be a conflict between the exclusiveness of friendship and the universality of Christian love, between *eros* and *agape*. Perhaps the presence of Salerio, Solanio, and the others was meant to head off objections from a Christian quarter.

The crux of the conflict between friendship and some versions of Christianity lay precisely in Antonio's distinctive act, the extreme expression of classical friendship, standing surety for another. Medieval Christianity generally approved of it, encompassing it under the doctrine of *imitatio Christi*. So Antonio, the "tainted wether" or black sheep (or goat), becomes the *Agnus Dei*, submitting to sacrifice by the Jews so others may live. (This suggests an allegorical motive for Antonio's insistence that Bassanio witness his death.) But Luther condemned surety as presumptuous and unchristian, a position derivable from his insistence on the unbridgeable gap between man and God, matter and spirit, this world and the next. In this as in so many other particulars, Shakespeare bridges that gap as he opts for the traditional view.
Not all noble virtues can be readily harmonized with Christianity, which arose, after all, as a plebeian religion in a remote colony of the aristocratic metropolis. Pride or love of honor presents difficulties, and that is no doubt one reason Shakespeare omits it; nor is it central to the idea of friendship. Magnanimity and condescension, on the other hand, can be "refunctioned," to use Brecht's term, for Christian purposes: they become "grace." As the rulers of this world are to be brought low, so all their lordly values must be transformed. Action, once the prerogative of aristocrats and free citizens, is now a universal right; only the form it must take in this world is its apparent opposite, patience. Christ's supreme act was to suffer on the cross and forgive his enemies. So, without rehearsing the literary transformations necessary to accommodate a Christian hero, we can see that Antonio's heroic act, after giving everything to Bassanio, is essentially to do nothing, to go to his slaughter like a lamb. A law of conservation of action seems to govern the three protagonists. Antonio's hazardous act frees Bassanio to act but leaves Antonio bound, Bassanio's hazardous act frees Portia to act while Bassanio stands helpless, and then Portia frees Antonio. And it has often been remarked that Portia's exemplary patience under her father's bond, a few complaints notwithstanding, has made her peculiarly competent to rescue Antonio from Shylock's bond.

It is the strong otherworldly thrust of Christianity, but also its compromise with this world, that we most need to bring out as an ideological horizon or framework essential to the play. Let one text on Christian dualism stand for many: "Lay not up treasures for your selves upon the earth, where the moth and canker corrupt, & where theeves dig through and steale. / But lay up treasure for your selves in heaven" (Matt. 6.19-20, Geneva Bible). Christian communities were to withdraw from the "world," although they tended to combine this withdrawal with the plebeian ressentiment that animates the lurid destruction of commercial Babylon in Revelation, the weeping of her merchants, the mark of the beast on those who buy and sell. No sooner, however, had Christian communities gathered to await the kingdom that is not of this world than they had to accommodate themselves to one that is. The indefinite postponement of Christ's appearance, the increasing numbers of Christians, the conversion of many of high social rank—these entailed compromise and doctrinal declension. By Shakespeare's day so many practices and exegeses had been established that the church could accommodate almost anything. Christianity was itself a kind of "supra-ideology" or universal culture or language in which subcultures or dialects could take up positions more properly termed ideological. But Christianity was not infinitely malleable. Tensions lay beneath many layers of hypocrisy. While Shakespeare's worldly audience might have felt little discomfort with the use of Christian values to justify worldly pursuits, there were those who did (members of the new sects, and "seekers" belonging to none); the texts could explode if not properly handled. Shakespeare risked blowing up his play by pressing the theme of spiritual wealth "even to the uttermost" amidst a cast of Venetian merchants and worldlings.

Jews, Puritans, and the Ideology of Risk

G. K. Hunter makes a strong case that in Elizabethan England the dominant orthodoxy held that Jewishness was a theological or moral condition, not a racial type. The Jew was "faithless" (see 2.4.37), a heretic, one who chose the wrong beliefs ("heretic" means "chooser" in Greek), but who could convert, as Jessica does, and be saved. When John of Gaunt speaks of "stubborn Jewry" (R2, 2.1.55), he implies that the Jews could decide not to remain Jewish. The Jews chose Barabbas—a thief, a type of avarice or worldly pursuit—over Christ. Hence worldliness is the "Jewish choice," and anyone who makes that choice is a Jew. Shylock reminds us of the original choice as he wishes "any of the stock of Barabbas" had married Jessica rather than a Christian (4.1.292). The "Jew," we might say, occupied an ideological space that might be taken by real Jews but not only by them; it could be taken by those who are Jews "inwardly," as St. Paul said (Romans 2.28-29). In England Jews were very few, and probably none could have served as a model for Shylock. It is true that the Lopez affair stirred up anti-Jewish feeling, but such feeling was ordinarily dormant, and was to a certain extent transferable to other targets. It is clear, in any case, what one of the main targets of The Merchant of Venice is, for Shylock is not only a miserly and avaricious worldling, and an inveterate hater of Christians, but a usurer.
There is now a vast literature on usury, and we need only glance at it here.\textsuperscript{15} The debate over usury epitomizes the tension between the worldly and otherworldly dimensions of Christianity. The Old Testament explicitly invokes a double standard: "Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury" (Deut. 23.19-20). That seemed to mean that Jews might lend money on usury to Christians, whereas Christians, for whom all men are brothers, must forswear usury altogether. Christ said, "\textit{Mutuant date, }" give loans without interest, "looking for nothing againe" (Luke 6.35). Most theologians agreed that usury was an act of hostility, the very opposite of charity and friendship. The official view of the Elizabethan government was that it was a "sin and detestable," forbidden by the Law of God (13 Eliz. c. 8, 1571), even though moderate interest (ten percent) was legal.\textsuperscript{16} When Antonio bids Shylock lend his money not as to a friend, "But lend it rather to thine enemy," he is invoking the Deuteronomic tradition as most Christians interpreted it.

The second source of teaching on usury is Aristotelian. In his \textit{Politics} (1258b 1-9), Aristotle wrote that usury is contrary to nature (\textit{para physin}) because its gain comes from money itself and not from exchange, for the sake of which money was invented. He notes that the very word for "interest" (\textit{tokos}) originally meant "offspring": interest is money born of money, an unnatural thing. Thomas Aquinas agreed that it is \textit{contra naturam}. Such is the basis of Antonio's argument against Shylock's exegesis of Genesis 30.31-43. As Shylock would have it, Jacob, the "skillful shepherd," intervenes in "the work of generation" and wins all the offspring as proper payment for his "thrift." To Antonio, Jacob's service was a "venture" in the hands of heaven. He scorns "A breed for barren metal," the gold and silver which Shylock boasts he makes breed as fast as ewes and rams (1.3.64ff, 129). Usurers are not only meddlers and panders, but false ones at that, for no new wealth is engendered; money is only transferred or stolen, as Laban learned.

We may note here an interesting instance of the layering of ideologies. The ideology of comedy celebrates marriage and fertility, and Aristotle denounces the unnatural fertility of usury. So there are two reasons that Shylock, who makes metal breed, loses his daughter and his wedding ring, not to mention "two sealed bags of ducats" and "two stones, two rich and precious stones" (2.8.18, 20), the family jewels; and that the contestants in the casket game must swear, if they choose wrong, "Never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage" (2.1.41-42): if they choose a breeding metal, they shall become sterile themselves.

With the Reformation, the prohibition of usury in Deuteronomy came in for revaluation and eventual rejection. Luther, always opposed in principle to usury, was even more opposed to efforts by radical reformers in 1524-1525 to abolish it. Faced with a peasantry in arms over usury, rents, and high prices, Luther unequivocally reopened the breach between this fallen world and the realm of the spirit. The Mosaic Code no longer bound Christians except in an inner, spiritual sense. A peasant is free to believe interest to be a sin, but if the law requires him to pay it, then pay it he must; a sin is not necessarily a crime. He must submit meekly, like Antonio, and leave to the discretion of the princes any action to abolish or limit usury.\textsuperscript{17}

According to Benjamin Nelson, it was Calvin who most radically and influentially transformed opinion on usury. Calvin agreed with the tradition that held that the distinction between brother and stranger on which the Deuteronomic tenet rests is abolished, so there are now no strangers whom we may treat as enemies. Yet the Law of Moses was only political, and not binding on Christians, even in an inner sense. Moses, moreover, only forbade biting or excessive usury, not all interest. Interest is permitted as long as it does not contravene the practice of charity, and that must be determined in each case by our consciences. Calvin made a decisive move toward individualism as he dissolved the old "tribal" barrier. In Nelson's phrase, he brings us "from tribal brotherhood to universal otherhood."\textsuperscript{18}

In England many clergymen (and playwrights) vehemently reacted in defense of the old prohibition and attacked those, mainly in the City, who practiced what they thought Calvin preached, and many of those were Puritans. The "elective affinity" of Swiss and Dutch Calvinists, Huguenots, German Pietists, and English Puritans for "rational" primitive-capitalist practice was noticed three centuries before Max Weber, generally
with contempt. Much of the initiative for the new commercial expansion in the City of London came from Puritan bourgeois "new men," although it was by no means limited to them, as it was common for the landed aristocracy to invest in commercial ventures. As the traditional agricultural and craft-guild economy began to give way before the new forces, the conservative ideologies of all classes seem to have found a scapegoat in the worldly "cit," usually a usurer, and very often a Puritan. The ideological crosshairs trained on the Jew were now centering on the Puritan.

I agree with those who have argued that Shylock is a kind of surrogate Puritan. Walter Cohen disagrees, but he does not weigh the arguments for it; he is more interested in the situation in historical Venice, where there were Jews but no Puritans. Contemporary literature about Puritanism, friendly and hostile, characterizes it, as Matthew Arnold did nearly three centuries later, as English Hebraism. Puritans were Judaizers, Christians of the Book, especially fond of the Old Testament, and they considered themselves, although with frequent anxiety, as the chosen people, or the elect. They gave their children Old Testament names either in Hebrew or in translation, such as Praisegod and Increase. They were people of contracts and compacts as the Jews were people of the Covenant. They banned images and kept the Sabbath holy. On the other hand, like the Pharisees, Puritans were seen as hypocrites who behind their "sad ostents" hid avarice or worse—just, in the case of Shakespeare's "precise" Angelo. In 1572 Thomas Wilson denounced "the dissembling gospeller" with his counterpart the papist: "And touching thy sinne of usurie, none doe more openly offende in thyth behalfe than do these counterfeite professours of thyth pure religion" (p. 178).

Werner Sombart's revision of Weber's theory, in The Jews and Modern Capitalism (1911), whereby Jews were the carriers of capitalism into Europe, posits "an almost unique identity of view between Judaism and Puritanism"; indeed, "Puritanism is Judaism." Shakespeare makes the fit between the Jew and the Puritan tighter by adding characteristics probably untypical of the Renaissance Italian Jew, or his stereotype in English thought, but certainly part of the stereotype, and often the reality, of the Puritan. Shylock dislikes masques, merry-making, and music. (Marlowe's Barabbas, on the other hand, is a bon vivant with a full wine cellar.) Shylock's manner of speaking, his laconic "plain style," and his literalness ("ships are but boards, sailors but men") smack of the Puritan. Harold Fisch thinks he detects a hint of Ramist logic, popular with Puritans, in Shylock's talk.

It would be too simple, although not altogether wrong, to say that his substitution of a Jew for a Puritan is an Aesopian maneuver to protect Shakespeare from the City authorities, many of them of Puritan or Calvinist leanings, who already disliked the theater. (Two reasons it is too simple, of course, are that some Puritans liked the theater and that Shakespeare had protection enough at the Court.) Shakespeare never set his plays in contemporary England and there were no Puritans in Venice; the decorum he always observes puts the issues at sufficient distance here to let his audience turn them over without the distraction of immediate pertinence. He seems nonetheless to invite his audience to take the play's gravamen as directed at the new class of individualistic Puritan merchants in the City.

For merchants they were. Shakespeare is quite misleading in suggesting that merchant adventuring and usurious calculating were done by different sorts of people. Venetian Jews did both, and English merchants, Puritan and otherwise, did both. Puritans, in fact, were heavily engaged in the Society of Merchant Adventurers, as the history of New England will remind us. Marlowe's Barabbas, although a much more stylized caricature than Shylock, is an adventurer, and he dwells on his argosies still at sea as much as Salerio supposes Antonio does.

It is evident then that Shakespeare wanted Antonio and Shylock to represent contrasting kinds of economic enterprise and was perfectly willing to bend the facts to make them do so. In the general scheme of the play, Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia stand for generosity, self-sacrifice, risk, and love, while Shylock stands for miserliness, sacrifice of others, certainty (or surety), and hatred. To fit two economic practices, themselves ideal types, into so general and morally absolute a plan is perhaps Shakespeare's fundamental ideological
I have not found recorded a claim by a Tudor merchant that he is entitled to large profits, or to the esteem of the community, because of the uncertainties and dangers of his work, but it is evident that a set of attitudes existed that we might call "the ideology of risk." It shows up negatively in the argument that usury is reprehensible because it is certain. "The essence of usury was that it was certain, and that, whether the borrower gained or lost, the usurer took his pound of flesh." Shylock is so filled with hatred that he passes up interest, but he insists on a contract, signed and sealed, according to his normal usage. Contemporary anti-usury tracts, too, distinguish clearly between merchant adventurers and money lenders (even if, as I have said, they were often the same people): "The usurer never adventureth or hazarded the losse of his principali: for he will have all sufficient securitie for the repaiement and restoring of it backe againe to himselfe." The lawyer in Wilson's Discourse, in phrases reminiscent of Shakespeare's "royal merchant," argues that "the merchant adventurer is . . . a lorde's fellow in dignity, as well for his hardy adventuring upon the seas . . . as for his royall and noble whole sales" (p. 203). In the sixteenth century as in all eras, merchant adventuring was closely connected with voyages of exploration, plunder, colonization, and imperial conquest; the aura of heroism, great adventure, and patriotism was transferable to the more strictly commercial aspect. The voyage of Drake's Golden Hind caught the imagination of many in England not least because it returned 4,700 percent on the ventured principal when it came home in 1580. The Antonios and Bassanios of the time, if not quite interchangeable, shared many functions and worked for the same companies. Bassanio, a soldier of fortune, presumably once a mercenary in a French army (1.2.108-10), is a kind of merchant adventurer; Antonio, as we have argued earlier, is a kind of risk-taking hero. (We might recall here John Ruskin's attempt in Unto This Last to specify the conditions under which the merchant, like the soldier, must give his life.)

So a new ideology of mercantile activity was emerging in Shakespeare's day, and Shakespeare seems to have shared it. Under one traditional scheme, the merchant, being a middle-man, held a position of middle honor (ranging from grudging tolerance to real respect) between the primary producers (peasants and artisans) and the parasites (users). Trade is dangerous to the soul and sometimes to the community, but it is necessary; the trader is entitled to fair profit for his labor, skill, and risk. When Calvin asks, "Whence do the merchant's profits come, except from his own diligence and industry," and omits Providence or luck, he transvalues the tradition, takes his stand on certainty, as if commercial prosperity is predestined as surely as our salvation or damnation, and gives Shylock an ideology opposite to that of risk, an "ideology of thrift," with its stock of proverbs such as "fast bind, fast find."

We may now see what may be Shakespeare's distinctive contribution to the history of capitalist ideology: he has invented an imaginary alternative to the Weber Thesis. Whereas Weber linked the habits of asceticism and rational self-scrutiny encouraged by Calvinism with the habits of saving and rational calculation essential to early capitalism, Shakespeare tied capitalism to a sort of anti-Calvinist Christianity that encouraged uncalculating acts of sacrifice and risk. Weber's and Shakespeare's spirits of capitalism, of course, differ as much as their Christian ethics. Shakespeare would separate mercantile capital from finance capital and attribute to the former not only the Christian virtues but the virtues of the aristocracy, as if to say that Antonio's way of doing business is the old true way, hallowed by tradition although it was in fact new), while Shylock's is an innovation dangerous to the community. It is thus fitting that the "old money" of Portia should, at least in intent, bail out Antonio from the clutches of the nouveau riche. The theses of Weber and Shakespeare, however, are similarly paradoxical, for both yoke an otherworldly ethic (Weber's "innerworldly asceticism") with worldly success. Weber tries to show how one transformed itself into the other; Shakespeare apparently sees no paradox at all, and employs each as the vehicle for the other's tenor.

Venice

Wherever they are set, all of Shakespeare's plays are "about" England. By this I mean more than the unexceptionable claim that all of English literature, no matter how exotic its subject, speaks to the condition
of its English-speaking audience. For Shakespeare and his audience shared literary conventions, such as allegory and the exemplum, and notions about universal human nature that led them to translate easily from an alien locale to their own. "Venice," however, bore connotations richer than, say, "Verona," where Shakespeare twice set plays, or "Messina." As M. M. Mahood points out, there is more local color here than in the other Italian settings: there are gondolas and "trajects," the Rialto and synagogues, and so on.28 On the other hand, Shakespeare's Venice is not so exotic that what goes on in it cannot easily strike home.

Venice, in fact, is a place with its own exotics; it is a part of Christendom, but as one of Christendom's frontiers it defines the alien. In nearby Belmont, Portia receives a stream of strangers, some of them quite exotic or outlandish in manner, but they are "inside outsiders" (assuming the Prince of Morocco is Christian), objects of mockery but not hostility, and familiar enough in this cosmopolitan locale. As a resident alien, the Jew can be tolerated as long as he maintains a pretense of civilized, "gentle" behavior, but he is always potentially the real enemy within, assimilable to the political enemy, the Turk, or the ultimate cosmic enemy, the Devil. Venice, then, can seem either generous and ecumenical, as befits a commercial capital, or strict and vigilant, as befits the defender of the frontiers. Translating, the London audience may think well of themselves as tolerant cosmopolites, but they are advised to consider their own undeniably English and Christian Shylocks as genuine aliens and threats to the polity.

A "myth of Venice" had gained currency in Elizabethan England and may have raised specific expectations among the better informed of Shakespeare's audience. Venice was a republic, indeed the "Most Serene Republic," whose longevity and stability were attributed by its admirers to a strict, intricate, and impersonal legal order. As Pocock summarizes it, "The mito di Venezia consists in the assertion that Venice possesses a set of regulations for decision-making which ensure the complete rationality of every decision and the complete virtue of every decision-maker."29 Othello illustrates the wisdom of Venetian decision-makers in the scene (1.3) where the Senate sees through the feint or "pageant" of the Turks and correctly concludes they are bound for Cyprus, and glances at Venetian serenity in the line of Brabantio to Roderigo, "What, tell'st thou me of robbing? this is Venice" (1.1.105). Lewes Lewkenor, who translated Contarini's book on Venice's constitution in 1599, praised "their penal laws, most unpardonably executed."30 The Doge has strictly limited powers, and could not pardon criminals or deny the course of law. The helplessness of Shakespeare's Duke is perfectly well-motivated, of course, by the internal demands of the plot, but Zera Fink is probably right in claiming that

this play in which everyone (Shylock, Antonio, Portia) except the irresponsible Salarino [Solanio] assumes that the laws will be adhered to, in which the laws are adhered to, and in which Shylock reaches for his triumph and arrives at his doom at every step in accordance with the law, and in which his case breaks down, not because the Duke refuses to enforce the law against a patrician, but because the law is discovered to be against Shylock—it is impossible, I say, to believe that as Shakespeare portrayed these things he was unaware of the contemporary reputation of Venice for justice and that it did not color to some extent his handling of his materials.31

The material Shakespeare was handling had to be handled with care, for it had sharp edges, edges that grew visible a generation later as republicans, commonwealthmen, and more radical reformers pressed attacks first against the Stuart kings and then against the monarchy itself. Contarini wrote that "the Duke of Venice is deprived of all means, whereby he might abuse his authority, or become a tyrant," and many were to wish that Charles the First could be reduced to such a dukeship.32 A similar thought is found in print as early as the 1530s. Under Elizabeth the religious, political, and economic pressures were still far from the point where Members of Parliament could ask the Venetian ambassador for an account of his country's constitution, as they did in 1644 (others publicly called for its adoption), but that constitution was admired by the influential circle of Leicester, Sidney, and Ralegh, whose opinions Shakespeare and many in his audience would have known.33 Yet if the "ideologeme" of Venice-as-republic was available, Shakespeare does not seem to have
triggered it in *The Merchant of Venice.* Whatever expectations his audience might have brought, only the legalism, and not the constitution itself, is put into the foreground, and the legalism is of course morally ambiguous.

If the play entertains any thoughts about Venice's way of governing itself, they seem to be implicitly critical. A nation of laws, of equals under the law, however praiseworthy, may land its citizens in tangles from which they cannot extricate themselves unaided. Although it is finally by quintessentially Venetian means that the knot is untied, the solution is brought by one who is trebly an outsider: an unknown lawyer from Padua, a lady from Belmont, an emblem of mercy or grace from on high. If a gracious intervention is sometimes needed to keep citizens (or at least male citizens) from injuring themselves and their state, then ideologically this points not only to heaven but to a sovereign (and perhaps a female sovereign) who understands the mystery of statecraft. One can see in Portia, too, something of Machiavelli's Fortuna, to master which is the ever-exigent need of a republic (as well as a prince) and which in the long run is certain to cause the state's decline or corruption. This time Fortuna turns out to be a stroke of Lady Luck, but next time the wheel may take a turn for the worse.

Much more fully active in the play than the political meaning is the archetypal image of "Venice" as the wealthy mercantile city, but this too carried ambivalent connotations. There was of course the ambivalence of wealth itself, a worldly good but a spiritual danger, a means of generosity but also an object of greed. Othello's Venice is perilously worldly and sophisticated; the Venice of Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) is pervaded by rapacity and cunning (though also by strict laws). Many Englishmen praised Venice for "the beautye and ryches of thyss world," as Andrew Borde did in 1542, but others denounced it for an immorality hidden behind its gorgeous facade. The theme of the caskets, the hypocrisy of Shylock and his goodly outside, the general glitter and merriment and masking, are all appropriate to Venice's reputation.

Walter Cohen argues that Italian economic history would allay the fears of capitalism prompted by the dichotomies of the English situation, for in the more advanced economies of Venice and other Italian cities these dichotomies were resolved and incorporated: merchant princes were also moneylenders, Jewish moneylenders were also merchants, and aristocrats lived in the city. Jews even contributed (by law) to charitable banks that helped the Christian poor. This may be so, although one may wonder how many Englishmen who knew about the Venetian economy were fearful of capitalism, since they would also have known that these dichotomies did not really exist in London either, except as abstractions. It is not "capitalism" that is frightening in the play, moreover, but moneylending; there was no name yet for capitalism in general. The "resolutions" of Venice, in any case, may not have been available as an "ideologeme" because few people knew about them, and Shakespeare seems not to have been one of the few.

This brighter side of Venice may have been eclipsed by a sense that England was in fact more advanced. The parallels between the two great island sea-powers of the modern world were hard to miss, and they were later elaborated in print (by James Howell, for example, in 1642). But it is possible that Venice provided an example peculiarly pertinent to England because England seemed about to inherit its imperial and commercial glory. Cohen claims that to Londoners "Venice represented a more advanced stage of the commercial development they themselves were experiencing" (p. 769), but the opposite ought to have been obvious in 1595 or earlier. Venice was in decline. England, once almost its economic colony, was now its rival for the long-distance carrying trade even in the Mediterranean. "The Venetians, who once almost monopolized England's woollen exports, ceased regular visits to London after 1533; they were last seen at Southampton in 1587." Indeed, this last visit ended in shipwreck off the Needles (Isle of Wight), a reminder of which may be found in the report that Antonio has lost a ship on the shoals of the Goodwins in the Channel, presumably on the return from London (3.1.1-7; cf. 2.8.27-32). The torch has been passed to London, and with it might come all the ills of worldly wealth. In Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (c. 1581), the lady named Lucre, a granddaughter of "the old Lady Lucre of Venice," inherits the family servant Usury, who has followed her to this new and better version of his home town.
Antonio's Venice, to be sure, mutes the acquisitive spirit among the Christians, or rather transmutes it, as in Bassanio's quest, to a more spiritual one, while concentrating it on Shylock in order to get rid of it. But the sadness of Antonio may be premonitory of his, and his city's, sterility. Not the least of the ills of worldly wealth is its transience: there is no future in it. Sated at the opening ("sad" in its oldest sense) Antonio finds life and living at the end by leaving Venice behind for a better place. So the riches of this world will lend themselves for a time to Venice, as they did to Babylony, Tyre, and Carthage before her, and will to England after her. In his title of "royal merchant" we may hear an echo of the "princes who are merchants" of Tyre, the "merchant city" whose destruction Isaiah foretold (23.8, 11). In the great opening passage of Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* we have the locus classicus of the historical parable the play lightly suggests: "Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction."

Auden points out that Shakespeare's Venice produces nothing of its own. Wealth grows through trade (Antonio), usury (Shylock), and fortune-hunting (Bassanio).

"Richly left," Portia inherits her wealth from her father. The other classes and castes are the Duke, lawyers, servants (Launcelot Gobbo), and "many a purchas'd slave" (4.1.90). Primary production (in England, the woolen industry) survives only as exemplum and metaphor: Shylock's tale of Jacob the shepherd, Portia as the Golden Fleece, Antonio as the "tainted wether of the flock," Shylock as a wolf. In the play as in real city finances the stress falls on money, the representative of already existing real wealth or value (if it is not debased). In all of this an Elizabethan might find perils to the soul. However, as the universal medium of exchange and the means of the communication or circulation of wealth, money reduces the moral question to simple terms: hoarding or free circulating, too much or too little, greed or generosity. Money is isomorphic to a one-commodity economy and mates well with the single spiritual commodity of love or friendship.

That is perhaps why Shakespeare gives us two kinds of money, coins and rings. It is as if, having shown money to be barren, he felt uneasy with even the proper use of money—lending it freely to help a friend. Rings are Utopian money. As a symbol of the bond of love, each ring is unique, as each bond is unique. Rings cannot be exchanged, as coins can, but they can circulate; here they go round in small circles as befits their size and shape. They live a charmed life in the charmed circle of lovers and friends. You give them away and they return with interest. Shylock, who does not live according to the bonds of love and friendship, loses his ring when he loses his daughter. If you are a lover or a friend, however, the magic in each ring protects you from the consequences of your act: if you intend to break a bond, at least as long as you do so out of a generous spirit, out of another love-bond, the ring returns to the original finger, bringing with it a larger circle of love. So the ring that Portia gives to Bassanio, and Bassanio gives to "Balthazar," Portia finally gives to Antonio to give again to his friend. It is as if they are all married to each other, and all the richer for the exchange of the one ring.39

Shakespeare was probably unaware of the doctrine of the "velocity of circulation," according to which a growth in the rate of circulation of money is a growth in the amount of money. This doctrine was circulating in his day (a Florentine named Davanzati invoked it in *Lezione della Monete* in 1588), but it was too good to be true.40 Like Dante's mirrors, which illustrate how love, like light, is multiplied by giving it away, the rings add to the total quantity of love, and even to the amount each lover owns, by taking themselves rapidly away from each lover by turns.

**Belmont**

The scene shifts from Venice to Belmont seven times, the seventh bringing us to the entire final act, where all the unsolved problems of Venice are "answered faithfully." The story of the pound of flesh, set entirely in

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Venice, contrasts with the story of the caskets, set entirely in Belmont. As the situation darkens in Venice, it brightens in Belmont and resolves itself happily. Except for a sequence in Act II dealing with Jessica and Gobbo, the setting alternates continually between the tragic and comic locales, each getting about half the lines. From the first shift of scene we sense that Belmont is a realm of answered prayers, of compensation for the world's injuries: a moment after Antonio says that "all my fortunes are at sea" and he shall rack his credit for Bassanio "even to the uttermost" (1.1.177, 181), Nerissa speaks of the abundance of Portia's "good fortunes" (1.2.4). This sense grows as the tenors of the two main plots diverge, even before Portia plans her intercession in Venetian affairs. It is as if the credit that is racked in Venice is stored in the treasury of the saints in Belmont, or as if the ruins of time (in Blake's words) build mansions in eternity.

From the scenario alone we would expect the two main plots to be close in meaning or moral if not in structure. As many critics have noted, they are exempla of the same precepts, like the two plots of King Lear. The casket story, the simpler of the two, teaches two closely related lessons: that true wealth is spiritual and inward, and that to find it you must risk everything you have. Morocco and Aragon choose gold or silver over lead and find no prize but a death's head or fool's head and messages about deception. Bassanio, by contrast, chooses not "by the view" of the casket but by an inner eloquence in it and opens the leaden one to find Portia's portrait. The theme of inner versus outer, of being versus seeming, is common enough in Shakespeare and in all literature; here it takes on a Christian cast whereby the inner or true becomes the spiritual and the outer or false becomes the material or worldly. When the scroll in the gold casket tells Morocco that "Gilded tombs do worms infold" (2.7.69), it recalls for us the whitened sepulchres or painted tombs of Matthew 23.27, beautiful outwardly, but "within full of dead mens bones and all filthines." The scroll in the silver casket echoes Psalm 12 in telling Aragon that "The fire seven times tried this" (2.9.63); so the words of the Lord are as pure as silver seven times purified, whereas all around us the children of men speak vain and flattering words with a double heart.

The connection with Shylock is obvious. Shylock is not only a vengeful usurer but a hypocrite, one of the Pharisees Christ likened to the painted tombs in his diatribe against them in Matthew 23. "O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" (1.3.97).

More prominent in the choice of caskets is the requirement that he who chooses lead "must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9). Bassanio's choice of lead, which threatens more than it promises—a woman who announces she stands for sacrifice—reveals his willingness to risk all for love, to see the world well lost for the sake of the one thing needful. Here the link with the main plot is even more substantial. Antonio, whose livelihood depends on risk, is prepared to sacrifice all out of love for Bassanio. Bassanio, himself a soldier of fortune, offers his parable of the second arrow to convince Antonio: by "adventuring" both arrows he will either find both or bring at least the "latter hazard" back again (1.1.140-52). We might doubt the wisdom of throwing good money after bad, but such a doubt is worldly wisdom, and Antonio, more devoted to friendship than to money, needs no convincing.

Besides the two main plots there are three others: Jessica and Lorenzo, the ring business, and the defection of Gobbo. Each of the plots may serve as a gloss on the other four, and without much effort we can read the play much as we might read Scripture with the four levels of exegesis at hand. To give away money for the sake of friendship, for example, is to leave a house of bondage, or of hell (2.3.2), and win a heavenly bride or bridegroom. To steal from a miser, to put on a disguise to fool a hypocrite—both parodied perhaps in Launcelot's attempt to extract a blessing, like Isaac, from his blind father—these are to assert the inner realm of faith and love against the glittering outsides of this world. To face death in a lead casket in the name of love and to be obedient to the mysterious will of a wise father are both somehow like the choice that Launcelot makes of following a poor gentleman, and all three choices bring "rare new liveries" (2.2.105) of one kind or another.
These interinanimations of meaning give the play much of the unity and closure it has, but the question of the two settings threatens to prise the play apart. They are so different in mood and style as to occupy almost incommensurable metaphysical states. Portia's role in the Venetian court is almost that of a heavenly being incarnate (in disguise) as a mortal, the Virgin Mary interceding against the Devil. When with Act V we break with Venice for good, in a manner critics have found awkward, we have entered a heavenly mansion full of music, from which we seem almost to look down on "the floor of heaven / . . . thick inlaid with patens of bright gold" (5.1.58-59). Here the unaccomplishable reaches fulfillment, the indescribable incarnates as act, and the Eternal Feminine drops manna on us from above. Here the Jewess turns Christian under the gentle instruction of her bridegroom, the lost rings find their owners, and in a "beautiful example of Shakespeare's dramatic impudence," Portia by a "strange accident" (5.1.278) can tell Antonio that three of his argosies are richly come to harbor.43

To put it another way, when we first hear of Belmont we guess it is a colony of Venice, a part of the Venetian empire, but by the end of the play the relationship seems reversed: Venice becomes a spiritually underdeveloped province of an empire of transcendent but benign power. At first we take Antonio's gift to Bassanio to be much like another commercial venture. He outfits Bassanio and sends him forth as he would a ship, borrowing against the prospects of success. As he would wait at home, perhaps in straitened circumstances, while his ship, unknown to him, founders on shoals or loads itself with riches, so he falls into ruin while Bassanio's expedition, unknown to him, grandly succeeds.44 Belmont is likened to "Colchos' strand," where Jason found the golden fleece and a magical wife along with it (1.1.169-72); Venice did trade in the Black Sea, although Trebizond, near ancient Colchis, was a commercial colony of Genoa, Venice's rival. Venetian fleets being as much military as commercial, it is appropriate that the venturer be a soldier. Bassanio will be the new lord of the lady of Belmont, the conqueror and colonizer who "marries" the land as Aeneas married Lavinia, Miss Italy, and as the Doge of Venice marries the sea. This symbolism, however, gives way to our strong impressions of the supernal power of Belmont and the infernal paralysis of Venice, and to the increasingly frequent theological suggestions that gather around Portia and her mission. There are two worlds after all, and Belmont is the "other" world, the place that makes all of life's actions into a divine comedy and from which, like Chaucer's Troilus, we may look down upon them and laugh.

**Ideological Distance or Openness**

Is all this to say—and Shakespeare could hardly have pushed it further without writing a simple morality play—that Venice is hopeless, or at best a stage where we must play sad parts (1.1.77-79), a place only to be endured as we prepare for the Kingdom? In reducing Venice to "the world" in Christian terms Shakespeare does more than blur the critical edge that the anti-usury polemic otherwise would give the play; he almost dismisses the sharp unbrotherly practices as of no importance to Christians, who will inherit their heavenly portions (or Portia, to repeat Ruskin's pun) when their worldly course is run. And yet by placing the otherworldliness of Belmont and its lady in the foreground, by giving so few "realistic" touches to it (mainly some charming complaints and teasings by Portia), Shakespeare also seems to be inviting us to take a closer look at this orthodox but unlikely resolution. He "estranges" it from us; it is all too wonderful, too pat, too flat. Behind the thin heavenly harmonies we still hear, and seem meant to hear, Shylock's harsh questions echoing unanswered.

I have been more or less skirting "the problem of Shylock," so troubling to modern audiences, and about which more has been written than any other feature of the play. Shylock can be gotten round if he is not presented as a tragic hero (as Heine interpreted him) or as one of a misunderstood and oppressed minority who sings kaddish over his daughter (as Laurence Olivier acted him). But he is there to be gotten round, and he must have been something of a "problem" in 1596, a character not fully digested and assimilated into the structure of themes.
Shylock has, notoriously, some good speeches which carry conviction and draw sympathy, although even his famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech expresses his habit of reducing everything to physical or "worldly" terms. He has a prima facie case against the Christians—he has been spat upon—although the play would have us believe Shylock deserved it for his hateful financial practices. More troubling is Shylock's indispensability to the transactions that further the plot. He is thoroughly integrated into the Venetian economy. As Antonio well knows, "the commodity that strangers have / With us in Venice" is essential to its prosperity, "Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations" (3.3.27-31). Although the mercy the Duke and Antonio render Shylock puts the lie to it, Shylock's plea that in seeking revenge he only follows Christian practice (3.1.61-66) rings uncomfortably true. (Marlowe's Barabbas says the same [JM 5.2.118]: "for Christians do the like.") He also reminds the court that Venetians hold many slaves, although we meet none of them. Shylock may be evil, but he is a necessary evil, and when the *bienpensants* of Venetian society mobilize to defeat him they can find nothing useful in their constitution. Even Portia's rescue, however satisfying dramatically, rests on the merest legal quibbles. That is of course part of the Christian theme: literally, "in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation" (4.1.195-96), for the law traps those who insist on it to the letter. Yet the feeling remains that not only Shylock but Venice too has gotten off more easily than it deserves: it was just good luck that Portia (or Bellario) came up with the answer. If the prosperity of the city rests on a system that allows hateful practices, its citizens should not be surprised if hatred also prospers to the point where it menaces the bonds of community. If the law permits any sort of contract, it can offer no reply to Shylock's "say it is my humour,—is it answer'd" (4.1.43). It must grant that it is answered, and preside over the dissolution of the traditional "organic" society into an aggregate of individuals who do as they like.

That seems to be what Shakespeare feared, but his honesty or empathy led him to give the Devil his due. The new and contemptible was hard to separate from the old and venerable, mercantile capital depended on financial capital, if not on old-fashioned usurious moneylending, and not all maritime ventures could be floated by partners in a joint-stock company. Up-to-date Shylocks of the London Exchange were a crucial part of the new capitalist expansion. The future lay with the banks. Shakespeare let such connections find expression in the play, with the result that the prevalent ideology of the play is at several points "subverted" or distanced.

This is not the only cause of the distancing effect. What I have just called the play's prevalent ideology is itself a product of at least three ideological discourses—agrarian-aristocratic, mercantile, and Christian (or one version of Christian)—that harmonize with each other only if certain features are kept subdued or vague. To these we should add an ambiguous theme on the power and place of women, a theme found in many other Shakespearian comedies but very prominent here. To Portia, brilliant, resourceful, and generous, who can extricate the male world of Venice from its stupid and self-destructive tangle—although she must do it through male means in male disguise, on a lark during a hiatus between her roles as dutiful daughter and dutiful wife. Finally we should note the effect of the constant alternation between utterly different kinds of story, setting, and mood, the "realistic" concatenation of events in Venice as against the triple rhythm of fairy-tale deeds in Belmont. With so much to accommodate, in fact, it is quite wonderful that the play comes across as cogently and coherently as it does.

I would argue, however, that a fair and comprehensive reading of the whole play, or a viewing of a performance, informed about its historical and ideological horizon, cannot give much more weight to these moments than I have given them. Recent post-structuralist readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, with little reference to the actual ideologies mobilized in it, have thoroughly elaborated its ironies and conflicts and countercurrents and set them free, as it were, to swamp the whole. Rene Girard, for example, gives as subversive a reading as one can without resorting altogether to the arbitrary play of meanings post-structuralism often celebrates, and he enters a vigorous brief in Shylock's behalf. Shylock is a Venetian among other Venetians, and only does what they do—especially when he confuses his personal and financial motives. He is the "grotesque double" of Antonio, and indeed "The generosity of Antonio may well be a
corruption more extreme than the caricatural greed of Shylock" because it threatens the ordinary system of Venetian practices and seems to avert its gaze from them (p. 102). Venetians fail to face up to their own motive of revenge (the law itself being only formalized revenge) and cloak their doings in the language of charity. In the end Shylock is not so much punished for a crime—"he has done no actual harm to anyone" (p. 108)—as made into a scapegoat for Venice's otherwise insoluble contradictions. Shakespeare writes a play with two levels, addressed to the vulgar or to the sophisticated in his audience.

Terry Eagleton cleverly points out that "it is Shylock who has respect for the spirit of the law and Portia who does not" (pp. 36-37). That "blood" is entailed by "flesh" is a reasonable inference well within the spirit of the law, "as any real court would recognize," and the strict precisionism that defeats Shylock will also undo the law itself, the very concept of law, which cannot exhaustively enumerate every conceivable aspect of the cases it covers (p. 37). Shylock seems intent less on killing Antonio than on exposing Venetian law for a hollow sham behind which the Christian nobility gets what it wants. He succeeds, and the law deconstructs itself, for Shakespeare's audience if not for Shylock's.

In cutting against the grain of the play this way, Girard and Eagleton bring out the "subversive" features of the play, but in doing so they leave themselves open to several serious objections. Setting aside Girard's Nietzschean view of justice as mere revenge and his anthropological view of punishment as mere scapegoating, we may ask why the moments of sympathy for Shylock, his home thrusts at the Christians, and their moments of calculation even in love should turn the play into a constant simultaneous double track of meaning, more like a logical paradox or figure-ground illusion than a sequence of virtual actions unfolding in time before a real audience. We also wonder why, on the sophisticated track, the subversive elements should take precedence over the more or less consistent if "conventional" framework of the rest of the play. Girard's modern taste for irony is surely anachronistically attributed to Shakespeare's audience. The same may be said of Eagleton, whose deconstructive effects are momentary paradoxes that work only if we forget the rest of the play. Eagleton ignores the contradiction between the oral understanding concerning the pound of flesh and Shylock's insistence on what was written; Shylock's "merry sport" is a deliberate lie. Eagleton also ignores Portia's elaborate attempts to dissuade Shylock and pay him many times his due, it being a reasonable inference that the point of any commercial contract is to allocate money, not kill people. While "any real court would recognize" that flesh includes blood, any real court would also recognize that the clause ordaining the pound of flesh was illegal in the first place. We may also ask Girard and Eagleton why they do not propose many more subversive ironies, for on their own principles there is an infinite number of them. To rule all but a few of them out, as they implicitly do, is to invoke standards of relevance—conventions of reading, historical probabilities, available ideologies, and even common sense—that will also, I believe, strictly limit the effects of the ones they discuss.

The harder if less exciting task is to weigh such subversive effects against the orthodox ones and give an account of what remains, after all, a single work that must be read or experienced in sequence through time, and a comedy at that. The larger problem with Girard and Eagleton, as with much post-structuralist criticism, is that their readings remain only two-term systems, despite the gestures toward infinite critical possibility. What one really needs for the interpretation I am presenting here is a system of five, six, or seven terms—terms that reflect the real cultural and ideological discourses accessible to Shakespeare and his audience. They were not infinite in number, they were not mere negations or subversions of one another (or any other), and they can (after all allowances for our ignorance) be specified in detail and discussed.

There may be another failure of historical imagination behind the attitude Girard and many earlier critics take toward the Venetians. They assume too easily that the Venetians, with the possible exception of Antonio, are shallow, superficial, hypocritical, and heartless, all tinsel and glitter, while against that suffocating background the harsh candor of Shylock is as welcome as a cooling breeze. They can point to a number of passages, but I think such critics are mainly giving vent to a mere distaste for the Venetians' friendly, gregarious banter: they forget the extent to which their own sensibility is colored by modern suspicions of
courtesy and social warmth and by the shriveling of the public sphere. Shakespeare's audience would not have felt nearly so impatient with the Venetians, would have enjoyed them and readily lent them their sympathy. Venice may be unable to solve its problems by itself, but gay camaraderie is not one of its problems. It may be one of its saving graces.

Notes


2 See, for example, Lawrence Danson, The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice (New Haven, 1978).


4 An earlier version of this paper had a discussion of the Utopian dimension of the play, but it is omitted here for the sake of space.

5 The most thorough and careful discussion of Marx's use of "ideology," which defends it from several modern extensions and reductions, is Bhiku Parekh, Marx's Theory of Ideology (Baltimore, 1982).

6 "Free" and "friend" are also etymologically related.

7 A good discussion of the theme of gift-giving is Ronald A. Sharp, "Gift Exchange and the Economies of Spirit in The Merchant of Venice," Modern Philology, 83.3 (1986), 250-65. I am leaving aside the possibility raised by Auden and others that Antonio has a homosexual passion for Bassanio. The case for it rests on a few doubtful phrases such as "tainted wether," and it seems to create many more problems than it solves.

8 Genealogy of Morals, Second Essay, Section 2.

9 Faust I, 1716-1717, my translation.

10 Another of Antonio's departures from normal commercial practice: although he reports that "My ventures are not in one bottom trusted, / Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate / Upon the fortune of this present year" (1.1.42-44), it seems that the bottoms are entirely his own, so when they miscarry he must absorb the entire loss. "During the whole medieval period," however, "a ship almost never went out on the account of a single individual, because of the risk, but was always built for a number of share-holders." Various formal associations, societates maris, developed in early modern times to rationalize and distribute risk. See Max Weber, General Economic History (New York, 1961), pp. 157-59. Marc Shell points out that Antonio does not insure his ships, even though marine insurance was common in both Venice and England. See Money, Language, and Thought (Berkeley, 1982), p. 54 n. 19.


12 Benjamin Nelson, The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1969), p. 152, quoting Luther, Von Kaufhandlung and Wucher (1524): "Standing surety is a work that is too
lofty for a man; it is unseemly, for it is presumptuous and an invasion of God's rights. . . . Therefore the man who becomes surety acts unchristianlike, and deserves what he gets, because he pledges and promises what is not his and is not in his power, but in the hands of God alone." See also Barbara K. Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in The Merchant of Venice," Shakespeare Quarterly, 13 (1962), 327-43.


14 I do not mean to suggest that there was no anti-Semitism of the racist sort we know in modern times, or that the play does not risk awakening it at a few points. But the idea of "the Jew" mobilized in the play does not rest on it, and indeed often opposes it. Terry Eagleton is simply wrong to call Antonio a "racist" and to compare his trial to that of "a later anti-semite, Adolf Eichmann." See his William Shakespeare (Oxford, 1986), p. 47.


16 Knights, p. 162.

17 Nelson, pp. 29-56. Luther "insisted upon the sharpest possible divorce between the Christian ethic and the character of political organization" (p. 67).

18 Nelson, pp. 73-82; Tawney, pp. 91-115.


20 Cohen dismisses the identification of Shylock with the Puritan as unconvincing for two reasons: "it is just as easy to transform him into a Catholic and, more generally, because he is too complex and contradictory to fit neatly the stereotype of Puritan thrift." For the first point Cohen cites Danson, but Danson does not consider the usury question, sobriety, thrift, Old Testament names, and other salient features of Shylock and the Puritan stereotype; he stresses that Catholics were sometimes equated with Jews, largely because of their doctrine of justification by works. This is not sufficient. Cohen's second point is true but does not rule out the probability that Shylock evoked the Puritan-as-usurer in the minds of his contemporary audience. It is not necessary to "fit neatly" a stereotype to bring it into play, nor is "thrift" the sum of the stereotype.

21 English version, trans. M. Epstein (New York, 1962), pp. 235, 236. Michael Nerlich has harsh criticisms of a different thesis of Sombart's, which we might call a variant of the Shakespeare Thesis, whereby capitalism is a hybrid of the heroic (entrepreneurial) spirit and the trading (bourgeois) spirit (pp. 79-82). But Nerlich does not consider the possibility that Shylock represents Puritanism.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have a suggestive page on Odysseus and Robinson Crusoe as forerunners of the bourgeois rationale: "the possibility of failure becomes the postulate of a moral excuse for profit." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1972), pp. 61-62. Nerlich, in his very interesting survey of the decline of the knightly-courtly ideology of adventure and the rise of a bourgeois variant, does not find this argument explicit anywhere, but takes it as implicit in the ennobling of merchant "adventurers." Nerlich's main exhibit is *The Merchant of Venice* itself.

Tawney, p. 44.


This was a scheme not very visible to the ideology that draws its main distinction between landed wealth and commercial getting, as in the opening of Jonson's imitation of Horace's Second Epode: "Happy is he, that from all business clear, / As the old race of mankind were, / With his own oxen tills his sire's left lands, / And is not in the usurer's bands."

Calvin cited in Tawney, p. 36.


Pocock, p. 325.


Lewkenor's translation, in Fink, p. 38.


Fink, p. 44.

Cohen, 769-72. Cohen's arguments about the actual English situation should now be canvassed in the light of Nerlich's discussion.

Fink, p. 46.


See G. K. Hunter, "Elizabethans and Foreigners," in "Shakespeare in His Own Age" (*Shakespeare Survey* 17), ed. Allardyce Nicoli (Cambridge, Eng., 1964), pp. 37-52. Also following Lucre and usury to London, according to David Bady, was double-entry bookkeeping, known as "the forme of Venice," some terms from which may have entered the language of *The Merchant of Venice*. See David Bady, "The Sum of Something:
Arithmetic in *The Merchant of Venice*" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 36.1 (Spring 1985), 10-30. Zera Fink denies that Venice's decline was evident. The Venetians had recently won the Battle of Lepanto (although they lost Cyprus) and were thought to be capable of great expansion. But Fink does not consider the city's manifest loss of economic hegemony, which would have been well understood by City merchants.

39 I realize that this theory of rings does not quite catch Jessica's seemingly heartless squandering of her parents' ring for a monkey. (She is denying her parentage? The ring is turquoise, i.e., Turkish, and therefore infidel?) In an annual ceremony the Doge of Venice married the sea by throwing a ring into it. (It always came back, too, in the form of worldly prosperity.)


41 Geneva Bible. Shakespeare's source in the 1595 English translation of the *Gesta Romanorum* three times describes the golden vessel as "full of dead mens bones" (Arden edition, pp. 172-74).

42 This is mainly Shakespeare's idea; his source stresses a more passive trusting in the Lord.

43 A comment on 5.1.278-79 in the New Cambridge edition, cited in the Arden, p. 138. Is it possible that the name Belmont is meant to echo the Venetian Monti di Pietà, Christian money-lending institutions intended to disrupt Jewish usurious practices? Monte meant "goods" or "assets," that is, a "mount" or "amount" of wealth; compare "he made his pile." See Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Marlowe, Marx, and Anti-Semitism," *Critical Inquiry*, 5.2 (1978), 294, and his source, Brian Pulían, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford, 1971), as well as Cohen, 770. There were also Monti di Carità or Monti dell'Abbondanza that distributed grain and other supplies during famines.

44 Nerlich elaborates this parallel very fully. Although he is often very illuminating in detail, he reduces the major characters to vehicles of a Marxist allegory. Antonio is a pale character with no personal life because he is nothing personally; he is bourgeois mercantile capital personified, sad because he has no function other than to provide the capital and stay home. Bassanio is the junior partner, or "apprentice," with no capital of his own, who carries out the actual business trip in return for a share of the profits. He defeats the feudal nobility (Morocco and Aragon) after the petty nobility withdraw (e.g., the Neapolitan prince, the County Palatine), just as bourgeois capitalism is defeating the remnants of feudalism. Portia is Fortuna, the goal of worldly pursuit. (Nerlich neglects that she is of the landed aristocracy herself.) Shylock is feudal usury, now archaic, about to be supplanted by venture capital.

45 A fuller treatment of ideology than is possible here would take up "male ideology" from a feminist standpoint. I omit it here because I think the issue of the status or rights of women is not foregrounded in the play, and the peculiarly male character of the Venetian way of doing things is only passingly and obliquely indicated. It is an interesting question where an ideological analysis should cease. Recent theories have claimed that such things as the self, subjectivity, objectivity, experience, science, reason, heterosexuality, and a preference for the human over other species are all ideological. I try to hold to a historical standard of the availability of an ideology and whether it is signaled or triggered in the text.

This may be the place to comment on Marc Shell's brilliant and fascinating chapter on the play (see note 10 above). A fuller interpretation than mine would have to absorb his many insights, especially on the theme of generation (of the Jewish race, of money, and so on), but they have serious limitations. Shell claims that the idea of "verbal usury" (which mainly refers to puns, such as gild/geld/Geld) was an "important technical term" in Christian patristic writings, but he offers only one citation, and that is for "spiritual usury" (see his notes 6 and 50). For his key pun, ewes/use/Jews, he offers the slenderest of evidence, another pun, in *LLL* 5.2.620. He cites "the similarity between the sound ieu in adieu and Ju in Jude" (note 7). But why does he neglect the d in adieu or the word sweet before Jude? He concedes that Kökeritz gives the J the modern sound. With such
faint historical controls, there is no end to punning and "supplementary" meanings.

46 René Girard, "'To Entrap the Wisest': A Reading of The Merchant of Venice," in Literature and Society (Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1978), ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 100-19. Girard actually does claim that "an infinite number of readings is possible" of The Merchant of Venice, and "this infinity is determined by 'thy play of the signifier'" (p. 119). But as so often in post-structuralist essays, the infinite play of the signifier remains only a menacing possibility behind the actual work of interpreting a real text, and Girard is not really very playful. He even begins by claiming that "the symmetry between the explicit venality of Shylock and the implicit venality of the other Venetians cannot fail to be intended by the playwright" (p. 100). This old-fashioned appeal to authorial intention would surely fail to intimidate a signifier that was bent on infinite play.

47 Eagleton, pp. 36-38. Besides Girard and Eagleton, one should note Frank Whigham's discussion of the importance of style in speech, dress, and demeanor: "Ideology and Class Conduct in The Merchant of Venice," in Renaissance Drama, NS 10 (1979), 93-115. While not post-structuralist, it leads to a plethora of ironies and subversions. "The intermixture of heroic and mercantile language emphasizes their relation to each other; the tonal disjunction suggests an ironic reading, since in romantic heroics financial foundations are usually suppressed as tawdry" (p. 96). Usually, perhaps, but it is precisely the ideological conjunction of heroic adventure and bourgeois merchant venturing, which Nerlich so thoroughly explores, that Shakespeare (and others) frankly celebrate. It may be ironic that Bassanio chooses lead even though it is gold that got him to Belmont, but the irony seems to be that of the worldhistorical mind, larger than Shakespeare's, and certainly larger than Bassanio's: to speculate on whether "Bassanio is so unreflective as to be unaware of the irony of his words" (p. 101) is to wander out of the play altogether.

48 It is worth noting that according to the dietary laws of Leviticus flesh must not include blood. "No soul of you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger that sojourneth among you eat blood" (Leviticus 17. 10-16). After Shylock twice exclaims about his "flesh and blood" (Jessica), and Salario elaborates on how different the two fleshes and the two bloods are, they then discuss the flesh (alone) of Antonio, which "will feed my revenge" (3.1.31-48). Shylock does not listen to himself or notice the implications of his metaphor of feeding for the prohibition in Leviticus (see also 1.3.161-63).

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): Gender Identity, Roles, And Relations

Marianne Novy (essay date 1984)


[In the following essay, Novy argues that the play criticizes the self-denial Antonio demonstrates throughout the play in favor of Portia's self-assertion and her acceptance of sexuality.]

Many critics describe The Merchant of Venice as contrasting taking to giving. Shylock to Portia and Antonio.¹ A few have begun to note that the play also contrasts two kinds of giving, and that neither Portia nor Antonio is uncritically portrayed as an ideal of perfect generosity. Antonio's attempt at total self-sacrifice is different from Portia's willingness to give and take while setting limits.² Antonio's words in the trial scene suggest a rivalry between himself and Portia.³ I believe that the personal rivalry dramatizes a struggle between two types of giving which was a central issue in the historical, religious, and psychological conflicts of Renaissance Europe. As a further sign of the centrality of this conflict in The Merchant, not only is Bassanio at the pivot of the personal rivalry between Antonio and Portia, but he also mediates between them in his
mode of giving and moves his closest alliance from Antonio to Portia during the play. If these types of giving are rivals, it is Portia's that wins; Antonio cannot maintain the attitude of self-sacrifice all the time, and his depression, as well as his antagonism to Shylock, casts doubt on the attractiveness of his attempts. Thus I would argue that *The Merchant of Venice* implies a criticism of the ideal of self-denial in favor of the more comprehensive attitude of Portia, who is not only more assertive than Antonio but also more accepting of sexuality.

In this reading, Antonio's anti-Semitism is closely related to the denial and projection required by his attempt at total self-sacrifice. The play's outsiders by race and sex, Shylock and Portia, are paralleled as well as contrasted. Portia's echoes of Shylock in the final ring episode cohere with the self-assertion she has shown throughout, as well as with Shakespeare's use and revaluation of his culture's association of both women and Jews with the flesh.

Both W. H. Auden and C. L. Barber make some interesting connections between *The Merchant* and the socioeconomic changes of its time, and these, with related psychological and religious changes, are the best context in which to see the oppositions within the play. The traditional ethic of Shakespeare's society was still that of the medieval theologians who found it sinful both to lend money for personal profit rather than out of generosity and to have sexual relations for pleasure rather than for procreation. On usury, Aquinas, for example, had said, "To take usury from any man is simply evil, because we ought to treat every man as our neighbour and brother." And summing up the thought of many other theologians, Saint Raymond said, "One ought to lend to one's needy neighbor only for God and principally from charity." In Elizabethan England the condemnation of usury was repeated both by caricaturing dramatists and also by such preachers as Henry Smith, Miles Mosse, Roger Fenton, Nicholas Sanders, Philip Caesar, and Gerard Malynes. On sex, Aquinas had said, "The end, however, which nature intends in copulation is offspring to be procreated and educated, and that this good might be sought it has put delight in copulation, as Augustine says, *Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.8. Whoever, therefore, uses copulation for the delight which is in it, not referring the intention to the end intended by nature, acts against nature." Various medieval theologians made various accommodations to mixed motives, but in general both money-lending and sex were supposed to be for the benefit of others more than for oneself. Actual behavior, of course, fell short of these ideals, but in the Middle Ages the feudal socioeconomic system supported them, while in the Renaissance socioeconomic changes pulled in the opposite direction.

Although some of our pictures of the community life from which the Elizabethans were emerging may be over-simplified, nevertheless it seems clear that they experienced an increasing individualism, acquisitiveness, and competitiveness. Of course, Shakespeare's audience did not make a sharp break with the past and give up the ideals of charity and self-sacrifice. Rather, their very retention of traditional ideals added to their sense of inner conflict. The need to define charity so that it could be combined with greater self-consciousness and a changing socioeconomic system led many theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, to new formulations; the struggle between communal and individualistic social systems had its analogue in psychic struggle. *The Merchant of Venice* provides a dramatic reflection of these struggles, and in its resolution of them, as apparently in history, the role of the outsider is particularly important.

Value systems that emphasize self-sacrificial giving—like the Christianity still honored in the world of *The Merchant* and its audience—often differentiate sharply between the community of those who give and the outsider, who has what they consider the uncivilized habit of taking and uncivilized anger at the excluding community. But of course those within the community are also taking from each other—and from those outside—although they may not admit it. Thus they may project their own acquisitiveness—and all the aggressions they cannot acknowledge—onto the outsider and persecute him or her as a scapegoat. Here Shakespeare draws on the Elizabethan theater's frequent identification of Venice with acquisitiveness to suggest its paradoxical similarity to Shylock, the outsider it calls a devil.
There are many kinds of outsiders in *The Merchant of Venice*. Not only Shylock, but also most of Portia's suitors are ethnic outsiders to Venice. Although a citizen of Venice, Antonio as well can be seen as a psychological outsider. Portia, as a woman, is different in a more obvious sense, although in Belmont the proper metaphor for the limitation on her actions is confinement rather than exclusion, and in Venice she passes for a Roman male. Insofar as her society is structured in patriarchal terms, it justifies its subordination of her by beliefs similar to those that justify its subordination of Shylock. Women and Jews could be seen as symbolic of absolute otherness—alien, mysterious, uncivilized, unredeemed. In this tradition, femaleness and Jewishness as qualities in themselves were associated with the flesh, not the spirit, and therefore with impulses toward sexuality, aggression, and acquisitiveness.

However, ... the attitude toward women in Shakespeare's society was not simply patriarchal, nor is it in this play. Nor could the attitude toward sexuality, aggression, or acquisitiveness have been monolithic. I believe that *The Merchant of Venice* likewise shows a divided attitude toward these qualities and distinguishes among their manifestations. Portia's active capacity for mutuality integrates and transforms associations of women with the flesh. Her self-assertion promises energies to sustain a more realistic love and community. In her betrothal speech to Bassanio, she explicitly denies the egoism of the isolated self, but suggests that her loving marriage to Bassanio multiplies her wishes for what she can share with him.

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Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich.
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(3.2.150-54)

Shylock, however, both speaks for and suffers from the most threatening possibilities of self-assertion. He is portrayed as one who is ambitious for himself alone.

Shylock's main role is to speak for the aggressive and acquisitive motives that his society follows but does not admit. His powerful appeal to human commonality that begins "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.51) makes its climactic point "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that" (3.1.57-59). In his first scene with Antonio and Bassanio he explains his anger at being treated like a dog, as if they might remember their own anger at being insulted and understand him. But insofar as his audience considers anger one of the seven deadly sins, his defense fails; it plays into the tendency to project anger onto an outsider and becomes a justification for further exclusion.

While his hostility and acquisitiveness are most evidently what his society fears in him, he suggests other qualities important in the transition to the Renaissance. When he tells about Jacob's breeding of spotted sheep by sympathetic magic, Shylock emphasizes the potency of Jacob's cleverness: "Mark what Jacob did . . . the skillful shepherd" (1.3.73, 80). By contrast, Antonio, the spokesman for his society's traditional values, denies Jacob's power and emphasizes his risk—using, of course, the same word that applies to his own attempts to make money:

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This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven.
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(1.3.87-89)
What Shylock stresses and Antonio denies is precisely the element of individual mastery that became more important in the Renaissance; such mastery correlates with the humorous vitality of Shylock's speech, which, as Sigurd Burckhardt has pointed out, contrasts with the somberness and ineffectiveness of Antonio's. On the other hand, Antonio's emphasis on the uncertainty of Jacob's ventures corresponds to the fact that the scholastic analysis of usury distinguished it from other more lawful forms of money-making, like Antonio's, by its lack of risk.

Although he profits financially from the new acquisitive society, Antonio cannot admit that he is anything but a giver, whether to Bassanio or to his other debtors. At the start, he says to Bassanio, "My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138-39). Suggesting a coalescence with classical Roman ideals of generosity, Bassanio describes him to Portia as

The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies, and one in whom
The ancient Roman honor more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

(3.2.293-96)

Courtsey and honor demand a minimizing of the giver's own needs and risks; Antonio plays down the danger of taking Shylock's bond and refuses to accept Bassanio's promise of a speedy return from Belmont. Thus his generosity denies a need for mutuality and tends toward an attitude of combined self-effacement and self-sufficiency. (As policy he lends money without taking interest.) When the wreck of his ships entitles Shylock to claim a pound of his flesh, according to their contract, Antonio plays the role of one who endures and gives all for the love of his friend; he is following an ideal of self-sacrifice and imitation of Christ.

Benjamin Nelson has suggested that this, as well as his general willingness to lend money without taking interest, links Antonio closely with predominant medieval ethical emphases. He would have been viewed critically by such reformers as Luther, who said, "Standing surety is a work that is too lofty for a man; it is unseemly, for it is presumptuous and an invasion of God's rights." The weakness of his language and his opening complaint of a sadness whose cause he does not know suggest other grounds for viewing him critically, and, in general, using a psychological perspective.

Many contemporary critics have seen homosexual feelings in Antonio's love for Bassanio. But it is important to note that Shakespeare's language can go much further in suggesting sexual undertones between men than Antonio's does. The sonnets play with far more witty double entendre than do Antonio's serious and asexual words. Antonio is one of the most reluctant punsters among Shakespeare's major characters and also one of the least given to talking about sex in any way. If we think of how Shakespeare's men usually talk about women among themselves—Benedick and Claudio, Oliver and Orlando, Romeo and Mercutio, Berowne and his fellows—it is remarkable that Antonio refers to Portia only at the beginning of the conversation: "What lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage," (1.1.119-20) and at the end as "fair Portia" (1.1.182). Nor does Antonio make punning references to male sexuality like those at the end of Sonnet 20:

But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

Antonio typically presents himself as completely asexual, as if following an ideal of celibacy; he behaves like the altruists described by Anna Freud who have given up to another person, with whom they identify, the right to have their instincts gratified. Nevertheless, there is one point at which Antonio finds it impossible to maintain his attitude of total self-sacrifice; the wreck of his ships finally forces him to make a request of Bassanio. Even then he tries not to ask it directly: "My bond to the Jew is forfeit. And since in paying it, it is
impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter” (3.2.317-22). For all Antonio's self-effacing posture, this wording makes Bassanio's appearance a test of his love. In spite of his intent, Antonio expresses a need for a mutuality of relationship in which he can receive as well as give. And it is interesting that this is also a point where sexual double entendre may lurk in Antonio's language. Bassanio has just betrothed himself to Portia, and in that context "use your pleasure" sounds a little more like the end of Sonnet 20.

But if in general Antonio denies or sublimes his own sexuality and instead supports Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, he also denies the acquisitiveness inherent in being a merchant and instead attacks Shylock, the double who shares and exaggerates his mercantile profession and marginal social status. Even in this respect, however, he generally presents himself as selfdenying, patiently holding in check his hostility to Shylock everywhere but in the scene where he arranges the loan. In his verbal attack on Shylock there, his speech takes on unusual energy; this is the one scene in which Antonio does not speak about being sad. His temporary recovery resembles the relief from a sense of powerlessness and depression that modern psychologists have often found to be one function of anti-Semitic outbursts.

Subject to the conflicting forces of Antonio and Portia, Bassanio mediates between them in his attitude toward giving. His giving is responsive rather than self-sacrificing; impoverished as he is, he is quite willing to take as well, but the juxtaposition of the two men ultimately emphasizes Bassanio's frivolity as well as Antonio's somberness. With Antonio's help, he can indulge in inviting his friends and even Shylock to dinner, taking on the hungry Lancelot Gobbo as an extra servant, and sending gifts to Portia. His attempt at unlimited generosity with his words complements Antonio's attempt at unlimited generosity with his money and his life. Bassanio's spontaneity is appealing, but there is something of a naive love of fine gestures in it, a romanticism of risk, magnanimity, and promise unqualified by a sense of responsibility. In a comparison he himself uses in asking money from Antonio, he gives and takes like a child at play—who believes that he can give anything away and have it to give again.

Juxtaposed with these three male characters, however admirable, fascinating, or charming they may be at their best, Portia seems much better able to cope with the world in which she lives—indeed, to protect it from the dangers of extreme asceticism, individualism, or irresponsibility. From the beginning of the play, where she mocks all her suitors, she would fall short by traditional standards of perfect charity, but she succeeds by the standards of romantic comedy. We first meet her complaining about one of the limitations traditionally set on women—patriarchal control of marriage choice. When she finds a way of dealing with this problem, it is not the blithe unconsciousness of limits that Bassanio shows, any more than it is passive self-sacrifice like Antonio's. In a situation that makes her an object to be chosen, her mockery of her suitors shows that she preserves her own wish to choose, and she defines her own requirements in a husband by observing what her suitors lack. For all the xenophobia in her wit, what she criticizes most are qualities that hinder mutuality of social interchange: "he doth nothing but talk of his horse. . . . He doth nothing but frown—as who should say, 'An you will not have me, choose!' He hears merry tales and smiles not; . . . he will fence with his own shadow. . . . You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him" (1.2.38-39, 43-45, 57, 63-64).

And because of her own skill in talking with people, she learns how to work with the limitations of the casket test. Although in its choice of imagery it seems to dramatize a definition of woman as an object, she can use it to disqualify those who so define her and would deny her an active role in a mutual relationship. With Morocco and Arragon, she speaks much more of the rules of the game than of her own feelings, and by hurrying them to the caskets, she exposes their susceptibility to the possession-oriented mottos: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" and "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.”

With Bassanio, by contrast, Portia can be much more than the passive object of quest. There is a new spontaneity in her language as she feels her way into trusting him with her thoughts:
There's something tells me, but it is not love,  
I would not lose you; and you know yourself  
Hate counsels not in such a quality.

(3.2.4-6)

By speaking of his company as something she does not want to lose, she first puts herself in the position of one who receives and asks for gifts; at the same time her language is generous. Perhaps by her own risk-taking, more than by any verbal hint, she reinforces his love of risk and encourages the frame of mind in which he chooses the casket demanding that he "give and hazard all he hath." Although she feels herself already his, she then speaks as active giver of herself. In light of all the economic imagery in this scene, it is interesting that her words to him here—"Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.166-67)—echo a medieval etymological pun often found in scholastic writings against usury: "A loan [mutuum] is so called from this, that mine [meum] becomes yours [tuum]". As in a purely financial partnership, however, she can ask for a share in the outcome of his ventures: "I am half yourself, / And I must freely have the half of anything / That this same paper brings you" (3.2.248-50). When what it brings is news of Antonio's losses, her decision to help comes not from an impersonal generosity but from a personal sense of relationship, through Bassanio, with Antonio, "the semblance of my soul" (3.4.20). Antonio's friendship with Bassanio has been basically one-sided, since generosity with money and life costs more than generosity with words; Portia tries to make their relationship more mutual as she both insists that Bassanio meet his obligations and enables him to do so.

In the trial scene, Venice continues to emphasize its own generosity in trying to deal with Shylock. Each of the male characters tries to play out his role to the extreme, and limitations suggested earlier become apparent; only Portia can act effectively. Shylock talks only about a side of human existence the Venetians would prefer to forget—impulses to destroy. "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?" (4.1.67). While earlier he could explain his anger as a response to Antonio's contempt, here he refuses to make his case in public terms—"I'll not answer that, / But say it is my humor" (4.1.42-43)—except to point out the dependence of the Venetian slaveholding system on the inviolability of private bonds analogous to his with Antonio. Antonio also refuses to argue his case in the court. Initially he presents his surrender as a kind of moral victory:

I do oppose  
My patience to his fury, and am armed  
To suffer with a quietness of spirit  
The very tyranny and rage of his...  

(4.1.10-13)

However, as the scene proceeds, some telling lines suggest that his sadness has its basis in his own anger turned inward, and they hint at the psychological basis for the peculiarly compelling quality in the confrontation between Shylock and Antonio:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,  
Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit  
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.

(4.1.114-16)

The startling self-disgust of these lines suggests the limits of Antonio's solution to the conflict between self-sacrifice and self-assertion.
Earlier Antonio’s language made him seem asexual; now he makes the image more concrete by calling himself a “wether”—castrated. Both “tainted” and the likelihood of rottenness in “the weakest kind of fruit” that “drops earliest to the ground” suggest disease and corruption. Whether he is criticizing himself for his asexuality and sense of powerlessness—tainted because he is a wether—or for the sexuality that makes him feel tainted and that he therefore tries to deny—a wether because he is tainted—he is clearly accusing himself of both disease and weakness. Oddly echoing his earlier attack on Shylock as “a goodly apple rotten at the heart” (1.3.97), Antonio here seems to be calling himself a failure by two different sets of standards, goodness as valued by Christianity and power as valued by individualism. Again his words call for a psychological interpretation, and psychoanalytic theory directly connects such self-criticism and depression with idealism and self-sacrifice. Freud explains self-criticism in melancholia by saying that “the more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego.”

Applying this concept to the suicidal melancholic, A. Alvarez describes his harsh internal ego-ideal as “an unappeased Doppelgänger, not to be placated, crying out to be heard.” Some of the power of the trial scene comes from the confrontation between Antonio and a character very much like this unappeased doppelgänger. The demands Shylock makes on Antonio coalesce with the demands Antonio makes on himself.

Both Antonio and Shylock appear to want the same outcome for the trial. Antonio's death would, apparently, be a victory for both of them according to their own opposite standards. The values they speak for are, of course, very much in conflict, and thus the conflict seems an impossible one to resolve. Where the play seems most clearly to be dramatizing the conflict between the opposing values of self-sacrifice and individualism, it dramatizes the conflict as a deadlock. Both the Duke and Bassanio attempt to mediate, but they are too openly hostile to Shylock and too similar to Antonio in their rhetoric and surface values.

Only Portia, using her outsider's perspective, can act effectively. She closes her "quality of mercy" speech with an admission such as none of the other characters has made that Shylock has a case in justice, and this prepares for her final ability to defeat him. Unlike the other characters, she can establish a common language with him; an outsider herself, she must be able to use language for more purposes than communion with friends or anger at other outsiders.

After words of self-sacrificing devotion from Antonio and Bassanio, it is Portia's disguised self-assertion that first hints that something may prevent Antonio and Shylock from acting out to the end their roles of giver and taker. Bassanio responds to Antonio's emotional farewell by declaring:

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life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.
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(4.1.282-85)

Portia draws back from the immediate situation and reminds us of the greater awareness and detachment her disguise gives her, like the awareness and detachment that come from recognizing that one is playing a game in which the rules can be manipulated. She says, "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (4.1.286-87). The realistic literalism of her words punctures the emotional and idealistic mood. Her skepticism about self-sacrifice puts her in momentary alliance with Shylock, who says, "These be the Christian husbands!" (4.1.293). She is too vital to let her husband get away with talking about sacrificing her—even at a farewell to his best friend—and at the same time resourceful enough to voice her complaint in a joke entirely in character for the objective doctor of laws she is playing. While Shylock, observing her insistence on the law and her outsider's irony here, may think he has met his ally, we can see that he has actually met his match. Her use of language here—detached, witty, literal to the point of being unfair—directly prepares for her use of language to save Antonio herself rather than being sacrificed for him.
"This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; / The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'" (4.1.304-5). Thus reading very literally the words that Shylock and Antonio agreed to as partners in the bond, she finds a way to force them out of their extreme positions—to compel Antonio to take and Shylock to give—for of course the court will seize on any means an apparently objective lawyer gives to defeat Shylock.

It is interesting to compare the trial scene with the somewhat similar deadlock that occurs in Richard II in the confrontation between Richard and Henry Bolingbroke, often seen as emblematic of the conflict between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Richard, like Antonio, presents himself as self-sacrificing, and even more explicitly compares himself to Christ. He says to Bolingbroke ironically, "They well deserve to have / That know the strong'st and surest way to get" (3.3.200-201). That play heads toward an outcome in which both win on their own terms, but the emphasis on conscience and sympathy is so great that whoever takes the throne appears to be in the wrong. In The Merchant of Venice, by contrast, Shakespeare avoids giving either Antonio or Shylock the victory on his own terms. Instead, the victory goes to Portia, and in spite of the cost to Shylock, it does not evoke the guilt of a purely egoistic victory of an isolated individual, since Portia wins it for Antonio's life as well as for the success of her marriage. Yet in the punishments she and Antonio can impose on Shylock for his intent because he is an outsider, we can see how pervasive the spirit of vengeance is in this play. No character is an ideal of perfect charity, although Antonio tries to be; the aggressive forces within and without are too strong. It has been suggested that Antonio is an ethical ideal because his attempt to sacrifice himself for his friend can be seen as an imitation of Christ. Yet by making him a melancholy and at times self-hating figure on the comic stage, Shakespeare deliberately exposes some of Antonio's limitations even to an audience uncritical of his anti-Semitism. Furthermore, it is not only her defeat of an adversary against which he is powerless that puts Antonio and Portia into direct contrast; Antonio makes the contrast both implicitly and explicitly. He presents his impending death as a defeat for Portia in a competition about who loves Bassanio most.

Commend me to your honorable wife.
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(4.1.271-75)

After he escapes death, furthermore, he continues to suggest that it is he, and not Portia, who loves Bassanio; he begs Bassanio to reward the lawyer with Portia's ring by saying, "Let his deservings, and my love withal, / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement" (4.1.448-49). Bassanio's choice to give away the ring he has promised Portia to keep until death—a choice made only after the lawyer has left and Antonio has made this request—prepares for the fifth act's further development of the contrast between Portia and Antonio.

"I pray you know me when we meet again" (4.1.417) is Portia's farewell to Bassanio in the trial scene, and the pun on "know," which relates sexuality to recognition, anticipates her emphasis on sexual identity in the return to Belmont and her implicit victory over Antonio. In the trial, the threat of aggression has been removed by projection onto a scapegoat; at Belmont, it can be dissolved in play—mock hostility that unites the married couples more closely. In the trial the characters presented a general show of liberality from which only Shylock was excluded; at Belmont, Portia and Nerissa will incorporate some of Shylock's self-assertion and demand for his rights into their relationships with their husbands. In the trial there has been a demonstration of agape, love that gives without asking for any return, in Antonio's willingness to die; in the fifth act the focus is on love as eros, which desires also to receive.

When the returning wives make their husbands account for giving away their rings, the strongly sexual tone of the threats and counter-accusations makes it clear that the argument is in some way working out—or rather
playing out—threats from sexuality at the same time that it is parodying threats from Shylock. Portia pretends possessiveness and promiscuity, parallels to the financial acquisitiveness and irresponsibility of earlier scenes. She assumes an inexorability like Shylock's, and Bassanio thinks she even makes a similar threat on his bodily integrity: he says, "Why, I were best to cut my left hand off / And swear I lost the ring defending it" (5.1.177-78).

But at the same time the threat is all controlled. Portia's quick conversational repartee with Bassanio has the formal parallelism of structure that one might find in a ritual or a rhetorical exercise. While acting angry at Bassanio, she is actually uniting the two of them more closely by emphasizing their sexual relationship. "Lie not a night from home" (5.1.230) is more an expression of desire than a warning.

Portia's play with Bassanio is echoed by Nerissa's with Gratiano: both of them include a number of jokes and equivocations about sexual identity.

   Nerissa The clerk will ne'er wear hair on's face that had it.
   Gratiano He will, an if he live to be a man.
   Nerissa Ay, if a woman live to be a man.

(5.1.158-60)

Nerissa is exuberating in her own disguised participation in the trial scene; her jokes and Portia's break down the general identification of the Christians against Shylock in the trial, where no sexual distinctions or relationships appeared. The wordplay on change of sex calls attention to sexual differentiation, a physical parallel to the mock-hostility and playful self-assertion of this scene.

The joking byplay creates an atmosphere in which Antonio feels uncomfortable. "I am th'unhappy subject of these quarrels" (5.1.238), he says, in a line that seems somewhat presumptuous at first. In a sense, however, they are quarreling about him. It was Antonio whose trial caused Bassanio's departure from Portia on their wedding day; it was Antonio who finally persuaded Bassanio to give the lawyer the ring. Even when Bassanio tries to conceal Antonio's intervention in his explanation to Portia, the motives he gives are words he used earlier in describing Antonio's virtues:

   I was beset with shame and courtesy.
   My honor would not let ingratitude
   So much besmear it.

(5.1.217-18)

These values of public generosity and individual reliability here confront the value of mutuality identified with Portia and marriage; we see Antonio's generous self-effacement causing his lack of participation in the vitality of both jokes and sexuality.35

In the final reconciliation between husband and wife, the threats of possessiveness and promiscuity are both dispelled, and the vision is one of a sexual relationship in which both partners can maintain their own identity. At the same time we are reassured that the idealism about self-sacrificing friendship that Antonio and Bassanio express and the reciprocal sexual relationship that Portia demands need not finally conflict with each other. Portia makes Antonio the intermediary when she returns her ring; afterwards she announces that his argosies are safe, and he pays tribute to her power, relinquishes his earlier depreciation of her, and acknowledges that he himself can receive as well as give. "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living!" (5.1.286).
Like Shylock's, Portia's role involves both power and powerlessness. Portia appears powerless at the beginning, and Shylock at the end, as reflections of a society in which women and Jews do not have equal rights; at other points in the play we see them possessing a power that is partly money, partly wit, and partly what Shakespeare's imagery makes of the magic that their society projects onto them. While the conclusion of the trial repeats the official power relationships between Christians and Jews, the working out of marriage relationships, by contrast, balances the official power in society. This reverses the situation in the other early comedy that ends with an emphatic ritual acknowledgment of marital power, *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Petruchio's roles as game-leader and patriarchal husband coalesce. But Portia's purpose in her final game is not, like Petruchio's, to get the spouse to play along; Bassanio, flexible and responsive, always follows the game-leader. It is, more accurately, to demonstrate to Antonio that she and Bassanio are in one game that excludes him—their marriage gives them a bond that takes precedence over other friendships—but that he can still play the role of friend to both of them. In trying to get Antonio with his ascetic idealism to accept the value of marriage, Portia and Shakespeare are acting analogously to those Renaissance humanists and puritans who were writing in praise of marriage, modifying traditional devaluations of women, and criticizing the application of the ideal of celibacy.

Earlier Gratiano and Salerio agreed that love was a constant and unstable pursuit of something new, and Gratiano added that like all other desires it leaves one "lean, rent, and beggared" (2.6.19), but the opposition between such passion and asceticism—between taking and giving—is transcended in the image of mutuality in love with which the play ends. Momentarily the three main characters fall into a tableau that could resemble the image of the Graces as deities of gifts, explained by Seneca in "De Beneficiis." In this image, important in Renaissance iconology and especially in the Neoplatonic philosophy of love of Marsilio Ficino, Seneca explains that the arrangement of the Graces "in a ring which returns upon itself shows "that a benefit passing in its course from hand to hand returns nevertheless to the giver" ("De Beneficiis," 3:13, 15). Yet we are free to think of the psychology of the characters as in tension with the image of harmony, just as the psychology of the trial scene is clearly opposed to the ritual significance of Shylock's baptism.

Michael Goldman has suggested that the great characters of both comedy and tragedy act out an attitude to the extreme, live out a wish of the audience beyond the bounds of ordinary life, and then find their self-definition questioned. The self-surrender of Antonio, the aggression of Shylock, and the responsiveness of Bassanio are all attitudes Shakespeare's audience had within themselves: alternative possible reactions to social change and personal loss. They are attitudes we all have within ourselves, and the play gives us a chance to dramatize our internal conflicts about them. It is the triumph of comic wish fulfillment that Portia can combine all three attitudes and finish the play bound in love and friendship with the representatives of the two attitudes the audience of Shakespeare's time honored most. Throughout, Portia is operating within limits—her father's will, her husband's departure, the laws of Venice, and the decision of the judge and Antonio. Yet she maneuvers superbly within those limits, and, unlike the other characters we have discussed, she is never humbled for going too far in any direction. In the final scene, she stops playing the role of the jealous and promiscuous wife at her own decision. Having already pronounced her submission to Bassanio with no prejudice to her autonomy in the trial scene or the ring game, she does not even make the gestures of self-subordination with which Rosalind and Beatrice end their plays.

Shakespeare's early poems and comedies, with their twins and their images of friendship, love, and marriage as double identity, show a fascination with the element of identification in love. Their structure and themes also suggest a concern for ideals of community. But he, like his society, was also fascinated by the separateness and the desire for self-assertion of the individual. Shakespeare's characters must face the fact that they are different, other, separate from those they love; they must recognize that the possibility of giving and receiving requires this separate identity, that love involves a risk that identification, whether possessive or generous, would deny. Like the threat of Shylock, whose trial postpones the consummation of marriages, otherness may seem an obstacle to love—and indeed, Shylock's conversion may be intended, among other things, as an exorcism of its threat. But the acceptance of Portia's self-assertion in *The Merchant of Venice* is
also a celebration of the ways that people manage to love one another with all their differences. In the words of a nun who taught me in grade school, "Marriages are always mixed." In the tragedies, such acceptance is harder for the heroes to achieve.

Notes


8 On the Sentences 4.33.1.3., quoted in John T. Noonan, Jr., Contraception (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 241-42. Another licit purpose of sexual intercourse was described as "paying the marriage debt"; the phrase suggests both other-centered motivation and the financial analogy. Noonan, Contraception, pp. 284-85.


11 For discussion of Bassanio too as outsider, see Kirby Farrell, Shakespeare's Creation (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), pp. 146-47, 152-55.


16 See Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion," pp. 328-36, 339; Nelson, *The Idea of Usury*, pp. 141-51. He is also aspiring to the Renaissance ideal of friendship, which involves elements from both classical and medieval traditions; see Laurens J. Mills, *One Soul in Bodies Twain* (Bloomington, Ind.: Principia Press, 1937). However, his relationship with Bassanio falls short of this ideal because of its inequality.


25 Posthumous constraints on marriage were common in Elizabethan aristocratic families, but with the increasing concern for compatibility the trend was to loosen them; see Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 1558-1641 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 597-99.


The conflict is a deadlock in an additional sense to that used by Harriett Hawkins in *Poetic Freedom and Poetic Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 71, of situations in which "opposed characters . . . each elicit both admiration and criticism." She discusses *Richard II*, to which I later compare *The Merchant of Venice*.

Antonio is self-controlled enough not to mock Shylock like Gratiano, and he does not take his share of the fine permanently, just on trust for Lorenzo during Shylock's lifetime. But however much the original audience preferred Lorenzo and Jessica to Shylock, honored Christianity, and condemned Judaism, they could see that the forced deed of gift and baptism punish Shylock, though ostensibly for his own good. Living in an age of religious persecution and of religious reform that stressed the individual conscience, many of them understood the difference between a free conversion and a forced one.


See Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings*, pp. 234-35.


Recently, Linda Bamber, in *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), p. 28, has also argued that in Shakespeare's comedies women can be other without really being outsider and alien. In general, I find Shakespeare's female characters more psychologically developed than she does; at this point I believe Portia's otherness as a woman has become identified with the unmergeable selfhood of the individual, male or female—what Stanley Cavell calls, from another perspective, "the sadness within comedy. . . . Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine and the other is yours"; see *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 339-40.

**Coppella Kahn (essay date 1985)**


*In the following essay, Kahn focuses on the ring plot and how it strengthens the main courtship plot of the play. Additionally, Kahn maintains that the ring plot demonstrates both the bonds between men which precede and interfere with marriage, and the male fear of being cuckolded, a fear which follows and threatens marriage.*
Shakespeare's romantic comedies center on courtship, a holiday of jokes, disguisings, songs, word play, and merriment of many kinds, which culminates in marriage, the everyday institution which both inspires holiday and sets the boundaries of it. Shakespeare doesn't portray the quotidian realities of marriage in these comedies, of course. He simply lets marriage symbolize the ideal accommodation of eros with society, and the continuation of both lineage and personal identity into posterity. Yet at the same time he never fails to undercut this ideal. In *The Merchant of Venice* he goes farther than in the other comedies to imply that marriage is a state in which men and women "atone together," as Hymen says in As You Like It. Rather than concluding with a wedding dance as he does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Much Ado About Nothing*, a wedding masque like that in As You Like It, or a combination of family reunion, recognition scene, and troth plighting as in Twelfth Night, he ends *Merchant* with a combat of wits between men and women, a nervous flurry of accusations and denials, bawdy innuendos and threats of castration, which make up the final episode of a subplot rather than rounding off the main plot by celebrating marriage. Commonly referred to as "the ring plot," this intrigue may seem trivial, but is actually entwined with the main courtship plot from the middle of the play, and accomplishes more than one darker purpose on which the romantic moonlight of Belmont does not fall.\(^1\)

To begin with, Shakespeare structures the ring plot so as to parallel and contrast Antonio and Portia as rivals for Bassanio's affection, bringing out a conflict between male friendship and marriage which runs throughout his works.\(^2\) As Janet Adelman points out in her penetrating essay on the early comedies, same sex friendships in Shakespeare (as in the typical life cycle) are chronologically and psychologically prior to marriage. "The complications posed by male identity and male friendship," she argues, rather than heavy fathers or irrational laws, provide the most dramatically and emotionally significant obstacles to marriage in The Comedy of Errors, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of a Shrew, and Love's Labor's Lost? In these plays, Shakespeare tends toward what Adelman calls "magical solutions," facile twists of plot and changes of character in which the heroes are enabled to pursue friendships with other men while also contracting relationships with women, even though these relationships jeopardize or conflict with their earlier ties with men. *Merchant*, I think, is perhaps the first play in which Shakespeare avoids this kind of magical solution and gives probing attention to the conflict between the two kinds of bonds, and to the psychological needs they satisfy.

Second, the ring plot comes to rest on the idea of cuckoldry, a theme as persistent in the comedies as that of male friendship. Bonds with men precede marriage and interfere with it; cuckoldry, men fear, follows marriage and threatens it. I wish to demonstrate the interdependence of these two motifs. First, though, it may be helpful to summarize the ring plot.

Articulated in three scenes, it begins at the very moment of Portia's and Bassanio's betrothal, after he has correctly chosen the lead casket. As Portia formally surrenders lordship over her mansion, her servants, and herself to Bassanio, she gives him a ring, enjoining him not to part with it. If he does, she cautions, he will bring their love to ruin and give her cause to reproach him. The next turn of the plot occurs during Shylock's trial. When there appears to be no recourse from the payment of the pound of flesh, Bassanio declares that though his wife be dear to him "as life itself," he would sacrifice her (and his own life) to save his friend. Portia in her lawyer's robes drily remarks, "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (4.1.28-85).\(^4\) Thus Shakespeare establishes a motive for the trick the wives play on their husbands: they want to teach them a lesson about the primacy of their marital obligations over obligations to their male friends. Next, the rings reappear at the end of the trial scene. When Bassanio offers the lawyer "some remembrance" for his services, the disguised Portia asks for the ring, and persists in asking for it even when Bassanio protests,

\begin{verbatim}
Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,  
And when she put it on, she made me vow  
That I should neither sell, nor give, nor lose it.
\end{verbatim}
At this point, it would seem that Bassanio has passed the test his wife devised: he knows how to value her ring. A moment later, though, at Antonio's urging he gives the ring away. Finally, reunited with their husbands, Portia and Nerissa demand the rings (which, of course, they still have) as proof of fidelity. Pretending to believe that Bassanio and Gratiano gave the tokens to Venetian mistresses, while the men try to defend themselves the women threaten retaliation in the form of cuckoldry. All the while, we as audience are in on the joke, titillated, but reminded by numerous double-entendres that the doctor and his clerk, whom Portia and Nerissa pretend to regard as fictions concocted by their guilty husbands, are in fact the two wives, who know better than anyone that their husbands are blameless.

Two complementary anxieties run through this intrigue: that men, if they are to marry, must renounce their friendships with each other—must even, perhaps, betray them; and that once they are married, their wives will betray them. Each anxiety constitutes a threat to the men's sense of themselves as men. In Shakespeare's psychology, men first seek to mirror themselves in a homoerotic attachment (the Antipholi in *The Comedy of Errors* offer the best example of this state) and then to confirm themselves through difference, in a bond with the opposite sex—the marital bond, which gives them exclusive possession of a woman. As I have argued elsewhere, the very exclusiveness of this possession puts Shakespeare's male characters at risk; their honor, on which their identities depend so deeply, is irrevocably lost if they suffer the peculiarly galling shame of being cuckolded. The double standard by which their infidelities are tolerated and women's are inexcusable conceals the liability of betrayal by women. In fact, the ring plot as a whole can be viewed as a kind of cadenza inspired by a bawdy story in a Tudor jestbook, the point of which is that the only way a jealous husband can be wholly assured of not being cuckolded is to keep his finger in his wife's "ring." The joke stresses both the intense fear of cuckoldry of which men are capable, and the folly of such fear.

Until the trial scene, it might seem that Shakespeare is preparing for a fairy-tale conclusion, in which both Antonio's and Portia's claims on Bassanio could be satisfied. Though they are paralleled and contrasted with each other (for example, both enter the play with a sigh expressing an inexplicable sadness, Antonio puzzling "In sooth I know not why I am so sad," and Portia declaring, "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world"), neither the friend nor the beloved behaves competitively at first. When Bassanio needs money to court Portia, Antonio's purse is his; when he needs it (as it seems at one point) to rescue Antonio, Portia's wealth is at his disposal. But when Antonio's ships fail to return and his bond with Shylock falls due, he sends a heartrending letter to Bassanio which arrives, significantly, just when he and Portia are pledging their love, and prevents them from consummating their marriage. Bassanio's two bonds of love, one with a man, the other with a woman, are thus brought into conflict. Portia immediately offers Bassanio her fortune to redeem his friend, but remarks, "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear" (3.2.312), calling attention to her generosity and his indebtedness. In contrast, Antonio's letter reads,

> Sweet Bassanio, . . . all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure,—if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.

(3.2.317-20)

As others have noted, the generosity of both rivals is actually an attempt "to sink hooks of gratitude and obligation deep into the beneficiary's bowels." At the trial, Bassanio's implicit conflict of obligations comes out in the open when, in language far more impassioned than that he used when he won Portia, he declares he would give her life for his friend's:
Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(4.1.278-83)

How neatly ironic that, in successfully urging Bassanio to give away Portia's ring, Antonio actually helps her
to carry out her plot against her erring husband: again, the two claims are irreconcilable, and the friend's gives
place to the wife's. "Let . . . my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement," pleads Antonio,
making the contest perfectly explicit (4.1.455-46). In the final scene, Shakespeare maintains the tension
between the friend's claim and the wife's until Antonio offers to pledge a pound of his flesh that his friend
"Will never more break faith"; only then does Portia drop her ruse, when Antonio offers to sacrifice himself
once again. Thus Shakespeare suggests that marriage will triumph over friendship between men.

Nevertheless, it takes a strong, shrewd woman like Portia to combat the continuing appeal of such ties
between men. At first, her power derives from her father; the wealth he bequeathed and the challenge he
devised make her a magnet, drawing nobles from all over Europe who hazard all to win her. Though in her
opening scene Portia sees herself as caught in the constraints of her father's will, Shakespeare soon makes it
clear that she has a will of her own. In her merrily stinging put-downs of the suitors, wit and verbal force
substitute for sexual force and prerogative—as they also do when she prompts Bassanio to choose the right
casket, when she manipulates the letter of the law, and when she uses the ring to get the upper hand over her
husband.

Portia's masculine disguise, however, also produces the suggestion that she is not just a clever woman, but
something of a man as well. For example, when Bassanio protests concerning the ring, "No woman had it, but
a civil doctor" (5.1.210), or when Portia jokes, "For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (5.1.259), it is as
though images of her as male and as female are superimposed. When Portia shares her plans for disguise with
Nerissa, she says their husbands "shall think we are accomplished with that we lack" (3.4.61-62), slyly
suggesting not a complete physical transformation from female to male, but the discrete addition of a phallus
to the womanly body. The line carries two implications, at least. One is that the phallus symbolizes not just
masculinity per se but the real power to act in the world which masculinity confers. The arguments she
presents as Dr. Bellario would have little force if she delivered them as Portia, a lady of Belmont. Another
implication is that Portia as androgyne is a fantasy figure who resolves the conflict between homoerotic and
heterosexual ties, like the "woman . . . first created" of sonnet 20, who is also "pricked out." As the concluding
episode of the ring plot proceeds, however, the double-entendres about Portia's double gender become mere
embellishments to the action, in which she uses her specifically female power as wife to establish her priority
over Antonio and her control over Bassanio.

The power is based on the threat of cuckoldry, the other strand of meaning woven into the ring plot. When
Portia gives the ring to her future husband, she says,

This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours,—my lord's!—I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(3.2.170-74)
Portia's gift limits the generosity of her love by a stringent condition. She gives all to her bridegroom; he in turn must keep her ring, or their love will turn to "ruin." This ominous note recalls another Shakespearean love token, the handkerchief Othello gives Desdemona. He calls it a "recognizance and pledge of love," but as he describes its history, it seems not so much the symbol of an existing love as a charm on which the continuation of that love magically depends. The handkerchief was first used to "subdue" Othello's father to his mother's love, and Othello hints that it should have the same effect on him when he warns, in lines reminiscent of Portia's, "To lose, or give't away were such perdition / As nothing else could match" (3.4.53-66). However, Portia's ring has less to do with magic than with rights and obligations. Unlike Othello, she is concerned more with "vantage," which the OED defines as gain or profit, than with some vaguer "ruin." She sees marriage as a contract of sexual fidelity equally binding on both parties, for their mutual "vantage."

On one level, the ring obviously represents the marriage bond, as it does in the wedding ceremony. But on another, it bears a specifically sexual meaning alluded to in the play's final lines, spoken by Gratiano: "Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.306-7). Rings, circles, and O's are frequently, in Shakespeare's works and elsewhere, metaphors for female sexual parts. In the last scene, speaking to Bassanio, Portia refers to the ring as "your wife's first gift" (5.2.166), that is, her virginity. In giving Bassanio her "ring," Portia gives him her virginity, and a husband's traditionally exclusive sexual rights to her. In Alls Well That Ends Well, Diana voices the same metaphorical equation when Bertram compares his masculine honor to the ring he wears: "Mine honor's such a ring," she replies; "My chastity's the jewel of our house" (4.2.45-46). When Bassanio accepts the ring from his bride, he vows to keep it on his finger or die. Again, the two meanings, proper and bawdy, come into play. He promises to be faithful to his wife, and also to keep her sexuality under his control—by keeping her "ring" on his "finger."

When Bassanio's passionate outburst in the trial scene reveals the intensity of his friendship with Antonio, Portia feels threatened, and later retaliates with the only weapon at a wife's command: the threat of infidelity. In a turnabout of the conventional metaphor for female chastity, she declares that her supposed rival "hath got the jewel that I love"—the ring, representing her husband's sexual favors and his fidelity. She continues with an even more unorthodox assertion of sexual equality:

I will become as liberal as you,
I'll not deny him anything I have,
No, not my body, nor my husband's bed:
Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.

(5.1.226-29)

Refusing to honor the double standard on which the whole idea of cuckoldry depends, and refusing to overlook her husband's supposed sexual fault, she threatens to seize a comparable sexual freedom for herself. One facet of Shakespeare's genius is his perception that men don't see women as they are, but project onto them certain needs and fears instilled by our culture. He and a few other writers stand apart in being critically aware that these distorted but deeply felt conceptions of women can be distinguished from women themselves—their behavior, their feelings, their desires. From Portia's point of view, women aren't inherently fickle, as misogyny holds them to be; rather, they practice betrayal defensively, in retaliation for comparable injuries.

The ring plot culminates in fictions: though Bassanio did give Portia's ring away, in fact he wasn't unfaithful to her as she claims he was, and though she threatens revenge she clearly never intends to carry it out. This transparent fictitiousness makes the intrigue like a fantasy—a story we make up to play out urges on which we fear to act. In terms of fantasy, Bassanio does betray Portia, both by sleeping with another woman and by loving Antonio. Portia, in turn, does get back at him, by cuckoldling him. At the level of fantasy, Shakespeare seems to imply that male friendship continues to compete with marriage even after the nuptial knot is tied, and
that men's fears of cuckoldry may be rooted in an awareness that they deserve to be punished for failing to honor marriage vows in the spirit as well as in the letter.

René Girard has argued that the binary oppositions on which the play seems to be built—Christian versus Jew, realism versus romance, the spirit versus the letter, and so on, collapse into symmetry and reciprocity. Girard holds that, though "The Venetians appear different from Shylock, up to a point,"

They do not live by the law of charity, but this law is enough of a presence in their language to drive the law of revenge underground, to make this revenge almost invisible. As a result, this revenge becomes more subtle, skillful, and feline than the revenge of Shylock.

By trivializing serious issues into jokes which rest on playful fictions, the ring plot serves to disguise the extent to which the Venetians do resemble Shylock. But it also articulates serious issues; in it as in the main plot, ironic similarities between Jew and Christian abound. Portia's gift to Bassanio seems innocent, like Shylock's "merry bond," but it too is used to catch a Venetian on the hip and feed a grudge. Her vow of revenge through cuckoldry parallels Shylock's in his "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech: both justify revenge on the grounds that what their adversaries denounce they actually practice. Just as in the trial Portia pleads for the spirit of mercy but actually takes revenge against Shylock through the letter of the law, so her original professions of boundless love are undercut by her later desire to even the sexual score. As Shylock says, "These be the Christian husbands!" (4.1.291). He was once a husband, too, and pledged his love to Leah with a ring—a pledge dishonored (so far as we know) only by his daughter when she turned Christian.

Finally, though, the ring plot emphasizes sexual differences more than it undercuts social and moral ones. It portrays a tug of war in which women and men compete—for the affections of men. Bassanio's final lines recapitulate the progression from homoerotic bonds to the marital bond ironically affirmed through cuckoldry which the action of the ring plot implies:

Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow,—
When I am absent then lie with my wife.

(5.1.284-85)

Similarly, the very last lines in the play, spoken by Gratiano, voice the homoerotic wish, succeeded by the heterosexual anxiety:

But were the day come, I should wish it dark,
Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.

Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing,
So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

(5.1.304-7)

Notes

dominance, see Anne Parten, "Re-establishing the Sexual Order: The Ring Episode in *The Merchant of Venice*" *Womens Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1982), Special Issue on Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare II, ed. Gayle Greene and Carolyn Swift: 145-56. While I share her view that cuckoldry is "a particularly disturbing specter which is bound up with the idea of female ascendancy" (pp. 149-50), we disagree about how the ring plot represents this specter. She holds that, by making explicit the male anxieties which cuckoldry inspires and then exposing them as "only a game" (p. 150), it dispels those anxieties; I believe that by voicing them loudly in the final scene, in lieu of conventional conclusions which celebrate marriage, the ring plot seriously undermines any comic affirmation of marriage. For a reading of the final scene as Portia's way of getting back at Antonio, see Leslie Fiedler, "The Jew As Stranger," in *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), esp. pp. 134-36.

2 Others have commented on the triangulated rivalry which the ring plot brings out. In her introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1974), Anne Barton notes that the ring plot is "a test which forces Bassanio to weigh his obligations to his wife against those to his friend and to recognize the latent antagonism between them" (p. 253). Leonard Tennenhouse, in "The Counterfeit Order of *The Merchant of Venice*" in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray Schwartz and Coppélla Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), observes that "This test of Bassanio's fidelity to Portia becomes, at Antonio's insistence, a test of Bassanio's love for Antonio" (p. 62). Lawrence W. Hyman, "The Rival Loves in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21 no. 2 (Spring 1970): 109-16, sees the main action of the play as a struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio, and interprets Antonio's bond with Shylock as a metaphor for the bond of love between him and Bassanio. See also Robert W. Hapgood, "Portia and *The Merchant of Venice*: The Gentle Bond," *MLQ* 28, no. 1 (March 1967): 19-32; on the ring plot, pp. 26-29.


5 Peter Erickson deals extensively with the psychology of homoerotic bonds in Shakespeare in his book *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*, forthcoming from the University of California Press. See also Shirley Nelson Garner's interesting treatment of this theme in "A Midsummer Night's Dream: 'Jack shall have Jill; / Nought shall go ill,'" *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1981), Special Issue on Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare I, ed. Gayle Greene and Carolyn Lenz: 47-64.


7 The story can be found in *Tales and Quick Answers* (1530), reprinted in *Shakespeare's Jestbook* (Chiswick: C. Wittingham, 1814), p. 14.

8 There is a hint, however, that Antonio's sadness is caused by the prospect of Bassanio's marriage. When noting Antonio's mood, Gratiano comments that he is "marvellously chang'd" (1.1.76), and a few lines later we learn that Bassanio had earlier promised to tell him about a vow to make "a secret pilgrimage" to a certain lady (1.1.119-20).

9 The phrase is Harry Berger's in "Marriage and Mercifixon in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Casket Scene Revisited," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 161, and describes what he regards as Portia's attempt to control Bassanio by giving him the ring. Regarding the secret agenda behind Antonio's generosity, see Robert Hapgood, cited in n. 2: "Antonio is at once too generous and too possessive. . . . He wants
Bassanio to see him die for his sake” (p. 261).


Michael Shapiro (essay date 1996)


[In the following essay, Shapiro explores the varying purposes and effects of the three instances of cross gender disguise (Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica) in The Merchant of Venice.]

Although Shakespeare gave three different types of male identity to the three heroines in his second play to use the motif of a boy heroine in male disguise, none of them became the Lylian page of Two Gentlemen. Multiplying the cross-dressed heroine in a single work called attention to its artificiality as a literary convention and a theatrical construction and probably made spectators more aware of something they "always knew": the female characters they accepted as mimetic illusions in the world of the play were constructed by male performers in the world of the playhouse. In Shakespeare's time, when audiences knew full well that all performers were male, even a single heroine in male disguise like Julia could function as a sign of self-referentiality. Some playwrights, such as Sharpham and Fletcher, followed Shakespeare's lead and amplified that sign by multiplying female pages. Others, such as Middleton and Dekker in The Roaring Girl, contrasted a conventional female page with a more original kind of cross-dressed heroine, while still other dramatists, such as Haughton and Shirley, included both a boy bride and a female page. These repetitions and contrasts announced that cross-gender disguise was more of a dramaturgical contrivance than a mimetic representation of cross-dressing practices in the world outside the playhouse. But such variations not only encouraged parodic effects but also permitted the use of different kinds of male disguise as a way of contrasting different kinds of heroines.

Early Duplication of Cross-Gender Disguise: Lyly's Gallathea

One of the first English plays to duplicate cross-gender disguise was Lyly's Gallathea (1583-85), performed by the Children of Paul's at court and probably in their own private playhouse. The idea for duplication was evidently Lyly's, for in his source (the tale of Iphis and Ianthe in book IX of Ovid's Metamorphoses), only one girl is raised as a boy, and she is transformed into a male in order to marry the other. Lyly has both girls, Phillida and Gallathea, disguised as boys and then makes them fall in love with each other but leaves open the question of which one Venus will change into a boy.

This uncertainty preserves the symmetrical balance between the two heroines, symmetry being as central a feature of Lyly's dramaturgy as euphuism is of his prose style. In parallel scenes, Lyly shows that each girl has been disguised as a boy by her father so that she will not be taken as "the fairest and chastest virgine in all the Countrey” (I.i.42-43), who must be sacrificed to Neptune. At the beginning of act II, Lyly brings the two disguised heroines together. From this point, they are always onstage at the same time and usually speak and act as mirror images of one another. Each girl has fallen in love with the boy that the other pretends to be and
so feels trapped within her own cross-gender disguise. In their second meeting, each one hints at her true
gender, and they do so with such success that they suspect each other of being a girl in male disguise:

Phil. Suppose I were a virgine (I blush in supposing my selfe one) and that under the habite of
a boy were the person of a mayde, if I should utter my affection with sighes, manifest my
sweete love by my salte teares, and prove my loyaltie unspotted, and my griefes intollerable,
would not then that faire face pittie thys true hart?

Galla. Admit that I were as you woulde have mee suppose that you are, and that I should with
intreaties, prayers, othes, bribes, and what ever can be invented in love, desire your favour,
would you not yeeld?

Phil. Tush, you come in with "admit."
Galla. And you with "suppose."
Phil. (Aside.) What doubtfull speeches be these?
I feare me he is as I am, a mayden.
Galla. (Aside.) What dread riseth in my minde!
I feare the boy to be as I am a mayden.

(III.ii.17-31)

Continuing in the same parallel fashion, Lyly makes each girl try to deny the growing suspicion that the other
is also a girl. Their confessions that they both prefer "a fonde boy" (1. 55) to any of Diana's nymphs throw the
relationship into a quandary, as Phillida acknowledges in the last speech of the scene: "Come let us into the
Grove, and make much one of another, that cannot tel what to think one of another" (11. 58-59).

In their next scene, they seem to have vanquished these fears and have returned to the starting point of their
relationship, each believing that the other is male. Once again they speak in parallel:

Phil I marvell what virgine the people will present, it is happy you are none, for then it would
have faine to your lot because you are so fair.

Galla. If you had beene a Maiden too I neede not to have feared, because you are fairer.

(IV.iv.1-5)

Their exaggerated relief suggests a strained effort to deny what they fear. Within a few lines, Phillida tells
Gallathea that "I love thee as a brother, but love not me so," and Gallathea readily declares that "I cannot love
as a brother" (IV. iv.12-14). Phillida then proposes for the sake of "showe" that one of them pretend to be a
woman, as Rosalind will offer to do to cure Orlando of his lovesickness in As You Like It:

Seeing we are both boyes, and both lovers, that our affection may have some showe, and
seeme as it were love, let me call thee Mistris.

(IV.iv.15-17)

This asymmetry is of short duration and balance is quickly restored when both admit fear of attending the
sacrificial rite.

Lyly is sometimes compared unfavorably to Shakespeare for preferring to manipulate his characters into
intricate patterns instead of exploring their psychological states. For G. K. Hunter, who emphasizes the debate
structure underlying Lyly's plays, their artistry lies in the juxta-position of contrasting attitudes toward a central issue:

Where all the characters are arranged to imitate one another, and where the focus of interest is on the repetition and modification and rearrangement of a basic pattern of persons, we do not ask how the persons will develop individually, but how the situation can be further manipulated.¹

In Gallathea, where the central debate topic is the relative superiority of love or chastity, several strands of plot serve, in Anne Lancashire's words, "to balance against one another different modes of loving."² The chaste and miraculously fulfilled love of the two disguised heroines is contrasted with two other plots: (1) Cupid inflames Diana's nymphs with lust for the two girls disguised as boys before he is punished by the Goddess of chastity and returned to his rightful place under the dominion of his mother, Venus; and (2) Rafe and his brothers outwit a series of pedantic dolts, but in displaying the cynical and bawdy wit typical of Lyly's pages, they also lightly suggest the impossibility of chastity as an ideal for human beings.

The complex interlacing of these plot lines is accompanied by an equally complex use of theatrical reflexivity. In choosing to double the heroine in male disguise, and also to make Cupid disguise himself as a nymph, Lyly highlights the presence of boy actors in female roles and so stresses the artificiality of his design. But at the same time, the multiple gender identities of male actors and female characters, and of male disguises in the cases of Phillida and Gallathea, create additional confusions of gender. The competing claims of love and chastity may also be perceived in terms of the tensions between homosexual desire and intense but Platonic friendship. These ambiguities of gender identity created by cross-gender casting and cross-gender disguising add poignancy to what Ellen Caldwell defines as the overriding question of the play: is there a kind of love that does not violate chastity, one that allows union with another without loss of self?³

From this viewpoint, there need be no contradiction between the ingenuity of Lyly's design and the urgency of the problem he is exploring. By act V, where both heroines are revealed by their fathers to be girls, sexual relationships in the play have become so tangled that they can only be resolved by the intervention of divine power, as in Ovid. Diana and Neptune propose to resolve the problem by ending what seems to them an unnatural relationship. But Lyly makes Venus, her supremacy over Cupid reestablished, approve Phillida's and Gallathea's relationship as an example of Love and Faith triumphing over Nature and Fortune. When they swear to her that their "loves [are] unspotted, begunne with trueth, continued wyth constancie, and not to bee altered tyll death," she overrules Diana and Neptune and promises to "turne one of them to be a man" (V.iii. 133-40). She does not specify which one.⁴ In the world of the playhouse, where both characters have always been boys, the indeterminacy of the ending echoes the love between Gallathea and Phillida before Venus's intervention transformed it into a conventionally heterosexual relationship.

Lyly's playful and sophisticated duplication of cross-gender disguise is rare for the mid-1580s and does not recur in his later works. Nor does such duplication occur in the 1590s in the first plays of adult troupes to use the heroine in male disguise, Greene's James the Fourth and Shakespeare's The Two Gentlemen of Verona. Duplication in The Merchant of Venice

In writing his second play with a heroine in cross-gender disguise, Shakespeare discovered the technique of varying the motif through repetition. Shakespeare had already discovered the efficacy of replication in writing The Comedy of Errors (Strange's, 1591?), where he doubled Plautus's single set of twins in order to multiply opportunities for confusion. There, because such doubling is so obviously mechanical, it helps to create an atmosphere appropriate for farce, a genre requiring a world apparently governed by equally mechanical principles that nevertheless baffle characters caught up in them precisely because they are so arbitrary and rigid.⁵ In adding a second and a third woman in cross-gender disguise to The Merchant of Venice (Chamberlain's, 1596-98),⁶ Shakespeare transcended the simple duplications of farce, but used repetitions to
achieve more sophisticated kinds of cross-referencing.

Nerissa's disguise is part of a simultaneous shadowing or echoing of Portia's cross-gender disguise. Jessica's disguise is part of a sequential arrangement, offering an abbreviated and ironic preview, or what Joan Hartwig calls a "proleptic parody," of what is to come. Jessica's disguise as a torchbearer or page also contrasts with Portia's disguise as a much more powerful male, a highly educated and assertive doctor of the law. These parallels and contrasts not only underscore the conventionality of the literary motif but also evoke awareness of the three play-boys and appreciation of their theatrical skills.

These additional cross-gender disguises do not occur in the narrative sources. Shakespeare added Nerissa's cross-gender disguise to the pound of flesh plot, novella 3.1 of Ser Giovanni's Il Pecorone (1378), perhaps taking a hint from Anthony Munday's Zelauto (1580), where both maid-servant and mistress don male disguise. Whatever its genesis, Nerissa's presence in the courtroom as clerk to Portia's "young doctor of Rome" (IV.i.153) results in the presence onstage of a second female character in male disguise. Using Nerissa's disguise as an echoing or shadow effect calls attention to the conventionality of a familiar motif, especially when the spectators have already seen another heroine—Jessica—appear in male disguise.

Jessica's disguising is also "Shakespeare's addition," as Kenneth Muir puts it, to the elopement of the usurer's daughter, in number 14 of Masuccio Salernitano's Novellino (1476) or in Munday's Zelauto. Jessica's escape in "the lovely garnish of a boy" (II.vi.45) is a particularly gratuitous addition, for the plot supplies the slenderest of reasons for Jessica to disguise herself—to attend Bassanio's feast undetected by Shylock. But in fact her plans for the disguise are laid even before Shylock receives the invitation to dinner. Earlier, Lorenzo tells friends he was "provided of a torch-bearer" (II.iv.23) and spoke to Gratiano of a "page's suit she hath in readiness" (II.iv.32). When we next see Jessica, in III.ii in Belmont, she seems to have resumed female attire and no subsequent mention is ever made of her having worn a page's suit when she eloped from Shylock's house. Extraneous with respect to plot, Jessica's brief appearance in male attire invites directors to make a theatrical and thematic point. The romantic quality of the cross-gender disguise was underscored by the lavish visual spectacle added to the scene in the nineteenth century, while modern productions use it to establish Jessica's vulnerability.

Jessica's adoption of male disguise underscores the precariousness of her situation but does not, like Julia's or Alathe's, allow her the compensating wit of a saucy lackey. That precariousness is suggested even before Lorenzo arrives, when Gratiano and Salerio, commenting on his tardiness, suggest that their friend's "obliged faith" lacks the passion of "love's bonds new made" (II.vi.6-7). Her short exchange with Lorenzo questions the reliability of men's love for women like herself and Portia, who are "richly left." In response to Lorenzo's call, "Ho! who's within?" (II.vi.25), Jessica—located "above"—asks that he identify himself with "more certainty, / Albeit I'll swear that I do know your tongue" (11. 26-27), evidently finding his voice alone, or perhaps his words, not sufficient basis for trust. Lorenzo answers by name and styles himself "thy love," but Jessica wonders "whether I am yours?" (11. 29, 31). His reply, "Heaven and thy thoughts are witness that thou art" (1. 32; emphasis added), has a slightly evasive tone, while her action, "Here, catch this casket, it is worth the pains" (1. 33), may indicate a desire to secure Lorenzo's love by means of a self-granted dowry, an impulse repeated a few lines later in her offer to "gild myself / With some moe [sic] ducats" (11. 49-50).

The scene also raises other questions about Lorenzo's commitment to Jessica. While she descends, Lorenzo expresses his love for her to Gratiano in "a figure of words" artificial enough to cast doubt on the sincerity or depth of his feelings. Whether or not Lorenzo's "On, [gentleman,] away!" includes his torchbearer, perhaps as affectionate teasing, more urgent attention is directed toward his male friends and their rendezvous with Bassanio: "But come at once, / . . . we are stay'd for at Bassanio's feast . . . / Our masquing mates by this time for us stay" (11. 46-48, 59). Unlike Bassanio's constancy, Lorenzo's is never tested, although it is challenged, bitterly or in jest, in the mythological "out-nightings" that begin act V.
Finally, although Jessica comments on the impropriety and possible shame of wearing male attire, she is willing to join other lovers in committing such "pretty follies" (1.37), risking her reputation for the sake of her beloved. Wearing male attire although not yet actually in her male identity, Jessica hesitates—either banteringly or thoughtfully—at the idea:

\[
\text{Jes. What, must I hold a candle to my shames?}
\text{They in themselves, good sooth, are too too light.}
\text{Why, 'tis an office of discovery, love,}
\text{And I should be obscur'd.}
\text{Lor. So are you, sweet,}
\text{Even in the lovely garnish of a boy.}
\]

(L1. 41-45)

Lorenzo's last words are rich in significance, for "garnish," according to the OED, can mean "outfit [or] dress," as well as "embellishment or decoration in general," although he later uses the word to disparage Launcelot's new livery or "army of good words" (III. v.65-70). In reassuring Jessica that her disguise is impenetrable enough to prevent her being shamed by discovery, Lorenzo seems also to be saying that in his eyes it embelishes her natural loveliness. In Shakespeare's day, the entire passage might also have reminded the audience that Jessica's appearance in male disguise was indistinguishable from the play-boy's resumption of his own identity. Unlike the speaker in Donne's elegy, "On His Mistres," who prefers his beloved to "Be my true Mistris still, not my faign'd Page," Lorenzo's delight in finding Jessica's female identity "obscur'd" may also have suggested to some spectators a stronger sexual interest in the play-boy than in the female character.

Jessica's vulnerability as a powerless female page highlights the more assertive version of male identity of "worthy doctor" (V.i.222) that Shakespeare and his sources assigned to Portia. Whereas most other disguised heroines serve men as youthful companions, Portia invents a role that will give her authority over the men in the play. To quote Catherine Belsey, in the guise of a "civil doctor" (V.i.210) "Portia fights Bassanio's legal battles from him—and wins." Portia is also the only one of Shakespeare's heroines to adopt and relinquish male disguise "not under pressure of events from outside . . . but by her own choice of time and circumstance." From the moment Portia broaches the idea of male disguise in III.iv, she reveals an energy, vitality, and playfulness that will enable her to control all relationships in the play. Whereas her counterpart in Il Pecorone dominates by inviting her suitors to bed and then drugging them, Portia manipulates events by the audacity and wit she displays while in male disguise, both in her legal battle with Shylock and in the ring episode that follows.

Portia in Belmont

Portia's first words in the play seem to echo Antonio's melancholic opening of the previous scene: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a-weary of this great world" (I.ii.1-2). The scene goes on to explain the source of this weariness—Portia's husband will be selected by a lottery devised by her late father, who was, as Nerissa reminds her, "ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations" (Lii.27-28). Her only release is purely verbal—a satiric cataloging of her wooers according to national stereotypes—and is as conventional as Lucetta's catalog of Julia's suitors in I.ii of The Two Gentlemen of Verona. It permits Portia to exercise her wit upon her suitors, one of whom will win her hand in accordance with her father's dictates. The mood is abruptly changed by Nerissa's innocent or teasing inquiry as to whether or not she remembers a visitor "in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier?" (I.ii.1 12-13). Portia's reply—"Yes, yes, it was Bassanio—as I think, so was he call'd" (11. 115-16)—contains a rush of enthusiasm followed by some sort of second thought, perhaps an attempt to appear nonchalant, even though neither the folio nor the first two quartos include the midline dash. She is reminded of her father's scheme by the servant's announcement of the
departure of "four strangers" and the arrival of "a fift [sic], the Prince of Morocco" (11. 123, 125).

Unless stage business to the contrary is added, the casket scenes themselves stress Portia's helplessness. Submissive to the will of her dead father, she has even less control over these events than does her counterpart in the tale in *Gesta Romanorum*, who is herself forced by the emperor to choose the vessel that will prove her a suitable bride for his son. As she tells Morocco, she is barred from the "right of voluntary choosing" and "hedg'd . . . by his [her father's] wit" (II.i.16, 18). Relieved when Morocco and Aragon make wrong choices, she is hopeful at the news of Bassanio's arrival but reveals considerable anxiety at their first meeting:

One half of me is yours, the other half yours—
Mine own, I would say.

(III.ii.16-17)

She makes an adroit recovery, for the slip is not coyness but indicates her fear that she might either lose Bassanio forever or succumb to the temptation to violate her father's will. Unable to persuade Bassanio to delay his choice, she identifies herself with "the virgin tribute paid by howling Troy / To the sea-monster," and adds a declaration of complete passivity: "I stand for sacrifice" (III.ii.56-57). Nevertheless, although some critics and directors think she steers Bassanio toward the leaden casket, her conduct during the casket scenes, according to the text, is ritualistically correct.16

After Bassanio's choice, many critics sense an emergence of self-assertiveness in Portia, and some find it enhanced by the planning and donning of disguise. Richard Wheeler notes a hint of Portia's power where others see only submissiveness: "when her likeness emerges from the lead casket, Portia, like the jinni emerging from the wonderful lamp, puts herself in the absolute service of 'her lord, her governor, her king'" (III.ii.165).17 Lynda Boose describes Portia's speech as a "showpiece demonstration of . . . deferential rhetoric" and notes how this "unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd" (1. 159), exploits advantages of birth and wealth to usurp male prerogatives:

[She] deftly proceeds to appropriate the husband's role and the husband's ring vow as she endows Bassanio with all her worldly goods inside a contract to which she appends conditions for converting the vows of wifely obedience into a wife's "vantage" and a husband's ingratiated debt.18

Shakespeare makes Portia flex her power more explicitly when she hears of Antonio's plight, for as several critics have pointed out, she recognizes Antonio as her rival for Bassanio. Whereas Ansaldo (Antonio) of *Il Pecorone* is the childless godfather of Giannetto (Bassanio), who has often asked the young man's real father to send him his godson, Shakespeare makes him a friend of unspecified age.19 The text is open enough to allow one to explain Antonio's love melancholy as stemming from one of several forms of male love: the jealousy of a homosexual lover, the frustration of an unacknowledged homoerotic attraction, or the possessiveness of a clinging friend.

At the very outset of the play, moreover, as Ruth Nevo has observed, marriage to Portia is presented as the way for Bassanio to clear himself of indebtedness to Antonio.20 Up until Antonio's reversals, he has given Bassanio generously of his wealth and recklessly of his credit, but his inability to pay Shylock, as he makes clear in the letter he sends to Bassanio, forces him to make explicit demands on his friend's love. His farewell speech in the courtroom scene is a challenge to Portia, for in sacrificing his life for Bassanio he levies an unpayable claim on Bassanio, a gift that his living wife can neither match nor repay. Only by saving Antonio's life can she prevent that drain on her husband's emotional capital. To do so, she must encounter her adversary not as his female rival but as his male deliverer.
Her first move, however, is to consolidate her position as Bassanio's wife before he returns to Venice, even if consummation must be deferred until later, as it is not in Il Pecorone:

*First* go with me to church and call me wife,
And *then* away to Venice to your friend.

(III.ii.303-4; emphasis added)

Boose points out that Portia's entire speech, beginning with "What, no more?" (1. 298), exhibits a sudden shift in Portia's rhetorical style: "In the space of sixteen lines she uses thirteen imperative verbs and four times subjugates male options to the control of her authoritative 'shall.'"21

In her next scene, Portia informs Nerissa that they will see their husbands "in such a habit / That they shall think we are accomplished / With what we lack" (III.iv.60-62), a clear reminder to Elizabethan spectators that the boy actors onstage were already so equipped. Unlike Jessica's shameful but necessary disguise as Lorenzo's torchbearer, this second scheme of male disguise is first envisaged as the occasion to parody outrageous excesses of swaggering masculinity:

I'll hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered like young men,
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man and boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a manly stride; and speak of ïrays
Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,
How honorable ladies sought my love,
Which I denying, they fell sick and died.
I could not do withal. Then I'll repent,
And wish, for all that, that I had not kill'd them;
And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,
That men shall swear I have discontinued school
Above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks,
Which I will practice.

(III.iv.62-78)

We never see these "raw tricks," for once Portia enters the courtroom disguised as Balthazar, she conducts herself with the gravity befitting a precocious legal scholar. The speech is a release of frustration, an eruption of high spirits. From now on, Portia's wit is no longer her recompense for helplessness before men but an instrument for taking over the male domain of the law. Her ridicule of men for their competitive rivalries, as well as for exaggerating their sexual prowess, indicates the superior sophistication that will bring her victory over Shylock in the legal arena and over Antonio in the battle for her husband's deepest loyalty.

But the speech has important theatrical effects. Whether given by a boy or a woman, it invites broadly parodic vocal and bodily mannerisms, certainly at "I could not do withal," perhaps in the style of the cheeky Lylian page. Portia answers Nerissa's question, "Why, shall we turn to men?" by pointing up the sexual innuendo in "turn," a subtler joke than Julia's and Lucetta's remarks about breeches, farthingales, and codpieces. On the Elizabethan stage, the phrase had rich reflexive possibilities, for the boy actors had not yet themselves become men or had only recently done so, and so might be understood to be asking about their future as female
impersonators or to be wondering, perhaps with mock horror or mock innocence, whether they should turn sexually to (toward) men. Such ironies could have transformed Portia's mimicry of swaggering virility into self-parody by a young male performer, reflexively alluding to his presence even before Portia's appearance in male disguise.22

Portia Doctor Balthazar

Such reflexivity gives Portia considerable power when she actually enters the courtroom, not as the theatricalized cheeky page, but as the sober legal prodigy. As Keith Geary puts it, the boy actor discarded the mannerisms of Portia, along with female costume, donned a lawyer's gown, and simply played Balthazar, a young doctor of laws.23 For most of the trial scene, to look only at the text, Shakespeare does to submerge Portia in the fused male identities of Balthazar and the young male performer. In this regard, Portia differs from Julia and Rosalind, who have numerous asides both as themselves and as their male alter egos, as well as from Viola and Imogen, who address the audience as themselves in soliloquies while in male garb. In her own person and as Balthazar, Portia has no soliloquies nor obvious asides, nor are there any unconscious reversions to female identity, "no funny, foolish slips when she plays the man; ... no charming lapses into girlhood," as Chris Hassel puts it.24 If Portia was physically absent on Shakespeare's stage during the courtroom scenes, the female character was nonetheless present in the minds of the spectators, just as they remained conscious (at some level) of the play-boy while Portia's female persona monopolized the stage.

Although the trial scene contains many nonverbal opportunities for the performer to oscillate between female character and male persona, Portia's absent presence is explicitly invoked only once, in a digression from the legal proceedings, a two-line remark on the willingness of husbands to sacrifice their wives. No such remark occurs in Il Pecorone, but Shakespeare seems to have added it not only to sharpen the rivalry between Portia and Antonio, but also to counterbalance the heavy emphasis on the male performer and male disguised persona by granting the female character a moment of rapport with the audience.

This crucial section begins with Antonio's farewell to Bassanio, which contains an explicit challenge to Portia:

Commend me to your honorable wife,
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(IV.i.273-77)

Bassanio's reply is an equally passionate elevation of male love over any other value, especially marriage:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(11. 282-87)

Bassanio's rhetoric includes Portia, not by her name but merely by the generic title of "wife."
Portia's response, if spoken as an aside, may have authorized the male performer to revert briefly to the mannerisms of the female character, but whether he did so or continued to play the doctor of law, the lines bring Portia's presence to the audience's mind:

Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer.

(IV.i.288-89)

The lines, which chastise Bassanio for offering to sacrifice his wife in order to free Antonio, can be spoken by Balthazar directly and perhaps only to Bassanio, but they might also be spoken aside to Nerissa, or to the audience. With or without a performer's explicit return to Portia, the lines point up Portia's presence. On the early modern stage, reminders of the female layer of identity probably underscored the virtuosity of the male performer in negotiating such rapid shifts and may thus have added depth or resonance to the character as well.

Bassanio's sacrificial offer is echoed in Gratiano's wish that his wife were in heaven to "entreat some power to change this currish Jew" (IV.i.292), just as Portia's (or Balthazar's) is echoed by Nerissa (or the clerk), who may address Gratiano directly, or offer an aside to Portia, or to the audience:

'Tis well you offer it behind her back,
The wish would make else an unquiet house.

(11. 293-94)

The whole discussion is rounded off by Shylock's contemptuous reflection, "These be the Christian husbands!" and sealed shut by his demand that the court no longer "trifle time [but] . . . pursue sentence" (11. 295-98).

This thirty-line segment, embedded in the trial scene, is the only scripted opportunity for Portia to remind the audience of her female identity. Elsewhere in the trial scene, Portia might find other occasions to exchange knowing glances with Nerissa, to mime a hurried consultation with her clerk, to allow her disguise to slip, or in other ways to play upon the audience's awareness of her layered gender identity. For example, she can react nonverbally to Bassanio's eagerness to pay double and then ten times the sum Antonio owes, offering money Portia gave him before he left Belmont. While Giannetto in *Il Pecorone* made only one offer to reimburse Shylock, Bassanio twice more offers to pay off the loan. Each time Bassanio does so, Balthazar insists that Shylock has chosen justice. From a thematic point of view, Portia's legal tactics are part of a theological debate with Shylock over the claims of mercy and justice, in which she will maneuver him into a trap created by strict interpretation of an obscure statute. But the immediate effect of rejecting Bassanio's several offers to repay the loan is to bring her into direct confrontation with her husband over the use of money she bestowed upon him.

Despite the deliberate blurring of Balthazar with the boy actor, the trial scene also reminded spectators of Portia's presence, whether or not the performer chose to embellish such signals nonverbally. When a performer of either gender acknowledges such reminders, spectators usually find it amusing, enjoying their superior knowledge vis-à-vis the characters, although making the effect too overt or too frequent can tilt any scene toward farce. During the trial, Shakespeare relied less on his heroine's movement in and out of cross-gender concealment and more on subtler reminders of her presence. He used more obvious reminders of Portia's feminine identity after the conclusion of the legal proceedings, when Portia, still in male disguise, discovers that Bassanio is still emotionally bound to Antonio.
Balthazar Obtains Bassanio's Ring

However one imagines the atmosphere during the trial, a sense of relaxation and relief must follow Shylock's departure and that of "the Duke and his train" seven lines later. Bassanio and Antonio, instructed by the duke "to gratify" Balthazar, linger onstage with the lawyer and, one assumes, her clerk. At this point, in a moment of informality and intimacy, Shakespeare releases the comic, almost carnivalesque, potentialities of cross-gender disguise that had been hinted at but kept more or less bottled up during the actual legal proceedings. Explicit play on Portia's multiple sexual identities begins when Bassanio addresses his wife as a "most worthy gentleman." Whether or not the performer chooses to respond to this mode of address in any way that indicates Portia's reaction, the audience's awareness of her presence would provide a strong undercurrent of irony. Such irony may arise from the casual posttrial atmosphere that encourages Bassanio to stand closer to Portia than he was when he offered to pay Shylock. Similarly, during the actual trial, the text required Portia to distribute her attention not only to him, but also to the lawbooks, to Shylock, to the duke, to Antonio, and possibly in other directions as well. In this segment of some forty lines until she leaves the court, she speaks almost exclusively to Bassanio.

Again Bassanio is lavish with his wife's money. His initial offer of the three thousand ducats due to Shylock to "freely cope your courteous pains withal" (1. 412) is immediately seconded by Antonio's offer of "love and service to you evermore" (1. 414). Portia refuses both gestures, but it is not clear to whom she addresses the line, "I pray you know me when we meet again" (1. 419). The line could point in several directions: a polite but ironic wish for further acquaintance directed to Antonio, an implicit challenge to Bassanio to recognize her, and, as the context activates bawdy connotations, both a wish and a dare that Bassanio sleep with her at their next encounter. Balthazar tries to take his leave but is prevented by Bassanio. In a gloss on Bassanio's next line, "Dear sir, of force I must attempt you further" (1. 421), one editor imagines that "Bassanio now runs after Portia, and the ensuing dialogue gains its effect from the audience knowing that they are husband and wife." At the equivalent point in Il Pecorone, the reader is also playfully reminded of the real identity of the judge (Portia). In refusing Giannetto's (Bassanio's) offer of money, the judge says, "Keep it, so that your lady may not say that you have squandered it." When Giannetto replies that his lady is "so kind and generous . . . that if I spent four times as much as this, she would not mind," the judge asks him if he is "happy with her." He answers that "she is as beautiful and wise as anyone Nature ever made" and invites him to come home with him to see for himself. When the invitation is refused, Giannetto again offers the money, at which point the judge notices the ring and asks for it. The narrative provides no indication of the reactions of Giannetto's wife underneath her male disguise but simply assumes that reader's awareness of her presence will allow them to savor the irony. Similarly, Shakespeare also relied on the audience to supply the presence of Portia, whether or not the male performer chose to make that presence visible through nonscripted shifts in and out of the female character.

But Shakespeare expanded the moment in adapting it to the stage, perhaps to give greater opportunities to the actor moving between Portia and Balthazar. In an addition to the source material, Shakespeare makes Balthazar refuse a cash payment for his services and ask instead for a pair of gloves before requesting the ring:

   Give me your gloves, I'll wear them for your sake,
   And for your love I'll take this ring from you.

(11. 426-27)

The gloves can belong to either Antonio or Bassanio. If they are Antonio's, "your sake" would refer to him and "your love" to Bassanio, creating a playable antithesis that builds up to the request for the ring. If they are
Bassanio's, Portia's focus on her husband's gloves, which he holds, or perhaps wears and removes, leads her to notice the ring on his finger. Unlike Gianetto, Bassanio refuses to part with a ring "given me by my wife" (1. 441) and Portia's last speech in the scene plays as wittily upon her hidden identity as her counterpart in Il Pecorone does:

And if your wife be not a mad woman,
And know how well I have deserv'd this ring.

She would not hold out enemy for ever
For giving it to me. Well, peace be with you.

(11. 445-48)

Unlike the judge in the narrative, she accepts Bassanio's refusal as definitive, disappointed as Balthazar but undoubtedly pleased as Portia, and leaves the stage, presumably with Nerissa.

In Il Pecorone, Giannetto (Bassanio) fears that his wife will believe "I have given it [the ring] to some other woman . . . and fallen in love elsewhere" (1:474). The judge seems to defend the wife but reiterates her doubts: "I am sure that she must love you well enough to believe you when you tell her that you gave it me. But perhaps you wanted to give it to one of your old loves here?" (1:474-75). Challenged to prove both his own fidelity and his faith in his wife's perfection, Giannetto gives the ring to the judge.

Shakespeare defers the surrender of the ring until after Portia leaves, in order to make Antonio pressure Bassanio into giving it to the lawyer, again pitting male lover against wife:

Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement [sic].

(11. 450-51)

Shakespeare invented a short scene in which Gratiano delivers the ring to Balthazar. Portia begins the scene by speaking to Nerissa, but the performer must abruptly shift back to Balthazar mannerisms when Gratiano addresses the lawyer as "Fair sir" (IV.ii.5). When Balthazar accepts the ring, Nerissa as the clerk asks for a private conference with the lawyer: "Sir, I would speak with you" (1. 12). Drawing Portia away from Gratiano, Nerissa proposes to get her husband's ring and clearly succeeds in doing so offstage while still disguised as a boy. Shifting gender identities, as the text did not require them to do during the actual trial, both women now resume their male attitudes, Nerissa turning back to Gratiano—"Come, good sir" (1. 19)—to request directions.

Portia's Return to Belmont

In the resolution of the ring plot in the final scene, the male performers represent Portia and Nerissa rather than the lawyer and clerk, although these male identities are as strongly present in the audience's memory as the female characters were in the courtroom. The audience's awareness of the male performers is also piqued throughout the scene by bawdy innuendoes, most of which refer to markers of male gender. Gratiano is the agent of the most overt bawdry, whether threatening to "mar the young clerk's pen" (1. 237) or vowing to "keep . . . safe Nerissa's ring" (1. 307). Portia first announces her intention to "have that doctor for [my] bedfellow" (1. 233) and within thirty lines confesses that "the doctor lay with me" (1. 259). Nerissa echoes both statements with regard to "that same scrubbed boy, the doctor's clerk" (1. 261), quoting Gratiano's earlier description of the clerk. When the men learn that they gave their rings to their own wives, they join Portia and Nerissa in jests about the maleness of doctor and clerk, which are also playful allusions to the gender of the
two actors:

_Gra._ Were you the clerk that is to make me cuckold?

_Ner._ Ay, but the clerk that never means to do it,

_Unless he live until he be a man._

_Bass._ Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow—

_When I am absent, then lie with my wife._

(11. 281-85)

Unlike the trial scene, which depended on the audience's multiconsciousness of actor, character, and disguise, the final scene derives its humor and its thematic force from explicit allusions to the heroines' various gender identities, and also from frequent use of bawdry—not as a conventional gender marker but to highlight all of the layers of gender in play.

Despite these differences, the final scene, like the trial scene, draws on the dexterity and energy of the performer in the world of the playhouse to enhance Portia's power as a character in the world of the play. Unlike other heroines in male disguise, she retains her authority when she returns to Belmont and resumes her identity as Bassanio's wife, and she uses her power to seal her victory over Antonio once and for all. As in the case of Julia in _The Two Gentlemen of Verona_, a female character's power can be reinforced by the theatrical vibrancy produced when opposing layers of gender identity are invoked on stage or actively evoked in the spectators' minds.

Unaware that it was his wife who canceled his debt to his friend, Bassanio introduces Antonio to Portia as the "man .. . to whom I am so infinitely bound" (11. 134-35). Portia's reply revives Shylock's insistence on the literal terms of his _bond_:

>You should in all sense be much _bound_ to him,

_For as I hear he was much _bound_ for you._

(11. 136-37; emphasis added)

Antonio's disclaimer, "No more than I am well acquitted of (1. 138), even if genuinely self-effacing rather than smugly self-satisfied, cannot eradicate Bassanio's sense of obligation to the man who offered to sacrifice his life on his friend's behalf. To rescue Bassanio from his wife's displeasure over the parting with the ring, Antonio makes an even more extravagant offer:

_I once did lend my body for his wealth,

. . . I dare be bound again,

My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord

Will never more break faith advisedly._

(11. 249-53)

Seeming to accept Antonio's offer to be her husband's "surety" (1. 254), Portia then undercuts it: she makes Antonio her unwitting agent by asking him to deliver to Bassanio a second ring, which her husband recognizes as the first. After some teasing, Portia explains all, reducing Antonio to a three-word statement of speechless wonder, "I am dumb" (1. 279), his next-to-last speech in the play. Shakespeare invents two more trump cards for her to play: her news for Antonio that "three of your argosies / Are richly come to harbor suddenly" (11. 276-77), followed by her gratuitously mystifying refusal to tell Antonio how she acquired this information: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter" (11. 278-79).
restoring her rival's wealth, as Monica Hamill comments, Portia "removes the last vestige of Antonio's role as martyr."

In addition to endowing Portia with an aura of mystery, Shakespeare also gives her a final use of legal terminology to recall her appearance in the courtroom, and perhaps to allow the performer a momentary reversion to Balthazar:

\[
\text{Let us go in}\\
\text{And charge us there upon inter'gatories}\\
\text{And we will answer all things faithfully.}
\]

(11. 297-99)

Whether Balthazar is also invoked by vocal or physical traits, as well as linguistically, the legalistic "inter'gatories" represents a final allusion to Portia's male disguise and so ends the play by calling attention to the layered complex of boy actor, female character, and male disguise. In the trial scene, male disguise reflexively illuminated the play-boy and also transformed the female character into a Bradamante or a Britomart jousting in the courtroom rather than in the lists or on the battlefield. In the final scene, rather than allow her to dwindle into a wife, Shakespeare not only endows her with superior knowledge but makes frequent and lively play with her complex identity as a boy heroine recently in male disguise, having already italicized this convention by using it proleptically and contrastively with Jessica and simultaneously with Nerissa. Shakespeare reminded his audience of the presence of several talented play-boys, one of whom represented both the loving, powerful, and now mysterious lady of Belmont and her alter ego, the witty and resourceful doctor of law. In so rich a field of theatrical play, I believe that many spectators would have noted the destabilization or disruption of gender roles but would have had difficulty extracting a single, consistent attitude toward the role and status of women. . . .

Notes

1 Hunter, John Lyly, 199.


4 Joel B. Altman, The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 209, argues that Gallathea is the one who will be transformed to a boy, for she seems to him to be more "heroic" in act I than the more "feminine" Phillida. Caldwell, "John Lyly's Gallathea" 34 n. 17, however, justifies the indeterminacy because of the "arbitrary nature and relative unimportance of the physical transformation in a play which celebrates Platonic union."

5 Jessica Milner Davis, Farce (London: Methuen, 1978), 62-63, explains the frequent use of twins and doubles in farce: "The artificiality . . . signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience and a lessening of their humanity: they lack the flexibility and the individuality of life."

6 Believing Antonio's "wealthy Andrew" to refer to the ship captured by Essex at Cadiz in mid-1596 and renamed The Andrew, most scholars now think the play was probably written in the latter half of that year.

7 Joan Hartwig, *Shakespeare 's Analogical Scene* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 12. As Bradbrook, "Shakespeare and the Use of Disguise," 166, comments, Shakespeare observes "a scale of contrast between Jessica's purely formal disguise, Nerissa's imitative one, and the significant robing of Portia."


9 John Dover Wilson, "The Copy for *The Merchant of Venice*, 1600," in *The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 110-11, 179-80, proposed that a scene of feasting at Bassanio's house, including the disguised Jessica and Shylock, was cut during revision.

10 Jessica's disguising was very important in Mark Lamos's 1984 production in Stratford, Ontario, as described by Paul Gaudet, "Lorenzo's 'Infidel': The Staging of Difference in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *TJ* 38 (1986): 275-90. Ellis Rabb's New York production (1973) also stressed Jessica's vulnerability in the elopement scene, whereas Irving invented stage business and devised elaborate pictorial effects to emphasize the pathos of Shylock; see James C. Bulman, *The Merchant of Venice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 36-38, 147.

11 Mahood, ed., *The Merchant of Venice*, 97-98nn. Unlike the first quarto, on which the Riverside text is based, the second quarto and the folio print "On, gentlemen, away," which may exclude or include Jessica.


13 John Donne, "Elegie: On His Mistres," in *The Complete Poetry*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 62, 1. 14. One manuscript version is entitled "On his mistres desire to be disguised, and to goe like a Page with him" (439). The speaker fears the scheme will not work, because "the rightest company / Of Players . . . / Will quickly know thee, / and no lesse, alas! / Th'indifferent Italian . . . / well content to thinke thee Page, / Will hunt thee with such lust, and hideous rage, / As Lots faire guests were vext" (11. 35-41).


Katherine E. Kelly, "The Queen's Two Bodies: Shakespeare's Boy Actress in Breeches," *TJ* 42 (1990): 87, glosses the line to refer to "the professional vulnerability of the boy player . . . [with] his dangerously changeable voice."

Geary, "The Nature of Portia's Victory," 58. The stress on Balthazar's maleness is necessary, Geary argues, because "Portia's disguise allows her to intervene directly to recover her husband, not, of course, from another woman, but from another man" (64). But he overstates the case, as in the following assertion, by ignoring the audience's mental retention of layers gender not visible at the moment: "the theatrical fact of the boy actor in the Elizabethan theatre makes Portia's sexual transformation complete" (58).


Shylock's position in this duel is a Pauline distortion of Judaism; see John R. Cooper, "Shylock's Humanity," *SQ* 21 (1970): 117-24; Bernard Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes without Jews: Images of the Jews in England*, 1290-1700 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 14-83; and Michael Shapiro, "Shylock the Jew Onstage: Past and Present," *Shofar* 4, no. 2 (1986): 1-11. In a conference paper (Shakespeare Association of America, 1991), Randall Martin points out that once Shylock drops his claim to Antonio's flesh, Portia has freed Bassanio from any obligation and thus no longer has a clear motive for further action against Shylock other than generalized hostility toward an alien or personal revenge, much to the distress of the actresses he interviewed.


I quote from the translation of *II Pecorone* in Bullough, *Sources*, 1:474. Subsequent references to this translation will appear in the text.


Joan Landis, "By Two-headed Janus': Double Discourse in *The Merchant of Venice*," conference paper (Shakespeare Association of America, 1990), 3, points out that the Latin word for ring is *anu* or *anulus*, and
Howard Jacobson has referred me to a passage in one of Cicero's letters (Epistulae ad Familiares IX.xxii.2), that plays on anulus and anus. See also Frankie Rubinstein, A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance (London: Macmillan, 1984), 220-21.


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): SHAKESPEARE'S PORTRAYAL OF SHYLOCK & THE ISSUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

SHAKESPEARE'S PORTRAYAL OF SHYLOCK & THE ISSUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Leo Kirschbaum (essay date 1962)


[In the following essay, Kirschbaum analyzes what the words "Christian" and "Jew" meant to an Elizabethan audience and argues that Shylock is not meant to be Shakespeare's portrayal of a "real Jew " but rather resemble the Elizabethan Puritan, and is intended to symbolize the anti-social traits which threatened conventional, Anglican sensibilities.]

The Merchant of Venice is a fantasy—but it is, at bottom, a serious fantasy. Its characters are not deeply drawn; its plot is providential; its atmosphere is unrealistic—but the conflict of values it illustrates was important to Shakespeare's own time. Difficult as it may be, let us suspend our own values, our contemporary basic decencies, if you wish, and strive to become members of a 1596 audience. Let us, in short, see what Shakespeare meant by Jew and Christian in his play so that we may come to understand a fifth act which is a triumph of moonlight, music, friendship, love, and laughter—a fifth act which so many people today must regard as extraneous and, perhaps, nasty after the fall of poor, persecuted Shylock.
There were no Jewish communities in England in Shakespeare's time. The rare individuals of Hebraic origin that history discovers in sixteenth century England merely enforce the point. Theatergoers could no more encounter kinsmen of Shylock in the streets of London than they could encounter kinsmen of Caliban. To the playwright and his auditors, Jews were almost as mythical as anthropophagi. Shakespeare's source for Shylock was not life but literature and folklore. In them the Jew was typed as an anti-Christian, usurious, cruel monster. This is the stereotyped figure which Shakespeare utilized for Shylock. And these are the traits which his spectators would expect in any stage Jew. Shylock would immediately be recognized as alien to the City of God, the ideal Christian community of the Middle Ages—and of the Reformation too, as Zurich and Geneva witness. But Shakespeare put the folklore Jew to new purposes. He infused the pasteboard figure with a range of attitudes and traits which symbolize the vast disruptive forces of sixteenth century Europe. The Christian community of Venice—i.e., the City of God—which Shylock threatens is an idealized projection of a real England which felt and saw but could not completely understand what was undermining it. As scapegoat, Shakespeare's Jew would provide a London audience of the 1590's with a satisfying release of resentments and frustrations, a kind of catharsis.

In Shakespeare's time the past was breaking up. Tradition and actuality were at variance. In the City of God communal values had always superseded private ones. But in the sixteenth century there was abroad a new idea, so disturbing that it became a bugaboo to frighten grown-ups, the idea of ruthless and iconoclastic individualism, as epitomized by the real and the pseudo-Machiavelli and by the doctrine of virtù, the uninhibited exploitation of all one's innate abilities and powers. Concomitantly, in the economic realm, commerce and industry were beginning to displace agriculture as the most expedient means to wealth. The discovery of the Americas showered Europe with riches that had been neither toiled nor spun for. The force of events was creating Economic Man—but not, as yet, his justification. In short, our modern financial era of commerce and industry was beginning. Furthermore, the Reformation was fracturing the European community, by state and within state, into antagonistic pluralities. A pervasive fear of otherness began to grow. English nationalism rose to a high tide; but in England itself, Catholic, Anglican, and Puritan feared and hated one another. So Shakespeare set before his definitely Anglican, definitely patriotic, and definitely conservative audience a monster, Shylock, in whom disruptive individualism, economic aggrandizement, and perturbing uncanniness appear at their most frightening and melodramatic.

Marlowe had showed Shakespeare the way. A few years before The Merchant of Venice, the former had brilliantly indicated what could be done with the folklore Jew to exploit the fears and resentments of Elizabethan London. In the prologue of The Jew of Malta, Machiavelli describes to the spectators his follower, Barrabas. The Jew's real God in the play is not Jehovah, but gold, won not by labor but by usury and sea commerce. Reviling the Christians and their values, he has no loyalties to anyone but himself—not to his synagogue, not to his daughter. He is anarchic in his desires for power and wealth—hypocritical, cunning, and murderous. Nevertheless, Marlowe's Jew and the other inhabitants of his play lack the immediacy of Shakespeare's figures. Barrabas is a competitor rather than an antagonist of the Christians, and the latter are by no means so differentiated from him that an English audience would automatically care to identify itself with them.

Shylock is more acclimatized to England than Barrabas. Shakespeare has given Shylock certain traits that tie him closely to the actuality of the times. He has much of the popular concept of the Puritan in him. Shylock is sober, industrious, Bible-quoting, hypocritical, assertive, and ruthless—and he is ostentatiously a killjoy. He is a projection of the hatred the more easygoing Anglicans felt for the righteous sectists, whom obscurely they were beginning to associate with economic aggressiveness and cupidity.¹ Again, Shakespeare emphasizes very much Shylock's apartness from the Christian community. It is stressed again and again that he is not a citizen of Venice, that he is an alien, di foreigner, a stranger. The ordinary London citizen violently disliked the foreign craftsmen from Flanders, Germany, and France (known as aliens, strangers, foreigners) who were allowed by special governmental dispensation to live and work in London. All through the sixteenth century there were resentment, agitation, and sometimes riots against them. Ill-feeling was especially strong in 1595.
Shylock, then, is not an imitation of a real Jew. He is meant to symbolize those antisocial traits which conventional society felt were inimical to their traditional sense of the normal and the decent. The Christian community in the play is meant to symbolize the preservation of these traditional values even in an era of economic expansion. Hence, in one way, Shylock is more real than the Christians in the drama, for he after all does derive from reality. The Elizabethans could not meet Jews, but they could meet Englishmen who, they thought, by and large, stood for what Shylock stood for. The play's Christian characters and their destiny, on the other hand, are a wish-fulfillment, a vision of goodness dreamt in the reality of an increasingly acquisitive society.

Let us examine the Christian values of the play. (As a matter of fact, most of the Christian characters are more depictions of values than they are attempts at giving the illusion of substantial dimensionality. To seek psychological depth in them is not only aesthetically wrong but dramatically destructive: they are meant to be felt as the not too differentiated and discrete cells of a single organism, the Christian community.) Since it bulks so large in the play, let us begin with the subject of money. When he looks at the three caskets, Bassanio says,

Therefore, thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge
'Tween man and man.

Since gold is not edible, it actually represents a kind of starvation unless used properly; silver, disreputable in itself, is a necessary slave that administers to men's requirements. Wealth, therefore, should be but a means to an end, not an end in itself; hence thrift is not a virtue, and debt is not defilement. Bassanio at the beginning of the play admits to Antonio,

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance.

Antonio does not blame him at all. Let me know your plan, he says,

And if it stand, as you yourself still do,
Within the eye of honor, be assur'd
My purse, my person, my extremest means
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.

Money, it is indicated, should be treated with a certain contempt, as in Portia's lines,

Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.
Double six thousand and then treble that
Before a friend of this description
Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.

Or in her refusal of ducats, when she is in disguise,

He is well paid that is well satisfied,
And I, delivering you, am satisfied,
And therein do account myself well paid.
My mind was never yet more mercenary.
Obviously, to the Christians in the play, money is a good only in so far as it serves human needs; and these needs are indirectly expressed by Portia when she speaks of "companions / That do converse and waste the time together." In other words, at the banquet of life, in innocent, pleasant, and cultured amity, sit a group of friends.

From the start of the play, the ease of such a fellowship is defined. It consists of laughter, dining, beauty, entertainment, music, conversation, gifts, and similar graces of humane society. Sometimes, this social ease takes the form of appropriate ritual: Bassanio tells Antonio that he needs "the means / To hold a rival place" with Portia's other suitors. Sometimes, this social ease takes the form of carefree expenditure: Lorenzo and Jessica spend money freely on their honeymoon in gambling and silly purchases. When they return, they are more or less penniless—but, significantly, Portia leaves "The husbandry and manage of my house" to Lorenzo. Always, if possible, in this Christian society, there should be innocent pleasure. Bassanio, for example, must have a "supper" before he leaves for Belmont. It is to be a merry occasion. Gratiano is not to try to be demure at it. Bassanio declares,

I would entreat you rather to put on
Your boldest suit of mirth, for we have friends
That purpose merriment.

Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio, and Salanio are preparing a surprise entertainment for the occasion. There will be masks, disguises, and torchbearers; and the masquers will be preceded by music, the drum and the fife. Music is important to these people. It plays while Bassanio chooses among the caskets. And music and the music of the spheres, those symbols of harmony, play a large part in the Lorenzo-Jessica overture to the love and friendship paean of the last act:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

But theirs is definitely not a hedonistic existence. Pleasure is not their chief good; it is an ancillary good. It is not so much that their religion is urbane as that their urbanity is religious. Human beings, they believe, are distinguished from animals by a natural tendency toward good and by reason. The Duke says that Antonio's bad luck would receive pity "From stubborn Turks and Tartars, never trained / To offices of tender courtesy." When Shylock refuses to give a "firm reason" why he is being so brutal to Antonio except a nonrational "certain loathing," Bassanio breaks out, "This is no answer, thou unfeeling man." A man who acts without reason or charity is like an animal; therefore, Gratiano cries at Shylock,

Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men.

The Christians in the play are well aware of the religious facts of life and death: original sin, redemption, baptism, prayer, grace, damnation, and salvation. Portia links Christian eschatology and the Lord's Prayer:

Though justice be thy plea, consider this—
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

"The course of justice" refers not merely to the individual but to mankind. She is referring to redemption from the just damnation of man by the mercy of the Christ. The prime purpose of life is salvation:

It is very meet
The Lord Bassanio live an upright life;
For, having such a blessing in his lady,
He finds the joys of heaven here on earth;
And if on earth he do not merit it,
In reason he should never come to heaven.

Lorenzo, in speaking of the music of the spheres, refers to immortality and its place in the order of the universe:

Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

A Christian can laugh at religious hypocrisy which emphasizes the outward for the sake of social approval:

If I do not put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer books in my pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, while grace is saying, hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat, and sigh, and say amen,
Use all the observance of civility
Like one well studied in a sad ostent
To please his grandam, never trust me more.

But heresy is a serious matter and must be hated:

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul, producing holy witness,
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek.

In religion,
What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament.

The religion of the Christian characters is reverent but not ostentatious. We hear that Portia, returning to Belmont,

doth stray about
By holy crosses, where she kneels and prays
For happy wedlock hours.

She is accompanied, it is said, by "a holy hermit," who may or may not be part of the white lie she has told Lorenzo and Jessica:
I have toward heaven breath’d a secret vow
To live in prayer and contemplation
Only attended by Nerissa here,
Until her husband and my lord’s return.
There is a monastery two miles off,
And there we will abide.

Coupled with the contempt in the play for money as money is the Christian principle that one must trust to Providence more than to mortal prudence. (Tawney suggests that the core of the ecclesiastical hatred of usury was the certainty of gain, the lack of risk on the part of the lender.—*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Pelican Books, p. 44.) The true Christian view is finely expressed in Launcelot Gobbo’s words to Bassanio:

Launcelot: The old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you, sir.
You have the grace of God, sir, and he hath enough.
Bassanio: Thou speak’st it well.

He that has the grace of God has enough; God will take care of his own. And this is implicit in what Nerissa tells Portia concerning the caskets:

Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations. Therefore the lott’ry that he hath 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.

Thus, to hazard is to have faith in Providence. Antonio tells Shylock that Jacob's gain was due to Providence, not to human device:

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.

Antonio "ventures" his life to provide Bassanio with money. And the right casket, the lead one, emphatically states the principle of risk: "Who chooses me must give and hazard all he hath." The word hazard runs through the play like a refrain. Jessica and Lorenzo do not worry about the morrow, but at the end of the play they are the inheritors of Shylock's wealth.

That the Christian community is a spiritual organism is postulated by the entire play. At the beginning of 3.4, Lorenzo says to Portia, "You have a noble and a true conceit/Of godlike amity." This last phrase, godlike amity, adumbrates the ideal view of society as the living body of Christ, as the City of God: The all and the one are the same. Portia says to Lorenzo,

I never did repent for doing good,
Nor shall not now; for in companions
That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an egal yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit;
Which makes me think that this Antonio,
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestow’d
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty!
This comes too near the praising of myself.
Therefore no more of it.

In saving others one is saving oneself. In loving others properly one is, in a theological sense, loving oneself properly. To be virtuous to one another is to imitate God, to resemble God: mercy, for example,

is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Hence the marked expression of friendship in the play, hence the emphatic assertion of the claims of charity.

Thus, the Christians in Shakespeare's Venice make up a distinct society of Christian solicitude, each is concerned more for others than for himself, all love Antonio. "Behind the figure of Antonio," says Theodor Reik in The Secret Self, "is the greater one of Jesus Christ." At the very beginning of the play, Gratiano declares to Antonio: "I love thee, and it is my love that speaks." A few lines later, Bassanio affirms similar affection: "To you, Antonio, I owe the most, in money and in love." Salerio gives his opinion concerning their friend: "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth." Later Salanio talks of "the good Antonio, the honest Antonio—O that I had a title good enough to keep his name company!" Bassanio describes him to Portia:

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies.

Lorenzo also describes him,

But if you knew to whom you show this honour,
How true a gentleman you send relief,
How dear a lover of my lord your husband,
I know you would be prouder of the work
Than customary bounty can enforce you.

Portia tells Bassanio to spend much money,

Before a friend of this description
Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.

That all the Christians so admire and cherish Antonio is significant in relation to the values in the play. He represents the ideal standard of caritas. All true Christians are his friends, and he has saved many from Shylock's grasp. For the sake of Bassanio he is willing to give up not only his wealth but even life itself.

Race and color in themselves are not socially significant to these people. It is what a man or woman morally is and does that determines whether he or she should be accepted or not. Jessica, referring to her own concept of the good life, puts the matter succinctly: "But though I am a daughter to [my father's] blood/I am not to his manners." Hence she adopts the faith the members of which do have the right "manners." And she is completely accepted by these members. The treatment of Jessica by the Christians is testimony that within the circumscription of the play, Jews are hated not because of their "blood" but because of their "manners." Christian virtue can so translate the individual that racial distinctions disappear:
Shylock: I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.
Salerio: There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish.

Hence, in all sincerity, when Antonio discovers that Shylock wants for the sake of "friendship" to charge him no interest, he says, "Hie thee, gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind." If by anti-Semitism is meant wholly irrational prejudice against Jews in general, it would be difficult to accuse any of the Christian characters in the play of that vice.

Let us now examine what Shakespeare means in the play by Jew. Observe Shylock at his first appearance in 1.3. Clad in his yellow gaberdine, he is visually the "stranger" within the gates, the "alien." He is not a citizen of the community, but a "foreigner." From the start, he is neither pathetic nor heroic but either sadistic or cringing.

Shylock: Antonio is a good man.
Bassanio: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
Shylock: Oh, no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.

Sufficient! Here is the essential doctrine of "economic man." Good has not merely shifted its meaning: it has shifted its deity! Yet, Shylock goes on, Antonio has not been a careful businessman. His ships are over the many seas. "And other ventures he hath, squand'red abroad." In other words, Antonio has not been prudent; he has ventured, hazarded. But men cannot be trusted, declares the Jew. There are "land rats and water rats": thieves and pirates. Nor is nature beneficent. "There is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks." In such an inimical world of men and things, Shylock refuses to hazard. He will trust only his own judgment. When Bassanio invites him to dinner to meet Antonio, Shylock gives his first example of twisting the Bible to his own uses: The swine into which Jesus sent the demons become the customary food of the Christians! Then Shylock follows with an extremely significant statement:

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.

Business is business. It has nothing to do with fellowship or religion. Here, then, is utter rejection of those Christian values which we have just analyzed. When Antonio enters, Shylock soliloquizes: "How like a fawning publican he looks." Shylock hates Antonio's self-abnegation, and Christian courtesy he interprets as fawning. Antonio has refused to be the economic man:

I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

Note the "more." Shylock hates Antonio more for economic reasons than for racial or religious ones. Since cunning economic man gets all that he can get, Shylock ridicules Christian charity as "low simplicity." Then, "If I can catch him once upon the hip, / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him." Cannibalism in Shylock is already indicated.

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift.
This is the first evidence of Shylock's ability to rationalize Christian hatred of his immorality into Christian hatred of his Jewishness. In other words, Shylock hypocritically covers up his own criminality by charging his accusers with anti-Semitism. In similar fashion, his usury becomes "bargains" and "well-won thrift."

To defend the malpractice of usury to Antonio, Shylock wracks Scripture in referring to the cunning Jacob and the pied lambs. But notice too another Biblical reference:

This Jacob from our holy Abram was  
(As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)  
The third possessor.

The "wise mother" was Rebecca, who tricked the blind Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Thus, the cunning of economic man becomes wisdom! And Shylock finishes his Biblical explication of Jacob with

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;  
And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.

God blesses economic man, cunning is wisdom, and everything is justified except outright stealing! Will Shylock make the loan?

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 suff ranee is the badge of all our tribe.  
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Antonio, it is clearly shown in this passage, hates Shylock because of his usury. But Shylock evades the issue: on the one hand, he says his Jewishness is the reason for this hatred; on the other hand, usury is not reprehensible: it is the "use of that which is mine own." Private judgment, Shylock implies, not communal judgment or welfare, should be the sole criterion in money matters.

Launcelot Gobbo is the "unthrifty knave" in whose risky care Shylock has left his house. We discover that he is so miserable as the Jew's servant that he wishes to run away. His master has not been giving him enough to eat: "I am famish'd in his service." Jessica in 2.3 indicates that we can trust the Clown's judgment: "Our house is hell; and thou, a merry devil, / Did'st rob it of some taste of tediousness." Why, from the Christian viewpoint, the house is hell is trenchantly suggested in 2.5. Shylock bullies his daughter and berates the unthrifty knave. Little food, little sleep, the frugalest necessities of clothing, constant labor for the master's prosperity—these are his theme. Launcelot hints that there will be a masque at the feast to which Shylock has been invited. Economic man is appalled at such epicureanism:

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica.  
Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife,  
Clamber not you up to the casements then,  
Nor thrust your head into the public street  
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces;  
But stop my house's ears—I mean my casements.  
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
My sober house. By Jacob's staff I swear
I have no mind of feasting forth tonight.

Neither his house nor its inhabitants are to hear the music or watch the procession. "Lock up my doors." A morris dance is as bad as stealing. "Stop my house's ears." Music destroys thrift. People who enjoy such vanities are "fools." His is a "sober house." And sobriety and cupidity suddenly coalesce in a reference to a Biblical personage who has already appeared as a symbol of business cunning, Jacob. Economic man in this scene is portrayed in all his unsleeping concern for frugality, rapid profit, and no leisure. In all his lack of human concern for his fellow man. And in all his aptness for proverbs of the Poor Richard type.

The patch [Launcelot] is kind enough, but a huge feeder,
Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day
More than the wildcat. Drones hive not with me. . . .

Well, Jessica, go in.
Perhaps I will return immediately.
Do as I bid you; shut doors after you.
Fast bind, fast find—
A proverb never stale in thrifty mind.

We do not see Shylock again until 3.1. However, we learn of his reaction to his daughter's flight from Salanio in 2.8:

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,
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats!"

We may well agree with the Christian speaker that this is a strange and outrageous lament. It is not the loss of his child, nor even that she has been disloyal to him, which has sent Shylock into a passion. It is clearly the money and the jewels.

In 3.1 he rails at the bankrupt Antonio. Then comes one of Shylock's most famous—and most misunderstood!—declarations:

Salerio: Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?
Shylock: To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? 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 humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I
will better the instruction.

Only eyes so blinded with sentimental tears that they cannot pierce hypocrisy, rationalization, and savagery can read this speech as a plausible justification of Shylock. He defends his cannibalism on grounds of revenge. Why? Antonio has hated him because he is a Jew. But the phrases before tell a different story. "Losses," "gains," "bargains," and "half a million" recall the villainous business morality which Antonio has considered vile. The word is *ethnic*, not *ethnic*, for Antonio's hatred. But Shylock wishes to make it *ethnic*. Is not a Jew a human being? The modern reader does not see here how completely Shylock is condemning himself. To be a human being means to act and feel as a human being. The more Shylock expounds on common physical attributes, the more definitely he is calling attention to the absence of common spiritual attributes. He claims that he has learned the principle of revenge from the Christians. But the "eye for an eye" Old Law has been replaced by the New Law, the Sermon on the Mount. And we shall see for ourselves later what Christian revenge is.

Shylock's egocentrism (his *real* concern for himself rather than his *exhibited* concern for his group), his placement of monetary loss skies higher than paternal loss, his fervid appetite for revenge even when it concerns his own flesh and blood—all these characteristics are brought out in his speech to Tubal:

Why, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankford! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now. Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! No news of them? Why, so—and I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! the thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief; and no satisfaction, no revenge! nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o' my shoulders; no sighs but o' my breathing; no tears but o' my shedding.

Mark Shylock's blasphemy when he is informed of Antonio's ill luck: "I thank God, I thank God! Is it true? is it true?" His gaiety is obscene. "Good news, good news! Ha, ha!" "I am very glad of it. I'll plague him, I'll torture him. I am glad of it." The critics are probably right in seeing real sentiment in his exclamation when told of the ring which Jessica sold for a monkey. "Out upon her! Thou tortured me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor." But the same critics are sentimental in their treatment of this detail. Any touch that postulates humanity in Shylock blackens by contrast his inhumanity all the more. This is only one detail—the cannibalistic money-lender is revealed in his next words: "I will have the heart of [Antonio] if he forfeit; for, were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will." Usury and murder are two sides of the same viciousness. And then Shakespeare presents a final nasty touch. After seeing an officer to arrest Antonio when his bond comes due, "good Tubal" is to meet Shylock "at our synagogue!"

Act 5 is the beauty, harmony, rest, and satisfaction after the storm. Act 4 is the storm. The Christian group is threatened by one who is alien to its principles. No one can deny the theatrical effectiveness of Act 4, the climax of the play, its exciting melodrama. But it *is* a parable, and its characters *are* symbolic. Portia is not merely Bassanio's clever young wife in disguise. She is allegory, the voice of God, the epitome of the New Law. Shylock too is symbol. He, new-destructive, is really a harking back to the old and pre-Christ. Shylock is the Old Law. He is the letter rather than the spirit. He is legalized injustice. He is hatred and inhumanity. He is the nihilism of selfish economic aggrandizement unmasked—as criminally destructive as murder. He is most frightening because he has law on his side. (In 1571, usury of not more than 10 percent became legal in England.) The community, it seems, must not only tolerate the enemy of good society these days, but, as it were, aid him to achieve his ends. Usury is legal, and Shylock's bond is legal—but they are not moral. The difference between the Tudor period and the later seventeenth century is that economic vice, legalized or not, had not yet been sanctified into social virtue.
The Duke calls Shylock, who has not yet come on, an "inhuman wretch" because he is void of "pity" and "mercy." Shylock enters. The Duke emphasizes the Jew's "strange" cruelty. He hopes that Shylock "touch'd with humane gentleness and love" will forgive Antonio not only his life but repayment of the money. The Duke expects a "gentle answer." But Shylock, emphasizing the legality of his position, refuses to give a rational answer as to why he wants Antonio's "carrion flesh." It is his "humour," his "affection"; it is a "certain loathing," and he refuses double payment of the loan.

Duke: How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?  
Shylock: What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

Thus, the Duke, before Portia, invokes "measure for measure." But the law-protected Shylock foresees no punishment either on earth or in after-life. He has no sense of sin or shame for what he is doing.

While the Duke converses apart with Nerissa dressed as a lawyer's clerk, Shylock takes out his knife and whets it on the sole of his shoe. Gratiano's outbreak at this spectacle stresses the non-humanity of the Jew. Shylock scoffs, "I stand here for law." Then Portia enters as a Doctor of Laws. She tells Shylock that his suit is of "a strange nature," yet Venetian law "Cannot impugn you as you do proceed." Hence, she declares, "must the Jew be merciful." 'On what compulsion must I?' asks Shylock. It is not law but humanity that must rule you, replies Portia. Mercy is above justice. But Shylock is obdurate. He again invokes "measure for measure" treatment: "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law. . . ." He hypocritically refuses repayment: "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven!" Again Portia appeals to him: "Be merciful. / Take thrice thy money; bid me tear the bond." Again Shylock invokes the law:

I charge you by the law,  
Whereof you are a well-deserving pillar,  
Proceed to judgment.

And yet once more Shylock refuses "charity" and reads the law narrowly and inhumanly:

Portia: Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge,  
To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.  
Shylock: Is it so nominated in the bond?  
Portia: It is not so express'd; but what of that?  
Twere good you do so much for charity.  
Shylock: I cannot find it; 'tis not in the bond.

Antonio is spiritually ready: "I am arm'd and well prepar'd." Bassanio and Gratiano say that they would sacrifice their wives to save Antonio. In an aside, Shylock sneers at these "Christian husbands."

Note that Shylock has been given opportunity again and again to be merciful—and to be well paid in the bargain, too. But he has refused to forgo cannibalism. He has constantly appealed to the law. So, when the law turns on him, he is the logical recipient of the eyefor-an-eye code. If he takes one drop of Antonio's blood, Portia declares, his lands and goods are "by the laws of Venice confiscate." Suddenly, the Jew (despite his oath!) is willing to take thrice repayment and forget the bond. No, says Portia, let the inhuman interpreter of the letter of the law proceed now according to the letter—but if he take more than a fraction of a fraction of a pound, he himself must die and his estate will be seized. Now Shylock will be satisfied with his principal. No, says Portia, follow the law and take your forfeiture of the flesh. Shylock, caught, gives up the bond snarlingly and prepares to leave. But the law which he has invoked so often has a terrible claim on him. If an "alien" has attempted the life of a "citizen," he loses all his goods (one-half to the would-be victim, one-half to the state), and his life is at the mercy of the state.
This is the ethical crux of the play. How vicious throughout *The Merchant of Venice* the Christians are to the Jew, say most of the critics. Well, here is the test. The Jew was merciless to the Christians. How will the Christians act now that they have Shylock on the hip? Portia advises him, "Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke." But the Duke forestalls him: "That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, / I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it." But half of his wealth is to go to Antonio, "The other half comes to the general state, / Which humbleness may drive unto a fine." Observe that the state is not at all anxious to take its legal half. But what about the other half? Legally, it belongs to Antonio. Portia turns to him, "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" She is putting Antonio's Christianity to the severest proof. Remember that he is in judgment on one who a moment before was ready to literally cut his heart out. This is Antonio's answer:

So please my lord the Duke and all the court  
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,  
I am content; so he will let me have  
The other half in use, to render it  
Upon his death unto the gentleman  
That lately stole his daughter—  
Two things provided more: that, for this favour,  
He presently become a Christian;  
The other, that he do record a gift  
Here in the court of all he dies possess'd  
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.

The legal phrase *in use* means that Antonio will manage one-half of Shylock's property until the latter's death. The inference is that he will turn over the profits to the final possessors, Jessica and Lorenzo. (At the end of the play, after Portia gives Antonio the letter announcing the safe arrival of certain of his supposedly lost ships, he cries, "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living.") Thus Antonio takes nothing for himself. And Shylock actually loses nothing. He retains his life. And he retains all his property in that it will go to those who under any circumstances have the legal and ethical right to inherit. And Shylock has the completely free use of one-half of his apparently ample wealth. Certainly this is mercy, not cold justice!

But what about Shylock's becoming a Christian? It is hard for moderns to see that this request is also part of the Christian mercy. Only if the Jew is baptized can he escape the eternal pains of hell. As the Jew wished to kill the goodness which is Antonio, so Antonio wishes to kill the Old Adam which is in Shylock. Times have changed. One has to adopt an historical perspective for *The Merchant of Venice* in order not to be shocked by what today seems sentimentally chauvinistic Christianity and nasty obdurate anti-Semitism. Shakespeare wrote a meaningful fantasy about a bad ogre who tried to hurt some good people in the City of God, but Jews today are so real that they can be seized and burnt in Nazi crematoria. But what Shakespeare's Jew and Shakespeare's Antonio ethically stand for is, perhaps, also real today. And some may say that this is a conflict which must go on until the last man is exterminated by the hydrogen bomb. The tendency of the modern psyche to exculpate Shylock because he is forced by society to be what he is is to misunderstand the tenor of the whole play. To Shakespeare and his audience sociological determinism was never a valid cause. It weis always a villain's excuse.

Notes


D. M. Cohen (essay date 1980)
In the following essay, Cohen contends that The Merchant of Venice is an anti-Semitic work not simply due to the characterization of Shylock but in the way it equates "Jewishness" with wickedness.

Current criticism notwithstanding, The Merchant of Venice seems to me a profoundly and crudely anti-Semitic play. The debate about its implications has usually been between inexpert Jewish readers and spectators who discern an anti-Semitic core and literary critics (many of them Jews) who defensively maintain that the Shakespearean subtext of mind transcends anti-Semitism. The critics' arguments, by now familiar, center on the subject of Shylock's essential humanity, point to the imperfections of the Christians, and remind us that Shakespeare was writing in a period when there were so few Jews in England that it didn't matter anyway (or, alternatively, that because there were so few Jews in England Shakespeare had probably never met one, so he didn't really know what he was doing). Where I believe the defensive arguments go wrong is in their heavy concentration on the character of Shylock; they overlook the more encompassing attempt of the play to offer a total poetic image of the Jew. It is all very well for John Russell Brown to say The Merchant of Venice is not anti-Jewish, and that "there are only two slurs on Jews in general"; but this kind of assertion, a common enough one in criticism of the play, cannot account for the fear and shame that Jewish viewers and readers have always felt from the moment of Shylock's entrance to his final exit. I wish to argue that these feelings are justified and that such an intuitive response is more proper and accurate than the critical sophistries whose purpose is to exonerate Shakespeare from the charge of anti-Semitism. Although few writers on the subject are prepared to concede as much, it is quite possible that Shakespeare didn't give a damn about Jews or about insulting England's minuscule Jewish community, and that, if he did finally humanize his Jew, he did so simply to enrich his drama.

I

Let us first ask what is meant by anti-Semitism when that term is applied to a work of art. Leo Kirschbaum suggests that it is a "wholly irrational prejudice against Jews in general," noting it would be difficult to accuse any of the Christian characters in The Merchant of Venice of such a vice. This seems to be John Russell Brown's view as well; he perceives the play's only anti-Semitic remarks to be Launcelot's statement "my master's a very Jew" (II. ii. 100) and Antonio's comment about Shylock's "Jewish heart" (IV. i. 80). While generally acceptable, Kirschbaumes definition seems to me to err in its use of the term irrational. Prejudice is almost always rationalized, and it is rationalized by reference to history and mythology. Jews have been hated for a number of reasons, the most potent among them that they were the killers of Jesus Christ.

I would define an anti-Semitic work of art as one that portrays Jews in a way that makes them objects of antipathy to readers and spectators—objects of scorn, hatred, laughter, or contempt. A delicate balance is needed to advance this definition, since it might seem to preclude the possibility of an artist's presenting any Jewish character in negative terms without incurring the charge of anti-Semitism. Obviously, Jews must be allowed to have their faults in art as they do in life. In my view, a work of art becomes anti-Semitic not by virtue of its portrayal of an individual Jew in uncomplimentary terms but solely by its association of negative racial characteristics with the term Jewish or with Jewish characters generally. What we must do, then, is look at the way the word Jew is used and how Jews are portrayed in The Merchant of Venice as a whole.

II

The word Jew is used 58 times in The Merchant of Venice. Variants of the word like Jewess, Jews, Jew's, and Jewish are used 14 times; Hebrew is used twice. There are, then, 74 direct uses of Jew and unambiguously related words in the play. Since it will readily be acknowledged that Shakespeare understood the dramatic and rhetorical power of iteration, it must follow that there is a deliberate reason for the frequency of the word in the play. And as in all of Shakespeare's plays, the reason is to surround and inform the repeated term with
associations which come more and more easily to mind as it is used. A word apparently used neutrally in the early moments of a play gains significance as it is used over and over; it becomes a term with connotations that infuse it with additional meaning.

The word *Jew* has no neutral connotations in drama. Unlike, say, the word *blood* in *Richard II* or *Macbeth*—where the connotations deepen in proportion not merely to the frequency with which the word is uttered but to the poetic significance of the passages in which it is employed—*Jew* has strongly negative implications in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is surely significant that Shylock is addressed as "Shylock" only seventeen times in the play. On all other occasions he is called "Jew" and is referred to as "the Jew." Even when he and Antonio are presumed to be on an equal footing, Shylock is referred to as the Jew while Antonio is referred to by name. For example, in the putatively disinterested letter written by the learned doctor Bellario to commend Balthazar/Portia, there is the phrase "I acquainted him with the cause in controversy between the Jew and Antonio . . ." (IV. i. 154-56). Similarly, in the court scene Portia calls Shylock by his name only twice; for the rest of the scene she calls him Jew to his face. The reason for this discrimination is, of course, to set Shylock apart from the other characters. This it successfully does. Calling the play's villain by a name which generalizes him while at the same time ostensibly defining his essence is, in a sense, to depersonalize him. As in our own daily life, where terms like *bourgeois, communist,* and *fascist* conveniently efface the humanness and individuality of those to whom they are applied, the constant reference to Shylock's "thingness" succeeds in depriving him of his humanity while it simultaneously justifies the hostility of his enemies. The word *Jew* has always conjured up associations of foreignness in the minds of non-Jews. When it is repeatedly used with reference to the blood-thirsty villain of the play, its intention is unmistakable. And the more often it is used, the more difficult it becomes for the audience to see it as a neutral word. Even if John Russell Brown is right, then, in pointing out that there are only two overtly anti-Semitic uses of the word in the play, it will surely be seen that overt anti-Semitism very early becomes unnecessary. Each time that *Jew* is used by any of Shylock's enemies, there is a deeply anti-Jewish implication already and automatically assumed.

III

In Act I, scene iii, after the bond has been struck, Antonio turns to the departing Shylock and murmurs "Hie thee gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (11. 177-78). The lines themselves seem inoffensive, but let us examine the words and the gestures they imply. Shylock has left the stage and Antonio is commenting on the bond that has just been sealed. It is impossible to ignore the mocking tone of Antonio's words and the fact that the scorn they express is directed toward Shylock's Jewishness as much as toward Shylock himself. Surely, too, the elevation of one religion over another is accomplished only at the expense of the religion deemed inferior. To imply that Shylock is so improved (however ironically this is meant) that he verges on becoming Christian is an expression of amused superiority to Jews. The relatively mild anti-Semitism implicit in this passage is significant, both because it is so common in the play and because it leads with the inexorable logic of historical truth to the more fierce and destructive kind of anti-Semitism, borne of fear, that surfaces when the object of it gains ascendancy. While Shylock the Jew is still regarded as a nasty but harmless smudge on the landscape, he is grudgingly accorded some human potential by the Christians; once he becomes a threat to their happiness, however, the quality in him which is initially disdained—his Jewishness—becomes the very cynosure of fear and loathing.

In its early stages, for example, the play makes only light-hearted connections between the Jew and the Devil: as the connections are more and more validated by Shylock's behavior, however, they become charged with meaning. When Launcelot, that dismal clown, is caught in the contortions of indecision as he debates with himself the pros and cons of leaving Shylock's service, he gives the association of Jew and Devil clear expression:
Certainly, my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master To be rul'd by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil; and to run away from the Jew, I should be rul'd by the fiend, who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew.

(II.ii. 1-30)

Significant here is the almost obsessive repetition of "the Jew." In the immediate context the phrase has a neat dramatic ambiguity; it refers explicitly to Shylock, but by avoiding the use of his name it also refers more generally to the concept of the Jew. The ambiguity of the phrase makes the demonic association applicable to Jews generally.

That Launcelot's description is anti-Jewish more than simply anti-Shylock is to be seen in the fact that the view of the Jew it presents is in accord with the anti-Semitic portrayal of Jews from the Middle Ages on. Launcelot's image of the Jew as the Devil incarnate conforms to a common medieval notion. It is expressed in Chaucer and much early English drama, and it is given powerful theological support by Luther, who warns the Christian world that "next to the devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venemous and violent than a true Jew." That a fool like Launcelot should take the assertion a step further and see the Jew as the Devil himself is only to be expected. And that the play should show, as its final discovery, that Shylock is only a devil manque is merely to lend further support to Luther's influential asseveration.

A less mythological but more colorful and dramatically effective anti-Jewish association is forged by the frequent and almost casually employed metaphor of Jew as dog. The play is replete with dialogue describing Shylock in these terms. In the mouth of Solanio, for example, the connection is explicit: "I never heard a passion so confus'd, / So strange, outrageous, and so variable / As the dog Jew did utter in the streets" (II. viii. 12-14). I do not believe that it is going too far to suggest that in this passage the word strange carries a host of anti-Semitic reverberations. It recalls to the traditional anti-Semitic memory the foreign and, to the ignorant, frightening Jewish rituals of mourning—rituals which in anti-Semitic literature have been redolent with implications of the slaughter of Christian children and the drinking of their blood. With this report of Shylock's rage and grief comes a massive turning point in the play. The once verminous Jew is implicitly transformed into a fearful force.

IV

To this argument I must relate a point about a passage hardly noticed in the critical literature on the play. Having bemoaned his losses and decided to take his revenge, Shylock turns to Tubal and tells him to get an officer to arrest Antonio. "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will. Go, Tubal," he says, "and meet me at our synagogue; go good Tubal, at our synagogue, Tubal" (III. i. 127-30). This collusive and sinister request to meet at the synagogue has always seemed to me to be the most deeply anti-Semitic remark in the play. It is ugly and pernicious precisely because it is indirect. What is the word synagogue supposed to mean in the context? Shylock has just determined to cut the heart out of the finest man in Venice; worse yet, the knowledge that he is legally entitled to do so brings him solace in his grief. Now what might an Elizabethan have thought the synagogue really was? Is it possible that he thought it merely a place where Jews prayed? Is it not more likely that he thought it a mysterious place where strange and terrible rituals were enacted? Whatever Shakespeare himself might have thought, the lines convey the notion that Shylock is repairing to his place of worship immediately after learning that he can now legally murder the good Antonio. Bloodletting and religious worship are brought into a very ugly and insidious conjunction.
Slightly earlier Tubal is observed approaching. Solanio remarks, "Here comes another of the tribe; a third cannot be match'd, unless the devil himself turn Jew" (III. i. 76-77). Incredible as it may seem, this line has been used to demonstrate that the play is not anti-Semitic, because Shylock and Tubal alone among the Jews are so bad as to be like devils. What the lines more probably mean is that these two villains are the worst Jews around, and that as the worst of a very bad lot they must be pretty bad.

In her study of the origins of modern German anti-Semitism Lucy Dawidowicz discerns two irreconcilable images of Jews in anti-Semitic literature,

. . . both inherited from the recent and medieval treasury of anti-Semitism. One was the image of the Jew as vermin, to be rubbed out by the heel of the boot, to be exterminated. The other was the image of the Jew as the mythic omnipotent superadversary, against whom war on the greatest scale had to be conducted. The Jew was, on the one hand, a germ, a bacillus, to be killed without conscience. On the other hand, he was, in the phrase Hitler repeatedly used . . . the "mortal enemy" (Todfiend) to be killed in self-defense.6

The Christians in The Merchant of Venice initially see Shylock in terms of the first image. He is a dog to be spurned and spat upon. His Jewish gaberdine and his Jewish habits of usury mark him as a cur to be kicked and abused. (Is it likely that Antonio would enjoy the same license to kick a rich Christian moneylender with impunity?) As Shylock gains in power, however, the image of him as a cur changes to an image of him as a potent diabolical force. In Antonio's eyes Shylock's lust for blood takes on the motive energy of Satanic evil, impervious to reason or humanity.

I pray you think you question with the Jew:
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf
Why he hath made the ewe bleak for the lamb;
You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops, and to make no noise
When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
You may as well do any thing most hard
As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—
His Jewish heart!

(IV. i. 70-80)

In this speech Shylock is utterly "the Jew"—the embodiment of his species. And the Jew's Jewish heart is wholly obdurate. He is a force of evil as strong as nature itself. No longer a dog to be controlled by beating and kicking, he has become an untamable wolf, an inferno of evil and hatred. The logical conclusion of sentiments like these, surely, is that the Jew must be kept down. Once he is up, his instinct is to kill and ravage. Indeed, Shylock has said as much himself: "Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause, / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs" (III. iii. 6-7). If the play defines Christianity as synonymous with tolerance and kindness and forgiveness, it defines Jewishness in opposite terms. The symbol of evil in The Merchant of Venice is Jewishness, and Jewishness is represented by the Jew.

V

The counterargument to the charge that Shakespeare is guilty of anti-Semitism has always depended upon the demonstration that the portrait of Shylock is, ultimately, a deeply humane one—that Shylock's arguments against the Christians are unassailable and that his position in the Christian world has resulted from that
world's treatment of him. This view, romantic in inception, still persists in the minds of a large number of critics and directors. From such authors as John Palmer and Harold Goddard one gets the image of a Shylock who carries with him the Jewish heritage of suffering and persecution, Shylock as bearer of the pain of the ages. This Shylock is religious and dignified, wronged by the world he inhabits, a man of whom the Jewish people can justly be proud and in whose vengeful intentions they may recognize a poetic righting of the wrongs of Jewish history.\footnote{That Jews have themselves recognized such a Shylock in Shakespeare's play is borne out in the self-conscious effusions of Heinrich Heine, for whom the Jewish moneylender possessed "a breast that held in it all the martyrdom . . . [of] a whole tortured people."\footnote{The usual alternative to this view is that of the critics who see Shylock as no more than a stereotyped villain. For these critics, what his sympathizers regard as Shakespeare's plea for Shylock's essential humanity (the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech [III. i. 59 ff.]) is nothing more than a justification for revenge. These critics circumvent the charge that Shakespeare is anti-Semitic by arguing that Shylock is not so much a Jew as a carryover from the old morality plays. Albert Wertheim, for example, asserts that "Shylock is a stylized and conventional comic villain and no more meant to be a realistic portrayal of a Jew than Shakespeare's Aaron is meant to be a realistic Moor."\footnote{John P. Sisk confidently declares that "Kittredge was mainly right in his contention that the play is not an anti-Semitic document." These views are determinedly anti-sentimental and usefully balance the oversensitive opposing position. Their mainstay is dramatic precedent, from which can be deduced the similarities between Shylock and the stereotypical comic villain of earlier dramatic modes. Toby Lelyveld notes striking resemblances between Shylock and the Pantalone figure of commedia dell'arte, for example: "In physical appearance, mannerisms and the situations in which he is placed, Shylock is so like his Italian prototype that his characterization, at least superficially, presents no new aspects save that of its Jewishness."\footnote{What the two critical opinions have in common in their determination to defend Shakespeare from the charge of anti-Semitism—but from opposite sides of the fence. Shylock is either a better man than we might be disposed to believe or he is not really human.\footnote{The latter reading seems to me to be closer to what the play presents. It is undoubtedly true that Shylock's "humanity" has frequently been given full—even excessive—play in the theatre. But it is always useful to bear in mind that he is the play's villain. All his words, even the most convincingly aggrieved among them, are the words of a cold, heartless killer and should therefore be regarded skeptically. Shylock is untouched by the plight of those around him, and he plots the ruthless murder of Antonio. Pity for him therefore strikes me as grossly misplaced, and the view of him as the embodiment of wickedness seems dramatically correct. His argument that he is like other men and that he is vengeful only because he has been wronged by them is a violent corruption of the true state of things. Shylock is cruel and monstrous and utterly unlike other men in their capacity for love, fellowship, and sympathy. Consider his remark that he would not have exchanged the ring his daughter stole for a wilderness of monkeys. Rather than redeeming him, as Kirschbaum points out, it only makes him the worse; by demonstrating that he is capable of sentiment and aware of love, it "blackens by contrast his inhumanity all the more."\footnote{As a sincerely expressed emotion the line is out of character. It is the only reference to his wife in the play, and, if we are to take his treatment of Jessica as an indication of his treatment of those he professes to hold dear, we may reasonably conclude that it is a heartfelt expression not of love but of sentimental self-pity. Shylock is, in short, a complete and unredeemed villain whose wickedness is a primary trait. It is a trait, moreover, that is reinforced by the fact of his Jewishness, which, to make the wickedness so much the worse, is presented as synonymous with it. And yet, although Shylock is the villain of the play, the critics who have been made uneasy by the characterization of his evil have sensed a dimension of pathos, a quality of humanity, that is part of the play. Audiences and readers have usually found themselves pitying Shylock in the end, even though the play's other characters, having demolished him, hardly give the wicked Jew a second thought. The Christians fail to see the humanity of Shylock, not because they are less sensitive than readers and spectators, but because that humanity emerges only in the end, during the court scene when they are understandably caught up in the}}}}}})}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}}
atmosphere of happiness that surrounds Antonio's release from death. Audiences and readers, whose attention is likely to be equally shared by Antonio and Shylock, are more aware of what is happening to Shylock. They are therefore aware of the change that is forced upon him. To them he is more than simply an undone villain. He is a suffering human being.

Shylock becomes a pitiable character only during his last appearance in the court of Venice. It is here that he is humanized—during a scene in which he is usually silent. Ironically, it is not in his pleadings or self-justifications that Shylock becomes a sympathetic figure, but in his still and silent transformation from a crowing blood-hungry monster into a quiescent victim whose fate lies in the hands of those he had attempted to destroy. How this transmogrification is accomplished is, perhaps, best explained by Gordon Craig's exquisitely simple observation about the chief character of The Bells. Craig remarked that "no matter who the human being may be, and what his crime, the sorrow which he suffers must appeal to our hearts. . . ."14 This observation helps explain why the scene of reversal which turns aside the impending catastrophe of The Merchant of Venice does not leave the audience with feelings of unmixed delight in the way that the reversals of more conventional comedies do. The reversal of The Merchant of Venice defies a basic premise of the normal moral logic of drama. Instead of merely enjoying the overthrow of an unmitigated villain, we find ourselves pitying him. The conclusion of the play is thus a triumph of ambiguity: Shakespeare has sustained the moral argument which dictates Shylock's undoing while simultaneously compelling us to react on an emotional level more compassionate than intellectual.

VI

If it is true that Jewishness in the play is equated with wickedness, it is surely unlikely that Shylock's elaborate rationalizations of his behavior are intended to render him as sympathetic. Embedded in the lengthy speeches of self-justification are statements of fact that ring truer to Shylock's motives than the passages in which he identifies himself as wrongly and malevolently persecuted. In his first encounter with Antonio, for example, Shylock explains in a deeply felt aside why he hates the Christian merchant: "I hate him for he is a Christian; / But more, for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (I. iii. 42-45). It is only as an afterthought that he ponders the larger question of Antonio's hatred of the Jews. The chief reason Shylock gives for hating Antonio—and the announces it as the chief reason—is directly related to his avarice in money matters.

Almost all of Shylock's speeches can convincingly be interpreted in this light. When he speaks, Shylock is a sarcastic character both in the literal sense of fleshrending and in the modern sense of sneering. For example, when he describes the bloody agreement as a "merry bond," the word merry becomes charged with a sinister ambiguity. Until the scene of his undoing, Shylock's character is dominated by the traits usual to Elizabethan comic villains. He is a hellish creature, a discontented soul whose vilifying of others marks him as the embodiment of malevolence and misanthropy. After Jessica's escape Shylock is seen vituperating his daughter, not mourning her, bemoaning the loss of his money as much as the loss of his child. His affirmations of his common humanity with the Christians, particularly in the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech, are above all meant to justify his thirst for revenge. His allegations that Antonio has disgraced him, laughed at him, and scorned his nation only because he is a Jew are lopsided. He is abused chiefly because he is a devil. The fact of his Jewishness only offers his abusers an explanation for his diabolical nature; it does not offer them the pretext to torment an innocent man. His speech of wheedling self-exculpation is surely intended to be regarded in the way that beleaguered tenants today might regard the whine of their wealthy landlord: "Hath not a landlord eyes? Hath not a landlord organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" Instead of eliciting sympathy for an underdog, Shakespeare intended the speech to elicit detestation for one in a privileged and powerful position who knowingly and deliberately abases himself in a plea for unmerited sympathy.

Furthermore, in answer to the tradition which defends Shylock on the grounds that Shakespeare gave him a sympathetic, self-protecting speech, we need to be reminded that the assertions it contains are dependent upon
a demonstrable falsehood. The climax of Shylock's speech, its cutting edge, is his confident cry that his 
revenge is justified by Christian precedent: "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a 
Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge" (III. i. 68-71). In 
fact what happens is that in return for the crime which Shylock commits against Antonio, he is offered not 
revenge but mercy—harshly given perhaps, but mercy nonetheless—and this in circumstances where revenge 
would be morally and legally sanctioned. The director who causes this speech to be uttered as a genuine 
defense of its speaker is thus ignoring one of the play's most tangible morals.

VII

Until the court scene, Shylock remains a readily understood and easily identified villain. His dominant 
characteristics are the negative qualities normally associated with vice figures. Sympathy for him before the 
reversal therefore does violence to the dramatic purpose of the play. Completely in the ascendency, he has 
power and the law itself on his side. When sympathy finally becomes right and proper, it transcends the 
narrow bounds of religion and stereotype. When finally we are made to pity Shylock, we do not pity a 
wrongfully persecuted member of an oppressed minority. Instead we pity a justly condemned and justly 
punished villain. A potential murderer has been caught, is brought to justice, and is duly and appropriately 
sentenced. The pity we are moved to feel is as natural and inevitable as the great loathing we were made to 
feel formerly. It results simply from the sympathy that we are likely to admit at any sight of human suffering, 
no matter how well deserved it may be.

In the court scene the presence of Portia stands as a direct assurance that Antonio will not die. While we 
remain conscious of Shylock's evil intentions, then, our judgment of him is tempered by our privileged 
awareness of his ultimate impotence. In other words, although we might despise Shylock, we do not fear him. 
This distinction is critical to an understanding of his character and of Shakespeare's intentions, and it helps 
explain the readiness with which we are able to extend sympathy to the villain.

The chief explanation, however, goes somewhat deeper. It is simultaneously psychological and dramatic. It is 
psychological to the extent that we are willy-nilly affected by the sight of Shylock in pain. It is dramatic to the 
extent that the scene is so arranged as to dramatize in the subtlest possible way the manifestation of that pain. 
Shylock remains onstage while his erstwhile victims are restored to prosperity by Portia. The publication of 
Antonio's rescue and of Shylock's punishment takes ninety-six lines, from Portia's "Tarry a little, there is 
something else . . ." (IV. i. 305) to Gratiano's gleeful "Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, / To 
bring thee to the gallows, not to the font" (11. 399-400). During this period—about five minutes—Shylock is 
transformed from a villain into a victim.

In part the inversion is achieved by use of the established fool, Gratiano, who, by trumpeting the victory of the 
Christians, assumes Shylock's earlier role as one who enjoys another's pain. Gratiano is a character who talks 
too much, who suspects silence, who prefers to play the fool. His joy in Shylock's downfall becomes sadistic 
and self-serving. Interestingly, it is not shared in quite so voluble a fashion by the other Christian characters. 
Portia has done all the work, and yet it is Gratiano—whose real contribution to the scene is to announce 
Portia's success and to excoriate the Jew—who cries at Shylock "Now, infidel, I have you on the hip" (1. 334). 
Until this point in the play Shylock has been vicious and sadistic, nastily rubbing his hands in anticipation of a 
bloody revenge, thriving on the smell of the blood he is about to taste. Now that role is taken from him by 
Gratiano, on whom it sits unattractively. The failure of his friends to participate in this orgy of revenge 
suggests that their feelings are more those of relief at Antonio's release than of lust for Shylock's blood.

As the tables are turned upon him, Shylock gradually and unexpectedly reveals a new dimension of himself, 
and the farcical pleasure we have been led to expect is subverted by his surprising response to defeat. He 
reveals a capacity for pain and suffering. As a would-be murderer, Shylock gets at least what he deserves. As 
a human being asking for mercy, he receives, and possibly merits, sympathy. Shylock recognizes instantly
that he has been undone. Once Portia reminds him that the bond does not allow him to shed one drop of blood, his orgy is over and he says little during the scene of dénouement, "Is that the law?" he lamely asks. Five lines later, he is ready to take his money and leave the court with whatever remaining dignity is permitted him. But an easy egress is not to be his. He is made to face the consequences of his evil. Portia's addresses to Shylock during the confrontation are disguised exhortations to him to suffer for the wrong he has done. She forces him to acknowledge her triumph and his defeat: "Tarry a little" (1. 305); "Soft . . . soft, no haste!" (11. 320-21); "Why doth the Jew pause?" (1. 335); "Therefore prepare thee to cut" (1. 324); "Tarry Jew" (1. 346); "Art thou contented, Jew? what dost thou say?" (1. 393). Shylock is made to stand silently, receiving and accepting mercy and some restitution from Antonio; he is compelled to bear, not the stings of revenge upon himself, but the sharper stings of a forgiveness that he is incapable of giving. His humiliation lies in his inability to refuse the gift of life from one whose life he maliciously sought. When he requests leave to go from the court, the change that has come over him is total. He is no longer a figure of vice, and he has not become a figure of fun (except, perhaps, to Gratiano). He is a lonely, deprived, and defeated creature feeling pain. The fact that he has caused his own downfall does not diminish the sympathy felt for him now, in part because of the protraction of his undoing, and in part because of the dramatic effect of the change in him. The suddenness of the alteration of his character forces a comparison between what he once was and what he has become. And where dramatic energy is its own virtue, the visible eradication of that energy is a source of pathos.

In this scene the word Jew has been used like a blunt instrument by Portia and Gratiano. Now, being used against one who has become a victim, the former associations of the word are thrown into question. Portia's persistence in doing to the Jew as he would have done to Antonio has a strangely bitter effect. She hunts him when he is down; she throws the law in his teeth with a righteousness that seems repulsive to us primarily because we have long been aware that Antonio was ultimately invulnerable. Having removed Shylock's sting, she is determined to break his wings in the bargain. In this determination, she is unlike her somewhat dull but more humane husband, who is prepared to pay Shylock the money owed him and to allow him to leave. Portia's stance is beyond legal questioning, of course. What gives us pause is the doggedness with which she exacts justice. Shylock is ruined by adversity and leaves the stage without even the strength to curse his foes: "I pray you give me leave to go from hence, / I am not well" (11. 395-96). He communicates his pain by his powerlessness, and the recognition of this pain stirs the audience.

In a brief space, in which his silence replaces his usual verbosity, Shylock is transformed. A villain is shown to be more than merely villainous. Shylock is shown to be more than merely the Jew. He is shown to possess a normal, unheroic desire to live at any cost. The scene of undoing is an ironic realization of Shylock's previously histrionic pleas for understanding. We now see something that formerly there was no reason to believe: that if you prick him, Shylock bleeds.

VIII

By endowing Shylock with humanity in the end Shakespeare would seem to have contradicted the dominating impression of the play, in which the fierce diabolism of the Jew is affirmed in so many ways. And indeed, the contradiction is there. Having described a character who is defined by an almost otherworldly evil, whose life is one unremitting quest for an unjust vengeance, it seems inconsistent to allow that he is capable of normal human feelings. The Jew has been used to instruct the audience and the play's Christians about the potential and essential evil of his race; he has been used to show that a Jew with power is a terrible thing to behold, is capable of the vilest sort of destruction. And the play has demonstrated in the person of his daughter that the only good Jew is a Christian. The contradiction emerges almost in spite of Shakespeare's anti-Semitic design. He has shown on the one hand, by the creation of a powerful and dominant dramatic image, that the Jew is inhuman. But he seems to have been compelled on the other hand to acknowledge that the Jew is also a human being.
The most troubling aspect of the contradictory element of *The Merchant of Venice* is this: if Shakespeare knew that Jews were human beings like other people—and the conclusion of the play suggests that he did—and if he knew that they were not merely carriers of evil but human creatures with human strengths and weaknesses, then the play as a whole is a betrayal of the truth. To have used it as means for eliciting feelings of loathing for Jews, while simultaneously recognizing that its portrayal of the race it vilifies is inaccurate or, possibly, not the whole truth, is profoundly troubling. It is as though *The Merchant of Venice* is an anti-Semitic play written by an author who is not an anti-Semite—but an author who has been willing to use the cruel stereotypes of that ideology for mercenary and artistic purposes.

Notes


3 Bernard Grebanier, interestingly enough, agrees that the play is not anti-Semitic, but contains instances of anti-Semitism. He remarks that Gratiano "is the only character in the entire play who can be accused of anti-Semitism." *The Truth about Shylock* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 300.


6 Dawidowicz, p. 222.


12 A fuller analysis of these two critical readings is provided in Danson, pp. 126-39.


James Shapiro (essay date 1996)

In the following essay, Shapiro discusses the Elizabethan fascination with the Jewish practice of circumcision and argues that Shylock's desire to cut a pound of Antonio's "fair flesh" centers on the threat of circumcision.

What a matter were it then if I should cut of his privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?

—spoken by the Jew in the English translation of Alexander Silvayn's The Orator, 1596

I hope I shall never be so stupid as to be circumcised. I would rather cut off the left breast of my Catherine and of all women.

—Martin Luther, c. 1540

Perhaps the least explicable feature of the ritual murder accusations was the charge that Jews first circumcised their victims before killing them. In some ways it must have made perfectly good sense. After all, it was well known that Jews circumcised young boys, and it was not all that difficult to imagine this practice as part of a more complex and secretive Jewish ritual ending in human sacrifice. In other ways, however, it made no sense at all, for as Menasseh ben Israel justifiably wondered, "to what end he was first circumcised" if "it was intended that shortly after this child should be crucified?" The confusion is understandable, since the ritual significance of what is described in the Bible as cutting the "foreskin" of the "flesh" remains poorly understood even by Jews and other peoples who have long practiced this rite. In the twentieth century we stand doubly removed from appreciating the effect of circumcision upon cultural identity. Even as circumcision is now routinely practiced in Western cultures for hygienic and aesthetic reasons, an awareness of its symbolic meanings (aside from psychoanalytic ones) has been virtually lost. Current debate about circumcision has focused almost exclusively on the pain it might cause the child, or on its effects upon reducing the spread of certain diseases. A very different situation prevailed in early modern Europe, where there was an intense curiosity about the often unnerving implications of a ritual bound up with theological, racial, genealogical, and sexual concerns. I am interested here not only in restoring a sense of the fascination and importance circumcision held for Elizabethans but also in arguing that an occluded threat of circumcision informs Shylock's desire to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh. Before turning to the presence of circumcision in The Merchant of Venice and its sources, it is important to consider what this ritual might have meant to Elizabethans, what their understanding of it was based on, and what light this casts on their cultural beliefs.

I. Elizabethan ideas about circumcision

In the twentieth century circumcision has often been described as a symbolic form of castration or emasculation. This association has undoubtedly been influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, who, in an argument that bears a striking resemblance to Maria Edgeworth's ideas about childhood trauma and the wellsprings of anti-Jewish feelings, writes in Little Hans that the "castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis—a piece of his penis, they think—and this gives them a right to despise Jews. And there is no stronger unconscious root for the sense of superiority over woman." For Freud, the symbolic act of circumcision proves a vital source of both misogyny and antisemitism. The notion that circumcision could easily slide into the more definitive cut of castration did not originate with Freud and in fact had long circulated in English culture. D'Blossiers Tovey, in his account of instances in medieval England in which Jews were charged with being "emasculators," cites a case from the reign of King John in which "Bonefand a Jew of Bedford was indicted not for circumcising, but totally cutting off the privy member" of a boy named Richard. And Shakespeare's contemporaries used circumcision as a metaphor for castration: the poet Gabriel Harvey, for example, implores God to "circumcise the tongues and pens" of his enemies.
For early modern English writers, though, the threat of circumcision did not begin and end with emasculation. In the sixteenth century circumcision was more than a cut, it was an unmistakable sign. But of what, exactly? When the Elizabethan preacher Andrew Willet tried to answer this question he found himself describing circumcision as not only a "a sign of remembrance or commemoration of the Covenant . . . made between God and Abraham" but also as a sign "distinguishing the Hebrews from all other people." To this genealogical, Jewish association, he added a few more that are distinctly Christian: circumcision prefigured "baptism" and demonstrated "the natural disease of man, even original sin."\(^5\) To these Willet might have added yet another: that through circumcision, one "is . . . made a Jew,"\(^6\) a troubling thought for a Christian who might find himself threatened with such a cut.

One such individual was Thomas Coryate, the celebrated Elizabethan traveler. Coryate describes how his efforts to convert the Jews of the Venetian ghetto soured, leading him to flee from the hostile crowd. Though this specific detail is never mentioned in the narrative itself, a picture of Coryate pursued by a knife-wielding Jew is included in a series of scenes illustrating the title page of his travel book, Coryats Crudities (see illustration 9).\(^7\) For those who wrote commendatory poems to Coryate's book—including Laurence Whitaker—this Jew threatens not death but circumcision: "Thy courtesan clipped thee, 'ware Tom, I advise thee, / And fly from the Jews, lest they circumcise thee." Hugh Holland, too, draws attention to the danger to Coryate's foreskin: "Ulysses heard no Syren sing: nor Coryate / The Jew, least his prepuce might prove excoriate." Coryate's conversionary effort backfires, and instead of turning Jews into Christians he finds himself in danger of being religiously transfigured by means of a circumcising cut.\(^8\) Holland, comparing Coryate to Hugh Broughton, the evangelizing Elizabethan Hebraist, makes this symmetrical relationship between baptism and circumcision explicit:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He more prevailed against the' excoriate Jews} \\
\text{Than Broughton could, or twenty more such Hughes.} \\
\text{And yet but for one petty poor misprision,} \\
\text{He was nigh made one of the circumcision.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

With the exception of a handful of infants circumcised by the radical Puritan group led by John Traske around 1620, and a few self-circumcisors like Thomas Tany and Thomas Ramsey thirty years later, there is no evidence that circumcisions took place in early modern England. Nonetheless, the same post-Reformation interest that led to this Judaizing impulse also inspired a broader curiosity about a ritual not only central to the Old Testament accounts of the patriarchs but also crucial to the theological position maintained by the apostle Paul in that central text of the Protestant Reformation, Epistle to the Romans. One result of this new interest was that English travelers eagerly sought out invitations to circumcisions and recorded what they witnessed for the benefit of their contemporaries. As noted earlier, the resilient Coryate, who in the course of his extensive travels had long desired to observe a circumcision, finally had his wish granted in Constantinople, at the "house of a certain English Jew called Amis" [i.e., Ames]. The fact that Ames and his two sisters spoke English no doubt made it easier for Coryate to have various details of the ritual explained to him. Coryate describes how the Jews came into the room and sung certain Hebrew songs, after which the child was brought to his father, who sat down in a chair and placed the child being now eight days old in his lap. The whole company being desirous that we Christians should observe the ceremony, called us to approach near to the child. And when we came, a certain other Jew drawing forth a little instrument made not unlike those small scissors that our ladies and gentlewomen do much use, did with the same cut off the prepuce or foreskin of the child, and after a very strange manner, unused (I believe) of the ancient Hebrews, did put his mouth to the child's yard, and sucked up the blood.\(^10\)
English observers were particularly struck by how the rite symbolically enacted the male child's passage from his mother to the community of men. Coryate observes that at the conclusion of the rite, the "prepuce that was cut off was carried to the mother, who keepeth it very preciously as a thing of worth," and Fynes Moryson, describing a circumcision he had witnessed in Prague, was alert to the fact that women were "not permitted to enter" the room and that they "delivered the child to the father" at the door. Like Coryate, Moryson records his surprise at witnessing another practice for which Scripture had offered no precedent, metzitzah, the part of the ceremony in which the circumcisor sucks the blood from the glans of the circumcized "yard" or penis of the infant. Moryson writes that "the rabbi cut off his prepuce, and (with leave be it related for clearing of the ceremony) did with his mouth suck the blood of his privy part." Apparently, this innovative practice, introduced during the Talmudic period, though not universally practiced by Jews, must have seemed to these English observers to have sodomitical overtones.

Coryate, Moryson, and other Elizabethan observers express surprise at the discrepancy between the ceremonies that they witnessed and that which they had expected to see based on the divinely ordained precepts set forth in the Bible. There was also disagreement over whether the Jews were the first people to have practiced circumcision. At stake in this debate was whether circumcision should be viewed as something peculiarly Jewish. On one side there were those like Samuel Purchas, who had read too many accounts from too many foreign lands to accept the argument that all peoples who practiced circumcision had learned this rite from the Jews. Purchas insisted that the "ceremony and custom of circumcision hath been and still is usual among many nations of whom there was never any suspicion that they descended from the Israelites." Opposing this minority view were those like Andrew Willet, who maintained that "circumcision was a peculiar mark of distinction for the Hebrews" and further urged that "some nations among the Gentiles retained circumcision by an apish imitation of the Hebrews, but they did abuse it superstitiously and did not keep the rite of institution as the Lord had appointed it." Writers who sided with Willet's position used this as a basis for substantiating claims about the discovery of the ten lost tribes of Israel. When Thomas Thorowgood, for example, writes that "many Indian nations are of Judaical race," he offers as evidence that the "frequent and constant character of circumcision, so singularly fixed to the Jews, is to be found among them."

While it was widely accepted that others—especially Turks—practiced circumcision, there was still considerable resistance to abandoning the idea that it was a distinctively Jewish rite. An unusual story regarding Turkish circumcision—and murder—made its way to England in February 1595 when John Barton, the English ambassador in Constantinople, forwarded to Lord Burghley a report describing the events surrounding the accession of the Turkish monarch Mohamet III. The narrative, written in Italian by a Jew named Don Solomon, describes how Mohamet consolidated his power by inviting his nineteen brothers, the eldest eleven years old, to greet him: Mohamet "told them not to fear, he meant no harm to them but only to have them circumcised according to their custom. . . As soon as they kissed his hand, they were circumcised, taken aside by a mute, and dextrously strangled with handkerchiefs. This certainly seemed strange and cruel, but it was the custom of this realm." The story offers yet one more instance, in the year preceding the first staging of The Merchant, of the association of circumcision with ritualistic and surreptitious murder.

II. Romans and the theological meanings of circumcision

This unprecedented interest in the physical act of circumcision was directly related to some of the theological preoccupations of post-Reformation England. Elizabethans knew that circumcision had caused something of an identity crisis for early Christians, especially Paul. Paul, who was himself circumcised and had circumcised others, directed his epistles to communities for whom to circumcise or not to circumcise was a matter of great concern. But Paul's remarks on circumcision went well beyond approving or disapproving of the act itself: they offered a revolutionary challenge to what defined a Jew, and by implication, a Christian. Luther and Calvin both devoted themselves to explicating Paul's often cryptic remarks on circumcision, and a host of English translators, commentators, theologians, and preachers enabled the widespread circulation of these
interpretations to the broadest community possible. More than anything else in the late sixteenth century—including firsthand reports like the ones described above—Paul's ideas about circumcision saturated what Shakespeare's contemporaries thought, wrote, and heard about circumcision. At times confusing and even contradictory, Paul's remarks, and the extraordinary commentary produced to explain and resolve various ambiguities contained in them, had an immeasurable impact on Elizabethan conceptions of Jews. This body of commentary, much of it gathering dust in a handful of archives, richly repays close examination.

The first problem confronting a Christian explicator of Paul's Romans was a fairly simple one. Since God had first ordered Abraham to undertake circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, what justified abandoning this practice? And what were the consequences of such a break? The immediate answer was that the Jews had misunderstood that this Covenant, like the Law, was not changed or abolished by Jesus, "but more plainly expounded . . . and fulfilled." "Surely," Philippe de Mornay wrote, in a text translated by Sir Philip Sidney, "in this point . . . we [Christians] be flat contrary to them." And sounding a bit like a modern deconstructive critic, Mornay adds, that the "thing which doth always deceive" the Jews is that "they take the sign for the thing signified," since circumcision was merely a "sign or seal of the Covenant, and not the Covenant itself."20

For John Calvin, the "disputation and controversy" over circumcision similarly masked a more consequential debate over "the ceremonies of the Law," which Paul "comprehendeth here under the particular term of circumcision." By equating circumcision with the Law and its supersession by faith, English Protestants drew an analogy between Paul's rejection of circumcision and their own repudiation of Catholicism's emphasis on justification through good works: it is "not circumcision, but faith [that] makes us wait for the hope of righteousness; therefore not circumcision but faith justifies."21 Calvin's interpretation of Paul had made it clear that "circumcision" had lost its "worth,"22 having been replaced by the sacrament of baptism. No longer even "a sign," it was "a thing without any use."23

But such an outright rejection of circumcision seemingly contradicted Paul's own assertion that "circumcision verily is profitable, if thou do the Law."24 Confronted with such a claim, commentators had to work hard to show that Paul's words actually meant quite the opposite of what literalists might mistakenly imagine. In order to achieve this end, the gloss to the Geneva Bible takes Paul's wonderfully concise and epigrammatic phrase and turns it into a ponderous argument: "The outward circumcision, if it be separated from the inward, doeth not only not justify, but also condemn them that are circumcised, of whom indeed it requireth that, which it signifieth, that is to say, cleanness of heart and the whole life, according to the commandment of the Law."25

The commentator's overreading is enabled by the fact that Paul in the verses that follow introduces a crucial distinction between inward and outward circumcision. It is a distinction central to his redefinition of Jewish identity in a world in which circumcision has been superseded: "He is not a Jew which is one outward, neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one within, and the circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God."26 Paul here attacks Jewish identity at its genealogical root.27 If he can deny that outward physical circumcision alone defines the Jew from generation to generation, he can insist on a figurative reading of the Law in all other matters as well. For Joseph Hall, Paul's message is unambiguous: "He that would be a true Israelite or Jew indeed must be such inwardly" and must be "cleansed from all corrupt affections and greed." Moreover, this "circumcision must be inwardly in the heart and soul and spirit (in cutting off the unclean foreskin thereof) and not a literal and outward circumcision of the flesh."28

Before turning to the symbolic circumcision of the heart touched on here by Paul and his explicators—the most striking feature of his argument and the most relevant to a reading of The Merchant of Venice—it is important first to emphasize that Paul and his followers were reluctant to abandon the outward, physical implications of trimming the foreskin, in part because this surgical act so perfectly symbolized the cutting off of sexual desire. Andrew Willet, drawing on the work of Origen, remarks that even if "there had been no other mystery in circumcision, it was fit that the people of God should carry some badge or cognizance to discern
them from other people. And if the amputation or cutting off some part of the body were requisite, what part was more fit then that . . . which seemed to be obscene?" The gloss to the Geneva Bible reads this 

puritanical perspective back into Genesis 17.11, explaining there that the "privy part is circumcised to show that all that is begotten of man is corrupt and must be mortified." And the 1591 Bishops' Bible similarly stresses the connection between circumcision and the curbing of sexual desire, explaining that Deuteronomy 30.6—"And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart"—means that God will "cut away thy ungodly lusts and affections." These commentaries effectively rewrite Old Testament allusions to circumcision, infusing them with Paul's deep discomfort with human sexuality.

John Donne was particularly drawn to this line of thought. In his New Year's Day sermon preached in 1624 commemorating the Feast of the Circumcision, Donne imagines himself in Abraham's place after having been commanded by the Lord to circumcise himself and all the men in his household. Given that it was to be done "in that part of the body," Donne surmises that this command must have struck Abraham as too "obscene a thing to be brought into the fancy of so many women, so many young men, so many strangers to other nations, as might bring the promise and Covenant itself into scorn and into suspicion." Why, Abraham must have wondered, "does God command me so base and unclean a thing, so scornful and misinterpretable a thing, as circumcision, and circumcision in that part of the body?" The answer, of course, is that in "this rebellious part is the root of all sin." The privy member "need[s] this stigmatical mark of circumcision to be imprinted upon it" to prevent Abraham's descendants from "degenerating] from the nobility of their race." Willet, Donne, and like-minded commentators never quite acknowledge that insofar as the cutting off of the foreskin effectively subdues that rebellious and sinful part of men's bodies, circumcision once again veers perilously close to the idea of a (partial) sexual castration and emasculation.

It was also clear to Christian theologians that for the Jews who literally circumcised the flesh, the Covenant could only be transmitted through men. This helps explain why Jewish daughters like Jessica in The Merchant of Venice and Abigail in The Jew of Malta can so easily cross the religious boundaries that divide their stigmatized fathers from the dominant Christian community. The religious difference of Jewish women is not usually imagined as physically inscribed in their flesh, and the possibility of identifying women as Jews through some kind of incision never took hold in England, though for a brief time in the fifteenth century in northern Italy the requirement that Jewish women have their ears pierced and wear earrings served precisely this function. In her investigation of this sumptuary tradition, Diane Owen Hughes cites the Franciscan preacher Giacomo della Marca, who in an advent sermon said that earrings are jewels "that Jewish women wear in place of circumcision, so that they can be distinguished from other [i.e., Christian] women." One wonders whether Pauline ideas about circumcising desire also shaped this bizarre proposal. Though this method of marking Jewish women was shortlived (other women also wanted to wear earrings) and apparently not widespread, a trace of it may possibly be found in The Merchant of Venice, when Shylock, upon hearing that Jessica has not only left him but also taken his money and jewels, exclaims: "Two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!" Shylock fantasizes that his converted daughter returns, and through her earring is reinscribed at last as a circumcised Jewess.

The problems that circumcision raise for issues of gender and sexuality persist into our own more secular age. To cite an unfortunate instance of this, modern medicine, when confronted with the extremely rare cases of botched circumcisions, has found it advisable to alter the gender of the child by reconstructing female rather than male genitalia. Does this procedure confirm the kind of anxieties we have been exploring about the underlying castrating and feminizing threat of circumcision? Or does it suggest that doctors are perhaps so influenced by such deeply embedded cultural beliefs as to translate them into scientific practice? In either case it underscores how provisional the assignment of gender is, a point familiar enough to Shakespeare's audiences confronted in The Merchant with cross-dressing women and a hero who describes himself as a "tainted wether," or castrated ram. Circumcision, then, was an extraordinarily powerful signifier, one that not only touched on issues of identity that ranged from the sexual to the theological but, often enough, on the
intersection of the two. The threat of Shylock's cut was complex, resonant, and unusually terrifying.

II. Circumcision in the sources of The Merchant

The foregoing analysis may help explain why *The Merchant of Venice*, more than any other depiction of Jews in this period, has continued to provoke such controversy and has also continued to stir long-buried prejudices against the Jews. I want to be careful here about being misunderstood. I am not proposing that Shakespeare is antisemitic (or, for that matter, philosemitic). *The Merchant of Venice* is a play, a work of fiction, not a diary or a polygraph test; since no one knows what Shakespeare personally thought about Jews, readers will continue to make up their own minds about this question. *The Merchant of Venice* is thus not "about" ritual murder or a veiled circumsising threat any more than it is about usury, or marriage, or homosocial bonding, or mercy, or Venetian trade, or crossdressing, or the many other social currents that run through this and every other one of Shakespeare's plays. Plays, unlike sermons, are not reducible to one lesson or another, nor do they gain their resonance from being about a recognizable central theme. Surely, in the hands of a talented dramatist, the less easily definable the social and psychological currents a play explores, the greater its potential to haunt and disturb. We return again and again to Shakespeare's plays because they seem to operate in these depths and tap into the roots of social contradictions on a stunningly regular basis, leaving critics with the task of trying to explain exactly what these are and how Shakespeare's plays engage them. With this in mind, I offer the following interpretation of the pound of flesh plot.

Those watching or reading *The Merchant of Venice* are often curious about what part of Antonio's body Shylock has in mind when they learn of Shylock's desire to exact "an equal pound" of Antonio's "fair flesh, to be cut off and taken" in that "part" of his body that "pleaseth" the Jew. Those all too familiar with the plot may forget that it is not until the trial scene in act 4 that this riddle is solved and we learn that Shylock intends to cut from Antonio's "breast" near his heart.36 Or partially solved. Why, one wonders, is Antonio's breast the spot most pleasing to Shylock? And why, for the sake of accuracy, wouldn't Shylock cut out rather than "cut off a pound of flesh if it were to come from "nearest" Antonio's "heart"? Moreover, why don't we learn of this crucial detail until Shylock's final appearance in the play?

It is not immediately clear how for an Elizabethan audience an allusion to a Jew cutting off a man's "fair flesh" would invoke images of a threat to the victim's heart, especially when one calls to mind the identification of Jews as circumsisors and emasculators. On a philological level, too, the choice of the word *flesh* here carries with it the strong possibility that Shylock has a different part of Antonio's anatomy in mind. In the late sixteenth century the word *flesh* was consistently used, especially in the Bible, in place of *penis*. Readers of the Geneva Bible would know from examples like Genesis 17.11 that God had commanded Abraham to "circumcise the foreskin of your flesh," and that discussions of sexuality and disease in Leviticus always use the word *flesh* when speaking of the penis.37

Not surprisingly, popular writers took advantage of the punning opportunities made available by this euphemism. Shortly before writing *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare himself had played on the sexual possibilities of *flesh* in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the opening scene of that play the servant Samson, boasting of his sexual prowess, tells Gregory: "Me [the maids] shall feel while I am able to stand, and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh." Playing on the contrast between erect flesh and flaccid fish, Gregory responds: "'Tis well thou art not fish." Mercutio returns to the same tired joke about the loss of tumescence when he says of Romeo's melancholy: "O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified."38 *The Merchant of Venice* is similarly replete with bad jokes about trimmed male genitals. As noted above, Antonio in the court scene speaks of himself as "a tainted wether" best suited to suffer the exaction of Shylock's cut.39 In addition, Salerio's jibe about Jessica having Shylock's "stones," that is, testicles, "upon her" and Gratiano's tasteless joke about "mar[ring] the young clerk's pen" (i.e., penis) offer two other instances from the play of men's obsessive anxiety about castrating cuts.40 It should also be noted that in Elizabethan England such a cut was not merely the stuff of jokes. As a deterrent to crime, convicted male felons were told at their sentencing to prepare to be "hanged by the neck,
and being alive cut down, and your privy members to be cut off, and your bowels to be taken out of your belly and there burned, you being alive.”

Scholars have long recognized that Shakespeare drew upon a well established tradition in his retelling the story of the pound of flesh. Among the printed sources Shakespeare may have looked at were Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* and Alexander Silvyn's *The Orator*. Other scholars have uncovered a range of analogues and antecedents, including popular English ballads like "Gernatus the Jew" and medieval works like the *Cursor Mundi* that bear a strong resemblance to Shakespeare's plot. Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to what part of the body the pound of flesh is taken from in these sources and analogues. In fact, when Shakespeare came to one of the main sources that we are pretty confident he consulted, Silvyn's *The Orator*, he would have read about a Jew who wonders if he "should cut of his [Christian victim's] privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?" Before turning to this story and its curious reception, I want to consider another first, one that is even more revealing about the significance of the pound of flesh: Gregorio Leti's *The Life of Pope Sixtus the Fifth*.

Leti was a popular Italian historian, born in the early seventeenth century, who left Italy and took up residence in Northern Europe after converting to Protestantism. For a brief period in the early 1680s he lived and wrote in England. Although there are no recorded performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during his stay there, Leti may well have become familiar with the printed text of Shakespeare's play in the course of the extensive research he undertook on Elizabethan England. The earliest edition of his biography of Sixtus V, first published in Lausanne in 1669, omits any reference to the celebrated pound of flesh story; the anecdote was only introduced in the revised version, published in Amsterdam after Leti's visit to England, which may suggest that Leti drew on English sources for this addition.

After 1754, when Ellis Farneworth translated Leti's story, those unable to read the Italian original could learn how in the days of Queen Elizabeth I it was "reported in Rome" that the great English naval hero, Sir Francis Drake, "had taken and plundered St. Domingo, in Hispaniola, and carried off an immense booty. This account came in a private letter to Paul Secchi, a very considerable merchant in the city, who had large concerns in those parts, which he had insured." Leti then relates that Secchi then "sent for the insurer, Sampson Ceneda, a Jew, and acquainted him with it. The Jew, whose interest it was to have such a report thought false, gave many reasons why it could not possibly be true; and, at last, worked himself up into such a passion, that he said, "I'll lay you a pound of my flesh it is a lie."" Secchi replied, "If you like it, I'll lay you a thousand crowns against a pound of your flesh, that it's true." The Jew accepted the wager, and articles were immediately executed betwixt them, the substance of which was "that if Secchi won, he should himself cut the flesh, with a sharp knife, from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased."

Leti then relates that "the truth of the account" of Drake's attack "was soon after confirmed by other advices from the West Indies," which threw the Jew "almost into distraction, especially when he was informed that Secchi had solemnly sworn [that] he would compel him to the exact literal performance of his contract, and was determined to cut a pound of flesh from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." We move here from a cut "from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased" to the more precisely defined "part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." The original Italian version conveys even more strongly a sense that only modesty prevents specifying that Secchi's intended cut will come from the unmentionable genitals of the Jew ("e che la modestia non vuo che io nomine"). The circumcised Jew faces a bit more surgery than he reckoned for.

The rest of the story should be familiar to anyone who has read Shakespeare's play, except, of course, that this time it is the Christian who is intent on cutting the flesh of the Jew. The Governor of Rome referred the tricky case to the authority of Pope Sixtus V, who tells Secchi that he must fulfill the contract and "cut a pound of flesh from any part you please, of the Jew's body. We would advise you, however, to be very careful; for if you cut but a scruple, or a grain, more or less than your due, you shall certainly be hanged. Go, and bring
hither a knife and a pair of scales, and let it be done in our presence." This verdict led both Secchi and the Jew to agree to tear up the contract, though the affair was not fully settled until Sixtus V fined both of them harshly to serve as an example to others.46

Farneworth, in a note appended to his translation, states the obvious: the "scene betwixt Shylock and Antonio in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice seems to be borrowed from this story, though the poet has inverted the persons and decently enough altered some of the circumstances."47 Farneworth's comment that Shakespeare "decently enough . . . altered some of the circumstances" presumably alludes to the threatened castration of the Jew. And while we don't know why Leti in the version of the story has "inverted the persons," there is little likelihood that he did it out of love of the Jews. In his book on Great Britain published in England shortly before his departure, Leti reveals his familiarity with London Jewry, describes the services at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London in somewhat mocking terms, and makes fun of the ridiculous gestures of the Jewish worshippers.48 We can only speculate about the original source of Leti's seventeenth-century story. Did it antedate Shakespeare's play, and was Shakespeare familiar with versions in which the Jew was the victim? Or did it emerge out of a tradition that was itself influenced by The Merchant of Venice? Did turning the tables and having the Christians threaten to castrate or symbolically recircumcise the Jew ultimately prove more satisfying to Christian readers?

Farneworth's translation of Leti's story made a strong impression on eighteenth-century English interpreters of The Merchant of Venice. Edmond Malone reproduced this passage in his influential edition of Shakespeare's works in 1790,49 and David Erskine Baker, though he does not acknowledge his source, wrote that Shakespeare's story "is built on a real fact which happened in some part of Italy, with this difference indeed, that the intended cruelty was really on the side of the Christian, the Jew being the happy delinquent who fell beneath his rigid and barbarous resentment." Tellingly, he adds that "popular prejudice, however, vindicates our author in the alteration he had made. And the delightful manner in which he has availed himself of the general character of the Jews, the very quintessence of which he has enriched his Shylock with, makes more than amends for his deviating from a matter of fact which he was by no means obliged to adhere to."50 Again, we are left with a set of difficult choices: is it "popular prejudice" that "vindicates" Shakespeare reassinging the "intended cruelty" to Shylock? Or is it Shakespeare's play that by the late eighteenth-century is influential enough to perpetuate and channel this "popular prejudice"?

Familiarity with this inverted version of the pound of flesh story was given even broader circulation by Maria Edgeworth in her novel Harrington, where she allows the Jew, Mr.

, to present what he believes to be the historically accurate version of the facts in his response to Harrington, who had recently attended a performance of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. Edgeworth, too, sees the issue of "popular prejudice" as a central one, and has Mr. Montenero politely acknowledge that while "as a dramatic poet, it was" Shakespeare's "business . . . to take advantage of the popular prejudice as a power," nonetheless "we Jews must feel it peculiarly hard, that the truth of the story should have been completely sacrificed to fiction, so that the characters were not only misrepresented, but reversed." Harrington "did not know to what Mr. Montenero meant to allude. He politely tried to "pass it off with a slight bow of general acquiescence," before Mr. Montenero went on to explain that in "the true story, from which Shakespeare took the plot of The Merchant of Venice, it was a Christian who acted the part of the Jew, and the Jew that of the Christian. It was a Christian who insisted upon having the pound of flesh from next the Jew's heart." Seeing how struck Harrington is by this revelation, Mr. Montenero magnanimously offers that "perhaps his was only the Jewish version of the story, and he quickly went on to another subject." Edgeworth adds her own authority to Montenero's when she provides a footnote to the words "true story" directing readers to "Steevens' Life of Sixtus V and Malone's Shakespeare," where the Farneworth translation appears. Strikingly, though, at the very moment that she insists on the original version, Edgeworth herself either misremembers or swerves away from a key features of Leti's "true story" in favor of Shakespeare's version of the events when she substitutes the words "having the pound of flesh from next the Jew's heart" for Farneworth's translation of Leti's original:
“from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention.”

Once nineteenth-century Shakespearean source-hunters like Francis Douce and James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps pointed out that Leti’s version could not have antedated Shakespeare’s play, and, moreover, that this episode in Sixtus V’s life was probably fictional, interest in Leti’s narrative rapidly declined. H. H. Furness, in his still influential variorum edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, includes Farneworth’s translation but then invokes the authority of those who dismiss it as a source. And though he quotes Farneworth’s observation that Shakespeare’s plot “is taken from this incident,” he cuts off the quotation at the point where it leads Farneworth to point out that Shakespeare has also made the Jew the victim and left out indecent details. Interest in pure sources—rather than near contemporary versions that might cast light on various aspects of the story—has been influential enough in Shakespeare studies in this century to account for the virtual disappearance of Leti’s story from editions or even from collections of Shakespeare’s sources. Nowadays, Leti’s version is no longer cited, mentioned, or even known to most Shakespeareans.

When we turn to Alexander Silvayn’s *The Orator*, which these same source-hunters agree is one of Shakespeare’s primary sources for the pound of flesh plot, we find a clear precedent for the argument that a Jew considers the possibility of castrating the Christian. The ninety-fifth declamation of *The Orator*, translated into English in 1596 shortly before the composition of *The Merchant*, describes “a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian.” In his appeal to the judge’s sentence that he “cut a just pound of the Christian flesh, and if he cut either more or less, then his own head should be smitten off,” the Jew insists that in the original agreement the Christian was to hand over the said pound:

> Neither am I to take that which he oweth me, but he is to deliver it me. And especially because no man knoweth better than he where the same may be spared to the least hurt of his person, for I might take it in such a place as he might thereby happen to lose his life. What a matter were it then if I should cut of his privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?

While Shakespeare’s eighteenth-century editors included this source in unadulterated form, a century later it would be partially suppressed, apparently proving too obscene for Furness to reprint in unexpurgated form. In a strange act of textual castration and substitution, Furness alters the line to read “what a matter were it then, if I should cut of his [head], supposing that the same would weigh a just pound.” This makes little sense, no matter how light-headed the victim might be, since in the next sentence the Jew continues, “Or else his head, should I be suffered to cut it off, although it were with the danger of mine own life,” and in the sentence after that wonders if his victim’s “nose, lips, his ears, and. . . . eyes . . . make of them altogether a pound.” Furness’s textual intervention immediately influenced subsequent editions of the play; a year after his edition was published, for example, Homer B. Sprague wrote "head" (without brackets) in his popular school edition of the play. The bowdlerization of this source, and the lack of interest in Leti, have effectively deflected critical attention away from aspects of the play that touch upon ritual Jewish practices.

IV. The circumcision of the heart

> Why this bond is forfeit,  
> And lawfully by this the Jew may claim  
> A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off  
> Nearest the merchant’s heart.

—*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.227-30

When Paul declares that "the circumcision is of the heart" and is "in the spirit, not in the letter," we are presented with a double displacement: of the physical by the spiritual and of the circumcision of the flesh by
the circumcision of the heart. Elizabethan commentators were well aware that Paul's metaphorical treatment of circumcision builds upon a preexisting tradition in the Old Testament, expressed particularly in Deuteronomy 10.16 and 30.6: "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart," and "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart."61 Mornay, in Sidney's translation, also notes that when the Old Testament prophets "rebuke us, they call us not simply uncircumcised, but uncircumcised of heart or lips,"62 and Peter Martyr simply confirms that "Paul borrowed" this "phrase touching the circumcision of the heart . . . out of the Old Testament."63

Hugo Grotius understood that this substitution of heart for flesh neatly defined the relationship between Christian fellowship and the genealogical Judaism it replaced, since the Covenant "should be common to all people." He even argued that the Old Testament prophets recognized this "mystical and more excellent signification contained" in "the precept of circumcision," since they in fact "command the circumcision of the heart, which all the commandments of Jesus aim at."64 John Donne is particularly eloquent on this symbolic displacement: "The principal dignity of this circumcision was that it . . . prefigured, it directed to that circumcision of the heart." For Donne, "Jewish circumcision were an absurd and unreasonable thing if it did not intimate and figure the circumcision of the heart."65

The unexplained displacement of Shylock's cut from Antonio's "flesh" upward to his heart is now considerably clearer. Viewed in light of this familiar exegetical tradition, Shylock's decision to exact his pound of flesh from near Antonio's heart can be seen as the height of the literalism that informs all his actions in the play, a literalism that when imitated by Portia leads to his demise. Also echoing through the trial scene of The Merchant are the words of Galatians 6.13: "For they themselves which are circumcised keep not the Law, but desire to have you circumcised, that they might rejoice in your flesh," that is to say (as the gloss to this line in the Geneva Bible puts it), "that they have made you Jews." Shylock will cut his Christian adversary in that part of the body where the Christians believe themselves to be truly circumcised: the heart.

Shylock's threat gives a wonderfully ironic twist to the commentary on Paul's Romans that "he is the Jew indeed . . . who cuts off all superfluities and pollutions which are spiritually though not literally meant by the law of circumcision."66 Psychoanalytically inclined readers will immediately recognize how closely the terms of this Pauline displacement correspond to the unconscious substitution central to Freud's secular theories. Theodore Reik, a disciple of Freud's, interpreted Shylock's bond in just these terms, arguing first that the "condition that he can cut a pound of flesh 'in what part of your body pleaseth me'" is "a substitute expression of castration." Reik adds that when it is later decided that "the cut should be made from the breast, analytic interpretation will easily understand the mechanism of distortion that operates here and displaces the performance from a part of the body below to above."67

In repudiating circumcision, Paul's sought to redirect the Covenant, sever the genealogical bond of Judaism, distinguish Jew from Christian, true Jew from false Jew, and the spirit from the flesh (while retaining in a metaphorical sense the sexuality attendant on the flesh). Yet his actual remarks about circumcision are enigmatic and confusing. It is only mild consolation that they proved no less puzzling to the sixteenth-century theologians who tried to untangle the various levels of Paul's literal and symbolic displacements. Take, for example, the Geneva Bible's gloss to Romans, which reaches new depths of convolution in its attempt to iron out these difficulties by asserting that "Paul useth oftentimes to set the letter against the spirit. But in this place the circumcision which is according to the letter is the cutting off of the foreskin. But the circumcision of the spirit is the circumcision of the heart. That is to say, the spiritual end of the ceremony is true holiness and righteousness, whereby the people of God is known from profane and heathenish men." In their frustration, Paul's interpreters often turned against one another. Andrew Willet, for example, chastised Origen for misreading Paul and "thus distinguishing the circumcision of the flesh; that because there is some part of the flesh cut off and lost, some part remaineth still. The lost and cut off part (saith he) hath a resemblance of that flesh, whereof it is said, all flesh is grass. The other part which remaineth is a figure of that flesh, whereof the Scripture speaketh, all flesh shall see the salutation of God." Willet is sensitive to Origen's conflation of the two kinds of circumcision here, spiritual and fleshly—"Origen confoundeth the circumcision of the flesh
and the spirit, making them all one”—but it is hard to see how to maintain hard and fast divisions when, on
the one hand, commentators drive a wedge between the spiritual and the physical, while, on the other, they
show how even in the Old Testament circumcision was used both literally and metaphorically. For Willet,
then, the correct interpretation, and one that seems to require a bit of mental gymnastics, requires that we
think not of the circumcision of the flesh and the circumcision of the heart "as though there were two kinds of
circumcisions" but as "two parts of one and the same circumcision which are sometimes joined together, both
the inward and the outward."68

IV. Uncircumcision

If the distinction between inward and outward circumcision were not confusing enough, Paul further
complicated matters by introducing the concept of reverse, or uncircumcision. Even if a faithful Christian
were circumcised in the heart, what if one's body still carried (as Paul's did) the stigmatical mark that revealed
to the world that one was born a Jew? The seventeenth-century Scottish preacher John Weemse recognized
that the early Christians were embarrassed by this Judaical scar: "When they were converted from Judaism to
Christianity there were some of them so ashamed of their Judaism that they could not behold it: they took it as
a blot to their Christianity."69 Uncircumcision, then, was the undoing of the seemingly irreversible physical
act that had been accomplished through the observance of Jewish law, and it was a topic that Paul would
return to obsessively (in large part because it was a pressing issue within the new Christian communities he
was addressing). Paul asks in Romans "if the uncircumcision keep the ordinances of the Law, shall not his
uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature (if it keep the
Law) condemn thee, which by the letter and circumcision art a transgressor of the Law?"70 In Galatians he
writes in a similar vein that "in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything" nor "uncircumcision, but
faith, which worketh by love."71 His remarks in Corinthians on the irrelevance of this mark are even more
forceful: "Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not gather his circumcision. Is any called
uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the
keeping of the commandments of God."72

Paul's shifts between literal and figurative uncircumcision in these key passages are dizzying, and the
commentators had to scramble to keep up with him. Thomas Godwyn voices the question that must have been
on many readers' minds: "Here it may be demanded how it is possible for a man, after once he hath been
marked with the sign of circumcision, to blot out that character and become uncircumcised?" He is
responding to Paul's warning that one should not "gather" or reverse one's circumcision. The gloss to this line
in the Geneva Bible also takes Paul in the most literal sense imaginable, explaining that this "gathering" is
accomplished with "the help of a surgeon" who undoes the effect of the cutting of the foreskin by "drawing
the skin with an instrument, to make it to cover the nut" or glans of the penis. The Geneva Bible even directs
readers to the medical source for this procedure, the seventh book of Celsus's De Medicina.74 Other writers
explained that Paul forbids this literal uncircumcision in his letter to the Corinthians "because some that were
converted to Christianity from Judaism did so renounce all their Judaical rites that they used means to attract
the preputia again, which was an act of too much superstition and curiosity, and so is censured here."75 It also
needs to be stressed here that, uncircumcision, like circumcision, was understood by Paul's commentators to
operate both spiritually and literally: Andrew Willet reminds his readers that "as there are two kinds of
circumcision, so there is also a twofold uncircumcision, "an uncircumcision of the heart, and another of the
flesh."

The belief that one could be uncircumcised, could have one's irreducible Jewish identity replaced with a
Christian one, is also a fantasy that powerfully shapes the final confrontation between Shylock and Antonio in
The Merchant of Venice. Antonio's consummate revenge upon his circumcised adversary, whose actions
symbolically threaten to transform not just his physical but his religious identity, is to ask of the court a
punishment that precisely reverses what Shylock had in mind for him. When Antonio demands that Shylock
"presently become a Christian," a demand to which the Duke readily agrees, the "christ'ning" that Shylock is
to receive will metaphorically uncircumcise him. The new covenant has superseded the old, as the sacrament of baptism, which has replaced circumcision, turns Jew into Christian. In his commentary on Romans Peter Martyr offers up a summary of Paul's treatment of the Jews that ironically foreshadows Antonio's victory over Shylock at the end of the trial scene: "In civil judgments, when any is to be condemned which is in any dignity or magistrateship, he is first deprived of his dignity or office, and then afterward condemned. So the apostle first depriveth the Jews of the true Jewishness, and of the true circumcision, and then afterward condemneth them."  

Antonio and Shylock, who fiercely insist on how different they are from each other, to the last seek out ways of preserving that difference through symbolic acts that convert their adversary into their own kind. Paradoxically, though, these symbolic acts—a threatened circumcision of the heart and a baptism that figuratively uncircumcises—would have the opposite effect, erasing, rather than preserving, the literal or figurative boundaries that distinguish merchant from Jew. It is just this fear of unexpected and unsatisfying transformation that makes The Merchant of Venice so unsettling a comedy, and that renders the even more deeply submerged and shadowy charge of ritual murder such a potent one. The desire to allay such fears produces a fantasy ending in which the circumcising Jew is metamorphosed through conversion into a gentle Christian. While this resolution can only be sustained through legal force in the play (Shylock's alternative, after all, is to be executed), its power was sufficiently strong for this spectacle of conversion to be reenacted in a number of English churches in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, as a handful of Jews were led to the baptismal font.

Notes


1 Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of the Complete Works, trans. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953—1974), vol. 10, p. 36. See, too, his Leonardo da Vinci (1910), where Freud notes that "here we may also trace one of the roots of the anti-semitism which appears with such elemental force and finds such irrational explanation among the nations of the West." For Freud, "circumcision is unconsciously equated with castration. If we venture to carry our conjectures back to the primaeval days of the human race we can surmise that originally circumcision must have been a milder substitute, designed to take the place of castration" (vol. 11, p. 95). He added this footnote in 1919. In his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis he similarly writes that there "seems to me no doubt that the circumcision practiced by so many peoples is an equivalent and substitute for castration" (vol. 15, p. 165). Sander Gilman's penetrating studies—The Case of Sigmund Freud, and Freud, Race, and Gender (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)—discuss in great detail the historical and medical issues that informed Freud's ideas about circumcision; see especially the chapter on "The Construction of the Male Jew" in Freud, Race, and Gender, pp. 49-92.

2 In Freud's own analysis of Shakespeare's play he avoids Jewish questions, focusing not on the pound of flesh plot but on the tale of the three caskets. Marjorie Garber, turning Freud's psychoanalytic approach against him, brilliantly argues that by "turning The Merchant of Venice into King Lear, Freud occludes Portia and her own scene of choice, when, dressed like a man, she chooses between two men, two symbolic castrates, Antonio the 'tained wether of the flock' (4.1.114) and Shylock 'the circumcised Jew.'" Garber wonders whether Freud, by focusing on this issue, is able to avoid confronting his own patriarchy and misogyny by failing to address the more disturbing "problem of the two things he does not want to think of, the two last things that remain on the periphery of the essay on 'The Three Caskets,' discreetly offstage and off-page, the two figures central to The Merchant of Venice: the crossdressed woman and the Jew?" (Marjorie Garber,

3 Tovey, *Anglia Judaica*, p. 65. Bonefand, we learn, "pleaded not guilty, and was very honourably acquitted," raising the interesting question of how, given the medical evidence, the case could ever have been successfully prosecuted.


6 As Purchas puts it in his *Pilgrimage* (1613), p. 158.

7 While this woodcut no doubt relates to his reputed escape from a crowd of hostile Venetian Jews whom he sought to convert, there is no evidence anywhere in Coryate's book that these Jews bore weapons against him. Coryate himself explains that "that some forty or fifty Jews more flocked about me, and some of them began very insolently to swagger with me, because I durst reprehend their religion. Whereupon fearing least they should have offered me some violence, I withdrew myself by little and little towards the bridge at the entrance into the ghetto" (Coryate, *Coryats Crudities* [London, 1611], pp. 236-37).

8 Coryate is subsequently imagined as facing the danger of circumcision in his travels through Islamic nations. A poem written in 1615 to Coryate by John Brown, an English merchant residing at the time in India, warns Coryate to "have a care (at Mecca is some danger) / Lest you incur the pain of circumcision." Coryate published the poem in his *Thomas Coryate, Travailer . . . Greeting. . . from the Court of the Great Mogul* (London, 1616), p. 34.

9 Coryate, *Coryats Crudities*, sigs. D7v, Elr, and A2r.

10 Coryate adds: "All his privities (before he came into the room) were besprinkled with a kind of powder, which after the circumcisor had done his business was blewed away by him, and another powder cast on immediately. After he had dispatched his work . . . he took a little strong wine that was held in a goblet by a fellow that stood near him, and poured it into the child's mouth to comfort him in the midst of his pains, who cried out very bitterly; the pain being for the time very bitter indeed, though it will be (as they told me) cured in the space of four and twenty hours. Those of any riper years that are circumcised (as it too often commeth to pass, that Christians that turn Turks) as at forty or fifty years of age, do suffer great pain for the space of a month" (Coryate, *Coryate's Crudities; Reprinted from the Edition of 1611. To Which Are Now Added, His Letters from India*, vol. 3, sig. U7r-U8v.

11 See Daniel Boyarin's essay in which he notes that "at a traditional circumcision ceremony the newly circumcised boy is addressed: 'And I say to you [feminine pronoun!]: in your [feminine] blood, you [feminine] shall live," and offers as a possible interpretation that "circumcision was understood somehow as rendering the male somewhat feminine," or alternatively, "that there is here an arrogation of a female symbol that makes it male, and that circumcision is a male erasure of the female role in procreation as well" (Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel': Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel," *Critical Inquiry* 19 [1992], p. 496, and n. 64).


13 Cf. John Evelyn, who reports in his diary entry for January 15, 1645, in Rome, that when "the circumcision was done the priest sucked the child's penis with his mouth" (as cited in A. Cohen, *An Anglo-Jewish
Scrapbook, 1600-1840 [London: M. L. Cailingold, 1943], p. 292). Charles Weiss notes that metzitzah "was probably introduced during the talmudic period," and that "its practice never became universal" ("A Worldwide Survey of the Current Practice of Milah [Ritual Circumcision]." Jewish Social Studies 24 [1962], p. 31). See too Bernard Homa, Metzitzah (2d ed., London, n.p., 1966), where the relevant Midrashic texts that are the source of the authority for this practice are cited. Michel de Montaigne also found an opportunity to observe and describe "the most ancient religious ceremony there is among men," which he "watched . . . very attentively and with great profit." He too was struck by the practice of metzitah: "As soon as this glans is thus uncovered, they hastily offer some wine to the minister, who puts a little in his mouth and then goes and sucks the glans of this child, all bloody, and spits out the blood he has drawn from it, and immediately takes as much wine again, up to three times." After bandaging the child, the "minister" is given "a glass full of wine. . . . He takes a swallow of it, and then dipping his finger in it he three times takes a drop of it with his finger to the boy's mouth to be sucked. . . . He meanwhile still hath his mouth all bloody" (Michel de Montaigne, Montaigne's Travel Journal, trans. Donald M. Frame [San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983], pp. 81-82. The event was recorded by one of Montaigne's servants, assigned to compile the journal).

14 The Bible also failed to prepare English travelers for what they would witness in Africa: female "circumcision." Samuel Purchas, anticipating the skepticism of his readers, writes of one of the voyages into Ethiopia: "Let no man marvel which heareth this, for they circumcise women as well as men, which thing was not used in the old Law." He also notes that both in Cairo and "Abassine" they "circumcise not only males, but with a peculiar rite females also" (Purchas, Pilgrimage, pp. 1040, 841, and 1134). The Islamic practice of delaying circumcision until sexual maturity struck Elizabethan writers, versed in a scriptural tradition of circumcision occurring on the eighth day, as unusual. Richard Jobson's description of his trip to "Gambra" in 1620, provided readers in England with considerable details of the practice—locally known as the "cutting of pricks"—experienced by brave adolescent boys in Africa: "Hither we came in season for that solemnity, hearing before we came, shouts, drums and country music. The boy knew the meaning, and told us it was for cutting of pricks, a world of people being gather[ed] for that purpose, like an English fair. . . . We saw our black boy circumcised, not by a marybuck [that is, a priest], but an ordinary fellow hackling off with a knife at three cuts his praepeuce, holding his member in his hand, the boy neither holden nor bound the while" (As cited in Purchas, p. 925). See, too, a later narrative where Richard Jobson speaks of the local African custom concerning circumcision: "It is done without religious ceremony, and hath no name but the cutting of pricks, the party stripped naked and sitting on the ground, and the butcher pulling the skin over very far, and cutting it, not without terror to the beholder" (As cited in Purchas, p. 1573).

15 Purchas, Pilgrimage, p. 121.

16 Willet, Hexapla, p. 204.

17 Thorowgood, Jews in America, pp. 13, 15. Similarly, when Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to Russia, Giles Fletcher, declared that the Tartars were the ten lost tribes of Israel, he too found confirmation in the fact that they "are circumcised, as were the Israelish and Jewish people" (Giles Fletcher, "The Tartars or, Ten Tribes," first published sixty-six years after his death in 1611, in Samuel Lee, Israel Redux: Or the Restauration of Israel [London, 1677], p. 22).


19 See Acts 16.3. Unless otherwise noted, scriptural passages are quoted from the 1589 edition of the Geneva Bible, published in London (I have modernized spelling and orthography here as well).


23 John Calvin, *A Commentane upon S. Paules Epistles to the Corinthians*, trans. Thomas Timme (London, 1577), fol. 82v. Others offered an evolutionary model that would explain the different attitudes the earliest Christians held toward circumcision. For example, the Scottish preacher John Weemse writes that in the "first period," Christians "might only circumsice; in the second period, circumsice and baptize; (for they had yet more regard to circumsice than to baptism); in the third period they baptized and circumsiced (now they had more regard to baptism than circumsice); in the fourth period, they only baptized" (Weemse, *The Christian Synagogue*, 4 vols. [London, 1633], vol. 1, p. 129).

24 Romans 2.25.


26 Romans 2.28-29.

27 For this aspect of Paul's thought, see Daniel Boyarin, who astutely observes that Paul's problem with circumcision was that it "symbolized the genetic, the genealogical moment of Judaism as the religion of a particular tribe of people. This is so both in the very fact of the physicality of the rite, of its grounding in the practice of the tribe, and in the way it marks the male members of that tribe (in both sense), but even more so, by being a marker on the organ of generation it represents the genealogical claim for concrete historical memory as constitutive of Israel." Thus, by "substituting a spiritual interpretation for a physical ritual, Paul was saying that the genealogical Israel 'according to the Flesh,' is not the ultimate Israel; there is an 'Israel in the Spirit'" (Boyarín, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," p. 502).


29 Willet, *Hexapla*, p. 142. Origen's own position may have been qualified by the possibility (according to Eusebius) that he had castrated himself in his youth in order to work unconstrained with female catechumens.

30 It should also be noted that there is a Jewish tradition that values circumcision because it curtails male desire. Daniel Boyarin cites the observation of Maimonides that circumcision was instituted "to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible" (in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. and ed. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 609, cited in Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," p. 486, note 37. Boyarin also notes the Platonic, allegorizing view of circumcision in Philo as well. Some of the complex ways in which circumcision was understood symbolically in Jewish exegetical traditions are explored by Elliot R. Wolfson in *Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual

31 Donne concludes, "God would have them carry this memorial about them, in their flesh," in "A Sermon Preached at Saint Dunstan's Upon New-Years-Day, 1624," *Sermons*, vol. 6, pp. 190-92.

32 The gendering of the act had long been a problem for Christian interpreters of the Bible, some condemning the Jews for leaving women out of the Convenant, others answering the objection "that circumcision was an imperfect sign, because it was appointed only for the males, the females were not circumcised," by saying that "the privilege and benefit of circumcision was extended also unto the females, which were counted with the men, the unmarried with their fathers, the married with their husbands" (Willet, *Hexapla*, p. 205).


34 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.82-84.

35 This problem is usually due to excessive electrocautery used in some hospitals, which burns off too much of the infant's penis to warrant reconstructing the organ. The surgeons perform a "feminizing genitoplasty," that is, reconstructing female rather than male genitalia (and at the age of puberty performing a second operation, a vaginoplasty, supplemented by estrogens). See John P. Gearhart and John A. Rock, "Total Ablation of the Penis After Circumcision with Electrocauter: A Method of Management and Long-Term Follow-up," *Journal of Urology* 142 (1989), pp. 799-801. The authors note that the "successful adaptation and normal sex life of our 2 older patients are a tribute to early gender reassignment, the involvement of a complete team of specialists, including a medical sexology expert, and extensive familial counseling from the time of injury" (p. 801). I am indebted to Dr. Franklin Lowe of Columbia Physicians and Surgeons for making this scholarship available to me. I am also grateful to Patricia E. Gallaher, of Beth Israel Medical Center, for providing me with material on circumcision procedures.

36 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.146-48, and 4.1.249. The first hint appears in act 3, when Shylock says to Tubal "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit" (3.1.119-20).

37 "Whosoever hath an issue from his flesh is unclean because of his issue," Leviticus 15.2. Biblical anthropologists have traced the practice of using the euphemism *basar* (flesh) when referring to the penis to the priestly redactors (rather than the Jahwist, who did not use this euphemism). See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 170-71.

38 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.29-30, and 2.4.37.

39 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.113. Antonio's next lines—"the weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me" (4.1.114-15)—may connect back to the recurrent biblical identification of fruit trees with circumcision. In his chapter on "Uncircumcised Fruit Trees," Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes the frequent comparison in biblical literature between "fruit trees and male organs" (p. 149; see, for example, Leviticus 19.23-25), and concludes that "the symbolic equation of an uncircumcised male and a young fruit tree rests on two, and possibly three, associations. The fruit of a juvenile tree is proscribed like the foreskin of the male organ. Furthermore, a male who is uncircumcised and not part of the covenantal community is infertile like an immature fruit tree. Finally, this symbolic equation may draw part of its plausibility from an analogy between circumcision and pruning," Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, p. 152. See, too, his "People of The Body: The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," *Journal of the*

40 Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 2.8.22, 5.1.237.


42 Before he had to leave in 1683—having run afoul of the Duke of York and England's Catholic community—Leti had even been elected to the Royal Society and asked by Charles II to write a history of England from its origins to the Restoration. See the introduction to Nati Krivatsy, Bibliography of the Works of Gregorio Leti (Newcastle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Books, 1982).

43 Gregorio Leti, Vita di Sisto V, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1693), vol. 3, pp. 134ff. Since the first English translation of Leti's biography—The Life of Pope Sixtus the Vth (London, 1704)—was based on the 1669 text, it does not contain the pound of flesh story.


46 And, conveniently, to pay for a hospital that he had recently founded. See Leti, Sixtus the Fifth, trans. Farneworth, pp. 293-95.

47 Leti, Sixtus the Fifth, trans. Farneworth, p. 293, n. 19.


51 Edgeworth, Harrington, p. 96.


54 Bullough, Sources, vol. 1, p. 483.

55 Bullough, Sources, vol. 1, p. 484. In other sources the cutting is to be done to the eyes (as in Anthony Munday's Zeluto), or is left ambiguous or unspecified, in the words of Fiorentino's Il Pecorone (1558), "wheresoever he pleases."

See Willet's gloss on this passage in *Hexapla*. Elizabethan editions of the Bible constantly read Pauline doctrine back into the Old Testament passages. Thus, for example, the Bishops' Bible gloss explains: "That is, let all your affections be cut off. He showeth in these words the end of circumcision"; and "Cut off all your evil affections."


Peter Martyr [Vermigli], *Most Learned and Fruitfull Commentaries of D. Peter Martir Vermilius, Florentine . . . Upon the Epistle of S. Paul to the Romanes* (London, 1568), p. 49v. Andrew Willet also cites the prophet Jeremiah, who proclaims that "all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart" (9.26).


For this psychoanalyst (who had first witnessed Shakespeare's play as a young boy at the turn of the century in antisemitic Vienna), only "one step is needed to reach the concept that to the Gentile of medieval times the Jew unconsciously typified the castrator because he circumcised male children." The "Jew thus appeared to Gentiles as a dangerous figure with whom the threat of castration originated." Theodore Reik, "Psychoanalytic Experiences in Life, Literature, and Music," in *The Search Within* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1956), pp. 358-59; first printed as "Jessica, My Child," *American Imago* 8 (1951), pp. 3-27.


Romans, 2.26-27.

Galatians, 5.6. He would return to this idea again shortly, when he states that in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Galatians, 6.15).

Corinthians, 7.18-19.
The same information was also made available in the margin of the Geneva Bible, where Elizabethans, who had no need of this procedure themselves, were nonetheless informed that "the surgeon by art draweth out the skin to cover the part circumcised." The Geneva Bible also cross-references 1 Maccabees 1.16, which describes how the Jews followed the "fashions of the heathen" and "made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy Covenant." The table of contents to the 1589 Geneva Bible (which usefully cites all biblical passages that mention circumcision) cites this passage as one in which the "Jews did uncircumcise themselves, and became apostates," indicating that the act carried with it associations of abandoning one religion for another.

Those curious enough to follow up the medical reference would have read in the Latin text of A. Cornelius Celsus (the first English translation, from which I quote, was not published until 1756) that this procedure requires that "under the circle of the glans, the skin" is "to be separated by a knife from the inner part of the penis." Celsus explains that this "is not very painful, because the extremity being loosened, it may be drawn backwards by the hand, as far as the pubes; and no hemorrhage follows upon it." Next, the "skin being disengaged, is extended again over the glans; then it is bathed with plenty of cold water, and a plaister put round it of efficacy in repelling an inflammation." Celsus offers as postoperative advice that "the patient is to fast, till he almost be overcome with hunger, lest a full diet should perhaps cause an erection of that part." Finally, when "the inflammation is gone, it ought to be bound up from the pubes to the circle of the glans; and a plaister being first laid on the glans, the skin ought to be brought over it" (A. Cornelius Celsus, Of Medicine. In Eight Books, trans. James Greive [London, 1756], pp. 438-39).

Hammond, A Paraphrase, p. 565. Hammond also describes the "practice of some Jews, who under the Egyptian tyranny first, then under Antiochus, and lastly under the Romans, being oppressed for being Jews, of which their circumcision was an evidence, used means by some medicinal applications to get a new preaputium. And these were called by the Talmudists mishuchim" (I transliterate the Hebrew here). Following the Geneva Bible gloss, Hammond cites as a medical authority "the famous Physician" Celsus, and, unusually, also invokes Talmudic antecedents, citing Rabbi "Aleai of Achan," who "made himself a preaputium."

Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.383, 4.1.394. Cf. Reik, who argues that if "Shylock insists upon cutting out a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast, it is as if he demanded that the Gentile be made a Jew if he cannot pay back the three thousand ducats at the fixed time. Otherwise put: Antonio should submit to the religious ritual of circumcision." In addition, at "the end of the 'comedy' Antonio demands that Shylock should 'presently become a Christian.' If this is the justified amends the Jew has to make for his earlier condition, it would be according to poetic justice that the Jew be forced to become a Christian after he had insisted that his opponent should become a Jew" (The Search Within, pp. 358-59).

Martyr, Most Learned and Fruitfull Commentaries, p. 48r.

See the fascinating discussion of the philosophical implications of Shylock's circumcising cut in Stanley Cavell, The Claims of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy [(New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], pp. 479-81). Marjorie Garber notes that both "Reik and Cavell predicate their insights upon an assumption of doubling or twinsonship, a moment of perceptual equipoise that enforces the disconcerting confusion of identities. . . . Cavell, with 'skepticism with respect to other minds' and the epistemological uncertainty of identity. Each reader appropriates Shylock's scene, persuasively, to his own theoretical project, and finds the twinsonship of Shylock and Antonio in the courtroom a theatrical hypostasis, an onstage crux that reifies his own perceptions" (Garber, p. 187, n. 63). See also Marc Shell, Money, Language, and Thought (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 47-83.
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I have retained the original spelling of early modern titles, though I have regularized capitalization. ... The abbreviation TJHSE stands for The Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England. Unless otherwise noted, the place of publication is London. ...

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The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): ECONOMICS & EXCHANGE

ECONOMICS & EXCHANGE

Lars Engle (essay date 1986)


[In the following essay, Engle contends that the relationships in the play transcend emotional boundaries and are all to some degree economic or legal in nature. Engle goes on to argue that a discussion of the play's plot in financial terms suggests avenues of historical interpretation and criticism which focus on credit and marriage as the primary means by which Elizabethan gentry and aristocracy raised money.]

"Those critics who idealize the Venetians," René Girard comments of The Merchant of Venice, "write as if the many textual clues that contradict their view were not planted by the author himself, as if their presence in the play were a purely fortuitous matter, like the arrival of a bill in the morning mail when one really expects a love letter."¹ As I discuss balances and movements of cash, credit, and obligation in this essay, I shall suggest that in The Merchant of Venice bills and love letters are unusually difficult to distinguish.

The play offers an especially dense set of erotic, economic, and spiritual transactions. The erotic transactions, though unorthodox in ways I shall point out, link the play to Shakespearean comedy in general, and are thus perhaps more ordinary than the economic and spiritual transactions, as women leave the control of their fathers, and men loosen bonds to other men, in order to marry. The Merchant of Venice, however, is unusual in that hardly any relationship between two characters is left as solely emotional or erotic: all have some explicit economic or legal analogue. "[S]o is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" (I.ii.24-25), complains Portia in Act I, punning on the emotional and legal senses of "will"; Bassanio has in the previous scene told Antonio "To you ... I owe the most in money and in love" (I.i.130-31), declaring parallel, perhaps inseparable, financial and erotic debts.² Money, of course, has a logic of its own, and the play presents money relations in extraordinary and systematic detail. Discussing the play's plot as a financial one, moreover, suggests ways to criticize it historically. Since the credit market and the marriage market were, along with land sales, the main methods of raising money available to the Elizabethan gentry and aristocracy, a play about the recovery of an extravagant young aristocrat's decayed fortunes by marriage to an heiress, and the rescue of his bondsman from a usurer's grasp by an unexpected verdict in court, may be topical in a way that will reward historical investigation.³ The play's Venetian setting and numerous fantastic elements do not prevent it from fitting Elizabethan patterns of aristocratic indebtedness and cash-raising through marriage. These constituted the very different expectations of an Elizabethan audience about why and how young aristocrats married, and our reconstruction of these expectations marks the terms in which Shakespeare's characters—the openhanded merchant who despises interest and lends out of friendship; the beautiful, loving, able, and forthcoming bride; the lord whose nobility and grace protect him from his financial irresponsibility; the creditor whose alienness and vengefulness allow debts owed him to be miraculously dissolved—can be interpreted as intensely wished-for or dreamed-about figures.⁴

One of my claims in this essay is that financial transactions in the play reward a more detailed analysis than they have to my knowledge received, and I shall survey the play with something of an accountant's eye for cash flows, unpaid balances, and the like. Since, as Bassanio and I have suggested, love and money reflect and express each other in the play, such a literal-minded inquiry will draw up perforce a second vaguer balance sheet of erotic obligation. As I chart these balances, I shall note points at which they suggest improvements in readings of the play as a meditation on marriage and credit in an emerging modern economy. I shall also
contend that the theological terms in which many economic issues—especially usury—appear are also shown in the play to define a system of exchange or conversion which works to the advantage of the "blessed": those who, by religion and social situation, are placed to take advantage of exchange patterns.

My discussion of the play's plot divides into three sections, one centering on Antonio and Bassanio, which asks why Antonio is sad; one on Shylock's attempts to justify usury, which asks whether Shylock is more like Jacob, Laban, or Esau; and one on Portia's handling of money.

I

Above all, money contrives to insert itself into all economic and social relationships. This makes it an excellent indicator: by observing how fast it circulates or when it runs out, how complicated its channels are or how scarce the supply, a fairly accurate assessment can be made of all human activity, even the most humble.5

In sooth I know not why I am so sad,
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn. . . .

(I.i.1-5)

It is worthwhile to speculate on what Antonio, in the opening lines of the play, says he does not know: why he is sad.

Salerio and Solanio, the small fry of the Rialto with whom Antonio is glumly conversing, offer two explanations for his sadness: that Antonio is worried about his ships, which they rather inconsiderately imagine sunk in a variety of ways, and, barring that, that Antonio is in love. I shall argue that they are right on both counts. Antonio's reluctance to be sounded by them gives no more reliable clue to his state of mind than Hamlet's answers to the not-dissimilar queries of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. To their first speculation, "I know Antonio / Is sad to think upon his merchandise," the merchant replies:

Believe me no, I thank my fortune for it—
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

(I.i.41-45)

No merchant can admit to be at risk, of course: Chaucer writes of his Merchant that "Ther wiste no man that he was in debt," and limiting others' knowledge of one's finances is a professional necessity. But we know from what Antonio says later to Bassanio that he is misleading his less intimate friends here. To Bassanio he confesses:

Thou know'rst that all my fortunes are at sea,
Neither have I money, nor commodity
To raise a present sum, therefore go forth
Try what my credit can in Venice do. . . .
In other words, all Antonio's disposable estate is "upon the fortune of this present year," despite what he has said to Salerio and Solanio about it. He later writes in desperation to Bassanio in Belmont, "my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit" (III.ii.315-17). So Antonio's credit has already been heavily used, and the assets with which he secures loans do not cover his borrowings. His credit, which he draws on in the absence of liquid assets, is protected by the sort of dissimulation we see him engaged in at the play's start, while at the same time threatened by his inability to look happy when his livelihood is at risk. His demeanor has come under scrutiny: "Believe me you are marvellously chang'd" (I.ii.76), as Gratiano notes. There are rumors on the Rialto that, as Shylock later puts it, "his means are in supposition" (III.i.15), and the itemization Shylock gives—ships to Tripoli, the Indies, Mexico, and England, "with other ventures," as he says, "squandered abroad," not only confirms the impression given by the obsequiousness of Salerio and Solanio that Antonio is a big operator, but also suggests that he is overextending himself. When noted at all, this overextension is usually taken as a mere donnée of the plot, yet the play offers answers if we seek to know why Antonio should need or want to take risks.

There is manifold evidence, first of all, that Antonio is generous to the point of being unbusinesslike. "He lends out money gratis" (III.i.39), Shylock says bitterly, later adding "He was wont to lend money for a Christian cur'sy" (III.i.43). Bassanio, probably with specific reference to the same habit from the viewpoint of a recipient rather than a competitor, calls him "the kindest man, / The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies" (III.ii.291). This echoes Salerio's earlier comment that "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth" (II.viii.35). Antonio himself says that formerly he has used his money to "oft deliver . . . from [Shylock's] forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me" (III.i.22-23). Shylock obviously resents in part his personal losses from Antonio's generosity ("he hath . . . hind'red me half a million" [III.i.48]), but he also seems to resent Antonio's persistent personalization of business relations, his interference with the social Darwinism of the marketplace. Shylock at one point calls him a "prodigal" (III.i.39), ignoring the term's New Testament valency, and if Antonio is lending money without interest to defaulters in order to prevent their forfeitures, he is indeed putting himself at financial risk. Evidently, then, the liquid assets Antonio finds himself short of at the play's opening have ebbed away from him in this general direction. We know, however, a good deal more exactly where some of Antonio's money has gone. The Venetian scenes of the first act are, after all, devoted to progressively more revealing discussions of Antonio's financial situation, from the evasions of his talk with Salerio and Solanio through his revealing private conversation with Bassanio to his uncomfortable arrangement to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock. We must now examine the second and third of these.

When told by Solanio "Why then you are in love," Antonio only replies, "Fie, fie." And when he is alone with Bassanio, Antonio is free to proceed to what is evidently uppermost in his mind:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage—
That you to-day promis'd to tell me of?

(I.ii.119)

Antonio has known, then, for an unspecified time, that Bassanio intends to woo a lady, and awaits details; indeed, the line "you to-day promis'd to tell me of," indicates that Antonio seems to have been pressing Bassanio for details, and finally to be receiving them. Except that he must yet wait some time to hear the answer to his question. Bassanio begins with apparent irrelevance:
"Tis not unknown to you Antonio
How much I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance:
Nor do I now make moan to be abridg'd
From such a noble rate, but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time (something too prodigal)
Hath left me gag'd: to you Antonio
I owe the most in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburthen all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.

(I.i.122-34)

Bassanio, then, whom we have just seen cheerfully making dinner plans, is Antonio's debtor, evidently to a considerable extent; he will not apologize for this directly (he was living at "a noble rate," i.e., one consonant with his rank, and his admissions of extravagance are qualified), but the speech is heavy with an uncomfortable sense of obligation. There is a particular discomfort—beyond that of a debtor speaking to a creditor—in the clause "To you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love." Taken to the letter, this means not only "you have given me money I have yet to return," but also "you have given me love I have yet to return"; it also, however, suggests that a return of love may partially compensate financial debt, or vice-versa. Certainly the debt to Antonio is not merely financial, but emotional as well; the bargains hitherto and following between Antonio and Bassanio show that very personalization of financial arrangements characteristic of Antonio which Shylock will parody with savage accuracy when he sets a pound of flesh as forfeit for a bargain later on.

If we, however, consider the local impact of this speech, it emerges as a request for permission for something: it admits debts (as things, apparently, which might inhibit the disclosure Antonio has requested), and makes Antonio's love a "warrant" for Bassanio to unburden himself, even in embarrassment. This at any rate seems to be how Antonio understands the speech—as a request for reaffirmation. He delivers in sweeping terms:

I pray you good Bassanio let me know it,
And if it stand as you yourself still do,
Within the eye of honour, be assur'd
My purse, my person, my extremest means
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.

(I.i.135-39)

He offers, then, not only his money but himself, and seems to be imagining, even desiring, an "occasion" for self-sacrifice. The wistful homoerotic suggestion ("my person . . . / Lie[s] all unlock'd to your occasions"), since it is not taken up by Bassanio, perhaps explains the self-sacrificial impulse. He encourages Bassanio to ask him for money, but Bassanio apparently still cannot tell him what for:

In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight
The self-same way, with more advised watch
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both,
I oft found both: I urge this childhood proof
Because what follows is pure innocence,
I owe you much, and (like a wilful youth)
That which I owe is lost, but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
(As I will watch the aim) or to find both,
Or bring your latter hazard back again,
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.

(I.i. 140-52)

By infantilizing himself here, Bassanio metaphorically shifts responsibility for the previous money lost to Antonio: it was after all Antonio, in his image, who shot the first lost shaft, and who is being invited to shoot another whose flight this time Bassanio will watch. The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, then, seems to resemble that between Citibank and Zaire, whereby the creditor, by the magnitude of the investment, becomes the thrall of the debtor, who can cause ruin by defaulting on or repudiating the debt. Bassanio's promise that he will at worst return the second loan in good time is, as we shall see in following the flight of Antonio's cash, a questionable one. And Antonio feels manipulated enough by Bassanio's evasive whimsy to object fairly strongly:

You know me well, and herein spend but time
To wind about my love with circumstance,
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:
Then do but say to me what I should do
That in your knowledge may by me be done,
And I am prest unto it: therefore speak.

(I.i.153-60)

This is a complex piece of reproach; at the end of it, we may well wonder who is winding about whose love with circumstance. "I can deny you nothing; at any rate acknowledge that you are making emotional use of me, and don't hide behind fictions of practicality which insult my intelligence and self-knowledge," might be a fair tendentious paraphrase in the Empsonian manner. We know that Shakespeare was interested in and had perhaps experienced such feelings from the sonnets: compare the opening of Sonnet 57:

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend
Nor services to do, till you require. . . .

In any case, the financial upshot of Antonio's speech is clear. Everything he has is at Bassanio's disposal, and he is hurt that Bassanio hesitates to use it.

Bassanio at last, convinced no doubt that he hurts Antonio more by withholding details of his marriage plans than by revealing them, tells Antonio of Portia and, again without making a direct request, asks for money:

her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them.
I have a mind presages me such thrift
That I should questionless be fortunate.

(I.i. 169-76)

"Thrift," here, assimilates success in winning Portia to success in clearing his debt to Antonio; since "thrift" in its everyday dispositional sense is what Bassanio conspicuously lacks, he is imagining having his accounts redeemed in one great stroke, which will show him to have been "thrifty" in a grand way all along. Antonio immediately replies, in lines quoted above, that he has neither money nor goods to sell, which sounds like the beginning of a refusal. He continues, however:

therefore go forth
Try what my credit can in Venice do,—
That shall be rack'd even to the uttermost
To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.
Go presently inquire (and so will I)
Where money is, and I no question make
To have it of my trust, or for my sake.

(I.i.179-85)

Again, Antonio offers his "uttermost," and imagines his credit on the rack. It is interesting that they need to inquire "where money is," suggesting, as it does, that all Venice may, like Antonio and Bassanio, have problems with liquidity. And Antonio's final formulation—he will obtain cash "of [his] trust, or for [his] sake" (glossed by a series of editors as "on my credit, or for friendship's sake")—suggests that he hopes to find the sort of friendly creditor he himself is, but may have to borrow at interest, depending perhaps on "where money is."

At the end of the first scene, then, our balance sheet is already fairly detailed, though no precise sum has yet been mentioned. Bassanio is in debt to everyone, but especially to Antonio, and evidently can raise no money except from loving and forbearing friends; Antonio has ventured his clearly very considerable fortune at sea or has generously given it away; Bassanio offers him a chance to recoup an otherwise irrecoverable debt by sponsoring his marital venture to Portia; Antonio does so, but insists that his gesture be read in emotional rather than financial terms (he never mentions Bassanio's debts to him, and it is Bassanio rather than he who represents the voyage to Belmont as a financial "plot and purpose"). Bassanio has been financially obliged, in effect, to ask Antonio's permission to woo—and this he does reluctantly.

Thus far, then, the wooing of Portia can be seen as an instance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has recently defined as "male homosocial desire": i.e., "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitality, and economic exchange—within which the various forms of traffic in women take place." Antonio, at least, has a stake in treating Bassanio's courtship of Portia as part of a complex economic and erotic transaction between two males. A comment of Sedgwick's suggests that she sees the difficulty of such subordinations as a Shakespearean theme: "... as Shakespeare's sonnets show, the male path through heterosexuality to homosocial satisfaction is a slippery and threatened one—although for most men, in at least most cultures, compulsory." I shall return to Sedgwick's very illuminating arguments when I have finished tracing the economic patterns of the play—patterns, interestingly, which no male seems to control thoroughly.
Bassanio, seeking "where money is," finds Shylock, and we seem to encounter a recognizable business transaction at last. The scene, which culminates in the acceptance of the "merry bond," as unbusinesslike a proposition as one could find, starts with a discussion of terms.

Shy. Three thousand ducats, well.
Bass. Ay sir, for three months.
Shy. For three months, well.
Bass. For the which as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
Shy. Antonio shall become bound, well.

(I.iii.1-5)

The focus seems to be on the bargain and its precise terms, not the personal relations which lie behind it. It is worth noting that the loan will be to Bassanio, with Antonio "bound." This means, in our business language, that he is a guarantor, but in Elizabethan terms it would suggest something more precise yet. Bassanio is a Lord; Antonio is not. In England until the mid-seventeenth century a nobleman could not be arrested for debt. Lawrence Stone quotes a letter from Sir Robert Cecil to Alderman Rowe: "it may be you will be loth to deal with a baron of the realm without some collateral securities of meaner quality." Stone continues:

It might indeed! Since the bodies of peers were immune and suits against them difficult, creditors often insisted that a nobleman's friends or his leading officers should join with him in a bond, recognizance, or statute. . . .

Owing, perhaps, to a natural reluctance of friends to get too deeply involved, the commonest sureties used by peers were their own servants Examples could be indefinitely extended, and there can be no doubt that this was normal practice. Satisfactory though this may have been to the creditors, the servants not infrequently found themselves less happily situated. In 1571 the servants of the Duke of Norfolk, in 1597, those of the Earl of Derby, in 1622 those of Bacon found themselves liable to arrest as sureties.10

There may, then, be a reminder in the initial terms of the arrangement, not merely that Antonio has credit and Bassanio has not, but that Bassanio is a noble and Antonio a merchant. This situates Antonio in class terms between Bassanio and Shylock, obviously, and it may help explain Antonio's extraordinary violence in repudiating Shylock's attempts to draw parallels between them later in the scene.

Shylock says, in an aside on Antonio's entry: "He hates our sacred nation, and he rails / (Even there where merchants most do congregate) / On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift, / Which he calls interest" (I.iii.42-46). And he clearly sees Antonio's temporary dependence on him as an opportunity to make some point about thrift and interest—one that he is not prone to make to Bassanio (whom Shylock seems to regard as of small consequence), but insists on putting to Antonio. He begins his indirect argument with another detail about Venetian finance:

I am debating of my present store,
And by the near guess of my memory
I cannot instantly raise up the gross
Of full three thousand ducats: what of that?
Tubal (a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe)
Will furnish me. . . .

(I.iii.48-53)
Shylock here, it would seem, is making a point about circulation: Antonio, in tapping him for cash, has access not to an individual but to a system. Certainly Shakespeare, at any rate, is making such a point—already in two and a half scenes the search for venture capital has gone through two middlemen and has crossed boundaries of rank and religion, has brought friendship to the market to finance marriage (or marriage to repay friendship), and has offered a wide variety of definitions of "thrift." Shylock's complaint about Antonio, partly practical ("He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [I.iii.39-40]), is partly also a complaint about Antonio's categorization of his activities: "my wellwon thrift / Which he calls interest."

If a discussion of interest is what Shylock wants, Antonio could hardly be more cooperative.

Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow
By taking nor by giving of excess,
Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,
I'll break a custom.

(I.iii.56-59)

Shylock reverts to this, with a key emendation: "but hear you, / Me thoughts you said, you neither lend nor borrow / Upon advantage" (I.iii.63-64). Antonio had used the word "excess"—and we must remember here that Antonio lends out money "gratis," so that he is treating any interest on a loan as "excess"; it is perhaps relevant to note that the officially permitted rate of return in England after 1571 was ten per cent, and moneylenders often got more.¹¹ Shylock turns Antonio's "excess" into the much more general "advantage," thus including the kinds of emotional return we have seen Antonio take from Bassanio earlier in the act.¹² Antonio, however, either does not notice the change, or will not split hairs: "I do never use it," he proudly replies.

II: Jacob, Esau, or Laban?

Antonio's sadness, I have suggested, is a market-linked phenomenon. So is Shylock's apparently irrelevant and patently incomplete retelling of the Jacob story, which is so evidently meant to justify usury.

Shy. 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.
Ant. And what of him? did he take interest?
Shy. No, not take interest, not as you would say
Directly int'rest,—mark what Jacob did —

(I.iii.66-71)

Shylock wishes to force Antonio to await his exegesis of the incident he has begun to tell; Antonio, impatient, wishes to force him to the point. The Jacob story itself, of course, is a powerfully multivalent subtext for Shylock to invoke here: Shylock claims to possess the patriarchs ("This Jacob from our holy Abram was"), and to interpret their example with authority. The lightly alluded-to story of Jacob's inheritance, however, is full of danger for him in an exegetical argument with a Christian in a Christian state. In general, as G. K. Hunter notes, Renaissance Christians held that "if Abraham and the other patriarchs of the Old Testament belong to the Christian tradition, they cannot belong to the Jewish one; and Jewish invocation of them is not simply alien but actually subversive."¹³ Specifically, the Lord's words to Rebekah, when Esau and Jacob
struggled together in her womb, were taken by Christians as the prefiguration of their own inheritance of the blessings of the Jews:

And the Lord said to her, two nations are in thy wombe, and two maner of people shalbe deuided out of thy bowels, and the one people shalbe mightier then the other, and the elder shal serve ye younger.  

Saint Paul, in Romans 9:12-13, comments, in "great heaviness and continual sorrow" for the Jews who have not accepted Christ:

It was said vnto her, The elder shal serue the yonger. As it is written, I haue loued Iacob, & haue hated Esau.

And Paul concludes:

What shal we say then? That the Gentiles which folowed not righteousnes, haue atteained vnto righteousnes, euen the righteousnes which is of faith. But Israel which folowed the Law of righteousnes, colde not atteine vnto the Law of righteousnes. Wherefore? Because they soght it not by faith, but as it were by the workes of the Law. . . . (9:30-32)

The Jacob story, then, is full of danger for Shylock. First, the story itself, as part of the Hebrew Bible, has been converted; and second, and more specifically, the story contains, from a Christian viewpoint, a prophecy of Christian inheritance of blessings, and a threat to those who trust in "the works of the law." Shylock seems unconcerned here with the story of how Jacob obtained his blessing: the deception of dim-eyed old Isaac, when Rebekah binds the kidskins on Jacob's hands and neck, is summed up neutrally by the phrase "as his wise mother wrought in his behalf; Shylock's concern is with what he did with the blessing. This is the story he tells Antonio, and it is crucial to note that he never completes or explains it. I quote at some length:

Ant. And what of him? did he take interest?
Shy. No, not take interest, not as you would say
Directly int'rest,—mark what Jacob did,—
When Laban and himself were compromis'd
That all the eanlings which 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 pill'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 blessing if men steal it not.
Ant. 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.
Was this inserted to make interest good?
Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?
Shy. I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast,—But note me signior.
Ant. Mark you this Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,—
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!
Shy. Three thousand ducats, 'tis a good round sum.

(I.iii.70-98)

What, we must ask, does Shylock want Antonio to "note," before he is thrown back on business by a series of insults in which his own behavior is taken as a text for moral commentary by Antonio to Bassanio? To learn, we must go back to the Jacob story, this time to that part of it Shylock is citing in detail. Jacob served Laban, his uncle, for twenty years, while avoiding the wrath of Esau for the theft of Isaac's blessing. Laban tricks Jacob by substituting Leah for Rachel in the dark (there's a kind of rough justice in this, given what Jacob and Rebekah did to Isaac), and he keeps Jacob as a servant even after Jacob has married Rachel. The wand trick which Shylock likens to his own interesttaking occurs after the following exchange between Jacob and Laban:

. . . Isaakó said to Labán, Sed me away that I may go vnto my place and to my countrey. . . . for thoues knowest what seruice I haue done thee. To whome Labán answered, . . . tarie: I haue perceiued that the Lord hathe blessed me for thy sake. . . . Appoint vnto me thy wages, and I wil giue it thee. But he said vnto hi, Thou knowest, what seruice I haue done thee. . . . For the litle, that thou haddest before I came, is increased into a multitude: and the Lorde hathe blessed thee by my comming. . . . (Genesis 30:25-30)

Jacob then proposes the grazing arrangement that Shylock describes, in which, from the increase of Laban's flocks, Jacob comes to have wealth of his own.

Shylock's never-interpreted biblical explanation, then, is an exceptionally rich one when applied to his situation as a Jewish moneylender in a cash-poor Christian state. He works for Antonio, supplying his needs and caring more providently for the money supply than the Christian merchants around him do; but because he is a Jew he is not allowed full participation in the economy, just as Jacob is prevented by Laban from having flocks of his own. Yet Jacob, blessed by God and his own ingenuity, breeds his own streaked flock from Laban's smooth one, and is hated for it, just as Shylock is hated for making money out of the money with which he supplies (or "blesses") the ventures of the Christians around him. Laban seeks to retain Jacob with him for the blessing Jacob brings—an economic one; yet he simultaneously denies Jacob rights to his gains, and indeed, as Jacob complains (Genesis 33:41), and as the Jews of Europe had notorious right to complain, "thou hast changed my wages ten times." It is this relation between Jacob and Laban, then, that Shylock is attempting to adduce as an explanation of his own place in the Venetian economy, and, more immediately, as a model for his relation to Antonio. Shylock's claim goes unheard because Antonio so violently rejects any claim of kinship, even as a fellow human being, from Shylock, who is driven to a much less sophisticated assertion of their relationship:

What should I say to you? Should I not say
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?'

(I.iii.115-17)

Shylock proposes the Jacob/Laban story as a model for the relationship between usury and venture capitalism with the former "blessing" the latter, but he cannot be heard except as a "devil," and must go on to defend his mere humanity. This entire incident offers rich territory for historically minded criticism to explore. There is
no doubt that loans at interest were essential, available, perilous, and feared in the last two decades of
Elizabeth's reign, during which Stone estimates that "about two-thirds of the peerage seem to have been in
growing financial difficulties."17 R. H. Tawney calls usury "the mystery of iniquity in which a host of minor
scandals were conveniently, if inaccurately, epitomized."18 Walter Cohen, in a recent essay on the play which
seeks to read it historically in both English and Italian terms, argues that Shylock, in contrast to Antonio, is "a
figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval."19 But Shylock's abortive scriptural
explanation of the usurer's relation to the capitalization needed by merchants is in fact an extraordinarily
progressive one (rather like Bacon's in "Of Usury"); what the scene illustrates is the diabolism forced on
Shylock by Antonio's near-hysterical resistance to any formal acceptance of the nature of the economic
system he lives in. Cohen later comments that "if the play revealed that merchants were as exploitative as
usurers, that they were in fact usurers [as was the case in England], then its entire thrust toward harmonious
reconciliation could only be understood as a fiendishly oblique instance of ironic demystification."20 Cohen
represents this as an unacceptably complex intention, but economic patterns I wish to trace here support such
an understanding; with respect to Shylock, they enlarge the significance of his exclusion to encompass the
exclusion of the demystifying self-defense he tries to offer. A Christian merchant, preserving homosocial
connection to a Lord, cannot afford to understand the parable of economic relations offered by the Jew.

Shylock, however, cannot control the interpretation of the text he cites. He does not remain Jacob for long,
and the Jacob story has an independent life in the play outside his speech.

Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's "unthrifty" servant, kneels backwards before his blind father, asks for a blessing,
and gains it only after old Gobbo, feeling the back of his head, exclaims "what a beard hast thou got"
(II.ii.89); the scene's parody of the deception of Isaac comes immediately prior to the entrance of Bassanio,
who offers, as Christianity does to converts, "rare new liveries" (II.ii.105). Launcelot begs employment,
commenting that "The old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you sir, you have 'the
grace of God' sir, and he hath 'enough'" (II.ii.140), suggesting that a blessing has passed to Bassanio. Jessica,
fleeing Shylock's house to join Lorenzo, and taking with her a casket and bags of ducats, echoes Rachel,
Laban's daughter, who steals his household gods when she flees in secret with Jacob. This last event, however,
reinforces the argument that Shylock loses control of the Jacob story as soon as he introduces it: he becomes
Laban, his daughter and idols stolen, or Esau, bereft of blessing and compelled to witness a younger people
thrive, rather than the Jacob he had been. Shylock plans to catch Antonio "on the hip," echoing a detail from
Jacob's wrestle with the angel, but in the trial scene it is Gratiano who exclaims "Now infidel I have you on
the hip" (IV.i.330). And it is Portia who will not release Shylock until he has blessed her and hers.

III: Protecting the Endowment

Portia, "richly left" in Belmont and guarded by the casket test, is a source of all that is good in life for
Bassanio if he can only find the proper intermediary. The caskets—gold, inscribed "who chooseth me shall
gain what many men desire"; silver, inscribed "who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves"; and lead,
inscribed "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath,"—offer extraordinary opportunities for
interpretation, which are complicated by Portia's telling Bassanio "I stand for sacrifice" and ordering a song
about how fancy is bred by visual appearances. The scene, at least in part, tests his willingness to take subtle
direction from Portia. In a play about economic, erotic, and religious venturing, circulation, and conversion,
however, only the lead casket, with its injunction to give and hazard, stands for a dynamic of exchange, and
touches the variety of kinds of exchange that the play presents. In doing so it creates, though rather vaguely,
an approximation of an Elizabethan marriage settlement with some advantage to the bride. "The father of the
bride had to provide a substantial cash sum, known as a portion," says Lawrence Stone. "In return . . . the
father of the groom had to undertake a far wider set of obligations. The most important was the provision of
an annual allowance for support of the bride if and when she became a widow, and the ratio between this
jointure, as it was called, and the cash portion was the main issue around which negotiations turned."21
Portia's name, then, is suggestive of the means of relieving debts (of various sorts) which she provides for
Bassanio; choosing the lead casket, which promises no profit and exacts gifts and risks, shows that he on his side offers a "jointure" of sorts to balance the huge "portion" he hopes to receive. It is worth nothing here that the lead casket in Shakespeare's presumed source for this part of the play bears the legend, "Who chooseth me shall finde that God hath disposed for him," so that Shakespeare has chosen an economic moral to replace a providential one.

Portia, then, in her speech ratifying Bassanio's successful casket choice, blesses him with herself and her wealth in familiar terms: "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted" (III.ii.166-67). Her control, as Shylock's was the bond, is the ring:

This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours,—my lord's—I give them with this ring.
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(III.ii.170-74)

Rings are signs of commitment and also tokens of wealth (Gratiano, who gets one from Nerissa, claims that his was of little cash value, as if that were relevant, when she condemns him for giving his away; Shylock lost two rings with Jessica, one a diamond that cost him two thousand ducats at Frankfurt, the other the turquoise Leah gave him when he was a bachelor, which Jessica, in an appalling parody of her mother's gesture, exchanges for a monkey: the error, then, involved in using something which has symbolic value for its exchange value is connected with rings in the play before the final scene). They are also, as circles, potential symbols of enclosure as well as of cycles of commitment and exchange.22

The instant Portia's house becomes Bassanio's, it begins to fill with guests: Gratiano will marry Nerissa and stay, Lorenzo and Jessica arrive hungry, having thrown away the money Jessica stole from her father's house ("you drop manna in the way / Of starved people," he says to Portia at the play's end), and Salerio brings a letter from Antonio.

After welcoming them all in his new capacity as host, Bassanio is forced by the letter to explain in some embarrassment to Portia that, while he never pretended to be rich, "Rating myself at nothing, you shall see / How much I was a braggart" (III.ii.256); his debts and Antonio's danger are revealed—evidently tactfully unmentioned before—and we see Portia echoing his descriptions of Antonio as she learns the extent of this prior emotional and financial obligation.

Bass. I have engag'd myself to a dear friend,
Engag'd my friend to his mere enemy
To feed my means.
. . . But is it true Salerio?
Jes. . . . If law, authority and power deny not,
It will go hard with poor Antonio.
Por. Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?
Bass. The dearest friend to me. . . .

(III.ii.260-91)

She then asks the sum of the debt, and delights all by saying "What no more?" "You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over. / When it is paid, bring your true friend along" (III.ii.297, 305-7). Thus she reverses the current of cash that has flowed in her direction by sending Bassanio back to Venice with a tidal
wave of ducats. Her speech, sometimes cited to show how far above financial concerns she is, concludes with a wonderful bow to the market—a line Pope thought unworthy of Shakespeare: "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear" (III.ii.312). She can securely outbid Venice for Bassanio, and seems cheerful at the prospect of establishing credit in her own favor. Bassanio then reads out Antonio's letter:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and (since in paying it, it is impossible I should live), all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure,—if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.

(III.ii.314-20)

"O love!" Portia echoes in an immediate counter to this claim; she then sends him off to the rescue: "Dispatch all business [their marriage!] and be gone!" And she wisely chooses to follow to protect her investment.

What Portia discovers here—to return to the terms suggested by Sedgwick—is the potentially homosocial aspect of her marriage to Bassanio. Describing the centrality of the homosocial relation of cuckoldry in Wycherley's The Country Wife, Sedgwick comments that in that play

> the triangular transaction between men of the possession of a woman—a transaction whose structuring presence in other texts sometimes requires some inferential work to detect—is simply the most patent subject. The status of women in this transaction is determiningly a problem in the play: not their status in the general political sense but their ambiguous status of being at the same time objects of symbolic exchange and also, at least potentially, users of symbols and subjects in themselves.\(^{23}\)

Portia, discovering Bassanio's "engagement" to Antonio, turns immediately to money, to male disguise, and to the law to protect her status as a principal and to avoid becoming an object of homosocial exchange.

Seen in this light, the trial scene betrays an unexpected (and I believe hitherto unnoticed) but cogent financial logic. Bassanio, following Portia's initial suggestion, makes a series of offers to Shylock and to Antonio. We appear to be seeing the repayment of Venetian debts that Bassanio forecast when proposing his venture for the golden fleece of Belmont. And Bassanio's offers are by no means confined to money:

> Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself,
> But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
> Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
> I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(IV.i.278-83)

All Belmont, love and money together, is offered for sacrifice.

What actually happens, however, is quite different. Portia leads Shylock to declare an intent to kill, by getting him to deny a surgeon's presence to staunch or cauterize the wound he will make in cutting the pound of flesh, and she then catches him in laws wider than those he has invoked.

> Por. if thou dost shed
> One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

Shy. I take this offer then,—pay the bond thrice
And let the Christian go.
Bass. Here is the money.
Por. Soft!
The Jew shall have all justice,—soft no haste!
He shall have nothing but the penalty.

Shy. Give me my principal, and let me go.
Bass. I have it ready for thee, here it is.
Por. He hath refus'd it in the open court,
He shall have merely justice. . . .

(IV.i.305-35)

Up to this point, Portia has been protecting her own money, which Bassanio seeks to give away. Shylock then attempts to end the trial:

Shy. I'll stay no longer question.
Por. Tarry Jew,
The law hath yet another hold on you.
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien,
That by direct, or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive,
Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke. . . .

Duke For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's,
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive into a fine.
Por. Ay for the state, not for Antonio.

(IV.i.342-69)

Each of these interventions protects Portia's endowment from threats; half Shylock's goods wipes out the debts Bassanio has to Antonio, and re-equips him as a merchant so that he will not turn into a dependent. He then, very neatly from this viewpoint, answers Portia's question, "What mercy can you render him Antonio?" by endowing Lorenzo and Jessica, so that they will not be dependents of Portia and Bassanio (whose house they are looking after, not very thriftily, in Portia's absence). The forced conversion of Shylock, moreover, completes the logic of his treatment in the play. His ducats, his servant, his daughter, his justifying biblical text, have all been converted to serve Christians; now he himself must convert, a final victim of the cruelty of typology.

Even though Portia's portion survives the trial untouched, Bassanio continues to attempt to give it away. He, with the freed Antonio beside him, says to the disguised Portia,
Bass. Most worthy gentleman, I and my friend
Have by your wisdom been this day acquitted
Of grievous penalties, in lieu whereof,
Three thousand ducats due unto the Jew
We freely cope your courteous pains withal.
Ant. And stand indebted over and above
In love and service to you evermore.
Por. He is well paid that is well satisfied.

(IV.i.404-11)

We may well believe Portia's comment here. She not only has the delicious opportunity to refuse her own money; she also has Antonio's precious testimony that the balance of erotic credit is now hers. She has, of course, ensured that the financial balance is on her side (in fact, any of the original three thousand ducats not spent by Bassanio before he first left Venice count as profit to Portia). She pauses only to request the ring, which Bassanio first denies, then gives at a request from Antonio that Balthazar's "deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'against your wife's commandement" (IV.i.446-47). And this is material for Portia's final educative gesture. She has put Antonio in her debt, though he doesn't yet know this, and with the ring she will teach Bassanio not to circulate her gifts, and turn Antonio from a rival into a surety for his love. She reproaches the ringless Bassanio on his return to Belmont, and he replies:

Bass. Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
I never more will break an oath with thee.
Ant. I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.
Por. Then you shall be his surety: give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.
Ant. Here Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring.
Bass. By heaven it is the same I gave the doctor!

(V.i.247-57)

Antonio, claiming a right from his near-sacrifice—a right both to exculpate Bassanio and to establish the supreme obligation that all are under to the male "doctor"—becomes a guaranteeing middleman in the final transaction of the play, a transaction which binds both men in obligation to Portia. Her triumphant manipulation of patterns of homosocial exchange is now complete. She remarks below: "I have not yet / Enter'd my house" (V.i.272-73, emphasis mine). She has, however, established her possession of it, and of Bassanio, and her absolute mastery of the systems of exchange in the play which have routed all blessings, economic, erotic, and theological, toward Belmont.

What then does this tell us?

I have tried to demonstrate that the pattern of credit and debit, payment and profit, is drawn in this play with nearly the precision of an auditor's report, and to suggest further that the character whose actions most shape and exploit this pattern is not Shylock or Antonio but Portia. She is both a better manipulator of exchange patterns, and a better idealizer of them, than her opponents Shylock and Antonio, who bless her with their thrift.
These claims, however, leave some vexing questions open: are the social values inscribed in *The Merchant of Venice* essentially conservative or progressive ones? Portia is, after all, a landed aristocrat, and the play shows, and apparently endorses, the fall of the goods of a progressive commercial exchange system into her lap. As in Shylock's story of Jacob and Laban, his "blessing" profits another—though in this case he must lose all that he values so that Portia may gain all she wants. From this viewpoint, the play offers reassurance that, while the world may change, inherited blessings will be preserved. On the other hand, more than any other Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Venice* shows a woman triumphing over men and male systems of exchange: the "male homosocial desire" of Antonio is almost as thoroughly thwarted in the play as is Shylock's vengefulness. Thus the play is both conservative and radical, and is perhaps centrally concerned to show the availability of power to all through systems of exchange which yet favor the flexible, the intelligent, and the already strong.

**Notes**


3 For persuasive arguments that the play invokes both English and Italian responses to the onset of credit economies, see Walter Cohen, "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH,* 49 (1982), 765-85, incorporated into his *Drama of a Nation: Public Theatre in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 195-211. I will suggest that Cohen could find much more detailed support for his views in the plot of the play.


6 Lawrence Danson, rather nervously fending off a homoerotic interpretation of Antonio's melancholy, comments that "Two monosyllabic expletives might seem a slender basis on which to build a character's motivations, but it can be done," quotes reports from the stage, and concludes that "What is crucial to decide. . . is whether those otherwise innocuous "fies" in the first scene should actually lead to Antonio's exclusion and a final dying fall" for the play. But there is much more than a couple of "fies" to suggest erotic causes for Antonio's melancholy. See Danson's good book, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 37-38.

7 See Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *The Kenyon Review,* ns 1, 4 (Fall 1979), 66 for a summary of financial relations between Antonio and Bassanio which in some ways anticipates this one. Shell calls Antonio on p. 70 "a zealot [against interest-taking] who seems to condemn even marine insurance." See also Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 69 for the interesting suggestion that Antonio "behaves like the altruists described by Anna Freud who have given up to another person, with whom they identify, the right to have their instincts gratified."

9 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 50.


11 See Stone, p. 530.

12 Shylock's line on first seeing Antonio: "How like a fawning publican he looks!" (I.iii.36), which has always puzzled commentators because Antonio can hardly be said to be "fawning" in his relations with Shylock, may be explicable in these terms. If we assume that Shylock sees Antonio as fawning on *Bassanio* (certainly the only person we see Antonio prone to fawn on), then the notion that Antonio is like a Roman tax-gatherer who abuses those below him—especially Jews—in order to ingratiate himself to those above, shows Shylock's insight into the kind of emotional "interest" we have seen Antonio exacting from his own loans.


15 See Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1948), pp. 169-72, and Danson, pp. 72-76, where these contexts are drawn together to support a different argument.

16 For a different reading of it, turning on the distinction in Jewish law between "brothers" and "others," see Shell, pp. 68-70.

17 Stone, p. 542.


20 Cohen, p. 774.

21 Stone, p. 633.

22 Sigurd Burckhardt, in *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 210, comments: "As the subsidiary metaphors of the bond and the ring indicate, *The Merchant* is a play about circularity and circulation; it asks how the vicious circle of the bond's law can be transformed into the ring of love." As will soon become clear, I do not feel that the "rings of love" at play's end offer a qualitative transformation of the earlier "bonds."


24 Compare Novy, pp. 76-80 for an account of how "the victory goes to Portia" at the end of the play which in several ways anticipates this one.

**Karen Newman (essay date 1987)**

The merchant of Shakespeare's title is ambiguous; it applies literally to Antonio, but also characterizes Shylock, and indeed all the play's action, not only the "bond" plot, but the love plot as well. The exchange of goods, whether they be "rich lading wrack'd on the narrow seas" (III.i.3) or women, characterizes the play's action. Readers have often remarked the language of commerce that characterizes the Venetian world of the Rialto where even a church, "the holy edifice of stone," would remind Christian merchants "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 skills" (I.i.30-34). Here the feminine personification of merchant ship as woman wounded figures both the commodification of woman and her violation. Belmont seems at first to be presented quite differently—talk there is of love, sexuality, familial relationships seemingly free from Venetian economic motives and aims. Portia's suitors are judged not on the basis of their wealth or goods, but in terms of personal and moral qualities, and it must be said, racial prejudice.

But as many readers have noted, any simple binary opposition between Belmont and Venice is misleading, for the aristocratic country life of Belmont shares much with commercial Venice: the matter and mottoes of the caskets suggest commercial values, and Portia's father's will rules her choice of husbands. Though venturing at Belmont is admittedly idealized—Bassanio's quest of Portia is likened to Jason's voyage, thus endowing it with a mythical dimension, and Portia's father's will, through the mottoes, criticizes rather than endorses commercial values—what is important is the structure of exchange itself which characterizes both the economic transactions of Venice and the love relationships forged at Belmont. Venice and Belmont are throughout the play compared and contrasted, but the syntax of exchange itself functions in both locales; indeed, it seems universal.

Before considering structures of exchange in Shakespeare's play, I would like to look in some detail at the status of exchange in anthropology. In his *Essay sur le don*, Marcel Mauss describes and analyzes one of the most remarkable features of primitive societies: the extent to which exchange—giving, receiving, and reciprocating gifts—dominates social intercourse. Gift-giving is significant according to Mauss because it establishes and expresses social bonds between the partners of an exchange. In the cultures that Mauss describes, "food, women, children, possessions, charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank" circulate in exchange. By offering a gift, the giver solicits friendship, establishes a relationship, perhaps seeks a reward. Gift-giving can be competitive—its "underlying motives are competition, rivalry, show and a desire for greatness and wealth." Acceptance of a gift creates a reciprocal relationship by implying a willingness to return a gift, so by giving a gift that cannot be reciprocated, either because of its kind or its excess, the giver can humiliate the receiver. Perhaps the most striking anthropological example of such gift-giving is the so-called Big Man of highland New Guinea who is assigned in adolescence a *buanyin* or exchange partner, and, apparently against indigenous norms of social behavior, is trained to an entire system of exchange and gift-giving in excess of what can be reciprocated. Such behavior results in prestige and power.

Claude Lévi-Strauss reworks Mauss's theory of the gift in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* by proposing that marriage is the most fundamental form of gift exchange, and women the most basic of gifts. In studying the function and origins of exogamy, Lévi-Strauss argues that incest taboos and other rules prohibiting sexual relations and marriage between family members insure alliances and relationships among men:

The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift. . . .
Gift-giving, then, for Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, establishes social bonds and is a strategy of power. For Lévi-Strauss, however, such bonds and strategies are gender specific: they are exercised by and forged between and among men by means of the exchange of women:

The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman ... but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners. . . .

(p. 115)

Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy which expresses it—has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together, and of superimposing upon the natural links of kinship the henceforth artificial links . . . of alliance governed by rule. . . . It provides the fundamental and immutable rule ensuring the existence of the group as a group.

(pp. 480-81)

For Lévi-Strauss, the exchange of women is at the origin of social life. His androcentric analysis seeks to authorize the exchange of women and the male bonds it constitutes by claiming that culture depends upon such ties. Feminists have pointed out two related consequences of Lévi-Strauss's claims. On the one hand, the seeming centrality of the woman as desired object is a mystification: she is a pseudo-center, a prize the winning of which, instead of forging a male/female relation, serves rather to secure male bonds. Others have looked not so much at the woman in this system of exchange, but at the male bonds it establishes. The French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray postulates that if, as Lévi-Strauss claims,

the exchanges which organize patriarchal societies take place exclusively between men, . . . [and if] women, signs, goods, money, pass from man to man or risk . . . slipping into incestuous and endogamous relations which would paralyze all social and economic intercourse, . . . [then] the very possibility of the socio-cultural order would entail homosexuality. Homosexuality would be the law that regulates the socio-cultural economy.

Irigaray's use of the French conditional, exigerait and serait, translated here as "would entail" and "would be," and her stipulation that homosexual relations per se are prohibited because they risk short-circuiting the very systems of exchange that produce male bonds, suggest her polemical purpose in positing homosexuality as "the law that regulates the socio-cultural economy." Irigaray eroticizes the ties between men Lévi-Strauss describes in order to suggest a continuum—which she expresses by her pun, "hom(m)o-sexualité"—that encompasses an entire range of male relations from the homoerotic to the competitive to the commercial. Recently Eve Sedgwick has made the perspectives first conceptualized by Kristeva and Irigaray available to the Anglo-American reader by appropriating the term "homosocial" from the social sciences to describe "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitality, and economic exchange—within which the various forms of the traffic in women take place."

*The Merchant of Venice* would seem to offer an exemplary case not only of Lévi-Strauss's exchange system but also of the French feminist critique of that system. The exchange of Portia from her father via the caskets to Bassanio is the *ur*-exchange upon which the "main" bond plot is based: it produces Bassanio's request for money from Antonio and in turn the bond between Antonio and Shylock. Though the disposition of Portia by her father's will, and the financial arrangements between Bassanio and Antonio that permit Bassanio's courtship, lead to heterosexual marriage, the traffic in women paradoxically promotes and secures homosocial relations between men. Read from within such a system, Portia's seeming centrality is a mystification, a pseudo-center, for woman in this series of transactions, to repeat Lévi-Strauss's phrase, "figures only as one of
the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners." The feminist rereading of Lévi-Strauss also provides another angle from which to read the *Merchant's* much-debated male relationship. Commentators have often remarked Shakespeare's introduction of the theme of friendship, a shift from the paternal/filial relationship of *Il Pecorone* usually recognized as the *Merchant's* primary source. But the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio has been interpreted not only as a version of idealized Renaissance friendship, but also as homoerotic.13 Certainly textual evidence suggests the difficulty in distinguishing between the erotic and the platonic in Antonio's relations with Bassanio. Instead of choosing one interpretation over another, idealized male friendship or homosexuality, Irigaray's reading of Lévi-Strauss allows us to recognize in Antonio's relationship with Bassanio a homosocial bond, a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails.

Some anthropologists have challenged not the phallocentrism of Lévi-Strauss's claim that exogamous marriage and the exchange of women is a necessary condition for the formation of social groups and ultimately of culture, but his theory of kinship itself. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, adduces instances of parallel cousin marriage from nomadic and gatherer groups which refute the structuralist interpretation of kinship as a rule-governed *system*, arguing instead that kin relationships are social *practices* that produce and reproduce historically specific social relations. In the cultures Bourdieu examines, for example, women often take part in the choice of a spouse for their children: how marriages are made and what they do "depend on the aims or collective strategies of the group involved" and are not constitutive *per se* of male bonds or of culture.14 But Bourdieu's ungendered social science vocabulary ("the collective strategies of the group involved") glosses over the significant fact that these aims and strategies inevitably allot women secondary status, for it is always the bride, and never the groom, who is an object of exchange among family groups and the means whereby social relations are reproduced. However they may disagree about the reasons for and results of kinship "rules" or "practices," in both Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Bourdieu's functionalist analysis, women figure as capital, as objects of exchange among men.

But the "traffic in women" is neither a universal law on which culture depends, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, nor simply a means of producing and reproducing generalized "social relations," as Bourdieu claims: Kristeva's and Irigaray's analysis of exchange exposes it as a strategy for insuring hierarchical gender relations. The exchange of women produces and reproduces what Gayle Rubin has termed a "sex/gender system" in which the traffic in women is only part of an entire system of sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and *people*—men, women and children—in concrete systems of social relationships.

... "Exchange of women" is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin.

(p. 177)

Such a sex/gender system functioned historically in early modern England where marriage, among the elite at least, was primarily a commercial transaction determined by questions of dowry, familial alliances, land ownership, and inheritance.15 Daughters were pawns in the political and social maneuvers of their families, particularly their male kin.16 Marriage contracts and settlements, familiar letters and wills, conduct books and sermons alike recognize in marriage an economic transaction based on the exchange of gifts—women, cash, annuities, rents, land.17 Divines preached sermons with such titles as "A Good Wife Gods Gift"; women were explicitly commodified, as in John Wing's exemplary exhortation, in his treatise on marriage, that men seek wives not in the devil's place—playhouses, may games, dance matches—but in God's house, since
[a]ll men love in merchandizing for any commodity, to goe as neere the welhead as they can, to such as make the commodities themselves, and from whose hands they doe originally come. 18

The commercial language to describe love relationships common in Elizabethan love poetry and in The Merchant of Venice displays not only the economic determinants of marriage in Elizabethan society, but England's economic climate more generally—its developing capitalist economy characterized by the growth and expansion of urban centers, particularly London; the rise of banking and overseas trade; and industrial growth with its concomitant need for credit and large amounts of capital. 19 Such changes, as Walter Cohen has demonstrated, inevitably generated anxiety that readers of The Merchant of Venice have recognized in the tension Shakespeare created between trade and usury, and in the ultimate triumph of Antonio and his incorporation into Belmont's world of aristocratic, landed values. 20

The exchange of gifts dominated not only kinship relations, but power relations as well. Gift-giving was a significant aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean social intercourse, as demonstrated by royal prestation and patronage, and by the New Year's gift roles, account books, and records of aristocratic families who vie with one another in their generosity to the monarch in quest of favor. 21 Not only the monarch and the aristocracy, but the gentry and the middling sort—all took part in these systems of exchange. Even the poorest families participated in such exchange systems: observers describe the custom in English villages of placing a basin in the church at weddings, into which guests placed gifts to help to establish the newly formed family in the community. 22 In the 1620s and 30s, gift-giving declined and signalled the alienation of the aristocracy, gentry, and urban elite from the court. 23

In III.ii, of The Merchant of Venice, Portia offers her love to Bassanio in a speech that epitomizes the Elizabethan sex/gender system:

You see me Lord Bassanio where I stand,  
Such as I am; though for myself alone  
I would not be ambitious in my wish  
To wish myself much better, yet for you,  
I would be trebled twenty times myself,  
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,  
That only to stand high in your account,  
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends  
Exceed account: but the full sum of me  
Is sum of something: which to term in gross,  
Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised,  
Happy in this, she is not yet so old  
But she may learn: happier than this,  
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;  
Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit  
Commits itself to yours to be directed,  
As from her lord, her governor, her king.  
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours  
Is now converted. But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,  
This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours,—my lord's!—I give them with this ring. . . .

(III.ii.149-71)
This speech begins with what we might term an affective paradox. Portia presents herself to Bassanio using the first person in an engagingly personal, if highly rhetorical, manner: "Such as I am." But her account of herself, as my own dead metaphor suggests, illustrates the exchange between the erotic and the economic that characterizes the play's representation of human relations. The rhetorical distance created by the mercantile metaphor shifts the speech from her personal commitment to a more formal bond marked by the giving of her ring, and that move is signaled by the shift to the third person ("an unlesson'd girl . . . she"). Portia objectifies herself and thereby suppresses her own agency in bestowing herself on Bassanio. The passives are striking—she casts herself grammatically in the role of object "to be directed"; she and all she owns "is converted" to Bassanio by an un stated agent. Perhaps the most marked stylistic feature of these lines is the repeated use of now which signals both temporal shifts and, more importantly, a moment of conversion. The rhetorical balance of line 166 is arrested by the caesura and the now of line 167 which insists on the present moment of commitment to Bassanio. The "but now" that follows refers back in time, emphasizing Portia's prior role as "lord" of Belmont, a role that she yields to Bassanio with her vow "I give them with this ring"; the moment of fealty is underscored by the repeated "even now, but now" in line 169.

The governing analogy in Portia's speech is the Renaissance political commonplace that figures marriage and the family as a kingdom in small, a microcosm ruled over by the husband. Portia's speech figures woman as microcosm to man's macrocosm and as subject to his sovereignty. Portia ratifies this prenuptial contract with Bassanio by pledging her ring, which here represents the codified, hierarchical relation of men and women in the Elizabethan sex/gender system in which a woman's husband is "her lord, her governor, her king." The ring is a visual sign of her vow of love and submission to Bassanio; it is a representation of Portia's acceptance of Elizabethan marriage which was characterized by women's subjection, their loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel. It signifies her place in a rigidly defined hierarchy of male power and privilege; and her declaration of love at first seems to exemplify her acquiescence to woman's place in such a system.

But Portia's declaration of love veers away in its final lines from the exchange system the preceding lines affirm. Having moved through past time to the present of Portia's pledge and gift of her ring, the speech ends in the future, with a projected loss and its aftermath, with Portia's "vantage to exclaim on" Bassanio:

I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(11. 171-74)

Here Portia is the gift-giver, and it is worth remembering Mauss's description of gift-giving in the New Guinea highlands in which an aspiring "Big Man" gives more than can be reciprocated and in so doing wins prestige and power. Portia gives more than Bassanio can ever reciprocate, first to him, then to Antonio, and finally to Venice itself in her actions in the trial which allow the city to preserve both its law and its precious Christian citizen. In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio.

Contemporary conduct books and advice about choosing a wife illustrate the dangers of marriage to a woman of higher social status or of greater wealth. Though by law such a marriage makes the husband master of his wife and her goods, in practice contemporary sources suggest unequal marriages often resulted in domination by the wife. Some writers and Puritan divines even claimed that women purposely married younger men, men of lower rank or of less wealth, so as to rule them. Marriage handbooks and sermons all exhort women to submit to their husbands, regardless of disparity in rank or fortune, as in this representative example from Daniel Tuvill's St. Pauls Threefold Cord:
Yea, though there were never so great a disproportion betwixt them in state and condition; as say the wife were a Princesse, the husband but a pesant, she must be yet in conjugall respects as a hand-mayd unto him; he must not be as a servant unto her. . . . And this subjection is so necessary, that without it the world could not long subsist; yea nature herselfe would suddenly be dissolved. . . .

The vehemence and fear of chaos and disorder Tuvill betrays are characteristic and imply a growing need in the Stuart period to shore up eroding class and gender hierarchies.

Bassanio's answer to Portia's pledge of love implicitly recognizes such a disparity and its effect by metaphorically making her the master:

Madam, you have bereft me of all words,
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
And there is such confusion in my powers,
As after some oration fairly spoke
By a beloved prince, there doth appear
Among the buzzing pleased multitude,
Where every something being blent together,
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy
Express'd, and not express'd: but when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence,—
O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!

(III.ii.175-85)

Bassanio's heavily marked epic simile is anomalous in Shakespearean comedy. It echoes the first and perhaps most famous Virgilian simile of the Aeneid, when Neptune's effect in quelling the storm inspired by Juno is compared to that of "a man remarkable / for righteousness and service" for whom the people "are silent and stand attentively; and he controls their passion by his words and cools their spirits." Shakespeare translates the Virgilian simile into his own romantic context in which the speaker's words, instead of having a quieting effect on heart and mind, create a Petrarchan paradox: blood that speaks, but a lover silenced. And in keeping with Petrarchan conventions, Bassanio's comparison figures Portia as dominating and distant—that is, as a prince. Renaissance rhetoricians such as Wilson and Puttenham define figurative language as translation, "an inursion of sence by transport"—a kind of figurative exchange which disturbs normal communication and makes unexpected connections. Poets use tropes so that "the hearer is ledde by cogitation vppon rehearsall of a Metaphore, and thinketh more by remembraunce of a worde translated, then is there expressely spoken: or els because the whole matter seemeth by a similitude to be opened...." Bassanio's political simile with its Virgilian intertextual exchange "disguises" Portia as a man and prefigures her masculine role in the trial scene where she insures the Venetian republic by reconciling the principle of equity with the rigor of the law.

We should also remember that Portia, whom Bassanio earlier describes as "nothing undervalu'd / To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia" (I.i. 165-66), is named after her classical ancestor who describes herself in Julius Caesar as "A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter. / Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded?" (II.i.295-97). That Portia was renowned in antiquity for sharing the political ideals of her father and husband, and Shakespeare represents her commitment to political action by her insistence, as Plutarch had recorded, on knowing of the plot to murder Caesar and by her taking part in the conference of Republicans at Antium. The Merchant's Portia resembles her classical namesake and her figurai persona ("beloved prince") by entering the male lists of law and politics. Far from simply exemplifying the Elizabethan sex/gender system of exchange, the Merchant short-circuits the exchange, mocking its authorized social structure and hierarchical gender relations.
For Portia's ring, we should remember, does not remain on Bassanio's finger, and his gift of the ring to Balthazar does indeed give Portia "vantage to exclaim." The gift of Portia's ring shifts the figurative ground of her speech from synecdoche to metonymy. Her lines first figure the ring as a part of her which she gives as a sign of the whole to Bassanio; in the final lines, however, the prefigured loss of the ring signals not substitution, but contiguity, metonymic relations. By following the movements of her ring, we may discover something about how the play both enacts and interrogates Elizabethan structures of figurative and sexual exchange. Objects, like words, change their meaning in different contexts; as things pass from hand to hand, they accumulate meanings from the process of exchange itself. Bassanio gives away his ring in payment for services rendered and in doing so transgresses his pledge to Portia. When it begins its metonymic travels from Bassanio to the young doctor, the ring picks up new meanings which contradict its status as a sign of male possession, fidelity, and values; it moves from Bassanio to Balthazar to Portia to Antonio and back to Bassanio again and the very multiplicity of exchanges undermines its prior signification. The ring also makes a figurative progress; in Renaissance rhetorical terms it is transmuted, "which is, when a word hath a proper signification of the [sic] owne, and being referred to an other thing, hath an other meaning." Portia's ring becomes a sign of hierarchy subverted by establishing contiguities in which the constituent parts have shifting sexual and syntactic positions. By opening out the metonymic chain to include Balthazar, Bassanio opens his marriage to forces of disorder, to bisexuality, equality between the sexes, and linguistic equivalence in opposition to the decorous world of Renaissance marriage represented by the love pledges in III.ii. Bassanio gives his ring to an "unruly woman," that is, to a woman who steps outside her role and function as subservient, a woman who dresses like a man, who embarks upon behavior ill-suited to her "weaker" intellect, a woman who argues the law.

In her fine essay, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," Natalie Zemon Davis details the ways in which women's disorderliness manifested itself in England and Europe during this period. Davis observes that anthropologists generally agree that forms of sexual inversion—switches in sex roles, topsy turvy, and images of the world turned upside down, "the topos of the woman on top"—like other rites and ceremonies of reversal, are ultimately sources of order and stability in hierarchical society. They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of, and safety valve for, conflicts within the system. They can correct and relieve the system when it has become authoritarian. But, so it is argued, they do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it.

Many feminist critics have agreed with such judgments in their readings of Shakespeare's comedies of sexual inversion. They argue that such play, usually in the service of courtship, is ultimately conservative, leading to conventional gender roles and patriarchal marriage. Portia, we are told, in giving up her disguise and returning Bassanio's ring, returns to "unthreatening 'femininity.'" But Davis herself disputes the interpretation of sexual inversion as simply a safety mechanism. She points out first that historians of early modern Europe are likely to find inversion and reversals less in prescribed rites than in popular festivities and carnival. Cultural play with the concept of the unruly woman, she argues, was a multivalent image which "could undermine as well as reinforce traditional hierarchical formations." Davis adduces examples of comic and festive inversion that carried over into political action, that provided not only release, but also represented efforts or provided the means whereby the distribution of power in society was questioned and changed. And, I would add, inversion affects not only the distribution of power but also perhaps structures of exchange themselves that historically have insured male hegemony and patriarchal power. Sexual inversion and play with the topos of the woman on top offered an alternative mode of conceiving family structure and gender behavior within that structure.
When Bassanio leaves for Venice to aid his friend, Portia evokes the conventional ideal of a Renaissance lady: she promises "My maid Nerissa, and myself meantime / Will live as maids and widows" (III.ii.308-9); to Lorenzo she claims they will live in a monastery to fulfill a vow "to live in prayer and contemplation," behavior which conforms to the Renaissance ideal of womanhood: chaste, silent, and obedient. Shakespeare evokes here the accepted codes of feminine behavior in his culture, thereby distancing the action from the codes of dramatic comedy that permit masculine disguise, female dominance, and linguistic power. Portia evokes the ideal of a proper Renaissance lady and then transgresses it; she becomes an unruly woman.

The common remedies for the weaker sex's disorderliness were, even among the humanists such as Vives, Erasmus, and More, religious training to make her modest and humble, education of a restricted kind designed not to inflame her imagination but to acquaint her with her moral duty, and honest work of a sort appropriate to female capabilities. Transgression of the traditional expectations for women's behavior brought down wrath such as John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*:

> . . . the holy ghoste doth manifestile expresse, saying: I suffer not that woman vsurpe authoritie aboue man: he sayth not, I will not, that woman vsurpe authoritie aboue her husband, but he nameth man in generali, taking frome her all power and authoritie, to speake, to reason, to interprete, or to teache, but principallie to rule or to iudge in the assemblie of men . . . [A] woman promoted to sit in the seate of God, that is, to teache, to iudge, or to reigne aboue man, is a monstre in nature, contumelie to God, and a thing most repugnãt to his will åd ordinãce.\(^{41}\)

It might be argued that the excess of Knox's attack, directed specifically against Mary Tudor, reflects his own rather than widely held views. But even humanist writers sympathetic to the cause of women's education assume the propriety of Knox's claims, if not his rhetoric. They exclude women from the public arena and assume the necessity of their silence.\(^{42}\) Leonardo Bruni, for example, warns that "rhetoric in all its forms—public discussion, forensic argument, logical fence, and the like—lies absolutely outside the province of women."\(^{43}\) When Portia takes off for Venice dressed as a man, she looses her tongue in public talk on subjects illsuited to the ladylike conduct she posits as a model and does exactly those things Knox and others violently attacked. She engages, that is, in productive labor reserved for men, and not insignificantly, in linguistic labor, in a profession the successful practice of which depends on a knowledge of history and precedent, on logic and reasoning, and on rhetoric, all areas of education traditionally denied to women.

Portia's manner of winning her case, her "integrative solution" as it has been called, deserves consideration. Her defense depends on a verbal quibble,\(^{44}\) a characteristic linguistic strategy of Shakespearean clowns which allows them to express ideologically subversive or contradictory attitudes or ideas. Indeed, in the *Merchant*, Launcelot Gobbo uses the quibble for just such purposes. His wordplay around the command to come to dinner at III.v.43, and his earlier play with Jessica on damnation (III.v.4-7), give a double perspective to serious issues in the play, issues of social and Christian hierarchy and the like.\(^{45}\) Portia and Launcelot Gobbo, woman and servant, are linked by this shared verbal strategy which allows them seemingly at least to reconcile irreconcilable perspectives and to challenge the play's overall mimetic design. They represent the "other" in the play, those marginal groups that are oppressed under the Elizabethan class/gender system, but whose presence paradoxically is needed to insure its existence. Their playful, quibbling misuse of language veils their subversive linguistic power. Portia's wise quibble saves the Venetian republic by enabling the Duke to follow the letter of the law and to save Antonio, to satisfy the opposing viewpoints represented by the Old and New law, by Shylock and Antonio. In another register, as Walter Cohen has pointed out, it unites the bourgeois values of self-interest with those of the traditional landed gentry, an imaginary literary solution to ideological conflicts manifest in late sixteenth-century England (pp. 776 ff.). But Portia's linguistic play here and in the final scene, like Launcelot Gobbo's, resists the social, sexual, and political system of which she is a part and provides a means for interrogating its distribution of power along gender lines.
The Merchant of Venice does not end with Portia's success in the courtroom; after her winning defense of Antonio, Portia asks Bassanio to return her ring, knowing, as her husband puts it, that "There's more depends on this than the value." We know this ring symbolizes the bargain of faith in patriarchal marriage Portia and Bassanio have made in III.ii. By obeying Antonio's exhortation and giving his ring to Balthazar, Bassanio affirms homosocial bonds—the exchange of women, here represented by Portia's ring, sustains relations between men. But Balthazar is, of course, Portia in disguise (and Portia, we should not forget, was played by a boy, so that literally all the love relations in the play are homosocial). When Portia laughs at the thought of "old swearing / That they did give the rings away to men; / But we'll outface them and outswear them too" (IV.ii.15-17), she keeps her promise. In losing their rings and breaking their promises to Portia and Nerissa, Bassanio and Gratiano seem paradoxically to lose the male privileges the exchange of women and the rings insured. When in the final act Portia returns her ring to her husband via Antonio, its multiple metonymic travels have changed it. The ring no longer represents the traditional relationship it figured in III.ii. On its figurai as well as literal progress, it accumulates other meanings and associations: cuckoldry and thus female unruliness, female genitalia, woman's changeable nature and so-called animal temperament, her deceptiveness and potential subversion of the rules of possession and fidelity that insure the male line.

Natalie Zemon Davis observes that female disorderliness was grounded in nature rather than nurture, in cold and wet humours which "meant a changeable, deceptive and tricky temperament" (p. 125). Physiology accounted for unruly women: shrews, scolds, transvestites, women who transgressed the rules of womanly decorum, were believed to suffer from hysteria, or a fit of what the Renaissance called the "mother" or the "wandering womb." In the intervening time between their marriage and its putative consummation after the play's close, Portia has fallen victim to an imaginative fit of the "mother" and become an unruly woman. Her so-called "hysteria" leads her to act like a man, to bisexuality—she dresses up like a man and argues the law, imaginatively expressing her own sexuality by cuckoldling her husband with Balthazar. As Portia says when she returns the ring, "I had it of him: pardon me Bassanio, / For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (V.i.258-59). Instead of the subservient woman of elaborate pledges at III.ii, Portia's speech at V.i.266 ff. is filled with imperatives—"Speak not so grossly . . . read it . . . Unseal this letter. . . ." Having expressly given over her house to Bassanio in III.ii, she says in V.i, "I have not yet / Enter'd my house" (11. 272-73). She emphasizes her power and secret knowledge by giving Antonio the mysterious letter, but refusing to reveal how she came by it: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter."

It is often said that Act V of The Merchant of Venice is unusually harmonious even for Shakespearean comedy; certainly the world of usury, hatred, and aggression that characterizes Venice has receded. But Act V is far from presenting the harmonious view of love and marriage many have claimed, for even the idyllic opening dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo is troubled by allusions to unhappy love and broken vows. Lorenzo mockingly calls Jessica a shrew and the play ends on an obscene pun on ring and a commonplace joke about female sexuality and cuckoldry, not on the idealized pledges of true love that characterize III.ii. Portia's verbal skills, her quibbles and play with words, her duplicitous representation of herself as an unlessoned girl who vows "to live in prayer and contemplation," even as she rules her household and prepares to argue the law, bring together contradictory attitudes and views toward women and their role and place both in drama and society. Bassanio accepts the oppositions that her play with language enacts: "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow," he says. But in an aside that scarcely requires a psychoanalytic gloss, Bassanio exclaims "Why I were best to cut my left hand off, / And swear I lost the ring defending it" (V.i. 177-78). Portia's unruliness of language and behavior exposes the male homosocial bond the exchange of women insures, but it also multiplies the terms of sexual trafficking so as to disrupt those structures of exchange that insure hierarchical gender relations and the figurai hegemony of the microcosm/macrocosm analogy in Elizabethan marriage. Instead of being "directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king," Portia resumes her role as lord of Belmont: "Let us go in," she commands. As Davis suggests, in the "little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization" (p. 150). The sexual symbolism of transvestism, the transgression of traditional gender roles and the figurai transgression of heterosexual relations, the multivalence of linguistic
meanings in women's and clowns' speech, all interrogate and reveal contradictions in the Elizabethan sex/gender system in which women were commodities whose exchange both produced and reproduced hierarchical gender relations.

Portia's masterly speech and gift-giving in the play's final scene return us once more to anthropology and to the powerful Big Man of the New Guinea highlands that Mauss describes. To read Portia's transgression as subversive risks the theoretical accusation that her power finally depends on a reversal, on occupying the position of the Big Man, thereby preserving the oppositions that ground gender hierarchy. Even the term for such a gift-giver—Big Man—is problematic and suggests the reinscription of binary notions of sexual difference, of male and female, binarisms that inevitably allot to one pole, usually the masculine, a positive value, to the other a negative. From such perspective, all resistance is always already contained, dissipated, recuperated finally to the status quo. But Derrida’s deconstruction of such inversion, unlike many of its ahistorical and ultimately conservative applications, recognizes that particular strategies, languages, rhetorics, even behaviors, receive meaning only in sequences of differences, and that those sequences of differences are produced within a particular discourse—philosophy or linguistics, for example—or within a particular historical instance. Behaviors and rhetorics signify within particular discourses, histories, and economies. I have therefore argued that the Merchant interrogates the Elizabethan sex/gender system and resists the "traffic in women," because in early modern England a woman occupying the position of a Big Man, or a lawyer in a Renaissance Venetian courtroom, or the lord of Belmont, is not the same as a man doing so. For a woman, such behavior is a form of simulation, a confusion that elides the conventional poles of sexual difference by denaturalizing gender-coded behaviors; such simulation perverts authorized systems of gender and power. It is inversion with a difference.

Notes


2 Lawrence Danson and other readers have noted "the play's unusually prominent series of binary relationships," The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), p. 10.

3 I have chosen deliberately to leave Shylock out of my reading of The Merchant of Venice in order to disturb readings of the play that center their interpretive gestures on the Jew. I recognize the suggestive possibilities, however, of readings such as Marianne Novy's which link Shylock and Portia as outsiders by virtue respectively of their race and sex, Love 's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 64 ff.


5 I am indebted to Gayle Rubin's discussion of Mauss in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Toward an Anthropology of Women, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975). I also thank Lynda Boose whose careful reading of this paper and its anthropological frame steered me to the specific analogy between Portia and the Big Man which I develop here.


11 Irigaray, p. 168. I am grateful to Jonathan Goldberg for reminding me of this orthographic play.


17 See E. T., *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights: or The Lawes Provision for Women* (London, 1632), also known as *The Woman's Lawyer*, which gathers together in one volume contemporary laws about women, property, and marriage. In Bk. II, chap. xxxii, there is an extended discussion specifically of the "condiments of love," that is, the gifts given at marriage. In his recent essay on exchange in the *Merchant*, Lars Engle (see note 12 above) claims Portia's name suggests the marriage portion, a common means of relieving debt in early modern England. Though it is conceivable that an audience might hear "Portia" as an aural pun on "portion," the name is not etymologically related to the Latin *portio*, -onis, a share, part, proportion, but the Latin *porcus*, pig, and the Roman clan, the Porcii, breeders of pigs.

18 *The Crowne Conjugall or the Spouse Royal* (London, 1632), sig. K2r.


20 See Walter Cohen's admirable "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH*, 49 (1983), 765-89, which appears in part in his recent book, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in*


23 For a more detailed account of Jacobean gift-giving, see Coppélia Kahn's "'Magic of bounty': Timon of Athens, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power," especially pp. 41 ff., in this issue.

24 Kenneth Burke calls this figure the "'noblest synecdoche,' the perfect paradigm or prototype for all lesser usages, [which] is found in metaphysical doctrines proclaiming the identity of 'microcosm' and 'macrocosm.' In such doctrines, where the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa, we have the ideal synecdoche. . . ." A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives (Cleveland: Meridian, 1962), p. 508.

25 For a contemporary discussion of the giving of rings, see Henry Swinburne, Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts (London, 1686), but written and published much earlier; see also Anne Parten, "Re-establishing sexual order: The Ring episode in The Merchant of Venice," Selected Papers of the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association, 6 (1976), 27-34. Parten also remarks this link between Portia's ring and her submission. Engle, cited above, claims that Portia's actions in the final acts represent "her triumphant manipulation of homosocial exchange" and her "absolute mastery" (p. 37). Not only the historical and cultural position of women in early modern England, but also the generic boundaries of comedy seem to me to preclude such optimism. We can, however, claim resistance, a dislocation of the structures of exchange.


28 William Gouge, Of Domesticali Duties (London, 1634), sig. T2r.

29 (London, 1635), sigs. B4v-B5v.

30 Virgil knew the simile from the end of Hesiod's prologue to the Theogony, but Shakespeare would only have known it, of course, through Virgil.


32 Compare Lévi-Strauss's discussion of language and the emergence of symbolic thought in the final pages of Elementary Structures: "But woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs. In the matrimonial dialogue of men, woman is never purely what is spoken about; for if women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined to a certain kind of communication, each woman preserves a particular value. . . . In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained
at once a sign and a value” (p. 496).


34 See Burke's account of metonymy, the basic strategy of which is to convey an "incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible" (p. 506; see note 24 above).

35 This is also the case with the play's other lost ring given as a prenuptial pledge, from Leah to Shylock, which Jessica gives to one of Antonio's creditors for a monkey.

36 Wilson, in Hardison, p. 45.

37 Lisa Jardine discusses the significance of Portia's "arguing the law," in "Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines: These are old paradoxes," in this issue, pp. 12 ff.


40 Parten, "Re-establishing sexual order," p. 32.

41 (London, 1558), sigs. 16v-17r.

42 On the position of the learned lady in the Renaissance, see Lisa Jardine, "'O decus Italiae virgo,' or the myth of the learned lady in the Renaissance," *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 799-819, as well as the opening pages of her essay in this issue of *SQ*.


46 See Murray Biggs's "A Neurotic Portia," ShS, 25 (1977), 153-59, which recognizes from an opposite perspective the meaning of Portia's request: "she, perversely, asks for Bassanio's wedding ring. It is her one fall from heavenly grace." For a heavily psychoanalytic reading of Portia's behavior and her quest for mastery, see Vera Jiji, "Portia Revisited: The Influence of Unconscious Factors Upon Theme and Characterization in The Merchant of Venice," Literature and Psychology, 26 (1975), 5-15.

47 Norman Holland presents a number of psychoanalytic accounts of the link between rings and female sexuality in Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); for folktale sources, see, for example, the Tudor jest book Tales and Quick Answers (1530) cited in Parten (see note 25 above).

48 E.A.M. Colman argues in his The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare (London: Longman, 1976) that Shakespeare's bawdy is associated with anarchic and dissident impulses.


50 In Love's Argument Novy claims "the threats of possessiveness and promiscuity are both dispelled," but does not explain how this should be so (p. 79).

51 Lisa Jardine analyzes the link between learning in women and sexual "forwardness" in her essay in this issue.


53 Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp. 19, 33 ff.

54 See Irigaray's discussion of "mimetisme" as self-conscious or reflexive imitation in Ce sexe qui n 'en est pas un, pp. 134 ff.

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 40): Further Reading


Analyzes the play's capacity to disturb and offend an audience and argues that the source of this discomfort is rooted in the depiction of the play's social transactions.


States that Shakespeare presents Shylock and Antonio as representatives of Judaism and Christianity, respectively, and argues that Shylock's fate is due in part to his status as a foreigner within the Christian community of Venice.


Offers an overview of the play which combines both historical and structural analysis.

Examines the various critical interpretations of Shylock from the standpoints of extreme sympathy to complete condemnation, and concludes that Shylock is not simply a comic villain, "but a character to be taken seriously."


Examines the way in which Portia's disguise as Balthazar is used by Shakespeare to dramatize the conflict between heterosexual and homosexual love within the Portia/Bassanio/Antonio triangle.


Presents a detailed introduction to the play, focusing on Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews, literary sources for the play, and discussion of the plot, characters, and performance history.

Hamill, Monica J. "Poetry, Law, and the Pursuit of Perfection: Portia's Role in *The Merchant of Venice*" *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* XVIII, No. 2 (Spring 1978): 229-43.

Analyzes the relationship between Portia's use of poetic language and her interpretation and obeying of the law.


Explores the meaning and difference between "wise love and foolish desire" and argues that the relationship between these two elements is the factor which unifies the play's various plots.


Suggests that the passages in the play in which Portia's suitors are discussed are references to writers whom Shakespeare admired and was indebted to for plots and inspiration.


Offers an assessment of the play's plot and characters and examines the ways in which the play's characters resist being viewed as allegorical figures.


Discusses how the play's language creates as many problems as it addresses and examines in particular how "bodily discourse" may be read in many ways, such as legal, theological, or amatory.

Examines the rhetoric of Shylock and the Prince of Morocco and argues that the discourse of the two characters emphasizes their shared status as outsiders.


Argues that the play offers a "political and economic critique of human production."

**The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 53): Introduction**

*The Merchant of Venice*

Sometimes listed among Shakespeare's “problem plays” because of its ambiguous treatment of issues such as religion, economics, and the role of women, *The Merchant of Venice* has also been a source of heated critical disagreement with regard to race. In this light, scholars have discussed not only Shakespeare's ambivalent depiction of the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, but also his derogatory presentation of minor, non-European characters such as the Prince of Morocco. Critics have debated whether this racial tension is evidence of Shakespeare's own opinions. Alternatively, some scholars have suggested that Shakespeare might have relied on his racially charged scenes to create an allegorical drama or to satirize and thereby condemn his own culture's prejudices.

Although Thomas Moisan (1987) and Stephen A. Cohen (1994) do not deal specifically with the issue of race, both critics see the character Shylock as a social outsider. Both also credit Shakespeare with using Shylock to subtly criticize his era and his fellow Europeans in their treatment of non-Europeans. Moisan, for example, argues that the play pokes fun at a European, Christian society that condemns the economics of usury even while it depends on its practice. Cohen, on the other hand, identifies Shylock as a lone and unsuccessful defender of equity and social freedoms against “royal authority”—an issue that would become increasingly important in England as the days of monarchical rule came to a close and the period of Cromwell's Commonwealth approached.

Marion D. Perret (1988) touches upon racial questions in *The Merchant of Venice* when he remarks that Shylock's race would have been irrelevant to Shakespeare's audience, who, he contends, would have been more concerned with the moneylender's business and religious practices. By contrast, John Picker (1994), Avraham Oz (1995), and James Shapiro (1995) all see race as a crucial issue in the play. Each stresses Europe's (and more specifically England's) fear of the outsider or non-European as a factor in the way in which Shylock is treated—first by Antonio, and later by Portia and the Duke of Venice in the trial scene. Oz observes that the treatment of Jews by European cities was, in fact, a means of enforcing power over all outsiders as well as over all Europeans who were subordinate to the local authority. Oz asserts that Shylock's bargain with Antonio represents an attempt to reverse the relationship between those who have power and those who do not. Shapiro looks at the play from a slightly different point of view: in his examination of British performances of *The Merchant of Venice* over the centuries, he observes that audiences and directors have struggled to accommodate Jews, whom they regard as a threatening, non-English race which is nevertheless of great economic importance. Mary Janell Metzger (1998) refers to color as a distinguishing factor for race in the play. Metzger notes the frequency with which Jessica is described as white-skinned and therefore noble in contrast to her father, Shylock, who is dark-skinned and untrustworthy. Jessica, Metzger argues, is white enough to be regarded by some of the characters as a “latent Christian”—thus “racializing” the conception of what it is to be Jewish. Kim F. Hall (1992) and B. J. Sokol (1998) discuss the treatment of other races in the play. Hall examines a brief reference in Act III to a “Moor,” or black, woman whom Lorenzo claims has been impregnated by Launcelot. These few lines, Hall asserts, highlight the English nation's preoccupation with preserving its identity and power as a race—an issue that was of much concern to
Elizabethan England, deeply involved as it was at the time in colonization and commerce overseas. Sokol acknowledges the fact that such prejudice against other races and colors was legally condoned in England, but he also argues that Shakespeare employs language and characterization to reveal the Elizabethan public's actual contempt for the discriminatory laws of the land. Sokol contends, for example, that Launcelot's crude jokes about the Moorish woman and Portia's vocal relief at not having to marry the Moroccan prince are meant to reflect badly on the speakers rather than on the victims of their remarks.

The discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* as an allegorical statement focuses more on Shylock's religion than his race. Some early critics argued, for example, that the trial scene during which Shylock is out-maneuvered by Portia and is punished for his cruelty stands for the triumph of Christianity over Judaism. Recently, however, scholars have taken a more specific and measured view of the allegorical elements in the play. While both Susan McLean (1996) and Judith Rosenheim (1996) note that the play intentionally echoes the parable of the Prodigal Son, neither concludes that this allusion to the New Testament functions unequivocally as a condemnation of one religion over another. Instead, McLean asserts that the complex and sometimes ironic “enactments” of different parts of the parable by various characters—Launcelot and Old Gobbo, Antonio and Shylock, Jessica and Shylock, Bassanio and Antonio—indicate that there is no easy way to forgive nor any one particular road to salvation. Similarly, Rosenheim argues that the genuine father/son relationship between Old Gobbo and the prodigal Launcelot reflects a symbolic one between Shylock and Antonio, and that the power struggle that occurs between each pairing represents both the flaws and virtues of the moral values of our own time as well as of Shakespeare's. Finally, Matthew A. Fike (1994) suggests an allegorical reading of the play when he observes that unlike other comedies by Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* is filled with a sense of disappointment, be it in business dealings (Shylock and Antonio), friendship (Bassanio and Antonio), or love (the participants in the ring scene) and that in this highly complicated play, disappointment represents humanity's earthly condition as one in which flawed happiness is the only type possible.

**The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 53): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies**


*[In the essay below, Lyon describes *The Merchant of Venice* as a “controversial play.” He demonstrates that literary critics have been widely divided concerning Shakespeare’s views on anti-Semitism, and concludes that the play needs to be examined not only from the point of view of Shakespeare’s era, but also within the context of his other plays.]*

The safest place to begin with so controversial a play as *The Merchant of Venice* is with effects rather than causes. In a brilliantly economical survey of the play's criticism, Norman Rabkin recently identified the essential quality of *The Merchant of Venice* to be its capacity to provoke a welter of diverging and opposing responses. Consequently Rabkin lamented the play's critical history as a series of strategies of evasion, determined either to dismiss the play, or through partiality and evasion, to coerce it into a thematic and tonal unity. Rabkin's crisp diagnosis of this critical tradition merits quotation at length:

Such radical disagreements between obviously simplistic critics testify to a fact about their subject that ought to be the point of departure for criticism. Instead, critics both bad and good have constructed strategies to evade the problem posed by divergent responses. Some blame Shakespeare, suggesting that his confusion accounts for tension in the work and its audience. Others appeal to a narrow concept of cultural history which writes off our responses as anachronistic, unavailable to Shakespeare's contemporaries because of their attitudes towards
usury or Jews or comedy. Still others suggest that, since the plays are fragile confections designed to display engaging if implausible characters, exegetical criticism is misplaced. Though all of these strategies attract modern practitioners, they have lost ground before the dominant evasion, the reduction of the play to a theme which, when we understand it, tells us which of our responses we must suppress. The ingenious thematic critic … is licensed to stipulate that ‘in terms of the structure of the play Shylock is a minor character’ and can be ignored, or that the action is only metaphorical and does not need to be examined as if its events literally happened, or that Shylock is only a Jew, or a banker, or a usurer, or a man spiritually dead, or a commentary on London life, never a combination of these; or that The Merchant of Venice is built on ‘four levels of existence’ corresponding to Dante's divisions—‘Hell (Shylock), Purgatory proper (Antonio) and the Garden of Eden (Portia-Bassanio), and Paradise’; or that the play is exclusively about love, or whatever, and, insofar as it doesn’t fit the critic's formulation, it is flawed.

(Rabkin 1981, pp. 7-8)

Only very recently have critics (Leggatt 1974; Rabkin himself; Nuttall 1983; Berry 1985) been prepared to display at length a perplexity which may perhaps account for the reticence of so many of our great Shakespearean critics on the subject of The Merchant of Venice. The critical response to the play proves less than directly rewarding. This can be ascribed in part, as Rabkin implies, to critics' obtuseness and interpretative aggression. But it also says something more interesting about the tenacity of the play's hold on the minds of its audiences and readers. The Merchant of Venice proves an extraordinarily difficult play from which to free oneself into an adequate degree of objectivity, and criticism tends to be symptomatic of the play rather than illuminating of it. Indeed, such criticism can often seem a reactive prolongation of that unfolding of postures, positions and habits of mind which both characters and audience assume, reject and reassume in the course of the play's performance. The oddities and embarrassments which surface in the course of these critical arguments are co-extensive with those occurring in the play and amount, in themselves, to something of a comedy.

There are two predominating and opposed ways of reading The Merchant of Venice. The basic division of opinion manifests itself in a variety of ways. Thus critics divide over Shylock. Some see in him the consistent villain of the piece, and consequently celebrate the Christian lovers' triumph over him. Against this, some see in Shylock victimised humanity and, accordingly, view the play's lovers with varying degrees of scepticism which, in extreme cases, can amount to hostility. More particularly, there are two focal points in such disagreements, two rich and complex scenes where, in Act 1 Scene 3, Shylock and Antonio first agree the terms of the bond, and, in Act 3 Scene 1, Shylock declares his intention to claim his rights in respect of it. Critical debate, though lively, is circumscribed, limited to discussion of character, and Shylock's character in particular. Prior to this century, the body of criticism of The Merchant of Venice has shown this emphasis on Shylock, but has proved less rich or rewarding than that which has accrued to many of Shakespeare's other plays; it has often been occasional, prompted by particular productions of the play and reveals, as the stage history does, the predictable shift, as we move from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, in the characterisation of Shylock—from clown and villain to the figure of wronged humanity who merits our compassion. (See John Russell Brown, ‘The Realization of Shylock’, in Brown and Harris 1961, pp. 187-210.)

When we turn from critics who discuss character to those who discuss theme, we find the critical accounts broader, accommodating more of the play, but the critics remain similarly divided in their opinions and attitudes. Thus, for some critics the play secures and celebrates valued distinctions—between material and spiritual wealth; between venturing and usury; between generosity and possessiveness; between love and the law; between mercy and justice. For others the play works to quite the opposite effect, undermining such distinctions through dark and troubling ironies. And some such critics pursue what they see as the play's ironic
mode to discover covert correspondences underlying the play's ostensible oppositions; hence, for example, the play's principal antagonists, Shylock and Antonio, are revealed to share the painful kinship of isolation and exclusion. These are larger discussions, not limited to a few of the play's great scenes, and exercised by questions of the relationship between the worlds of Belmont and Venice, and between the casket plot and the bond plot. As with considerations of character, however, the fundamental disagreement remains whether to regard the *The Merchant of Venice* as characterised by celebration or irony.

Frank Kermode is representative of those who emphasise celebration, and reveals incidentally the kind of oddity which typically accompanies the expression of such views:

*The Merchant of Venice*, then, is ‘about’ judgment, redemption and mercy; the supersession in human history of the grim four thousand years of unalleviated justice by the era of love and mercy. It begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love. And all the time it tells its audience that this is its subject; only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of *The Merchant of Venice*.

(Kermode, in Brown and Harris 1961, p.224)

The tone of this is reminiscent of that adopted by the overly brusque Antonio in his dealings with Shylock early in the play. With Kermode's earlier insistence on ‘the correct interpretation’ (ibid., p. 222), it is all the more surprising from a critic who is later to emerge as a champion of critical pluralism, and who has always emphasised the patience of Shakespeare before his interpreters. The tension between the claimed themes of harmony and love, and the impatience and intolerance with which they are urged is odd indeed. Kermode's method of argument is also interestingly representative in the way he appeals to analogies from *nondramatic* literary modes to ‘resolve’ the play's difficulties and thus stabilise, and perhaps falsify, the drama; in his case the appeals are to Spenser, Milton and the Bible. Barbara K. Lewalski pursues a similar interpretation of the play, with similar no-nonsense tone and similar appeals to nondramatic modes, here biblical allusion and allegory:

comprehension of the play's allegorical meanings leads to a recognition of its fundamental unity, discrediting the common critical view that is a hotch-potch which developed contrary to Shakespeare's conscious intention.

(Lewalski 1962, p.328)

But when the importing of an allegorical framework threatens to displace rather than illuminate the particularities of incident and character, might we not wonder whether drama should be subordinated to allegory in this way? We are getting remote from the experience of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Harley Granville-Barker has proved even more brusquely untroubled by the play in his insistence that the casket plot and the bond plot have all the unreality of fairy tales, unaware in that appeal that fairy tales and folklore rarely enjoy the psychological and sociological innocence he imputes to them (Granville-Barker 1958, Vol. 1, p.335). Concerned to assimilate *The Merchant of Venice* to the pattern of festivity and merriment which he discerns in Shakespearean comedy generally, C. L. Barber finds various embarrassments in pursuing this line of interpretation; Barber openly confesses his unease, but finds himself drawn into weak argument nevertheless:

The whole play dramatizes the conflict between the mechanisms of wealth and the masterful, social use of it. The happy ending, which abstractly considered as an event is hard to credit, and the treatment of Shylock, which abstractly considered as justice is hard to justify, work as we actually watch or read the play because these events express relief and triumph in the
achievement of a distinction.

(Barber 1972, p. 170)

But a distinction which works only if we don’t think about it, is more likely to be a distinction undermined than a distinction made.

John Russell Brown also sees *The Merchant of Venice* as a play which secures distinctions—between material wealth and love's wealth. He finds the play's own sententiousness catching, but proves less than fully responsive to the drama’s dynamic testing of such static aphorisms and can be led into such contortedly protective logic as the suggestion that ‘it is Shylock's fate to bring out the worst in those he tries to harm’ (Brown 1962, p. 74).

Of course, all of these critics, and many others who share the same interpretative emphasis on celebration, have valuable and substantial things to say about the play, but the oddities here suggest that their readings bear a tangential relation to *The Merchant of Venice*’s essential nature.

Those critics who see *The Merchant of Venice* as an ironic play are also useful. Moreover, perhaps because they don’t pursue extraneous authorities to verify their interpretations, their readings often have the advantage that they focus more attentively and sustainedly on the drama before us. Even when overingenious or wrong-headed, the particularity of their arguments seems closer to the particularities of the play itself. But it is also true that these critics are often no less biased nor odd than their opponents. Both A. D. Moody and Harold C. Goddard are aware that they are not offering interpretations from first principles, as it were, but their corrective readings often prove less surefooted than these critics might intend. Moody sees *The Merchant of Venice* as a play which ‘does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence’ (Moody 1964, p. 10), but comes repeatedly close, in his emphasising of the covert above the overt, to seeing the transparent evil of Shylock as no evil at all; Shylock's ‘villainy is almost naïve and innocent’ by comparison with the Christians' (ibid., p.29). At times Goddard loses his footing entirely and sinks into rhetoric and implausible metaphor:

> Even Shylock, as we have seen, had in him at least a grain of spiritual gold, of genuine Christian spirit. Only a bit of it perhaps. Seeds do not need to be big. Suppose that Portia and Antonio, following the lead of the seemingly willing Duke, had watered this tiny seed with that quality that blesses him who gives as well as him who takes, had overwhelmed Shylock with the grace of forgiveness! What then? The miracle, it is true, might not have taken place. Yet it might have.

(Goddard 1960, p. 111)

If Professor Kermode sounded uncomfortably like Antonio, then Professor Goddard's pleading out-Shylocks Shylock, but without the villain's vengeance.

*The Merchant of Venice*’s capacity to prompt these contradictory reactions has led critics to speculate about the circumstances of the play's composition and its creator's intentions. Initially, the focus of attention is the portrayal of Shylock. In H. B. Charlton's influential view, the anti-Semitic Shakespeare sets out to pander to prejudices common to himself and his audience but finds, in spite of himself, that his characteristic powers and intuitions lead to a humanised Shylock; ‘His Shylock is a composite production of Shakespeare the Jew-hater, and of Shakespeare the dramatist’ (Charlton 1949, p. 132). It is a powerful thesis, reiterated as recently as 1980 by D. M. Cohen, with but one alteration in its argument:
It is as though *The Merchant Venice* is an anti-Semitic play written by an author who is not an anti-Semite—but an author who has been willing to use the cruel stereotypes of that ideology for mercenary and artistic purposes.

(Cohen 1980, p. 63)

The limitation in such arguments lies in their often unintentionally diminishing image of Shakespeare as naïve and inspirational, a great artist almost in spite of himself. Shakespeare does not *stumble* on the fact of Shylock's humanity; a writer who habitually confers inner life on the characters he finds in his sources and who, as we shall see, characteristically compounds the complexities of these sources, is *cultivating* difficulty in a spirit of exploration. The openness which allows him to make such discoveries is matched by a resourcefulness in subduing the arising discrepancies into some degree and some appearance, at least, of artistic coherence.

Most recently some critics have emphasised, in *The Merchant of Venice*, not a failure of artistic unity but the dynamism of drama, and have therefore shown themselves more thoroughly admiring of the play. Ralph Berry finds it to have ‘the self-adjusting elasticity of the great play’ (Berry 1985, p. 46), and finds design in the play in its temporal shaping of the sequence of its audience's diverse responses: the play is so organised as to *prove* the audience's discomfort. The boldest and most ambitious of recent critics writing on the play locate discrepancy and incoherence, not in Shakespeare's play, but in his, and our, world beyond the drama, and they thus transform talk of incoherence into praise of the play's inclusiveness. A. D. Nuttall finds *The Merchant of Venice* characteristic of Shakespeare's tendency 'to take an archetype or a stereotype and then work, so to speak, against it, without ever overthrowing it' (Nuttall 1983, p.124). But ‘Shakespeare will not let us rest even here. The subversive counter-thesis is itself too easy. We may now begin to see that he is perhaps the least sentimental dramatist who ever lived. We begin to understand what is meant by holding the mirror up to nature’ (ibid., p. 131). For Norman Rabkin, too, *The Merchant of Venice* in its inclusiveness, contradictions and complications, reflects the larger reality of a world itself unyielding of simple and single meanings. The ‘artistic multivalence … is the mirror of an unfathomable reality which is the source of the trouble … a reality that cannot be cut down to a single understanding’ (Rabkin 1981, p. 139-40). It misrepresents both Nuttall and Rabkin, each engaged in large considerations of Shakespeare and the nature of creativity and criticism, to adumbrate their arguments in this way and to narrow their speculations to apply only to *The Merchant of Venice*. Nevertheless, *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, and we might worry that their emphasis on Shakespeare's reality and nature is at the cost of criticism and appreciation of his art, and that the play continues to trouble despite the grandeur of such exonerations: *The Merchant of Venice* perhaps represents a moment of integrity too questioning and insufficiently artful to contain multifarious truths within the coherence and consolation of art. Some, at least, of the irreconcilable elements in *The Merchant of Venice* are not shaped into telling insight, but remain unrewarding flaws, symptomatic of lines of thought discarded in the course of the exploratory process. Indeed, Nuttall's and Rabkin's arguments are not too far removed from the greater stringency of Dr Johnson who celebrates Shakespeare as the poet of nature whose incoherences and discrepancies, though natural, are incoherences and discrepancies none the less.

Like *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*’s provocativeness goes beyond critical response to creative redaction. Famously, *King Lear* spawned Nahum Tate's corrective Restoration work, *The History of King Lear*, and more recently, Edward Bond's *Lear*. *The Merchant of Venice* follows a very similar pattern, giving rise to George Granville's *The Jew of Venice*, first performed in 1701 and dominating the stage until Macklin's return to the Shakespearean text in 1741; and, more recently, to *The Merchant*, by Arnold Wesker, himself Jewish. What is interesting in the case of both works, given my argument for the inherently problematic and dramatic nature of Shakespeare's play, is how both redactions, though in opposing ways, simplify and clarify the issues of the original by means which also substantially reduce the dramatic power of the results. Granville's play secures Shylock as comic villain and celebrates love and friendship in the figures of Antonio, Bassanio and Portia. The most relevant omission is that of the critically contentious Act 3 Scene 1 of
Shakespeare's play, where we had seen Shylock's reaction both to the loss of his daughter and to Antonio's losses; Shylock's villainy becomes much less ambiguous as a result of that omission. The now clear contrast between Shylock and the Christians is repeatedly and crudely pointed up in such moments as Shylock's aside in the scene, merely reported in Shakespeare but now dramatised by Granville, of Bassanio's and Antonio's pained parting:

Bassanio
... Oh my Antonio! ’tis hard, tho' for a Moment,
To lose the Sight of what we Love.
Shylock (aside)
These two Christian Fools put me in mind
Of my Money: just so loath am I to part with that.

(Spencer edn, 1965, p.372)

In Granville's version, the original play's sententiousness is heavily augmented, playing, as it does, into the Restoration's shrivelled sense of dramatic action as merely subservient to, and illustrative of moral statement. Granville reverses the characteristic Shakespearean process of creation to the extent that the drama is now contained by its moral sententiae, its 'good Morals and just Thought' as the play's Epilogue puts it (ibid., p. 401). Action once exploratory is now ornamental, and the resulting play is both stable and static. The dramatic urgency of the early scenes in Shakespeare's play is supplanted by an interpolated scene of stylised moralising in which Antonio, Bassanio and Shylock drink to Friendship, Love and Money, respectively, and this moralised tableau-like quality is further enhanced by the addition of a masque reiterating the values of Love and Friendship.

As a creative response to what he sees as Shakespeare's anti-Semitic play, Arnold Wesker's The Merchant, first performed in Stockholm in 1976, is altogether more extreme—and understandably so, given the racial identity of the playwright and the holocaust after which he writes. But the integrity of his intention is destructive of the dramatic qualities of his play, and it is unsurprising that The Merchant failed in New York and has never been performed in London.

In Wesker's version, the casket plot is but the foolish philosophical whim of Portia's father, and the love of Portia and Bassanio is marked, not by any romantic idealism, but by pragmatism and realism. Jessica runs off with the 'sort of' poet, Lorenzo, in similarly mundane fashion, although she later proves stouter and more articulate in Shylock's defence than Shakespeare's Jessica did. The shallowness of the young Venetians is much emphasised. Wesker's Shylock and Antonio are old friends in their mid-sixties. This Shylock dominates his play: he is tyrannically hospitable; he is a miser only in so far as he hides Hebrew books to prevent the Christians burning them, and only his daughter is treasured above these books; a committed feminist, Shylock is out to demonstrate in the education of Jessica that daughters can be the intellectual rivals of sons. Money-lending is never Shylock's full-time occupation, and he uses his wealth to function as a one-man Arts Council in the Venetian ghetto, financing art, music, literature, philosophy and architecture. His wealth is further used in helping the poor and the Jewish refugees fleeing the Inquisition. Moreover, the Jews, through taxes and forced ‘loans’, are shown to be one of Venice's principal sources of finance.

Wesker's Shylock and Antonio agree their bond reluctantly, only because the law demands it. And it is a merry nonsensical bond indeed, in mockery of the law and agreed over much mutual tickling. Later Shylock's sole reason for not abandoning the legal claims he has in respect of the lapsed bond is that others in the Jewish ghetto fear—and have cause to fear—that the Christians will use such a precedent against them in future dealings. Shylock must stick to the law to ensure the law's future protection of his people, and his reaction when Portia deploys her legal tricks is thus a relieved ‘Thank God’. Shylock pays the price of seeming to threaten the life of a Christian, and now contemplates a departure for the Holy Land.
But Wesker's corrective urge is repeatedly of a vehemence and urgency in excess of what the immediate
dramatic contexts he creates will sustain, and the emphatic extremity of his message is thus intelligible only
if we look beyond the particular moments in which it is delivered to the Shakespearean play against which it
is a reaction. Wesker's *The Merchant* has a problematic status as a work of art and is not the autonomous
drama it ostensibly appears but is parasitic on the play it reviles. The characters' voices are subordinated to the
single, wilful voice of the playwright pursuing his argument with Shakespeare.

For us here, Wesker's redaction illuminates the Shakespearean original in two ways. In transforming his
sources, Shakespeare had rendered Shylock a more complex and sympathetic character than the villain in the
various tales he used, and clearly Wesker is moving very much further in the same direction. But in one
important way Wesker is reversing the effect which Shakespeare had on his source materials. Wesker returns
the story to its earlier simplicity, and unravels the teasings and testings which Shakespeare's creative
amalgamation of a variety of sources had produced. The result is stridently univocal and undramatic. The
three centres of narrative interest—Shylock and Antonio, Portia and Bassanio, Lorenzo and Jessica—are now
securely and hierarchically ordered with the Shylockian tale almost eclipsing the other two. And the questions
and challenges arising from the Shakespearean interplay of narratives are thus suppressed. Wesker renders the
casket test cynical so that the Portia we see there is no longer at odds with the quick-witted character we see in
the trial scene. Bassanio becomes once again the godson of the Antonio figure of Shakespeare's primary
source, Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone*, and Antonio ages accordingly; the further amatory tension which the love
of Antonio for Bassanio had introduced into Shakespeare's play is again excised in Wesker's version. The
story, now so favourable to the Venetian Jews, has in other respects come full circle and Wesker is at odds
with Shakespeare not merely in attitude but in method and art. While more obviously liberal, Wesker is also
less exploratory.

Wesker's play vindicates his Jew. But it is a neat irony that Wesker's play is more akin to the flatter
 simplicities of Shakespeare's sources than to *The Merchant of Venice* itself; the story can become comforting
for the prejudiced and the enlightened alike only if its Shakespearean truths are simplified.

The possible sources of *The Merchant of Venice* are multiple and various, admit of varying degrees of
probability and influence, and extend both very far back to longstanding traditions of folklore, and to
near-contemporary plays, some of which are now lost. (The full facts are discussed by Geoffrey Bullough
[1957], Kenneth Muir [1977], and John Russell Brown in the Arden edition of the play [1961].) What is
salient is the audacity implicit in Shakespeare's combining of such diverse material, his cultivation of the
problematic and the probing. Shakespeare is going out of his way to make things difficult for himself and his
audiences. In Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone*, the imppecunious Giannetto is dependent on his Venetian godfather,
Ansaldo, to finance the amatory pursuit of a widowed lady of Belmonte, whose devised test is altogether more
basically sexual and mercenary. To win her, the suitor must bed her—not an easy task, since she habitually
knocks him out, prior to bedtime, with some doped wine. If the suitor fails, he forfeits all his wealth.
Effectively, the lady of Belmonte is running an enterprising business. Giannetto's third attempt on the lady is
again financed by Ansaldo, despite the godfather's having been bankrupted by Giannetto's two previous
ventures. Ansaldo now borrows from a Jew and is dependent on a bond which, if he fails to keep it, demands
the payment of a pound of his flesh. The lady's maid warns Giannetto off the wine, Giannetto successfully
performs the required test—the narrative spares us any details of the lady's initial surprise but reassures us that
finally she is highly delighted by his performance—and Giannetto takes charge of Belmonte. Eventually, he
recalls Ansaldo's bond and realises that his godfather's life must be in danger. Giannetto returns to Venice to
be followed there by his lady in disguise, and she successfully performs her tricks in the Venetian courtroom.
The ring intrigue follows but is quickly cleared up in Belmonte, where godfather Ansaldo is cheerfully
married off to the lady's maid.

Borrowing from other sources, Shakespeare multiplies both his cast-list and the story's complications. Thus
the Jessica story is the synthesis of elements and hints from a wide range of narratives: she owes something to
Abigail, the daughter of Barabas, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*; she echoes the daughter of the usurer in Munday's *Zelauto*, a story which, with its financial borrowings and cruel bonds, influences *The Merchant of Venice* in multiple ways; and Jessica derives, too, from *Il Novellino* of Masuccio, where a young girl plunders her miser father to run off with the youth who is his debtor. The important point here is that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare seems to be multiplying his young couples and to be producing a number of triangular relationships which mingle obligations and loyalties of love and money (father—daughter—lover, friend—suitor—lady). By such means he sets up testing analogies among the various centres of dramatic interest. In what ways are the relationships between, first, Jessica and Shylock and, second, Portia and her father, similar? How does Bassanio differ from Lorenzo? Do Portia's and Bassanio's attitudes to money differ substantially from those of Lorenzo and Jessica? To this end, too, Shakespeare alters the relationship in *Il Pecorone* between Ansaldo the godfather and Giannetto the godson, to the loving friendship of Bassanio and Antonio. And Shakespeare rejuvenates the Ansaldo figure to further that emphasis. The neatness of Ser Giovanni's original is intentionally disrupted as Gratiano now marries the lady's maid, Nerissa, and in Shakespeare's asymmetrical ending, Antonio is left in disquieting isolation. A new complicating relationship comes into play in Shakespeare's drama. In contrast, Wesker, as we have seen, firmly subordinates the various love stories to the story of Shylock, and restores Antonio to his former dignified and disinterested age.

The Jew and/or usurer who is to become Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is frustrated in courtrooms as diverse as those of *Il Pecorone*, *The Ballad of Gernutus* and Munday's *Zelauto*, but Shylock's antecedents are not further punished. The new emphasis on the trial of Shylock and its painful consequences for him is Shakespearean; it deepens the seriousness of the threatening villain and invites speculation about the inner condition of Shylock's future life and about the society that preserves itself by such harsh means.

Characteristically, Wesker again mitigates the isolated silence of Shylock's exit from the Shakespearean play in the new image of his projected pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

But perhaps the largest change which Shakespeare makes is in the borrowing of material from the Christian allegory of *Gesta Romanorum*, which allows Ser Giovanni's test of virility and seduction to be displaced by the decorous formality of the casket test. The trickery of the trial scene and the sexual trickery in Belmonte in *Il Pecorone* are all of a piece. They belong to a coarser and simpler comic world, fabliau-like in its ribaldry. When Shakespeare imports the casket plot into his play, this bawdry gets pushed to the side of the drama and is expressed through the figures of Gratiano and Nerissa. Bassanio's wooing of Portia is conducted by way of the caskets and involves the elevated and stylised presentation of rich depths of human feeling. Fabliau-like tales concentrate on the entertaining intrigues of action, while what we might describe as the romantic elements in the narrative of *The Merchant of Venice* invite its audiences and readers to look beyond events to matters of morality, feeling and human worth. It is this curious mixture of kinds of story which produces the greatest interpretative puzzles of *The Merchant of Venice* and may afford some explanation of the play's capacity to prompt opposing responses.

Shakespeare's fusion of this variety of sources is not without flaw; Bassanio, for example, is introduced as Antonio's 'most noble kinsman', a residual detail left over from *Il Pecorone*, but this relationship is never again mentioned in the play. But Shakespeare's bringing together of the realism of *Il Pecorone* and the romantic qualities from *Gesta Romanorum* produces the distinctive challenge of *The Merchant of Venice*: the shifting nature of the literary worlds in which the various stories are played out; the uncertainties over the kinds of response appropriate to the play's various characters; and the typical tensions between the play's characters and the situations in which they find themselves. Is Bassanio out of place in the elevated world of Belmont's moral testings? Is Portia more suited to being the dignified lady of Belmont or the quick-thinking manoeuvrer in Venice? In which scene and in which world are Portia and Bassanio most truly themselves?

Again in contrast, Wesker in his version refuses to enter imaginatively into the expressive life of the casket plot convention and views it externally, as it were, as merely the mad whim of a foolish philosopher, a whim to be circumvented by some devious thought in order that a shallower and more tawdry love between
Wesker's Portia and Bassanio can come to fruition.

Wesker's *The Merchant* illuminates the controversies which surround *The Merchant of Venice* in a second way. Throughout his play, Wesker is much exercised by the problem of interpretation and repeatedly off-loads undigested and undramatic lectures on Jewish history on the slender and insufficient pretext that Shylock, who gives voice to them, is a garrulous hoarder of books, much interested in his racial past. In attempting to locate some stability of attitude among the ambiguities of *The Merchant of Venice*, and to constrain the play's troublesome meanings, literary critics often appeal beyond literature to history and historical contexts. Although few literary historians would defend the assumption in the abstract, they often argue, in their considerations of *The Merchant of Venice, as if*, unlike literature, history were straightforwardly factual, unambiguous and not itself in need of interpretation. But *within* Wesker's play, historical information is extensively used as an honourable, if dramatically clogging, means to further Wesker's polemical argument and vindicate the Venetian Jews. Wesker's example usefully reminds us that historical argument, like art, is never merely factual and is rarely disinterested.

Arguing that Shylock is a villain, that Shakespeare and his audiences were, to a man, prejudiced against Jews, and that the practice of usury was universally reviled, though practised none the less, E. E. Stoll is representative in his naïve confidence in Shakespeare's 'thoroughly Elizabethan taste', 'the popular imagination', ‘the established traditions’ and so on. Stoll exhibits, too, a tendency to argue from origins, and in doing so, to argue *The Merchant of Venice* back to the cruder simplicities of its antecedents. Thus Shylock is dragged back to the Jews of medieval iconography and the Mystery plays, and to the Barabas of Marlowe's cruder, more farcical *Jew of Malta*—though, as Stoll doesn’t note, the Christians in that play are not shown much more favourably than Barabas himself. But, even allowing that Stoll's characterisation of the times is predominantly accurate, *The Merchant of Venice* may be a response to, as well as a reflection of, popular beliefs and prejudices (Stoll 1927, pp. 255-336).

One particularly neat example of history's untidiness, its tendency to complicate rather than clarify, lies in Renaissance England's attitudes to usury, an issue central to our play. But even that is not strictly true. Rather oddly, critical interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* so often circles around the issue of usury when, in fact, no transaction involving usury occurs in the dramatic action of the play. (See, for example, E. C. Pettet, ‘*The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Usury’, in Wilders 1969, pp. 100-13.) Shylock is by profession an usurer, although we never see him behaving as one on stage, and none of the numerous financial dealings and misdealings in the play involve usury. Yet characters within the play judge, or prejudge, Shylock by his profession rather than by his immediate actions, and critics beyond the play—especially those who see Shylock as the villain of the piece but wish to defend the play from accusations of anti-Semitism—maintain that emphasis. This phenomenon is but one of the play's examples of the workings of prejudice and its infectiousness: judgements are formed on the evidence of, or hearsay about, the past, and such judgemental habits preclude the possibility of innocence in the present and particular. Yet it remains true that Shylock is an usurer and that usury is important to the play, even if that importance has been exaggerated. History proves less helpful than it might, and, like the play, displays an ambiguous and equivocal attitude to usury.

In 1571 English law legalised usury, despite the evidence that it was ruining the more profligate among the landed gentry caught out by the inflation attendant on the rise of commerce. In 1572 Thomas Wilson published his *Discourse Upon Usury* which reiterates, energetically and at length, medieval and religious hostility to the practice of usury. And this is a text much favoured by purveyors of Elizabethan World Pictures, despite, it seems, Elizabethan practice. But in the third edition of his *Essays*, published in 1625, Francis Bacon, writing ‘Of Usury’, takes a more sanguine and balanced view. He argues that, given human frailty, usury is a necessity and discovers not merely the disadvantages but the benefits of the practice. Between Wilson and Bacon comes *The Merchant of Venice*, written at some time between 1596 and 1598. It would seem that in their actions, in their discursive writings, and, indeed, in their plays, these Elizabethans do not take an unequivocally black view of usury.
In this example I am gesturing briefly at the intellectual and social history of Renaissance England. But which history are we to appeal to? If we are seeking the security of a context for *The Merchant of Venice* then geography conspires with history to augment our difficulties. Do we look to Shakespeare's England? Or to the history of Venice? Or, more problematically still, to the history of Belmont? Are we not rather dealing with a coalescing of various kinds of history and fiction which occurs within the dramatist's mind and which we are more likely to recover from an examination of the play, than from history books? And if we look beyond Shakespeare to the history of his audience, we might wonder whether Shakespeare plays to his audience's assumptions, or plays against them or, most likely, does both in his usual complex way.

Nevertheless, *The Merchant of Venice* is not ahistorical. Indeed, it is itself an historical document which contains history's complexities and ambiguities—although the play is not merely that. But *The Merchant of Venice* isn’t autonomous either, and if we need a context for the play, then what follows here suggests that Shakespeare's larger oeuvre answers most fully to that need. Of the same historical period, created by the same mind, and in the same literary mode, Shakespeare's other plays illuminate *The Merchant of Venice* but do violence neither to its individuality nor its complexity.

Criticism: Race: Marion D. Perret (essay date 1988)


*[In the essay below, Perret asserts that modern directors of The Merchant of Venice are wrong in worrying about Shakespeare's anti-Semitism, and claims that the playwright might in fact have been parodying his audience's views rather than pandering to them.]*

Because Bernard Beckerman was so interested in the theater, for this panel on “*The Merchant of Venice: Problems of Influence*” I have chosen to consider some ways in which preconceptions about Jews in Shakespeare's time and ours have influenced performance. My hope is that approaching the play through the preconceptions of its audience can reveal something about how the play, if not the playwright, works and shed some light on the problem of Shakespeare's supposed anti-Semitism.

Underlying my consideration are two assumptions. The first is that Shakespeare, consciously or unconsciously, would have taken his audience's preconceptions into account in shaping both text and performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. The second is that most Elizabethan playgoers and many modern ones would equate the performance they see with Shakespeare's text. In the theater the play is, effectively, what the audience sees played; what they see played depends partly upon what they notice, and what they notice depends upon their preconceptions.

As a practical man of the theater, Shakespeare must have recognized that the audience of *The Merchant of Venice* would bring to the playhouse certain assumptions about Jews, whom the Elizabethans would have encountered only as Marranos, apparent converts to Christianity who practiced their old faith secretly (Roth 139-43). Shakespeare would have known that most in his audience thought Jews cold-hearted usurers and crucifiers of Christ. That anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's day was not based on race (Echeruo 5-8) is important because it explains why the Elizabethans could respond to some actions, such as Shylock's conversion under pressure, differently than we do. As Jonathan Miller notes, “if the Jew's fault stems from his failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah,” that fault disappears when he consents to becoming a Christian (821). The Elizabethan playgoers would have paid attention not to Shylock's race but to his occupation and his religion; to both their immediate response would have been negative.
Although Shakespeare may have written the play to capitalize on excitement stirred up by Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and the trial of Dr. Lopez, this does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare intended to present his Jew as stereotypically villainous—he may instead have felt a need to show that Jews are men rather than monsters. Nor does it necessarily mean that Shakespeare intended to focus on the nature of the Jew rather than on the nature of the Christian. Marrano or Puritan, usurers in Elizabethan England were Christian, allowed by the law of 1571 to charge ten percent interest (Pettet 21); in *The Description of England* (1587) William Harrison speaks of usury as “a trade brought in by the Jews, now perfectly practiced almost by every Christian and so commonly that he is accounted but for a fool that doth lend this money for nothing” (as quoted in Danson 146). Theatergoers stimulated by the play into thinking about the abuse of usury would be likely to reflect as much upon the cruelty of English Christians as upon the cruelty of a Venetian Jew.

The stir caused by *The Jew of Malta* and the trial of Dr. Lopez does mean, however, that Shakespeare's audience had strong preconceptions of the Jew for the playwright to work with or against. Playgoers would take for granted ways in which the presentation of the Jew fit their preconceived image. Playgoers attentive enough to note ways in which the Jew did not fit their stereotype—such as Shylock's sentimental attachment to the ring given him by Leah before their marriage—would be struck by these deviations. Paradoxically, thinking in terms of stereotypes could lead the playgoer away from thinking in terms of stereotypes.

The text does not prepare playgoers to see a moneylender in Jewish gaberdine; Shylock's entrance in I.iii in exotic garb and makeup would have startled the first audience into attention. Their preconceptions about Jews, confirmed by Shylock's aside explaining his hatred of Antonio, would lead them to hear more sinister undertones to Shylock's offer than Antonio does. Shakespeare has carefully set up the sequence of what the moneylender tells us to stress certain preconceptions more than others. Shylock's first words emphasize money, and his first aside announces that he hates the merchant more for business reasons than for religious ones. Shylock's long tale about how Jacob made ewes breed, “inserted to make interest good,” irritates Antonio into insisting that the Jew get to the point; this should make the audience listen carefully for that point and consider not only how unconvincing the analogy is but also how convincing “Hath a dog money?” is. Shylock's point, “Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?” is that self-interest should teach us to be humane to others, regardless of religion. Antonio’s “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” warns the playgoers not to judge characters only by what they say, especially by what they say about religion. The way Shakespeare in I.iii plays with preconceptions about Jews and usurers works against our seeing religion as the central issue here. Because Shylock's first scene gives the moneylender as well as the merchant an opportunity to declare his feelings about the Jew's occupation and religion, Shylock, as Danson observes, “can be judged on the basis of what he will do in the course of the play, rather than on preconceived notions” (150).

Though *The Merchant of Venice* pleased King James so much that he ordered it played a second time during Shrovetide 1605 (Chambers 2: 332), we know almost nothing about how the play was originally presented and very little about how the audience perceived it. This is particularly frustrating because, as Styan points out, Shakespeare may have functioned like a modern director in shaping the performance (53), which would thus give us a clue as to his auctorial intentions. What contemporary evidence we have suggests that Shylock had theatrical impact out of proportion to the number of scenes in which he appears, but that this impact was not enough to change the play from comedy to tragicomedy or to give the bond plot predominance over the love plot.

There is no Elizabethan evidence that Shylock was perceived as a strong tragic element; the head- and running-titles of the first quarto (1600) call the play a “comicaull Historie” (Chambers 1: 368), and Mere's list in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) includes it among the comedies. That the play was regarded as a comedy does not, however, mean that Shylock was originally presented as a comic villain, as Doggett played him in 1701, although the sight of Shylock with false nose and red wig and beard would work against serious or sympathetic consideration. Stage tradition cannot be indiscriminately relied upon in reconstructing the original performance. The tradition “that Shylock was intended as a comic figure,” Grebanier points out,
“dates from Granville’s perversion of the play” (313). The tradition that Richard Burbage was the first Shylock is questionable because the sole authority for it is some lines, presumably forged, added by Collier to the *Elegy on the Death of Richard Burbadge* (Furness 370). Baldwin, in working out the roles acted by each member of Shakespeare’s company, assigns Shylock not to Burbage but to Thomas Pope, the “high comedian and gruff villain” of the company (246).

We might know more about Shakespeare’s intent if we knew who played Shylock. If Burbage, the leading actor, played Shylock rather than Bassanio, the audience would give more, and more careful, attention to the Jew. Regardless of who played Shylock, the plot guarantees dramatic importance to the moneylender, although he appears in only five of the twenty scenes, and Shakespeare develops the moneylender’s character more fully than did his source *Il Pecorone*.

Whatever the playwright’s intention, that the Elizabethans found Shylock a powerful presence onstage is suggested by the title page of the first quarto, which announces “The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice. With the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Jewe towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh: and the obtayning of Portia by the choyse of three chests.” Shylock is immediately individualized, pointed out by name, while Antonio, who gives the play its title, is referred to simply by his occupation.

Even so, the title page in no way indicates either that the play is focused on Shylock or that Shylock is seen as an opposite to Portia, the only other character accorded a name. The description calls attention to the casket scene rather than to Portia herself or to the intensely dramatic courtroom scene, although this must have appealed greatly in that litigious age. Instead of balancing Shylock’s cruelty against Portia’s charity or cleverness, the subtitles refer to Shylock’s “crueltie” and Bassanio’s “obtayning” of Portia—the polarity of values we have learned to see the characters as representing (Old Law/New Law, Justice/Mercy, getting/giving) appears not to have struck the Elizabethans as forcefully as it strikes us. Only in relation to Shylock does the title page draw on stereotypes: Shylock is referred to not as moneylender but as Jew, which for an Elizabethan effectively identifies his occupation, and the dominant impression of “extreame crueltie,” a popular preconception about money lenders, Jewish or Gentile, has eclipsed the fact that Shylock does not actually cut any flesh.

We naturally know more about modern preconceptions and performances than about those of the Elizabethans. Preconceptions about how Shylock should be treated come from several sources: our own experience and belief; our reading about the play; our culture’s acceptance of religious pluralism and rejection of the horrors of the Holocaust. Most of what we know invites us to extend sympathy to Shylock, so that as Hunter observes, we tend to “push modern reactions to modern anti-Semitism into a past where they do not belong” (66). When reading Shakespeare, we make an effort to subordinate our preconceptions to Elizabethan ones, but while watching Shakespeare, we instinctively react as though “what Shakespeare intended does not matter—what matters is what he did”—whether or not we go on to assert, as Stoll does, that “we have as good a right as Shakespeare to our opinion of Shylock” (331). Because current preconceptions are different from the Elizabethan ones, productions of *The Merchant of Venice* today are often shaped defensively. Directors have to deal with our assumption or fear that the play is anti-Semitic; accusations of prejudice dog the play because our consciousness, scarred by modern persecution of the Jews, encourages a stubborn tendency to see this Jew as symbolic of all Jews.

A major reason playgoers persist in seeing *The Merchant of Venice* primarily in terms of Jew against Christian, or, more precisely, of Christians against the Jew, is that Shylock encourages others to regard him as the victim of religious persecution (Grebanier 179). Our sense of his being persecuted because of his faith comes partly from historical fact, partly from the way he manipulates our perception of the cause of mistreatment, and partly from our preconceptions, which lead us to undervalue the second of the two reasons, religious and economic, he gives for his seeking revenge. To the Elizabethans it mattered little whether Shakespeare presents the Jew as villainous because he is a usurer or villainous because he is a Jew. To us it
matters a great deal. Since we assume that interest will be asked when money is lent and we take commercial competitiveness (but not ethical values) for granted, we pay more attention to the religious motive Shylock stresses to the Christians than to the economic motive he stresses to his fellow Jews—which the text actually emphasizes, both in number of lines and in number of characters recognizing this motivation.

This tendency to separate economic motivation, that does not catch our attention or disturb us, from religious motivation, that does, leads many playgoers to hear in Shylock's “Hath not a Jew eyes?” a plea by one man on behalf of his race, without recognizing how the moneylender shifts the ground of offense to justify his personal desire for revenge. Willy-nilly, the modern audience throws on Shylock the burden of epitomizing a long-suffering people. Shylock invites us to respond this way by adopting in the presence of Christians the attitude of Persecuted Jew. That he has been mistreated by the Christians is made clear early in the play—Antonio, who has spat upon Shylock's Jewish gaberdine, declares he may do so again—yet it is also made clear that Antonio scorns Shylock not because Shylock is an enemy of Christ but because Shylock is a usurer. Our preconceptions keep us from noting that when no Christian is around, Shylock acts like a human being who just happens to be a Jew; he no longer acts the victim of anti-Semitism.

This inability to see Shylock simply as an individual causes a disquieting clash between our preconceptions about Shakespeare and our preconceptions about Jews. None of us likes to think that our Shakespeare, Shakespeare of the comprehensive humanity, could be prejudiced. Yet Shylock's inviting us to regard him as scorned simply because he is a Jew strikes a sensitive spot in playgoers haunted by memories of the Holocaust. Understandably supersensitive, playgoers may perceive an unflattering presentation of this particular Jew as an unflattering representation of all Jews and mistreatment of the Jew by other characters as mistreatment by the playwright. To view IV.i as primarily the destroying of Shylock and only incidentally the rescuing of Antonio is to see what happens through Shylock's eyes. We need to remember that Shakespeare is neither Gratiano nor Shylock. Shakespeare, innocent of modern history and not responsible for our preconceptions, gives us a Jew who is persecutor as well as persecuted and who under pressure chooses to give up his religion rather than his money. If the audience could see Shylock as a human being who is also a Jew, rather than as the Jew, those who put on the play would be freer to find Shylock's rightful place in the delicate balance of the drama.

Long before the Holocaust, in 1911, Stoll declared that “on the popular stage … Shylock must be played pretty much as Irving played him,” that is, as a tragic figure, “though this is not Shakespeare's Shylock” (334). Only five years ago the New York Times reported that “many Shakespearean scholars and Jewish critics agree that it is not so much the play itself as how it is played that really matters” (Kakutani 30), presumably because performance can vindicate their preconception of Shakespeare as too large of soul and sympathy to have written an anti-Semitic play. What keeps The Merchant of Venice onstage today seems to be less its greatness than the challenge of presenting it in ways that diminish in performance what can be perceived as bias in the text.

There are a number of strategies for making our sympathy for Shylock seem evoked by Shakespeare. Interpretive cutting can refocus the play. In the nineteenth century the last act was frequently omitted, so the play in effect ended with the exit of Shylock, broken. Jonathan Miller's 1970 production at the National Theatre, which starred Laurence Olivier as Shylock, made the Jew almost a tragic hero by changing the primary motive for his vengefulness. This was accomplished by eliminating the explanations Shakespeare gives him in I.iii.39-42,

\[
\text{I hate him for he is a Christian,} \\
\text{But more, for that in low simplicity} \\
\text{He lends out money gratis, and brings down} \\
\text{The rate of usance here with us in Venice},
\]
and in III.i.119-21: “I will have the heart of him, if he forfeit; for, were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will.” Without these lines Shylock becomes more sympathetic; it appears that he seeks Antonio's heart not because the merchant has undercut his business but because his own heart, his daughter Jessica, has been stolen from him by one of Antonio's set. For those who saw the National Theatre production without a fresh memory of the play, the loving Shylock created by interpretive cutting was Shakespeare's Shylock.

Playing against the text as well as playing with the text reshapes our sense of Shakespeare's Shylock. For example, in the version of this production televised in 1974, III.i is carefully shaped to create sympathy through sentimental vignettes of a Jew more sinned against than sinning. Shylock, hearing of the ring traded for a monkey, stoops over his wife's picture and kisses it, sobbing. Opening a desk drawer, he takes out a prayer shawl, kisses it and puts it on, covers his eyes, then lifts them to heaven. The words that accompany these actions, “I will have the heart of him,” are overpowered by the striking visual images insisting that Shylock is a devout man driven to hate by the loss of a loved one. We are invited to pity the prayer-shawled figure rocking back and forth in speechless grief without reflecting upon the words just uttered. We easily forget what we hear, that Shylock meets Tubal at the synagogue not to worship but to plan the legal butchering of a human being. We recall instead what we see, Shylock the loving father, the devoted husband, the devout man (Perret 150). Shylock is unquestionably the focus of sympathy in this production.

Yet another strategy for avoiding any appearance of modern anti-Semitism, blackening the Christians rather than whitewashing the Jew, is used by Miller in his 1981 BBC production. As he points out in his introduction for television, “The Christians are shown to be just as merciless and heartless as the unjust Shylock.” The audience is forced to recognize that the inclination to torture knows no religious boundaries by the presentation of III.i, where the Christians cruelly make sport of a Jew whom they accuse of cruelty, and IV.i, where a Jew torments a Christian by insisting on the letter of the law, then is tormented by another Christian in the same way. To see Solanio lunge mockingly at Shylock's genitals when the Jew complains of the “rebellion” of his “flesh,” then Salerio lock his arm around Shylock's neck, choking off protest, is to be shocked into feeling for the Jew's vulnerable humanity. To see Portia standing behind Shylock, her hand holding his on the knife, insisting as he had insisted that he take his pound of flesh, is to be shocked into thinking about the Christian's inhumanity.

The approach of favoring neither Christian nor Jew calls attention to rather than mutilates what is in the text. While the insistent emphasis on flaws can make the characters and their world so unattractive that the comedy loses any sense of joy and light, as did the 1973 Rabb production (Novick 1, 5), the 1981 BBC production shows that such heaviness is not necessary. That we have, in general, come but a little distance from the Elizabethan expectation that performance should indulge preconceptions is suggested by the kind of objections I have heard made to the BBC production. Some felt the Jew should have been presented more positively, given more dignity; none felt the Christians should have been presented less negatively. The time is yet to come when performances of The Merchant of Venice, shaped without reference to the audience's preconceptions about Jews, can fully realize the text's painful richness.

Works Consulted


**Criticism: Race: Kim F. Hall (essay date 1992)**


*[In the essay below, Hall focuses on lines in Act Three of The Merchant of Venice which describe Launcelot's impregnation of a black woman. Hall argues that this brief passage underscores a major theme of the play: the fear of racial intermingling that occurs when a country such as Elizabethan England makes imperialistic inroads into other countries.]*

Samuel Purchas introduces his popular collection of travel narratives, *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (the 1625 sequel to Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Voyages*), by recounting the virtues of trade. He equates the benefits of navigation with Christian charity and leads his reader into the collection proper by envisioning a world converted to Protestantism:
... and the chiefest charitie is that which is most common; nor is there any more common then this of Navigation, where one man is not good to another man, but so many Nations as so many persons hold commerce and intercourse of amity withall; ... the West with the East, and the remotest parts of the world are joyned in one band of humanitie; and why not also of Christianitie? Sidon and Sion, Jew and Gentile, Christian and Ethnike, as in this typical storie? that as there is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptisme, one Body, one Spirit, one Inheritance, one God and Father, so there may be thus one Church truly Catholike, One Pastor and one Sheepfold?

Charity may not begin at home, but it certainly ends up there, as the charitable cause of conversion redounds to the economic benefit of the English world. The initial ideal of “commerce and intercourse of amity” among many types of men is replaced by a vision of global unity that denies difference just as Purchas's own language does. (The singular construction [“one Lord, one Faith”] subsumes difference when it replaces the “and” that allows differences to exist simultaneously [“Jew and Gentile”].) English trade, rather than fostering a mixing of cultures, will eradicate religious differences, as well as cultural and gender differences, under one patriarchal God.

Purchas's glorified version of the end of English colonization similarly serves to efface the multivalent anxieties over cross-cultural interaction that permeate English fictions of international trade. In uniting economics and Christian values, Purchas highlights the fact that colonial trade involves not only economic transactions, but cultural and political exchange as well. The anthropologist Gayle Rubin notes in her influential feminist critique of Lévi-Strauss, “Kinship and marriage are always parts of total social systems, and are always tied into economic and political arrangements” (207). Likewise, the exchange of goods (or even the circulation of money) across cultural borders always contains the possibility of other forms of exchange between different cultures. Associations between marriage, kinship, property, and economics become increasingly anxiety-ridden as traditional social structures (such as marriage) are extended when England develops commercial ties across the globe. Extolling the homogenizing influence of trade suggests that English trade will turn a world of difference into a world of Protestant similitude. However, it leaves unspoken the more threatening possibility—that English identity will be subsumed under foreign difference.

It is this problem of “commerce and intercourse,” of commercial interaction inevitably fostering social and sexual contact, that underlies representations of miscegenation in the early modern period. 1 In addition to addressing domestic anxieties about the proper organization of male and female (particularly about the uncontrolled desires of women), the appearance of miscegenation in plays responds to growing concerns over English national identity and culture as England develops political and economic ties with foreign (and “racially” different) nations. This essay will draw on Purchas's dual sense of the all-encompassing nature of trade encounters and colonialism's alleged homogenizing power to suggest the significance of a brief instance of miscegenation in Shakespeare that has been insistently ignored by critics.

Although the most central—and most commented on—problem of difference and trade in The Merchant of Venice is between Jew and Christian, more general anxieties about the problem of difference within economic exchange are encapsulated in an instance of miscegenation never staged. In act 3, the audience witnesses a joking interchange between Shylock’s servant, Launcelot, and Lorenzo and Jessica about their mixed marriage:

jes.
Nay, you need not fear us Lorenzo, Launcelot and I are out,—he tells me flatly that there’s no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says that you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price of pork.

362
I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the negro's belly: the Moor is with child by you Launcelot!

It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for.

(3.5.28-39)

The Arden edition of *Merchant* helpfully notes that “this passage has not been explained” and suggests, “Perhaps it was introduced simply for the sake of the elaborate pun on Moor/more” (99n35). Their joking conversation no doubt parodically reflects the investment of the commonwealth in sexual practices. Nonetheless, it also begs the question of the difference between Lorenzo's liaison with a Jew and Launcelot's with a Moor. The Renaissance stage abounds with jokes about bastards: if Launcelot's fault was merely the getting of another, there would be no reason to emphasize that this invisible woman is a Moor. In his *Black Face, Maligned Race*, Anthony Barthelemy notes that this exchange reflects ideas of the licentiousness of the black woman typical of the time (124). However, it may be that this pregnant, unheard, unnamed, and unseen (at least by critics) black woman is a silent symbol for the economic and racial politics of *The Merchant of Venice*. She exposes an intricately wrought nexus of anxieties over gender, race, religion, and economics (fueled by the push of imperial/mercantile expansion) which surrounds the various possibilities of miscegenation raised in the play.

II

Before moving into the play itself, I would like to sketch out some of these anxieties over miscegenation by examining one of the play's possible “sub-texts” (Jameson 81). In 1596, despite her earlier support of English piracy in the slave trade, Queen Elizabeth expressed concern over the presence of blacks in the realm. She issued a proclamation to the Lord Mayor of London which states her “understanding that there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie” (qtd. in Fryer 10) and demands that blacks recently brought to the realm be rounded up and returned. This effort was evidently not very successful, as she followed up that proclamation with another order of expulsion:

… whereas the Queen's Majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her Highness and the King of Spain, who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people that want the relief which those people consume; as also for that the most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel, hath given especial commandment that the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this Her Majesty's dominions. … And if there shall be any person or persons which are possessed of any such Blackamoors that refuse to deliver them in sort as aforesaid, then we require you to call them before you and to advise and persuade them by all good means to satisfy Her Majesty's pleasure therein; which if they shall eftsoons willfully and obstinately refuse, we pray you then to certify their names unto us, to the end Her Majesty may take such further course therein as it shall seem best in her princely wisdom.

(Qtd. in Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 20-21)

While such critical attention as has been paid to this document concentrates on the attempt to discharge Moors from the realm and uses the attempt itself to prove the existence of a viable black presence in England (Newman, “And wash the Ethiop white” 148), the terms of the proclamation demand special attention. The
image of large numbers of Moors having “crept into this realm” suggests that they suddenly appeared of their own volition (despite having been “fostered and relieved” here by unnamed residents). The proclamation then lays the fault of this invasion at the foot of Spain, a country already suspect for its past history of interracial alliance. The rest of the document is concerned to prevent contact between these “creeping” invaders and “her own liege” people despite its contradictory contention that Elizabeth's own subjects are the ones “possessed” of blackamoors to the detriment of the state.

Although chronic food shortages occurred throughout Elizabeth's reign and certainly seemed to be a goad to plantation and exploration, her naming of “these hard times of dearth” suggests that both of the expulsions occurred in the context of very immediate state concerns. England from 1594 to 1597 saw dramatic declines in grain harvests (the staple of the lower-class diet), culminating in the famine of 1597. Indeed, much of northern Europe (although, interestingly, not Italy) suffered from famine and starvation from 1595 to 1597. Although the famine in England hit hardest in the northwestern parishes, its effects were felt throughout the realm, as Andrew Appleby notes, “It is abundantly clear, however, that the grain harvest was the heart of the English economy … and that its malfunctions were felt, with disastrous results, throughout the kingdom” (137). Private citizens, the Privy Council, and the general public showed concern over the unavailability of bread even in the earliest of those years. These “dear years” carried with them a range of other social dislocations: a reduction in baptismal and marriage rates, a rise in mortality and civil unrest, and, significantly, the unemployment of servant classes. Key government measures were issued in proximity to both expulsions and indicate that the famine generated a degree of class conflict. Elizabeth's order to make starch from bran rather than grain needed for food was issued in the same month as the first order of expulsion. Another proclamation, ending price-fixing and compelling the landed classes to remain in the counties because “her majesty had thus determined for relief of her people to stay all good householders in their countries, there in charitable sort to keep hospitality” (Hughes and Larkin 172), was issued a few months later.

Equally important in the expulsion order is the reference to the religion (or lack of religion) of the Moors, which is based on the supposition that they are a logical group to cut off from state resources because they have “no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.” In this time of crisis Christianity becomes the prerequisite for access to limited resources. Certainly, Elizabeth's evocation of the religious difference of the Moor would seem to support the common view that religion, not race, is the defining mark of difference in early modern England. I would argue, however, that even though religion is given as a compelling reason for excluding Moors, emphasizing religious difference only clouds the political reality that the Moors' visibility in the culture made them a viable target for exclusion. In other words, it is their physical difference in association with cultural differences (a combination that is the primary basis for the category “race”) that provokes their exclusion—not just their religion.

In Elizabeth's proclamation we see what may be a source of the threat posed by Launcelot's Moor. In times of economic stress, visible minorities very often become the scapegoat for national problems. The proclamation shares with Merchant an alarm over unregulated consumption. Launcelot's evocation of the scarcity of food through his jesting over the rising price of pork reveals a similar unease over limited resources. Thus, famine, one of the more specific rationales for English colonial plantation and expansion, becomes here associated with the black woman. Ultimately both texts draw on and reproduce the same racial stereotype. Just as the image of the black female as consumer of state resources in the twentieth-century United States is statistically inaccurate but politically powerful, so may the black presence have been a threat (albeit small) to white European labor, which is magnified by its very visibility. This sense of privation produces an economic imperative in the play, which insists on the exclusion of racial, religious, and cultural difference. With the finite resources of a Venetian (or Elizabethan) society reserved for the wealthy elite, the offspring of Launcelot and the Moor presents a triple threat that in this world is perceived as a crime against the state. Their alliance is perhaps even more suspect than the ominous possibility of a marriage between Portia and the prince of Morocco, since it would produce a half-black, half-Christian child from the already starving lower
classes who threatens to upset the desired balance of consumption. The pun on “Moor/more” further supports this image of the black woman as both consuming and expanding and is particularly striking in a play where the central image is the literal taking of flesh and where Christian males worry throughout about having “less.”

The acute sense of privation amid plenty is signaled through Merchant's ubiquitous images of starvation that are interwoven with the incessant eating in the play. Walter Cohen sees Launcelot as integral to the play and notes in particular the way he “systematically and wittily misconstrues Lorenzo's apparently straightforward order that the kitchen staff 'prepare for dinner!’” (210). Launcelot's first move is to remind Lorenzo of the servants' hunger: “they all have stomachs” (3.5.44). Earlier, he claims that he is starving in Shylock's employ: “I am famish’d in his service. You may tell every finger I have with my ribs” (2.2.101-03). Shylock's version, “The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder” (2.5.45), may reinforce the idea that these outsiders literally starve rightful citizens, yet it also suggests a Christian appetite out of control. Bassanio, describing his poor finances, suggests bulk without sustenance in saying that he lost wealth, “By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance” (1.1.124-25). Finally, Antonio, in reminding Solanio of Venice's strict commercial laws, laments, “These griefs and losses have so bated me / That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh / Tomorrow, to my bloody creditor” (3.3.32-34).

The associations with eating and starvation link outsiders, particularly Shylock, with one of the most compelling tropes of colonialist discourse: the cannibal. Cannibalism was a source of as much anxiety as fascination for the traveler; it seemed to be one of the final lines drawn between the savage Other and the civilized self (Cheyfitz 42; Hulme 81-83; Kilgour 5-7). The reasons given for imperial plunder by Bertoldo in Philip Massinger's The Maid of Honour suggest that much of this obsession springs from a sense that the dividing line is not as clear as one might like:

```
Nature did
Designe us to be warriours, and to breake through
Our ring the sea, by which we are inviron'd;
And we by force must fetch in what is wanting,
Or precious to us. Adde to this, wee are
A populous nation, and increase so fast,
That if we by our providence, are not sent
Abroad in colonies, or fall by the sword,
Not Sicilie (though now, it were
more fruitfull,
Then when 'twas stil'd the granary of great Rome)
Can yeeld our numerous frie bread, we must starve,
Or eat up one another.
```

(1.1.202-13)

In specifically ascribing to the English an aggression and ferocity that are the essence of European definitions of the cannibal (Hulme 83), Bertoldo hints at the tentativeness of that division. The movement of the passage also suggests a blurring of boundaries: the opening image of the breach of England's geographic insularity which releases the energies of a warlike nation rapidly moves into an evocation of violent, desperate want which could easily turn in upon itself. Massinger skates a fine line between identity and difference in allowing his character to suggest that imperial expansion is the only thing separating the civilized Englishman from the cannibal and that the dangers of cannibalism lie on either side of England's borders. His metaphor is similar to an earlier and more specific reference to English want in Richard Hakluyt's Discourse of Western Planting. In this attempt to persuade Elizabeth to adopt a plantation policy, Hakluyt associates cannibalism with another marginalized group—the unemployed. He warns Elizabeth:
But wee for all the Statutes that hitherto can be devised, and the sharpe execution of the same in poonishinge idle and lazye persons for wante of sufficient occasion of honest employmente cannot deliver our common wealthe from multitudes of loyterers and idle vagabondes. … [W]e are growen more populous than ever heretofore: So that nowe there are of every arte and science so many, that they can hardly lyve one by another, nay rather they are readie to eate upp one another.

(234)

The troping of cannibalism links actual shortages of food with the need to promote colonial trade in a way that also provides a compelling metaphor for the loss of communal identity in such trade. The desire to make contact with and to exploit Others always carries with it the possibility of engulfment. Such fears of erasure are embedded in metaphors of eating, but the figure of the cannibal specifically locates such fears within a framework of colonial trade and religious difference.

The language of eating in The Merchant of Venice situates Shylock within this framework by merging images of cannibalism with older accusations of blood libel. He claims, “But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian,” and Gratiano describes him, “thy currish spirit / Govern’d a wolf, who hang’d for human slaughter—” (4.1.133-35).9 According to Maggie Kilgour, feeding from (or eating with) the Other is a perilous involvement which carries the risk of being eaten by the Other:10

To eat in a country is potentially to be eaten by it, to enter into a false identification by being absorbed by a foreign culture—what we call “going native”—and so be prevented from returning to a place of origin in which one is truly at home. The opposite of returning to one's own hearth is ultimately to be subsumed totally by a hostile host.

(23)

Shylock's reluctance to eat with the Christians displays the fear of “be[ing] subsumed … by a hostile host,” but in terms that ratify the reciprocal Christian fear of being consumed by a guest/alien who has been allowed into the home/country. Economic exchanges with an outsider like Shylock open up Venice to sexual and commercial intercourse with strangers; this breach brings with it the threat of economic upheaval and foreign invasion. Social activities such as eating and marriage resonate because of the already permeable borders of the Venetian economy. In defending his insistence on the completion of a legal bond, Shylock comments on the assumed rights of the Venetians to “bond” and to preserve their racial purity in a speech laden with references to problematic communal activities:

You have among you many a purchas’d slave,  
Which (like your asses, and your dogs and mules)  
You use in abject and in slavish parts,  
Because you bought them,—shall I say to you,  
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?  
Why sweat they under burthens? let their beds  
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates  
Be season’d with such viands?

(4.1.90-97; emphasis added)

Rhetorically, Shylock exposes the fears of a chauvinist culture by revealing the Venetians' problematic economic position, suggesting that, in such an open system, the slaves among them may just as well become sons-in-law.11 The passage may also tie the problem of eating with colonial trade in the reminder (“let their palates / Be season’d with such viands”) that the search for spices for aristocratic palates provided much of the
momentum for foreign trade. His questions allow for a provocative glance at Queen Elizabeth's dilemma. Producers of labor are also consumers, and the blacks that she wants to exile are a presence precisely because of the increased economic expansion she supported.

As critics have often noted, the language of commerce and trade permeates the Venetian world. This mercantile vocabulary is tied to an erotic vocabulary in much the same way as Titania's description of her Indian votress in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* links the pregnant maid and Indian trade. Like his companion, Bassanio, Antonio begins the play in a melancholy mood; Solanio attributes his sadness not to love, but to the possibility of economic disaster: “Believe me sir, had I such a venture forth, / The better part of my affections would / Be with my hopes abroad” (1.1.15-17). Echoing the eroticized discourse of actual merchant adventure, Solanio's discussion of Antonio's afflictions as “affections” locates the erotic in the economic, particularly as he makes Antonio's fear of losing his ships sound much like the fear of losing a lover:12

should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,
Which touching my gentle vessel's side
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks. ...

(1.1.29-34)

Solanio's displacement is all the more resonant in its religious overtones and its hints at a loss of Christian belief. Foreign adventure proves a dangerous distraction as the stones of the Christian church provoke reminders of the beguiling hazards of trade.

The potential dangers of Antonio's mercantile involvement with foreign Others, read as seductive sexual union, are offset by the rejection of difference in the golden world of Belmont. Bassanio's discussion of his intent to woo Portia suggests an interesting inversion of Antonio's economic adventures. The narrative of his romantic quest is filled with economic metaphors, and his description of Portia makes it obvious that there is an unfavorable balance of trade on the marriage market. Rather than bringing wealth into the country, suitors are coming to Belmont to win away Portia's wealth, as Bassanio notes:

Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.

(1.1.167-72)

While Antonio participates in the expansion of Venice's economic influence, Bassanio insulates the sexual economy of Venice from foreign “invasion.” In language closely approximating Bassanio's, his competitor, the prince of Morocco, “a tawny moor” (and, we presume, a Muslim), frames his own courtship as colonial enterprise and religious pilgrimage when he chooses caskets:

Why that's the lady, all the world desires her.
From the four corners of the earth they come
To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint.
The Hyrcanian deserts, and the vasty wilds
Of wide Arabia are as throughfares now
For princes to come view fair Portia.
The watery kingdom, whose ambitious head
Spets in the face of heaven, is no bar
To stop the foreign spirits, but they come
As o’er a brook to see fair Portia.

(2.7.38-47)

Morocco reveals the peril of such international competition for wealth (and beauty). The test demanded by Portia's father expands the sex/gender system by opening up the romantic quest to foreign competition, as it were, inviting both the possibility of miscegenation and of another race absconding with the country's money and its native beauty. Morocco explicitly raises this idea and associates it with England:

They have in England
A coin that bears the figure of an angel
Stamp’d in gold, but that’s insculp’d upon:
But here an angel in a golden bed
Lies all within.

(2.7.55-59)

At the very moment in which he loses the game by making the wrong choice, Morocco raises the specter of a monetary and sexual exchange in England with the image of Portia as an angel in a golden bed. Although the metaphor would seem to deny the comparison (“but that’s insculp’d upon: / But here … ”), Portia is imaged here as the literalized coin of the realm. She, as object of an expanded sex/gender system, can like a coin be circulated among strangers.

The boundaries of Portia's island are hardly impregnable: the surrounding water “is no bar” and no more than a “brook” to outsiders; Portia herself is the open “portal” to Venetian wealth. The sexual and the monetary anxieties of a Venetian state that is open to alien trade are displayed and dispelled in the casket plot, which allows Portia to avoid the threat of contact with others. The prince of Morocco is thus able to attempt to woo but ultimately to lose her. He also loses his right to reproduce his own bloodline, a right not explicitly denied the other suitors (Shell 72). The momentary threat posed by the prince's wooing is dispelled, as is the larger cultural threat posed by the sexuality of the black male. The denial of his fertility should perhaps be looked at in juxtaposition with the fertility of Launcelot's Moor: the prince's sexuality denied, Launcelot then has license to replace him as the Moor's “cultural partner” and to appropriate her body.

The Morocco scene is only the most obvious example of the exclusionary values of Belmont. Portia derides all other suitors for their national shortcomings, reserving her praise for her countryman, Bassanio (a man who at first glance seems to have little to recommend him). Interestingly, the joking about the effects of intermarriage is preceded by the prince of Morocco's attempt to win Portia and Portia's deliverance as he chooses the wrong casket. Portia's response to her narrow escape, “A gentle riddance,—draw the curtains, go,—/ Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78-79), is typical of the generally negative attitudes toward blacks prevalent at the time, but, in true Belmont fashion, in no way reveals the political and economic implications of her aversion.13

The economic issues which underlie the romantic world of Belmont rise to the surface in Venice, where there appears to be a real cash-flow problem. Most of the Christian men, it seems, are on the verge of bankruptcy. Bassanio reveals his monetary woes in the opening of the play, “‘Tis not unknown to you Antonio / How much I have disabled mine estate” (1.1.122-23). Despite Antonio's denial, his funds are stretched and the possibility of his financial ruin is evoked from the very beginning. Tellingly, Antonio has no hope for a legal remedy from his bargain because strangers in Venice have certain economic privileges:

The duke cannot deny the course of law:
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.

(3.3.26-31)

In Antonio's case, the very openness of Venetian trade has negative effects for the city's males. The protection Venetian law should afford its “own natural subjects” is weakened by the economic imperatives of mercantile trade.

In contrast to the males, the women are associated with an abundance of wealth. As we have seen, Portia comes with a large fortune and Lorenzo “steals” two thousand ducats along with a jewel-laden Jessica. The comic resolution of the play is not merely the proper pairing of male and female, but the redistribution of wealth from women and other strangers to Venice's Christian males. Portia's wealth goes to Bassanio, Antonio's is magically restored through her agency, and, most importantly, Shylock's is given over to the state through a law unearthed by Portia/Balthazar:

It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien,
That by direct, or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive,
Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state.

(4.1.344-50)

The law that allegedly gave advantage to aliens is counteracted by a law that repeals that advantage. More than providing an object lesson for Shylock, “hitting him where it hurts,” as it were, the punishment makes sure that the uneven balance of wealth in the economy is righted along racial and gender lines. Antonio’s modification of the sentence only highlights this impulse, as he insists that his portion of Shylock's money be passed down “unto the gentleman / That lately stole his daughter” (4.1.380-81). Lorenzo’s final expression of gratitude to Portia, “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (5.1.294-95), typifies the tonality of the play. Portia does indeed drop manna (which she redistributes from the city's aliens) upon the males of Venice: she is the bearer of fortunes for Bassanio, Antonio, and Lorenzo.

Economic alliances in the play are made with expectations of one-way exchange, which is often troped through conversion. Thus Bassanio and Antonio stress Shylock's “kindness” when making the deal in order to give Shylock the illusion of a communal interest and identity rooted in Christian values. Antonio takes his leave, claiming, “The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind” (1.3.174), a phrase which only serves to remind Shylock and the audience that his “kindness” is still contingent. The pun on “kind” used throughout this scene reminds us that the courtesy and “kindness” shown in the play's world is only extended to those who are alike and judged of human “kin” by Christians. Shakespeare also demonstrates how selective such inclusion can be when the duke, in an attempt to make Shylock forgo his bond, invites him into the community, not by imagining a shared humanity, but by creating a cultural hierarchy which stresses Shylock's difference: “From stubborn Turks, and Tartars never train’d / To offices of tender courtesy” (4.1.32-33). Such rhetorical moves only emphasize that the power of exclusion and inclusion rests with what Frank Whigham calls the “elite circle of community strength” and that the outsider is powerless to determine his status within that group (106-07).

The imagery associated with Shylock in the play reveals an ongoing link between perceptions of the racial difference of the black, the religious difference of the Jew, and the possible ramifications of sexual and
economic contact with both. We can see clearly how the discourses of Otherness coalesce in the language of the play. In claiming that Chus is one of his countrymen, Shylock gives himself a dual genealogy that associates him with blackness, forbidden sexuality, and the unlawful appropriation of property. Obviously, Shylock's recounting of the Jacob parable has its own cultural overtones and serves to highlight his religious difference. However, his incomplete genealogy is further complicated by the fact that Jacob, the progenitor of the Jews, robbed his brother, Esau, of his birthright as eldest brother. Both Jews and blacks become signs for filial disobedience and disinheritance in Renaissance culture. In the two biblical accounts of blackness, Chus (or Cush), the son of Ham, is born black as a sign of the father's sin. A popular explanation of blackness recounted by George Best in his description of the Frobisher voyages shows the problem of disinheritance:

> and [Ham] being persuaded that the first childe borne after the flood (by right and Lawe of nature) should inherite and possess all the dominions of the earth, hee contrary to his fathers commandement [to abstain from sex] while they were yet in the Arke, used company with his wife, and craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren: for the which wicked and detestable fact as an example for contempt of Almightie God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should be borne whose name was Chus, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde.

(Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* 3: 52)

Like Shylock's genealogy, Best's narrative gives disobedience and disinheritance a crucial role in the formation of difference. In reading Jews and blacks as signs for theft from rightful heirs, such genealogies may have supported the notion for the English reader that these “aliens” usurp the rightful prerogatives of innocent (pre-Christian) victims. (In other words, forcible seizure of their property is excusable because their ownership is suspect.) The Ham story is a bit more problematic because Ham, the originator of the sin, was himself white. Only his offspring, Chus, bears the burden of the original sin, and the blackness thus becomes a reflection of the nether side of a white self. These biblical “sub-texts” help support the play's central action: a circulation of wealth to an aristocratic, male elite that is predicated on the control of difference. Aliens must be either assimilated into the dominant culture (Shylock’s and Jessica's conversions) and/or completely disempowered (Shylock’s sentence). Their use as explanations for racial difference allows for the organization of property, kinship, and religion within an emerging national—and imperial—identity.

III

Since the Venetian sex/gender system is constructed along the axis of foreign trade, it is not surprising that female characters play key (if little noted) roles in the circulation of wealth. The successful end of courtship (endogamous marriage) is achieved through the balancing of the problems of conversion, inheritance, and difference. The proper pairing of male and female thus comes to represent the realignment of wealth and the reassertion of control over difference. In their active desire, these outspoken women are often the more conservative agents of the play. Associated with conversion, they assure that wealth is redistributed into the hands of the male elite.

*Merchant* offers the Jessica-Lorenzo courtship as a successful type of cross-cultural interaction: one like our original model in Purchas, where cultural difference—and property—are controlled under the aegis of a Christian God. Unlike another disobedient daughter, *Othello’s* Desdemona, Jessica's filial disloyalty is lauded by the community largely because her actions constitute submission to the larger, racially motivated values of Belmont and Venice. Ironically, her very disobedience proves her “faith” to her husband just as it shows her “fairness.” Lorenzo declares, “And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true, / And true she is, as she hath prov’d herself” (2.6.54-55). In cutting herself off from her father, Jessica also divorces herself from her Jewish ancestry. When she leaves her father's house, Gratiano declares, “Now (by my hood) a gentle, and no Jew”
In fact, the very desire to marry a Christian separates Jessica from her father's alieness. Shylock's claim of consanguinity is resolutely denied throughout the play. Salerio declares, "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers, than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods, than there is between red wine and Rhenish" (3.1.34-36). The terms of Salerio's insistence on absolute difference go as far to exclude Shylock from the realm of humanity (so defined by Christian Venetians) as they do to include Jessica. Jessica herself, in a rehearsal of her own conversion, parodically stages herself as the bride of the Song of Songs, saying, "I am glad 'tis night—you do not look on me" (2.6.34), and covering herself with gold, "I will make fast the doors and gild myself / With some moe ducats" (2.6.49-50), as she begins the "conversion" of money from Shylock to Lorenzo. Jessica's disobedience is acted out as a gender transgression: she escapes from her father's house dressed as a page and is playfully aware of her transgressive behavior, "For I am much ashamed of my exchange" (2.6.35). Of the "exchanges" Jessica makes (husband for father, male dress for female, Christian identity for Jewish), the change in dress is the one she marks as potentially subversive. However, Jessica's cross-dressing is seemingly less complicated than Portia's, since her transgression, taking place as it does during a carnival and facilitating her assimilation into the community of Belmont, is validated by the rest of the play.

Like Jessica's cross-dressing, which is not only excused but lauded in the play, Portia's actions work mainly to fulfill the larger economic needs of the commonwealth. Portia is the focal point of the Venetian economy and its marriage practices: it is through her that money is recirculated to the Christian males and difference is excluded or disempowered. She describes her betrothal as a conversion, "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.166-67). Bassanio's "pilgrimage" results in the "conversion" of Portia and her possessions as she too fills the coffers of the male Christians. As Balthazar and as Portia she performs a valuable service to the state. Her disguise allows her to become the agent of conversion and, as Frank Whigham notes, compulsory conversion is associated historically with confiscation of goods by the state. It is she (as Balthazar) who silences the alien. She is the enabling factor that "converts" cash to its "rightful owners," not only hers to Bassanio, but Shylock's to the state and to his Christian heirs.

With their cross-dressing and their active pursuit of female desire, both Portia and Jessica break the constraints of gender; nevertheless, in a text dense with cultural, economic, and gender conflict, glorifying these women as the transgressive disrupters of social order may serve only to obscure the very complex nature of difference for a changing society in which racial categories developed along with changing organizations of gender. To look solely at hierarchies of gender defines the issue too narrowly and valorizes gender as the primary category of difference. Reading Portia as the heroic, subversive female proves particularly problematic when we place her actions in relation to other categories of difference. While her "witty" remarks about her suitors display a verbal acumen and forwardness typical of the unruly woman, her subversiveness is severely limited, for her strongest verbal abilities are only bent toward supporting a status quo which mandates the repulsion of aliens and outsiders. To valorize such cross-dressed figures as liberating Others is to ignore the way their freedom functions to oppress the racial/cultural Others in the play. Portia's originally transgressive act is disarmed and validated by the play's resolution when these "disorderly" women become pliable wives.

Although I have argued that these women serve in some ways as successful comic and economic agents, the play itself does not allow for the same neat elimination of difference offered by Purchas in the opening of this essay. Unlike other Shakespearean comedies, The Merchant of Venice ends not with a wedding or the blessing of the bridal bed, but with the exchange of rings and the evocation of adultery. The only immediately fertile couple presented in the play, Launcelot and the Moor, are excluded from the final scene. Her fecundity exists in threatening contrast to the other Venetians' seeming sterility, particularly as it is created with Launcelot Gobbo, the "gobbling," prodigal servant whose appetites cannot be controlled. Like Shylock's absence, their exclusion qualifies the expected resolution of the text and reminds us of the ultimate failure to contain
difference completely even as the play's aliens are silenced. The Moor, whose presence may be a visible sign for the conflation of economic and erotic union with the Other in the rhetoric of travel, provides a pregnant reminder of the problematic underpinnings of the Venetian economy.

In her *Literary Fat Ladies*, Patricia Parker charts the appearance of dilated female bodies in Renaissance texts. While they are specifically located within the rhetorical technique of dilation, these “fat ladies” are figures for the delay and deferral that is a central topos of many important Renaissance subtexts such as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the Bible (texts that are also key in the troping of imperial desires). The chief purpose of dilation (amplification or the production of *copia*) is mired in an anxiety over uncontrolled excess; hence the texts become as preoccupied with mastery and control over expansion as with the expansion itself. Parker argues, “Dilation, then, is always something to be kept within the horizon of ending, mastery, and control” (14). Certainly the problem of controlled expansion reverberates within colonial discourses of the Renaissance as travel writers and editors struggle to produce texts which allow expansion but always within the confines of conversion and colonial mastery. In some ways, the figure of the fat lady serves the same purpose as Purchas's introduction: the promise of profitable conversion within the space allowed by deferral of the judgment of the Second Coming.

These fat ladies resonate within a varied field of meanings associated with the judicial, the temporal, the genealogical, and the erotic. Although Parker does not specifically name Launcelot's Moor in her catalogue of fat ladies, she too operates within a similar web of meaning. She appears in the dilated space of the play that postpones both the resolution of Antonio's dilemma and the consummation of Bassanio's and Portia's betrothal. Like Parker's first example (Nell from *The Comedy of Errors*), she is a large presence that is only described. Not permitted to speak, the Moor still encapsulates ideas of copious fertility and threatening female sexuality. However, unlike the other Shakespearean fat ladies, Launcelot's Moor cannot be regarded as “a dilative means to a patriarchal end” (19), that is, as a momentary disruption of the text or a deferral that contains the promise of an ordered conclusion. Her pregnancy is a reminder of the dangerous result of uncontrolled crossing of borders, of trade that holds the dual (and irreconcilable) promises of the production of new wealth and of an insupportable excess. The end she promises is a mixed child, whose blackness may not be “converted” or absorbed within the endogamous, exclusionary values of Belmont. This dusky dark lady is perhaps more like the women of the *Aeneid*, perpetrators “of delay and even of obstructionism in relation to the master or imperial project of the completion of the text” (Parker 13). She interferes with the “master/imperial” project of *The Merchant of Venice*—the eradication or assimilation of difference. Unlike other fat ladies, her “promised end” signals not resolution, but the potential disruption of Europe's imperial text, because in *Merchant's* Venice—and Elizabeth's England—the possibility of wealth only exists within the dangers of cultural exchange.

Notes

1. Even though the word *intercourse* did not come to have its current sexual connotation until the eighteenth century, Purchas's use of “commerce and intercourse of amity” resonates powerfully in this way for a modern reader, and I would like to retain this anachronistic sense for the purposes of this paper. Indeed, this paper will read anachronistically throughout. *Miscegenation*, too, is an eighteenth-century term which has particular resonances for the modern American reader. Like “race,” the word *miscegenation* is particularly enabled by later scientific discourses; however, the concepts certainly predated the scientific sense. Although there certainly were Renaissance words, such as *mulatto*, for the offspring of certain interracial couples, I prefer to use the term *miscegenation*, just as I play on *intercourse*, to locate an emerging modern dynamic for which there was no adequate language.

2. Eldred Jones sees this moment as the first glimmer of an emerging stereotype of black women (*Othello's Countrymen* 119). He also seems to agree with the Arden editor. He argues that the Launcelot/Moor liaison is an “earthy basic relationship” which completes a structural pattern of
romantic relationships in *Merchant*, yet he downplays the relationship's significance: “This cold douche of earthy realism is not unlike the Jacques/Audrey contrast to the Orlando/Rosalind, Silvius/Phebe love types in *As You Like It*. The fact that Launcelot's partner is a Moor only lends emphasis to the contrast” (*Othello's Countrymen* 71).

3. For a more complete discussion, see Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* (10-12). Fryer provocatively contends that the second order of expulsion was to make up the payment for the return of eighty-nine English prisoners from Spain and Portugal.

4. The reprints of this document indicate some confusion. I have used Eldred Jones's transcription of the 1601 draft proclamation in the Cecil papers, which reads “are crept.” In contrast, James Walvin's version of this same proclamation (65) reads “are carried,” as does the version in Hughes and Larkin (220-21). The facsimile included in Jones (plate 5) appears to me to read “are crept” and I have thus accepted his transcription.

5. English travel writers, not surprisingly, frequently compared their visions of colonial rule with the Spanish model. England saw itself as in part “correcting” the vexed model of colonial rule in Spain. In his *View of the Present State of Ireland*, Spenser outlines one of the sources of this sense of Spain's mixed heritage, as he suggests that Spain's current riches are the inheritance of a long history of invasion, particularly by Africans: “ffor the Spaniarde that now is, is come from as rude and salvage nacions, as theare beinge As it maye be gathered by Course of ages and view of theire owne historye (thoughe they thearein labour muche to ennoble themselues) scarce anye dropp of the oulde Spannishe blodd lefte in them: … And yeat after all these the mores and Barbarians breakings over out of Africa did finallye possesse all spaine or the moste parte thereof And tredae downe vnder theire foule heathenishe fete what euuer little they founde theare yeat standinge the which thoughe afterwaordes they weare beaten out by fferdinando of Arraggon and Elizabeth his wiffe yeat they weare not so clensed but that thorogh the mariage which they had made and mixture with the people of the lande duringe theire longe Continvance theare they had lefte no pure dropp of Spanishe blodd no nor of Romayne nor Scithian So that of all nacions vnder heave I suppose the Spaniarde is the most mingled moste vncertaine and most bastardlie … ” (90-91).

6. Kwame Anthony Appiah is the most recent purveyor of this view. In the entry “Race,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, he argues, “… in Shakespearean England both Jews and Moors were barely an empirical reality. And even though there were small numbers of Jews and black people in England in Shakespeare's day, attitudes to ‘the Moor’ and ‘the Jew’ do not seem to have been based on experience of these people. Furthermore, despite the fact that there was an increasing amount of information available about dark-skinned foreigners in this, the first great period of modern Western exploration, actual reports of black or Jewish foreigners did not play an important part in forming these images. Rather, it seems that the stereotypes were based on an essentially theological conception of the status of both Moors and Jews as non-Christians; the former distinguished by their black skin, whose color was associated in Christian iconography with sin and the devil … ” (277-78). It seems apparent in Elizabeth's document that there was a black presence that had its own reality for Elizabeth and that religion appears as rationale after the fact.

7. Patricia Hill Collins lucidly outlines the connections between the welfare mother and mammy stereotypes, arguing, “Each image transmits clear messages about the proper limits among female sexuality, fertility and Black women's roles in the political economy” (78). See also Angela Davis's description of specific political manipulations of the welfare mother image (23-27).

8. My brief discussion of cannibalism owes a great deal to Peter Hulme's materialist critique of the term “cannibal” (78-87) as well as to Maggie Kilgour's exploration of metaphors of incorporation. For an anthropologist's critique of the charge of cannibalism, see Arens.

9. On blood libel, see Poliakov 58 and Kilgour 5. Hulme also suggests a connection in his sense that the rise in accusations of anthropophagy involved the “ritual purging of the body of European Christendom just prior to, and in the first steps of, the domination of the rest of the world: the forging of a European identity” (85-86). Ben Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humour* contains similar links between economics, cannibalism, and anti-Semitism when Carlo Buffone exclaims, “Marry, I say,
nothing resembling man more than a swine, it follows nothing can be more nourishing: for indeed, but that it abhors from our nice nature, if we fed upon one another, we should shoot up a great deal faster, and thrive much better: I refer me to your usurous cannibals, or such like: but since it is so contrary, pork, pork is your only feed” (5.5.61-66).

10. Eric Cheyfitz briefly outlines the relationship of cannibalism to kinship structures in his discussion of Montaigne's “Of Cannibals”: “Cannibalism expresses, or figures forth, a radical idea of kinship that cuts across the frontiers of hostile groups. To eat the other is to eat the self, for the other is quite literally composed of the selves of one's kin, who compose oneself, just as the self, it follows, is composed of the others one has eaten. Cannibalism, like kinship, expresses forthrightly the essentially equivocal relationship that obtains between self and other” (149). As I have suggested, it is precisely this aspect of cannibalism that appears so upsetting to European notions of social order and control. In A Report of the Kingdome of Congo (1597), Abraham Hartwell expresses horror at the idea of cannibals who eat their own kin: “True it is that many nations there are, that feede upon mans flesh as in the east Indies, and in Bresill, and in other places: but that is only the flesh of their adversaries and enemies, but to eat the flesh of their own friends and subjects and kinefolkes, it is without all example in any place of the worlde, saving onely in this nation of the Anzichi” (36).

11. I borrow this multivalent use of “chauvinist” from Susan Griffin (298-305).

12. For more on the gendering of the discourses of travel and trade, see Parker 142.

13. In his liberally sympathetic discussion of Morocco's rejection, Frank Whigham acknowledges the racism of courtly ideology by nothing that “[t]hroughout the scenes with Morocco the element of complexion provides a measure of the exclusive implications of courtesy in Portia's society” (98). However, Whigham then blames the Moroccan prince for his own loss because of “his statement of defiant insecurity regarding his skin color” (98), which is rhetorically out of sync with courtesy theory. His reading remystifies the color problem by blaming it on the prince. Portia never mentions his “imagery of martial exploit and confrontation” (98), only his complexion; so too the tradition of failed suitors indicates to the audience that his unsuitability is not so much a question of rhetorical decorum as racial “propriety.” In Morocco's case, “defiant insecurity” may simply be a sensible response to the racism implicit in Portia's courtly ethic.

14. Shakespeare draws upon a system of associations between the Jew and the black which is as old as Christianity itself. For a brief outline of the association of blackness with the Jew, see Gilman 30-35.

15. For an excellent discussion of the racial and economic ramifications of the Jacob and Esau parable, see Shell.

16. In his Pseudodoxia Epidemica, Sir Thomas Browne uses this same parable to explain one theory of the causes of blackness, replacing the biblical injunctions against disobedience with a lesson about the powers of the imagination: “[I]t may be perpended whether it might not fall out the same way that Jacobs cattell became speckled, spotted and ring-straked, that is, by the power and efficacy of Imagination; which produceth effects in the conception correspondent unto the phancy of the Agents in generation” (513).

17. Lars Engle argues that this story is purposely incomplete: “It is this relation between Jacob and Laban, then, that Shylock is attempting to adduce as an explanation of his own place in the Venetian economy, and, more immediately, as a model for his relation to Antonio” (31).

18. It is in this same narrative that Best includes one of the earliest recorded instances of miscegenation in early modern England, which he uses to refute the climatic theory of the cause of blackness: “I my selfe have seene an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole brought into England, who taking a faire Englishwoman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, although England was his native countrey, and an English woman his mother: whereby it seemeth this blacknes proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could any thing alter, and therefore wee cannot impute it to the nature of the Clime” (Hakluyt, Principal Navigations 3: 50-51).

19. Among critics of The Merchant of Venice, particularly feminists, there is a great deal of debate over the possible feminist implications of Portia's transvestite disguise. Is Portia truly the disorderly, unruly
female preached against in tracts against cross-dressing or are such disguises diversions which ultimately serve to restore patriarchal order? Catherine Belsey finds the play less radical than its earlier counterparts: “The Merchant of Venice is none the less rather less radical in its treatment of women as subjects. … [The play] … reproduces some of the theoretical hesitation within which it is situated” (195-96). Lisa Jardine locates Portia within a tradition of “confused cultural response[s] to the learned woman” (“Cultural Confusion” 17) and notes that although Portia possesses many threatening advantages over the males in the play, the play still ends with the sexual subordination of women (17). In contrast, Karen Newman finds in Portia a necessary threat to social order: “Portia evokes the ideal of a proper Renaissance lady and then transgresses it; she becomes an unruly woman” (“Portia's Ring” 29). Lars Engle also notes a split between conservative and radical elements in the play; however, he sees Portia as part of the latter precisely because she is the agent of exchange: “On the other hand, more than any other Shakespearean play, The Merchant of Venice shows a woman triumphing over men and male systems of exchange: the ‘male homosocial desire’ of Antonio is almost as thoroughly thwarted in the play as is Shylock's vengefulness” (37). Nonetheless, male homosocial desire (which can be a conservative force) is also a force which threatens the sex/gender system.

20. Parker draws on Jardine's connection of the figure of the pregnant woman and her “grossesse” with fertility and threatening sexuality (Jardine, Still Harping 131; Parker 18).

21. Black Africans become in the Renaissance signs for the impossible, which often comes to include the impossibility of their being subdued to European order. The emblem for the impossible, “washing the Ethiop white,” suggests a sense of submission to a European order. Richard Crashaw’s poem “On the Baptized Ethiopian” specifically adapts this as a figure for conversion and the Second Coming. For more see Newman, “And wash the Ethiop white,” and ch. 2 of my dissertation, “Acknowledging Things of Darkness: Race, Gender and Power in Early Modern England.”

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Criticism: Race: John Picker (essay date 1994)


[In the essay below, Picker describes Elizabethan England's creation of and discrimination against the "other," or outsider, in order to preserve its own sense of a closed society. Picker observes that this "ghettoizing" is reflected in The Merchant of Venice, where Shylock is consistently excluded from communal life simply because he is a Jew.]

1. “GO PRESENTLY INQUIRE, AND SO WILL I / WHERE MONEY IS”: THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In his seminal work on Shakespearean festive comedy, C. L. Barber introduces a theory of comic form which attempts to account for the role of figures such as Shylock in the early plays. Emphasizing the connection between theatrical practices and social customs such as May Day and the Winter Revels, Barber argues that...
the early comedies celebrate natural vitality and social identity. He considers the underlying movement of
Shakespearean comedy to be the passage “through release to clarification,” that is, from revel and celebration
to the formation of a durable communal bond. According to Barber, Shakespearean comedy requires
integration and closure such that any marginal figures, or “butts,” as Barber refers to them, must be restrained
and expelled by society. By defeating such challenges, the society gains strength and, finally, reestablishes
itself. \(^1\) The presence of a threatening figure thus enables disparate groups to come together as a community,
and overpower a common scapegoat. Yet, as Barber writes, “behind the laughter at the butts, there is always a
sense of solidarity about pleasure, a communion embracing the merrymakers to the play and the audience.” \(^2\)
Barber's theory of festive comedy, then, contains the underlying paradox that a welcoming community can be
established only through ridicule and ostracism.

This essay examines how characters in *The Merchant of Venice* attempt to silence, ignore, interrupt, and
otherwise stifle Shylock; at the same time, it demonstrates how Shylock's voice and personality undercut their
attempts, to the extent that his presence informs a reading of the play. In what follows, I will argue that
Shylock thwarts society's attempts to contain him. I would like to suggest that in *Merchant*, Shakespeare
poses two similar questions, one focusing on historical circumstances, and the other dealing with issues of
genre: just how can Venice's and Belmont's citizens reconcile the need for Shylock's money with the fact that
they shun him socially? And secondly, how can the play reconcile its need for Shylock's threatening presence
with the fact that it ultimately expels him from comic closure? By allowing Shylock to undermine closure,
Shakespeare unites these historical and generic concerns, and exposes the paradoxical principle upon which
his comedy and his society operate: the formation of communal identity through exclusionary practices.

Although Edward I expelled the majority of Jews from his kingdom in 1290, Jewish stereotypes continued to
flourish in England throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Elizabethans encountered few Jews in the
city and countryside, yet Church sermons nevertheless proclaimed Jews to be “hard-hearted blasphemers who
were also vain, ostentatious, and deceitful,” and encouraged the association of the “devil Jew” with avarice. \(^3\)
The tradition of connecting Jews with cupidity had originated virtually as they arrived on European soil, and
with good reason: moneylending was one of the few professions that European Jews were permitted to
practice. As Cecil Roth writes, the “practice of usury was considered to be a sin for any man, but seemed in
Gentile eyes to be less so for Jews, who had so many [sins] on their infidel consciences that one more or less
hardly mattered.” \(^4\) While Christians considered usury sacrilegious, they did not hesitate to request extensive
loans from Jews in order to conduct trading ventures and appease belligerent enemies. And, lacking the
relatively modern invention of state-sponsored welfare programs, many Italian city governments depended
upon Jewish usurers to support the poor by opening “loan banks.” Jewish money thus represented a powerful
force governing the sustenance, expansion, and protection of Christian societies. \(^5\)

Yet, Renaissance Europe denied Jews the freedom to inhabit the same communities as Christians. In the
words of Bernard Glassman, “there was the need for the Jew's services on the one hand, and the contempt for
his person, on the other.” \(^6\) Christians welcomed Jewish money, and often *required* it, so long as accepting it
did not necessitate welcoming the Jewish moneylender. Venice, the most important trading city in Italy,
established the first ghetto in Western history for its substantial Jewish population. Because Venetian
merchants relied heavily on usurers to finance business ventures, Jews who sought business flocked to the
city. In 1516, however, the threat of a burgeoning Jewish population drove the Venetian government to
legislate the confinement of Jews to a specified district. This was the New Foundry, or *geto nuovo*, from
which the word “ghetto” originated. \(^7\) Within the *geto nuovo*, Jewish heterodoxy was kept safely away from
Christian homes, while, in the marketplace or *piazza*, those same Christians coveted loans from Jewish
usurers. Hence, the very layout of Venice reproduced the Christians' paradoxical desire to embrace
desperately needed Jewish money and simultaneously shun the Jews who possessed it.

There is a striking parallel between the bind in which Jewish usurers were placed by their Christian debtors,
and the place of marginal figures in the model of Shakespearean comedy as expressed by C. L. Barber. As
Jewish usurers were required to finance the growth of Renaissance European communities, so threatening figures must be present for communal growth to occur in Shakespeare's comedies. And, paradoxically, just as those Jews were socially ostracized by the societies that they financed, so the community that the outsider helped to construct had to expel him or her in order to reach closure. Throughout Merchant, Shakespeare dramatizes this paradox by allowing Shylock consistently to challenge the restraints of the Venetian community and, finally, by permitting him to undermine comic closure.

2. “I AM NOT BOUND TO PLEASE THEE WITH MY ANSWERS”: SHYLOCK'S CONTAINMENT CHALLENGED

We are introduced to Shylock through a series of abrupt, grating conversations which feature his refusal to be manipulated and ostracized. In his first scene, Bassanio makes him acutely aware of his marginal status by approaching him solely to take out a loan of three thousand ducats. Shylock shows his resentment toward this treatment by manipulating their dialogue in fascinating ways:

shylock:  
Three thousand ducats—well.  
bassanio:  
Ay, sir, for three months.  
shylock:  
For three months—well.  
bassanio:  
For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.  
shylock:  
Antonio shall become bound—well.  
bassanio:  
May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?  
shylock:  
Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.  
bassanio:  
Your answer to that.  
shylock:  
Antonio is a good man.  

(I.iii. 1-11)

Here, Shylock uses repetition and carefully-placed interjections to masterful effect. He entices Bassanio by echoing “for three months” and “Antonio shall become bound,” but forces anxious pauses upon the dialogue with each irritating “well.” His refusal to answer Bassanio with a simple yes or no is not simply a sign of verbal teasing or “dangling,” as Lawrence Danson has suggested. Rather, by withholding an answer, Shylock subtly resists conducting economic as well as linguistic transactions with Bassanio. In this way, Shylock establishes a connection between conversational and monetary exchange. Through pauses, repetition, and a final pun on the moral and economic connotations of “good,” Shylock defies Bassanio's repeated attempts to impose limits on his response to the bond. Rather than reply in terms that readily satisfy Bassanio, Shylock disturbs and challenges him by remaining linguistically and economically unengageable.

If Shylock is subtly obdurate with Bassanio, he is ardently defiant toward Antonio's wishes. When Antonio enters the scene, he has little desire to speak directly to Shylock, from whom he only wants money; Antonio asks Bassanio, “Is he yet possessed / How much ye would?” (I.iii. 61-2). The odd wording of this question reveals contempt for Shylock in two ways. First, it suggests a low pun on the Jew's supposed “possession” by the devil. This gibe is consistent with Antonio's caustic remark about Shylock later in the scene, that the “devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (95). Second, in his question, Antonio marginalizes Shylock by speaking about him in the third person despite his presence onstage. Shylock, however, refuses to be slighted or ignored, and he interrupts with, “Ay, ay, three thousand ducats” (62). This interjection enables him to
disrupt Antonio’s conversation with Bassanio and protest his relegation to a third-person presence.

In the Jacob and Laban story which follows this exchange, Shylock further challenges both his relegation to marginal status and the evil connotation implied in Antonio’s use of “possession.” Lars Engle, one of the few critics to grapple with the exegesis, provides an insightful analysis based on the premise that “the Jacob story … is full of danger for Shylock.” Indeed, notions of threat and discontinuity pervade Shylock’s speech from the moment he starts to deliver it:

shylock:
When Jacob grazed 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?

(68-72)

The reference to the patriarchs is a calculated non sequitur, and to make its impact even more disturbing to Antonio, Shylock breaks off his narrative to supply apparently irrelevant background information. Thus, his words here seem carefully crafted to serve a double purpose: to defend the practice of usury while offending Antonio. The significance of Shylock’s digression is revealed through his skillful mockery of Antonio’s initial pun on possession. While the merchant had implied only ten lines earlier that the Jew was “possessed” with deviant spirits, Shylock subtly twists this double meaning to remove the negative connotation from “possession” and align himself with the patriarchs. Thus he ingeniously suggests that each patriarch was not “possessed” by evil because of his Judaism, but, quite the opposite, a “possessor” of God’s promise.

Such wordplay and digression annoy Antonio and prompt the merchant to ask impatiently, “And what of him? Did he take interest?” Shylock responds with a detailed description of Jacob’s cunning actions, a speech which taunts both Antonio’s argument for the abnormality of usury as well as the merchant’s lack of children:

shylock:
… the ewes being rank,
In the end of autumn turned to the rams;
And when the work of generation was
Between these woolly breeders in the act,
The skilfull shepherd pilled 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-colored lambs, and those were Jacob’s.

(77-85)

This speech is part of Shylock’s attempt to draw a parallel between Jacob’s manipulative tactic and his own usury in order to suggest that usury is as natural as sexual propagation. Using alternatingly rolling and terse alliteration, Shylock makes the sheep’s sexual activities uncomfortably visual: “rank” ewes “turned to the rams” “in the end of autumn” for “the work of generation” and “the doing of the deed of kind.” He supplements this with the bizarre image of “woolly breeders,” a coarse description of mating sheep. According to Shylock, Jacob himself takes an active role as the one who “stuck [“certain wands”] up before the fulsome ewes” in order to carry out his plan. Thus, through the use of a phallic object, Jacob makes the ewes conceive a specific type of lamb.
Shylock uses this tale of overt sexuality to disturb Antonio's containing presence. With references to the reproductive behavior of sheep, Shylock's exegesis of the Jacob story seems “full of danger,” not so much for the Jew, as Lars Engle suggests, as for Antonio, who is confronted in this speech with a subtle criticism of both his opinion of usury and his own lack of offspring. Shylock, by craftily arguing that usury gives him the power to control acts of reproduction, directly challenges Antonio's belief that usury involves the use of “barren metal” (131). When Antonio expresses impatience once more with “Was this inserted to make interest good? / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?,” Shylock retorts with a pun which aligns usury and reproduction: “I cannot tell; I make it breed a fast” (91-3). Shylock defends usury as natural and regenerative rather than abnormal and impotent. Furthermore, Shylock argues that interest, like sexual reproduction, is a creative, productive catalyst; he suggests that interest is necessary to produce new wealth, just as sex is essential to create new people. In this way, his words belie the definition of usury to which Antonio subscribes.

By emphasizing sexual regeneration in the Jacob story, Shylock further discomforts Antonio, the play's only bachelor and childless adult. Although E. Pearlman considers Shylock “hungry for money but basically unsexual or anti-sexual,” it seems that Shylock equates sexual regeneration with the interest he gains through usury. In fact, Shylock blurs distinctions between the two, so that he would have his “gold and silver” “breed as fast” as “ewes and rams.” Using this analogy to argue that usury is as natural as sexual reproduction, Shylock can only further disturb Antonio, who lacks offspring as well as the hope of marrying and producing them. Hence, Shylock's exegesis, as an argument for the legitimacy of usury and a statement of sexual fecundity, challenges and discomforts the very man who most detests him.

Antonio and Bassanio are not alone in failing to contain Shylock's presence. In the second act, after Jessica has absconded with a portion of her father's savings, Solanio presents a narrative of Shylock's reaction to Jessica's flight which attempts to satirize the Jew:

solanio:
I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
“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,
Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter!
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol’n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats!”

(II.viii.12-22)

We should be wary to take this passage at face value, for, as Paul Cantor correctly observes, Solanio's paraphrase of Shylock is not simply a quotation of Shylock's words verbatim, but a caricature. As a caricature in the guise of a paraphrase, the speech becomes a complex form of containment. Solanio purports to repeat Shylock's words, but he actually exaggerates and manipulates them to construct a warped picture of how, as we later discover, Shylock reacted. Although he delivers this report in order to make Shylock's personality seem, like a “dog Jew,” inhuman and obsessive, Solanio ironically implicates not so much Shylock here as his own bad judgment. We might find it difficult to discover what in the speech seems “so strange … and so variable,” for Solanio's rendition is nothing if not predictable in its reliance on the Jewish stereotype and in its redundant use of “daughter,” “ducats,” “justice,” “stol’n,” and so forth.

As we later see firsthand, Shylock's response to Jessica's departure uses much of the same language as Solanio's paraphrase, but exhibits anger and pain that the crude parody simply does not convey.
tells Shylock of Jessica's whereabouts, there is an almost chilling bitterness in the abandoned father's words: “I would my daughter were dead at my feet, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!” (III.i.83-5). With its funerary pall, this passage is anything but comic. Furthermore, there is mournful remorse in Shylock's tone as he realizes he will have “no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o’ my shoulders, no sighs but o’ my breathing, no tears but o’ my shedding” (III.i.89-91). These lines convey a genuine sense of loss and tragedy, not the humorous obsessiveness of Solanio's shallow parody, which deprived Shylock's reaction of its emotional core and left only the empty shell of similar words (“daughter,” “ducats,” and “jewels”). It seems that Shakespeare allows Solanio to deliver his satiric paraphrase first, so that when Shylock finally speaks, his own deeper feelings undermine the limited portrayal that Solanio had previously constructed for him.

As we have seen thus far in Merchant, Shylock's physical presence is at once required by the Venetians—enabling Bassanio to finance travel to Belmont—and despised by them, as revealed by Solanio's demeaning paraphrase. However, rather than placidly acquiesce to the paradoxical constraints set on his shoulders, Shylock adamantly defies them. The play's famous “I am a Jew” speech represents the culmination of Shylock's rebellious attitude:

shylock: 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 humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

(II.i 55-69)

The cohesiveness of this speech pivots upon a series of intricate counterbalances. Nourishing feeding is juxtaposed against poisoning, the latter of which, with the wounds, the diseases, and pricking, is counteracted by healing. In the middle of the passage, warming and cooling conveniently neutralize each other. Shylock neatly places his tickling question next to his pricking one, thereby suggesting a metaphorical relationship between creeping fingers' and a puncturing point's contact with skin (in addition to the rhyming of the two verbs). This complex series of counterbalances gives the speech a symmetry which allows it to stand on its own, similar to a soliloquy.16 Ironically, Shylock chooses an unpredictable moment—when he is in the company of two of the play's least significant characters—to deliver one of the play's most extraordinary pieces of rhetoric.

Embracing a plethora of corporal perceptions, from an animated tickle to cold-blooded murder, Shylock's lines emphasize a sensuality which transcends the social hierarchy imposed by the Christian community. While Shylock's previous earthiness relied on brash statements of sexual activity in order to rile Antonio, now the focus is on basic mortal characteristics and sensations: at first, eyes, hands, and organs; then, illness and health, life and death, and laughter. His images work to challenge and eradicate notions of difference which the Christians want desperately to maintain. For, Shylock speaks not only of Jewish experience, but of human experience. In doing so, he confronts Salerio and Solanio with what, for them, must seem a frightening prospect: that, despite his religious and cultural identity, he shares with them a fundamental humanity.

With his final query—“if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”—Shylock consciously vocalizes his challenge to containment for the first time. No longer will he taunt and be taunted. His vow for vengeance is as eloquent a statement of defiance as it is a call for Antonio's pound of flesh. Kiernan Ryan artfully writes that this speech introduces “the full, protesting force of an irresistible egalitarian vision, whose basis in the shared
faculties and needs of our common physical nature implicitly indicts all forms of inhuman discrimination.”

Shylock's forcefulness leaves Salerio and Solanio stunned and speechless; the climactic affirmation of vengeance is only disturbed by the entrance of “a Man from Antonio” (s.d.). In the moment right before this, Solanio, Salerio, and perhaps the audience realize the shocking implications of Shylock's words. However irrational his response seems, it nevertheless represents a combative stance against the restraining power of the Christian community, particularly the stifling voice of Antonio and the deceptive actions of Lorenzo.

Following this decisive argument for equality, Shylock's more intimate conversation with Tubal aids in further humanizing him by providing details of his present condition as a forsaken father and of his previous role as a husband. We watch Shylock reveal anger and despair, with his emotional state at the mercy of Tubal's words. In just forty lines, Shylock confesses his anguish over Jessica, his hatred towards Antonio, his attachment to his savings, and, perhaps most interestingly, his devotion to Leah, his wife:

\[
\text{tubal:} \\
\text{One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.} \\
\text{shylock:} \\
\text{Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it} \\
\text{of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness} \\
\text{of monkeys.}
\]

(III.i.111-16)

While this exchange contains an element of absurdity by juxtaposing a cherished ring against “a wilderness of monkeys,” within the trade-off there is also, undeniably, a sense of poignancy. Clearly, Shylock values the “turquoise” that Leah gave him before their marriage, for the loss of the ring represents Jessica's paramount crime, the news of which actually goes so far as to “torture” him. Judging by the worth that Shylock places upon the ring, it quite possibly represents the only memento of Leah left to him. This passage, then, takes Shylock's “Hath not a Jew eyes?” argument one step further by establishing his humanity on an emotional level. He perceives his possessions as much more than simply a means to acquire more money and ensure prosperity in days to come. The turquoise ring represents for him not a method to build for his economic future, but a connection to his emotional past.

In the talk with Tubal, Shylock's character undergoes myriad developments which convey a multifaceted portrait. His urgent concerns of the present bring to the surface memorable past experiences. These, in turn, enable Shylock to appear as more of an individual human being and less a stereotypical menacing villain to us. As Norman Rabkin rightly argues, during this scene, we “respond to signals of Shylock's injured fatherhood, of his role as heavy father, of his light hearted mistreatment at the hands of the negligible Salerio and Solanio, of his motiveless malignity, and we try hopelessly to reduce to a single attitude our response.” At once, then, Shylock strikes us as more fully humanized than his oppressors, and his characterization seems more complex than theirs. Shylock thus maintains a significant humanity which successfully undermines the other figures' attempts to belittle him.

In Shylock's first scene with Bassanio and Antonio, his resentment seems somewhat restrained and playful. But with Antonio behind bars, his tone suddenly shifts to an intractable extreme, beyond reason, humaneness, and even the ability to listen:

\[
\text{antonio:} \\
\text{I pray thee hear me speak.} \\
\text{shylock:} \\
\text{I'll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak.} \\
\text{I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more.} \\
\text{I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,} \\
\text{To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield}
\]
To Christian intercessors. Follow not.
I’ll have no speaking; I will have my bond.

(III.iii.11-17)

Earlier, Antonio attempted to silence Shylock while attaining a monetary bond. Here, though, the power dynamics have been reversed, so that Shylock now plays the role of stifler and bond seeker to the imprisoned merchant. Furthermore, Shylock reverses the roles with a diabolical twist; while Antonio's original desire for a loan of money was innocuous, Shylock's bond is deadly.

With “I will not hear thee speak,” Shylock openly admits to what he had only hinted at with his repetitive “well” to Bassanio in their first scene together. That is, he now refuses outright to participate in conversational exchange, nor will he listen to Antonio. Shylock's “I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more” expresses precisely Antonio and Bassanio's original demand upon him: a binding economic agreement but not a conversation, the latter of which implies a linguistic communion formed between speakers and listeners. Shylock seems to hint at the paradox of his own position as a member of an economic but not a social community in Venice. Through demands for both silence and fulfillment of a bond, Shylock forces Antonio into the very position in which the merchant had previously placed him.

Thus, the play constructs Shylock as a man acutely aware of his subservient role in Venice and preoccupied with how to thwart those who have relegated him to that position. As we have seen, he accomplishes this through coarse references to the corporeal, through stylish rhetoric, or by bluntly refusing to listen. Uniting all of these responses, the climactic trial scene sets Shylock against Merchant's community as it frantically tries to impose closure upon him by swaying him from his violent plan. Conflict in the scene does not occur solely between Christian mercy and Jewish hardheartedness, as has often been argued. Rather, what gets played out during the trial is, in part, the battle between expectation, in the guise of comic closure, and defiance of what is expected, as represented by Shylock's determination to perform the directive of his bond.

Early on, the scene establishes the expectation that the Christian community will triumph over the outsider. The Duke hints at this when he tells Shylock, “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” (IV.i.34). Indeed, the Duke does not simply want “a gentle answer,” he expects it, as if he knows he is a player in a comedy, and that comedy requires overcoming obstacles to secure comic integration and closure. And if the title character succumbs to Shylock's knife, hope for such closure is, of course, doomed. The court scene, then, captures characters in Merchant as they struggle to save their own comedy from imminent collapse.

Portia, dressed as the judge Balthazar, functions both to interpret the law and to ensure that the comedy achieves closure. After Antonio confesses to Shylock's bond, Portia commands: “Then must the Jew be merciful” (181). Disguised as a representative of the law, Portia gains the authority to make such absolute decrees in Venice. Yet, her command serves a structural purpose as well. Portia does not say solely that Shylock should show mercy, but that he must. As with the Duke's desire for a “gentle answer,” Portia's words suggest an underlying expectation for behavior which will guarantee proper comic closure. Indeed, by saving Antonio's life while defeating Shylock, Portia effectively removes the obstacle to the comic denouement. Shakespeare accomplishes a fascinating unity of plot and structure through her, since she serves a dual purpose as both judge within the intrigue of Merchant, decreeing what is correct behavior in Venice, and judge without, determining how best to overcome the obstacle to community and close the comic framework of the play.

Like Portia, the Duke attempts to overpower and ultimately expel Shylock. Rather than put Shylock to death, however, he forces the Jew to give up all of his savings:

duke:
Thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thy ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's;
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive into a fine.

(367-71)

Jean Howard has written that a “pardon so self-righteously granted seems more a gesture of pride than of spontaneous mercy,” and she is right to see in the Duke's pronouncement a thinly veiled ego trip.21 Also present, however, is the urge to deprive Shylock of his only source of power—his money. But, as Shylock says, such an action would do more than simply bankrupt him:

shylock:
Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!
You take my house, when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house. You take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

(373-6)

Shylock makes a valid point here, since usury, as we have seen, was one of the only means by which Jews could earn a living.22 In these lines, Shylock continues to drive home his paradoxical relationship with Venice's Christians, by imploring them to understand that their “pardon” promises not forgiveness but annihilation. Ironically, the Duke spares Shylock's life by “tak[jing]” the very things which enable Shylock to live. Thus, the “pardon” which seemed motivated by mercy reveals itself to be mercilessly sadistic. Had the Duke ordered Shylock's death, at least this would have been a terminal punishment, but the Duke's so-called pardon instead promises to be interminably torturous and humiliating. Stripped of his possessions—the very things which define his identity in Venetian society—Shylock retains his life, but no possible way to live it.

Together with the Duke's pardon, Antonio's final demand for Shylock's conversion constitutes a self-defeating and excessive punishment. Rather than let Shylock remain a Jew, albeit a poor one, Antonio suggests a different penalty:

antonio:
So please the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for half his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death to the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more: that for this favor
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift
Here in the court of all he dies possessed
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.

(379-89)

Not only does Antonio's supposed “favor” maintain, in the long run, total control over Shylock's possessions, but it further stipulates that Shylock “become a Christian.” Hence, Antonio's punishment does not fully restore Shylock's independent economic status, and it completely obliterates Shylock's cultural and religious connections. The punishment comes to represent not so much a response to a misdeed as it does a personal attack on an outsider. By maintaining economic and religious control over Shylock, Antonio attempts to eradicate the Jew's identity on every level. Paul Cantor notes that, as we watch Antonio pronounce his punishment, we “sense that Venice is forcibly imposing conformity, responding to a challenge to its beliefs by
simply trying to eliminate that challenge.”²³ Ironically, rather than teach Shylock a lesson in compassion and display evidence of the mercy which just moments ago Portia had urged Shylock to use, Antonio goes too far.

The conversion's harshness reveals a fundamental anxiety among the Christians to reach closure. The conversion is so excessive that it does not elevate Shylock to the level of a gratified, merciful Christian, but reduces him to a broken, weary man. When Portia asks him, “art thou contented, Jew?,” he merely echoes her resignedly with, “I am content” (392-3). There is no evidence of the conversion bringing Shylock any solace, newfound understanding, or acceptance into the Christian community. Rather, it humiliates him, and he exits anticlimactically:

**shylock:**
I pray you, give me leave to go from hence.
I am not well. Send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.

(394-6)

The incomplete act of signing the deed seems to symbolize Shylock's relationship with the Christian community as he leaves the stage. The conversion, far from enlightening Shylock in the glories of Christianity, sickens him into silence. In their anxious rush to reach closure, the Venetians and Belmontians have attempted to overcome an obstacle to community at a terrible price. Denying Shylock his dignity, the Christians have mercilessly victimized him.

3. “AND YET I AM SURE YOU ARE NOT SATISFIED / OF THESE EVENTS AT FULL”:
**SHYLOCK'S CONTAINMENT DEFIED AND CLOSURE DENIED**

The cruel punishment of Shylock casts an ominous cloud over the final act's attempts at blissful closure. When E. C. Pettet writes that “the play dissolves, appropriately, in the exquisite love scene under the moon in Belmont,” he disregards the very inappropriateness of the Christians' behavior toward Shylock and the way in which this flaws the play's comic ending.²⁴ As the Christians celebrate their own marriages and good tidings, their joy is undercut by an audience's acute awareness of Shylock's absence. The words of Portia and Jessica reveal that the Christians' improper treatment of Shylock overpowers the festive attempts of the final act.

Rather than revel in the triumph of community, the characters in Belmont struggle gloomily to honor their newly-formed bonds. Their conversations are overshadowed, literally and figuratively, by Shylock's mistreatment. Portia makes this clear when she compares Belmont's nighttime to a day plagued by dark clouds:

**portia:**
This night methinks is but the daylight sick;
It looks a little paler. ’Tis a day
Such as the day when the sun is hid.

(V.i. 124-6)

Portia's image of a sick, paling night undermines the attempts to create a lively scene in Belmont. While glorious sunshine would have portrayed the confident couples in brilliant light, the inclement weather seems to reflect discomfort below the play's surface. According to Portia, the clouds hide the sun from view, and this has the effect of infecting the day with disease. But Portia's metaphor also seems to give voice to a deeper message within the play. Just as the clouds cover the sun, the characters of *Merchant* have hidden Shylock away by refusing to acknowledge his cruel punishment and by attempting to forget him. As the sickness which Portia refers to darkens an otherwise sunny day, *Merchant's* Christians have inflicted their comedy with
an illness, the inability to deal satisfyingly with Shylock, which darkens what should be a radiant closure to the play.

Throughout the final act, pessimism, discomfort, and doubt emanate from Jessica. Her few lines and mysterious silences reveal a subtle alignment with her father's personality. During the act's opening exchange between herself and Lorenzo, she puts a damper on the romantic mood with a suggestion of dishonest love:

_Jessica:_
_In such a night_
_Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,_
_Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,_
_And ne'er a true one._

(V.i. 17-20)

Just as her father mocked Antonio's sexuality earlier, so Jessica now mocks Lorenzo's status as a faithful husband. However, while Shylock disturbed the single Antonio by discussing the natural reproductive activity of “woolly breeders,” Jessica teases the married Lorenzo with the dour insinuation that his “vows of faith” to her are suspect and that he is a liar, perhaps even an adulterer. Jessica, then, ridicules the sexual attitudes of the Christian community as her father had before her, and, by doing so, her personality is partially aligned with Shylock's. Thus, the Jew's presence, although banished, resurfaces through his daughter's attitudes and effectively challenges the supposed fidelity of the very thing which enables communal continuity—marriage—in the final act.

Furthermore, like Shylock, Jessica stubbornly refuses to conform to the wishes of the Christian community. As Lorenzo tries in vain to entertain her by speaking of celestial music as the “harmony … in immortal souls” and finally ordering music to be played, Jessica's discomfort becomes most acute:

_Lorenzo:_
_Come ho, and wake Diana with a hymn!_
_With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear_
_And draw her home with music._

_Jessica:_
_I am never merry when I hear sweet music._

_Lorenzo:_
_The reason is, your spirits are attentive._

(V.i. 70)

By calling for music, Lorenzo desires to envelop himself and Jessica in an illusion of blissful harmony, where only his notion of celestial notes played by “young-eyed cherubins” can be heard (62). Yet, with her remark, Jessica refuses to participate in this illusion. Her words betray deep feelings of anxiety and detract from the joyous atmosphere that Lorenzo struggles to attain. Jessica cannot easily make her “spirits” less “attentive” and simply disregard her sadness for the sake of a comic resolution. Rather than pretend, as Lorenzo does, that music has the power to resolve problematic situations, she acknowledges her discomfort and draws an audience's attention to the artificial nature of Lorenzo's request in light of what has happened to Shylock.

Both Jessica and Shylock represent what Ralph Berry describes as “the unmentionable” in the play, that is, threatening forces which the central community tries vainly to sweep aside and cover up. In court, the Duke told Shylock that he “expect[ed] a gentle answer,” and Portia announced that Shylock “must … be merciful,” as if they knew that obstacles to comedy have to be defeated if comic closure is to be attained. Lorenzo seems to share this attitude when he elaborates on the beneficial effects of harmonious sounds and then concludes
with an imperative for Jessica to “mark the music” (88). In effect, Lorenzo forces Jessica to endure the music, despite the fact that she seems unwilling to partake in his musical illusion of happiness.

Jessica's pessimistic remark about “sweet music” is also her last speaking moment in the play. Rather than permit the existence of challenges to comic progression, Lorenzo stifles Jessica's voice, just as Portia and the Duke do to Shylock's in the courtroom. Thus, the Christian community effectively marginalizes both the Jewish father and his converted daughter. Whereas Shylock leaves the stage, however, Jessica remains onstage in spite of her silent misgivings, watching but not conversing with the other characters. The audience never hears her respond to Lorenzo's silencing mechanism, and the text does not indicate how she reacts. This leads an audience to wonder whether or not Jessica remains internally torn between Jewish and Christian worlds and between her father's and her husband's households. By stifling Jessica's voice, the Christians fail to resolve, and prevent Jessica from resolving, her religious, cultural, and social allegiances. Anxiously attempting to reach closure, the characters of Merchant have only compounded their difficulties by failing to deal satisfactorily not just with Shylock, but with Jessica as well.

Many of Shakespeare's festive comedies, including Love's Labors Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Much Ado About Nothing, end with song and dance celebrating the integration of community. But The Merchant of Venice ends quietly and anticlimactically, with Gratiano's crass quibble on “Nerissa's ring” and the Christians' hasty exit. In marked contrast to endings of other Shakespearean comedies, I envision a performance in which the stage remains absolutely silent and still, similar to Jack Gold's 1980 BBC production. Jessica has been left alone on the set; her solitude expresses her own hesitancy to participate in the revelry, just as it also parallels Shylock's own solitude offstage. She reads his “special deed of gift,” the document that Nerissa has given to her and to Lorenzo, which states that they will inherit Shylock's property upon his death (291-2). This deed represents the only connection remaining between the Jewish father and his converted daughter, and I believe that it jars Jessica's memory to recall stealing Shylock's jewels and learning of his subsequent punishment. In this sudden moment of realization for her as well as for the audience, her expression slowly shifts from happy anticipation of married life as a Christian, to guilty regret for what she has tacitly allowed to be done to her father. Jessica's performance thus involves the skillful act of opening the play up to the audience and encouraging us along with her, to feel sorrow for Shylock's treatment.

4. CONCLUSION

In The Merchant of Venice, Shylock fulfills a necessary role in the Christians' economic community as a usurer, but he is simultaneously shunned because of his Judaism, while, within the play, he represents a threatening presence which a welcoming community must paradoxically ostracize in order to reach comic closure. Similarly, Jessica, as a wife with a large dowry, is required for the Christians' economic community, but, like her father, she, too, is alienated for voicing a challenge to closure. Hence, both Shylock and Jessica are necessary to the play's central community for their economic importance and their role as obstacles which must be overcome. Yet, in the community's efforts to reach closure, it fails to deal appropriately with these opposing voices. Rather than negotiate with its outsiders, the Christian community silences them, but with so much force that its attempts are undermined. In the process of restraining Shylock, the society ironically draws attention to the unrestrained cruelty that it uses in its own punishment of difference.

By allowing Shylock and Jessica to undermine closure, Shakespeare unites the historical and literary concerns outlined above. He seems to recognize the inherent similarity between Renaissance Venice's need for the Jew in order to define itself economically, and the need of his play's Venetians to ostracize Shylock in order to define themselves as a community. Indeed, Shakespeare creates a fascinating tension between the exclusionary practices of Venetian Christians and the demands of the comic genre.

Leaving this tension unresolved, Shakespeare makes a statement about the tendency of both comic form and historical circumstance to require an “other” for self-definition. He problematizes the fact that comic
characters, like sixteenth-century Venetians, manipulate and finally ostracize those outside of their central community. By allowing Shylock to upset the play's closure, then, Shakespeare places in the foreground the position of the “other.”

He suggests that, rather than operating under principles of egalitarianism and mercy, the Christians of the comedy and of Venice take what they want from Jews, only to hide them away in an attempt to silence their frustrated voices. Defying containment and overshadowing The Merchant of Venice's closure, Shylock protests the fact that the comedy has established community at the paradoxical price of ghettoizing its outsider.

Notes

1. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 4, 6-8. Barber defines the “butts” as scapegoats who obstruct the actions of the play's central community in Shakespeare's comedies. Thus, characters such as Falstaff are not “butt” figures, according to Barber's use of the term.

2. Ibid., pp. 8-9.


5. For a dramatic treatment of the ways in which city governments required and extracted Jewish funds for self-protection, see Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, one of Shakespeare's most important sources for *The Merchant*. For more on English Christian perceptions of, and relations with, Jews, see the introduction in James Bulman, *The Merchant of Venice* [Shakespeare in Performance Series] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).


8. All references to *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by Kenneth Myrick (New York: Signet Classic, 1987).


11. I find Engle's word choice particularly suggestive when he writes that “Shylock claims to possess the, patriarchs … and to interpret their example with authority” (p. 29). Here, Engle uses a meaning of “possess” which, knowingly or unknowingly, plays on Antonio's possession pun by twisting it just as Shylock does. Instead of the Devil possessing Shylock, we now have Shylock possessing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.


15. Shakespeare uses these notions of caricature and paraphrase similarly in *Othello*, when Iago relays what seem to be Cassio's sleepy outbursts to Othello.
iago: In sleep I heard him
say, “Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!”
And then, sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,
Cry “O sweet creature!” Then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o’er my thigh,
And sigh, and kiss, and then cry, “Cursed fate
That gave thee to the Moor!”

(III.iii.416-23)

Just as Solanio slandered Shylock with the message equating daughters and ducats, so Iago condemns,
and, even more extremely than Solanio, nearly dooms, Cassio by portraying him as a lusty, jealous
suitor. Paraphrasing, then, represents for both Solanio and Iago a means to ridicule and manipulate
their enemies.

16. This point gains even more credence if we accept James Bulman’s suggestion that Shylock’s speech
may have originally been delivered directly to the audience as a soliloquy; see Bulman, p. 8.
18. Ralph Berry, “Discomfort in *The Merchant of Venice,*** Shakespeare and the Awareness of the
19. Norman Rabkin, “Meaning and *The Merchant of Venice,*** Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning
20. See, for example, Barber, p. 185; Danson, p. 164; E. C. Pettet, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the
Comedy,” in *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, ed. by A. R. Braunmiuller and J. C. Bulman
24. Pettet, p. 29.
25. Importantly, the act begins with Jessica and Lorenzo exchanging a series of remarks about various
tragically doomed couples (Ryan, p. 22). The tragic subjects of the opening conversation ironically
undermine the comic harmony that Lorenzo hopes to foster.
27. Lawrence Danson claims with hesitation that, in “I am never merry when I hear sweet music,” Jessica
expresses herself “with (I take it) a newcomer’s insecurity” (Danson, p. 187). Rather than insecurity, it
seems that Jessica reveals the reluctance that she, as well as the audience, feel toward rejoicing in
comic closure so soon after her father has been humiliatingly banished. I do not agree with John
Gross’s opinion that Jessica’s “emotional bond with [Shylock] is broken” in this act, and that her
silence suggests her acquiescence to the others (Gross, p. 62). Ralph Berry is perhaps correct when he
writes that “Jessica becomes a focus of stillness and darkness” in the final act and that she “has a long
way to go in Christian society” (Berry, pp. 61, 59).
28. I would not go so far as to claim that the ambiguous ending does enough to balance the oppression of
Shylock. Rather, it avoids providing a simplistic comic resolution and thus calls into question the
appropriateness of his treatment.

**Criticism: Race: Avraham Oz (essay date 1995)**

SOURCE: “‘Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?’: Riddles of Identity,” in *The Yoke of Love:*
*Prophetic Riddles in The Merchant of Venice*, University of Delaware Press, 1995, pp. 93-133.
In the excerpt below, Oz remarks that the outsider status that Renaissance European cities imposed upon non-European inhabitants (and on Jews in particular) was an attempt to exert power over various members of society. Thus, in The Merchant of Venice, Shylock does his best to reverse this “master-slave” relationship through his pound of flesh arrangement with the European Antonio.

The question whereby Portia, clad as a young male judge, launches the process of justice at the court of Venice has intrigued many readers of the play. “She can’t be serious,” we tend to ask, shifting our eyes from the figure of Venice’s prince of merchants, who retains his posture of gloomy dignity even at court, to that of “old Shylock,” clad in his Jewish gaberdine. Thomas Moisan, who used the same question of Portia in the title of his illuminating discussion of The Merchant of Venice, concludes that seriousness is not at all what we must expect of this play; indeed it is the playfulness with which it treats the prevailing socioeconomic ideologies of the time, playfulness that produces something like Macherey’s famous parodic distance toward them (Macherey 1978, esp. 61ff), which illuminates the dramatic tension in which the play holds “the competing impulses of recuperation and subversion” (Moisan 1987, 203). The idea that the play holds recuperation and subversion in dramatic tension seems, indeed, to be the only valid refutation of the age-old rivalry between the so-called “romantic” and “ironic,” or “apologetic,” interpretations of The Merchant of Venice. It is a way to recognize “the necessity that determines the work” without imposing a constraining “meaning” on the unresolved riddle of the play (Macherey 1978, 77-78). And yet Portia’s question, raising one of the major issues of the play, the question of identity, should be taken more seriously into consideration. Coming from a character who but of late had openly yielded her identity to become the wife of he who won her in conforming his own identity to a heavily ideological construct, it is perhaps the very question that any judicious reading of the play must seriously attempt to leave open—not, however, without first scrutinizing its implications. It is, in other words, one of the most spontaneous and genuine expressions in The Merchant of Venice of that “process of riddle-work before its final completion,” a necessary stage in the “confrontation with otherness,” much upon which runs the wisdom of the play. Read against the background of the varied cluster of issues raised, addressed, suggested, and represented in the play by the plots of the merchant and the Jew, ranging from the politics of love and identity to the structure and meaning of cannibalism, slavery, private possession, money, and terrorism, Portia’s “Which is the Merchant Here? and Which the Jew?” is not less crucial to The Merchant of Venice than Barnardo’s no less riddling “Who’s there” that sets the course for the probing into the mysteries of “the world” in Hamlet. Some facets of that “process of riddle-work” informing the play will be addressed in the present chapter.

It has already been argued in the introduction that the character of Shylock could be transformed from one minority affiliation, that of the Jew, to another, be it an alien in general, a moneylender, or an early modern version of the terrorist. My project here is to examine what makes Shylock’s conspicuous ethno-religious identity lend itself to any transformation at all. A provocative artistic formulation of this project was offered, a few years ago, in an Israeli film, Rafi Bokai’s Avanti Popolo (1986). The film depicts the escape of two Egyptian soldiers through the Israeli lines in Sinai in an attempt to reach the Egyptian border. When captured by a group of Israeli soldiers, one of the Egyptians starts to recite Shylock’s “hath not a Jew eyes” speech. An Israeli soldier comments: “He has changed the parts!” Has he, indeed? It seems that Shylock is carefully provided in the play with more solid distinctions than any other character in terms of ethno-religious identity, class, family hierarchy, or even gender (which is more than can be said of Portia at the time she poses her question). Can we separate the validity of his Jewishness from all the rest and ask to what extent is it to be taken literally as a token of ethnic identity?

The question of identity looms constantly through the major tensions, conflicts, and crises informing The Merchant of Venice. On the surface level, the ancient narrative picked up by Shakespeare is populated by effective, well-defined dramatic subjects. Yet on a deeper level all the seemingly stable intersubject boundaries are deliberately effaced, all the safe codes of individuality transgressed by language devices and ceremonial acts, to finally transform what was initially conceived as a lifelike, well-defined character into a “crystallized monad” of entirely different order. The riddles propounded by the late Master of Belmont to the
living suitors who have come to appropriate the identity of his daughter concern (and devour, like an ancient
monster) their own identities. The moral riddle propounded by Shylock to Venice not only transforms
Venice's prince of merchants to a helpless victim, but robs also Bassanio of his newly acquired identity as the
new master of Belmont and causes Portia to adopt a male identity in order to secure her recent “yoke of love.”
What we get here is a play about human subjects tampering with identities, attempting incessantly to
contemplate, define, and fashion themselves and the others. This kind of mobility is barely surprising: “The
Renaissance delighted in stories of the transformation of individuals out of all recognition—the king confused
with the beggar, the great prince reduced to the condition of a wild man, the pauper changed into a rich lord”
(Greenblatt 1988, 76). The interchangeability of characters as a major proclivity in Renaissance drama has
been often marked by critics, but in many cases “recognition of change is resisted by the characters” (Loomba
1989, 100). Here, however, it is all premeditated and openly done. If Adam Smith is right to spot in human
nature a basic “propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another” (Smith 1950, 1:15), the
characters of The Merchant of Venice constantly probe his point in dealing not only in merchandise, property
and money, but also with their pliable identities. Subjects are yielding themselves to be restructured by
socioeconomic circumstances; identities exchanged and bartered; and riddling formulations inscribed on
caskets, informing bonds of credit, marriage and amity or consecrating rings disrupt any trace of the
homogeneity of the subject. It is a play designed to dismay all essentialists: the moment we seem to have
captured the properties qualifying a given dramatic subject, it leaps into another transformation, which
explains the degree of personal offense taken by critics who painfully watch that slick prodigal, “self-loving
parasite” (Eagleton 1986, 45), Bassanio, winning the top prize at the Belmont contest of wit.1

In most cases, however, one feels the identities resulting of those transformations were hardly worth the
effort. The Merchant of Venice has often been proclaimed a flawed vessel, unworthy of the serious themes it
contains. Those who find fault with its dramatic merits, holding the plot incredible and the characters flat, tend
to blame the deficient skills of an immature author. For those, as John Lyon puts it, “it seems appropriate to
talk of the defects of Shakespeare's creative virtues” (Lyon 1988, 64). Indeed, judging The Merchant of
Venice from the stance of Shakespeare's later psychological achievements, the world surrounding Shylock and
Antonio seems shallow, its complexities mechanical, and the discourse out of which the characters stem
hardly sufficient to pierce the code of even those shallow complexities. But this impression of a less
substantial pageant is not exclusively produced by the shortcomings of a lesser authorial skill (in spite of
many attempts to present it as such)2 for in The Merchant of Venice most characters turn out to be imaginary
constructs forged either by themselves or by others. Disguises, deceptions, mistaken identities, and other
forms of transformation are common in Shakespeare, especially in the comedies; but nowhere do they seem
more obsessively practiced than here. The play opens with Antonio, having much ado to know himself,
presenting his perplexion in turns to the entire guild of Venetian merchants, each of whom volunteers to tell
him who he really is, what are his concerns, and what role he should play on the world's stage. Having
adopted the role assigned to him by Bassanio, devoting to him not only his purse but his person, Antonio
proceeds to let Shylock have a claim on his body. In the meantime Portia is having fun constructing before
Nerissa each of her present suitors. Since Nerissa must have seen them all, what we have here is yet another
instance of the common practice by which the characters of our play seem to pass their time: the forging of
identities. Launcelot Gobbo comes on stage to entertain us by multiplying himself, in the vein of medieval
moralties, into the triad of Launcelot, conscience, and the Fiend. Then he dons a different identity to “try
confusions” (2.2.35) with his blind father, just to go on adopting a new identity as Bassanio's servant, a
transformation that involves the immediate provision of “a livery more guarded than his fellows” (147-48).
And then follows Jessica, eloping with Lorenzo to receive her new identity as a Christian amidst the turmoil
of the masque, in which everybody around adopts borrowed identities.

All these, however, are but an introduction to the feast of transformations and riddles of identity the play still
has in store for us. Antonio may believe naïvely that there is “no masque to-night” (2.6.64), once his friends
have taken off their masks to set sail for Belmont. But we know better. Not only Gratiano, who describes in
great detail the sober habit and the observance of civility he vows to put on in Belmont, but Bassanio himself,
who implored him to transform himself, prepares to do the same. The Master of Belmont, we learn, has designed a special quiz for his daughter's suitors, who are asked to define her by subscribing to a chosen model of moral identity. One of the offered models corresponds to the official ideology held by the Christian society of the play, and the penalty exerted on those who fail to find it or to comply by it is, not fortuitously, to remain forever solitary, namely to be devoid of marital affiliation, which in the world of romantic comedy is the basic form of solidarity. Whereas Bassanio wins sexual and economic gratification by endorsing a ready-made identity, his rivals, cut off from the fulfillment of love and procreation, are doomed to total insularity, which precludes identity, as the gloomy tokens of death and folly that will qualify them from now on will attest. Thus, Morocco and Arragon, those two potential alter-egos of Bassanio, are convicted to eternal otherness, a lot not incompatible with that awaiting both Shylock and Antonio by the end of the play even though Shylock, who lost his marital status by death and his patriarchal status by folly, will be graciously offered a refuge from his spiritual seclusion by drowning his otherness in the font of the official Christian ideology.

While all this is taking place, Shylock seems to be the only one to withstand the sea of transformations and, by opposing, remain himself. Stephen Greenblatt would even applaud him for accumulating identity in the course of the play (Greenblatt 1980, 208), namely, establishing it even further: accumulating is a crucial word to describe him who defends interest by using the fable of Jacob's hire (1.3.71-85). A closer look, however, will reveal the character of Shylock to be the most intricate construct among the play's dramatis personae. For whereas all the other characters are what we may call, for the sake of generality, regular dramatic constructs, the representation of Shylock is doubly removed, namely a dramatic construct built on a cultural construct. It is a practice Shakespeare was scarcely to repeat in his work until the creation of Caliban in The Tempest, another dramatic construct built on the same principle (Aaron, Morocco, or Othello may not fall exactly into the same category, since their “alien” quality seems to immerse in their color symbolism rather than in a particular socioeconomic classification). For the sake of understanding the dramatic function of such a cultural construct in a play which otherwise seems to follow faithfully the narrative patterns of romantic comedy, we shall have to summarize some historical evidence. Thus we may learn, for instance, how Shylock's struggle to secure a complex identity by force of possession may be explained by its bearing on the history of Jewish economy in Renaissance Italy and Europe in general.

Since Jews were expelled from England by King Edward I in 1290, exactly three centuries before Shakespeare embarked on his playwriting career, he had no immediate model for Shylock. For whatever way we may read the play, we must acknowledge that Shylock baldly insists on his Jewish identity. Whether or not did the memory of self-confessed Jews remain sufficiently vivid to nourish Shakespeare's imagination three centuries after their expulsion (see, e.g., Poliakov 1966, 78), such a model was scarce in Elizabethan England. Indeed, both Shakespeare and Richard Burbage (who must have portrayed Shylock first) may have had an opportunity to meet in London the famous Doctor Roderigo Lopez, who, as Sidney Lee puts it, “shared with actors an intimacy with those noblemen who were the warmest patrons of the drama” (Lee 1880). Burbage could even have met him earlier, at Kenilworth, where his father's troupe was patronized by the Earl of Leicester, who then employed Lopez as his personal physician. And yet the small community of Marranos, to whom Lopez belonged, had officially to conceal their religious affiliation. Contemporary, London-born Amis, the possible relative of the Añes family (Lopez's in-laws), whom Thomas Coryat met in Constantinople, could hardly hope to observe the ceremony of circumcision as openly in England as in Turkey. Lopez's own Jewishness, emphasized in his trial by both his prosecutor (“worse than Judas himself”) and judge (“vile Jew”) (Sinsheimer 1964, 66), served but to underline the main charge brought against him of conspiring to poison the Queen in the service of Spain. “That he was a Jew,” says Lytton Strachey, not without justice, “was merely an incidental iniquity, making a shade darker the central abomination of Spanish intrigue.” Unlike Shylock, Strachey adds, “Dr Lopez was europenized and christianized—a meagre, pathetic creature who came to his ruin by no means owing to his opposition to his gentle surroundings, but because he had allowed himself to be fatally entangled in them” (Strachey 1971, 61). When the rope was put on his neck, Bishop
Goodman tells us sympathetically, Lopez cried out that his love for the Queen was greater than his love for Jesus Christ to which the crowd responded: “He is a Jew! He is a Jew!” (Goodman 1839, 155). Shylock paraphrases Antonio in citing that same phrase: “I am a Jew” (3.1.52) in a way that combines self-dignity with defiant complaint.

Jews were not allowed back officially into England before the successful negotiations between Menassheh Ben Israel, the leader of Amsterdam Jewish community, and Cromwell in December 1655 (see Katz 1982). We have already noted how in 1607, a decade after Shylock was created, Sir Thomas Sherley was still trying to intercede with King James on behalf of a group of Levantine Jews, who wished to settle in England, be granted freedom of religion and allowed to build synagogues (for the payment of a considerable annual tribute), but to no avail. King James declined granting them similar rights also in Ireland, for a tribute of two ducats per head (see Davies 1967, 181-82; and see introduction, n.18…). There were converts, such as Nathaniel Menda, brought into Christianity in 1577 by John Foxe (Foxe 1578). However, the one case we know of in contemporary England in which a Jew, arrested following a religious dispute, openly asserted his Jewishness in court, that of mining technician Joachim Gauzn (a native of Bohemia who found his way to England as a foreign laborer), was exceptional, local, and scarcely known. The Jewish gabardine was, at least in England, a visual metaphor; the antipathy between the population of London's Old Jewry and hogsflesh (as Jonson’s Well-Bred testifies in Every Man in His Humour), was a thing of the past; and no usurer in usury-riddled London was a self-confessed Jew. To that extent was the reality of Jew hatred effaced from actual experience after three centuries of absence, that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, several Puritans dared convert themselves to Judaism, circumcision and all, while others demanded the recall of the Jews to England (Roth 1941, 149-54).

Even in contemporary Venice former Jewish moneylenders had to abandon their trade and revert to pawnbroking and the selling of second-hand merchandise (veteramentarii). The civil emancipation through money, which Greenblatt is borrowing from Marx's On the Jewish Question, in his essay on Marlowe, is but partly accurate: Marx's somewhat mystified figure of the “real Jew” is far from being methodologically scrupulous, drawing, as Julius Carlebach is showing, on descriptions of his intellectual predecessors from Kant and Hegel to Feuerbach and Bauer rather than on empirical experience. In any case any such concept belongs to a later age: only from the later part of the seventeenth century onward do we find among Jews the common practice of monetary investments in industry, agriculture, and commerce on a large scale (see Katz 1961, 44). There is only scant historical evidence in the early modern period of Jews actually initiating the monetary process rather than joining it at less advantageous, hence less competitive, junctures. The exclusivity of the institutional framework made it difficult, if not impossible, for the Jews to launch any mainstream enterprise. Credit is far from being a Jewish invention, but a basic element of capitalist economy, for which Jews, whose money was not often invested in immovable property (a point to the consequence of which I shall come back later) had normally more available assets (see Katz 1961, 47-48). Most European countries utilized Jewish material and human resources to enrich economic processes that were developing within the frameworks of their own established institutions, which were as a rule impenetrable by the Jews and thus uninfluenced by any allegedly emancipated Jewish economy. England, which has vigorously embarked on its capitalist era especially under the Tudors without a single Jewish catalyst of significance, is obviously a case in point.

The dramatic construct called Shylock (unlike the historical “Barabas,” a name of obscure origin and without analogues) had no representational bearing on contemporary reality in the sense that other characters did. Thus what distinguishes Shylock from the other characters of the play is a representational void, or an absence. It is, of course, a roaring absence, full of stage presence. We do not know whence, if at all, he came from, or how he came by his present occupation or wealth. The play does not tell us much about past events in the lives of its characters and yet we know a good deal about Bassanio's prodigal career; about his former association with the Marquis of Montferrat, which has brought him to meet Portia before; we know about Portia's life as a rich heiress desired by suitors from all over the place; about Antonio's mercantile enterprises;
and we even get a feeling of Launcelot Gobbo's childhood. The case of Shylock is entirely different. The only biographical detail we know about him is one which is revealed in a functional context: his having had a wife (or that, at least, is whom we assume she was) named Leah, who gave him a turquoise ring when he was a bachelor (3.1.111). But the absence of a personal biography suggests that Shylock partakes in the general, fairy-tale biography offered by the popular imagination for the cultural construct of the Jew. Such an exemplary biography is provided by Marlowe for his Barabas, involving all the clichéd activities and occupations traditionally attributed to, or associated with the Jew, from well poisoning and killing sick Christians, through practicing “physic” to the detriment of his Christian patients, to usury (*The Jew of Malta* 2.3.176-202). In terms of that nonbiography, the Jew is indeed very close to Marx's definition, cited by Greenblatt: “a universal antisocial element of the present time” (Greenblatt 1980, 204). Shylock's wish to see his daughter “dead at [his] foot, and the jewels in her ear ... and the ducats in her coffin” (3.1.80-82) belongs to the same order of transgressive acts as Barabas's murdering Abigail: both are simultaneously deeds and non-deeds, devoid of the necessity of representation. For in the case of that cultural construct turned dramatic character, we cannot easily separate the positive limits, the finitude of the subject, which in Foucault's hostile description “is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language” (Foucault 1970, 315), from the transgression of the subject, which suggests an absence of knowledge, or a knowledge of absence. Barabas has done a lot of mischief, as he himself admits and as we get a chance to see for ourselves; and yet, regardless of what he has actually done, there is a permanent stock of evil, inherent in the cultural construct of the Jew and ever ready to be assigned to him in people's minds with no need for factual evidence:

*Barnardine.*

... go with me
And help me to exclaim against the Jew.

*Jacomo.*

Why, what has he done?

*Barnardine.*

A thing that makes me tremble to unfold.

*Jacomo.*

What, has he crucified a child?

(*The Jew of Malta*, 3.6.45-49)

Marlowe even provides us with a lively illustration of the common process in which such a fictional identity, or “biography,” is forged, when drunken Ithamore is gratuitously constructing the clichéd image of the mean Jew before the courtesan and her bully, with Barabas in disguise providing the truth for us, as he always does in his asides:

*Ithamore.*

'Tis a strange thing of that Jew: he lives upon pickled grasshoppers
and sauc'd mushrumps.

*Barabas [aside].*

What a slave's this! The governor feeds not as I do.

*Ithamore.*

He never put on a clean shirt since he was circumcis’d.

*Barabas [aside].*

O rascal! I change myself twice a day.

*Ithamore.*

The hat he wears, Judas left under the elder when he hang’d himself.

*Barabas [aside].*

'Twas sent me for a present from the Great Cham.

(4.4.65-74)
Such an imaginary biography awaits, potentially, Shylock as well; but since, unlike in the case of Barabas, which Marlowe took the pains to draw carefully to the last detail, it is not complemented in Shakespeare's play with actual, reliable details, Shylock lives in the public domain of common fictionality. Technically, of course, Shylock is a dramatic subject as any other character in the play. But even in his asides, even when citing his dreams, he seems to be nothing more than an abstract measure, qualifying and defining the immanent constitution of the others. Shylock is the zero point of all the other identities in the play: signifying all, representing none. Unlike an individual case of transgression, such as an evil eye cast by a local witch, the Jew is not counted as a particular threat on a personal level. His effect is of a different, universal order. He is the archetypal Other whose desire structures the subject. For on the one hand he is the great menace, penetrating the dream of love and humanity offered by the play with his blunt discourse of vulgar rationality, his seemingly soluble riddles, to reduce a mystery of enchanting volume into an impoverished pageant of disenchantment; but paradoxically he also represents at the same time the secret, unconscious desire of all the rest for a momentary (or maybe eternal?) liberation from the fetters of “legitimate” discourse and official ideology. Shylock may not be the only one in Venice who dreams of money-bags (2.5.18), but he is certainly the only one to admit it freely in public. Money-bags investing a dream, Jacob's staff informing a fable or a swear (2.5.36), and even a vision of jewels in one's dead daughter's ear (3.1.81) acquire a different symbolic meaning than “some more ducats” (2.6.50) gilding a romantic elopement in plain reality. The plain monetary transaction that threatens to reduce the narrative of the play to the level of a fortuitous, if curious, court proceeding suddenly acquires an aura of poetic acuteness and necessity.

Thus *The Merchant of Venice*, a play whose poetry is curbed by a constant look to the rise and fall of shares in the Rialto, needs Shylock's fairy-tale cruelty to redeem its hidden depths of love and harmony. The dry words of Shylock's bond provide for Bassanio's encounter with the prophetic words which the Lord of Belmont had inscribed on the caskets, elicit Portia's poetic lecture on the quality of mercy, and make Lorenzo praise the harmony of the spheres. The legitimate discourse of Venice and Belmont, which has fallen prey to Antonio's
sadness, Bassanio's prodigality, and Portia's weariness can only be recovered when Shylock's subversive discourse intervenes. But Shylock exacts his price. By the end of the trial scene both Venice and Belmont are buying their freedom from Shylock's constraint by the sole device of subscribing to his own discourse.

For Shylock is planted in a discourse within which human desire and happiness are almost totally subordinated to economic needs and gratification; where human sympathy and solidarity, redefined in a newly formed cosmopolitan world, is divorced from the all-embracing image of Christ (a divorce for which the obvious cases of Shylock or Morocco serve but radical symbolic signifiers) and becomes a function of a fragile, compromising alliance between interdependent classes, genders and races; where the notion of “good men” equals financially “sufficient” ones. In such a world of growing individualism any representation of harmony is but a token of coming to terms with the ever-multiplying, necessarily heterogeneous modes of one's own identity. In a world in which credit has become a precondition of commerce (see Cohen 1985, 199); where risk and hazard inform the very core of survival; where personal identities, so much dependent on power structures generated by economic status, are constantly prone to get diffused or totally lost in the procedures of mercantile ventures containing the calculated, though barely insured, risks of storms and pirates, one gets obsessed with fashioning and redefining one's identity by means of symbolic language games with ideological backing. The word, it seems, will hold even when everything else, including one's own identity, will fail, that is, of course, if you are at the right end of the political vocabulary, as Shylock is painfully to learn. Which is why Antonio, who at the outset is sufficiently provided with material wealth, craves for having his sadness and identity put in appropriate words; and why Portia's suitors have to know their way with words rather than with bed-pillows, as is the case with the earlier, medieval versions of the story, in the Dolopathos or the Gesta Romanorum. A world reduced to moral riddles and legal phrasings will not be recuperated by psychological subtleties or accented realism but by symbolic acts, involving the breaking of a code of mystery, which at the same time negotiate their validity with the imaginary patterns of unconscious jouissance. And indeed, as Granville Barker rightly diagnosed, “There is no more reality in Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and the Beanstalk” (Barker 1963, 99). It is a telling phrase, since, whether or not we agree with its other implications, we cannot escape the notion that The Merchant of Venice is indeed a play governed by symbolic signifiers, by words and phrasings qualified by unconscious semiotic patterns, rather than by lifelike characters representing full-fledged human subjects motivated by rational considerations.

Without taking too seriously the extent of “reality” Granville-Barker's implied reader is supposed to expect, it is obvious that the provocative assertion with which he opens his discussion of The Merchant of Venice implicates the host of critics who for ages had attempted to endow the play with solid aura of reality, presenting the religious conflict as contributing to a “problem play” such as Measure for Measure is reputed to be, “pièce à thèse” attacking a topical political or moral problem in terms of a didactic theatrical event. As such, Granville-Barker's assertion is not entirely out of place: the prominent symbols investing the narrative of the play—the bond, the caskets, the pound of flesh, and the ring—are all assembled here from the popular repository of folklore and mythology, the powerhouse of human fantasy, the vocabulary of the imaginary order and the immediate constituents of the collective unconsciousness. As many nineteenth-century source hunters have assiduously shown, one may trace all the moral and ideological issues and narrative-units of The Merchant of Venice back to the realm of folktales and parables, exemplum and fairy tales. A major property of the fairy tale, before it has been loaded by modern authors (especially from the eighteenth century onward) with heavy ideological burden (Zipes 1988, 3), is its potential indifference to moral criteria and psychological responses. The function of those, to the extent they exist at all in the world of fairy tales, is hardly more than to serve or decorate the narrative. Human subjects (and their interrelationships) are to be grasped more in terms of textual strategies, such as hermeneutical analysis (see, e.g., Ricoeur 1973), rather than conceived of as fully rounded, holistic human beings equipped with a distinct and definite psychological apparatus. If Shakespeare's fairy-tale characters haunt our deepest feelings long after the play has ended, it is because Shakespeare “could not help giving life to a character … no more … than the sun can help shining” (Barker 1963, 99); and the major function of those fairy-tale symbols in the world of the play may not be incompatible.
with providing for “the Utopian vocation of the newly reified sense, the mission … to restore at least a symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it, a world of extension, gray and merely quantifiable” (Jameson 1981, 63). For without that symbolic level, negotiating and appropriating imaginary patterns of unconscious jouissance, both the language investing Shylock's bond and Portia's caskets, and the experience of love and harmony investing the play, cannot be reconciled with the world of the Real (or the Rialto, for that matter) but in terms of measure and calculation. And these are better expressed by signs and ratios rather than by full-fledged dramatic representations of human subjects.

A surprising feature (for some) of the early folk versions of the Pound of Flesh narrative is the absence of the Jew from the story. But this should come as no surprise for anyone who will note that The Merchant of Venice has nothing to do with a narrow concept of Jewishness but rather with the general theme of power relations and their critical exposure and demystification. It is not just the power the Venetian state exerts on its citizens (among them Shylock), but also the power that the latter's exert on the world and their fellow citizens. For power, which (as Foucault tells us) is always inseparably entangled with knowledge, has no constant, definite source but is revealed in an open, dialectical “cluster of relations” between the political and social factors (Foucault 1980, 199). Therefore, power is not solely the property of the political establishment, but is circulated by chain reaction from society to the individual. The very effect of power constitutes the individual, which is parallelly transformed into becoming a vehicle of power. The same political establishment that gave privilege to the worldview (hence, to the system of knowledge or ideology) of the society of Christian merchants surrounding Antonio has simultaneously generated Shylock's power to exert moral and physical terror on that society by his knowledge of its constitution. Shylock is far from owning an essential dramatic identity: a function of the others' fears and desires, he is rather a dramatic process or a “flow,” which can be construed either in terms of the signifying flow, whose discovery is assigned by Lacan to Freud and “the mystery of which lies in the fact that the subject does not even know where to pretend to be its organizer” (Lacan 1977, 259), or, alternatively, in Deleuze and Guattari's antioedipal terminology (Deleuze and Guattari 1977). Rather than becoming a unified subject, endowed with particular psychological or ethnic properties, Shylock embodies the nonsubjective, anarchic power contained in the subversive exploitation of judicial rationality by the other or the alien, and he is thus empowered by the very liberal-humanist discourse held by the society he turns against. The dramatic situation emanating from this cluster of relations is ambiguous and dialectical: on the one hand, Venetian society allows Shylock a seemingly protected legal standing, yet on the other hand this legal protection is precarious, owing to Shylock's alienation from that liberal-humanistic discourse, founded in the play on the magic unity of gentle and gentile, which is to The Merchant of Venice what kin and kind is to Hamlet.

Yet the signifying pattern gentle-gentile does not necessarily depend, as it would appear, solely on Shylock's ethno-religious identity. Rather, it may allude to every aspect of the Christian discourse of the play, which embraces such diverse themes as commerce, usury, music, love and amity, in all of which Shylock's otherness plays a crucial role. Instances of all these fields of dramatic tension will be touched upon in our reading of the play in chapter 3 of this book. It will suffice for our purpose in the present chapter to demonstrate how the “cluster” of power relations is activated in a socioeconomic context in which Shylock's Jewishness plays an important, yet not indispensable, part.

"'TIS MINE, AND I WILL HAVE IT": POSSESSION IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

An experienced merchant and capital owner, Antonio somewhat condescendingly rejects the suggestion, made by Salerio and Solanio, that his melancholy, which drives him to “have much ado to know [him]self” (The Merchant of Venice, 1.1.7), is caused by a worry for his scattered property. In business, as in mental economy, there are obvious advantages for diversification:

Believe me no, I thank my fortune for it—
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year.

(41-44)

There is, however, a point in their suggestion (if that is what they imply) that parts of his identity are
imprinted in his material possessions. The latter, which range from his merchandise to his very body, are the
symbolic battleground upon which much of the dramatic conflict of _The Merchant of Venice_ is acted out.

Rising capitalism, which dominated English socioeconomic discourse in the early modern period, had a
slower impact on legitimate ideology than on daily practice. This resulted in ideological controversies on the
intellectual scene between conservatives and conformists, both lagging behind, and attempting to come to
terms with social and economic realities. Under the influence of the Reformation, new theories of property
were preached and advanced throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1549, Sir John Cheke
“warns the poor that an equal distribution of wealth would not be in their interest, as it would take from them
the opportunity of becoming rich” (Schlatter 1951, 105). The changing perspectives on economy distinguish
the obsolete attitude of fifteenth-century moralities toward material wealth from that of a sixteenth-century
morality such as Skelton's _Magnyfycence_, in which material prosperity is not any more solely a function of
faith and good deeds but of economic discretion and husbandry, and where Prince Magnyfycence (an updated
Everyman, significantly endowed with an absolute hegemonic power, rather than a representation of the
communal average like his fifteenth-century prototype) is not expected to renounce wealth altogether but use
it conscientiously. Antonio, the prince of Venice's merchants, rehabilitates the contemptuous view of the
merchant by the early authorities, for whom “A merchant shall hardly keep himself from doing wrong, and a
huckster shall not be freed from sin.”

The moral ambiguity regarding commerce investing the economic
discourse since the revival of mercantile enterprise around the eleventh century still moderately haunts the
conscience of Venice's Christian merchants in Shakespeare's play, and the economic aspects of the “good
inspirations” informing the will of Portia's dead father curbing “the will of [his] living daughter” (1.2.24-25,
28) reflect, at least in theory, the sentiment informing the wills of many bankers and merchants in the late
Middle Ages, who left a good deal of their worldly goods to the poor or the clergy as a token of repentance
(see Pirenne 1969, 17ff). This ambiguity may account for the fact that Antonio will never be caught
throughout the play in the actual process of dealing with any of his commercial enterprises (as opposed to
Shylock, who considers Bassanio's offer, initially at least, as a regular, daily transaction and partakes with
Salerio and Solanio in being constantly attentive to news from the Rialto).

A similar change of attitude affects the contemporary controversy over usury. As against the more orthodox
views of ecclesiastical conservatives, reiterating Scriptural and patristic prohibitions, one may find
contemporary voices defending the lending at interest as an act of Christian charity. In his exegesis of the
Deuteronomic passage concerning usury, Benjamin Nelson argues, Calvin himself “charted the path to the
world of universal Otherhood, where all become ‘brothers’ in being equally ‘others’. … prov[ing] that it was
permissible to take usury from one's brother” (Nelson 1969, 73). Calvin's argumentation was adopted by many
exponents of usury in Tudor and Stuart England, “a society of small property owners … borrowing and
lending were common” (R.H. Tawney in Wilson 1925, 19). When a major seventeenth-century figure like Sir
Robert Filmer enters that ideological battle, he supports a similar position, namely denying a godly warrant
for the denouncement of usury and reducing it to a matter of personal conscience. Nelson believes that
Shakespeare may have joined the debate in _The Merchant of Venice_, in the special connotation given in this
context to “Christians' and ‘Jews’, ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’” (Nelson 1969, 86-87). In spite of Antonio's harsh
words against Shylock's practice of usury, which seem to reflect the ideological position of the church's
orthodoxy, the play follows the more pragmatic position in presenting many of its characters with the task of
taking decisions on material wealth by using personal conscience: such is the case of Portia's suitors, Antonio
and his Venetian merchant-companions, or the party concerned in deciding the fine on Shylock at the end of
the trial.
Another field of ideological controversy was the realm of private possession. With the rise of capitalism, we are told, “property is equated with private property—the right of a natural or artificial person to exclude others from some use or benefit of something” (Macpherson 1975, 105). But though on the whole English society in the Renaissance was organized accordingly as a private property system, the official ideology of the age was still committed to the orthodox idea that original communism was a state of purity from which the present system has diverted. Whether that diversion was sinful, tolerable, or justified under the circumstances was a matter of opinion. The world was promised to Adam to dominate, but was it allocated to any private individual? And how exactly was that domination qualified or compared to the domination of God? The orthodox monastic ideal, derived from the monks' traditional reading of the Bible and Patristic authorities, regarded private property as a major impediment to salvation, and thus considered its abolition part of the desirable return to the primary condition (see Reeve 1986, 53-55). More's *Utopia* could be taken to express implicitly a similar sentiment. Filmer, however, taking part in this controversy as well, defended private property in denying that there had ever been a stage in which it was absent.

Those two conflicting conceptions of private property are lying at the core of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is, in more than one way, a play about ownership. Antonio, the merchant of Venice, is faced in the play with at least three challenges to his identity as a possessor. In the first outer circle of ownership, he is challenged by natural and human powers as an owner of material possessions. In this struggle he is prone to lose his goods, ships, and money—all of which serve him as tokens or carriers of some other, imagined, yet undefined wealth. In the second circle of ownership he is challenged by human powers as an “owner” of a friend who is first to proclaim himself contracted to Antonio, owing him “the most in money and in love” (1.1.131). On the third, more personal level of ownership, Antonio is challenged by individual and corporate human powers as the owner of his own body. On all three levels his position of ownership is temporarily shaken, to be only partially recuperated. His material goods are partly returned to him at the very end, but the fact that he will never “know by what strange incident” three out of his five argosies have fortuitously “come to harbour” (5.1.277, 78) will forever undermine his sense of absolute domination of his property. His “ownership” of Bassanio as a friend is both reasserted and qualified at the end by the latter's marriage bond. And, finally, Antonio's domination of his body is returned to him, but its partial recuperation does not signify an absolute reassertion of Antonio's ownership rights as it does the fallibility of human reason in securing possession through language. In spite of Shylock's defeat in court, his terms, indicating the limits of Antonio's possession of his own body, are ultimately reasserted rather than challenged in principle. A similar crisis of ownership affects other characters in the play, from Portia, through Bassanio and Shylock down to Portia's bunch of suitors.

The solution of the Master of Belmont's ideological riddle contest, behind which the subject of possession is constantly and notably lurking, suggests (at least in theory) a restrained approach to private possession: one is rewarded for not aspiring (let alone proclaiming an aspiration) for lucrative wealth. This is the common compromise of the official Christian ideology in early capitalist Europe between orthodox humility before a guiding providence and pragmatic recognition of the power of wealth. The binary opposition to that dogmatic prescription is provided by Shylock, who would identify himself with Jacob in his capacity as “third possessor” and insist on his deserts. Confident in his autonomous ability to assess and formulate the latters, he phrases them eloquently in what seems at the time to be a carefully drawn bond. On the surface level, according to which the narrative appears to follow the pattern of romantic comedy, Shylock's project is doomed to failure. This position corresponds to the message of the silver casket, echoing Antonio's reproaching Shylock for making no distinction between his gold and silver and Jacob's ewes and rams. It is Antonio, who but now sought a judicious definition of his own identity, who introduces to the play Shylock's identification with the devil. On the face of it, there is no leap of imagination here, since the association of the Jew with the devil is a commonplace on the plane of symbolic order. Barabas, for instance, is described by Ithamore as the devil's instrument to perform sheer evil:

> the devil invented a challenge, my master writ it,
and I carried it.

(The Jew of Malta, 3.3.20-21)

But whereas Barabas serves the devil because he is “set upon extreme revenge” (3.3.47) on the Christians he hates, the association of Shylock with the devil is made in different terms. Though Shylock is presented by Antonio as “the devil [who] can cite Scripture for his purpose” (1.3.93), his identification with the devil is made in an economic, rather than religious, context. Like the devil who should be denied any right of possession in the human world, Shylock should be denied any such right for living of the breeding of a barren metal. Whereas the metaphor of procreation may be applied to substantial possessions of representational value, such as Portia's lands or Antonio's goods, Shylock's money is denied the right of breeding. In his delegitimation of Shylock as possessor, Antonio is joined by a surprising ally. It is Jessica who reiterates his identification of her father with the devil in describing her father's house as “hell,” a clear indication of an illegitimate property. In fourteenth-century Venice, Jews were not allowed to possess even houses or land which were given them as a gift. They were only allowed to live temporarily in rented apartments (Shipper 1935, 425). The move of Launcelot Gobbo from the household of the Jew to that of the Christian, accompanied by the same identification of the Jew with the devil, belongs to the same pattern.

More complex in this context, however, are the implications of Jessica's obscure reference to Tubal and Chus as Shylock's “countrymen” (3.2.284). As opposed to Marx's aforementioned reference to the “chimerical nationality” of Judaism as “the nationality of the merchant, of man of money in general,” which may be read as a sociological or theological one (Marx 1975, 239), the reference to a Jew as a “countryman” is purely symbolic, implying absence rather than identity. Since Jews reached Europe through expulsion and a process of gradual dispersion rather than conquest, colonization, or mass migration, they could possess no economic positions which depended on hegemonic power or expropriation of lands:

I must confess we come not to be kings:
That's not our fault: alas, our number's few,
And crowns come either by succession,
Or urg'd by force.

(The Jew of Malta, 1.1.127-30)

Even where the Jews could be in possession of lands, such as in Barabas's island, whose circumstances Marlowe appears to have studied carefully:

Barabas.
and I have bought a house
As great and fair as is the Governor's;
And there in spite of Malta will I dwell,
Having Ferneze's hand.

(2.3.13-16)

—they often preferred to deal in landed property not so much as “a form of family investment, as it was for the Christians in Malta as elsewhere, so much as a method of making money,” since that tricky “mortgage” system served “to avoid the odium which the taint of usury brought with it” (Wettinger 1985, 40). With the continuing practice of expulsion of Jews, which became widespread especially in Western Europe throughout the fifteenth century, such a prospect becomes a considerable factor in the Jewish own investment policy (see Katz 1961, 47). The lack of lasting property, in Feudal and early modern Europe, meant a temporary status of citizenship and a perpetual state of alienation. Othello the Moor, another alien in Venice, is theoretically free to join his fellow countrymen in the realm of the Prince of Morocco. In The Merchant of Venice, all the characters are identified by local habitation: Portia's suitors are identified by their countries; there is a clear
division, at the outset, between the Venetians and the residents of Belmont; Launcelot Gobbo defines himself as an Italian (2.2.150), and his father, who owns a horse and brings a dish of doves as a present, must own a plot of land in the country. Even “a poor Turk of tenpence” such as Ithamore would season his fantasy of marrying the courtesan with the vision of settling in “a country:”

Content: but we will leave this paltry land,  
And sail from hence to Greece, to lovely Greece.  
I’ll be thy Jason, thou my golden fleece.

(\textit{The Jew of Malta}, 4.2.92-94)

Whereas all the others may be referred to by their local habitation or country of origin, the Jew may cite a list of places where he visited for a purpose (Shylock's Frankfort, Barabas's Italy, France, etc.) or at best be related to his latest country of temporary residence, where, like here, he was residing in “hell.” Not even the ancient, spiritual locus of Jewish desire will do: “creep[ing] to Jerusalem” (\textit{The Jew of Malta}, 4.1.62) is brought up by Barabas as a mode of penance only when he shams a wish to become a Christian. Calling their fellow Jews “countrymen,” as do Jessica (who, whether she reports faithfully or lies about Shylock's particular talk with Tubal or Chus, probably quotes her father's regular terminology) and Barabas, betrays aliens' conspiracy rather than citizens' local pride or patriotism:

Barabas.  
... let 'em combat, conquer, and kill all,  
So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth.

(150-51)

The identification of Shylock with the devil is associated, both in principle and in the play's \textit{praxis}, with the latter's unlawful possession of human souls and bodies. Again, it appertains to a breach of a socioeconomic restriction no less than to religion. The exchange of identities, as we have seen, is a common practice among the characters of the play. Portia, for instance, whose identity is first defined in the play as “a lady richly left” (1.1.161), yields herself to Bassanio in terms of identity and possession simultaneously:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours  
Is now converted.

(\textit{The Merchant of Venice}, 3.2.166-67)

By way of a specially designed system of restrictions, which proved to have defined the ethno-religious identity of Shylock and his “fellow countrymen” in terms of a separate socioeconomic class, Shylock is barred from possessing anything but faceless, “barren metal,” which, on the one hand, is devoid of any representational identity but for the “breeding use” of which, on the other hand, he is sharply reproached. Denied his rights to substantial possession, Shylock's subversion of power in striving for autonomous identity is diverted against the body of Antonio. The exertion of bodily punishment is one of the age-old emblems of absolute power: the right to dismember, fracture, or confine the human body to a forced asylum, as Essex, for instance, took the liberty to do to Doctor Lopez (a liberty that significantly will be qualified by a law of “habeas corpus”) is a prerogative of kings and masters. Here it is appropriated for the private use of an individual who is himself coerced by the official system: the physical expropriation of Antonio's body will defeat the rival “legitimate discourse,” which threatens Shylock's autonomy of otherness. The body, that “most quotidian part of our landscape and the most potent signifier known to us” (Gent & Llewellyn 1990, 9), is hardly confined in the context of the play to its physiological ontology. It indicates the boundaries of individual identity as recognized by the world (which Antonio emphatically interrogates at the opening scene of the play): “The subject originally locates and recognises desire through the intermediary, not only of his
own image, but of the body of his fellow being” (Lacan 1988a, 147). Shylock, for whom a body is a rich metaphorical “habitation” (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.3.29), will regard his habitation as a body, with casements for ears (2.5.34). He would catch his rival “upon the hip” (1.3.41), feed upon him (2.5.14-15) and bait fish with his flesh (3.1.47). James Shapiro's suggestion that Shylock's design against Antonio's body has to do with castration places Shylock's otherness within a specific context through its implication of circumcision (Shapiro 1992). It would seem, however, that Shylock aspires to a more ambitious and universal project. By mutilating Antonio, Shylock will inscribe his own otherness on the body that stands nearest the heart of Venice's wholesome, dominant discourse. The wholeness of the human body is a vital condition for man's position in the world:

Man is all symmetrie,  
Full of proportions, one limbe to another,  
And all to all ther world besides.

(George Herbert, “Man,” 13-15)

The complexity of human body is revealed in its symmetry and proportions, and “the first step in unraveling this complexity is to postulate that the system of man's body is both exhaustive and all-inclusive, that it has everything it needs and nothing superfluous.” This complexity of the body serves also “as a figure for the world's complexity whether cosmic, political, or architectural” (Barkan 1975, 3-4, 6). By inscribing his will on Antonio's body in threatening to strike off a material pound of flesh and proclaiming his right to redesign its natural shape, not only does Shylock disrupt the inherent symmetry of Antonio's body, but he also offends the ideological values that symmetry stand for within the official Christian discourse (of which the harmony of the spheres, eulogized by Lorenzo in act 5 is a typical macrocosmic metaphor). For if Shylock's scheme prevails, it may subversively subordinate “objective” history to his own, rival discourse of divisiveness, quantifiable individuality, and reified personal deserts. Shylock's project of dismembering Antonio is thus one of self-assertion, an act of self-recognition on his own part:

The body as fragmented desire seeking itself out, and the body as ideal self, are projected on the side of the subject as fragmented body, while it sees the other as perfect body. For the subject, a fragmented body is an image essentially dismemberably from its body.

(Lacan 1988a, 148)

Shylock's design to cut off Antonio's body constitutes the peak of his imagery of feeding and devouring throughout the play, to serve as the diametrical opposition of the “barren metal” and the utmost stage of acquiring a substantial identity. The myth of eating a rival's body is widespread and influential in folk literature, and Shakespeare himself did not shy from using it literally in *Titus Andronicus*. Speculations regarding its relevance for *The Merchant of Venice* have ranged from ritual killing to therapeutic drinking of the heart's blood. In Declamation 95 of *The Orator* (1596), which has been suggested as a possible source for Shakespeare's play, the Jew says: “I might also say that I haue need of this flesh to cure a friend of mine of a certaine maladie, which is otherwise incurable.” The image of Shylock standing over Antonio with his pointed knife could also bring to mind Abraham, prevented at the last moment by the Angel of mercy from sacrificing Isaac. And yet the essential meaning of Shylock's act of transgression is verbal rather than physical. As he himself initially suggests (whether genuinely or cunningly one does not know), there is no material gain for him in exacting the forfeiture:

A pound of man's flesh taken from a man,  
Is not so estimable, profitable neither  
As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.

(1.3.161-63)
Hence the execution of Shylock's threat must be public and ceremonial, since it is not necessarily the actual pound of flesh he is after, but what it stands for, through the ritual proclamation of his possessing it. Cutting a person's body can be conceived as a statement, a speech act, as the case of the biblical Levite and his raped and murdered “concubine” tells us:

And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel. And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds.

(Judges 19:29-30)

Just as the severed body of the biblical girl speaks, so is Shylock's bodily threat not surprisingly secured by language: its meaning is discursive rather than physical. Shylock's project, in other words, is not bodily punishing the Antonio who spat on him on Wednesday last (1.3.121) but to transform his identity into a human quantity, subject to possession by others. Nor is it surprising that only within the discourse generated by Shylock's phrasing of his bond, offered in “merry sport” (1.3.141), will Portia be able to defeat him at court, in adopting similar terms of jouissance. It is a battle of words that uncovers the two rival concepts of possession which, as we have seen, lie at the core of the play's ideological clash. On the one hand there is Shylock, who attempts to appropriate the constituted validity assigned to feudal property into the realm of mobile property where he reigns, and then in turn tries to convert his money, which in the domain of property is basically a signifier, into substantial property in the shape of human flesh (materializing the image of the body as “habitation”). Using the two signifying modes at his disposal, the money in his coffers and the language of his bond, Shylock would inscribe his power on Antonio's body, playing creator and destroyer in dominating the course of his victim's life and death. Shylock considers his proclaimed act of ceremonial mutilation as serving him to enact his symbolic richness in terms of the material world. Unlike Portia who claims the rights for her possessions by birth, Shylock uses his economic power and knowledge of Venetian law to carve for himself (literally) the identity of one “richly left” whose claim on material property is clearly evident. He is bound to find out, however, that it is much easier to handle an abstract quantitative possession such as money than any kind of substantial possession, let alone human flesh.

The standing of human body within the realm of property theory is far from decisive. Some would regard the body as a substance sui generis among the world's entities, and therefore deny any subordination of it to property laws. “What?” says St. Paul, “know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (I Cor. 6:19-20). Hobbes, who “reduces the human essence to freedom from others' wills and proprietorship of one's own capacities” (Macpherson 1962, 264), observes accordingly that it is the law of nature (lex naturalis) that implies that “every man has a right to every thing, even to another's body,” a liberty that endangers the security of everyone, and therefore it is a general rule of reason to seek peace (Hobbes 1929, 99). According to Common Law (which for Shakespeare's audience may be the normative representation of the law), the human body is “incapable in law of being [subject] of property” (Pollock and Wright 1888, 232). Others, however, “hold that the body should be thought of as property, and emphasize that each person owns or has title to himself or herself” (Munzer 1990, 37). For the Levellers, and especially Richard Overtone, the fundamental postulate of natural property right “was that every man is naturally the proprietor of his own person” (Macpherson 1962, 139-42), a position which will be readily endorsed by modern liberal theory (see, e.g., Nozick 1974). Shylock, no doubt, claims Antonio's pound of flesh by strength of property law:

The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!

(4.1.99-101)

How would the original audience of the play conceive of the moral basis of Shylock's claim? The legal analogy Shylock uses in that same speech to support his claim is that of slavery: a more familiar demand which, he might hope, not improbably may help to render his original claim less striking. In this he follows a long conceptual tradition, which can be traced back to Aristotle's contention that “the slave is not only the slave of his master but wholly belongs to him” (Politics 1254a 12; Aristotle 1905). Christianity amplifies this, and St. Thomas Aquinas reminds one that for maiming one's servant “the penalty was forfeiture of the servant, who was ordered to be given his liberty” (Summa Theologica, 21, q. 105 art. 4). Rejecting James's claim on the English throne, Robert Parsons, in 1594, would appeal to property owners in reminding them that “the upholders of divine right … also maintain that the king reduces all subjects to slaves, for as Aristotle defined him, a slave is a man whose property belongs to his master” (Schlatter 1951, 113). Parsons does not address the issue of the body as property, but the persistence of the phenomenon of mutilating slaves (see, e.g., Patterson 1982, 59) betrays such a notion. For Shakespeare's audience, the slave is a less abstract cultural construct than is the Jew. Both the presence and impact of slavery, consisting in the radical legal claim of master on slave in terms of property, persisted uninterruptedly within the ideological framework of the Middle Ages, side by side with its common substitution in feudalism by the less radical relation of serfdom.24 “As a commodity, the slave is property” (Finley 1983, 73), and for some writers his/her powerlessness is comparable with death, since “it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death” (Patterson 1982, 5; see also Phillips 1985, 5-6). Shylock's tricky formulation of his claim over Antonio's pound of flesh never mentions death explicitly, even though everyone knows with Portia that following the implementation of Shylock's bond Antonio is in danger to “bleed to death” (4.1.254). Shylock's reified conception of his “owned” part in Antonio's body precludes any notion of death, for there is no life in quantifiable property. In an ironic Foucauldian overturn of power relations, he who is not allowed to make “a barren metal” breed turns a living body into a lifeless property.

But not only the actual presence of slavery has affected medieval Europe and contributed to the cultural construct of the slave:

The persistent and growing influence of Roman law, which contained a sophisticated set of regulations for slavery, helped shape the legal systems of the European West and provided a ready-made set of rules that could be put into force easily when slavery again became economically significant.

(Phillips 1985, 3-4)

English law, we are told, “has never furnished a case in which a person claimed a pound of flesh as penalty, but it has been called upon to consider the case of a usurer who reduced his debtor by contract to virtual slavery, and has refused to enforce it” (Keeton 1967, 132-33). However, some earlier investigators of the legal implications of Shylock's claim did attempt to relate the latter to the persistent influence of the Roman law on contemporary legal practice. In the profused nineteenth-century practice of source hunting for the Pound of Flesh motif, no clear connection has ever been established between the early oriental, religious versions of the story and its medieval Western, secular ones. In the former versions, such as the one in the Indian Mahabharata, the human hero is tested by the gods in making him shelter a dove (Agni in disguise) from a pursuing Indra, disguised as a hawk: when the latter claims his right of feeding according to the law of nature, the hero finally yields to him a piece of his own flesh which equals the weight of the dove.25 In the Western medieval versions, the secular bond substitutes the religious vow, the creditor or usurer substitutes the bird of prey (which may explain why the farfetched etymological association of the name Shylock and Shallach, the archaic Hebrew for cormorant, has fascinated some scholars), the legal penalty substitutes the religious
sacrifice, and the secular law replaces moral tenets. As a consequence, several attempts have been made to trace the origins of the Pound of Flesh story back to the Roman laws of the Twelve Tables. The third Table accords the creditor with almost unrestricted rights over the debtor's freedom and body: after three days in which the debtor was exposed in the marketplace and the debt was still due, the several creditors were allowed by the law to divide his/her body between them, “and he who takes more or less than he legally deserves will not be held guilty.”

Scholars who believed that the last clause is a direct reference to the Pound of Flesh story conjectured that the story itself preceded the Law of the Twelve Tables, or that the clause is a later interpolation (the fact that we do not have the original Table gives ground to such speculations).

Jacob Grimm (the elder of the two famous brothers) associated the story with the fifth-century Sallic Wergild law, which he argues is a relic of an ancient Teutonic law that decreed the death or mutilation penalty against a debtor failing to pay his debt (see Grimm 1828, 611-21). Grimm compares this law with a Norwegian law allowing the creditor of a debtor who would not be bailed by his friends “to cut from the debtor's body as he pleases, from above or below.”

English law followed the German in allowing the mutilation of the debtor's or offender's body. Under the influence of the ancient slavery law, the amputation of a hand or a leg became a fashion during the rule of Henry II (Pollock and Maitland 1898, 461); and in Shakespeare's time (3 November 1579), John Stubbs and William Page, the author and distributor, respectively, of The Discovery of the Gaping Gulf, a “lewd and seditious” pamphlet against the queen, were punished by striking off their right hands with three blows. But there was another, more direct yet unnoticed bearing of the Pound of Flesh narrative on the master-slave property relation. There is no evidence that Shakespeare might have read the earliest European version of the folk motif, the Creditor of the Dolopathos; but it is interesting to note that in it, the vengeful creditor is a former slave of the young hero, who bears a grudge toward his former master who, at a burst of choler, once struck off his leg. The Creditor of the Dolopathos is not a Jew. If there is any connection in the common imagination between the Jew and slavery, it has to do with the major involvement of Jews in the slave trade since the early Middle Ages (see, e.g., Bloch 1975, 3). With the decline of feudalism and the rise of colonialism as an outcome of mercantile and early industrial capitalism, the master-slave relation was vigorously revived as a socioeconomic paradigm, especially in regard to Christians—non-Christian, European—non-European binary relations. We have Hakluyt's description of the first English slaving voyage under Hawkins's command, which left the coast of England in October 1562, and after having received “friendly entertainment” at Teneriffe:

passed to Sierra Leona … where he stayed some good time, and got into his possession, partly by the sword, and partly by other means, to the number of 300 Negros at the least, besides other merchandises which that countrey yeeldeth.

(Craton, Walvin, and Wright 1976, 12)

The ethno-religious otherness of the enslaved party from the point of view of the official ideology helped suppress the moral problem potentially involved in the revived practice, establishing it as a legitimate institution rather than a moral category (See Finley 1983, 126). We may only speculate about the exact reaction of the original audience of Marlowe's play to Barabas's malicious hope “to see the Governor a slave, / And, rowing in a galley, whipp'd to death” (5.1.66-67), a wish granted him in the following scene, but if he wanted to let his illustrious heroic villain retain his dramatic stature and command of the audience's subversive sympathies until the very moment of his overthrow, Marlowe had to make Barabas relinquish white, Catholic Ferneze's slavery for strategic reasons. Similarly, Shylock would not bring up the issue of slavery in relation to Antonio but as an analogical case in terms of property relations. It is this property relation that is represented in Prospero's reference to Caliban: “this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (The Tempest 5.1.275-76) in which “mine” represents an identical claim to Shylock's reference to Antonio's pound of flesh, or Catholic Vice-Admiral del Bosco's account of his
Of whom we would make sale.

(The Jew of Malta, 2.2.9, 17-18)

While Launcelot Gobbo is hired by Shylock for a wage, and by agreement may change his master at his own request, Barabas purchases Ithamore (“a poor Turk of tenpence … born in Thrace; brought up in Arabia” [4.2.42, 2.3.129-30]), at the marketplace and promptly marks him, as he would do with any piece of property. Such precedents enable Shylock to regard his bodily claim on Antonio in terms of a legitimate legal relation. The analogy between body rights and property rights is not contested by the Venetian court. In fact, Keeton argues,

Portia was adopting precisely the attitude of the Court of Chancery of the period. Substitute “estate” for “pound of flesh,” and you have a typical Elizabethan suit in Chancery. The creditor is about to take possession of the debtor's estate. Very well, says the Court, you may take possession, but you must use the profits you acquire by taking possession in satisfaction of the debt, and you must account strictly for everything you receive. … The estate must not suffer in the slightest degree from the entry into possession of the creditor. In both cases the creditor prefers the safer course, and refrains from entering into possession.

(Keeton 1967, 145)

By introducing the second defense against the implementation of Shylock's bond (as she did earlier in “The quality of mercy” speech), Portia does contest, indeed, the total reification of Antonio's body implied by Shylock's argument. But this is but an added victory (which is therefore absent from the narrative, more basic, sources of the Pound of Flesh story). For all practical reasons, she won her legal battle in the first round, and that she did on Shylock's terms. Even her potentially spiritual arguments are subject to the logic of property law: the human body is not that well dissociated from spirit; and thus had even Shylock remembered to specify blood in his bond, Portia could get him on account of Antonio's spirit which is not to be separated by him from Antonio's body, whether by way of death or dementia. Like the devil's, Shylock's claim on anybody's soul (which lies beyond the controversial domain in which the body may be reified and conceived as subject to property law) is a priori unfounded, which is why Shylock himself would never have brought it up. Even here, however, the victory of the official Christian ideology over Shylock's transgression would have been granted on Shylock's terms.

Against Shylock's reifying argument the play had posited the public quiz proclaimed by the Master of Belmont for a lucrative prize: the contesters are required to fashion their own identity, assisted by the guidelines inscribed on the caskets, in order to gain possession of the late master's daughter, the Belmont heir. The ideological position represented by the clever charade devised by the Master of Belmont, as we have seen, is designed to reassert the ideological patterns shaping the official discourse of Christian Europe in the Renaissance. Those patterns consists in two basic tenets: one is to adopt a meek and humble position, relinquishing all claim to material possession, in order to gain such fortune as an answer to this obedient gesture. It is a typical post-medieval, early capitalist translation of the Christian-feudal idea of humbleness into the realm of mercantile venture. Antonio's conception of his commercial ventures is founded on the same ideological grounds. So do all the merchants of Venice accept some providential authority when they venture and hazard with their transitory “fortunes,” that mobile property which can change hands in no time in the same way the goddess Fortune is tampering with human lots. It is the official knowledge, immersed in the “conscientious” solution of the identity riddles inscribed on Portia's caskets; conscientious, since it stands the test of the official, legitimate ideology: one is expected to yield one's material possessions in order to regain “conscientious” property.
The other basic tenet of early capitalist Christianity suggests a similar move regarding one's identity. It is clearly symbolized by the “egall yoke of love” (3.4.13), shared by those carrying that legitimate discourse in the play: Bassanio, Portia, and Antonio. Only they are capable of generating the word which, by countering Shylock's claim over Antonio's body, will physically bar Shylock from any threatening power position. Paradoxically, they will do so by coercing Shylock to baptize, namely accept the yoke of the legitimate discourse in an act in which love is enforced rather than willingly subscribed to. Thus this spiritual union, as indeed the play will later remind us, contains dialectically bodily and spiritual bondage that also counters the illusion of freedom and autonomy:

Ant.
I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.
Por.
Then you shall be his surety.

(The Merchant of Venice, 5.1.249-54)

The illusory autonomy of the legitimate discourse contains the submission of its major proponents in the play to the restrictive formations of that very discourse. Thus it is accustomed to blame Shylock for overobserving the written word rather than the spirit of the law. But Terry Eagleton, not less convincingly, argues that it is Shylock who has respect for the spirit of the law and Portia who does not. Shylock's bond does not actually state in writing that he is allowed to take some of Antonio's blood along with a pound of flesh, but this is a reasonable inference from the text, as any real court would recognize. ... Portia’s reading of the bond, by contrast, is “true to the text” but therefore lamentably false to its meaning.

(Eagleton 1986, 36-37)

This is certainly true; as it may be true that “what is at stake in the courtroom … is less Shylock's personal desire to carve up Antonio than the law of Venice itself” (Eagleton 1986, 38). Yet Eagleton's excited defense of Shylock and just account of his dramatic position as some Brechtian alienating character does not make Shylock an Azdakian alienated (if biased) umpire. Although he is, as I have argued above, a function of the others' fears and desires, a dramatic process or a “flow,” still he functions as a party in a dialectical move. As such he is not just a victim (as Eagleton would have him) but also a terrorist. What we have here, then (at least on one significant level), is a Foucauldian process of power, in which rivaling speech-acts are clashing rather than psychological human beings. Shylock's very knowledge of the official “truth” serves him as a subversive instrument for gaining power and control which contradict his otherness, which is why the legitimacy of his economic activity is rejected by the official society. When Shylock, armed with his knowledge of the Venetian legal and political discourse, exploits the power granted him by the Venetian book of laws to materialize his barbaric fantasies to the point of cannibalistic fit, he simultaneously asserts and challenges the power of the political system. In that mimetic procedure whereby power and knowledge combine to subvert hegemonic power, rather than in a subjective alignment of individual properties, lies the dramatic effectiveness of Shylock in the play.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Lloyd 1875, 100; Moody 1964, 23-24; Nuttall 1983, 122.
2. Of which Shakespeare was accused, ranging from alleged inability to master properly characters and situations (see Fergusson 1971, Goddard 1951, among others), to occasional slips such as the discrepancy, marked by Dr. Johnson, between the terms of the caskets ordeal (never to “woo a maid”) and the schedule’s addressing Arragon: “Take what wife you will to bed” (2.9.70), or the incredible testimony (timewise) by Jessica concerning her overhearing her father's talk with Tubal and Chus (see, however, Bradshaw 1986, who considers the latter slip as enriching the argument of the play).

3. See Coryat 1625, 1823-25. For an extensive analysis of the evidence concerning the absence of Jews from England between 1290 and their return in 1655, see Cardozo 1925, 85-140.

4. Gaunz was arrested in Bristol in 1598, about two years after the writing of The Merchant of Venice. See Roth 1941, 142.


6. Greenblatt 1980, 204. And see Marx 1975, 239.

7. See Carlebach 1978, 152-53. For Kant's conjectures see chapter 1, n. 13.

8. “Each outsider, including the Jews as individuals, had to fit into the pre-existing economic structure and social fabric, upon neither of which he could expect to make any significant impact” (Arcadius Kahan, “The Early Modern Period,” in Gross 1975, 58). See also Grebanier 1962, 82-83.

9. None of the the suggested etymologies and analogues is convincing. Biblical Shèlah or Shiloh, awkwardly glossed as “dissolving … mocked or deceiving” by a contemporary source, sound farfetched, whereas Shallach, an archaic Hebrew word for cormorant, was hardly used at all, let alone as a personal name.

10. See, however, the discussion about the relation between past and present in the play in Lyon 1988, “Beginning in the Middle,” 29-52.

11. For this distinction, see Thomas 1973, 668.


13. See Manly 1897, 1:239-76.

14. See Johannis de Alta Silva 1913; Gesta Romanorum 1879.

15. These are discussed at large in the third chapter of Oz 1990. For the Pound of Flesh motif in folk literature, see also, e.g., Toulmin-Smith 1875-76; Conway 1880 and 1881; Manzi 1896; Vámbéri 1901; Friedlander 1921; Wenger 1929; Landa 1942; Sinzheimer 1964.

16. Such a later insertion of the Jew is not an uncommon practice. See, e.g., the discussion of pseudo-Jewish characters in folk literature in Bin-Gurion 1950, 205-12. In addition to the Pound of Flesh motif, Bin-Gurion counts among the legends in which the figure of the Jew was a later interpolation also “The Jew among the Thorns” (Grimm K-HM no. 110, type 592 in Aarne-Thompson [FFC 184]), where in the original version a Christian priest appears instead of the Jew; “The Revenge for a Murdered Jew” in its various versions (Grimm no. 115, Bechstein, DM 1845, 60, “Das Rebhuhn”; Aarne-Thompson 960), which reminds the Classical story of “The Murdered Ibicus”; Judas Iscariot; “The Wandering Jew”; and the story of the three rings, which Bocaccio borrowed from the “Novelino” and Lessing used in his Nathan the Wise.

17. Ibid., 98. And see chapter 1, n.54; Foucault 1979, 92-97; Foucault 1977, 213.

18. Ecclesiasticus 26, 29; and cf. also 27, 2: “As a nail sticketh fast between the joinings of the stones, so doth sin stick close between buying and selling.” Demosthenes says it is a marvel to see a man practicing commerce remaining honest.

19. For an extensive summary of that controversy, see Jones 1989. See also Nelson 1969, 82ff.

20. See Filmer 1653, where in the preface Filmer summarizes his entire argument. And see Jones 1989, 158ff, and the whole chapter titled “The Evolution of the Concept of Usury.”

21. Namely, in which “in principle, each resource belongs to some individual” (Waldron 1988, 38).

22. Silvayn 1596, 402 and see J. R. Brown's “New Arden” edition, Brown 1959, 169. For an extensive discussion of the use of the heart’s blood for therapeutic needs, see Cassel 1882; see also Pouchelle 1990, 74-75. The Grimm Brothers speculated about some analogies between the Pound of Flesh theme and the German epic poem Poor Heinrich, where the doctor “whets his knife” like Gernutus or Shylock (94.1.121). A similar scene is found also in the Bluebeard story, which, the Grimm brothers
argue, is also related to the therapeutic theme: Bluebeard is trying to cure himself from the rare disease that turns his beard blue by drinking his wives' blood. They relate theme to medieval allegations of Jews as seeking the blood of Christian children, possibly for therapeutic needs. This connection is unconvincing, and it should be remembered that in the first Western versions of the Pound of Flesh story the creditor is not a Jew.

23. The speech act implications of the Judges incident is illuminatingly discussed by Mieke Bal; see Bal 1988, 129-68. And cf. Felman 1980, who makes a similar case for Molière's Don Juan, reading it in the light of the speech act theories of Austin, Searle, etc.

24. Bloch's once neglected theory (Bloch 1975) is now borne out by new historical writing, dating the decline of slavery as a major socioeconomic system in Europe much later than was accepted before. See, e.g., Phillips 1985, especially part II; Bonnassie 1991.

25. For a detailed discussion of the oriental versions, see Oz 1990, 36-44; Wenger 1929; and see also, e.g., Foucaux 1862, 241-50; Benfey 1859, 1, 388-407; Conway 1880, 830-31.

26. “Si pluribus addictus sit, partes secanto, si plus minusve secuerint se [= sine fraude esto].” The law is cited in Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae, 20, 1. See also Kohler 1919. Cardozo eagerly supports the theory connecting the Pound of Flesh story with the Roman law, as well as similar Germanic and Nordic laws; see Cardozo 1932. Radin, however, stresses the fact that Gellius himself comments that the very severity of the law manifests that it was not designed to be actually executed, and that he, Gellius, himself did not know of any case in which the radical clause of the law was implemented. See Gellius, loc. cit.; Radin 1922. Radin denies the alleged connection between The Merchant of Venice and the “third Table,” arguing that the whole motif is based on a private contract agreed upon by the parties concerned and not dependent on state law.

27. See Cardozo 1925, 242. Griston 1924 places the action of The Merchant of Venice in the second decade of the fourth century A.D., under the Law of the Twelve Tables.

28. See Kohler 1919, 91, where the Norwegian law is cited in the original.

29. See, e.g., Pollock and Maitland 1898, 453; Friedlander 1921, 27; Niemeyer 1912, 22.

30. See Stubbs 1968, introduction, xxxv-xvi; Landa 1942, 25. Mutilation was used, though rarely, as accompanying punishment on the pillory: “a Kent labourour convicted in 1599 for declaring that ‘the Queen's Majestie was Antichrist and therefore she is throwne down into hell’ was sentenced to be pilloried and to have his ears cut off, while a Colchester yeoman convicted in 1579 for calling the Earls of warwick and leicester traitors was sentenced to stand on the pillory in the town's market place and have his ear nailed to the pillory” (Sharpe 1990, 21).

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In the essay below, Metzger examines Elizabethan England's anxieties about racial and religious differences as symbolized by Shylock's daughter, Jessica, in The Merchant of Venice. Metzger contrasts the white-skinned, Christian-looking Jessica, who willingly and easily converts, with her dark-skinned father, who is forced by society to convert without ever, in fact, being accepted by society.

Jessica, the other Jew in The Merchant of Venice, is doubly distinguished. Unlike her father, Shylock, she is said to be “gentle”: at once noble and gentle. Yet as the “now” quoted in my title signifies and as Jessica readily admits, she remains “a daughter to [Shylock's] blood” despite her conversion (2.6.51, 2.3.18). Distinguished from Portia and Nerissa, whose marriages work to secure the social standing of the men they love, she is more saved than saving in her marriage to Lorenzo. Indeed, representations of Jessica, unlike those of other characters in the play, turn on alternating characterizations of her as a latent Christian and as a racialized and thus unintegrable Jew.

Until recently, discussions of race or Jewishness in The Merchant tended to focus on Shylock alone. These readings suggested that critics could deal with religion, gender, or class but not with all three. There were no attempts to understand how such categories are, as Carol Neely puts it, “inseparable, unstable, disunified, and mutually constitutive” (303). Critics like Neely, however, imply that reading Jessica both as a wealthy white woman who is thus coded as gentile and as “issue to a faithless Jew” (2.4.37) should highlight the interconnectedness of discourses of difference in Shakespeare's time. This critical project has been considerably advanced by James Shapiro's Shakespeare and the Jews, which challenges assumptions about the significance of real and imagined Jews for early modern English audiences. By documenting both the actual lives and fictive representations of Jews in Shakespeare's England, Shapiro eliminates the distinction between theology and race implicit in G. K. Hunter's argument that Shakespeare and Marlowe did not depict “real” or “racial” Jews but, rather, portrayed a “moral condition” rooted in a “theological rather than ethnological framework” (215). Similarly, Kim Hall's studies of early modern representations of race and gender show how, in an age of soaring population and foreign immigration, English fears of uncontained female sexuality found expression in a “narrative of alien culture” that fused notions of blacks, Jews, and women (Things 39).

Yet like critics before them, Hall and Shapiro do not see Jessica as a central figure in The Merchant or in the play's discourse of racial difference. Although Shapiro grants that “the battle over The Merchant of Venice is a battle over the nature of Englishness itself and who has the right to stake a claim to it,” he dedicates but a few pages of his book to Jessica (4). She does not appear in his index. More sensitive than many new-historicist critics to issues of gender, Shapiro nevertheless explains the focus on Jewish men in the texts he examines (and thus in his text) by noting “that Jewish men were represented as endowed with male and female traits”
Unfortunately, representations of men subsume those of women once again. Like Shapiro, Hall acknowledges the significance of Jessica as a figure of conversion. Yet while she skillfully traces the ambivalence present in the travel narratives she reads and in the imagery associated with Shylock, she finds Jessica's conversion an unambiguous portrayal of “a successful type of cross-cultural interaction” (“Guess” 102). Hall registers her uneasiness with this position, admitting that “glorifying” the transgressions of women like Jessica and Portia, as feminist critics often have, “may serve only to obscure the very complex nature of difference for a changing society in which racial categories developed along with changing organizations of gender” (103-04).

Hall's discomfort with readings that fail to acknowledge Jessica's ambivalent status in the play echoes my own. Indeed, I have long thought that Jessica's multiplicitous nature—as Jew and Christian and as “fair” beloved descended from blackened Chus, her father's “countryman” (2.4.39, 3.2.285)—constitutes an emblematic figure for the play's renewed discontinuities. The ambiguous mix of comedy and tragedy, humanism and racialism, patriarchal imperialism and festive rebellion in The Merchant corresponds to the inherent incompatibility of the identities Shakespeare attempts to unite in Jessica. Indeed, the nature and effects of Jessica's difference can illuminate how Shakespeare may have struggled with competing notions of Jewishness circulating in early modern England and how he worked to resolve them by creating not one Jew but two. In what follows I argue that only attention to the shifting emphases on discourses of gender, class, and religion in Shakespeare's representation of Jessica can elucidate The Merchant's relation to early modern England's emerging ideology of race and to the bitter effects of that ideology that persist even today.5

Any discussion of conversion in Shakespeare must involve the Jew, just as any discussion of the Jew in Shakespeare inevitably involves the meaning of conversion in early modern England. As Hunter rightly observes, theology is central to the analysis of the early modern theatricalization of Jews because of the “long and torturous tradition” of interpreting Christianity adversus Judeos—that is, in opposition to Judaism (213). More simply, early modern Christian notions of what it means to be subject to God inevitably entail an account of the Jewish refusal to receive Christ as the Messiah. The English Reformation complicated Christians' response to Jews by offering an unqualified promise of conversion within a discourse shaped by the oppositional rhetoric of anti-Semitism. Further, as historical documents attest, the problem of the Jew in Christian England intersected with an emerging ideology of race to affirm a notion of English identity in which color, religion, and class converged.

In succeeding editions of Actes and Monuments, perhaps the most prevalent religious text in Elizabethan England excepting the Bible, the Protestant John Foxe offers “a complete history of the lives, sufferings and deaths of the Christian Martyrs from the commencement of Christianity to the present period” (1563 ed., title p.)—that is, the stories of men and women who met death rather than assert as true what they believed false. Foxe emphasizes the role of reason in the practice of the “true” Christian faith. Describing his text as an “[e]cclesiastical history” from which “the people may learn the rules and precepts of doctrine,” Foxe takes a pedagogical tone: “They that be in error, let them not disdain to learn” (1570 ed., 4r). Or as he puts it in the 1563 edition, “Ignorance is the mother of all errors” (EE3v). Yet for Jews, the original recusants, choosing the truth was a matter not simply of learning but of a prior belonging that was denied them: “For like as the nature of truth so is the proper condition of the true church, that commonly none seeth it, but such only as be members and partakers thereof” (3r). Foxe argues even more ambivalently in the 1570 edition that Jews are to blame for their failure to choose wisely—“who should rather have known and received him than the Pharisees and Scribes of that people who had his law”? (E1r). He also repeatedly characterizes them as inherently unable to make such a choice. Foxe presents Jews both as “more tolerable than Papists” (1563 ed., K1v), who abandon their poor and worship idols and bread, and as “enemies to Christians” (1570 ed., index), as child murderers whose historical and bloody destruction confirms their rejection by God (1563 ed., E1r).6 This ambivalence finds an analogue in The Merchant, where Jews are characterized as unwilling and unable to see the truth of the Messiah in Jesus, driven by their base natures, as Gratiano says with characteristic hyperbole, to pursue their “wolvish, bloody, starv’d, and ravenous” desires (4.1.138).
Foxe's apparent need to account for Jewish belief may be as old as Christianity itself, but the sixteenth century constitutes a specific and particularly significant moment in that history (see, e.g., Gerber; Netanyahu; Friedman; Shapiro). For the first time Jewishness was legally defined through Spain's pure-blood laws “not as a statement of faith or even a series of ethnic practices but a biological consideration” (Friedman 16). In England, as Foxe's text illustrates, the question of the Jews took on new importance in the light of Reformation struggles among Christians over the proper path to God's truth. How could one discern, as Foxe puts it, between “antiquitie and novelty” (1570 ed., iv), between false worship and true faith? The Protestant emphasis on the inability of the individual to effect his or her own salvation, which Foxe's text elaborates, challenges the promise of Christianity made explicit in baptism. Called to “learn” and to “choose” rightly, one nevertheless could not “see” unless elected a “member or partaker thereof” by God's grace.

Readers like Hunter have been inclined to dismiss the import of such questions by asserting the relative scarcity of Jews in England in Shakespeare's time. But the presence of crypto-Jews (converts to Christianity who secretly practiced Judaism) in Elizabethan England has been acknowledged since Lucien Wolf's discovery in the early twentieth century of a mostly Portuguese community of Jews. In fact, The Merchant followed fairly closely on the trial and execution of the most connected member of that community, Elizabeth's chief physician, Roderigo Lopez, and Shylock's principal antagonist takes the name of the man whose political aspirations provided the context for Lopez's alleged treason: Don Antonio, pretender to the throne of Portugal following the death of the cardinal-king Henry. Such allusions would have been easily recognized by Shakespeare's audience.

According to Wolf, this Portuguese community “could not have remained altogether unknown to the general public, while to the Government, with its vigilant watch of all strangers hailing from Spain and Portugal, it must have been in every sense an open secret” (21); indeed, Wolf documents the government's knowledge in the correspondence of Lord Burghley, the queen's secretary of state, and his son Robert Cecil. But more important, Wolf argues that the Portuguese community of Jews was tolerated because they served the state without causing a stir—that is, because of economic interest: “they appear to have been, on the whole, quite decent folk, who worked honestly and unobtrusively at professions, trades and handicrafts which added appreciably to the well-being of the country” (22). Living and working “honestly and unobtrusively” meant becoming invisible as “former” Jews and convincingly performing the prerequisites for integration into English society. The cases of Joachim Gaunse on the one hand and of Bernard Leavis and Pedro Frere on the other illustrate this. Gaunse, a German Jewish mining chemist who worked in England for eight years, was expelled in 1598 on the grounds that he had challenged Christian doctrine in debating the status of Jesus with a Protestant minister from Bristol. Portuguese agents pursuing prohibited Spanish goods on behalf of English traders, Frere and Leavis were accused by Mary May, a Christian investor, who claimed that their Jewishness was a principal cause of her losses. Though much evidence of their “secret practices” was procured from servants and acquaintances, the court did not expel them; rather, it was “moved with the losses and trobles which the poore straungers indured” as a consequence of doing English business (Sisson 51). As long as Jews did not publicly insist on their Jewishness, economic interests prevailed.

As other deportations suggest, notions of religious and racial conformity may have contributed to the emerging concepts of the English subject and of its requisite other, the alien. In 1596, the year The Merchant was probably written, Elizabeth I wrote to the Privy Council to request the aid of the mayor of London, his aldermen, and “all the other Maiours, Sheryfes, etc.” in deporting eighty-nine blacks, to be given to a Lubeck merchant in exchange for his return of an equal number of English prisoners of war held by Spain and Portugal (Acts 16). Elizabeth distinguished “people of our owne nation,” “the subjectes of the land and Christian people, that perishe for want of service, whereby through labor they might be mayntained,” from “those kinde of people,” meaning blacks, brought to live and work in England (16, 20-21). As Elizabeth's equations among color, faith, wealth, and nationality confirm, to be black was to be a common laborer, non-Christian, and consequently not English.
While European Jews may appear to have had the advantage over blacks in their ability to pass, as it were, as white and Christian and hence English, analogies between blackness and Jewishness were long-standing. As Anthony Barthelemy has shown, the association of blackness with sin and evil, which dates from the ancient world, was adopted by Christianity and overlaid with a narrative of salvation and damnation: white became the color of the saved, black the color of the damned. First among the damned would, of course, have been the Jews, as a 1604 biography of Spain's Charles V demonstrates:

Who can deny that in the descendent of the Jews there persists and endures the evil inclination of their ancient ingratitude and lack of understanding, just as in Negroes [there persists] the inseparability of their blackness? For if the latter should unite themselves a thousand times with white women, the children are born with the dark color of the father. Similarly, it is not enough for a Jew to be three parts aristocrat or Old Christian for one family-line [i.e., one Jewish ancestor] alone defiles and corrupts him.

(Friedman 16-17)

Shakespeare's Jessica anticipates this equation when she describes her father as a countryman “[t]o Tubal and to Chus” (3.2.285), for the first is a Jew and the second the mythical originary black African.11

The connection between blacks and Jews as alien others helped construct the racialized notion of Englishness. Because of color privilege, however, the converted Jews of London were not always perceived as threats to emerging notions of English identity, as Roger Prior's discovery of an integrationist Italian Jewish community in Tudor London indicates. Like the Portuguese Jews, the Italian Jews owed their presence in England to royal patronage, engaged in trade, and had connections to Jews in Antwerp. They lived in the same places in and outside London as their Portuguese counterparts did, but they integrated into English society far more thoroughly through marriage to Christians (see Prior 138). According to Prior, Shakespeare draws distinctions between converted Italian Jews, like Emilia Bassano—better known now as the poet Emilia Lanier—the woman alleged to be the dark lady of his sonnets, and Portuguese converts like Lopez whose resistant Jewishness was seen as a threat to English identity.12 Whether or not Prior's claims about Emilia Bassano are true, the history of the Italian Jewish community suggests that competing notions of Jewishness existed at the time Shakespeare wrote and staged The Merchant. The construction of Jews as “deserving” (as they would later be labeled in the state documents calling for their readmission to England) or alien may have functioned to authorize the social and political agendas of British imperialism and the racialism it depended on.13 Foxe's concerns may be seen, then, as representative of larger political questions: How would the English distinguish resistant and finally unintegrable Jews like Lopez or Gaunse from more cooperative and thus “truly” convertible Jews like Bassano? How could they affirm this distinction without denying the meaning and promise of conversion to Christianity? And how could English Christians define the Jew's difference both as a difference of nature and as a difference of faith involving the act of will faith requires? These issues constitute Shakespeare's challenge in The Merchant of Venice—a challenge he meets by presenting Jessica as a “fair” Jewish alternative to Shylock.

Initially Launcelot describes Jessica as a “[m]ost beautiful pagan, [a] most sweet Jew,” and her embodiment of such conjunctions is an obvious source of comic tension in the play. Significantly, however, Launcelot's oxymorons depend on anti-Semitic assumptions that are impressed on the audience when Shylock first appears onstage as the incarnation of the inherently evil Jew of medieval and early modern Christian legend: he is scheming (“If I can catch him once upon the hip … ” [1.3.46]), greedy (“He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usuance” [1.3.44-45]), satanic (“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. … O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!” [1.3.98, 102]), and eager for Christian blood (“[the] fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me” [1.3.150-51]14).
Jessica must overcome these images if she is to be integrated into the world of the play, which is largely defined in opposition to the malevolent Jewish otherness of Shylock. The difficulties of doing so, however, become quickly apparent. Alone onstage at the end of her first scene, Jessica presents the audience with the first of several arguments for her convertibility.

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife!

(2.3.16-21)

That Jessica distances herself from sin by blatantly disregarding her father's authority may be necessary, but it is also problematic. For Shakespeare's audience, patriarchal authority was divinely ordained, and it secured the right of princes as well as that of fathers. Jessica's disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience's acceptance of her as a Christian.

The late-sixteenth-century debate over the role of parental authority in choosing a spouse would have been equally familiar to Shakespeare's audience. Moreover, texts such as Andrewe Kyngesmill's “Godly Advise Touchyng Mariage” (1580) and Charles Gibbon's How to Bestow Children in Marriage (1591) reveal that the contest between individual will and patriarchal authority in the choice of spouses was often most intense when marriages were proposed between “believers and nonbelievers” (Kyngesmill Jiv). Gibbon lays out the competing views about such marriages in a fictional debate between Philogus and Tychias. Philogus argues that a Christian should not “be unequally yoked with infidels for what fellowship hath righteousness & what communion hath light with darkness?” Tychias counters that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife” and vice versa (C2r-v).

In this context, acceptance of Jessica's marriage to Lorenzo would require a Christian audience to conclude either that she is a believer before her marriage or that she is, as she insists, “sanctified” through her marriage. In fact, Jessica lays claim to both arguments. Distinguishing between her own and her father's manners to resolve the “sin” and “strife” implicit in her rebellion, she underscores her preconversion difference. She nullifies the claims of filial attachment by insisting that she is a different kind of Jew, one whose manners take precedence over blood and who thus can see the truth of Christianity. Conversely, she equates Shylock's blood and manners, asserting a racial notion of Jewishness that she claims not to share. To extend an argument Frank Whigham makes, material and aesthetic distinctions between the powerful and the powerless take on both moral and bodily force and thus reveal to the audience a “natural” social hierarchy in which men subordinate women and Christians subordinate Jews (95, 103). Indeed, though Jessica clearly prefers a Christian life, she is saved not so much by her own choice as by Lorenzo's choice to marry her. By uniting her willingness with the willingness of others to find her integrable, she combines the blessings of Christian grace with individual will.

The need to guarantee Jessica's willingness is demonstrated in the scene following her soliloquy, in which Lorenzo, Gratiano, Solanio, and Solerio plan how Jessica, along with “what gold and jewels she [shall be] furnished with,” will be taken “from her father's house” (2.4.31, 2.4.30). Jessica's wealth and her willingness to spend it constitute the first of several distinctions that guarantee her integration into Christian society. The next is articulated by Lorenzo when he receives her letter setting the time of their elopement:

I know the hand; in faith, 'tis a fair hand,
And whiter than the paper it writ on
Is the fair hand that writ.
The stress Lorenzo places on “fair” is echoed by Gratiano and again by Lorenzo before the scene concludes (2.4.28, 2.4.39). Early modern uses of fair combine the senses of color and beauty, and Lorenzo's direct reference to whiteness suggests color is related to his assertion of Jessica's worth. Thus, while the scene establishes the means for Jessica's liberation from Shylock's house, it creates a color difference between father and daughter that justifies her removal, and it casts that difference as a source of comedy instead of tragedy: consider, for example, Desdemona's fate after eloping. Why color might be a prerequisite to differentiation from the Jewish stereotype is suggested later, in the seemingly comic debate between Launcelot and Jessica about the effectiveness of Jewish integration through marriage. In an awkward quotation of Exodus 20.5, Launcelot warns Jessica that “the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children” (3.5.1-2). She answers by repeating her earlier argument: “I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian” (3.5.19-20). The power of her response is manifest not only in its simplicity, which contrasts with Launcelot's comic misprisions, but also in the representation of marriage as a force for order. But Lorenzo clarifies the bodily requirements for marriage as a means for the “making of Christians,” as Launcelot puts it, when Jessica relays Launcelot's claims (3.5.23). “I shall answer that better to the commonwealth,” Lorenzo warns Launcelot, “than you can the getting up of the Negro's belly; the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot” (3.5.37-39).

Jessica’s defense and Lorenzo's rebuttal show how her whiteness and femaleness make possible her reproduction as a Christian in the eyes of the “commonwealth.” As Hall notes, the scene reflects that institution's investment in “sexual practices” (“Guess” 89). Moreover, Jessica's marriage reconstitutes her as a body, for according to Christian ecclesiastical and legal authorities, a woman was incorporated into the body of her husband in marriage, becoming both one with and subject to him. As Portia says after Bassanio has successfully negotiated the prenuptial test devised by her father, “Myself, and what was mine, to you and yours / Is now converted” (3.2.166-67). In a play concerned with the conversion of Jews, Portia's terms make explicit the analogy between the transfer of her person and property to Bassanio and the incorporation of Jessica's person and property into Lorenzo. Like Portia's conversion from “lord,” “master,” and “[queen]” to “an unlessoned girl” ready “to be directed / As from her lord, her governor, her king” (3.2.167, 3.2.168, 3.2.169, 3.2.159, 3.2.164-65), Jessica's conversion from dark infidel to fair Christian is required by the play's ideology of order through marriage. As Jessica argues early in the play, becoming one with the body of Christ requires not only her marriage to a Christian but also the conversion of her body in distinctly racial and gendered terms (2.3.16-21).

It is in this context that Lorenzo's celebration of Jessica as “whiter” than the paper she writes on becomes significant. For unlike the offspring of Launcelot and his absent black lover, those of Jessica and Lorenzo will not differ bodily from the normative white Christian subject. Drawing on the work of Kim Hall and Janet Adelman, Lynda Boose explains the significance of this distinction:

In terms of the ideological assumptions of a culture such as that of early modern England, the black male-white female union is not the narrative that requires suppression. What challenges the ideology substantially enough to require erasure is that of the black female-white male, for it is in the person of the black woman that the culture's preexisting fears both about the female sex and about gender dominance are realized. Through her, all free-floating anxieties about “the mother's dark place” contaminating the father's designs for perfect self-replication become vividly literal.

(“Getting” 45-46)

Like Lorenzo, Hall and Boose consider Jessica visually white and therefore integrable within the racial and religious ideologies of early modern English patriarchy. But this view obscures the process of racialization in the play and thus the intersection of religion and gender in the production of racial ideology. In an inversion of
the hierarchy of flesh and blood that Portia uses to incriminate Shylock, Jessica’s “Jewish blood” is subordinated in the course of the play to her “fair” and hence convertible flesh (see 3.1.37-42). After her marriage, she will “appear,” to quote Wolf, to be one of the “decent folk” who constitute Christian society.

In this context, Shylock's attempts in act 3 to defend himself against the attacks of Solanio and Solario take on new significance. Shylock appears to fail when he asserts, as Normand Lawrence writes, “that his daughter partakes of the same physical substance as himself, and so shares the same racial identity” (58): “I say my daughter is my flesh and blood,” he declares (3.1.37). Solanio returns:

There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish.

(3.1.39-42)

Whereas Shylock merely cites the relation between his body and his daughter's, Solanio emphasizes a transformation in Jessica whereby color and gender combine to overcome less discernible differences of blood.

Shylock, like Launcelot's black child, cannot undergo such a transformation. The reasons for his inability to do so help explain the unsettling effect of the final order for his conversion.19 For Shylock's body, like the body of any Jewish man, would “convert” a Christian bride. Further, unlike Jessica, Shylock bears the mark of Judaism on his body—circumcision—and the Jewish body lies at the center of early modern anti-Semitic discourse. Though this bodily difference is never explicitly referred to in the play, the representation of Shylock as a devil intent on the apportionment of a Christian body is part of a tradition of anti-Semitic discourse in which Jews were said to be horned, tailed, and bearded like goats, to emit a distinct smell, and to be the source of leprosy and syphilis. According to this discourse, Jewish men, unlike Christian men, shared the mark of women's sexual difference: menstruation,20 a feminizing trait that would effectively erase the patriarchal authority inscribed literally and figuratively on Jewish men. The male Jew incarnated the power of naming attributed to all men: this power became particularly threatening in a Jewish man because in placing his name on a Christian woman, and thus on future generations, he embodied the danger of the annihilating, consuming other.

For Shapiro, Christian obsession with circumcision and with the sacred covenant it symbolizes “shapes the final confrontation between Shylock and Antonio”: thus Antonio's demand that Shylock “presently become a Christian” “metaphorically uncircumcise[s] him” (130).21 The new covenant, represented by symbolic circumcision of the heart, supersedes the old, thus resolving the troubled relation between physical attributes and social identity through baptism.22 As critics have noted, Shylock's conversion occurs only after the play ends, and it is cast as an act of submission on his part—“I pray you give me leave to go from hence, / I am not well. Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it” (4.1.395-97)—a portrayal that weakens the representative power of the transformation. In contrast, Jessica is to be incorporated into Venetian society because she has been excluded from the practice of circumcision. According to Shapiro, this exclusion “helps explain why Jewish daughters like Jessica in The Merchant of Venice and Abigail in The Jew of Malta can so easily cross the religious boundaries that divide their stigmatized fathers from the dominant Christian communities. The religious difference of women is not usually imagined as physically inscribed in their flesh” (120). But as I have argued, female difference was inscribed in the flesh not only by religious discourse but also by ideologies and emerging notions of race and nationality, which converged to define the “proper” English person.

From this perspective, the unsettling effect of Shylock's forced conversion can also be traced to the tension in Foxe's writing between the notion of free will implicit in baptism and the drive to delimit and thus control the oppositional other implicit in Christian imperialism. Like Othello, Shylock inspires feeling about his fate only
insofar as he is capable of choosing Christian “goodness.” Moreover, Shylock's malevolence depends on the shifting inscription of Jessica as racial Jew and freely choosing Christian. Jessica's incorporation into Christian society is essential to defining her father's alien status. Indeed, her nature in act 5 may be said to offer something of a reverse image of her father's in his final scenes: represented initially as her father's daughter, ruing her rebellion but longing for salvation through subordination in Christian marriage, she becomes the cool wit who seeks to “out-night” Lorenzo, trades the tokens of her mother's love for a monkey, and gains the trust of Portia in her plot against Bassanio (5.1.23). Shylock, by contrast, evolves from the resistant other to the raging and then nearly silent Jew of the fourth act and finally to a converted but unwilling, powerful yet alien figure, the image of the other against which English identity could be inscribed as white and Christian.

Still, such distinctions between Shylock and Jessica are perhaps too easy. As Lorenzo's attempt to claim the perceptual difference of Jessica's fairness makes clear, the logical incompatibility of the play's representations of Jews is impossible to sustain and requires endless permutations. Consequently, the Jessica of act 5 may be read not as an alternative and fully integrated Jew but as a homeless figure that suggests the dangers of consummating a relationship across such differences. In this reading she becomes an emblem of postcoital regret, ruing not her rebellion against patriarchal authority but the terms of her new commitment to it and the meager possibilities for unalienated pleasure they provide. In act 5, both Jessica and Lorenzo look to the past to make sense of their relationship. Further, the relationships with which they allegorize and thus make sense of their own all end tragically because of confusion and conflicting aims: Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Aeneas and Dido, Jason and Medea. Then, as if to illustrate and thus anticipate the potential for tragedy in their own union, Jessica and Lorenzo offer individual memories of the fateful night of their elopement. “In such a night / Did Jessica steal from a wealthy Jew, / And with an unthrift love did run from Venice, / As far as Belmont” (5.1.14-17), says Lorenzo, using metaphors of wealth, poverty, and thievery to underscore Jessica's betrayal of her father and the loss of security their mutual commitments guaranteed her. Playful or bitter, Jessica's version of the night hints at the difficulty of establishing trust between persons of different religions, colors, classes, and especially genders that is played up in the rest of act 5: “In such a night / Did young Lorenzo swear he lov’d her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And n’er a true one” (5.1.17-20).

These two distinct readings of the final act of The Merchant are both predicated on the idea that Jessica's difference—from her father and from the Christian characters—is crucial to the play's meaning. As the excluded other whose resistance to the truth of Jesus serves to delineate the essential, impermeable nature of the Christian story, the converted Jew could function to guarantee simultaneously both the promise of freedom implicit in baptism and the incontrovertible difference of white, Christian, and, by analogy turned equation, English forms of being. Indeed, only by taking Shylock's measure in the light of his daughter's difference—a difference that combines shifting representations of gender, color, class, and religion—is it possible to account for the play's inscription of contradictory notions of Jews. If The Merchant's representation of Jews continues to haunt us—as the numbers of productions and critical responses to the play suggest it will and the survival of its racial discourse in contemporary politics suggests it should—we may get closer to the meaning of such ghosts by examining more closely the nature of their differences.

Notes

1. Tubal is the only character other than Shylock described as “a Jew” in the dramatis personae. He is also Shylock's only friend and the source of the funds that guarantee Shylock's bond. Although Tubal is certainly worthy of study, I focus here on the play's major characters.

2. I use the term integration to refer to the acceptance of (forcibly or willingly) converted Jews by English Christians rather than assimilation, which in modern usage implies the freedom to continue practicing Judaism, an option unavailable to Jews in Shakespeare's England.
3. Compare, for example, the work of McKewin; Boose, “Comic Contract”; Leventen; and Newman, “Portia's Ring” with that of Whigham; S. Cohen; Moisan; W. Cohen; Oz; and Ferber. Though there are differences in the ways each group of critics sidesteps the issues raised by the intersection of gender, race, and class, Newman and Ferber both illustrate the problems such critical choices raise. Each addresses the issue in a footnote. Newman states that she has “chosen deliberately to leave Shylock out of [her] reading … to disturb readings of the play that center their interpretive gestures on the Jew.” She “recognize[s] the suggestive possibilities, however, of readings … which link Shylock and Portia as outsiders by virtue respectively of their race and sex” (“Portia's Ring” 19). Ferber declares, “A fuller treatment of ideology than is possible here would take up 'male ideology’ from a feminist standpoint. I omit it here because I think the issue of the status or rights of women is not foregrounded in the play, and the peculiarly male way of doing things is only passingly and obliquely indicated” (460). Both comments appear to acknowledge the importance of the critical claims they choose to ignore, then contradict their initial claims. Newman leaves Shylock out because he has somehow enabled readings that fail to account for the play's women, but her reference to other “possibilities” suggests that elision of Shylock's “race” in favor of his gender, which is implicit in her reasoning, is problematic. Jessica, who is a woman and a Jew, is not mentioned at all. Ferber's claims are manifestly absurd given the importance the play assigns to marriage and gender roles, such as father, daughter, brother, husband, and wife. When considered at all, Jessica is often presented solely as a contrast to Portia's image of filial feminine duty: “where Portia gives, Jessica takes; where Portia accepts constraints, Jessica rebels” (Leventen 62).


5. There is an important distinction between racism as an identifiable mode of twentieth-century thought and the racialist roots of this ideology in early modern culture. Others have made the same distinction (see Neill; Bartels; Boose, “Getting”; Erickson).

6. Foxe's attitude toward Jews seems to take a turn for the worse after the 1563 edition. While in that edition Jews frequently serve to point up the errors of Catholics (see, e.g., “Jewe's Reasoning with Master Wysehart” [NNiir]), in the 1570 edition Jews appear most often as ridiculous and deserving targets of violence, willing victims like the “Jewe fallen into a privey [who] would not be taken out for kyping hys Sabboth day” (Nir).

7. See, e.g., Greenblatt, “Marlowe,” and Ferber. On the historical presence of Jews in England, see Katz, History and Philosemitism; Rabb; Gwyer; Wolf; Roth; Samuel; Hyamson; Prior; Shapiro. Others who attempt to account for the representation of human difference in early modern Europe include Bartels; Mullaney; Pratt; Hulme; Brown; Said; Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions; Erickson.

8. Hotine cites the publication in 1594 and possibly early 1595 of the popular account of Lopez's trial, A True Report of Sundry Horrible Conspiracies to Have Taken Away the Life of the Queenes Majestie, which along with Marlowe's Jew of Malta documents the popular taste for anti-Semitic representations that preceded Shakespeare's Merchant. See Hotine for a useful chronology of the revival of Marlowe's Malta that preceded and followed Lopez's trial in 1594; the play was revived yet again in early 1596, the year in which it is generally agreed Shakespeare wrote The Merchant. More recently, David Katz, the foremost historian of English Jews, has argued that “Lopez, the model for Shylock, had far greater influence in the long run on moulding public views and prejudices about the Jews than the worthy efforts of all the English Rabbis put together” (History ix). Katz argues for Lopez's guilt. For a competing interpretation of the case against Lopez, see Gwyer.

9. For more on Gaunse, see Feuer; Abrahams; Shapiro.

10. For the story of Frere and Leavis, see Sisson.

11. A 1578 adaptation of the biblical narrative of Ham and his sons by George Best, an English traveler, is a possible source for Jessica's reference to Chus. See Hakluyt for Best's complete text. For useful discussions of Best's representations of race, see Newman, “Ethiop” 78-82; Boose, “Getting” 43-48;
12. For more on the influence of Lopez, see Katz, _History_.

13. The term _deserving_ is used in a 1656 document in which a committee of the Council of State argues for the readmission of Jews to England. For a copy of the document, see Samuel.

14. For studies of the representation of the Jew in medieval and early modern European culture, see Trachtenberg; Poliakov; Edwards; Baron; Yardeni; Felsenstein; Shapiro. Tractenberg suggests that the equation of Jews with devils was the product of Christian legends in which “the inexorable enemies of Jesus … were the devil and the Jew.” “It was inevitable,” he argues, “that the legend should establish a causal relation between them” (20). Shapiro claims that “by the late sixteenth century the widespread medieval identification of Jews and the devil had virtually disappeared in England” (33), yet he locates the medieval myth of abduction and ritual murder in Shylock’s desire to feast on his Christian enemies (110).

15. On patriarchalism in early modern England, see Schochet; Ezell.

16. On marriage without parental consent during the sixteenth century, see Ingram.

17. Kyngesmill’s text takes up the topic under the heading “Certain places of Scripture touchyng ungodly matchyng in Mariage” and focuses on marriage to “women of a wicked kinred and Religion.” Such marriages are inadvisable, he argues, because unbelieving wives don’t properly fear and submit to their husbands and thus “overruleth the beleevyng husbande and causeth hym to make a plaine shipwracke of faith … ” (4iiv).

18. On early modern constructions of the term _fair_, see Hall, _Things_ and “Black-Moor.”

19. Shylock’s distaste for Christians is based on the historical practice of ritual separateness. As Johnson explains in his history of the Jews, “Circumcision set [Jews] apart and was regarded by the Greco-Roman world as barbarous and distasteful. But at least circumcision did not prevent social intercourse. The ancient Jewish laws of diet and cleanliness did” (133-34). Thus, Shylock’s declaration “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” (1.3.33-35) can be read as evidence that Shakespeare’s knowledge of Jewish practice and perspective went beyond stereotypes.

20. Poliakov claims that Christians believed in Jewish male menses; he cites late-fifteenth-century documents concerned with Jewish ritual murder (143). Foa discusses how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century beliefs in a Jewish cause of syphilis were related to the discourse of sexual difference long applied to women. In a study of the nineteenth-century British equation of usury and prostitution, Gilman documents the continuity of the practice of feminizing male Jews (cf. Gallagher).


22. As Shapiro explains, Paul’s letter to the Romans attempts to promote symbolic circumcision of the heart without condemning the trimming of the foreskin. Shapiro argues convincingly that the shift in _The Merchant_’s representation of the terms of Shylock’s bond, from “fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me” (1.3.150-51) to “A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off / Nearest the merchant’s heart” (4.1.232-33) involves a “double displacement” of Paul’s text: “For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision” (Rom. 2.25). Thus, Shapiro continues, “Shylock will cut his Christian adversary in that part of the body where the Christians believe themselves to be truly circumcised: the heart” (127). The heart takes the place of the penis, the spirit the place of the letter. However, as Shapiro notes, such a displacement depends on a distinction between the symbolic and the literal, between the spirit and the flesh, that Paul’s text does not sustain. Paul’s terms conflate the categories by begging the question of interpreting God’s law. Instead of solving the problem of Jewish and Christian identity, Paul’s concern with circumcision becomes a touchstone for obsessions about the relation between physical attributes and social identity.

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of colleagues and teachers.

Works Cited


Criticism: Race: B. J. Sokol (essay date 1998)


[In the essay below, Sokol discusses the legally sanctioned forms of racial prejudice in Elizabethan England—against Jews and people of color, for example—but argues that through characterization, language, and imagery in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare intimates that Renaissance public opinion condemned these prejudicial laws.]
The legally institutionalized prejudice seen in *The Merchant of Venice* is repulsive from a modern perspective. I will argue that this play portrays deeply ironic images of social prejudice that offended Elizabethan standards of decency and fairness as well as ours. Paradoxically, these contemporary Elizabethan standards come into focus when the play is viewed from a perspective involving legal history, for they in fact trumped the prejudicial laws of Shakespeare's time.

In the updated approach to Shakespeare of his provocative book *Kill All the Lawyers?*, a practising American lawyer Daniel J. Kornstein advises Shylock to appeal against Portia's judgement. And he makes frequent reference to modern legal doctrines, often specifically American, to show how these have evolved or advanced since Shakespeare's time. Yet Kornstein sometimes discusses issues and principles which have persisted in the Anglo-American legal tradition since Shakespeare's time, which may guide us to the shared social and moral vocabulary of Shakespeare and his age.

I share Kornstein's view that Shylock is presented by Shakespeare as distinctly ill-intentioned, yet still a man wronged and unjustly treated. I also agree that this 'minority view' in literary criticism negates certain *prima facie* appearances of the play, but it is a valid and necessary one because in the play's fictionally constructed world, as in the real world, 'appearances deceive'. But I will base my position more historically than Kornstein's; to launch my own discussion I will note what is illuminating in his advice to Shylock, and how inaccuracies and anachronisms detract from it.

A first error is that this advice ignores Elizabethan jurisdictional and legal peculiarities relevant to *The Merchant of Venice*. The question of what jurisdiction, if any, Shakespeare had in mind for the play's fictional lawcase has been much debated. I have argued for the special appropriateness of a jurisdiction which was originally derived from Italy, but well known to Elizabethans. This was the jurisdiction of the pan-European traditional International Law Merchant. Uniquely in England, some Law Merchant tribunals allowed a combination of summary civil and criminal judgement (as is seen in the ‘pie-Powders’ court of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*). This very combination of judgements in the trial scene of *the Merchant of Venice* therefore need not have provided, *pace* Kornstein, any grounds for an appeal.

Others of Kornstein's law points are less ahistorical. He discusses at length a social need for appropriate limitations on the freedom to make contracts, and there were parallel (if subtly different) sixteenth-century discussions of enforcement or relief from the provisions of 'sealed bonds' like Shylock's.

Even more interesting, in spite of partial anachronism, is Kornstein's citation of a modern principle of 'equal protection of the laws', under which he condemns the 'vile Alien Statute' invoked by Portia against Shylock. Despite his revulsion at the *unequally* protective 'Alien Statute' of Venice cited by Portia, at first glance such a statute would seem hardly remarkable from an Elizabethan perspective. In 1601 Elizabeth arranged to expel from England all 'Negars and blackamoors'. In 1594 she seemed hesitant to punish the unfortunate Doctor Lopez, but Jews were so *unequally* protected in her realm as to be officially outlawed. Although they were not enacted, other Elizabethan anti-Alien laws were repeatedly proposed, and economic surveys were undertaken to investigate their applicability. Roman Catholics also suffered legal disabilities in Shakespeare's time, and possibly Shakespeare's family suffered under these. Yet, despite these circumstances, I will argue that legal and social inequality based on prejudice is intended to be seen as unjust within the context of *The Merchant of Venice*.

II

To bring this into focus, I will first trace allusions in the play to legalistic biblical materials. In the course of his dramatic handling of a litigious and mercantile Jew, Shakespeare drew so heavily upon biblical stories concerning especially property relations and legal vindication that *The Merchant of Venice* contains the most extensive biblical references in all his work. Current legal topics were also apparently meditated upon by...
Shakespeare for *The Merchant of Venice*. I believe that the play reflects a contemporary crisis about justice. Historically, this resulted from no simple matter of ‘law before equity’ or any converse formula, but rather from the philosophic casualties of a battleground between conflicting and combative jurisdictions.12

Certainly the riddle of where true justice lies was made more complex both in *The Merchant of Venice* and in Shakespeare's London by the presence of economically important alien subcommunities. Those were generally tolerated, although their rights, for instance to trade and to employ English men and women, suffered periodic verbal attack and occasional outbursts of unofficial anti-foreigner rioting. So Shakespeare's allusions to social and ethical questions concerning aliens, as in Gobbo's ruminations on employment by Shylock, touched live issues. Yet not entirely live, for it is most likely that Elizabethan London did not provide Shakespeare or his audience with visible prototypes for the legal treatment and actual behaviour of Jews.13 There were, however, many refugee households, and foreign merchants or visitors whom Shakespeare could have asked about continental Jews; with certainty, by early Jacobean times, Shakespeare had contacts with artisans who numbered among London's alien communities.14

The balance of evidence indicates that Shakespeare's personal associations were unlikely to have produced close observation of any Jews.15 One of the surprises of *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, is that he imagined a Shylock exhibiting a propensity often seen in tolerated Jewish minorities, which is his enthusiastic voluntary turning to Christian courts and lawyers.16 Shylock's doomed pursuit of a Venetian legal underpinning for his revenge against Venice embodies some of the most complex human motives portrayed in the play.

III

In his pursuit of revenge Shylock repeatedly makes references to Old Testament stories of the legal vindication of the oppressed and of the restoration of their denied freedom or rights. One such reference is made in a moment of anticipated triumph, when all seems to be going Shylock's way in his lawcase against the Christian merchant Antonio. Highly gratified by the apparent progress of the case, Shylock exclaims of the seemingly unbiased Christian justicer Portia/Balthazar: ‘A Daniel come to judgment: yea, a Daniel!’ (4.1.219). Significantly, the name ‘Daniel’ means in Hebrew ‘God has judged’.

Shylock does not refer directly to the biblical book of Daniel in which the exiled Jewish hero is first valued for skill in interpreting dreams and visions, but then, for his piety, is thrown into a lions' den. Yet there is a parallel between various demands for the rigid application of Venetian laws in Shakespeare's play and the legalistic basis for Daniel's ordeal; Daniel is punished through the application of an inflexible law of the Medes and Persians obtained by his enemies solely in order to catch Daniel out.17

Let us delay discussion of such stories of jurisprudential chicanery to note first that Shylock explicitly refers to Daniel as a shrewd lawyer, rather than as an unfairly treated Jewish alien. Shylock's reference must then be to the story in the book of Susanna in which Daniel appears as a resourceful detective/advocate. In this apocryphal book of Shakespeare's frequently employed Geneva Bible, Daniel wins a court case for the innocent but vulnerable Susanna, and thereby defends justice itself. He astutely represents her, saving her person and her reputation despite the apparent hopelessness of confronting the perjured testimony of two salacious Elders. These lying old men are not only establishment figures, but also possess the crushing moral authority of actually being judges. What is crucial in Shylock's allusion is that Daniel's advocacy for Susanna before the court of the people defends the friendless weak against the socially powerful. It is also important that Daniel's defence of Susanna relies on a cunning legal stratagem; he separates the two false witnesses and traps them into contradictory statements. The risky legal adventures of Susanna lead to a biblical conclusion that God ‘saves those who hope in him’, even if they are in desperate straits.
As his own hopes rise, Shylock begins to identify himself with a socially weaker party avenged and vindicated by law, and so remembers Susanna's legal rescue by Daniel. His joy in seeming to win his law case with Portia's aid shows Shylock's complex motives, which include not only revenge against powerful Antonio, but also a desire for public acknowledgement of his rights, and thus for social recognition.

Shylock's intended foul revenge is only ambiguously legal, and is necessarily incapable of rendering the good he desires. Nevertheless, in the complexity of his motivation Shylock is unique among fictional Jews of the age. These were typically stereotyped as monsters of furtive, gloating, mass-murdering perfidy. Correspondingly, Shylock's broken-hearted ending is unlike the merely physical dismemberment through torture that demolishes other Elizabethan literary Jew-monsters.

IV

Shylock's excitement when he lauds Portia's Daniel-like astuteness is not only villainous gloating. The peculiarly urgent significance he attaches to his anticipated legal victory is clarified by a consideration of Shylock's lengthier allusions early in the play to the legal manoeuvres recorded in the Book of Genesis of the patriarch Jacob. These are manoeuvres that Shylock finds wholly good. Shylock first mentions Jacob's wrested inheritance, 'wrought' by his 'wise mother' (1.3.68), thus making the only approving comment on mothers in The Merchant of Venice (all others are bawdy, cynical or both). This allusion introduces an explicitly approving account by Shylock of the trickery Jacob used to gain an advantage over the revenge upon Laban. Both biblical stories, purportedly told to justify lending money for interest, are oblique to this purpose, but both have other compelling resonances in The Merchant of Venice.

An important factor common to both of these stories is that they involve peculiar dealings with animals. This fact, if not its significance, is obvious in Shylock's account from Genesis 30-1 of how 'Jacob graz'd his uncle Laban's sheep' (1.3.66), but it arises also in connection with his allusion to how Jacob became holy Abraham's 'third possessor' (1.3.68-9), that is, the third Hebrew patriarch. Genesis 27 tells how Jacob's 'wise mother' Rebekah helped him to trick the second patriarch, Isaac, into giving to him a deathbed blessing intended for the first-born son Esau. To this end Rebekah covered Jacob with the 'skins of the kids’ so that he appeared to blind Isaac's touch to be a 'hairy man' like Esau, and she dressed him in animal skins smelling of the hunter Esau. This looks like a direct application of a technique of benevolent deception still practised by shepherds today; to save an orphaned lamb they place the skin of a stillborn lamb over it to trick the stillborn's mother into accepting it as her own. Shakespeare, raised near the Cotswolds, knew of such techniques of husbandry, as many in his audiences may have done. For them Shylock's allusion to the biblical pastoralist's ruse was a first hint in The Merchant of Venice of an inspired use of trickery.

The story of Jacob and blind Isaac re-echoes in the play in the ludicrous episode of the 'confusions', or practical jokes, perpetrated by Launcelot Gobbo on his 'more than sand-blind' father, who refuses him blessings, finding him too hairy (2.2.30-95). This burlesque emphasizes how in the Bible divinely controlled fate, acting through means that may even seem unjust, selects a destined heir through deception.

After alluding to Jacob's inheritance, Shylock gives Antonio a rendition of the story of Jacob's revenge on Laban which, in the context of their ongoing financial negotiations, has sinister implications. Involving a crafty contract, in effect a ‘merry bond’, which yields redress for a legitimate grievance, this story again describes Jacob's trickery. After Laban has repeatedly cheated Jacob of the rewards due for decades of labour, Jacob negotiates for a final wage all the (normally rare) black or parti-coloured offspring of his flocks. Jacob then employs specialized animal breeding techniques, to his great advantage. By inducing all the best animals of Laban's flocks to conceive 'streak'd and pied' offspring, he gains all the profits of the herds.

This biblical story, like the tale of Jacob acquiring Esau's blessing and birthright, might seem to us only an account of crafty cheating. But the Renaissance responded differently to Jacob's tactics. The episode of the
coloured sheep is followed in Genesis by Jacob's explanation to his two wives (Laban's daughters) that God Himself ordained his success (31:4-10). In the Geneva or ‘Breeches’ translation of the Bible often used by Shakespeare the passage is glossed marginally: ‘This declareth that the thing which Iacob did before, was by Gods commandement, and not through deceite.’ Next Jacob tells his wives that in a dream God's angel showed him the way to his safe vindication, and the Geneva Bible glosses: ‘This Angell was Christ.’ Thus Shakespeare's audience may well have held Jacob's cunning legal moves to be an unorthodox but no less justified means of attaining an outcome ordained divinely, an outcome vindicating the oppressed.

Just like Jacob, whom he describes making a seemingly foolish but wily contract with oppressive Laban, Shylock obtains a silly-seeming ‘merry bond’ from Antonio. His aim is also to obtain compensation. Analogously with Jacob wearing animal skins, Shylock later mimics animality in his insistence on taking Antonio's flesh (justifying accusations he is a ‘cut-throat dog’ or ‘wolf’). Antonio, for his part, notices merely that Shylock's story of Jacob's practice against Laban does not excuse the taking of monetary interest (nor does Shylock take any from Antonio on this occasion). There is deep irony in how the Christian merchant impatiently understands Shylock's stories in a mercantile light only, and cannot hear how much the Jew admires the third biblical patriarch's skill in obtaining a ‘merry’ legal redress for injustices.

The picture unseen by Antonio in Shylock's story, of the powerless foreigner Jacob besting the established local patriarch Laban, explains why Shylock does not retire in defeat after the egregious theft of his wealth and his daughter. He seeks rather for vindication on the terms of Venetian justice, and yearns to present such an excellent legal case against Antonio that it is sure to succeed. Just as Othello must show himself the most superb of Venetian soldiers to overcome the racial prejudices that he has internalized, so Shylock must show himself to be the most adroit Venetian litigant and businessman.

There are things in Shakespeare that cannot be appreciated without imagining that some of his characters have mental interiors. Why did Antonio fail to comprehend the point of Shylock's story about Jacob's divinely inspired revenge, and also why isn’t he made suspicious by Shylock's willingness to lend him money without taking interest? Is he distracted even more than his unworldly ‘want-wit’ sadness described at the play's start might account for, or deaf to the ominous drift of Shylock's question: ‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend thee three thousand ducats?’ (1.3.116-17)? In twenty lines Shylock five times repeats that Antonio has abused him as a ‘dog’ or ‘cur’. Antonio's response is, 'I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again’ (1.3.126). Thus Antonio flaunts his hatred of the Jew while he puts his life in hands that must be clenched at hearing his hate.

This may seem suicidal. Indeed by the time of his law trial Antonio's melancholy has deepened to the point where he craves only death. Using animal imagery in ways new to the play, he speaks of himself as a sacrificial lamb. Correspondingly, he and Gratiano relabel the former ‘dog’ Shylock as a ‘wolf’, perhaps recalling the name of the infamous Doctor Lopez. But unlike the historical Lopez, Shylock makes an excellent legal case for himself, which despite prejudice seems to give him ascendancy.

At this point Shylock gleefully seizes the dramatic and linguistic initiative, transforming the Christians' animal images by saying that he intends to use Antonio in no other way than they use ‘many a purchas’d slave, / Which (like your asses, and your dogs and mules) / You use in abject and in slavish parts, / Because you bought them’ (4.1.90-3). In other words, Shylock spitefully reviles the Christians by claiming to imitate their low moral stature. Despite sentimentalists' readings, Shylock similarly concludes the famous ‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’ speech not with a noble plea for equality, but by spitefully justifying a Jew's desire for Bacon's ‘wild justice’ of illegal revenge on the basis of ferocious ‘Christian example’ (3.1.60-6). However, in his argument about asses and slaves Shylock may extend his sarcasm into an even more biting and unexpected area than such levelling ethical nihilism. In the First Folio punctuation (more clearly than in the Arden), his ambiguous retort may even propose that the Christians might support bestiality:
You have among you many a purchased slave,
Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in servile parts,
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?

(TLN 1996-2000)

We will find the legal and ideological aspects of such a suggestion crucial. Before addressing them, we may note that Shylock, in taxing the Christians on keeping slaves, may recall with bitterness the Scholastic doctrine that ‘all Jews collectively inherited servile status to Christians’. It may also reflect the legal status of Jews as the king’s property in England between the Conquest and their expulsion.

But usually (or in practice) such semi-feudal ownership was more constrained by decency than Shylock's mercantile ‘asses/slaves’ equation, which obliterates distinctions of human life, animal life and material goods. Indeed the very making of such an equation might seem to condemn Shylock's morality, compared with the Christians'. But the play quite promptly upsets this distinction, by showing two Venetian men blithely regarding their wives as their absolute property, as disposable as so much livestock:

bassanio

Antonio I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem’d above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

[...]

gratiano

I have a wife who I protest I love,—
I would she were in heaven, so she could
Entreat some power to change this currish Jew.

(4.1.278-88)

On hearing these edifying offers, Shylock remarks with wholly justified sarcasm, and also in dismay for his apostate daughter, ‘These be the Christian husbands!’

V

Often without explicit censure, The Merchant of Venice repeatedly presents characters confusing human with animal life, thereby suggesting ethical equations of life with property. Thus Shylock dismisses his lazy servant Gobbo with comparisons to unprofitable livestock.

Later Shylock seems to equate his paternal relationship with cash when he polishes Marlowe's Barabas's ‘O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss!’ to: ‘My daughter, O my ducats! O my daughter!’ (2.8.15). But Shakespeare, as opposed to Marlowe, tempers his Jew's mercenariness in relation to his daughter when the human/animal distinction becomes crucial in Shylock's shocked response to learning of Jessica's bartering of Leah's love-token turquoise ring for a monkey.

Shylock's hatred of Antonio is also not limited by a cash nexus; no amount of ‘moneys' can buy off his revenge on his reviler and tormentor. Yet he explains this with bitter animal/human sarcasm, pretending that his hatred is as inexplicable as an animal phobia: ‘men there are love not a gaping pig! / Some that are mad if they behold a cat!’
There are many other strange concatenations of hatred with animal imagery in the play, as when Shylock sarcastically mocks his own supposed mercenariness by asserting that a financial option on Antonio's human flesh is ‘not so estimable, profitable neither / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats’ (1.3.162-3). These concatenations are focused and elucidated by an oddity of legal history. To find the appropriate connection we must take a close look into some little regarded elements of the play.

VI

Seemingly minor excrescences of Shakespearian texts may hold clues to deep themes and meanings. One such excrescence produces a conundrum and tonal crux of *The Merchant of Venice* when, in supposedly idyllic Belmont, the newly married Lorenzo accuses Launcelot Gobbo of the ‘getting up of the negro's belly’ (3.5.35). This accusation is framed in a scene containing much quibbling, and might seem to disclose no more than the insignificant tastelessness of a bawdy mini-subplot. But the complex wording of Gobbo's reply to Lorenzo's accusation serves rather as a key, or the second half of a key, to unlock the cupboard of prevalent social attitudes as portrayed in Belmont. Evaluation of these attitudes is crucial for a proper understanding of the play.

The first half of the key provided by Gobbo's overtly crude excuse for his fornication is found in the concept behind a repulsive legality noted by Sir Edward Coke. Coke discusses a law symptomatic of fear and hatred which made a marriage between a Christian and Jew equivalent to the *clamantia peccata* of sodomy and bestiality. According to his *Institutes*, ‘the party so offending should be burnt alive’. Indeed an unusual case of such a burning in 1222 is discussed in Pollock and Maitland's monumental *History of English Law*, which also ponders an alternative view that burial alive was more appropriate than burning for Christians married to Jews.

However, for our discussion, not rare punishments but the legal equivalencing of Jewish miscegenation with bestiality is most significant. For, even beyond biblical injunctions, Shakespeare's age viewed the *damantia peccata* of bestiality with an anxiety fuelled by ideological terror. Although actual indictments in Elizabethan England for bestiality were rare, and convictions still rarer, the offence was violently condemned. According to the analysis of Keith Thomas, this was because it violated an insecure yet crucial division of humans from animals. So nudity, long hair, night work, nocturnal burglary (for, said Coke's *Institutes*, night was ‘the time […] wherein beasts run about seeking their prey’), the play-acting of animal roles and even swimming caused great anxiety. No wonder then, wrote Thomas:

> Bestiality, accordingly, was the worst of sexual crimes because, as one Stuart moralist put it, ‘it turns man into a very beast, makes a man a member of a brute creature.’ The sin was the sin of confusion; it was immoral to mix the categories. Injunctions against ‘buggery with beasts' were standard in seventeenth-century moral literature, though occasionally the topic was passed over, ‘the fact being more filthy than to be spoken of.’ Bestiality became a capital offence in 1543 and, with one brief interval [1553-62], remained so until 1861. Incest, by contrast, was not a secular crime at all until the twentieth century.

In accord with what Keith Thomas identifies as persistent early-modern ‘discourses on the animal nature of negroes’, the doctrine equating Jewish-Christian miscegenation with bestiality is extended to Moorish-European miscegenation also when envious Iago repeatedly describes newly married Othello and Desdemona as beasts coupling. In the light of such equivalencing, suggesting ideological damnation beyond any aesthetic repugnance, we may understand why Portia so strongly abhors the prospect of marriage with a Prince having ‘the complexion of a devil’, even if ‘he have the condition of a saint’ (1.2.123-4).

The legal equivalencing of miscegenated human marriages with the terrible *clamantia peccata* of bestiality may also help explain why *The Merchant of Venice* contains nearly eighty references to animals, and why the
most striking of these are to animals breeding.\textsuperscript{39} In fact, Jewish Law prescribes a more humane standard of care for animals than Christian interpreters of Shakespeare's time recognized when they overlooked or anthropocentrically allegorized Old Testament demands for kind treatment.\textsuperscript{40} Nonetheless, of all the characters in the play Shylock uses negative animal imagery most often (thirty-three times), and most vehemently. In Shakespeare's creation of Shylock it seems Jewish dietary restrictions were taken as characteristic of revulsion for all beasts, despite the many Old Testament laws protecting them.\textsuperscript{41}

So, as mentioned earlier, Shylock describes an irrational detestation of animals or of certain music when asked to explain his hatred of Antonio:

\begin{verbatim}
What if my house be troubled with a rat [...]  
Some men there are love not a gaping pig!  
Some that are mad if they behold a cat!  
And others when the bagpipe sings i’ th’ nose  
Cannot contain their urine.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{(4.1.44-50)}

But Shylock's allusions to animal or music-phobia are a disingenuous opposite of what they claim to be: rather than describing an unfounded aversion, they recall how Antonio persistently called him a dog, and how the music of a Venetian festival covered the theft of his wealth and daughter.\textsuperscript{42} Again, he images unpleasant animal/human interactions to represent more ugly human/human ill-will.

A mock denial of ill motives where these are crucial, a sly or spiteful self-denigration, and deliberate confusion of the animal with the human, characterize also the covert message of Lancelot Gobbo's dismissal of responsibility for his fornication. Like Shylock's jest about hating Antonio for 'no reason', Gobbo's self-exoneration for having illicitly impregnated an unseen and nameless female ‘negro’ or ‘Moor’ is ostensibly humorous. It caps a scene of quibbling, perhaps not really merry, in Belmont. This begins with Jessica cornered by her erstwhile servant/ally Gobbo, now elevated in rank, who over-familiarly, uncomfortably and blasphemously (by denying grace) wrangles that she must be ‘damn’d’ either with Jewish ancestry or else (if she is not Jewish) with bastardy. Next, in a parody recalling Shylock's commercial grievance against Antonio's interest-free lending which ‘brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice’ (1.3.39-40), Gobbo laments Jessica's religious conversion because:

\begin{verbatim}
this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs,—if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we  
shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{(3.5.21-3)}

Although he is now a licensed clown, Gobbo's use of commercial/animal imagery in connection with Christian conversion may make the auditor begin to wonder if there is something untoward in his raillery.

At this moment Jessica's new husband Lorenzo enters, and she reports to him how Launcelot:

\begin{verbatim}
tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says  
you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you  
raise the price of pork.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{(3.5.29-33)}

To this gibe against his wife and his marriage, Lorenzo retorts with a counter-accusation of miscegenation against Gobbo: ‘I shall answer better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the negro's belly:
the Moor is with child by you Launcelot!' To this Gobbo makes his riddling reply:

It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for.

(3.5.37-9)

Lorenzo comments on this, ‘How every fool can play upon the world!’, presumably pointing towards quibbles including the multiple puns: ‘more’/‘Moor’; ‘more’ = greater vs. more = pregnant; and take = understand vs. take = sexually use.

Yet there is more going on in Gobbo's complexly phrased rationalization than simply his skill with what Lorenzo later calls the 'tricksy word'. Gobbo says that if the pregnant Moor is ‘less than an honest woman’ (and therefore is a woman) she is ‘indeed more’ than he took her for. This amounts to a confession or boast that Launcelot took her for less than a woman of any kind, for he ‘took’ her as an animal. With the greatest effrontery he frankly admits that racial miscegenation was, for him, just bestiality.

VII

Gobbo's ‘humorous’ crudeness about the pregnant Moor creates a unique and valuable episode of the play, yielding a context in which racial prejudice is stripped of its more usual disguise of politeness and social grace. The Clown's indecent racialism is not wholly different from the casual bigotry of the higher-born Belmontese visitors and natives, and it serves to point up what may tend to be confused or overridden by their charm.

Due appreciation of our distance from Shakespeare's age does not obscure his depiction of the ‘better’ classes of Belmont as comfortable and indeed satisfied with their offhanded disdain for aliens and minorities. Possibly the reason that their collective attitudes of scorn and unthinking bias have rarely been explicitly commented upon is that the racialist attitudes of the socially ‘superior’ characters of The Merchant of Venice need not affront us unless we choose to be painfully responsive to them. If we choose to enjoy a comedy with clear winners and losers, or to identify with a ‘winning side’, we may easily accept the self-estimation of the play's blithely overweening characters and evade whatever may taint their charismatic gloss, fashionable charm and eventual triumph.

Moreover Shakespeare makes the taking of an ethical stance which can question the dominant group's position very difficult for both Elizabethan and modern audiences. The Merchant of Venice is deliberately designed to evoke a specific anxiety inhibiting any disapproval of its luxury-loving Belmontese. Those who attack their leisureed ‘good life’ may appear boorishly Malvolio-like or untutored in pleasure. Some of the finest poetry of the play specifically warns off resistance to Belmont's softer charms, disparaging that dangerous curmudgeon ‘The man that hath no music in himself’ (5.1.83). Many critics even go farther, identifying in wealthy Belmont a kind of utopia, a place of giving without stint and a community of unlimited selfless love. I would argue, rather, that a lesson is dearly bought in the play's last Act: that adult love distinctly requires both a clear sense of the self and an understanding of the need for limitations in giving.

Despite the warnings and temptations of Belmont's elite, I believe that their mixture of bigotry and cruelty with social privilege and charm is a product of Shakespeare's deeply intentional irony. Such irony adds a clanging impact to the unruffled expression, at a moment of joy, of a racialist metaphor for mistaken or misled perception:

Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea: the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which times put on
To entrap the wisest.

(3.2.97-101)

Bassanio's aberrant association of an in-reality ugly ‘Indian beauty’ with a trap and a sea of danger passes without any comment in the scene, as it does in most explicit criticism. Yet corresponding unnoted particulars problematizing value are unquestionably manifest elsewhere in the play.

For example, the word ‘good’ is used in a particularly cynical way by Shylock when he carefully explains that by calling Antonio a ‘good man’ he means merely good for the ducats owed (1.3.11-15). The same word appears sixty-three times in the play, mainly used by the Venetian men to mean profitably effective or in conventional epithets (as in ‘good signors’ or ‘good Leonardo’). But ethical ‘good’ is also discussed by Nerissa and Portia (1.2.10-28, 3.4.10, 4.1.257, 5.1.91); on varied uses of a single word hinge differences between material concerns, empty social conventions, and moral concerns.

If varied uses of a single word in The Merchant of Venice require irony-detecting discrimination, harder problems of interpretation arise in regard to the chauvinism of its Belmont. Veiled distinctions must be sifted without the aid of Shylock's very helpful key to his own comment on Antonio being only financially ‘good’:

Ho, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.

(1.3.13-15)

The only sure external test for literary irony requires a certainty about assumed values unavailable in The Merchant of Venice, where virtually all values presented are problematized. There may be clues, however, to an intended literary irony in the stylistic or structural quirks of over-emphatic expression or repetition (as there are in the hyper-altruistic zeal of the cannibalistic letter-writer of Swift's A Modest Proposal). Accordingly, in basically monocultural Belmont one hears excessively many casual slurs against foreigners, some like Bassanio's aspersion quite violent, which may imply an habitual trend of prejudice there.

Discrimination on this point is perplexing. Are we being tested when we are invited to join the clear lead of Nerissa in approving Portia's repetitively jeering characterizations of her foreign suitors? Are Portia's remarks really witty, or are they desperate antidotes to her initially depressed weariness with 'this great world' (1.2.1-9)? Arguably, Portia's anti-foreigner invective may be an extra-dramatic 'stand-up comic' bid for the pit's vulgar laughter. But in most instances her comments are not mere banter, for they purport to represent her offstage experiences of the Neapolitan, Palatine, French, English, Scottish, and German suitors' odd behaviours. Yet the culminating instance of Portia's anti-suitor gibes cannot be excused as wry reportage. In this she gratuitously dismisses the courtship of the Prince of Morocco before she has seen or met him; she denigrates his 'complexion of a devil' after seeing only his (presumably black) 'forerunner […] who brings word the prince his master will be here to-night' (1.2.118-25). So Shakespeare presents us with the image of absolute racial prejudice.

We are placed at risk of being seduced by elements in the play asking for our tacit allowance of Portia's stark prejudice against Morocco. For one thing, the Belmontese world of genteel privilege, luxury and wit discourages all punctilious distinctions or unsuave scruples. In such a world, the harshness of racial discrimination may seem attenuated, as are the later cruelties of the sexual ring tricks, by being attuned to near-musical conventions of teasing and charm. A great majority of modern critics greatly favour what they hear as the social harmonies of Belmont, which drown out for them Portia's prejudgement of the
not-yet-seen, soon stunningly seen, ‘tawnie Moore all in white’ (Folio stage direction, TLN 514).

But by making this one clear instance of Portia's wholly unsupported prejudice resemble her former wryly ‘observant’ nationality quips, the play tempts us to lose our own ethical bearings. Here, as often, The Merchant of Venice seems deliberately to make difficult its demands on audiences; here these are demands of the sort Peter Davison believes implicitly made with regard to racism: ‘often in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and especially in [Othello] the audience is called upon to exercise judgement, to distinguish facts from its prejudices’.47 But the misleading parallel of Portia's remarks on Morocco with her earlier ones on other suitors, rather than confusing us, may challenge us to identify a tonal difference. Such a difference does arise, because Portia cannot describe Morocco or his behaviour. Her barb must therefore be purely verbal. Although in Shakespeare's age punning could present true wit or even profundity, it could also portray moral shallowness.48 Portia's equivocation between Morocco's ‘complexion’ meaning skin colour and his ‘complexion’ in the sense of humoural make-up or character does mark an unamiable decline in the quality of her repartee. It displays none of the fashionable skill in Theophrastian character sketching she has shown before—we may even feel vicarious embarrassment on account of her descent from high-spirited wryness into desperately brittle hilarity.49

But Shakespeare makes it impossible for audiences to dwell long on Portia's racial prejudice, although for some its acrid taste may linger. For when the Prince of Morocco arrives he indeed at first displays an unbalanced personality, or unfortunate ‘complexion’. In a seeming anticipation of racial prejudice he shows himself vainglorious and magniloquent, over-vaunting his heroic valour and sexual ‘blood’. So he begins, ‘Mislike me not for my complexion’, boasts of virility, and claims that he can ‘Pluck the young suckling cubs from the she-bear / Yea mock the lion when a roars for prey’ (2.1.1-38). Again, as with Shylock, animality is actually asserted by an individual who is subject to social prejudice. This is of course in accord with the prejudicial English marriage law.

Morocco's embattled vanity leads him to mis-choose the golden casket, which occasions Portia's gruesomely dismissive couplet:

A gentle riddance,—draw the curtains, go,—
Let all of his complexion choose me so.

(2.7.78-9)

Her racialist relief is expressed with perhaps a telling displacement of idiom, wherein ‘gentle riddance’ substitutes for a more usual locution such as ‘fair’ or ‘good riddance’ (OED, ‘riddance’, 4). This may suggest that for Portia ‘gentle’ behaviour, good breeding, prevails over any other good.

On another plane, Portia's elation with being safe from marriage with Morocco may imply more than racial aversion. The defeat of any unwanted suitor may give her some relief from the feelings of oppression and powerlessness under the mortmain of her father's will: ‘I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father’ (1.2.23-5). Antipatriarchal motives may well inspire Portia's anti-foreigner gibes, all of which are made against sexually acquisitive men.50 Yet, if Portia's sense of oppression is lightened by Morocco's defeat, she lacks compassion for a fellow-sufferer under the will that oppresses her. Shakespeare pointedly shows Portia administering to Morocco (and only to him) the oath required under the will, ‘if you choose wrong / Never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage’ (2.1.40-2). In accepting this stipulation, hazardizing his sexual and dynastic future, Morocco is fully as brave as he claims to be. Because he risks a heavy loss for her, it is difficult to hear the pat, sententious couplet above, in which Portia welcomes his destruction.
Characteristically, the play complicates the issue. The Prince of Arragon soon after finds a mocking fool's head in his chosen silver casket, which seemingly releases him from his vow of permanent celibacy: ‘take what wife you will to bed, / I will always be your head: / So be gone, you are sped’ (2.9.70-2). Arragon's only punishment for his mistaken choice is humiliation. His choice of silver, although showing insincerity, may also reflect that he is white, not ‘tawnie’ or golden like Morocco. I would not insist on this contrast of Arragon's and Morocco's fate, but will note that it aligns with the variation in Portia's remarks about these suitors. Her sneers about Morocco's ‘complexion of a devil’ far exceed her brief gibe on Arragon's folly, suggesting that racial prejudice in Belmont is so virulent as to make miscegenation with bold Morocco more unacceptable than marriage with vain and foolish Arragon.

VIII

If all laws are enacted only to support the interests of powerful élites, or if law typically only strait-jackets human desires (these are the alternatives often proposed by recent commentaries on Literature and Law), then law can have little to do with literature's longstanding fascination with justice. But, conversely, part of the strong theatrical appeal of The Merchant of Venice may derive from what it shares with many other literary and folkloric portrayals of justice enacted. This is the satisfaction of a desire that may even be a human instinct, the desire to see redress of grievances and the orderly advancement of social good. Even a troubling critique of society, exposing the deficiencies of law, may hinge on a hope for such ‘good’.

To carry a bit farther our prior discussion of the varied uses of the epithet ‘good’ in The Merchant of Venice, let us note that its application in an often-repeated and insincerely conventional form of address is once applied even to ‘good Shylock’ (3.3.3). This is Antonio's phrase when he is about to be arrested for debt, when his vital interests are at stake. The hollowness of this form of address could not be more poignantly indicated than by its use in imploring a reviled enemy. But its typical hollowness in use is once made even more explicit, by means of an inversion. This occurs in another highly charged context, when Solanio, regretting his former cynical banter about Antonio’s depression (1.1.47-56), brings the news of Antonio’s merchant losses. Solanio here eschews what he calls his former ‘slips of prolixity’, and consciously if brokenly tries to rehabilitate the worn-out phrase ‘good Antonio’, and recover its meaning:


it is true […] that the good Antonio, the honest Antonio;—O that I had a title good enough to keep his name company!—

(3.1.10-14)

That the very word ‘good’ can be used so feelingly in The Merchant of Venice, as well as in self-interested, sarcastic, and unthinkingly conventional ways, surely indicates that we must confront this play with very alert attention.

With such attention we have noted that the play's pervasive animal imagery, bearing both legal and ideological ramifications, rears up in a ‘witty’ exchange between a Clown and a newly married Jew and Christian to disgrace its often critically vaunted world of Belmont. Although Jessica identifies Portia as a near-goddess in the same short scene, Launcelot's guilt-dismissing ‘confession’ still exposes the submerged racist values of Portia’s realm. Well in advance of Gratiano's frighteningly obscene (not bawdy, nor erotic) castration jests, which cap Belmont's gender struggles while ending the play, Gobbo's ugly sexual gloating demonstrates how all the resolving finalities of the comedy are undercut by chronic confusions. These are confusions between seeking wealth or pleasure, fitting societal moulds, and possessing full humanity.

Notes


4. Kornstein, *Kill All the Lawyers*, p. 84.

5. Ibid., pp. 68-79.


9. See David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England 1485-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 49-101. The execution for treason of Lopez in 1594 occasioned a wave of Elizabethan anti-Semitism which was engineered ‘in Essex's interest’ according to J. R. Brown, ed. the Arden Edition *The Merchant of Venice* (1955; London: Methuen, 1977), p. xxiii. (Except where otherwise noted, all references to the play will be from this edition.) But *Merchant* was unlikely to have been occasioned or influenced by the Earl of Essex's manipulation of the Lopez affair, since Shakespeare was allied with an anti-Essex faction; see my ‘Holofernes in Rabelais and Shakespeare and some manuscript verses of Thomas Harriot’, *Etudes Rabelaisiennes* 25 (1992), pp. 131-5.


12. I argue in ‘Law Merchant’ that *The Merchant of Venice* is set in the context of profound jurisprudential problems arising from the competition for profitable business of King's Bench with Common Pleas, the intellectual jostling of common law with equity, and the common lawyers' attack on the powers of the special jurisdictions of Borough Courts, Merchant Law, Admiralty, Staple Courts, etc. (not officially over until 1977!).

13. A community of Sephardi Jews was present in Shakespeare's London: see Lucien Wolf, ‘Jews in Elizabethan England’, *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society*, 11 (1928), 1-91, which states, pp. 21-2, that the Marranos were tolerated ‘so long as they did not break the law or outrage public sentiment’, although once, in 1592, they departed from secrecy to ‘assemble for Divine worship in London’ under diplomatic protection. According to Katz, *The Jews*, p. 108, these Marranos were generally so secretive that ‘The only Jews of most people's acquaintance were biblical figures, literary characters, and entirely imaginary.’ On contrary speculations see below.

Institutes, 52 (1989), 250-3.

15. On whether Shakespeare knew any of the ‘hundred or more’ Jews in his London see James Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews (The Parkes Lecture: University of Southampton, 1992), pp. 1-7. This is generally sceptical, but notes, p. 17, that Thomas Coryate ‘expresses no surprise […] that Amis [a Jew Coryate met in Constantinople] had spent thirty years in a London that many scholars assume was free of Jews’.

Shakespeare's acquaintance with converted Italian Jews could be argued if he knew of John Florio's partial Jewishness, or else through the highly unlikely actuality that: (1) Emilia Bassano Lanier was intimate with Shakespeare, as alleged by A. L. Rowse, ed., Emilia Lanier, The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady (London, 1978), pp. 6-37; (2) all of the musical Bassano family in England were Jews, as is well argued by Roger Prior, ‘Jewish Musicians in the Tudor Court’, Musical Quarterly, 49 (1983), 253-95, p. 253; (3) the staunchly Christian Emilia Bassano even knew of her ancestral faith; (5) she confided about this to Shakespeare. Only if these concur is it possible that Emilia's Jewishness might have influenced The Merchant of Venice, as alleged in A. L. Rowse, What Shakespeare Read—and Thought (New York: Coward,McCann and Geoghegan, 1981), p. 172.

16. As detailed by Robert Kirsner in ‘Rabbi Sem Tob the Poetic “Melamed” of Fourteenth Century Spain’, the Sepharad 1492-1992 conference (7-10 May 1992) at San Francisco State University. To illustrate typicality Professor Kirsner told me a parallel anecdote from his own life: the congregation of the Feinberg synagogue of Cincinnati Ohio, divided in the 1950s over whether to seat women with men during religious services or to preserve traditional segregation, asked an eminent Christian judge to decide the issue (he chose integration).

17. Daniel 6:4. The conspiratorial legal moves of the envious rivals against Daniel are emphasized in the twelfth-century text of The Play of Daniel (Egerton Ms. 2615) and in W. H. Auden's poem ‘Daniel […] a sermon’ written to accompany the play's 1958 performance: these texts are printed in the album booklet of the performance, Decca DL 9402.

18. Aside from Shylock's perceptions of Rebekah and Leah, the play excludes images of powerful women and of women valued as other than possessions. So, all of Portia's shrewd actions require denial of gender while her rival Antonio loses all his vigour when offering a breast in false-feminine nurturance. My ‘Constitutive Signifiers or Fetishes in The Merchant of Venice?’, The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 76 (1995), 373-87, finds these issues central.

19. These implications are not analysed in John Scott Colley, ‘Launcelot, Jacob, and Esau: Old and New Law in The Merchant of Venice’, Yearbook of English Studies, 10 (1980), 181-9, which sees Shylock's reference to the biblical story of Jacob and Laban only in relation to the story of Jacob and Esau. Colley references only the Bishops' Bible.

20. Vexed questions of just what Jacob's special methods of cattle breeding were, and particularly whether they were natural or miraculous in operation, are discussed in an essay on the tradition that maternal imagination may affect embryos: M. D. Reeve, ‘Conceptions’, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society, 215 (1989), 81-112. Reeve's discussion of exegetical and textual problems relevant to Jacob and Laban, pp. 85-92, does not consider Shakespeare or the Bible translations that he used.

21. That Laban's coloured animals have especially high value is richly ironic in the racial contexts of The Merchant of Venice, as we shall see.

22. On divine validation of the trickery of Esau see Colley, ‘Launcelot, Jacob and Esau’, p. 186. Condoned trickery constitutes a huge theme reflected in Solomonic justice, Jesuit teachings on equivocation, the trick statute in Tirso de Molina's Don Juan, Duke Vincentio's ‘craft’ in Measure for Measure, etc.


‘venture […] sway’d and fashion’d by the hand of heaven’ cannot ‘make interest good? / Or is our
gold and silver ewes and rams?’ (1.3.86-90) shows that he has not understood how, for Shylock,
trickery of the unjust may provide a divinely ordained recompense.

29. Pollock and Maitland, The History of English Law, vol. 1, 471, explains: ‘the Jew, though he is the
king’s serf, is a freeman in relation to all other persons’. See R. A. Routledge, ‘The Legal Status of the
a contemporary hand in the British Library copy 508.g.5(2.) adds, ‘But if converted he shall not be
burnt’.
and handed over to lay power a deacon who had turned Jew for the love of a Jewess. The apostate was
delivered to the sheriff of Oxfordshire, who forthwith burnt him […] This] prompt action seems to
have surprised his contemporaries, but was approved by Bracton’. Archbishop Langton’s proceedings
became quite famous for legal and political reasons discussed in F. W. Maitland, ‘The Deacon and the
where one partner in a Jewish marriage converts to Christianity, a rare instance where a full divorce
allowing remarriage was allowed, and another case in which ‘a Jewish widow was refused her dower
on the ground that her husband had been converted’.
32. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 549.
34. See statistics in ‘Bestiality and Law in Renaissance England’ pp. 147-50, an appendix to Bruce
Thomas Boehrer, ‘Bestial Buggery in A Midsummer Night’s Dream’, The Production of English
Renaissance Culture, ed. David Lee Miller, Sharon O’Dair, and Harold Weber (Ithaca: Cornell
36. Ibid., pp. 38-9. Slightly later human transfusion of animal blood, and still later vaccination, were
opposed on the same basis.
37. Ibid., p. 42; on later-emerging racist theories of human polygenism see ibid., p. 136.
38. Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Othello at last compares himself to a ‘base Indian’ or in the Folio text a ‘base Judean’ (TLN 3658),
and then stabs himself imaged as a ‘circumcised dog’.
39. This search was done using the University of Toronto’s TACT text analysis program applied to
40. Thomas, Man and the Natural World, pp. 22-4 and 151; but p. 137 claims that some common people
ignored this and regarded animals ‘in the way that Jews had before them, as essentially within the
covenant’.
41. Exodus 23:5 and 12; Deuteronomy 22:4; Proverbs 12:10; Hosea 2:18 even speaks of a holy covenant
with beasts.
42. Jessica says at 3.2.6 that Shylock’s murderous intention predated her elopement, but Ruth Nevo,
Comic Transformation in Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1980), argues persuasively, pp. 130-1, that
by emotional logic it must develop afterwards.
43. I argue in ‘Constitutive Signifiers’ that Antonio's selfless code is necessarily defeated by Portia and the marriage contract.

44. What Bassanio has in mind is made explicit in Montaigne's sceptical ‘An Apology’, Essays (New York: Modern Library, 1933), p. 429: ‘The Indians describe [beauty as] blacke and swarthy, with blabbered-thick lips, with a broad and flat nose, the inward gristle whereof they load with great gold-rings, hanging downe to their mouth’. The Oxford text places Bassanio’s lines in an aside, exonerating the others present from sharing his vision. Other editors emend, not seeing the implied contrast of Indian with the beauteous. Yet, as the Arden editor tersely notes, p. 82, ‘the Elizabethan aversion to dark skins gives sufficient meaning to the passage’.


48. On wordplay central to a Shakespeare play see my ‘A Spenserian Idea in The Taming of the Shrew’, English Studies, 66 (1985), 310-16; for an ignoble pun see King Lear, 1.1.11-12.

49. Production may highlight Portia's decline from witty discernment, may elide this, or may make it ambiguous and confusing. The last may be best, as it leaves uneasy responses unguided.


51. The locution ‘good sir[s]’, listed only four times by Bartlett, is actually very commonly used in Shakespeare's plays (62 times). In Hamlet, 2.1.47, Polonius explains its insincerity to his spy Reynoldo.

**Criticism: Allegory: Susan McLean (essay date 1996)**


*In the essay below, McLean identifies allegorical elements in The Merchant of Venice, arguing that the parable of the rebellious but repentant Prodigal Son is reenacted numerous times between different character pairings. Consequently, by the end of the play the audience is left to contemplate the virtue of forgiveness.*

The word “prodigal” appears more often in The Merchant of Venice than in any other play of Shakespeare's, yet the relevance to the play of the parable of the Prodigal Son has excited little critical attention.¹ Not only is Bassanio called “prodigal” by himself and Shylock, but Shylock also calls Antonio “a prodigal,” and Gratiano
alludes to the parable of the Prodigal Son just before Lorenzo elopes with Jessica. Bassanio and Antonio enact elements of the story of the Prodigal Son at a serious level, while Launcelot Gobbo and his father parody the same story. Jessica also rebels against paternal control, and Portia expresses her desire to do so, though she insists that she will never violate the conditions of her father's will. Instead, she uses the ring plot to create a scenario of disobedience, sin, repentance, and forgiveness that exorcizes the threat of her previous independent behavior and embodies the New Testament ideal of love, in contrast to the unforgiving attitude of Shylock toward his daughter.

“Prodigal” has three key meanings in the context of The Merchant of Venice. It can refer to extravagant expenditure, lavish generosity, or the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), whose reckless defiance of paternal control led to sin, ruin, repentance, and ultimate forgiveness. In the parable, the younger of two sons asks his father for his inheritance, leaves home, spends all of his money on harlots and riotous living, and is reduced to becoming a famished swineherd. He then returns home in repentance to ask to become one of his father's servants, but is received gladly by his father, who gives him the best robe, a ring, and shoes, and feasts him on a fat calf. The elder brother begrudges his father's celebration, pointing out that he has never been similarly rewarded for being virtuous and obedient, but his father tells him that it is appropriate to rejoice, “for this thy brother was dead, and is alive againe: and he was lost, but he is found” (Luke 15: 32, Geneva Bible).

The paradox of the Prodigal Son—that the sin is a necessary prelude to the forgiveness—echoes the theme of the “fortunate fall.” The parable presents generosity and mercy as the central attributes of Christianity, and it rejects the elder brother’s narrow focus on desert and obedience to his father's commandments. Allegorically, in the parable the elder brother is identified with the Jews and the laws of the Old Testament, the younger brother with the Christians, and the father with the merciful God of the New Testament. The parable thus brings together several themes that are important in The Merchant of Venice: the triumph of mercy over justice, as portrayed in the trial scene; the rewarding of humility over presumed desert, as exemplified in the casket scene; and the forgiveness of penitents, as seen in the ring plot and in the subplots concerning Launcelot and his father, and Lorenzo and Jessica.

The popularity of the Prodigal Son story in Renaissance literature has been attributed to several sources. Richard Helgerson suggests that stories of prodigals embodied the ongoing conflict between the two Renaissance traditions of “civic humanism and courtly romance,” in which “Humanism represented paternal expectation, and romance, rebellious desire” (41). Alan R. Young attributes the popularity of the theme in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama to its flexibility for exploring theological issues and “such special contemporary concerns as education, the proper use of wealth, and the responsibilities of a prince” (52-3). Young includes Shakespeare's Henry IV, parts 1 and 2 (which were written around the same time as The Merchant of Venice) among the plays that use the Prodigal Son motif.

Marilyn Williamson connects the popularity in the 1590's of romantic comedies about penniless young men who marry heiresses (such as Bassanio and Orlando) to the dearth of opportunities for social advancement among educated but impoverished young men, which encouraged fantasies of upward mobility through marriage to a wealthy woman (14). Williamson notes that in Shakespeare's romantic comedies the prodigal males often “put the powerful lady in the parent's place by asking her forgiveness” (33). This pattern also appears in Shakespeare's problem comedies, in which errant males, such as Bertram and Angelo, are redeemed by the forgiveness of virtuous women (58, 101).

Shakespeare's treatment of the Prodigal Son story is a radical departure from the didactic, admonitory treatment that the story usually received in early Tudor drama and fiction, in which “The prodigality of a son who defies his father's counsel is ruinous, not momentarily, in the third act of a play that will surely end happily, but forever” (Helgerson 35). Shakespeare restores the forgiveness that is central to the biblical parable and extends its scope to include romantic as well as filial relationships. The story of the Prodigal Son may have appealed to Shakespeare not only because forgiveness had a powerful claim on his imagination, but
also because it is crucial to the contrast that he wished to show in *The Merchant of Venice* between the values of the Old and the New Testaments.\(^4\)

For men, “prodigality” has overtones of sexual as well as financial impropriety, because the Prodigal Son of the parable wasted his patrimony on harlots. When Bassanio confesses to Antonio that he has lived beyond his means, he does not specify what he has spent his money on, but says

\[
\text{my chief care}
\]
\[
\text{Is to come fairly off from the great debts}
\]
\[
\text{Wherein my time something too prodigal}
\]
\[
\text{Hath left me gag’d.}
\]

(*Merchant 1.1.127-30*)\(^5\)

In this context, the word “prodigal” could allude to sexual expenditures, but—if so—Bassanio's stated intention of seeking a wife suggests that he means to reform his behavior. When Shylock uses “prodigal” to describe Bassanio (“I’ll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian” 2.5.15-16) or Antonio (“A bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto” 3.1.41-42) his meaning is primarily financial, but with suggestions of shameful behavior. However, the word tends to take on exclusively sexual connotations when applied to a woman, as is clear in *Hamlet* in Laertes's advice to Ophelia: “The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (1.3.36). Because sexual misbehavior was considered venial in a man, but unforgivable in a woman, the “prodigality” of Portia or Jessica has necessary limitations.

Bassanio is the most obvious parallel to the Prodigal Son. He wastes both his patrimony and the money that he had previously borrowed from Antonio, who then acts the part of the forgiving father and lends him more money. Later, Bassanio gives away Portia's ring and she accuses him of giving it to a woman, but once again he is forgiven.\(^6\) Bassanio's inherent generosity is visible when he hires the scapegrace Launcelot and tells a servant, “Give him a livery / More guarded [i.e., ornamented] than his fellows’“ (2.2.146-7). Marilyn Williamson argues that Bassanio's extravagance both clears him of suspicions of mercenary motives, and prepares the viewer for his ungreedy choice of the lead casket and his generosity in giving his wedding ring to the disguised Portia (33). Launcelot is more accurate than he knows when he tells Bassanio, “The old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you, sir: you have the grace of God, sir, and he hath enough” (2.2.141-3). In the context of the play, Bassanio's open-handedness—like Antonio's and Portia's—is the human reflection of divine mercy.

Antonio resembles the Prodigal Son in the lavishness of his generosity, in its nearly disastrous consequences, and in his eventual redemption, but there is no hint of selfishness in his behavior, so there is nothing for him to repent in order to gain salvation. He is identified more closely with the father of the parable and with Jesus himself than with the repentant sinner. Not only does he forgive Bassanio for putting him into a life-threatening situation, but also he intercedes with the court to reduce Shylock's penalty and convert him to Christianity (thereby giving Shylock a chance at salvation as well).

The character of Launcelot Gobbo has often been considered irrelevant to the main action. Leo Rockas, however, argues that Launcelot participates in the theme of father-child relationships (347-48), and René E. Fortin draws a further connection to the incident in Genesis 27 in which the younger son Jacob tricks his blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing that should have gone to his elder brother Esau, an incident that Christians interpreted as prefiguring the transfer of divine favor from the Jews to the Christians (266-68). The Launcelot-Old Gobbo plot also functions as a comic parody of the Prodigal Son story. Like the Prodigal Son, Launcelot is famished in the service of a bad master, Shylock, and he turns to his father to get a better post as the servant of Bassanio, who rewards him with a fancy livery (just as the Prodigal Son is given the best robe on his return). Launcelot initially leads his blind father to believe that he is dead, which then increases the
father's rejoicing upon learning that his son is actually alive. Old Gobbo does not kill a fat calf, but he does bring “a dish of doves” (2.2.127) as a present for Launcelot's master, and Launcelot persuades him to give them to Bassanio instead. As René E. Fortin has noted,

The doves also recall the doves or pigeons offered as sacrifice in the Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22-24); the passage lays stress upon this ritual as being according to the Law of Moses and highlights the fact that Jesus was himself observant of the Law.

The doves, which were prominently featured in pictorial representations of the Presentation in the Temple and were thus identified with paternal love, also recall the doves that Noah sent forth from the Ark (Genesis 8:8-12). They therefore are both a reminder of God's original covenant with the Jews and a symbol of the transfer of that covenant to the Christians, when the gift intended for Shylock is given to Bassanio instead.

The scene between the two Gobbos is funny because Launcelot's treatment of his father is distinctly unfilial, yet the father is no less happy to recover his son. Launcelot's behavior serves as a comic parallel to Jessica's treatment of Shylock (whose own attitude is so unfatherly that he wishes his daughter dead, if he could thus get his money back). Launcelot's effrontery also contrasts with the filial devotion of Portia to her father's will and of Bassanio to the fatherly Antonio. Launcelot's later concern that the conversion of Jews will raise the price of hogs (3.5.21-22) and his getting the Moor pregnant (3.5.37) may recall the Prodigal's working as a swineherd and consorting with harlots. Just as Launcelot's treatment of his father is the opposite of the Prodigal's humility, so his behavior after receiving his father's blessing is cheerfully unregenerate. Perhaps because his disrespect is neither malicious nor harmful, Launcelot participates in the general amnesty typical at the end of comedy, from which Shylock is excluded.

While waiting for Lorenzo to arrive and elope with Jessica, Gratiano alludes to the story of the Prodigal Son in a way that seems ominous for the eloping couple:

All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy’d.
How like a younger(7) or a prodigal
The scarfed 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!

(2.6.13-20)

From the context, one might assume that Gratiano is identifying Lorenzo with the prodigal and Jessica with a strumpet who will ruin him. Lorenzo is certainly, like Bassanio, a penniless young man, but Jessica more nearly fits the pattern of the prodigal. She disobeys her father's orders; steals some of his money; runs off, disguised as a boy, with her lover Lorenzo, who is a Christian and therefore an inappropriate suitor in her father's eyes; and spends her father's money in an extravagant manner. Yet all of these “sins” have mitigating circumstances in the eyes of the audience. Because her father is wicked and a Jew, her disobeying and leaving him to become a Christian is presented as a change for the better. Because she is his only heir, she is seen as having some just claim to the money that she steals from him to be her dowry. Her running off with a lover would be sinful, except that she marries him. Her choice of Lorenzo, who has no money of his own, is a sign of the unselfishness of her love (Partee 18). Her subsequent wastefulness with money is both a suitable punishment on Shylock for his miserliness and, paradoxically, a sign of her own lack of mercenary attitudes.
Like the Prodigal Son, Jessica leaves her father's control and wastes part of her patrimony, but unlike him, she
does not undergo ruin or repentance. Instead, Shylock himself undergoes ruin, (forced) repentance, and
Christian forgiveness, at the cost of his own unwilling conversion to Christianity. Jessica reaps the Prodigal's
reward of a generous welcome (though from Portia, not Shylock) and the rest of her patrimony upon
Shylock's death (granted by Shylock at Antonio's insistence). This inversion of the parable, in which the child
proves wiser than the father, depends on the fact that the child is Christian and the father Jewish. Shylock,
indeed, resembles the narrow, rigid, calculating, and prohibitive Pharisees to whom the parable of the Prodigal
Son was originally addressed. In rejecting her father, Jessica is rejecting Old Testament law for New
Testament mercy, which is one reason that Shylock gets the full force of the law, while his daughter gets
mercy.

Jessica leaves a patriarchal household, in which the man is a domineering autocrat, in favor of the loving
mutuality of the Protestant ideal of companionate marriage. Lorenzo is, of course, still the head of the
household, and it is into his hands that Portia commits the running of her house while she is away. Yet
Jessica's teasing, bantering tone in her conversations with Lorenzo shows that she is neither a submissive nor
a silent wife, and has led some critics to question the happiness of her marriage. When Jessica praises Portia,
Lorenzo tries to turn her praise toward him:

Jessica:
Why, if two gods should play some heavenly match
And on the wager lay two earthly women,
And Portia one, there must be something else
Pawn'd with the other, for the poor rude world
Hath not her fellow.
Lorenzo:
Even such a husband
Hast thou of me as she is for a wife.
Jessica:
Nay, but ask my opinion too of that!
Lorenzo:
I will anon. First let us go to dinner.
Jessica:
Nay, let me praise you while I have a stomach.
Lorenzo:
No, pray thee, let it serve for table-talk;
Then, howsome'er thou speak'st, 'mong other things
I shall digest it.
Jessica:
Well, I'll set you forth.

(3.5.76-87)

Her teasing refusal to endorse his playfully exalted opinion of himself both asserts the independence of her
mind and reveals his willingness to allow her to say whatever she pleases. Similarly, when the two exchange
stories of unhappy lovers at the beginning of Act 5, Jessica refuses to let Lorenzo have the last word:

Lorenzo:
In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
As far as Belmont.
Jessica:
In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he lov'd her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
And ne'er a true one.
Lorenzo:
In such a night
Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
Slander her love, and he forgave it her.
Jessica:
I would out-night you, did nobody come; 

(5.1.14-23)

Lorenzo refers to himself as being “unthrift”—a synonym for “prodigal,” but also a word that recalls Shylock's statement that “thrift is blessing, if men steal it not” (1.3.87). Lorenzo and Jessica accuse each other of stealing, yet in a play in which Shylock's “thrift” is exposed as damnable, Jessica's theft of herself and her father's money and Lorenzo's theft of her soul are paradoxically virtuous because the lovers obey the rules of “love's wealth,” stealing only in order to give (Brown 70-71). The underlying generosity of their love is visible in Lorenzo's instant forgiveness of Jessica's “slander.”

Lorenzo's jesting reference to Jessica as “a little shrew” does raise the issue of the threat to masculine authority that a wealthy wife traditionally represented to an impoverished husband. This threat is even more obvious in the case of Portia, who brings to Bassanio not only much greater wealth than Jessica's, but also extraordinary intelligence and even competence in the exclusively male field of law. Because she has so much, it is essential that she give it all away if she is not to seem a threat to Bassanio's control. No sooner does he solve the riddle of the caskets than, in a speech that resembles Kate's speech of submission at the end of The Taming of the Shrew, she compares herself to

an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpracticed;
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o’er myself; and even now, but now
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(3.2.159-174)

The exaggerated humility of this speech (which contrasts strikingly with her witty, condescending comments on her previous suitors) is all the more necessary because it is so patently false. Neither before nor after the speech does Portia act at all like an “unlesson'd girl,” yet it is essential that she acknowledge the legal reality that all of her possessions and her own independence now belong to her husband and that she accept the transfer of power ungrudgingly. She reserves to herself only woman's traditional weapon—speech—and promises to use it against Bassanio only if he breaks his marriage vow by relinquishing the ring.

Portia's subsequent behavior hardly seems consonant with her proclaimed submissiveness. She often thereafter refers to her house as “my house” or “my hall,” and to her servants as “my people” or “my servants.” Moreover, she continues to direct the action, both openly and covertly, urging her husband to pay off Antonio's debt, no matter what it costs, and to leave for Venice as soon as the wedding vows are made. She then delegates the care of her house to Lorenzo, and follows her husband to Venice in disguise and without his knowledge. In Venice, she tricks Bassanio into relinquishing the ring and then uses her possession
of it to lord it over her husband and to threaten him with the ultimate indignity of cuckoldry.

Yet Portia's behavior is not as insubordinate as it appears. Her references to the house and servants as hers are made mainly when Bassanio is not present, and could be less a statement of ownership than a sign of her continuing residence and authority in her husband's absence (when he is present, she welcomes his friends to “our house,” 5.1.139, though she later reverts to saying “my house” twice, 5.1.223, 273). Bassanio seems bashful at first about assuming the authority that is his by marriage. When he chooses the correct casket, he says to Portia that he is “doubtful whether what I see be true / Until confirm’d, sign’d, ratified by you” (3.2.147-48). Later, in welcoming his friends to Belmont, he says,

Lorenzo and Salerio, welcome hither,
If that the youth of my new int’rest here
Have power to bid you welcome. By your leave,
I bid my very friends and countrymen,
Sweet Portia, welcome.

(3.2.220-24)

His hesitancy to assume command is something that Portia must help him to overcome. When she sees that he is moved by the contents of the letter he has received from Antonio, she urges him to share his trouble with her:

With leave, Bassanio; I am half yourself,
And I must freely have the half of anything
That this same paper brings you.

(3.2.248-50)

When she tells him to pay off Antonio's debt and to join his friend immediately, Portia knows that she is telling him to do what he really wants to do, but would hesitate to do for fear of seeming ungracious or spendthrift to her. Even her insistence on an immediate wedding is a generous action because it gives him the legal right to all of her property, but without any benefit to her, even of the physical satisfaction of the wedding night. Her statement to Bassanio—“Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.313)—is not a declaration of ownership, but, as John Russell Brown suggests, a sign of her “willingness to continue to give joyfully in love” (68). Lorenzo later commends Portia's “god-like amity, which appears most strongly / In bearing thus the absence of your lord” (3.4.3-4). It is Portia's own generosity that later makes her a suitable advocate for mercy.

Bassanio proves no match for Portia in generosity, so she is forced to give him a lesson in it. To do so, she turns herself into a “prodigal” to see whether he has the will to forgive her.14 The trouble starts at the trial, when he exclaims

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem’d above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil to deliver you.

(4.1.280-85)

Portia dryly responds, “Your wife would give you little thanks for that, / If she were by, to hear you make the offer” (4.1.286-7). She recognizes both that Bassanio would not say such a thing in front of his wife and that
he does not have the right to make the offer. He would be justified in offering his own life, but not that of another. Her subsequent request of his ring is a test that he is predisposed to fail, because he has already established that he sets his obligations to his friend above those to his wife. His failure, however, is only partial. He demonstrates great reluctance to part with the ring; his sense of obligation to the friend who had risked his life for him is his sole reason for giving it up; and he is honest to Portia later about his reasons for losing it.

Because Bassanio defends his parting with the ring on grounds of honor, Portia tests him on those same grounds. He tells her,

I was enforc’d to send it after him.  
I was beset with shame and courtesy.  
My honor would not let ingratitude  
So much besmear it.

(5.1.216-19)

In upholding his obligations to his friend and his reputation among men, Bassanio ignores the equally binding obligation to keep his word to his wife. She picks up the theme of honor:

Let not that doctor e’er come near my house.  
Since he hath got the jewel that I lov’d,  
And that which you did swear to keep for me,  
I will become as liberal as you:  
I’l not deny him any thing I have,  
No, not my body nor my husband’s bed.  
Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.  
Lie not a night from home. Watch me like Argus;  
If you do not, if I be left alone,  
Now, by mine honor, which is yet mine own,  
I’l have that doctor for my bedfellow.

(5.1.223-33)

She threatens to be as “liberal” (i.e., “generous”) as Bassanio, and to give the doctor any thing she has—but, of course, the only thing that she still has any control over is her own body (even the bed is her husband’s). A woman’s honor is her chastity, and Portia can say that that still belongs to her because she has not yet given it to Bassanio. She reminds him that she has the power to ruin his honor—i.e., his reputation among men—by making him a cuckold. After he has begged her forgiveness for breaking his word and has sworn not to do so again, she asks his forgiveness and implies that she has already slept with the doctor.15

This is Bassanio’s ultimate test—can he be as forgiving as she is?—and, interestingly, Portia does not wait for the answer because however he replied, he would look bad. The conscious cuckold was a figure of ridicule in the Renaissance, yet a refusal of forgiveness would be a failure of Christian charity. Portia saves Bassanio’s face by revealing her imposture. Bassanio can then forgive her—not for adultery, but merely for playing a trick on him. Portia also gets one more chance to be generous, giving Antonio the news that his ships have come in safely and giving Lorenzo news of the bequest from Shylock. As a married woman, Portia can no longer give away money or property, but she can still use her energies and abilities to benefit others. Lorenzo’s response—“Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (5.1.294-95)—again identifies Portia with divine generosity, and Antonio tells her, “Sweet lady, you have given me life and living” (5.1.286). As in the parable, he that was dead is alive, and that which was lost (the ships, the rings) is found.

The motif of the Prodigal Son not only links several plots and subplots of the play, but also should serve to
moderate the current critical tendency to sympathize with Shylock and to judge the Christians harshly for not living up to the merciful ideals that they profess. The basic premise of Christianity—that the sinner who believes and begs forgiveness will find mercy, while the self-righteous and the nonbeliever will not—may seem unfair, as the parable of the Prodigal Son presumably did to the Pharisees to whom Jesus told it when they objected to his eating with sinners. Yet according to that premise, even such feckless or unfilial prodigals as Launcelot, Jessica, Gratiano, and Bassanio must be forgiven, along with the more virtuous Portia and Antonio, while Shylock the Jew, the arrogant pagan Prince of Morocco, and the self-regarding Prince of Arragon may not.

Portia says of mercy, “It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (4.1.185). Those who give forgiveness (Portia, Antonio, Lorenzo, Old Gobbo) and those who receive it gratefully (Bassanio, Gratiano, Launcelot, and Jessica, through her conversion to Christianity) are granted both mercy and good fortune. Those who are convinced of their own desert (Morocco, Arragon) or righteousness (Shylock asks “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” 4.1.89, and exclaims “My deeds upon my head!” 4.1.204) are subjected to the full rigors of the law. Shylock does not beg for mercy when Portia urges him to do so, and he objects to the terms of mercy when he is offered his life, saying

Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!  
You take my house when you do take the prop  
That doth sustain my house. You take my life  
When you do take the means whereby I live.  

(4.1.372-75)

His inability to accept mercy gratefully when it is offered bodes ill for his future forced conversion.

To argue that Shakespeare uses the Prodigal Son motif to reinforce the sympathies of the audience with his Christian characters and to condemn the self-righteousness of Shylock does not minimize the ironies and moral ambiguities of the play. On the contrary, the variety of moral shadings in the different prodigals and self-righteous characters brings into sharp focus the paradoxes of salvation that are inherent in the parable itself. The combination in The Merchant of Venice of “optimistic faith in man's spiritual possibilities with an ironic sense of human fallibility” (Lucking 374) links it to Shakespeare's other “comedies of forgiveness.” As Robert Grams Hunter suggests, the success of a comedy of forgiveness depends on the audience's identification with the sinner:

Medieval men and their Elizabethan descendants were taught to be charitable out of a sense of common humanity, which meant a sense of common evil. … Modern charity … is more likely to be associated with making allowances, with pity and tolerance. We tend to forgive the man who does evil not because we recognize ourselves in him, but because we see him as a poor unfortunate, a victim of heredity and environment, the creature of an unhappy past—one who, through no fault of his own, is our inferior. We are likely, therefore, … to react rather as the pharisee reacted to the publican. This is not the reaction which the sinning mortals of Shakespeare's comedies … were intended to provoke. Such dramas invite us to forgive the sins of others not because we (unlike them) are good, but because we (like them) are not good.

(243-44)

This difference between Renaissance ideals of charity and modern ideals of tolerance interferes with our ability to see Shylock as Renaissance viewers probably would have seen him—not as a scapegoat, but as a man whose lack of charity sets off, by contrast, that virtue in others.
Notes

1. The parable is not mentioned, for instance, by Barbara Lewalski in “Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*.” René E. Fortin does note that Bassanio functions as a “prodigal” son to Antonio (263), but he does not elaborate. Sylvan Barnet points out that Bassanio, Antonio, and Portia are all “prodigal” in the sense of being generous (and that Shylock is their antithesis). He denies that the honorable Bassanio should be identified with “the wretch who appears in school dramas concerning the Prodigal Son” (26), yet he concludes that “Shakespeare's use of the motif is in accord with Christ's parable: the prodigal is ultimately acceptable, and the 'virtue' of the self-satisfied uncharitable elder brother—a figure who, like Shylock, holds to the law, fulfills the bond—is not enough” (26). John S. Coolidge says that the parable of the prodigal son “supplies a minor leitmotif to the play” (245), but he does not develop the idea except to say that the parable embodies “the New Testament idea of love” (246) and to point out the hint of hope that the parable lends to the otherwise ominous overtones of Gratiano’s allusion to it just before Jessica’s elopement (260).

2. Whether Portia hints at the correct answer to the casket riddle through the song or her line “I stand for sacrifice” (3.2.57) is impossible to determine, though I side with Harry Berger, Jr., in thinking that the cues are more likely unconscious than deliberate (160). One does not offer one riddle as the solution to another, and Portia tells Bassanio directly that she will never be forsworn by telling him the answer (3.2.10-12).

3. See Gary Grund, “The Fortunate Fall and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice,*” which discusses the motif of the Fortunate Fall, but does not connect it to the parable of the Prodigal Son.

4. Surprisingly, Robert Grams Hunter does not include *The Merchant of Venice* among Shakespeare's “comedies of forgiveness”—among which he includes *Much Ado About Nothing, All's Well That Ends Well, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, Measure for Measure,* and *The Tempest*—because, despite its denouement of forgiveness, “Shylock is the serio-comic scapegoat of the drama” (87). Yet to ignore the entire fifth act, in which forgiveness and reconciliation figure prominently, seriously misrepresents the play.


6. Because Bassanio swears “when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence” (3.2.183-84), his loss of the ring parallels the Prodigal Son’s presumed death. As Ronald A. Sharp has noted, Bassanio’s gift of the ring is his opportunity to “hazard all for love” and thus prove himself worthy of both Antonio and Portia (256-57).

7. “Younger,” which appears in the Quarto and Folio texts of the play, is often emended to “younker,” meaning “a young nobleman or fashionable young man,” in order to remove a perceived redundancy in the allusion to the Prodigal Son. It is possible, however, that Shakespeare wished to evoke the situation of younger sons in general, as well as that of the biblical Prodigal, through his use of overlapping but not synonymous terms.

8. See Catherine Belsey (48-52) for a discussion of this new model of marriage in relation to Portia.

9. See Ralph Berry (59-61) and John Lyon (71) for a negative view of Jessica’s relationship with Lorenzo.

10. For the opposite view, that Jessica’s theft foreshadows an unhappy marriage, see Lynda E. Boose (336-37).

11. See Anne Parten (146-54) for a discussion of this threat in relation to Portia. She does not mention its relevance to Jessica.

12. The similarity of Portia’s speech to Kate’s has been noted by Lisa Jardine (60-61) and by Leonard Tennenhouse (55-56).

13. I am indebted for this observation to Joseph Wagner’s paper, “From Obedience to Sovereignty in *The Merchant of Venice,*” which he delivered at the 1994 Midwest Modern Language Association conference in Chicago.
14. Shakespeare's later cross-dressed heroines, Rosalind and Viola, have the opportunity to educate their future husbands about the nature of love before they marry, but we do not see Bassanio and Portia together until the casket scene, so Portia is forced to be her husband's teacher after the wedding, a role that he may allude to when he tells her “Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow” (5.1.284), “doctor” having its Latin meaning of “teacher.”

15. It is crucial that the audience knows all along that Portia has not been unfaithful to Bassanio. The audience can thus enjoy Portia's clever equivocations and Bassanio's discomfiture without thinking that Portia is a monster. According to the double standard in operation at the time, sexual prodigality in a woman was not forgivable.

16. Gratiano, whose name means “grace,” is a particularly ironic embodiment of the paradoxes of divine grace because he is vindictive toward Shylock and defensive rather than contrite to Nerissa about the loss of his ring. He tells Shylock

\[
\text{Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith} \\
\text{To hold opinion with Pythagoras,} \\
\text{That souls of animals infuse themselves} \\
\text{Into the trunks of men.}
\]

(4.1.130-3)

He does not waver in his faith, however, and he does accept Nerissa's forgiveness with gratitude. Like Launcelot, another largely comic figure, Gratiano is allowed the latitude to misbehave without being condemned for it.

Works Cited


Criticism: Allegory: Judith Rosenheim (essay date 1996)


[In the essay below, Rosenheim argues that the themes of power, fatherhood, and blindness are developed through allegory in The Merchant of Venice. These themes are principally presented through the parable of the Prodigal Son as it applies to Launcelot versus his father, Old Gobbo, and, by extension, to the “father” Shylock versus the “son” Antonio.]

In Asserting the prevalence of “symmetry” or moral equivalence between Shylock and Antonio, René Girard is adding his voice to an enduring current in the criticism of The Merchant of Venice. It is much the same opinion that Hazlitt advances in suggesting that Shylock’s “Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries;” that A. D. Moody holds in finding that Merchant is “about the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges”; or Harold Goddard in remarking that Antonio “catches his own reflection in [Shylock’s] face”; or Kiernan Ryan in defining Shylock’s “bloodthirsty cruelty” as the “mirror-image of [the Christians’] concealed real nature.”¹ A factual basis for this parity can be identified in the observation of Walter Cohen and Michael Ferber that sixteenth century merchants like Antonio were themselves usurers like Shylock.² Yet those who
draw these parallels are usually prompted by the consideration that Shylock's villainy should be weighed against his suffering. Indeed, Shylock has recently become the beneficiary of a critical tendency to censure the play's Christian society by showing him as its victim. Thus for Frank Whigham, Shylock is “a dehumanized tool and disposable slave of order,” who falls prey to the Christians' hegemonic use of law; for Ryan, he is the victim of a “money-centred world” “projecting upon him its displaced hatred of itself”; for Lars Engle, he is the provident custodian of the money-supply whose forced conversion makes him “a final victim of the cruelty of typology”; for Thomas Moisan he is the “scapegoat” absorbing “the blame for whatever is ‘wrong’ with the [economic] system.”

Still, hostility toward Christian society would probably not generate sympathy for Shylock were it not for an accompanying perception of something attractive in his characterization, as Engle seems to suggest in representing him, a bit dubiously, as civic-minded. This perception may derive at least partly from the recognition that Shylock is drawn as a character of exceptional power. Thus John Russell Brown observes that

in performance Shylock is the dominating character of the play; none other has such emotional range, such continual development, such stature, force, subtlety, vitality; above all, none other has his intensity, isolation, and apparent depth of motivation.

Brown's words attest the impact of what Moody and H. B. Charlton express as Shylock's humanity; but this term also seems to imply a positive element in his makeup, an element boldly asserted in Goddard's declaration that “what is deep down in Shylock is precisely his goodness.”

I believe that, in their various ways, these perceptions of Shylock are valid. Yet the arguments supporting them are not entirely convincing. Those who would exculpate Shylock by likening him to the bad Christians encourage the skeptic to object that making the Christians bad cannot make Shylock good; as Girard admits in cautioning that “Shylock is rehabilitated only to the extent that the Christians are even worse than he is.”

Even as he notes the power of Shylock's characterization, Brown fails to comprehend the function of that power in the drama, and thus is led to complain that Shylock's “dominance often does ill service to the play as a whole.” And while sensing a profound level of goodness in Shylock, Goddard identifies that goodness only as a yearning for acceptance, a yearning not likely to impress those who see Shylock as evil and thus as deserving the contempt he endures. Rather than a villain because a victim, Shylock becomes for such critics as C. L. Barber, Frank Kermode, and Sylvan Barnet a victim of his own villainy. And this view of Shylock, itself more or less explicitly informed by the negative attitude toward Jews prevailing in the sixteenth century, is reinforced by critics who emphasize the virulence of this attitude. To E. E. Stoll, Shylock's Jewishness is itself a “badge of opprobrium” associating him with Judas; add to this his identity as moneylender, and Shylock comes to embody “two of the deepest and most widely prevalent social antipathies of two thousand years.”

We cannot doubt that Stoll and Hunter accurately describe the accepted perception of Jews in Shakespeare's day. Nor can we doubt that this perception, including its darkest representation of Jews as deicides and cannibals, influences Shylock's characterization. What remains unclear is how this historically oriented perception can comport with the modern sense that, somehow, Shylock is good. To be sure, Girard would impugn the stereotypical aspects of Shylock's character by arguing that Shakespeare has put them into the play with the full intention of making them “an object of indignation and satire” comprehensible to “those who can be reached.”

Girard thus sees Shakespeare as introducing an opposing current into his play, which he locates in the speeches of Shylock. Yet rather than accounting for Shylock's perceived power and goodness, this satire merely relieves the badness of his historical traits by once again applying them to everyone. The insufficiency of Girard's analysis thus prompts us to consider that we will not succeed in
justifying the sympathy that Shylock so often inspires until we can stop opposing his historical meaning to his modern meaning. And we will be able to end this opposition only by endowing Shylock with an original meaning that is positive, a meaning that gives strong evidence of being authorially intended and that redefines the basis for his perceived likeness to the Christians. In sum, we need to recover from the originally intended conception of Shylock a value that resonates with—and even refines—our own perception of him, thus bringing coherence to what Robert Weimann would call his “past significance” and his “present meaning.”

It is such a meaning, together with the meanings supporting it, that I will attempt to describe in the following pages. By complementing, adjusting, and extending the insights of previous interpreters, I propose to reveal the presence of a current in Merchant that contests Shylock's conventional badness in the very terms that have been seen to support it: the terms of Shakespeare's religious culture, which remains, if less authoritatively, our culture as well. From this religious culture Shakespeare will be shown to derive a positive meaning for Shylock's Jewishness and a similarly positive modification in the meaning of Antonio's Christianity. In deriving these meanings from the religious aspect of Shakespeare's culture, moreover, I depart from the recent critical tendency to define Shylock and Antonio with reference to their economic identities as usurer and merchant. Rather, it seems to me that the economic identities of these antagonists subserve their more important identities as Jew and Christian. And this view of their identities leads me to address their conflict through the teachings of St. Paul rather than those of Karl Marx. Yet, as I shall argue, the ancillary character of economics in this play will be grasped only in the recognition that Shakespeare's use of it is not literal but symbolic, a possibility overlooked by those who focus their historical investigations of this play on its economics. Cohen, for example, may admit that approaching the play as a critique of British capitalism “fails even to account for all of the purely economic issues in the work; his purpose in this admission is to justify an investigation of the play's Venetian setting as the venue more nearly reflecting its opposition of Jewish fiscal capitalism to native mercantile capitalism. Yet might we not alternatively refer to lack of precise realism in the play's economics to its function as the vehicle of a theological tenor? And would not such a function have the merit of integrating the play's economic and theological realms of meaning? My purpose in attempting this integration, however, is not to suggest that Merchant simply reflects received principles of religious orthodoxy; rather, it is to show how the distinctions that Shakespeare expresses through money present a formidable if highly constructive challenge to theological tenets engaged by the play.

The meanings I want to develop present Shylock not as a symbol of what Christianity negates, but rather as the symbolic source of its most treasured gift of salvation. But thus to redefine Shylock is by no means to regard him as free of defect or even as the play's main enunciator of this meaning. No doubt, he has morally compelling moments. Yet Shylock will be seen as contending with Antonio in a quarrel that is itself subject to censure, this censure tainting both antagonists. This censure has been partly discerned in the marginal dialogue between Launcelot and Old Gobbo in II.ii, which I shall further explore as an allegorical representation of the religious conflict represented in Antonio and Shylock. I suggest that this seemingly unimportant dialogue presents us with an instance of a literary device that André Gide in 1893 called mise en abyme, a term originally pertaining to heraldry, where it denotes a small figure placed at the heart of an escutcheon and replicating in miniature the escutcheon itself. Mise en abyme has been defined as “any enclave entertaining a relation of similarity with the work which contains it.” In Merchant, it appears as an encoded dialogue wherein two minor characters repeat on a smaller scale the play's major conflict, and in so doing, give new definition to this conflict. Not only repeating and redefining this conflict, however, they also exhibit a way of resolving it that seems to challenge the validity of its actual outcome. If the II.ii dialogue can be convincingly shown to perform these reflexive and critical functions in the play, it will emerge as a powerful key to its interpretation.

Yet assuming that the Launcelot/Old Gobbo dialogue harbors symbolic meaning, why should we assume that this meaning can be identified? Partly, perhaps, because it is expressed in terms that are arguably objective in comprising well-known elements of Shakespeare's religious culture. For, as we shall see, Launcelot and Old Gobbo are invested with two biblical allusions, and these allusions accord them typological identities that they
then, as I think, transfer to Antonio and Shylock. These typological identities will be shown to have two functions. They refer the antagonism between these major characters to hegemonic impulses in both their traditions, Christianity attempting to dominate and assimilate Judaism, while Judaism would comparably dominate the gentile world by withholding its spiritual riches from that world. But these same allusions also identify a basis for the interaction of these characters that is not hegemonic but relational, and this relational basis turns out to be allegorically familial: Shylock and Antonio assume the relationship of father and son. It is this relationship that can support the pervasive but inadequately argued approbations of Shylock cited above. The biblical character of his paternity accounts for Shylock's power and goodness, and his fatherhood to Antonio places his perceived likeness to Antonio in a positive light that validates both these characters equally. For while the play certainly invests paternity with a connotation of authority, it also balances the father's authority over the son with the father's dependence on the son. This balance enables the relationship of father and son to imply not the “either/or” logic of domination but rather the “both/and” logic of mutual affirmation. And this “both/and” logic effectively destroys the legitimacy of a Christian or Jewish identity based on hegemony.

It is the evolution of power relations into family relations that the II.ii dialogue will be shown to achieve. And it is by contrast with this achieved evolution that the settlement between Antonio and Shylock in IV.i will be recognized as minimal and abortive. Thus the meanings generated by the II.ii dialogue tend to support the opinion of those who, in defiance of its historical justification, have found this settlement disturbing and unsatisfactory. Most importantly, these meanings shed light on the disputed significance of Shylock's forced conversion by suggesting that the play itself condemns it. The effect of the moral reference secreted in this dialogue is thus to endow "Merchant" with a refreshing, even startling, air of modernity. Yet what authenticates this modernity is its historic derivation. For since this dialogue can originate only in Shakespeare himself, its opposing voice will be regarded as his own allegorical commentary on the religious quarrel he depicts in Shylock and Antonio. Indeed, the force of this commentary emerges in the observation that Shakespeare compounds its new and relevant meanings out of wholly traditional components, and thus demonstrates how a poet of high and principled imagination validates his culture by causing it to transcend itself. In being grasped through its mimetic origin, the moral relevance of this dialogue reveals the play as both mirror and lamp: "a product of the past," but also "a 'producer' of the future."20

I

Given what Mikhail Bakhtin has said about the carnivalesque in its various manifestations—the tendency of its crude and abusive laughter to annihilate the "epic image of the absolute past" by bringing it close for free and fearless investigation; its exploitation for this purpose of "an accidental and insignificant pretext"; its capacity to combine "an intense spirit of inquiry" with "a utopian fantasy"; and especially its use of the clown as the author's vehicle (though in this case not his own mask) for exposing "all that is vulgar and falsely stereotyped in human relationships"21—it is hardly surprising that Shakespeare locates his own critical and visionary engagement of ancient texts in the dialogue of Launcelot with Old Gobbo in II.ii. For here is a marginal dialogue that shows a young man, identified as clown, toying with his blind father in a manner both crude and cruel.22 Mistakenly supposing that this dialogue has an entertaining rather than a testing function, interpreters have often been baffled by its degraded humor. Accordingly, they have repeatedly dismissed Launcelot as, for example, "the slenderest and most pointlessly fatuous of Shakespeare's clowns."23 Yet the mere gratuitousness of Launcelot's jesting has also prompted the suspicion that his antics somehow inform the action of the play. Leo Rockas and Jan Lawson Hinely have aptly noticed that Launcelot's conflicted decision to flee Shylock in II.ii, taken immediately before this dialogue, anticipates Jessica's similarly conflicted decision to flee Shylock in II.iii.24 And with daring insight, René Fortin has found this dialogue to constitute an allegorical comment on the play's religious conflict, this comment providing a "counterstatement to the major allegorical statement of the play" that offers to correct "the one-sidedness and reductiveness of interpretation that the naive allegory invites."25 In his view of this dialogue, Fortin uncovers important meanings; yet he only begins to mine them, his thesis thus begging the clarification and extension that this
study will attempt to supply. To do this, however, requires that we first appreciate the importance of Fortin's thesis in light of the studies that inform it, particularly those of Dorothy Hockey and Barbara Lewalski.26

Like Henley before her,27 Hockey discerns a biblical persona lurking within this dialogue, a persona referring not to Launcelot but rather to Old Gobbo. This old father is seen to embody the Old Testament figure of Isaac: more precisely, the Isaac of Genesis xxvii, where the patriarch is similarly old and blind, and where his son Jacob, guided by the instructions of his mother, deceives his father into granting him his blessing.28 Hockey's observation suggests that Old Gobbo is conceived as an allegorical representation, or type, of Isaac. And because this representation is presumably intended and therefore serious, Hockey attempts to interpret it by suggesting that it refers to the characterization of Shylock. For, as she notices, Shylock likewise invokes Genesis xxvii.29

This Jacob from our holy Abram was
(As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)
The third possessor; ay, he was the third

—(I.iii.72-74)30

Hockey's guess assigns a meaning to the otherwise vacuous character of Old Gobbo. But what gives that meaning dramatic significance is its ability to suggest that Old Gobbo typifies Isaac in order to project this biblical identity onto Shylock: that is, in order to make Shylock himself a type of Isaac. And a further parallel between Old Gobbo and Shylock emerges in the suffering of derisive cruelty by them both, this parallel suggesting that Old Gobbo's suffering may likewise be meant to inform the suffering of Shylock. If this is so, it means that the disturbing effect of this dialogue is entirely deliberate, its lucid cruelty ultimately referring to Shylock in his typological identity as Isaac and somehow linking that identity with his suffering.

Yet if Shakespeare is really using Old Gobbo to project the identity of Isaac onto Shylock, he is proceeding in a manner conspicuously oblique, especially when we observe that Isaac is named neither by Old Gobbo who represents him nor by Shylock who alludes to him. And why Shakespeare should find it desirable to mediate the connection between these characters through an allusion itself veiled will emerge in the tendency of Old Gobbo's Isaac to draw in a further typological identity anchored in Launcelot, an identity whose still more obscured lineaments may well answer to the subversive nature of the meanings it will be shown to suggest. Before addressing this identity, however, we ought first to consider what the presence of Isaac in Shylock can mean; and doing this entails acknowledging Lewalski's understanding of Shylock. In a view shared by a number of interpreters but best developed by herself, Lewalski regards Merchant as informed by the dichotomies of Pauline theology, in which Judaism affirms the works and justice of law in opposition to the unearned mercy or grace of Christian faith.31 This Pauline view of Judaism is what Lewalski finds Shylock to express, his individuality being subordinated to his symbolic representation of Judaism itself.32 Moreover, as Lewalski reposes the justice of Jewish law in Shylock, she likewise reposes the grace of Christian faith in Antonio, by allegorizing him as “the very embodiment of Christian love,” whose readiness to pay Bassanio's debt assigns him “the role of Christ satisfying the claim of Divine Justice by assuming the sins of mankind.”33 And reinforcing the play's involvement of Pauline theology is Lewalski's observation that the dénouement of the conflict between Shylock and Antonio enacts Paul's critique of Jewish law. Paul insists that, like a schoolmaster whose lessons are designed to render him superfluous, law obviates itself by instructing its followers that it does not save, but rather condemns them. Shylock similarly finds that the law he has adduced for his vindication in fact confutes him, as his astonished “Is that the law?” (IV.i.314) suggests; and by identifying him as alien, law ends by condemning him. Thus Shylock's conflict with Antonio is found to dramatize “the confrontation of Judaism and Christianity as theological systems,” with Shylock's eventual subjection to Antonio and forced conversion to Christianity expressing the supersession of Judaism as the religion of law by Christianity as the religion of faith.35
The pertinence of the biblical Isaac to this view of Shylock emerges in the ability of this figure to reflect Paul's explanation of why Judaism should of right be superseded. For the age and blindness that Isaac exhibits in Genesis xxvii are the very defects that Paul imputes to Judaism in presenting it as outworn. As “the ministration of death” which “is done away” (II Corinthians iii.7), the dispensation of Moses is old, its law of works contrasting with the “Law of faith” (Romans iii.27), as “the olden of the letter” with the “newnes of Spirit” (Romans vii.6) and “newnes of life” (Romans vi.4). Paul also teaches that the old and outwardly literal meaning of Scripture is carnal, whereas its inwardly symbolic essence is spiritual; and that adherents to the Old Law of Judaism apprehend only the carnally literal meaning of Scripture and so are blind to its spiritual essence. God has given them “eyes that they shulde not se” (Romans xi.8); “The vaile is layed over their hearts” (II Corinthians iii.15). Thus Paul imputes a carnal unwisdom to Judaism, which he represents as blindness, this carnal unwisdom being what Isaac's blindness enables him to express. And the credibility of these Pauline meanings in Isaac is enhanced by their availability to Shakespeare in Calvin's Commentary on Genesis. Calvin here sees Isaac's physical blindness as a trope for the unwisdom or psychic blindness that causes him to prefer his elder son Esau above his younger and more deserving son Jacob: “With a blind, or, at least, a most inconsiderate love to his first-born, he [Isaac] undervalued the younger. And further attesting his Pauline understanding of Isaac's blindness, Calvin notes its connection with his carnality: Isaac was “so enslaved to the indulgence of the palate” that he was “induced to give his preference to Esau, by the taste of his venison.” But most significantly, Calvin makes Isaac symbolic of the Jews: “Let the Jews now go and glory in the flesh; since Isaac, preferring food to the inheritance destined for his son, would pervert … the gratuitous covenant of God!” Possibly instructed by Calvin, Shakespeare seems to be giving Isaac the same meaning that Calvin gives him.

Thus a typological perception of Old Gobbo seems to ramify into further allegorical associations that intensify the theological suggestiveness of Shylock. Old Gobbo transfers his identity as Isaac to Shylock. But to the extent that Shylock himself can be viewed as symbolic of Judaism, the Isaac in Shylock allegorizes his Judaism as old, carnal, and blind. Yet the allegorical significance of Isaac becomes still more specific when we pause to observe that Genesis xxvii presents a father-son drama. If the Isaac in this text allegorizes Judaism, he also expresses fatherhood, a theme of Merchant that is primarily exhibited in both Old Gobbo and Shylock. And though the non-Jewish Old Gobbo cannot himself relate Isaac's paternity to his Jewishness, these qualities are subtly linked in Shylock, whom Lorenzo calls “father Jew” (II.vi.25), thereby expressing Shylock's paternity as a function of his Jewishness. Thus in addition to being old, carnal, and blind, Judaism in Isaac emerges as paternal. And not adventitiously. For the carnal unwisdom of Isaac's blindness pertains to his paternity in preventing him from recognizing his son, Jacob. It is likewise a father-son drama that Old Gobbo and Launcelot present. And this same carnal unwisdom of father Isaac in failing to recognize his son Jacob is what blind Old Gobbo will be seen to exhibit in his own inability to recognize his son Launcelot. Yet if Old Gobbo's function is to apply the paternity of Isaac to Shylock, the carnal blindness of that paternity may plausibly pertain to him as well: Shylock too may have a son he cannot recognize; that is to say, a child other than Jessica, whom Shylock recognizes perfectly well. Carnal like Isaac, Shylock can be seen to recognize Jessica, because she is his carnal or biological daughter—Shylock calls her “My own flesh and blood” (III.i.34). But if Jessica's daughterhood is recognized because it is biological or carnal, this sonhood may well remain unrecognized because it is not carnal but rather spiritual: the same spiritual sonhood that Paul accords those whose faith in the redemption promised by God to Abraham makes them children of that promise and Abraham's true seed: “Nether are thei all children, because thei are the sede of Abraham: … That is, they which are the children of the flesh, are not the children of God: but the children of the promes are counted for the sede” (Romans ix.7-8). Paul thus identifies a spiritual as well as a carnal mode of sonhood; indeed, preferring the sonhood of the spiritual promise to the sonhood of the flesh. And since the play incorporates other cardinal tenets of Pauline theology, it is plausible to suspect that it incorporates this tenet as well, its involvement enabling Shakespeare to make Shylock father to an unrecognizably spiritual son. Yet not only hidden from Shylock, this son is also hidden from us, his hiddenness impelling us to ask if he really exists and thus obliging us to test for his existence. How might we do this? Perhaps by pursuing the suspicion that the identification of this son ought to parallel the recognition of Old Gobbo's association with Shylock. Just as
Old Gobbo refers to Shylock, so Launcelot may be expected to refer to this son. And as Old Gobbo's reference to Shylock is veiled, emerging only through the mediating figure of Isaac that he typifies, so we can expect that the character to which Launcelot hypothetically refers will similarly resist identification until we discover a biblical figure that Launcelot likewise typifies. Does the play provide such a figure?

It would appear to in the biblical character of Jacob. For just as Launcelot is son to Old Gobbo, Jacob is son to Isaac. And Launcelot clearly invokes the Jacob of Genesis xxvii by twice asking Old Gobbo for his blessing: “Give me your blessing” (II.i.78, 84). Moreover, by noting that Paul's Epistle to the Romans ix.6-13 represents Jacob's achievement of his elder brother Esau's blessing as symbolic of Christianity's supersession of Judaism, Fortin suggests that, even as an Old Testament figure, Jacob invokes sonship as Christian; just as Isaac represents paternity as Jewish. Thus in causing Old Gobbo and Launcelot to typify Isaac and Jacob, Shakespeare is said by Fortin to be placing Judaism and Christianity in the relation of father and son, an idea that Lewalski likewise entertains in finding the converted Jessica's relation to her Jewish father to express the filial relation of Christianity to Judaism. It is, however, the failure of this father-son relationship that Fortin sees the II.ii dialogue to express, since he finds this relationship so represented as to require the paternal recognition that is lacking in Old Gobbo and the filial piety that is lacking in Launcelot.

I think that Fortin has discerned the broad meaning of this dialogue. Yet a problem remains. For while Launcelot's pursuit of his father's blessing can be seen to invoke Jacob, his Jacob seems, in the absence of a fraternal rival, to lack the specifically Pauline connotation that the carnal unwisdom of Old Gobbo, by contrast, imparts to his Isaac. Though the Isaac in Old Gobbo bears a suggestion of Judaism, the Jacob in Launcelot need not, in the absence of further evidence, bear a corresponding suggestion of Christianity. Thus, just as it is, Fortin's thesis cannot be sustained. Still, the insufficiency of its defense need not suggest that Fortin's insight is invalid but only that it requires better substantiation. And this possibility prompts me to suspect that if Jacob does not sustain Fortin's thesis, it may be because the identity we are looking for is not primarily Jacob but rather some other figure that is likewise provided by the play. This hunch is reinforced, moreover, by the recognition that Launcelot's cruelty to his father is unaccounted for by the Isaac story, where Jacob deceives his father at his mother's command but certainly does not torment him. While imitating the behavior of Jacob, Launcelot also exhibits behavior unlike that of Jacob. And just as the figure of Jacob cannot account for all that Launcelot does, so Isaac cannot entirely account for the behaviors of Old Gobbo, especially his suffering and eventual recognition of his son. These unaccounted for details suggest that in addition to the Isaac story, which is certainly present, a second model may be involved in the Launcelot/Old Gobbo dialogue, a model that theologizes Launcelot in his cruelty just as the Genesis xxvii model theologizes Old Gobbo in his blindness. If an Old Testament model defines blindness as both paternal and Jewish, we may expect this second model to be likewise biblical but drawn from the New Testament and defining cruelty as both filial and Christian.

Suggestively, the play appears to contain a filial model of New Testament provenance in its allusions to prodigality. In I.i we hear Bassanio describe his habit of living past his “faint means” as making his time “something too prodigal” (I.i.125, 129); and Shylock likewise calls Bassanio “The prodigal Christian” (II.v.15). Not limited to Bassanio, however, this trait is also ascribed to Antonio: once obliquely in I.iii.21, where Shylock refers to his ventures as “squand'red abroad,” and again, more directly in III.1.45, where Shylock calls him “a prodigal” in the course of comparing him to the daughter who has fled with his wealth and squandered it. These allusions appear to invoke the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke xv. And these invocations are reinforced by the play's extended reference to this story in II.vi, a reference apparently directed at Jessica in immediately preceding the elopement that makes her a Christian. Might the Prodigal Son be the identity we are seeking? It seems probable. For, as we shall see, there is evidence to suggest that the sixteenth century understood this son to symbolize the Gentiles or Christians, it being this understanding that Shylock reflects in his reference to Bassanio as “The prodigal Christian.” And notwithstanding David N. Beauregard’s view of prodigality as expressing extreme liberality, much as Barnet earlier takes it to express Christian generosity, we may recall that the original Prodigal's way with money has nothing to do with
generosity, extreme or otherwise, and everything to do with the profligacy sequent to his rebellion against his father. Moisan, indeed, recognizes that the play invokes this term in its biblical sense of profligacy, while also considering that this meaning commands the recognition of Shakespeare's audience. And supporting Moisan's opinion is Bassanio's characterization of his "something too prodigal" time as making him "a willful youth" who wastes and loses another's money; "and like a willful youth, / That which I owe is lost" (I.i.146-47). In this confession, Bassanio becomes one of those high-born prodigals that Moisan finds repeatedly censured in anti-usury tracts of the period such as The Death of Usury (1594): those idle borrowers who sought loans in order "to consume in prodigall maner, in bravery, banketting, voluptuous living, & such like." Yet in thus referring the censure of prodigality to the wasteful use of money not one's own, Moisan neglects other implications of this biblical term that the play may also be adducing: those nuances of rebellious flight and cruelty that are preeminent in Launcelot. For just as the Prodigal runs away from his father in an act of rebellion, so we meet Launcelot in the rebellious act of running away from Shylock. And just as the Prodigal's running away becomes an act of cruelty in making his father think him dead, so Launcelot exhibits cruelty in making his father think him dead. It thus becomes plausible to regard the rebellious flight and cruelty of Launcelot as enabling him to typify Luke's Prodigal Son, just as Old Gobbo's blind nonrecognition of his son enables him to typify Isaac.

But if Old Gobbo projects his Isaac onto Shylock, who is the character upon whom Launcelot projects the identity of the Prodigal Son? As Launcelot is cruel, we can expect that the character he refers to will likewise be cruel. Suggestively, two of the characters verbally associated with prodigality demonstrate cruelty to Shylock in a manner evocative of Luke's Prodigal. The first is Jessica, who, like the Prodigal, takes her father's money, runs away from him, beggars herself, and causes her father, if not to think her dead, to wish her dead, in effect declaring her dead to him. Yet though fascinating and complex in her prodigality, and strongly associated with Launcelot, Jessica cannot be the character we are seeking, because she is both a biological and a recognized child. Besides Jessica, however, there is Antonio, who treats Shylock with contempt, this contempt resonating with the contempt that Launcelot likewise directs toward Shylock. And linked with Antonio's contempt is his demand to borrow Shylock's money, which enables him to invoke the Prodigal's demand for his father's money. Moreover, as the money demanded by the Prodigal facilitates the flight that repudiates and, in that sense, kills his own sonhood, so in the money he borrows from Shylock, Antonio actively abets Shylock's desire to kill him. These resemblances permit us to suspect that Antonio is the ultimate and hidden referent of Launcelot's prodigal sonhood. Just as the Gentiles are not the literal, biological children of the Jewish patriarch Abraham, and yet remain his symbolically spiritual children; so the gentile Antonio, while certainly not a literal, biological child of Shylock, may remain, in a realm of dramatic meaning restrictedly allegorical, the symbolically spiritual child of Shylock, the play's Jewish father, who invokes "holy Abram" and "father Abram" (I.iii.72, 160). And just as Shylock's psychic blindness comments on the Judaism he represents, Antonio's prodigality can be seen to comment on the Christianity he represents. It may be the Christian cruelty of Antonio to Shylock in I.iii that Launcelot glosses as prodigal in II.ii, the prodigal representation of this cruelty turning its carnivalesque ridicule into an object of our ridicule. As exhibited in Launcelot, Antonio's contempt for Shylock can have no suggestion of revolutionary glamour; for, like Jack Cade of 2 Henry VI as well as Stephano and Trinculo of The Tempest, Launcelot rebels not against the system so much as against his place in it, his desire being to supplant his father's authority with his own, as we shall see.

Against such a thesis one could, of course, object that, in being motivated by Shylock's usury, Antonio's cruelty should be able to resist the charge of prodigality. For as a monitory practice denounced by the Church, usury can be honorably detested by Antonio for transgressing his Christian ethic. Yet such an exoneration is complicated by the curious tendency of money to supplant religion itself as a motive for hatred between Shylock and Antonio. While hating Antonio as Christian, Shylock hates him even more for the losses he sustains in Antonio's refusal to practice usury:

I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

(I.iii.41-45)

And with suggestive equivalence, Antonio “hates” Shylock's “sacred nation” but more vigorously “rails” against his usury:

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
Even where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest.

(I.iii.48-51)

These emphases might well be taken to suggest that the religious conflict Shylock describes functions merely as the false consciousness of a conflict that is really economic. Yet it also seems appropriate to observe that money can itself bear a spiritual meaning, as in Paul's references to divine grace as “the riches of [God's] bountifulness” (Romans ii.4) and “the riches of his glorie” (Romans ix.23). Thus while money can express a negative worldliness, as it certainly does in Marlowe's Jew of Malta, Paul's words suggest that money can also be made to symbolize divine grace. And the pertinence of this meaning to Merchant is suggested by the observation that Paul constitutes the riches of God's bountifulness in the blessing given by God to Abraham: the same blessing that Shylock in his I.iii defense of usury invokes as the possession lineally descending to Jacob from “our holy Abram” (I.iii.72). The association of money with blessing by both Paul and Shakespeare's character suggests to me that money in Merchant symbolizes this very blessing, the blessing of Abraham. Yet my intention in making this equivalence is hardly to ignore the play's negative portrayal of the money gained through usury, it is to explore the negative portrayal of usury for its own symbolic meaning. And this meaning will emerge in the interpretation of usury as symbolic of the Jews' claim to Abraham's blessing through a biological mode of inheritance that reserves that blessing exclusively to themselves. It is usury in its representation of this restrictedly Jewish blessing that can account for Antonio's detestation of it as well as his abuse of Shylock for practicing it, because the Christian Antonio claims this same blessing. Thus a theological competitiveness can be seen to inform the issue of money in this play. And by appreciating the theological resonance of this money, we can see that its Jewish grasping and Christian giving are not ultimate values but rather subserve the protagonists' differing needs. Shylock, the “rich Jew” (V.i.292), has the blessing and wants to keep it; so he favors grasping; the gentile Antonio needs this blessing and wants Shylock to give it to him, so he favors giving. Yet the one-sidedness of these values also distorts then, their distortion accounting for the representation of their exponents as blind and prodigal. Blind to the identity of Antonio as his spiritual son, Shylock, like father Isaac, would graspingly deny him the blessing of his wealth; while as Prodigal Son, Antonio demands the giving of Shylock's wealth in contemptuous repudiation of his carnal paternity.

To be sure, a still more problematical aspect of this thesis lies in its assertion of a relationship between Shylock and Antonio that lacks a literal basis in the text. Yet by invoking a theology that provides for a spiritual concept of sonhood, this thesis may mitigate if not solve the problem it raises. And further atoning for the allegorical character of this thesis is its usefulness in clarifying a number of critical perceptions about the play. By providing the play with typological identities that are relatively stable, it reinforces the conviction of Lewalski as well as Nevill Coghill, Kermode, John Cooper, Albert Wertheim, Norman Holland, Leslie Fiedler, Lawrence Danson, and to a lesser extent, Barber that the conflict between Shylock and Antonio is religious. In postulating a symbolic view of money, this thesis dissolves the tension that Moody and Norman Rabkin see to trouble the play's ultimate enrichment of the Christians with the pelf that they have hated Shylock for possessing. And in making money symbolic of Abraham's blessing, it reinforces John...
Coolidge's understanding of the conflict in *Merchant* as a struggle for possession of the Hebrew Scriptures that contain this blessing, a struggle that the Church conducted through the hermeneutics of its *adversos Judaeos* tradition.\(^{56}\) This is the tradition that both Calvin and Shakespeare engage in their treatment of Isaac's blindness; and that Shakespeare appears, however surprisingly, to be adapting to his treatment of prodigality as well.

These typological references may also help to dispel some theoretical doubts regarding the play's interpretability by resolving discrepancies that Rabkin has observed between the meanings that the play tempts us to formulate and the nuanced responses that its experience demands. Identifying meaning as the product of intellect, Rabkin argues that an adequate definition of the play's meaning is not attainable because “all intellect is reductive”: “the closer an intellectual system comes to full internal consistency and universality of application … the more obvious become the exclusiveness of its value,” its “summary thematic statements” suppressing our “aesthetic experience.”\(^{57}\) To support this view, Rabkin observes in part that critical formulations of the play's meaning are beset with disagreement.\(^{58}\) Yet in extending to the question of whether Shylock or Antonio is the more deserving of blame, this disagreement may be obviated by the tendency of their typological identities to validate detractors of them both. Because their blindness and prodigality make them both wrong, the censure of them both can be right. Beyond showing us how both these characters are wrong, however, these biblical allusions also show how they are also both right, as Coghill perceives in finding that the Old Law and the New Law lodged in these antagonists are “both inherently right.”\(^{59}\) For in also defining them as father and son, these typological identities refer the self-identity of each to the other, the father being father by virtue of the son and the son being son in having a father. Their relationship thus emerges as one of mutual dependency, which requires each to validate the other. And this shared validity can be seen to sustain the critical praise they have both received. The paternal and filial essences of these antagonists prevent their respective defenders from contradicting one another.

Moreover, by seeing that their defects of blindness and prodigality make them both wrong while their relationship as father and son makes them both right, we can see why the judgments they elicit from critics often exhibit the tentativeness, the backing and filling, the saying and unsaying that Rabkin has appropriately noticed.\(^{60}\) Thus Barnet can declare Shylock to be “a hardhearted, self-regarding diabolical figure,” while also admitting that “we powerfully feel his claim.”\(^{61}\) Similarly attesting that *Merchant* is not an “easy” play by the apparent design of its author, Brown observes that he so presents Shylock's “devilish motivation” and “inhuman demands” as to encourage his audience to sympathize with them.\(^{62}\) And just as the play mitigates the evil of Shylock, so it impugns the goodness of Antonio, as Joan Ozark Holmer and Danson suggest in faulting his Christian failure to love his enemy Shylock.\(^{63}\) Most importantly, however, the representation of these antagonists as both wrong and right prompts us to see what is wrong with them as vitiating what is right in them and thus as thwarting what should be a relationship of mutuality. As the source of their discord, then, the blindness and prodigality evinced by these characters become the objects of Shakespeare's censure and not the characters themselves. In Launcelot and Old Gobbo, moreover, these defects are largely surmounted, when Launcelot repents his cruelty to his father and Old Gobbo recognizes and blesses his son. Thus, as before suggested, Launcelot and Old Gobbo in II.ii seem to assume a paradigmatic function that renders their reconciliation prescriptive of a proper reconciliation between Antonio and Shylock. Yet while laying down this prescription, Shakespeare does not defy the realities of his world by having his antagonists fulfill it. Shylock's blindness is not lifted; rather, he is forced to bless Antonio with his symbolic money while remaining blind to his identity; and Antonio's prodigality seems to be reduced in one way, only to be maintained in another; specifically in his demand for Shylock's conversion, as we shall see.

Finally, recognizing the biblical character of Shylock's paternity can give us a surer sense of the play's tonality. For to the extent that this identity is derived from the Bible, it is not derived from New Comedy, and this means that Shylock is not a properly abandoned *senex* with whom we unaccountably sympathize, but rather a father whose dignity justly indicts the discontent and ensuing elopement of his daughter. Thus Shylock's biblical paternity lends support to those who deny that the tone of this play is romantic.\(^{64}\) And since
a romantic conception of the play is what impels critics to complain that Shylock's prominence impairs "the play as a whole" or raises "an interest beyond its resign," dispelling that conception also obviates the need for these complaints.

II

Yet before attempting to demonstrate how these meanings flow from the typological identities of Isaac and the Prodigal Son, I need to assure the reader by textual evidence that these identities exist in II.ii; and that they are there imposed on Launcelot and Old Gobbo in order to be transferred to Shylock and Antonio. Fortunately, a number of parallels suggesting the presence of blind Isaac in Old Gobbo have already been adduced by Hockey, and need only to be restated and reinforced. Just as Genesis xxvii begins by telling us that Isaac "was olde," so Shakespeare calls Launcelot's father Old Gobbo. In Isaac, blindness is a defect of age: Isaac "was olde, & his eies were dimme so that he colde not se" (Genesis xxvii.1); similarly, Old Gobbo is "more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind" (II.ii.36-37) which means that his eyes are not only dim but that he cannot see. Isaac's blindness makes him unable to recognize his son Jacob: "For he knewe him not" (Genesis xxvii.23). Correspondingly, Launcelot associates his father's blindness with nonrecognition of his filial self: "O heavens, this is my true-begotten father, who being more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind, knows me not" (II.ii.35-37). And just as Isaac's blindness is symbolic of his unwisdom, so Launcelot imputes unwisdom to Old Gobbo's blindness by saucily reversing the proverb regarding the wise child's ability to know his own father: "Nay, indeed if you had your eyes you might fail of the knowing me; it is a wise father that knows his own child" (II.ii.75-77). Isaac's blind unwisdom is characterized as carnal in being focused on food, as he shows in telling his favored son, Esau, to "make me savourie meat, such as I love, and bring it to me that I maie eat, and ... my soule maie blesse thee, before I dye" (Genesis xxvii.4); Launcelot ascribes a lecherous carnality to his father, which he describes in terms of cooking and eating: "For indeed my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste" (II.ii.16-18). Genesis xxvii focuses on the blessing of Abraham, Jacob asking his father to "eat of my venison, that thy soule maie blesse me" (Genesis xxvii.19); Launcelot twice asks Old Gobbo, "Give me your blessing" (II.ii.78, 84). Even as it accounts for his unwillingness to bless Jacob, Isaac's carnal blindness enables Jacob's mother to coerce him into blessing Jacob by disguising him as the hairy Esau: "And she covered his hands and the smothe of his necke with the skinnes of the kyds of the goates" (Genesis xxvii.16). Thus deceived by his blindness, Isaac mistakenly but properly blesses Jacob: "For he knewe him not, because his handes were rough as his brother Esau's handes; wherefore he blessed him" (Genesis xxvii.23). Insolently presenting the back of his head to his father, Launcelot causes the old man's blessing hands to mistake his head for his face and thus to think his face much hairier than it is: "Lord worshipp'd might he be, what a beard hast thou got! Thou hast got more hair on thy chin that Dobbin my fill-horse has on his tail" (II.ii.93-95). And if Jacob's "wise mother" plays a part in securing his blessing, Launcelot's identification of his mother helps induce Old Gobbo to bless him: "I am sure Margery your wife is my mother" (II.ii.89-90); to which the old father replies: "Her name is Margery indeed. I'll be sworn, if thou be Launcelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood" (II.ii.91-93).

But while invoked by Old Gobbo who is not Jewish, Isaac seems to describe Shylock who is. By his own admission, Shylock too is "old" (II.v.2). In offering Antonio a bond of flesh, he shows his law to exhibit the carnality appropriate to its Jewishness. And to the extent that blindness symbolizes unwisdom Shylock's psychic blindness to Antonio as his spiritual son may be the unwisdom that Launcelot adduces, when he observes of his father, "Nay, indeed if you had your eyes you might fail of the knowing me; it is a wise father that knows his own child." Just as Isaac's carnal blindness requires Jacob's "wise mother" to deceive Isaac into blessing him, so Shylock's blindness to his son Antonio requires another wise woman, Portia, to trick Shylock into endowing him with his blessing-symbolizing wealth.

Yet if Launcelot's pursuit of his father's blessing identifies him as Jacob, his running away from Shylock bears a different emphasis:
Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me, saying to me, “[Gobbo], Launcelot [Gobbo], good Launcelot,” or “good [Gobbo], or “good Launcelot [Gobbo], use your legs, take the start, run away.” My conscience says, “No; take heed, honest Launcelot, take heed, honest [Gobbo],” or as aforesaid, “honest Launcelot [Gobbo], do not run, scorn running with thy heels.” Well, the most courageous fiend bids me pack. “Fia!” says the fiend; “away!” says the fiend; “for the heavens, rouse up a brave mind,” says the fiend, “and run.” Well, my conscience, hanging about the neck of my heart, says very wisely to me, “My honest friend Launcelot, … bouge not.” “Bouge,” says the fiend. “Bouge not,” says my conscience. … To be rul’d by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil; and to run away from the Jew, I should be rul’d by the fiend, who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation. … The fiend gives the more friendly counsel: I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment, I will run.

(II.ii.1-32)

This speech depicts a psychic battle within Launcelot, a battle whose seriousness his flippant tone tries unsuccessfully to conceal. The fiend is prompting him to act on an impulse that his conscience is struggling to restrain. And the impulse that Launcelot's conscience would restrain is his desire to run away from Shylock, running away being variously alluded to seventeen times. Given the play's previous glances at prodigality, these insistent references to running away may well be inviting us to recall that Luke's Prodigal Son similarly “toke his journey into a farre countrey” where “he wasted his goods with riotous living” (Luke xv.13). So when Launcelot decides to run away from Shylock his master at the behest of the fiend, his action can plausibly acquire a prodigal connotation, especially in light of the association that II.ii will establish between master and father. But it also appears significant that, while decided, Launcelot's struggle is not resolved on the merits. By identifying his flight as prompted by the fiend, Launcelot recognizes that it is wrong. But Launcelot attempts to evade the wrongness of following the fiend's commandment by charging that Shylock too is “a kind of devil” and “the very devil incarnation.”69 In the absence of a valid reason for his defection, Launcelot demonizes Shylock, this demonization spuriously licensing his running away.

Despite its light tone, Launcelot's demonizing of Shylock seems loaded with a serious meaning that emerges in its connotation of contempt. In demonizing Shylock, Launcelot is obviously expressing contempt for him. And once recognized to express contempt, Launcelot's demonizing can be linked to the flight it licenses. For flight and contempt both express alienation, albeit in significantly different ways. Flight is an action and thus can be said to express alienation psychically or spiritually. Thus if the alienation of flight expresses prodigality, so too the alienation of contempt may express prodigality, the one expression being carnal while the other is spiritual. In their carnality and spirituality, moreover, Launcelot's two expressions of prodigal expressions of prodigal alienation assume an obviously Pauline connotation, the connotation of Pauline spirituality in Launcelot's contempt being enhanced by its verbal character. For it is by defining the blessing as a verbal promise that Paul makes it spiritual; just as he declares “faith preached” to be the way of receiving the “Spirit”: “Received ye the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith preached?” (Galatians iii.2). But what makes these Pauline modes of prodigality significant is the observation that they are respectively displayed with great prominence by Jessica and Antonio. Like Launcelot, Jessica runs away from Shylock; and like Launcelot, Antonio treats him with contempt, in part, by calling him devil: “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (I.iii.98). It thus becomes possible to suspect that the flight and contempt united in Launcelot associate him with both Jessica and Antonio in their respectively carnal and spiritual expressions of a common prodigality.

Further reinforcing Launcelot's association with Jessica and Antonio is his placement in the drama between these characters, Launcelot's prodigality in II.ii standing between Antonio's prodigality in I.iii and Jessica's
prodigality in II.iii. This placement seems to enhance the ability of Launcelot to clarify the prodigality of Antonio. For it is by following and thus repeating the prodigality of Antonio that Launcelot can gloss that prodigality. But if Launcelot's prodigality follows that of Antonio, Jessica's prodigality follows that of Launcelot. And this suggests that just as Launcelot's situation enables him to comment on Antonio, Jessica's situation enables her to comment on Launcelot. Indeed, it would appear that if Launcelot's purpose is to comment on Antonio, it is Jessica that facilitates this purpose by clarifying prodigality in Launcelot. For Jessica expresses her prodigality in the physical action of flight, which is easily identified as prodigal, in contrast to contempt, which is relatively subtle. Thus an appreciation of how Launcelot's contempt identifies Antonio's contempts as prodigal should emerge from an appreciation of how Jessica's flight identifies Launcelot's flight as prodigal, it being Launcelot's flight that lends the connotation of prodigality to his contempt.

Jessica clarifies the prodigality of Launcelot's flight by repeating, and thus emphasizing, it in the next scene. But besides repeating Launcelot's flight, Jessica also repeats the thoughts and purposes attending it. In recognizing that shame for her lineage is a “heinous sin” (II.iii.16), Jessica exhibits the inner struggle that precedes Launcelot's flight. Like Launcelot, Jessica flees in order to “end [the] strife” (II.iii.20) that cannot be resolved. And albeit subtly, Jessica preserves Launcelot's association of flight with demonizing contempt by referring to her father's house as “hell” (II.iii.2). As Launcelot's demonizing of Shylock reflects badly on himself, so in locating the hellishness of Shylock's house in its “tediousness” (II.iii.3), Jessica has been seen to betray the frivolity of her own nature. Like Launcelot and Jessica also flee for the same prodigal purpose. Launcelot anticipates and gets the license of a fool in being given “a livery / More guarded than his fellows” (II.ii.154-55), and he expresses that license in “getting up of the Negro's belly” (III.v.38-39); Jessica leads a life of riot with Lorenzo. And besides repeating Launcelot's flight in its various aspects, Jessica further clarifies the prodigality of that flight by recasting it as a child's flight from a father.

In II.vi, moreover, Shakespeare all but explicitly identifies Jessica's flight as prodigal through Gratiano's extended allusion to the Prodigal Son. For in being delivered just before Jessica executes her flight, this allusion seems to point toward her:

How like a younger or a prodigal
The scarfed 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!

(II.vi.14-19)

Like Jessica, the “scarfed bark” is female. But this bark also seems to mediate between the behavior of the original Prodigal and Jessica. Like the Prodigal who takes his journey into a far country, the bark “puts from her native bay”; and like the bark, Jessica abandons her father's house, to journey abroad with Lorenzo. Like the lascivious Prodigal who “devoured [his father's] goods with harlots” (Luke xv.30), the bark is “Hugg’d and embraced by the strumpet wind”; and, like the embraced bark, Jessica is embraced by Lorenzo, who plays the harlot or “strumpet wind”; and like the bark, Jessica is beggared by her riot with Lorenzo.

Thus in II.vi, Shakespeare reinforces the prodigal character of the flight that Jessica clarifies in Launcelot, and Launcelot's flight, spiritualized into contempt, is what he clarifies in Antonio. Yet in mediating Jessica's prodigality to Antonio, Launcelot also orients these characters to each other; thus enabling us to regard them as the carnal and spiritual reflections of one another. As Jessica's flight acts out her contempt, Antonio's contempt emerges as a psychic flight from Shylock's strong claims against his conscience. As Jessica's flight becomes the recourse of an unresolved inner struggle, so the breakdown of Antonio's strained civility under the pressure of Shylock's arguments can likewise reflect an impasse in his own inner struggle.
Flight, however, is not the Prodigal's only behavior. For not only fleeing from his father, the Prodigal also demands his money: “And the yonger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of the goods that falleth to me. So he devided unto them his substance” (Luke xv.12). If the physicality of the Prodigal's flight suggests its carnality, the verbal character of his demand suggests its spirituality. And these distinctions become pertinent when we recall that both these prodigal behaviors are expressed in the play. If Jessica expresses the Prodigal carnally in her flight from Shylock, Antonio seems to express the Prodigal spiritually in his I.iii demand to borrow, or “have” (I.iii.116) Shylock's money. But one more complication obtains. For if, apart from the inherent spirituality of his demand, Antonio spiritualizes Jessica's flight into contempt, Jessica, apart from the carnality of her flight, may also be seen to carnalize Antonio's demand for Shylock's money by running away with Shylock's money. If Antonio spiritualizes what is carnal, Jessica carnalizes what is spiritual, these transformations enabling Jessica and Antonio to participate in both behaviors of the Prodigal, in both the taking of money and the flight that also appears as contempt. And this participation lends a moral significance to the observation that, even as he demands Shylock's money, Antonio treats him with contempt. His contemptuous demand for Shylock's money thus becomes a complex act of prodigality demonstrating his unworthiness to receive that money, as Shylock trenchantly observes:

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 suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe).
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now 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.

(I.iii.106-19)

Once grasping a symbolic dimension in Shylock's “moneys,” we begin to recognize a meaning in his indignant words that transcends the realm of economics. Rather than the usually cited speeches of III.i and IV.i, these words of Shylock address the theological core of his claim against Antonio, a claim whose merit, while not perfect, is reinforced by Antonio's defiant retort:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?

(I.iii.130-34)

Not only churlish, however, Antonio's prodigal demand for Shylock's money assumes a further and darker implication emerging from its suggestive parallel with Jessica's absconding from Shylock. For in running away with her father's money, Jessica commits physical, literal theft. Thus to the extent that Jessica's flight expresses physically what Antonio's contempt expresses spiritually, it may effectively accuse Antonio of an alternatively spiritual form of theft. In short, Shakespeare may be ascribing theft to prodigality in both Jessica and Antonio, thus giving point to Shylock's monitory observation to Antonio that “thrift is blessing, if men steal it not” (I.iii.90). And Shakespeare seems to be establishing this guilty equality between Jessica and Antonio with the view to establishing a further equality in guilt between Antonio and Shylock. For in being
understood as theft from Shylock, Antonio's contemptuous demand assumes a likeness to Shylock's usury, which was understood as a legal form of theft, a theft that Shylock at first intends to practice against Antonio. Further evidence for the view of Antonio's demand as theft will emerge in the discussion of how the text provides for a symbolic understanding of money as Abraham's blessing. What we need to notice now is that both the money stolen by Jessica and demanded by Antonio is lost, its loss in both cases invoking the Prodigal's loss of his father's money. If Jessica squanders Shylock's ducats in riot with Lorenzo, the ventures out of which Antonio is to repay Shylock's loan are analogously and therefore prodigally "squand'red abroad." As with Bassanio's self-referred observation that "like a willful youth, / That which I owe is lost," Antonio loses what he owes Shylock. But it is Shylock himself who most clearly and overtly identifies the bankrupt Antonio as prodigal by comparing him to his own prodigal daughter: "There I have another bad match. A bankrout, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar, … " (III.i.44-46). Just as Jessica's riot reduces her to beggary, so Antonio's losses reduce him in III.iii to begging Shylock for his life. And the lost gains of Jessica and Antonio are what Launcelot will likewise be seen to anticipate in II.ii by seeking the paternal blessing that money symbolizes in a manner conducting to its loss.

III

The obviously subversive implication of thus defining the play's representatively Christian character as prodigal may go far toward explaining why Shakespeare presents this definition in so veiled and oblique a manner. He could not prudently express such a meaning in any other way. Yet prudence may not be the only cause of its obscurity. Further impeding a recognition of Antonio's prodigality is the presence in Launcelot and Old Gobbo of more than one biblical persona. For the allusions to Isaac and the Prodigal Son draw in their own stories, both of which are told simultaneously. And each of these stories contains a father and a son. So by telling both of them at once, Shakespeare endows his dialogue with two fathers and two sons, Old Gobbo primarily representing the blind Isaac but also the suffering father of the Prodigal; while Launcelot primarily represents the Prodigal Son but also Jacob, the fusing of the Prodigal Son with Jacob supporting Fortin's sense of Jacob in this play as a Pauline expression of Christianity. The conflation can account for the puzzling linkage of Old Gobbo's Isaac with his suffering, that suffering pertaining to his identity as father of the Prodigal. It can also account for Launcelot's ability to associate his prodigal flight from Shylock with a request for his father's blessing that, besides resonating with the Prodigal's request, is Jacob-like in its deceitful withholding of his identity; just as Jacob hides his identity from his father. Yet while doubtlessly troublesome, this doubling is probably not capricious. For attention to the characteristics of the dialogue's two fathers can reveal them as supplying one another's deficiencies, just as the two sons seem similarly to supply one another's deficiencies. If Isaac is blind, the father of the Prodigal can see and recognize his son; if the Prodigal's father suffers under the impiety of his son, Isaac does not so suffer. If the Prodigal is rebellious, Jacob is pious; but Jacob is also devious in his piety, whereas the Prodigal is honest and forthright in his rebellion, just as Antonio is forthright in his hostility to Shylock. These mutually amending identities seem to anticipate a composite father who sees with joy and a composite son who candidly expresses piety, these composites being achieved by a purging away of the paternal defects of blindness and suffering and the filial defects of rebellion and deceit. But this is not all. For it is also important to notice that, in their rectification, these composites seem to coalesce into new typological identities, these identities being the father and son of the Prodigal's return. For that is the father who sees with joy: "And when he was yet a great way of, his father sawe him, and had compassion, and ran & fel on his necke, and kissed him" (Luke xv.20). And that is the son who candidly expresses repentant piety: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthie to be called thy sone: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke xv.18-19). It is in these transformations that father and son express the redemptiveness of their mutual dependency, the father being blessed in the reclamation of his son and the son being blessed in his return to his father. And these typological transformations are what Launcelot and Old Gobbo achieve in their II.ii reconciliation.

It would thus appear that the powerfully moving scene of the Prodigal's return to his father is what Old Gobbo and Launcelot set forth as the, albeit unachieved, ideal of reconciliation between Shylock and Antonio as
Jewish father and Christian son. Yet this scenario requires that the two fathers and two sons culminating in these redeemed identities pertain not only to Old Gobbo and Launcelot but also to Shylock and Antonio. In Shylock these fathers are relatively easy to spot. His blindness to his spiritual son and his suffering enable Shylock, like Old Gobbo, to represent both blind Isaac and the father of the Prodigal. Likewise, Antonio can be seen to reflect Launcelot's prodigal contempt, to which he adds a similarly prodigal demand to “have” Shylock's money. And as Launcelot is like Jacob in deceitfully hiding his filial identity from Old Gobbo, so Antonio refuses to acknowledge his filial relation to Shylock. But there is a deeper sense in which Antonio may express the deceit of Jacob. For Antonio demands Shylock's money not for himself but on behalf of his friend Bassanio. And by demanding this money in another's name, Antonio may subtly invoke Jacob as the son who asks for the blessing in the disguise of another's name. To be sure, this association may seem dubious in ignoring the sharp difference between Jacob's grasping and Antonio's generosity. Yet this difference seems curiously to fade in the observation that Antonio's generosity has in fact been challenged by a number of critics, who see it as his means of fast-binding Bassanio to himself. In confessing his inability “to know myself” (i.i.7), which suggests an ignorance of his own motivation, Antonio may well prompt us to regard him as self-deceived. It is the self-deceivedly self-serving character of his demand that seems most profoundly to associate Antonio with the deceitful selfishness of Jacob; just as the contemptuous character of that demand can reflect the rebellion of the Prodigal. And these associations gain plausibility in the contrasting observation that, while not expunging rebellion and deceit from the terms of his IV.i settlement with Shylock, Antonio mitigates these defects by muting his contempt for Shylock and also, as I shall suggest, by demanding his wealth not for another but, more honestly and knowingly, for himself.

Yet Shakespeare's ability to meld the fathers and sons invoked by these two texts is also enhanced by similarities in the texts themselves. For in dealing alike with a father and son as well as with a father's gift to his son, these texts can almost be seen as Old and New Testament versions of the same story. And further suggesting their similarity is the observation that the original form of both these stories includes a third character in an elder brother who vies with the younger for paternal favor and loses out, or sees himself as losing out, to the younger. But what seems the most important similarity in these fraternal conflicts is their susceptibility to analogously allegorical interpretations that are pertinent to Shakespeare's play. As earlier observed in Romans ix.6-13, Paul takes the conflict of Jacob with Esau to symbolize the conflict between Christianity and Judaism, the elder Esau representing Judaism, while the younger Jacob who displaces him represents Christianity. In the Prodigal story, an elder brother interprets the father's celebration of the Prodigal's return as evidence that he loves this offending younger better than himself (Luke xv.29-30). Yet in this story the father assures the elder that his love for the returned Prodigal does not prejudice his love for him:

Sonne, thou art ever with me, and all that I have, is thine. It was mete that we shoulde make mery, & be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive againe: and he was lost, but he is founde.

(Luke xv.31).

As with Paul's understanding of Esau and Jacob, the Geneva Bible glosses this verse in a manner that likewise makes the elder and younger brothers of Luke xv symbolic of the Jews and the Gentiles: “Thy parte, [who] art a Jewe, is nothing diminished by that ye Christ was also killed for the Gentiles.” This gloss attests the sixteenth-century understanding of the Prodigal Son as symbolic of the Gentiles or Christians. But the further importance of this gloss emerges in its ability to suggest that, not only derogating the Jews, sixteenth-century Christianity could also recognize a mutuality between Jews and Christians, this mutuality being what Shakespeare affirms, even as he gives it an alternative definition. For in both these stories Shakespeare deletes the elder brother, the only trace of him in Merchant residing in Gratiano's reference to “a younger or a prodigal” in II.vi.14, which implies an elder as well. In effect, Shakespeare no longer needs the elder brother because he has transferred the Judaism he represents to the father. But in thus making these stories express a
conflict between the father and a remaining younger, Shakespeare also puts moral pressure on this younger. For a younger brother may justly refuse submission to an elder brother inherently inferior to himself, as Paul finds a symbolically Christian Jacob to do regarding a symbolically Jewish Esau. But it is problematical for a son to rebel against a father, however old and infirm, because, unlike an elder brother, the father is author of the son; as Fortin likewise suggests in finding the II.ii dialogue to define Judaism as “the older tradition from which [Christianity] derives its richness.” And beyond the father's authority, there is his dependence. While II.ii will show paternal infirmity as tempting the son to abrogate his loyalty to his father, it will also show this infirmity as making the son essential to the father, as Old Gobbo suggests in calling Launcelot “the very staff of my age, my very prop” (II.ii.66-67).

The description of filial defection as prodigal becomes still more suggestive, moreover, if we consider that this biblical term tends to resonate with doctrines central to the Christian theology of supersession. For the Prodigal's behavior toward his father seems to resemble the behavior of the Church toward its own parental source. We have observed that the Prodigal both demands his father's wealth and rebels against him. But as Rosemary Ruether observes in her influential book, *Faith and Fratricide*, this curious combination of demand and rejection is what Christianity has historically exhibited toward Judaism. Ruether explains that the Church needed “to legitimate its revelation in Jewish terms,” that is, to show that revelation as representing “the true meaning of the Jewish Scriptures and … the divinely intended fulfillment of Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets.” Thus the Church claimed the texts of Judaism for itself. But its need to legitimate its own interpretation of Jewish Scripture also prompted the Church to reject the Jews' reading of these texts. And the pertinence of this hostile appropriation of Jewish Scripture to *Merchant* is what Antonio appears to evince in his I.iii response to Genesis xxx, the text relating Jacob's breeding of Laban's sheep, which Shylock takes for his discourse on usury. For while accepting the authority of Shylock's text, Antonio rejects Shylock's interpretation of it. While Shylock takes this text to show the blessing as gained by “what Jacob did” as “skillful shepherd” (I.iii.77, 84), Antonio contradictingly refers to Jacob's blessing as “A thing not in his power to bring to pass / But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven” (I.iii.92-93). Yet what confirms the theological suggestiveness of this dispute is the recognition that Shylock's approbation of Jacob's skillful deeds adumbrates Paul's characterization of works as a method of active self-reliance by which the Jews are said to earn Abraham's blessing; while Antonio's reliance on “the hand of heaven” adumbrates Paul's identification of grace as the passively unearned way of Christianity, the way that supplants Jewish works. Thus Antonio's negation of Shylock's interpretation can be seen to epitomize the larger claim of the Church to a superior understanding of the Jewish Scriptures that validates its superseding appropriation of these Scriptures. And while it is certainly plausible to assume that Antonio's opposing interpretation should enjoy the presumption of approval, we should also note that this presumption is subtly undermined by the continuity of his argument with his contemptuous, which is to say prodigal, demand for Shylock's money.

But not only demanding his father's wealth and rebelling against him, the Prodigal also turns the wealth he takes from his father into the means of his rebellion, that wealth being what enables him to run away. And in this behavior, the Prodigal seems to reflect the tendency of the Church not only to claim Jewish texts and interpret them differently, but also to search these very texts for passages that might be seen to delegitimate the claim of the Jews to be their rightful inheritors, passages that formed the hermeneutical tradition known as *adversos Judaeos*. In effect, this tradition adduced Scriptural texts purporting to show Judaism as delegitimating itself, texts that Paul calls to witness in declaring Judaism abrogated by the coming of Christ: “Now is the righteousness of God made manifest without the Law, having witnes of the Law and of the Prophetes” (Romans iii.21). Ruether, moreover, explains that one of the ways in which the Church turned the Jews' texts against them was by distorting the dual character of Hebrew prophecy: its dialectic of judgments and promises, denunciations and consolations. Whereas the prophets directed both the judgments and the promises to the Jews, the Church claimed the promises for itself while relegating the judgments to the Jews. Thus Jewish texts were used to define the Jews as a rejected and reprobate people, and this charge of reprobation attained its culmination in Christian writings demonizing the Jews and the law. In John viii.44, Jesus tells the Jews that “Ye are of your father the devil.” Associating law with the quasi-Gnostic realm of
condemned nature, Paul defines it as “the traditions of men, according to the rudiments of the worlde” and as “ordinances of the worlde” (Colossians ii.8, 20); rudiments and ordinances, which in Galatians iv.3 and iv.8-10 assume the character of bondage: “Even so, we when we were children, were in bondage under the rudiments of the worlde.” And as the most notorious demonizer of Judaism and Jews, St. Chrysostom charges in one typical passage that “demons inhabit the very souls of the Jews, as well as the places where they gather.”

It is thus to the adversos Judaeos tactic of turning the Jews' prophecies against them that the Christians' demonizing of Shylock can be traced. And this tactic also seems to be symbolically acted out by Jessica and Antonio in their prodigal rejection of Shylock through his own wealth. For as her letter to Lorenzo suggests in crudely detailing the items of her stolen dowry, “What gold and jewels she is furnish'd with” (II.iv.31), Jessica uses her father's money to purchase the marriage that effects her escape from him. But is the behavior of Antonio any different? He demeans Shylock for lacking the “friendship” he would triumphantly display toward Bassanio by lending him money free of interest: “for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?” Yet Antonio would express his superior generosity by means of money that belongs to Shylock. Just as Jessica uses her father's own wealth to flee from him, so Antonio uses Shylock's own wealth to insult him, the prodigality of their actions being reinforced by the financial ruin that overtakes them both. But the supersessionary implications of Antonio's prodigality also seem to invest the ruin it provokes with a specifically theological if unorthodox suggestion: which is that Christianity can void the validity of Judaism to Judaism only by voiding the validity of Judaism to itself as well, which is to say, by beggaring itself. We should note, moreover, that a comparably theological censure is applied to Shylock's Jewish blindness. As earlier observed, Shylock compares Antonio's financial losses to those of the prodigal Jessica in terms that finally include the overt identification of Antonio too as prodigal: “There I have another bad match. A bankrout, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar … ” Since prodigality implicitly includes the notion of son or child, a notion explicit in the case of Jessica, Shylock's comparison of Antonio to Jessica while calling him prodigal can be read as all but divulging to us that Antonio too is his child. Yet subtly invoking Paul's view of the Jews as blind to the meaning of their own texts, Shylock speaks words that he himself fails to understand.

It thus appears that Shakespeare's use of the adversos Judaeos tradition is most startling in the impartiality of its application. Not only using a Jewish text “against the Jews,” he also uses a Christian text “against the Christians,” thus turning the hermeneutic of self-invalidation against its own practitioners. Eschewing, moreover, the tendency of this tradition to distort Hebrew prophecy by disjoining its condemnations from its promises, Shakespeare's biblical texts exhibit a prophetic balance in their conjoined implications of censure and approbation. Yet here a problem arises. For the adversos Judaeos claim that Judaism confutes itself is precisely what Shylock's Jewish law appears to illustrate in IV.i. Shylock is defeated by his own bond or law in failing to fulfill its stipulation that he exact a just pound of Antonio's flesh while spilling no drop of his blood. How then can the play censure the use of Judaism to confute Judaism as prodigal without contradicting its own plot? Serious as this objection is, I think that we can answer it by observing that this plot evinces a suggestive parallel between the fates of Shylock and Antonio. If the play defeats Shylock's law in IV.i, it defeats Antonio's love in V.i by alienating him from Bassanio. If Shylock's own bond or law is implicated in his defeat, Antonio's love seems likewise involved in his defeat. And if law expresses Judaism, love assumes a comparably Christian connotation by invoking the concept of the promise. For Gratiano subtly bases love, like Abraham's blessing, on the word of promise: “I got a promise of this fair one here / To have her love” (III.ii.206-7). And by granting her love in a manner that evokes God's promise to Abraham, Nerissa makes it an expression of her generosity, or charity, thus endowing that love with a dominant spirituality that warrants Gratiano's theologically nuanced response to it with a pledge of “faith.” When Bassanio asks, “And do you, Gratiano, mean good faith?”, he responds, “Yes, faith, my lord” (III.ii.210-11). It is, moreover, the spiritual character of his love for Bassanio that Antonio attests in offering to immolate his flesh for him.
Yet, as earlier observed, a number of critics have recognized that Antonio's love is tainted by possessiveness, and this possessiveness introduces contradiction into Antonio's character by challenging the spirituality of his love. For if love expresses its spirituality in charity, which defines it as generous, its possessiveness bespeaks not spirituality but carnality. This observation tallies, moreover, with the widespread critical awareness of a carnal element, whether implicit or explicit, in Antonio's love for Bassanio. I myself tend to view this carnality as latent and becoming overt when Portia thwarts Antonio's martyrdom for Bassanio in IV.i. For to the extent that Antonio's martyrdom expresses his love's spirituality, it does this by containing the possessiveness of that love within a dominant generosity. Though his martyrdom for Bassanio would give Antonio a powerful hold on him, yet that hold would be achieved through the greatest of all gifts: life itself. Thus when Portia thwarts Antonio's martyrdom by defeating Shylock's bond, she destroys the greater mechanism of generosity that had subsumed the carnal possessiveness of Antonio's love, which forthwith emerges in the interaction of Bassanio, Antonio, and Portia concerning Bassanio's ring. In her disguise as the young doctor Balthazar, Portia asks Bassanio to give her his ring in payment for saving Antonio's life. And since this is the ring that Portia has commanded him to keep and that he himself has promised to keep, Bassanio denies her the ring. But Antonio now intervenes to insist that he surrender the ring: “Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement” (IV.i.450-51), the term “commandement” bearing the obvious connotation of law. By dismissing Portia's prohibition as a “commandement,” Antonio seems to be urging Bassanio to disvalue his marriage with Portia as a merely legal arrangement. So when Bassanio reverses his refusal and sends the disguised Portia the ring, he can be seen to transgress the legal character of his marriage for the sake of Antonio. But this transgression also seems to convey a sense of sexual rejection. For with the carnality appropriate to the legality of the contract it betokens, Portia's ring has been seen to symbolize the sexual essence of the female body, as Portia herself suggests in her ensuing threat to entitle the possessor of the ring to the sexual possession of her body:

Since he hath got the jewel that I loved,  
And that which you did swear to keep for me,  
I will become as liberal as you,  
I’ll not deny him any thing I have,  
No, not my body nor my husband's bed”

(V.i.224-28)

It is important to notice, moreover, that Bassanio follows his surrender of the ring with a decision to accompany Antonio to his house, thus consenting to spend his wedding night not with his wife but with his friend. In a moment of special intimacy, Bassanio tells Antonio,

Come, you and I will thither presently,  
And in the morning early will we both  
Fly toward Belmont. Come, Antonio.

(IV.i.455-57)

This decision suggests that, rather than merely expressing his choice of a spiritual love for Antonio above his carnal love for Portia, Bassanio's surrender of the ring effectively transfers his erotic allegiance from his wife to his friend. And further negating a spiritual value in Bassanio's decision to surrender the ring and go home with Antonio is the recognition that in both these actions, Bassanio breaks promises. Bassanio had promised Portia to keep her ring and had likewise promised her that, while he was in Venice, “No bed shal e’er be guilty of my stay, / Nor rest be interposer ’twixt us twain” (III.ii. 326-27). As the object of Portia's faith in Bassanio's love, these promises constitute the spiritual basis of their marriage, the basis that Bassanio destroys in breaking them. In acceding to Antonio's demand and going home with him, Bassanio would appear to be violating both the carnal and the spiritual integrity of his marriage to Portia.
Yet the implications of Bassanio's moral failure extend beyond himself to Antonio as the instigator of that failure. For in prompting Bassanio to surrender Portia's ring, Antonio subtly demands, and I think, attains, a carnal payment from him not entirely different from that which Shylock had tried to achieve through his bond. In making this demand, Antonio degrades his love from charity to lust, thereby contradicting the spirituality of his love that is fundamental to his Christian faith. But what gives a further significance to the sense of degraded self-contradiction in Antonio's love is the ability of that love to assume a parallel with Shylock's law, which has similarly degraded itself to an unfulfillable and therefore self-contradicting warrant for murder. Just as the contradiction in his degraded law, together with its identification of him as alien, betrays Shylock into guilt; so the contradiction of his faith by his carnally degraded love betrays Antonio into guilt. And as Shylock is then forced to surrender the law that incriminates him, so Antonio is, albeit more subtly, forced to surrender the love that incriminates him by handing Bassanio over to Portia. It is this parallel that Brown decries in observing that Antonio's eventual loss of his friend has “a potential dramatic interest comparable to Shylock's isolation at the end of the trial.”

Are we then to view the play as rejecting faith in love or the greater faith in God defined as Love? It does not seem likely. But if faith can be defeated and yet not rejected, are we compelled to view Shylock's defeated law as rejected? Instead, might we not surmise that what has been rejected in Shylock and Antonio are not the principles of law and faith but rather these principles in the blindness and prodigality that cause them to deny the mutual dependency of their relation as father and son?

I shall interpret the cold accommodation between Shylock and Antonio in IV.1 as beginning and then aborting the restoration of their relation as father and son. Yet since the terms of this aborted reconciliation are partly monetary, they will attain the theological meanings I am trying to impart to them only if we perceive money as a symbolic representation of Abraham's blessing. This symbolic view of money is what the play supports in its subtle association of the physical "goods" that the Prodigal's father gives his son with the spiritual blessing that Isaac gives Jacob. And a comparably symbolic meaning in money is what Shylock suggests, with the tacit concurrence of Antonio, by representing Jacob's wealth as making him “blest” (I.iii.89). But more extensive evidence for such a view seems to emerge from the play's focus on Shylock's usury. For in defending this practice, Shylock articulates three pairs of terms, two of these pairs pertaining to the monetary practice of usury, while the third pair not only mediates between the realms of money and blessing but also discriminates two separate ways of having this blessing. While Shylock adduces the terms of this third pair to express his exclusively Jewish claim to Abraham's blessing, his effect, contrary to his intent, is to disclose a way in which Jew and Christian can both share in this blessing. What, then, are the terms that Shylock invokes, and how do they enable his usury to both symbolize Abraham's blessing and provide for its sharing?

IV

In I.iii, Shylock analyzes his usury into "moneys" and "usances" (I.iii.108), components which are analogously rendered as principal and interest. Shylock repeatedly makes mention of "interest" (I.iii.51) in I.iii, while twice referring to "principal" in IV.1: “Give me my principal, and let me go” (IV.1.336); “Shall I not have barely my principal?” (IV.1.342). But in addition to "moneys" and "usances" with their apparent equivalence to principal and interest, Shylock's I.iii defense of usury introduces a third pair of terms: possession and thrift, thrift meaning profit. In calling Jacob “the third possessor,” Shylock advert obliquely to Abraham's blessing as the thing Jacob is possessor of; yet the possession he adduces also identifies a mode of having that blessing: the having of it as something owned, like Shylock's “moneys” or principal. Shylock also refers to Jacob as breeding thrift from his uncle's sheep. And Shylock likewise identifies thrift as blessing in observing that

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;
And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.
Yet if thrift, like possession, is thus identified as blessing, thrift is also differentiated from possession. For whereas possession pertains to the blessing owned as principal, thrift pertains to the blessing derived as profit from a principal that is not owned. Jacob breeds this thrift out of sheep owned, rather, by his uncle Laban, as Shylock observes in beginning, “When Jacob graz’d his uncle Laban’s sheep” (I.iii.71). Thus possession and thrift emerge as terms denoting distinct ways of having Abraham’s blessing. And as possession corresponds to “moneys” held as principal, thrift corresponds to the “usances” or interest on that principal, interest being the concept that thrift is introduced to defend.

But while Shylock shows Jacob to breed the thrift that is blessing from a principal not his, he also shows Jacob, as “third possessor,” to possess the blessing as principal. Jacob is thus accorded a double having of Abraham’s blessing. And it is Jacob’s double having of Abraham’s blessing that Shylock appears to adduce in justification of his own usury, since in usury Shylock similarly lays claim to both possession and thrift, as he emphasizes in referring to “my moneys and my usances.” This double having, however, is subtly reproved by Antonio’s reference to the interest added to principal as “excess” (I.iii.62). For to the extent that Shylock’s money and usances represent a double having of Abraham’s blessing, they suggest an excess of having for Shylock that results in a defect of having for Antonio. In contrast to Shylock’s usurious possessing with a thrift that is “assur’d” (I.iii.29), Antonio is a merchant, which means that his wealth is given out at hazard and, like the Prodigal’s goods, may be “squand’red abroad” and lost, the profit with the principal.

Not only represented as something owned like principal, however, possession is also associated with paternity, and paternity as carnally defined. For in calling Jacob “the third possessor,” Shylock is obliquely referring possession to the three patriarchs of Israel, of whom Abraham and Isaac are first and second. And by referring to the first patriarchal possessor as “our holy Abram” and “father Abram,” Shylock is further defining the first of the great fathers biologically. For Abram is the name by which Genesis applies the patriarch’s fatherhood to the Jews as his sole children through biological descent; as opposed to the name, Abraham, by which God makes him “a father of manie nacions,” a father defined by the Geneva Bible, citing Romans 4.17, “not only according to ye fleshe, but of a farre greater multitude by faith”:

Beholde, I make my covenant with thee, & thou shalt be a father of manie nacions, Nether shal thy name anie more be called Abram, but thy name shalbe Abraham: for a father of manie nacions have I made thee.

(Genesis xvii.4-5)

Since the children of a father are his heirs, it follows that Shylock’s restriction of the patriarch’s paternity to the Jews likewise makes them the sole inheritors of his blessing. And it is as one of these exclusively biological heirs that Shylock claims possession of Abraham’s blessing. Moreover, to the extent that Shylock shows the blessing to comprise not only possession but also thrift, his restriction of its possession to himself can be seen as just. For even if Antonio’s gentile identification as spiritual son makes him ineligible for possession of Abraham’s blessing, he remains entitled to the thrift or profit of this blessing. Yet not only justly claiming possession, Shylock unjustly claims thrift as well, the injustice of this claim being what Antonio registers in railing against Shylock’s “thrift, / Which he calls interest.”

It is Shylock’s desire to claim thrift, moreover, that can explain his representation of its production as blatantly sexual: his conjuring up of “wooly breeders in the act” and “work of generation” (I.iii.83, 82). For these images establish the carnality and hence the Jewishness of Jacob’s thrift that makes it rightfully his. And by comparing the thrift that Jacob breeds from sheep with the interest that he himself breeds from money, Shylock hopes to define his interest as likewise carnal, thereby rendering it Jewish and rightfully his. It is thus appropriate that Antonio should challenge the legitimacy of Shylock’s interest by challenging the
carnality of its generation:

Was this inserted to make interest good?
Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?

(I.iii.94-95)

Yet it is not Shylock's thrift only that Antonio challenges. For when Shylock refuses to concede the inorganic character of his "gold and silver"—"I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast" (I.iii.96)—Antonio turns to Bassanio with the insulting observation that "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (I.iii.98). Antonio all but calls Shylock devil to his face. And just as the adversos Judaeos tradition called the Jews devils in order to define them as blessed in no manner whatever but rather as cursed, Antonio's demonizing of Shylock can be seen to alienate him from Abraham's blessing not only in its thrift but also in its possession, as he further attests in railing not only against Shylock's thrift but also against "me" and "my bargains." Just as Shylock would deny the blessing to Antonio, Antonio would deny it to Shylock. Yet, it may be asked, how do we square such an argument with the eventual truth of Antonio's insult: the fact that Shylock indeed proves himself a "cruel devil" (IV.i.217) in Act IV. Perhaps by noting that, while showing Shylock to commit evil, the play also shows him to suffer evil, and may subtly be underlining that suffering through a positive meaning reposed in the name of Old Gobbo. In observing that "suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe," Shylock emphasizes his habitual patience under contempt, thereby anticipating the similar patience of Old Gobbo. And heightening the suggestiveness of this anticipation is Brown's observation that Old Gobbo's name appears in the quarto as "Iobbe," which is "the Italianized form of Job," the archetype of patience in suffering. Like Old Gobbo, Shylock is a kind of Job: a Job at the end of his patience.

If our sense of mutual wrong between Shylock and Antonio is clarified by the distinctions of possession and thrift, that sense is also informed by what has earlier been described as their common involvement in theft. Usury is, at first, to be Shylock's legal form of theft from Antonio. But Antonio too is associated with theft in being the object of Shylock's warning that "thrift is blessing, if men steal it not." And supporting the reference of Shylock's words to Antonio is the tendency of Jessica, in exhibiting literal theft, to define Antonio's contemptuous demand for Shylock's money as a correspondingly psychic version of that theft. But likewise suggesting theft in both Jessica and Antonio is the recognition that the conditionality Shakespeare applies to Antonio's thrift is likewise applied to Jessica's possession. As Antonio is spiritual heir to Shylock's thrift, Jessica is carnal heir to his possession; what she takes is, after all, destined to be her own. But Jessica is heir to Shylock's possession only so long as she acknowledges her biological daughterhood to him, the very relationship she repudiates by fleeing from him: "Farewell, and if my fortune be not cross'd / I have a father, you a daughter, lost" (II.v.56-57). Jessica's repudiation of her biological daughterhood is what her absconding expresses and what defines the possession she absconds with as stolen. But if Jessica repudiates her biological daughterhood to Shylock, Antonio repudiates his spiritual sonhood to Shylock. Thus if Jessica's repudiation constitutes her possession as stolen, may not Antonio's repudiation constitute his thrift as stolen? Viewed in this way, Antonio's theft resides not in his demand for thrift, which is just, but rather in a spiritual contempt for Shylock that denies him possession as the prerogative of his carnal paternity. Just as Shylock's initial refusal of the thrift of profit of his symbolic money to Antonio bespeaks a blind refusal to acknowledge his spiritual sonhood, so Antonio's denial of Shylock's possession bespeaks a prodigal refusal to acknowledge the carnal character of his paternity, a refusal that Antonio attests in desiring to convert him.

Moreover, since "thrift is blessing" only "if men steal it not," the loss of its efficacy as blessing would tend to suggest that it has indeed been stolen. And to the extent that the ability to bless is the ability to redeem or save, it is interesting to observe that thrift eventually proves unable to buy back or redeem Antonio from the condemnation of Shylock's law. Shylock eventually grants Antonio an interest-free loan, thus giving him the thrift of his money, but on the condition that he return its principal or possession within three months. And the terms Shylock establishes for his loan are such that no amount of interest or thrift will be allowed to
compensate for the failure of Antonio to repay its possession by that time; rather, possession, inherently carnal to begin with because carnally claimed, will be claimed in the very flesh of Antonio. This is just what happens. Having failed to return the possession of Shylock's loan by the appointed time, Antonio finds that a ransom of thrift “ten times” (IV.i.211) the amount of that possession can be refused. Yet the spiritual meaning of this thrift is what reveals the true significance of its vitiation by suggesting that Christianity steals and thus vitiates its thrift or profit in Abraham's blessing by withholding its possession from the Jews. If this meaning is valid, it implies that the blessing of Abraham can be secured to neither Jew nor Christian unless secured to both together, by the allotment of possession to the Jews and thrift to the Christians. And that it may, despite its heterodoxy, be valid is supported by the observation that his dual allotment is what Antonio can be seen to propose in his IV.i disposition of Shylock's wealth.

Addressing the court, Antonio says,

To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use …

(IV.i.381-83)

Antonio divides Shylock's wealth between himself and Shylock, thus sharing that wealth with Shylock. But Antonio also stipulates that Shylock is to die “possess’d” (IV.i.389) of his half, whereas for the duration of Shylock's life, Antonio is to have the other half “in use,” which is to say, in a trust. The significance of Antonio's proposal of a trust emerges in the recognition that this legal instrument can enable its trustee to eschew possession of the principal while claiming its profit, or thrift, which is what I think Antonio intends to do. To be sure, a trust need not by definition grant the trustee its profit, and critics unable to cope with Antonio's eventual consent to get as well as give balk at the idea of his profiting from his trust. Yet when we consider that Antonio has at this point no other means of living and has just declared his preference for death over “An age of poverty” (IV.i.271); and when we further consider the symbolic meaning of the profit in question, it becomes highly unlikely that Antonio means to refuse it.\(^{87}\) Not validated, moreover, as the result of Christian hazard, since it entails no hazard, Antonio's profit is rather validated in accruing to him without his possession of the principal, which he yields to Shylock's heirs. It thus appears that Antonio claims the thrift of Abraham's blessing for his Christian self while restoring its possession to the Jewish Shylock. In light of the meanings associated with possession, this restoration can suggest Antonio's attempt to recognize, however incipiently and obliquely, that the blessing he would have is Shylock's abiding possession, the prerogative of his carnal paternity. By claiming Shylock's thrift in a manner that restores his possession, Antonio claims his thrift but steals it not. Thus he begins to make it an authentic blessing, as he further suggests in claiming that thrift both without the conspicuous contempt that had marked his demand for Shylock's money in I.iii, and also more honestly, which is to say, for himself. Did Antonio do no more than this, he would have begun to purge away the defects of his identities as Prodigal Son and Jacob, thus initiating the process that redefines him as the returned Prodigal.

V

Yet Antonio appears to take this course only to abandon it and revert to the contempt and deceit of the unreconstructed Prodigal Son and Jacob. This abandonment suggests that Antonio ends his conflict with Shylock still mired in the internal struggle that Launcelot exhibits at the outset of II.ii but eventually overcomes. Yet if Launcelot's II.ii dialogue with his father shows how the conflict of Antonio with Shylock should end and does not, that dialogue also epitomizes major elements in the dynamics of this larger quarrel. For Launcelot's interaction with Old Gobbo shows how the defects of paternal blindness and filial prodigality exacerbate each other; how the mutual exacerbation of their defects would propel father and son, albeit figuratively, toward mutual murder but for the supervening realization that mutual murder is also mutually
suicidal; and how this recognition prompts father and son to abate the blindness and prodigality that estrange them. Turning now to a close reading of this dialogue, I shall try to show how it conveys these meanings and invites their reference to Shylock and Antonio.

As Launcelot's flight from Shylock bespeaks his prodigality, his designation of Shylock as “this Jew my master” refers this prodigality to a resentment of authority. And appropriately leveling that resentment at the father he proceeds to meet, Launcelot determines to “try confusions” (II.ii.37) with him, just as Jacob tries confusions with old Isaac. By recalling, moreover, that Jacob's purpose in his confusions was to compass his father's blessing, we may surmise that Launcelot's purpose in these “confusions” is similarly to compass his father's blessing, presumably because he associates this blessing with authority. But if Jacob would seek this blessing by confusing himself with his brother Esau, Launcelot's reference to Old Gobbo as “my true-begotten father” (II.ii.35-36) suggests that he would seek this blessing by confusing the roles of father and son by making himself his father's father. And in forthwith demanding that his father address him as “Master Launcelot” (II.ii.48), Launcelot further suggests that his aim in this role reversal is to assume the mastery belonging to a father. Yet what enables Launcelot to act out his desire to dominate his father is his father's blindness. His blindness is what prevents Old Gobbo from recognizing that the stranger he stops to inquire the way to Shylock's house is his son. And this lack of recognition causes the old father to call him “Master young man” and “Master young gentleman” (II.ii.33, 39), as well as addressing him with the deferential “you” rather than the familiar “thou.” Not merely basking in the pleasure of his father's error, however, Launcelot is prompted to affect the persona of authority and erudition that will encourage its continuance. Launcelot would reinforce his father's belief that he is addressing his social better, so that the old man will continue according him the honorific titles of “sir,” “your worship,” “your mastership,” and “young gentleman” (II.ii.51, 56, 59, 70-71).

This deception becomes seriously mischievous, however, when Launcelot decides to tell his unrecognizing father that he is dead, much as Luke's Prodigal causes his father to think him dead: “For this my sonne was dead … ” (Luke xv.24). Addressing Old Gobbo as “father,” yet meaning him to perceive that address merely as a term appropriate to his age,88 Launcelot says,

Talk not of Master Launcelot, father, for the young gentleman, according to Fates and Destinies, and such odd sayings, the Sisters Three, and such branches of learning, is indeed deceas'd, or as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven.”

(II.ii.60-65)

This statement is deliberately cruel, as Launcelot himself acknowledges in telling the audience with Vice-like candor that it is intended to bring his father to tears: “Mark me now, now will I raise the waters” (II.ii.49). But not only cruel, this false news impairs still further his father's ability to recognize him. And to the extent that nonrecognition of a child is what constitutes paternal blindness, Launcelot's prodigality can be seen to deepen that blindness, just as that blindness incites his prodigality.

Yet the cruelty of Launcelot's communication is not without purpose. For in anticipating that it will reduce his father to tears, Launcelot invites us to regard his false report as intended to break his father's spirit, thus making him submissive to himself. Launcelot appears to be using the report of his own death as a way of achieving authority over his father, a way that, indeed, succeeds, as the old man attests in begging his unknown son to deny the death that his authority has already convinced him is true: “I know you not, young gentleman, but I pray you tell me, is my boy, God rest his soul, alive or dead?” (II.ii.70-72).

Not only subjugating his father, however, this news also threatens to kill him, as Old Gobbo's self-centered reaction demonstrates: “Marry, God forbid, the boy was the very staff of my age, my very prop” (II.ii.66-67). Trying to evade the force of his father's distress, Launcelot attempts to treat it as matter for mirth and, turning
to the audience, asks, “Do I look like a cudgel or a hovel-post [that is, a little hovel or house89], a staff, or a prop?” (II.ii.68-69). Yet the flatness of the joke seems to suggest that Launcelot's cruel heart is being disquieted by his conscience. And though, by contrast, there is no sense of deliberate cruelty in Old Gobbo's blindness, that blindness retains its own lethal potential. For Launcelot glancingly observes that “murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may” (II.ii.79-80), and the tendency of these words to associate murder with the hiddenness of “a man's son” enables them to suggest that a father's failure to recognize his son effectively, if subtly, murders him.

In the tendency of their blindness and prodigality to push them toward mutual murder, however, Old Gobbo and Launcelot seem to adumbrate a dangerously deepening bitterness in the settled antagonism between Shylock and Antonio. Because his habitual blindness makes him unable to see that Antonio is his spiritual son and, as such, entitled to the thrill of his possession, Shylock provokes him to the habitual insolence that parallels the Prodigal's flight from his father. But in I.iii, blindness and prodigality take a particularly nasty turn. Shylock's defense of his usury is dismissed by Antonio, and when Shylock in his turn scorns this dismissal, he incurs the ultimate contempt of demonization, which, confirmed and unrepented, prompts Shylock to propose the bond of flesh. It thus appears that Launcelot's reference to a son's murder by an unknowing father, which Old Gobbo displays only figuratively, really pertains to Shylock in his literal attempt to murder Antonio through the flesh bond. To be sure, it may be objected that the spectacle of Shylock similarly wishing his biological and acknowledged daughter Jessica “dead at my foot” (III.i.88) challenges this association of murder with nonrecognition or blindness. Yet Shylock's rejection of Jessica may have another point to make. It may be that just as Shakespeare shows antagonism between carnal law and spiritual faith to destroy both these principles, so he may also be working out that destruction in Jessica and Antonio as carnal and spiritual children of Shylock. In representing Shylock as a father who rejects the spiritual son he does not know only to eventually reject the carnal daughter he does know, Shakespeare may well be suggesting that Jewish paternity cannot choose between its children: that it will have both or neither. But setting aside Shylock's rejection of Jessica, what seems important to observe here is that, in his own way, Antonio shares the homicidal impulse of Shylock. For if the flesh bond serves Shylock's desire to murder Antonio physically, it also whets Antonio's desire to obliterate Shylock's Jewish identity through the spiritual means of conversion: “The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind” (I.iii.178).

As Shakespeare cleverly demonstrates through Old Gobbo and Launcelot, however, these lethal impulses are self-defeating. For the true effect of Old Gobbo's paternal blindness toward his son is to enable that son to manipulate the father into denying his own authority. Seeking to assume his father's authority, Launcelot urges Old Gobbo to relinquish that authority by referring to his son as “Master Launcelot.” And recognizing the self-demeaning implication of this request, Old Gobbo refuses to comply. Thus when Launcelot twice asks his father, “Talk you of young Master Launcelot?” (II.ii.48, 50), the old man responds, “No master sir, but a poor man's son” (II.ii.51). Yet Old Gobbo's blindness has the ironic effect of turning his denials into affirmations. Failing to perceive that the Launcelot whose mastership he denies is the very person he is addressing as “sir” and “Master,” Old Gobbo in fact grants Launcelot the mastership he professes to refuse him, as Launcelot invites us to recognize. For when Launcelot proceeds to insist that “we talk of young Master Launcelot” (II.ii.54-55) and her father again objects, “Your worship's friend and Launcelot, sir” (II.ii.56), Launcelot rejoins with an emphatic and repeated “ergo,” signifying that the father has proved his son's point: “But I pray you, ergo, old man, ergo, I beseech you, talk you of young Master Launcelot” (II.ii.57-58). And to Old Gobbo's uncomprehendingly stubborn “Of Launcelot, an't please your mastership” (II.ii.59), Launcelot triumphantly concludes, “Ergo, Master Launcelot” (II.ii.60). Just as Old Gobbo's blind inability to recognize his son effectively grants Launcelot the prodigal mastery so prejudicial to his paternal self, Shylock's carnal inability to call Antonio son may inform his own deferential address to him as “Signoir Antonio,” that address more broadly referring the historical domination of Judaism by Christianity to Judaism itself in its failure to recognize its paternal relation to Christianity.
Launcelot's prodigality can likewise be seen to recoil against him by thwarting the very aim it pursues. His aim in dominating an unknowing father is to secure that father's blessing. But having attained this dominance through the report of his own death, Launcelot now finds himself unable to induce his father to bless a son he thinks dead. To the contrary, the more credit his authority has with Old Gobbo, the more remote his blessing becomes.

Not only self-defeating, however, the homicidal impulses of blindness and prodigality are eventually revealed as suicidal. For Launcelot achieves authority over his father by verbally killing himself. Seeking to usurp his father's paternity, he kills his own sonhood. And Launcelot's self-killing quest for authority invokes a similarly self-destructive recoil in Antonio's desire to dominate Shylock. Antonio is prompted to accept Shylock's bond partly by his determination to interpret it as signaling Shylock's impending conversion from carnal Jew to spiritual Christian. And prompting Antonio to this interpretation is his wish to void the paternity constituted in Shylock's Jewish identity in order to claim the authority of that paternity for himself. Yet his eagerness to supplant Shylock's Jewish paternity makes Antonio, like Shylock, blind by preventing him from discerning the bond's ability to reduce him to the flesh claimable on terms of Shylock's carnality. In attempting to spiritualize Shylock out of existence, Antonio incurs the risk of carnalizing himself out of existence, this consequence of his bargain once again impugning the larger Christian theology of supersession. And just as the murder and suicide associated in Launcelot seem evinced in Antonio, so the same association of murder and suicide can be discerned in both Old Gobbo and Shylock. As he admits, Old Gobbo cannot survive without the support of the son his own nonrecognition murders. And his tendency to destroy the basis of his own existence may well inform the condemnation that Shylock incurs in attempting to murder Antonio. Just as Old Gobbo needs Launcelot to be the prop of his age, Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that Judaism in Shylock needs Christianity in Antonio to become the prop of its age.

It is thus appropriate that the suicidal implications of blindness and prodigality should force the surrender of these defects. Launcelot reveals himself submissively to his father, thus enabling Old Gobbo to recognize and bless him. But while imperative, this surrender and recognition also require a capacity for self-transcendence that is difficult to achieve. And this difficulty, the tough struggle it entails for both father and son, is what the II.ii dialogue is at pains to exhibit. Recognizing that the announcement of his death has alienated him from the blessing he wants, Launcelot finally decides to reveal himself to his father. Yet blind from the first and made more so by the authority of his son, Old Gobbo resists Launcelot's pleas for recognition. And just as Old Gobbo's blindness is so firmly planted as hardly to be uprooted, so Launcelot revokes his prodigal death by reluctant stages. Suing for recognition, Launcelot first asks, “Do you know me, father?” (II.ii.69). But plausibly mistaking his nomination as father merely for an address to his age (since Launcelot has so used it), Old Gobbo poignantly replies, “Alack the day, I know you not, young gentleman” (II.ii.70-71). Again Launcelot asks for recognition: “Do you not know me, father?” (II.ii.73.) But helplessly lamenting his blindness, Old Gobbo again replies, “Alack, sir, I am sand-blind, I know you not” (II.ii.74). Unyielding paternal blindness now prompts Launcelot to revive himself even to the prejudice of his authority, as he shows by kneeling down to ask his father's blessing: “Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son. Give me your blessing” (II.ii.77-78). Yet his own stubborn prodigality prevents Launcelot from identifying himself plainly and also causes him to kneel with his back to his father. And just as Launcelot's tergiversation comprises his filial submission, so Old Gobbo's inability to recognize him attests the old father's continuing blindness: “Pray you, sir, stand up. I am sure you are not Launcelot, my boy” (II.ii.81-82). The need to penetrate his father's blindness now drives Launcelot to concede that he can never be father to Old Gobbo. Dropping the title of master, he pleads, “I am Launcelot, your boy that was, your son that is, your child that shall be” (II.ii.84-86). But again, to no avail: “I cannot think you are my son” (II.ii.87). To overcome this blindness and secure his blessing, Launcelot must not only surrender his mastership; he must also, like the Prodigal asking to be as one of his father's hired servants, resume the rank of servant; which he does by styling himself “Launcelot, the Jew's man” (II.ii.89). This confession works. Now recognizing his son, Old Gobbo reclaims him with an exclamation of joy that drops the respectful “you” for the familiar “thou”: “I'll be sworn, if thou be Launcelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood” (II.ii.91-93). It is Antonio's similarly difficult—and
unachieved—surrender of his Christian impulse to dominate the Jewish Shylock that seems prescribed as the condition of his filial recognition.

Yet we should also notice that Launcelot's confession not only vanquishes his own prodigality; it also accommodates the carnality of his father's blindness by adducing the identifiably carnal link between himself and his father, which is his mother: “I am Launcelot, the Jew’s man, and I am sure Margery your wife is my mother” (II.ii.89-90). Significantly, Old Gobbo expresses his recognition of Launcelot in restrictedly carnal terms, terms that anticipate Shylock's later description of his biological daughter as “My own flesh and blood” (III.i.34). Yet while a maternal link allows Old Gobbo an at least carnal recognition of his son, no such carnal link can help Shylock recognize his wholly spiritual relationship to Antonio. He must either see spiritually or, as it proves, not at all. Thus if this dialogue posits the prodigality that Antonio does not vanquish as one condition of his recognition by Shylock, it also posits the carnality, which is to say, the blindness, that Shylock does not vanquish as another condition of that recognition.

By contrast, Old Gobbo so far sheds the psychic limitation of Isaac's blindness and the woe of the Prodigal's father as to liberate what is positive in these blessing fathers: their recognition and joy, which now coalesce to transform Old Gobbo into the father of the restored Prodigal, who blesses his son both knowingly and willingly. Old Gobbo places his hands on Launcelot's head in sign of blessing. And in the ability of his confession to purge away the rebellion of the Prodigal and the deceit of Jacob, Launcelot integrates the respective honesty and piety of these identities in evocation of the returned Prodigal. Validating these transformations, moreover, is their enabling of life to conquer death. By recognizing his son, Old Gobbo reclaims the staff and prop of his age; and in being restored to his father Launcelot evokes the Prodigal's return from death to life: “For this my sonne was dead, and is alive againe: and he was lost, but he is founde” (Luke xv.24).

Clearly, this satisfying reconciliation is not attained by Shylock and Antonio. Yet in supplying the pattern of a true reconciliation, Launcelot and old Gobbo enable us to recognize the movement, however tentative and aborted, that Antonio and Shylock make toward its achievement. As before observed, Antonio's request for Shylock's money in IV.i is devoid of the blatantly prodigal contempt he had exhibited in I.iii. Similarly, he drops his formerly Jacob-like pursuit of Shylock's blessing wealth in another's name. And in thus ameliorating his identities as the Prodigal and Jacob, Antonio offers to exchange them for the identity of the returned Prodigal. For just as Launcelot's self-revival as returned Prodigal also restores life to his father, Antonio restores life to himself and Shylock together by dividing between them both the wealth without which neither he nor Shylock could live, as Shylock, speaking for himself, attests:

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

(IV.i.374-77)

In returning the wealth that supports his house, Antonio becomes to Shylock what Launcelot becomes to Old Gobbo: the “staff” and “prop” of his age.

Yet this amelioration does not progress. For while Launcelot eventually vanquishes his Jacob-like reluctance to identify himself as Old Gobbo's son, Antonio remains like Jacob in asking Shylock for his money without confessing his filial identity. And not only failing to progress, this amelioration seems to collapse in a reversion to prodigality. For in an act that reassociates the transmission of Shylock's wealth with theft, Antonio forces Shylock to bequeath his possession to “the gentleman / That lately stole his daughter” (IV.i.384-85). And whereas Launcelot surrenders his Prodigal desire to be his father's master and father,
Antonio fulfills that prodigal desire for filial dominance. As master to Shylock, Antonio demands that he “presently become a Christian” (IV.i.387). And as one of two “god-fathers” to bring Shylock “to the font” (IV.i.398, 400) of baptism, Antonio likewise becomes his father, albeit a father from whom Shylock now evinces a prodigal desire to flee: “I pray you give me leave to go from hence, / I am not well” (IV.i.395-96). This evidence suggests that the moral status of Shylock's forced conversion, long disputed, should be decided in the negative. Rather than prescriptive or remedial, this conversion can be seen as symptomatic of what remains wrong with both Antonio and Shylock. For not only attesting prodigality in Antonio, it also results from the self-defeating tendency of Shylock's blindness to incite that prodigality. Thus Shylock's conversion is congruent with his abidingly flawed identities as Isaac and father of the reprobate Prodigal. Like Isaac with Jacob, Shylock is made to bless Antonio in ignorance of his filial identity. And like the Prodigal's father, he endows Jessica in pained awareness of her unreformed prodigality. As a measure of what is wrong with both antagonists, moreover, this conversion appropriately informs the self-defeating events that Antonio's prodigality now prompts him to initiate. For the contempt of law that emboldens him to demand Shylock's conversion is what Antonio likewise exhibits in demanding that Bassanio break Portia's commandment, that demand culminating in the forfeiture of his friend. Had Antonio achieved a properly filial respect for Shylock's carnal law, and hence for his Jewishness, he would have observed Portia's analogously carnal law and kept his friend.

The play thus offers a sharp contrast between the failed reconciliation of Shylock with Antonio and the successful reconciliation of Old Gobbo with Launcelot. Yet even this paradigmatic reunion remains imperfect. For Old Gobbo remains blind. And in restricting his blessing hands to a carnally tactile knowing that mistakes his son's head for his beard, Old Gobbo's blindness suggests his enduring limitation. Comparably, Launcelot's atonement to his father does not expunge the appetite aspect of his prodigality, which prompts him to continue hankering for a life of sexual license: “Here's a small trifle of wives! Alas, fifteen wives is nothing! Aleven widows and nine maids is a simple coming-in for one man” (II.ii.161-63). Yet while suggesting the partial persistence of paternal blindness and filial prodigality, the II.ii dialogue also tantalizes us with the fleeting vision of a time when these defects will be entirely dispelled. For to the request for his father's blessing, Launcelot appended a reflection of seemingly choric significance: “Give me your blessing; truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may, but in the end truth will out” (II.ii.78-80). What can this truth be if it is not “a man's son” finally recognized by a father no longer blind? And if Shakespeare has designed this whole dialogue to point beyond itself to Shylock and Antonio, and especially to the religious traditions they embody, might not the truth here adduced refer to the eventually dispelled blindness of Shylock’s paternal Judaism? But just as Launcelot's brief reference to the truth that must ultimately “come to light” may extend beyond Old Gobbo to Shylock's Jewishness, so Launcelot seems still more briefly and obliquely to reflect on Old Gobbo in a manner that likewise reflects on himself and, by extension, on the Christian Antonio. For in describing Old Gobbo as “this honest old man, and though I say it, though old man, yet poor man, my father” (II.ii.138-40), Launcelot is defining him as old, honest, and—poor man—father to a prodigal son! And if these words indeed imply a rueful self-awareness, might they not anticipate the remorse of the Prodigal that makes him no longer prodigal; just as Launcelot anticipates a time when the father will recognize his son? While such scent evidence cannot sustain so large an argument, its presence in this dialogue demands at least tentative recognition.

What seems more certain is that this dialogue is a highly articulated and profound allegory, which Shakespeare fashions out of received cultural elements that he molds into the vehicle of his own meaning. These elements are the two objectively biblical identities that he imposes on Launcelot and Old Gobbo, the resulting disproportion between the meaning of these characters and their marginal status prompting the justified suspicion that their function in this allegory is to mediate these typological meanings to the play's Venetian principals, Shylock and Antonio. These meanings allegorize their respectively Jewish and Christian identities as blind father Isaac and Prodigal Son. But it is in the II.ii dialogue that the complex interactions of these allegorized principals are epitomized. In their blindness and prodigality, Old Gobbo and Launcelot identify hegemonic impulses in the respective traditions of Shylock and Antonio that bring them into conflict;
as father and son, Old Gobbo and Launcelot exhibit the properly familial relationship of these principal characters, with its reciprocal requirements of paternal duty and filial loyalty. In expressing an evolution of power relations into family relations, the II.ii dialogue shows how the quarrel between Shylock and Antonio should end, thus becoming an interpretive norm that Shakespeare inserts into his play. And by contrasting with the minimal and aborted settlement that Shylock and Antonio do in fact attain, this norm assumes an oppositional force censuring that settlement while also attesting Shakespeare's awareness of the difficulties involved in getting beyond it. Shakespeare thus makes old texts speak new meanings, meanings that show our religious culture as both flawed and instinct with the capacity for its own renewal; in their intellectual and moral refinement, these meanings secure the modern value of this play by making it a force for such renewal.

Notes


15. Girard, 100.

17. Cohen, 771; Ferber, 446.
20. Weimann, 49.
24. In “‘A Dish of Doves’: *The Merchant of Venice,*** ELH, 40 (1973): 347, Leo Rockas observes that Launcelot's moral dilemma in II.i “is the same one that Jessica expresses in the following scene.” Hinely, 220, observes that “Launcelot's initial struggle between his conscience and the fiend … is a farcical version of Jessica's situation, presented in the scene immediately following.”
27. John Russell Brown, ed. the new Arden *Merchant of Venice* (London: Methuen, 1959), 39, note to line 75, citing Henley as seeing “allusions to the deception practiced on the blindness of Isaac; cf. the recognition by feeling Launcelot's hair.”
29. Hockey, 449.
32. Lewalski, 342.
34. Lewalski, 341-42.
35. Lewalski, 331, 338.
38. Calvin, 50.
40. Fortin, 267.
41. Fortin, 266-67.
42. Lewalski, 334.
43. Fortin, 267-68.
45. Barnet, “Prodigality and Time in The Merchant of Venice.” 26. Like Barnet, Brown in the Arden Merchant, lvi, uses prodigality to describe the giving that he sees as the play's most important value: “Giving is the most important part—giving prodigality, without thought for the taking.” And in “The Merchant of Venice and the Pattern of Romantic Comedy,” Shakespeare Survey, 28 (1975): 82, R. F. Hill similarly views Jessica's squandering as “a free outgoing of that which was not given us to hoard.”
46. Moisan, 198.
47. Moisan, 195.
48. At the 1985 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Nashville, Tennessee, in seminar XIII entitled The Merchant of Venice Controversies: Past and Present, I presented the idea of Launcelot as a type of the Prodigal Son in a paper entitled “The Merchant of Venice and the Blessing of Abraham.” The same sense of Launcelot's meaning as well as its extension to Jessica appears in Beuregard's 1988 essay, 39-40.
50. For an example of this view, see Moisan, 191.
51. To appreciate Paul's insistent representation of grace as wealth, see Ephesians, where he calls God “riche in mercie” (ii.4) and refers to “his riche grace” (i.7), “the exceeding riches of his grace” (ii.7), and “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (iii.8).
52. See Hunter, 64-65, for the conventionally negative representation of money in The Jew of Malta as worldly and anti-Christian.
58. Rabkin, 7.
60. Rabkin, 10-12.
61. Barnet, Twentieth Century Interpretations, 6, 7.
63. Holmer, 309; Danson, 31-32.
64. Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed., The Merchant of Venice (1926; rpt. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1953), xxii; Charlton, 125; Moody, 17; Brown in the Arden Merchant, xxxiv, records the 1709 opinion of Nicholas Rowe that the play “was design’d Tragically by the Author.” In “Brothers and Others,” in The Dyer's Hand and other Essays (New York: Random House, 1948), 223, 221, W. H.
Auden renders a common judgment in calling *Merchant* a “problem” play to be “classed among Shakespeare’s ‘Unpleasant Plays.’” And Ryan, 49, likewise repudiates “the traditional romantic idealist reading of the play.”

65. Brown, “The Realization of Shylock,” 206; Barber, 190. See also Ferber, 459, for the description of Shylock as “character not fully digested and assimilated into the structure of themes.”

66. Hockey, 448-449.


68. In the new Variorium edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Horace Howard Furness, 12th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1888), 69, the note to line 89 records Staunton's opinion that “stage tradition, not improbably from the time of Shakespeare himself, makes Launcelot, at this point, kneel with his back to the sand-blind old Father, who, of course, mistakes his long back hair for a beard, of which his face is perfectly innocent.”

69. In *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy* (London: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1985), 33, Richard A. Levin these allegations as “Launcelot's rationalizations, offered … to ease his conscience …”

70. Charlton, 156, observes that Jessica's phrase “says more of [her] frivolous nature than of the repulsiveness of her father's house.”


72. The possessive taint in Antonio's love for Bassanio has frequently been noted. In “Portia and *The Merchant of Venice*: the Gentle Bond.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 28 (1967): 26, Robert Hapgood observes that “Antonio is at once too generous and too possessive.” In “The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice,*” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 21 (1970): 110, Lawrence W. Hyman observes that “Antonio's wealth which he puts at his friend's disposal is a means of holding on to Bassanio's love.” Hinely, 234, likewise describes Antonio's love of Bassanio as “possessiveness expressed through generosity.”

73. This reading of the Prodigal story is accepted by modern interpreters, as exemplified by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 254.

74. Fortin, 267.

75. Ruether, 94.

76. Ruether, 65, 139-40. On 117-21 Ruether lists the various expressions of this tradition, including Tertullian's *Adversos Judaeos*, Augustine's *Tractatus adversus Judaeos*, the eight sermons against the Jews preached by John Chrysostom, and Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

77. Ruether, 137-40.

78. Ruether, 230. While observing *Merchant* to evoke the patrician negation of the Jews' claim to the prophetic promises, Coolidge does not recognize this negation as censured by the prodigal identities of Launcelot, Jessica, and Antonio.

79. Ruether, 101-2, 176-79.


82. Hinely, 235, observes that following the forfeiture of the ring, the friends are “closer than at any other time in the play.”

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83. Fiedler, 135, observes that in returning her ring to Bassanio's finger, Antonio gives “the bridegroom away.” And Geary, 67, similarly perceives that Antonio's return of Portia's ring to Bassanio means that “Portia has defeated him and displaced him in Bassanio's heart.” See also Kahn, 107.


85. Engle, 28-31, finds the Jacob/Laban story to express Shylock's just complaint that, like Jacob working for Laban, he serves the economy without being allowed full participation in it. By contrast, Joan Ozark Holmer takes a negative and, I think, more accurate view of Shylock's biblical defense of his usury. By finding this story mentioned in an anti-usury tract that excoriates those who adduce Scripture in defense of usury, she aptly suggests that this tract provides both the text for Shylock's defense of usury and the opinion that censures it. See “Miles Mosse's The Arraignment and Conviction of Usurie (1595): A New Source for The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Studies, 21 (1993): 15-17, 21, 34.

86. See Brown, the Arden Merchant, xxii: “The quarto's repeated 'Iobbe' (II.i.3 ff.) suggests that Shakespeare intended to use the Italianized form of Job.”

87. The OED gives “Use 4” as “the act or fact of using, holding, or possessing land or other property so as to derive revenue, profit, or other benefit from such.” “Use 4” has an alternate meaning b that defines it as “a trust or confidence reposed in a person for the holding of property, etc., of which another receives or is entitled to the profits or benefits.” But it is meaning c that cites the phrase “in use,” not only showing that phrase to denote a trust but also referring the terms of that trust as readily to the primary definition that gives the profit to the trustee, as to the alternate meaning of b that gives the profit to another. It is the uncertainty thus introduced into “in use” that has prompted critics to disagree on the question of who gets the profit of Antonio's trust. Brown in the Arden Merchant, 119, note to line 379, suggests that it will go to Shylock. Holmer, “The Education of the Merchant of Venice,” 317, agrees. Danson, 125, thinks that both principal and profit will go to Jessica and Lorenzo at Shylock's death. Yet Brown also recognizes Antonio's poverty, which suggests that he himself keeps it, as Johnson, I think correctly, concludes: “Antonio declares that, as the Duke quits one-half of the forfeiture, he is likewise content to abate his claim, and desires not the property but the use or produce only of the half, and that only for the Jew's life … ” See Furness, the Variorum Merchant, 227, note to lines 398-402.

88. Furness, the Variorum Merchant, 68, note to line 65.

89. Furness, the Variorum Merchant, 68, note to line 64.

90. In the Variorum Merchant, 69, note to line 83, Furness asks us to “note Gobbo's respectful 'you,' until he recognizes Launcelot, and then his change to 'thou.'”

91. Among those offended by Shylock's forced conversion are Quiller-Couch, xix-xx; Charlton, 128; Goddard, 89; and Sigurd Burckhardt, “The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond,” ELH, 29 (1962): 253. Among those who defend it as saving Shylock's soul or bringing him social benefits are Coghill, 23; Lewalski, 341; Cooper, 121; Wertheim, 85; Barnet, Twentieth Century Interpretations, 7; and Holmer, “The Education of the Merchant of Venice,” 321.

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 53): Criticism: Disappointment


[In the essay below, Fike analyzes disappointment as a central theme in The Merchant of Venice, concluding that the disappointment found in love, friendship, and aspirations in the play mirrors Shakespeare's belief that perfect harmony is to be found solely in the afterlife.]

While Jessica and Lorenzo's banter at the beginning of Act V of The Merchant of Venice has been viewed as out of character with the harmony one expects at this point in a comedy, it has not yet been analyzed in light
of the theme of disappointment. As Gratiano expresses it, “All things that are / Are with more spirit chasèd than enjoyed,” a direct commentary on Lorenzo’s tardiness for his liaison with Jessica (II.vi.12-13). Lorenzo, in other words, may derive more pleasure from striving for Jessica than he does from her permanent presence in his life. What may be true for him is definitely true for other characters: since it is more enjoyable to anticipate than to attain, disappointment is ascendant in the universe of the play. Thus the classical allusions in the “love duet” not only reflect disappointing circumstances earlier in the play but also contrast with what, ultimately, does satisfy.

Gratiano’s comment introduces a simile that suggests a paradigm of disappointing experience: “How like a younger or a prodigal / The scarfed bark puts from her native bay, / Hugg’d and embracèd 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!” (II.vi.14-19). Here is a nautical rendering of the prodigal son story, but with disappointment as a variation. There is a return, but it is not restorative. To illustrate his sense that all things are more heartily pursued than savored, Gratiano omits the part of the allusion that would qualify his assertion, stressing instead the negative effects on the ship of wind and water, which correspond to the prodigal son’s debasement and destitution. That is, Gratiano stresses the flight from the stormy sea, and by implication from the sty, rather than the safe harbor or the positive life in the father’s house. In reality, the return from sea or sty would presumably transcend expectations and be enjoyed with more spirit that it is pursued. But for Gratiano, if there even is a homecoming for son or ship, it is not the happy occasion that the parable depicts. What makes his allusion problematic is not only the omission of the welcome but also the implication that the homecoming, if it were achieved, would be a disappointment.

The fiscal ventures in the play bear out the prodigal’s experience of pursuing what does not yield the hoped-for enjoyment. Bassanio, like the prodigal son, asks father-figure Antonio for an additional loan. His earlier use of borrowed money has not met his needs or fulfilled his expectations. Shylock pursues his bond with Antonio with great gusto, but his attempt to enforce it results in personal and financial ruin rather than satisfaction—the greatest disappointment suffered by any character in the play. Antonio himself suffers fiscal disappointment. While it is fortunate that three of his ships return, Shylock’s earlier statement conveys the more significant fact that many more have been lost: “Yet [Antonio’s] means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath, squand’red abroad” (I.iii.17-21). The return by the three ships ironically implies the grim spectre of loss: the disappointing truth that most of Antonio’s ships, in fact, have been wrecked or are still missing, much as the prodigal’s return underscores his great financial losses. But Antonio, who denies in Act I that the anxiety of ownership causes his sadness, also subtly contrasts with the prodigal: he has achieved fiscal success. If Gratiano’s insight holds, the hollowness of ownership causes Antonio’s melancholy. His material wealth at the opening is enjoyed with less delight than presumably it was anticipated. If Antonio’s prosperity has not lived up to his expectations and does not supply the happiness for which he yearns, disappointment results and sadness is its symptom.

Human relationships are fertile ground for disappointment as well. Antonio’s sadness stems partly from his awareness that Bassanio’s marriage to Portia diminishes Antonio’s role in his friend’s life. Solanio makes it clear how much Antonio loves Bassanio: “I think he only loves the world for him” (II.viii.50). The second loan affirms their friendship but ultimately results in diminished closeness. The suitors provide a more dramatic illustration of relational disappointment. Gratiano’s image of a ship setting forth to encounter a natural force personified as a woman parallels their failure: they return home as romantic beggars, not having won Portia’s hand but having sworn never to marry. They have chased marriage with great spirit but have forfeited married life along with the enjoyment it might have brought. Even apart from marriage, relationships cause disappointment in The Merchant of Venice. Shylock is devastated by Jessica’s greed and insensitivity, and Launcelot’s liaison with a black serving girl has resulted in a pregnancy. There is no evidence that this fazes the clown, but the pregnancy is clearly an unwanted inconvenience.
While Jessica and Lorenzo's banter in V.i is good-natured, their allusions suggest that the passage may participate in the disappointment that shadows the earlier action. They celebrate their love by allusion to mythical lovers—Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Aeneas and Dido, Jason and Medea—who come to grief because of misunderstanding or betrayal.²

A first possibility is that the allusions convey doubts about the stability of their marriage. Perhaps Jessica will betray Lorenzo as she has already betrayed Shylock—Lorenzo's reference to Cressida suggests that he is not unaware of that possibility. He may one day be to Jessica as Troilus is to Cressida, or as Gratiano's prodigal ship is to the “strumpet wind”—not just a disappointed husband but also the victim of betrayal. As for Lorenzo, Gratiano's insight may apply: perhaps he was more eager to pursue Jessica than to enjoy her in marriage. Shakespeare's own Cressida, in the later play bearing her name, offers words that sound very much like Gratiano's comment on his friend's tardiness, a connection furthering his suspicion about Lorenzo's attitude: “Women are angels, wooing: / Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing. / That she belov'd knows nought that knows not this: / Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is. / That she was never yet that ever knew / Love got so sweet as when desire did sue” (Troilus and Cressida I.ii.286-91). For men, as Gratiano would agree, the chase is more enjoyable than the achievement of a romantic goal. Perhaps Lorenzo, not having heard Gratiano's wry comment of Act II, fears that he will not enjoy his marriage to Jessica as much as he has anticipated because all things that are, including marriage, are enjoyed more in prospect than in attainment. Jessica playfully implies an awareness of Lorenzo's potential for infidelity in her reference to Medea and Aeson, for the story of Aeson's rejuvenation includes Jason's betrayal of Medea after years of marriage. In their banter, Jessica and Lorenzo thus hint at each other's potential for betrayal. Despite the loveliness of the setting and their good humor, the potential for marital disappointment is the faint undertone of their love duet—the extent of implications for Jessica and Lorenzo's attitudes toward each other. If doubts exist at this point, they are merely playful, as though they were a kind of inoculation against future infidelity or “a comic exorcism of the tragic side of love” (Leggatt 143).

Indicting unfaithful lovers of both sexes suggests a criticism of couples in general. In Lorenzo's statements the betrayers, Aeneas and Cressida, are both male and female—the myths he alludes to distribute blame for pain in relationships to both genders. It is tempting, however, to view Jessica's references in a different light, since her allusion to Pyramus and Thisbe evokes tragic misunderstanding, rather than betrayal. Moreover, her reference to Aeson's rejuvenation, a kind of rebirth, is appropriate to new life in Belmont. Yet the Medea-Aeson allusion undercut itself because of the duet's parallelism. The earlier allusions to mythical women and their lovers call Jason to mind, despite specific reference only to his father. Shakespeare knew that, following the rejuvenation, Jason abandoned Medea who then burned “hir husbands bride by witchcraft” and “in hir owne deare childrens bloud had bathde hir wicked knife” (Ovid 146; VII.501, 503). Whereas Lorenzo refers to Cressida and Aeneas, unfaithful lovers, Jessica invokes Jason and Medea who are hateful to each other. The point of the four allusions, then, is not merely the fact that women like Cressida betray men like Troilus, or that men like Aeneas desert women like Dido, or that the mutual misunderstanding of a couple like Pyramus and Thisbe can lead to tragedy for both. More important than that, the recollection of Jason and Medea suggests mutual disappointment in marriage. The sad conclusion is that the sexes, in their shared humanity, are potentially hateful to each other, or more specifically that Jessica and Lorenzo will encounter their share of problems in married life.

Just as the love duet participates in the disappointment developed earlier in the play, it also signals disappointment in the future, as further parallelism reveals. The situation in each allusion is once removed from tragedy. Troilus mounts the Trojan walls and sighs for Cressida; he later achieves full understanding of her betrayal. Thisbe sees the lion and runs away … later Pyramus's discovery of her bloody veil leads to double suicide. Dido, having loved Aeneas and been deserted, longs for his return; she has not yet killed herself in despair. Medea gathers herbs that renew her husband's father; abandonment and murder happen years in the future. The allusions, therefore, create the sense of a coming storm. For Thisbe and Dido, a present problem (the presumed death of Pyramus, abandonment by Aeneas) leads to future suicide. Troilus

²This is a reference to Gratiano's line in Act V, Scene I, where he says, “I do not know the reason why she is so cold and unkind.”
and Medea, though they perform positive actions in the present, are betrayed in the future. Thus the play invites seeing Jessica and Lorenzo in a similar way. Underneath their banter lies the sense that their happiness may one day yield to disappointment and discord. That is in harmony with the pattern of disappointment established in Acts I through IV: anticipation transcends outcome.

The love duet also casts doubt on the future of other marriages in the play. The invocation of Jason and Medea colors Gratiano's earlier statement about the successful trip to Belmont: “I know that [Antonio] will be glad of our success; / We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (III.ii.240-41). He and Bassanio have achieved their goals, but the recollection of Jason and Medea in Act V ironically undercuts Gratiano's delight: he celebrates his marriage in terms of a classical figure who is famous for infidelity. Moreover, whereas Gratiano's own prophecy in Act II qualifies his fiscal and marital success, he is now blind to the violation of expectations and the potential for disappointment in his own marriage and in Bassanio's. He has forgotten that, in the problematic universe of The Merchant of Venice, it is simply impossible to attain with the same savor as one anticipates. Marital happiness is not an exception to the rule.

But marriage is merely synecdoche: as marriage carries the potential for disappointment, so does all of life, as Shakespeare's treatment of Belmont reveals. For Jessica, Belmont “figures forth the heavenly city” (Lewalski 343): “It is very meet / The Lord Bassanio live an upright life, / For having such a blessing in his lady, / He finds the joys of heaven here on earth” (III.v.73-76). It turns out, however, that Belmont is to the heavenly city as human life is to immortality. One “figures forth” the other in Jessica's imagination, but conflating the two—burdening an earthly state with expectations of heavenly bliss—can cause disappointment. The actual nature of Belmont is implied by Lorenzo's statement: “There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold'st / But in his motion like an angel sings, / Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins; / Such harmony is in immortal souls, / But whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it” (V.i.60-65). Lorenzo refers to both the music of the spheres and the corresponding music within the human soul. As longing for heavenly music is frustrated in this life, so Belmont falls short of the heavenly city. If full spiritual enjoyment is not possible, then Jessica's prediction is unlikely to be realized. Lorenzo's message is simply that the afterlife transcends expectations; nothing earthly can satisfy. The happy banter of Jessica and Lorenzo, itself problematic, is fleeting, for marriage, Belmont, and all of life are subject to the same potential for disappointment.

Surprisingly Launcelot expresses the proper qualification in his statement to Bassanio, though he may not realize it. “The old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you, sir: you have the grace of God, sir, and he hath enough” (II.ii.149-51). Whatever jokes Launcelot may be making, the important point is what the original proverb conveys: “He that hath the grace of God hath enough.” Disappointment results from an earthly outcome's ultimate insufficiency, its inability to live up to expectations. Even rejuvenation like Aeson's cannot change the inner man, alter the fact of eventual death or ensure eternal life. Everything earthly is doomed to death, which is why Morocco finds a skull in the golden casket. God's grace, however, is sufficient in itself and does not disappoint us: “They called vpon thee, and were deliuered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded” (Psalm 22:5). Ultimately, the play points toward the need for the salvation Portia alludes to—“mercy … above this sceptered sway” (IV.i.193). The problem with the love duet, then, is that, despite Jessica's conversion, the allusions are based not on Christian mercy but on thinking that predates the old law: revenge is justifiable (Medea), and suicide is an adequate response to loss (Pyramus, Thisbe, Dido, and perhaps Troilus). However humorous their banter may be and however hopeful their future may seem. Jessica and Lorenzo are still operating in a universe of disappointment and indirectly imply the need for grace and charity.

So instead of offering marriage as an end in itself, the playwright implies that no ending, however comedic, can be totally unproblematic, since harmony in this life and of the earth forever falls one step short of celestial harmony. It is true that the lovers have avoided tragedy, though they voice subtle reminders of its everpresent possibility. But no one can enjoy the goal with as much spirit as one pursues it because full enjoyment,
Shakespeare suggest, abides only in the next life and in the realization of divine love. Otherwise, disappointment is the burden of mortality.

Notes

1. For commentary on V.i.1-24 see Auden 113-15, Baxter 74-77, Cosgrove 57ff., Gnerro 19-21, Hassel 69, Hill 85, and Leggatt 143.
2. Jessica actually refers not to Jason but to his father: “In such a night / Medea gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew old Aeson” (V.i.13-15). The reference to Aeson and the argument for invoking Jason are examined below.

Works Cited


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 53): Criticism: Elizabethan Culture And Values

In the essay below, Moisan argues that while The Merchant of Venice appears to celebrate the Elizabethan values of Christian ethics and good business, the play instead subtly exposes a contradiction between the apparent belief in these values and whether or not they are actually practiced.

As a locus in which to ponder the ideological function of the Shakespearean text, The Merchant of Venice is an obvious, and obviously problematic, choice. At a glance, the Merchant seems to inscribe and affirm an ideological calculus that fused the interests of the state and the assertions of a providentialist Christianity with the prerogatives of an increasingly capitalist marketplace. We can perceive this calculus allegorized in the central action of the play and ratified in the ultimate thwarting of the Jewish usurer Shylock, the redemption of the Christian merchant Antonio, and the triumphs—forensic and domestic—of the bountiful aristocrat Portia, and we can see it reflected and legitimated in the sundry polarities the play has often been said to be—to use Frank Kermode's rather equivocal quotation marks—“about”: the Old Law versus the New Law, Justice versus Mercy, Vengeance versus Love (1961, 224). At the same time, however, the considerable residue of qualification that attends even the most compelling efforts to schematize the play in this way has made it no easy matter to say what the Merchant is “about”; and in the degree to which the play leaves us, for example, feeling troubled over the treatment of Shylock, or appears to blur the distinctions on which the polarities above depend, leading us, in effect, to ask with Portia, “Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?” (IV. i. 170), we may wonder whether the Merchant invokes the ideologically sanctioned mythologies of the time only to question and subvert them.

In part, of course, it can be argued that the contradictions we experience in the Merchant are evidence, not of its subversive design, but of its mimetic fidelity, and that the dissonances we detect in it are but echoes of the tensions and stresses of the society it reflects, a society in transition, confronting—or being confronted by—what Louis Adrian Montrose calls “the ideologically anomalous realities of change” (1980, 64). “Taken on its own terms,” Jonathan Dollimore reminds us, “an ideology may appear internally coherent. When, however, its deep structure is examined it is often discovered to be a synthesis of contradictory elements” (1984, 20). Thus, in the inclination we feel to ask “Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?” we may merely be responding to the traces in the play of a debate within the times over whether Old Religion and New Business were fully compatible, and whether the “thrifty” pursuit of trade and the “prodigal” indulgence of greed were fully distinct. On the other hand, to the extent to which we see in the Merchant a movement toward reconciliation and harmony—a thesis argued most fully by Lawrence Danson some years ago (1978, esp. 1-21, 170-95)—the play can be said to ritualize the ideological synthesis being wrought from the contrarieties of its society.

We find the Merchant scanned in these terms quite cogently in an essay published several years ago by Walter Cohen (1982). For Cohen the Merchant enacts a largely successful, and deeply comic, mediation between two differing conceptions of socioeconomic relations: the one rooted in English history and reflective of contemporary anxiety over the emerging economic order, the other derived from Shakespeare's Italian sources and reflecting both a less troubled view of the capitalist system and a more confident differentiation between the figure of the usurer, who incarnates, Cohen would suggest, “a quasi-feudal fiscalism” in decline, and that of the merchant, who embodies, in Cohen's words, “an indigenous bourgeois mercantilism” on the ascent (1982, 771). In Cohen's reading the workings of dramatic form and ideological synthesis are persuasively integrated. Even as the central action of the play, Cohen argues, upholds a “formally dominant Christian, aristocratic ideology,” we see in “the subversive side of the play” evidence of “an internal distancing,” a distancing, however, which may complicate but does not annul that harmonic “movement” Cohen sees in the play “towards resolution and reconciliation” (pp. 779-81). In this way The Merchant of Venice can be seen to negotiate among the heterogeneous impulses and interests that characterized the “public” of the public theater. At the same time, the Merchant can also be taken to exemplify what might be called the emerging “containment” theory of Renaissance drama, to wit, that the Shakespearean stage offered a platform on which cultural heterodoxy could be at once expressed, engaged, and contained, a forum, Cohen observes, for “communal affirmation and social ratification, [and] a means of confronting fear and anger in a manner that
promoted reassurance about the existence and legitimacy of a new order” (p. 783; see also Montrose, 1980, 62-4; Greenblatt, 1981, 40-61).

Still, that there is a “movement” in The Merchant of Venice “towards resolution and reconciliation” has not been, the annals of criticism would show, a truth universally acknowledged. To be sure, a play which has as much conflict in it and yet ends as happily as the Merchant does would seem to have something to do with resolution and reconciliation, and, certainly, the subject of harmony is much in the night air of Belmont in act V. Yet whether the play actually produces a harmonious resolution and reconciliation or merely invokes harmony by the power of dramatic fiat and in the interest of ideological conformity or capitulation is not an easy matter to settle, though it is an important one to consider if we are to assess the nature of the accommodation the Merchant reaches with its society.

At this point it might be useful to think of what it is we experience in, to use Cohen's words, that “internal distancing” at work in the play. For Cohen this distancing is evident in the articulation the Merchant accords sentiments that would qualify or subvert the ideological prescriptions the action, or fable, of the play would appear to embrace. Ultimately, though, I would suggest that in the “internal distancing” we perceive in it, the Merchant asserts its “play-ful” alterity, distancing itself simultaneously, on the one hand, from the ideological implications of its fable, and on the other, from the very questionings and subversive sentiments to which it gives notice. We get a hint of this distancing in the tendency of the play to leave unresolved dialogic exchanges in which it permits the mythologies it inscribes to be interrogated. We sense it more pointedly, though, in the, literally, “anti-literal” skepticism we hear displayed in it toward “words” and “texts,” a skepticism through which the play pretends to dissociate itself from the very textuality that nourishes and complicates it. In this way the play implicitly underscores its theatricality and resolves, and “recuperates,” the “confusions” in its text by posing—or imposing—a comic, a comically dramatic, solution.

What follows, then, is an attempt to read The Merchant of Venice in and, in a sense, out of the discourse of its times. First, and at the risk of viewing the play from the kind of distortingly narrow, overly economic, overly Anglicized, perspective that Cohen warns against—and avoids (pp. 768-70)—I will look at some of the ways in which the play participates in and interrogates the economic mythologies of its times by affiliating itself with the texts in which these mythologies are shaped, rehearsed, and questioned. From there, however, I would like to speculate on how the play strives to extricate itself from the complexities and contradictions of the times which its text, and textuality, have “uncovered.”

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In what sense, though, would The Merchant of Venice, with its eponymous setting and Italian literary pedigree, have held up a mirror to its English audience? Quite apart from the topicality commentators have detected in it,\(^3\) of interest to us here is our awareness that the Merchant evokes the growing “trafficking” of the English nation in trade, or, rather, the growing identification of England and its institutions with trade and capitalist enterprise. We hear this prominence of trade and investment recorded not a little sardonically in the impecunious Thomas Dekker's observation in “The Guls Horn-Booke” (1609) that the theater “is your Poets Royal Exchange,” and that the poets’ muses “are now turned to Merchants” (pp. 246-7). We find it noted more positively in contemporary sententiae fusing the pursuit of trade and the interests of the state. Thus, for Bacon (“Of Vsurie,” 1625 [1966]) the “Customs of Kings or States … Ebbe or flow with Merchandizing” (p. 170), an opinion seconded and elaborated upon by John Stow in The Survey of London (1603 [1912]), when he pauses in his account of London's past to recount the benisons produced by London's mercantile present, remarking that

truly merchants and retailers do not altogether intus canere, and profit themselves only, for the prince and realm both are enriched by their riches: the realm winneth treasure, if their trade be so moderated by authority that it break not proportion, and they besides bear a good
fleece, which the prince may shear when he seeth good.

(p. 495)

In sum, the business of Britain is business, and what’s good for business is good for Britain.

At the same time, as we know, such assertions do not infrequently bear the refrain that what is good for business and Britain is probably not displeasing to God either. It is in God’s name that profit often gets pursued, and it is as a providential sign of God’s favor that the attainment of profit often gets justified. Certainly we find this providentialist and Calvinist-based mucilage spread quite profusely and adhesively in contemporary accounts of exploration of the New World, in which the propagation of God’s word and the true faith is invoked both as a necessary and sufficient condition for the successful pursuit of commercial gain and national enhancement, and, at times, as a happy consequence of that pursuit. “Godlinesse is great riches,” Hakluyt declares at the outset of his *Divers Voyages* (1582 [1850, 8]), his implicit confusion of riches spiritual and material a characteristic illustration of the idiom in which the desire for gain and a concern for salvation could without the slightest betrayal of cynicism be reconciled as part of the same ideological “project.”

Nor is this coupling of the propagation of faith and trade any less pronounced—though it sounds less ingenuous—in the accounts of the English Merchant Adventurers’ dealings with the Old World, a recurrent theme of which, understandably, is the abundance of blessings that will accrue to all parties concerned through an expansion of English trading rights on the continent. Hence, in a letter from one such Adventurer (c. 1565) we find the Earls of East Friesland being advised that with a strong English trading presence in their realm, “God shall be known, praised and feared, and his whole Gospel and commandments taught and preached, to the comfort of all Christian nations” (Ramsay, 1979, 113), and, it should be added, to the intended discomfort of the Pope, the Turks, and any other infidels who might have political or religious, or, of course, commercial, designs on that part of Europe.

To an audience inured to such texts, *The Merchant of Venice* might well have seemed a transparent allegory of its times. It establishes the merchant in the figure of Antonio as a friend of the state (IV. i. 1-34), it trots out a biblical precedent for the association of profit by “venture” with the blessings of divine providence (I. iii. 86-8), and, in the rather “providential” restoration of Antonio’s fortunes after his deliverance from the merciless Jew (V. i. 273-9), it might well appear to subscribe to the notion that “Godlinesse is great riches.” Indeed, Cohen has alluded to act V in particular as an “aristocratic fantasy” in which the “concluding tripartite unity of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia enacts precisely [an] interclass harmony between landed wealth and mercantile capital, with the former dominant” (1982, 772, 777). If, for the moment, we accept Sidney’s contention in his *Defence of Poesie* (1595 [1968]) that the mimetic role of poetry is to show not “what is, or is not, but what should, or should not be” (p. 29), then we might say that the *Merchant* realizes its mimetic function by dramatizing a vision of how the established social order and religious values could be reconciled with the new economics.

Central to this vision, however, and deepening the involvement of the *Merchant* in the economic discourse of its time is the triumph the play enacts over usury in the figure of the usurer Shylock. That usury was at once a widespread practice and significant concern in Shakespeare's society, and that the resources of usurers were sought, not only by profligate young gentlemen and capital-hungry merchants, but by Parliament and the Queen herself, are facts well-established and oft remarked. The purpose of underscoring them here is to recall the degree to which a work like the *Merchant*, “indebted” as it is to its Italian sources, could still integrate these sources with more localized and contemporary materials both to create a fulcrum for the expression of communal concerns and frustrations, and also, and more interestingly, to create the illusion that whatever the socially and economically diverse elements of Shakespeare's audience did not have in common, they at least shared a common enemy in the form of usury and its personification.
In no small part, of course, the domestic appeal of the Merchant would have lain in the domestication of its villain, Shylock, who—whatever kinship he may share with his thinly drawn counterpart in the putative source story, Il Pecorone, or with Marlowe's exotically evil and extravagant Machiavel, Barabas—should have been quite recognizable to any in Shakespeare's audience who had read or heard their share of the myriad of anti-usury harangues in circulation at the time. To those so fortunate the penalty ultimately imposed upon Shylock—harsher than that suffered by Fiorentino's usurer in Il Pecorone, and harsh enough to have occasioned a good deal of critical rationalization—may well have seemed just what they had come to believe a usurer conventionally deserved, including the obligation to be converted and saved in spite of himself. 

Certainly those in the audience who were versed in the anti-usury tracts of the times, and had heard interest taking excoriated by Henry Smith in The Examination of Usury (1591) as “biting usury” (p. 8), or had read in Thomas Lodge's Alarum Against Usurers (1584) that usurers possessed “the voracitie of wolves” with which to devour men's bodies and souls (p. 77), should have read the string of daimonic and “currish,” wolverine epithets liberally bestowed upon Shylock in the play (I. iii. 106; II. ii. 22-6; II. viii. 14; III. i. 19-20; III. iii. 7; IV. i. 128; IV. i. 283) as merely a standard part of his job description. Those, meanwhile, familiar with the tract wishfully entitled The Death of Usury, or, The Disgrace of Usurers (1594) would have read that when in days of yore “an usurer came to be knowne, his houses were called the devils houses, his fields the devils croppe” (p. 34), and may well have heard a familiar resonance in Jessica's preelopement complaint that “Our house is hell” (II. iii. 2).

Stephen Greenblatt has suggested that Jessica's description of her father's house as hell is an apt metonym for the peculiar social isolation of the Jew in the modern European society from which, and for which, he earned capital (1978, 295). We find this conception of the usurer's social alienation no less evident in the diatribes against the Jewish moneylender's Christian counterpart in Shakespeare's England. Cut off from the society his profession would undermine, the usurer—Henry Smith maintains (1591, 35)—will be cut off from posterity as well, a fate, we will recall, Shylock is spared only when, in the spirit of Christian forgiveness, Antonio compels Shylock to “re-inherit” his daughter and make her and her Christian husband his heirs (IV. i. 384-6). In his moral isolation the usurer is prone, Smith contends, to vices such as revenge, vices which may eventually work against the usurer's economic self-interest (pp. 6-7). We are reminded of this especial, and ultimately self-destructive, perversity, of course, in Shylock's unwillingness to accept any compensation for the forfeiture of Antonio's bond except the penalty of flesh stipulated in the contract. “You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh, than to receive / Three thousand ducats,” Shylock tauntingly declares. “I'll not answer that! / But say it is my humour,—is it answer'd?” (IV. i. 40-3).

Nor, we might surmise, would Shakespeare's audience have had Shylock answer in any other way. For there must have been a certain rhetorical convenience and moral self-assurance in being able to cast the argument against usury in the terms of polar oppositions of good and evil that transcend purely economic considerations. Indeed, the pressure of ideology may manifest itself most strongly in the attempt evident in the rhetorical structure of the play to universalize its central conflict and suppress its more parochial economic antecedents. In the exchange with which the play opens, after all, Antonio is permitted to reject the insinuations of Salerio/Solanio that he is the total homo economicus, whose mind is “tossing on the ocean” with his investments (I. i. 8-45), and he implies both by his words here and by his actions shortly hereafter that, for him at least, it is not money that makes the world go round. For his part, Shylock may be sincere in attributing at least a part of his hatred of Antonio to the abuse he has suffered from Antonio on the Rialto (I. iii. 101-24), to the resentment he justifiably feels on behalf of his race (I. iii. 43-7), and to his perception of the hand Antonio's friends may have had in the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo (III. i. 22-3), and we may well see in his enmity the traces of the economic rivalry in Venice between the Jewish moneylender and the up-and-coming Christian entrepreneur and banker (Cohen, 1982, 770-1). Yet as he proceeds in his bloodlust, Shylock acts in a way that would have confirmed the anti-usury polemicists of Shakespeare's audience in their darkest beliefs about usurers: he becomes that most reassuring of villains, the villain who pursues his villainy because “it is my humour,” because he would “choose” it over, not only a more virtuous, but even a more lucrative alternative.
That Shylock should “choose” to do wrong reminds us, though, of the simultaneously most damning and yet socially and ideologically most reassuring charge to be leveled at usurers in Shakespeare's time, namely that usurers are heretics, willful choosers of the wrong course and, therefore, most deserving of unqualified reproach. “[O]ne saith well,” Henry Smith observes, “that our Usurers are Hereticks, because after manie admonitions yet they maintaine their errors, & persist in it obstinately as Papists do in Poperie” (1591, 2). In fact, we find this association of usury and heresy made quasi-official by that great collector of commonplaces and regurgitator of Elizabethan orthodoxy, Francis Meres, whose entries for “Vsurie” in his Palladis Tamia (1598) are followed immediately by those for “Heresie, Heretickes,” which, doubtless by no accidental coincidence, are immediately followed by “Death” (pp. 322-7).

This association of usury with heresy and with choosing the wrong course is of “interest” on several counts. On the one hand, the connection between usury and heresy might suggest that the rhetoric was in place by which the usurer could be singled out, not simply as an economic scoundrel and renegade, but as an enemy of God and, therefore, a threat to the state, and our recognition of this possibility deepens our perception of the audience's perception of Shylock. On the other hand, the connection of usury with choosing enables us to see a link between Shylock and the unhappy “choosers” of the casket scenes, and suggests a sense in which both elements of the rather exotic source tradition behind the Merchant, both the flesh-bond and the caskets stories, could be said to respond to the domestic experience and economic concerns of Shakespeare's audience.

Here we might recall that oft cited passage from The Schoole of Abuse (1579) in which Stephen Gosson pauses in his drama-bashing long enough to bestow unwonted praise upon a play called The Jew, which Gosson describes as “representing the greedinesse of worldly chusers, and bloody mindes of usurers” (p. 30). Now, how indebted Shakespeare is to this play, if he is indebted at all, and whether Gosson’s “worldly chusers” and “bloody minded usurers” refer to different characters or are merely different tags for the same character, are matters quite unsettled (Brown, 1955, xxi-xxxi; Bullough, 1964, 445-6). Still, we might observe that in the anti-usury parables to which Shakespeare's audience was likely to have been exposed two character types recur, the “bloody minded usurer” and the “wordly chuser,” the figure, that is, whose craving for the riches and vain delights of the world creates the conditions in which the usurer thrives. We find evocations and validations of this antimaterialist sentiment in the unlucky choices of Morocco, who assays his choice of caskets by reckoning the things of this world he desires, and Aragon, who chooses by considering the things of this world he deserves. “All that glisters is not gold,” reads the not very consoling scroll Morocco finds in the death's head “awarded” him for choosing the golden casket (II. vii. 65), a truism Thomas Lodge invokes in his Alarum Against Usurers when he recounts how “a young Gentleman,” smitten with promises of easy credit and easier living, listens to the blandishments of a wicked usurer, a “subtill underminer,” and, “counting all golde that glysters,” succumbs (p. 45).

Indeed, the wisdom of such antimaterialist apothegms is most volubly articulated, and heeded, by the one happy casket chooser, Bassanio, whose casket-selection musings resonate with the kind of sententiae one finds in Lodge or other anti-usury writers. Not for Bassanio is it to assume “all golde that glisters.” Rather, “The world is still deceiv’d with ornament” (III. ii. 73). Obviously knowing something that eluded Morocco, Bassanio immediately rejects the allure of riches and beauty metonymized in the “crisped snaky golden locks” beneath which lurks “[t]he skull that bred them in the sepulchre” (92-6). Ornament “is but the guiled shore / To a most dangerous sea” (97-8), with “gaudy gold, / Hard food for Midas” (101-2), and silver but a “pale and common drudge / 'Tween man and man” (103-4).

Surely, though, there is at least a hint of incongruity in hearing this vein of rhetoric from Bassanio, whose tendency toward materialism and consumption has been deemed conspicuous enough to trouble a number of critics,10 and whose reasons for seeking funds might well have reminded Shakespeare's audience of the idle borrowers condemned by the anti-usury authors, who seek loans, not to survive, but, as the author of The Death of Usury insists, “to consume in prodiggall maner, in bravery, banketting, voluptuous living, & such like” (1594, 32). Bassanio may well love Portia for her “wondrous virtues,” but, as we know, in limning her
praises to Antonio, he notes first that she is “a lady richly left, / And she is fair” (I. i. 161-2). And, skeptical as Bassanio may later show himself to be toward “damned show,” we recall that, by his own admission, it was precisely for the sake of “showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means” would permit that Bassanio “disabled mine estate” (I. i. 123-5)—even as his continued pursuit of financing will come close to disabling Antonio's estate and Antonio himself!

Surely there is an incongruity here, and it is an incongruity which reflects, not simply the hybrid traces of Shakespeare's sources, but an ambivalence we find in Shakespeare's culture toward wealth and the “venturing” for it in trade. As we noted before, to those engaged in exploration for profit, there may have been something at once instructive and reassuring in Hakluyt's dictum that “Godlinesse is great riches.” Yet for every suggestion that God and Plutus may not be incompatible, we hear the dissonant reminder that they are not identical either. “[S]hall we conclude,” Lodge asks, not unrhettorically, “because the usurer is rich, he is righteous? because wealthie, wise? because full of gold, therefore godly?” (1584, 71). Indeed, we overlook the full rhetorical agenda of texts celebrating the benefits of trade if we fail to hear in them an attempt to calm the fears and quiet the antimaterialist objections the “prodigal” pursuit of profit had engendered. Thus, Stow (1603), we will recall, trumpets the blessings trade has brought to the many, even as he acknowledges the great riches that have accrued through trade to the few, and even as he adds the rather anti-laissez-faire proviso that merchants' business “be so moderated by authority that it break not proportion” (p. 495).

In a sense, contemporary attacks upon usurers are a reflection of the success of such utilitarian rationalizations as Stow's. For if it is granted that the fruits of trade enhance the “commonweal,” then it only follows that the ills attendant upon the increases in trade and venture capitalism should be treated, not as inherent in the system, but as excesses or abuses, or even subversions of the system. Thus, it is quite consistent with the times that Bassanio, who so incarnates the entrepreneurial spirit of the age, and whose very choice of the lead casket is encoded as an act of “hazard,” should dissociate himself from the ornamental riches with which “the world is still deceiv'd,” and the obsession which usurers and other breakers of economic proportion exploit.

As we know, however, usury and trade existed in a relationship that was far more ambiguous than anti-usury tracts might imply, indeed, a relationship that might be said to have been more symbiotic than inimical. Bacon puts the complexity of the relationship squarely when he observes (in “Of Vsurie,” 1625) that, while the first “Discommoditie” of usury is that “it makes fewer Merchants” since, obviously, it diverts money from trading to trading in money, the first “Commoditie” of usury is, paradoxically, that it makes more merchants and “aduanceth” trade, since “it is certain, that the Greatest Part of Trade is driuen by Young Merchants, upon Borrowing at Interest” (pp. 170-1).

This embarrassing interrelationship is a fact that not even avowedly anti-usury discourses can fully suppress. So it is that we hear the author of The Death of Usury labor to give the most moral, anti-usury, reading to the law enacted by Elizabeth which voided the ban imposed by Edward VI upon the practice of usury, and which formally reinstated 10 per cent as the maximum interest rate. The law, the author maintains, could not be construed as condoning usury, but, instead, “leaves it after a sort to the curtesie and conscience of the borrower”—rather as if interest payments were to be regarded as something no more coercive than tipping! Why did Elizabeth enact this statute if it was not the intent of her government to encourage the practice of usury? Our author notes that when, under Edward VI, usury was prohibited “this inconvenience came, fewe or none would lend because they might have no allowance, whereupon her Maiestie to avoyde this euill, made this remissiue clause” (1594; see also Smith, 1591, 30). Having rationalized the government's unapprovingly permissive policy on usury, the same author wonders why the usurer does not simply follow the example of a number of merchants and invest his money in trade where, with the likelihood of fewer risks and greater profits, “it will be lesse noted, and himself better esteemed” (p. 27). Which is the merchant here, and which the usurer?
Indeed, to keep the distinction straight, and to cope with the disquieting realities of the economic system, we find polemicists engaging in the sorts of polarization evident in the surface of the *Merchant*. Merchants follow a career, Lodge hastens to affirm, “both auncient and lawdable, the professors honest and vertuous, their actions full of daunger, and therefore worthy gaine; and so necessary this sorte of men be, as no well governed state may be without them” (1584, 43). The blame for whatever is “wrong” with the system, then, is left for the usurer to absorb, whose function is rather that of the scapegoat: he embodies the enemy within that must be exorcised by being externalized and, literally, alienated.14 What better figure to fill this role than, of course, the Jew, whose vices can be, as we suggested before, familiarized, but whose identity by type is comfortably different and distanced. Shakespeare's Shylock, rooted as he is in older and foreign literary and dramatic forms, is an appropriate focus for the domestic anxieties of Shakespeare's audience, not in spite of his difference, but, rather as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, because of it (1978, 295-6).

To enumerate ways in which a play “reflects” the discourse of its times is not the same, unfortunately, as saying how the play responds to that discourse, a truth one feels embarrassingly keenly in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*. It may be fair to suggest that what we encounter in the play is “merely” a mirroring both of the myths by which the age read itself and of the anxieties those myths could not entirely dispel. Yet in holding up the mirror to its age so faithfully, does the play affirm the myths it enacts, or does it subvert them by mirroring their qualifications as well? Or, rather, does it affirm the myths it dramatizes by mirroring their qualifications, by admitting them as qualifications which ultimately can be contained and “lived with”? Recently, Greenblatt has explored this *tertium quid* in texts where the play of ideology much more clearly assumes the form of a conflict between authority and forces threatening to undermine that authority (1981, 40-2). In the *Merchant* what is questioned is not authority as such, but whether the accommodation of Christian orthodoxy and economic reality the play inscribes is entitled to the moral authority to which it appears to lay claim. The play allows this questioning to be voiced, and voiced forcibly, only to contextualize it in such a way that its implications are deflected or muted, or, as Cohen has observed, repressed.

Certainly, for example, we feel the justice of Shylock's enraged defense of his humanity (III. i. 47-66), and we recognize as valid both in that speech and in others by Shylock the doubt being cast upon the Venetian Christian' presumptions of moral superiority. Yet, as Cohen remarks, though Christians may well be abusive slaveholders, we encounter no Christian slaveholders within the fiction of the play (1982, 774), and, a point so often noted, when push comes to shove, we know who cannot be dissuaded from killing whom, and who is capable of mercy—at least on some terms. And even though, as could be rightly objected, Gratiano shows himself (IV. i. 360-3, 375, 394-6) to be one Christian in whom the quality of mercy appears quite strained—perhaps, even, drained—still, it could also be urged that Gratiano is interestingly differentiated from his fellow Christians, who, it would seem, find him not worth listening to (I. i. 114-18).

Again, what is worth noticing is not that the *Merchant* should mute or repress contradictions and qualifications, but that it should call them into play at all only to repress them, illuminating them only to cover them, or, perhaps, “re-cover” them. For an example we might consider the curious resonances in the play of the idea of “prodigality.” The word “prodigal” occurs several times, twice on the tongue of Shylock (II. v. 15; III. i. 39-40), who employs it as a term of derision for Christians whose “prodigality” clearly differentiates them from the “thrift” Shylock tends to associate with his own endeavors (I. iii. 45, 85, 172; II. v. 54). Like “thrift,” “prodigal” is a word prodigally used in anti-usury tracts, and is employed to castigate, or warn, those “worldly choosers” whose wasteful ways and love of material things make them the prey of the likes of Shylock (*The Death of Usury*, 1594, 32; Lodge, 1584, 50, 51, 53, 56, 62, 75). On the one hand, there is, doubtless, a purposeful irony in having Shylock condemn the Christians for the sort of fiscal irresponsibility off which he “thrives;” to paraphrase Antonio, not only can the devil cite Scripture, but he seems to have done his share of reading in anti-usury tracts as well. Moreover, that Shylock should find prodigality contemptible
obviously gives prodigality something to commend it, and we feel invited to associate the word with those antipenurious, anti-Shylockean virtues that schematic interpretations of the play generally place on the Christian side of the ledger: love, mercy, liberality. On the other hand, however, in the degree to which Shylock's words recall the antimaterialist rhetoric of the age, they remind us that in some sense Shylock's charges against the Christians are true, that Bassanio in particular is conspicuously, perhaps, culpably, "consumptive," and we may hear in his words an evocation, rather muffled, of that anxiety over wealth which is a part of the cultural context of the play.

At the same time, it is difficult for us, and was likely to have been even more difficult for Shakespeare's audience, to hear the recurrent references to "prodigal" without thinking of the parable from Luke 15 with which "prodigal" has become synonymous. An allusion to the parable occurs in the chattering Gratiano's description of the once finely fretted merchant ship returning from its voyage "like the prodigal ... / With over-weather'd ribs and ragged sails— / Lean, rent, and beggar'd by the strumpet wind!" (II. vi. 17-19). Dangling here in the idle Gratiano's idle simile, the parable of the prodigal son looms over much of the play, though it is a reference Shakespeare seems quite pointedly to have kept in the background. It informs the story in Il Pecorone, in which the surrogate Antonio is the adoptive father of the Bassanio figure and plays the part of the all-forgiving, self-sacrificing father when the son twice "hazards"—and loses—all he has (Bullough, 1964, 466-7, 469). It informs the Alarum Against Usurers, in which Lodge offers a variation on the parable, having the father at first forgive the son, only to disown him later when the prodigal proves unregenerate (1584, 56-7). In the Merchant, traces of the parable suggest themselves in the opening exchange between Antonio and Bassanio, only to remain submerged within the notoriously elliptical and elusive relationship between these characters. For Shakespeare to have made those traces more distinct would have strengthened the connection between Bassanio and the wastrel youths pilloried in the anti-usury tracts of the day, and, implicitly, would have given a sharper resonance to the antimaterialist evocations in Shylock's invective. As it is, however, the parable of the prodigal son presents itself in the play as an analogy left teasingly inchoate, with our sense of its nonpresence keen enough for us to notice its suppression.

Still, is such suppression evidence that the Merchant participates in the religioeconomic mythology of its times, or that it parodies it? In reifying in its own text the rationalizations and contradictions we encountered in other texts of the times, is the Merchant exorcising these qualifications, or, rather, is it underscoring their persistence? As Norman Rabkin demonstrated several years ago, critical commentary on the Merchant documents nothing more clearly than the resistance we encounter if we seek answers to these questions in the text of the play (1981, 28-9). In fact, what the text of the play may lead us to infer is that "texts" themselves are not to be trusted. "Texts," the play insists, can mislead and can be misread. Scripture we may think is authoritative, but, as Antonio warns Bassanio, it can be cited by the devil "for his purpose" (I. iii. 93); sententiae, "Good sentences," no matter how "well pronunc'd," Portia reminds Nerissa, are far easier to pronounce than to follow (I. ii. 10-20); words are "tricksy," Lorenzo declares, and can be summoned to "Defy the matter" by any number of fools like Launcelot Gobbo, "who hath planted in his memory / An army of good words" for the purpose (III. v. 59-64); while "delicate fools" can, like Morocco and Aragon, display their foolishness in the very deliberateness with which they puzzle over texts, showing that they "have the wisdom by their wit to lose" (II. ix. 81). Indeed, if we read E.F.J. Tucker's reading of the play aright, what Portia's climactic judgement against Shylock enshrines most of all is the principle that for the law to be properly applied it must be understood in its spirit or intent, rather than read for the "letter" of its text (1976, 100-1).

How do these expressions within the play of skepticism toward texts affect our reading of The Merchant of Venice? Collectively, they would appear to support the argument that the play allegorizes the triumph of love, mercy, divine justice, and other desiderata over the various mean-spirited and short-sighted impulses emblematized in a narrow, close-reading legalism. Bassanio, for example, does not have to ponder closely the wordings on caskets, since he has higher, intuitive impulses to guide him—not to mention, of course, the subliminally helpful hints and "mood music" provided by Portia! On the other hand, the antiliteralism we
come upon in the play at times serves the ideologically salutary purpose of upholding orthodoxy against the subversive, and subversively unanswerable, “misuse” of the texts and authorities by which orthodoxy is normally enforced: Scripture, the law, formulations of the “best interests” of the “commonweal.” Antonio issues his admonition about Scripture, after all, when Shylock proves uncomfortably adept at biblical exegesis, with Antonio’s words, as A. D. Nuttall has put it, suggestive of “a man who is holding fast to a conviction that his opponent must be wrong but cannot quite see how” (1983, 128). Analogously, Lorenzo lodges his complaint against “tricky” words and fools just after Launcelot has appealed to the laws of supply and demand to argue that Jessica’s conversion to Christianity will raise the price of pork (III. 5. 19-23). The “word” must be suspect if it allows a Jew to use Scripture to justify usury and a fool to use the economic calculus of the times to suggest that, at least in one respect, the interests of Christianity and the economic interests of the commonwealth are not identical!

Yet in underscoring the equivocality and ambiguity of texts and “the word,” The Merchant of Venice distances itself from the very textuality which nourishes it and the texts which it evokes and by which its discourse is enriched and complicated: the Italian novelle that are the immediate source of its fable, anti-usury diatribes, accounts of commercial exploration and exploitation, parliamentary decrees and edicts of law, and, the most authoritative and yet unreadable text of all, Scripture. In calling attention to the ways in which texts can be misused to yield subversive generalizations, the Merchant would have its audience believe that it is something other than, more than, another text, and would persuade us that the way to true harmony and resolution lies in the playful particularity of its dramatic action. In this way the Merchant as a piece of theater distances itself from the subversive resonances it yields as a text. At the same time, however, by its very ludic nature the Merchant can pretend merely to “play” with the religioeconomic mythology its fable inscribes. In the degree to which the Merchant asserts its independence of the very textuality it evokes, its playwright can invoke the indemnity of Sidney’s poet, who, Sidney glibly reminds us, cannot ever be said to lie, because he “nothing affirmeth” (1595, 29).

We find this curious negotiation between text and play epitomized at the outset of act V, in the exchange in which Jessica and Lorenzo lyrically recount some of the assorted amorous misadventures that occurred on just “such a night” as the moonlit one they are enjoying at Belmont (V. i. 1-24). It is a passage which can be cited to confirm the darkest misgivings that can be, and have been, entertained about the “prodigal” and “unthrifty” manner in which Lorenzo and Jessica contrived to “steal from the wealthy Jew” (Moody, 1964, 46-7; Burckhardt, 1968, 224). It is a passage which, if read darkly, provides an ironic prelude to that “aristocratic fantasy” played out in the rest of this the concluding scene of the play. How we interpret this exchange depends very much on the degree of proximity we posit between Jessica and Lorenzo and the roster of literary amatory “unthrifths” whom they invoke and with whom they “playfully” associate themselves, or, rather, each other: Troilus and Cressida, Thisbe and Pyramus, Dido and Aeneas, Jason and Medea. To measure Jessica and Lorenzo by the texts in which they would inscribe themselves is not only to deepen our suspicion that Jessica and Lorenzo themselves either are not or will not be or do not deserve to continue to be happy, but also to bring the world of the play closer to the ambiguous light shed upon its proceedings by literary allusion and analogy. In the immediate context the intrusion of the dramatic action, in the person of Stephano arriving to announce the imminent return of Portia (V. i. 25), prevents Lorenzo and Jessica from fully shaping their own history to the specifications of the doleful texts they have been reciting. In this way they are permitted to maintain their theatrical “otherness” from the textual patterning by which they make it very tempting to read them. Hence, with no little tension, the world of texts is kept playfully separate from the world of the theatrical fiction.

Here, to be sure, it could be argued that the playfulness we have been claiming for the Merchant is but the rhetorical signature of its own textuality, with the distancing effect this playfulness produces nothing other than that parodic distance which Pierre Macherey contends must ever mark the relationship of “literary language” to the ideological discourses it evokes, that inherent distantiation through which “literary discourse merely mimics theoretical discourse, rehearsing but never actually performing its script” (1978, 59). At the
same time, though—even as we must question whether “literary language” can in fact be so essentially
distinguishable from other discourses as Macherey would maintain—we are no less likely to recognize in
the Merchant the symptoms of the curious dualism with which the public stage of Shakespeare's day
“represented” the world of, and to, its public, and with which it negotiated—and accommodated—the
ideological currents and cross-currents of the time. As Louis Montrose has demonstrated, Shakespearean
drama in particular calls upon the affiliative power inherent in theater to “re-present” to the audience a
“paradigm” of its culture even while calling attention, self-reflexively, to the devices, conventions, and forms
that inscribe the experience of theater as but illusion, and its business but “play” (1980, 66; also 1981, 33).
This dualism entails, of course, a certain artistic—and political—convenience, for even as it proclaims the
mimetic power of drama to suggest and portray resemblances to “real life,” it insists upon the figurative
character of those resemblances and, thus, enables the playwright to claim limitations upon his responsibility,
his accountability, for literal truth. “What childe is there,” asks Sidney in his response to Gosson's attack, “that
coming to a play, and seeing Thebes written in great letters upon an old doore, doth believe that it is Thebes?”
(p. 29). Sidney's “question” is, in fact, an assertion of an artistic license which the more wary upholders of
orthodoxy should have found disquieting: the license to be taken seriously but not literally, and, therefore, not
too seriously!

In no form are this reflexivity and playing at representation so overt as in comedy, and in no Shakespearean
comedy is the tension that this playing embodies—and the convenience it affords—more evident than in the
Merchant, where, I have tried to suggest, we are treated to an exposition and interrogation of the prevailing
religioeconomic mythologies of the day, even as we feel a pull toward the reassuring particularity only a
dramatic solution and resolution can provide. Indeed, nothing better attests to the will and power of dramatic
art to divert attention from the ideological contradictions it reflects to its own playful alterity than the sense
that has permeated a good deal of criticism on the Merchant that “somehow,” through some combination of
conventions comic, festive, and carnivalesque, the play manages to transcend the issues its text problematizes
to render a dramatically, theatrically, satisfying experience. “The happy ending,” C. L. Barber observes, with
a keen and generous appreciation for this festive difference, “which abstractly considered as an event is hard
to credit, and treatment of Shylock, which abstractly considered as justice is hard to justify, work as we
actually watch or read the play because these events express relief and triumph in the achievement of a
distinction” (1959, 170). The Merchant “works”—and worked—and achieves its “triumph,” of course,
precisely in the degree to which it works upon its audience, and critics, to relax their discriminations and
equate the illusion of a “distinction” with its “achievement.”

Now, as Robert Weimann has shown, no figure in Shakespearean drama so well incarnates in action and
speech the playfully representative force of Shakespearean drama as does the fool (1978, 30-48, 133-51), and
so, to italicize the peculiarly playful relationship of the Merchant to the religioeconomic vision its fable
enacts, we might conclude by looking once again at that exchange in act III (v. 19 ff.) in which the fool,
Launcelot Gobbo, opines on the economic ramifications of Jessica's conversion. Cohen has observed how in
general Launcelot's penchant for the verbal malapropos gives voice to “an alternative perspective on the
related matters of Christian orthodoxy and social hierarchy” (1982, 780), and the truth of that observation is in
no way belied by Launcelot's performance here. Yet what is most exemplary in what Lawrence Danson calls
Launcelot's “wonderful confusion of carnal matters and spiritual” (1978, 97) is the complexity of response it
elicits from us. Practiced as we have become in making sense of what we take to be the ostensible non-sense
and inversions of sense that dot Launcelot's “normal” discourse, we have no difficulty in grasping an ulterior
pertinence in the apparent im-pertinence of Launcelot's juxtaposition of things spiritual and porcine. After all,
Launcelot is not the first character in the play, we are likely to recall, who has shown himself to be a homo
economicus in matters related to Jessica; and whatever incongruity we may feel in hearing Jessica's
conversion turn Launcelot's thoughts to pork is only a comic reprise of the incongruity we may have felt in
hearing from Solanio that Jessica's elopement turned her father's thoughts to ducats (II. viii. 12-22). Still, even
as Launcelot's reasoning reassuringly parodies the materialism we associate with and hear burlesqued in
Solanio's burlesque of Shylock, it reminds us that it is not only the Jew and usurer who brings an economic
algorithm to his reading of experience, and that the line in the play distinguishing the “thrift” of the usurer from the values of the Christian community is not so very reassuringly or consistently sharp.

At the same time, however, the associations called into play by Launcelot's words are kept at a playful distance by the comic theatricality of his character. Yet this distancing is double-edged. On the one hand, Launcelot's generic “foolishness” permits the play to articulate elements of social criticism without appearing to engage or take them seriously. Indeed, Launcelot's comicality enables the Merchant to glance yet glance but teasingly at assumptions left unquestioned by its fable: that godliness and riches are linked, that Christianity and the economic interests of the commonwealth are in harmony. On the other hand, though it may distance itself from the kinds of question and questioning Launcelot's words may suggest, the Merchant leaves these same assumptions ultimately unaffirmed. Lorenzo deals with Launcelot's provocative—and provoking—thesis, we will recall, not by refuting it, but by changing the subject and grumbling about “tricksy words” in the mouths of fools. Like the exchange between Jessica and Lorenzo, the dialogue here is significantly disengaged. Above all, in having economic theory uttered from the mouth of a fool, the Merchant glances reflexively and parodically at the very sort of discourse in which it has involved itself and immersed us. In the playfulness of Launcelot the Merchant asserts its own playfulness and illuminates the dramatic tension in which it holds the competing impulses of recuperation and subversion.

Notes

1. For another synopsis of the polarities through which the play is often schematized, see Greenblatt (1978), 293-4. All references to the Merchant are to the Arden edition, edited by Brown (1955).

2. Consider the note of qualification obtruding in Barbara Lewalski's contention that the conversion imposed upon Shylock at the end of the play is a prefigurement of the final conversion of the Jews: “because Antonio is able to rise at last to the demands of Christian love, Shylock is not destroyed, but, albeit rather harshly, converted” (Lewalski, 1962, 334).

3. For a summary and discussion of a number of the topical possibilities, see Brown (1955), xxi-xxvii.


5. In the source story from Il Pecorone, “[t]he Jew, seeing that he could not do what he had wished, took his bond and tore it in pieces in a rage.” See Bullough (1964), 474.

6. Thus, in the concluding remarks in Thomas Lodge's Alarum Against Usurers (1584), the moneylenders are exhorto to “harden not your hearts, but be you converted … and turne, turne, turne unto the Lord, (I beseech you) least you perish in your own abominations” (1584 [1853] 79). See also the penitence of the usurer at the conclusion of Lodge's A Looking Glasse, for London and England (1598 [1963, 69]).

7. See Lodge (1584 [1853], 77; Smith (1591), 8; also Brown (1955), xxiv.

8. Smith goes so far as to maintain that were there no usury, there would be no “revenging,” and that “they which brought in Vsurie, brought in a law against themselves” (pp. 6-7).

9. In his insistence upon the letter of the bond, Shylock follows the example of the usurer in Il Pecorone (Bullough, 1964, 471), but in the defiance with which he teasingly defends his right to the pound of flesh, he seems akin to the moneylender in Alexander Silvayn's The Orator (trans. L.P., 1596), who, having speculated on various reasons why “I would not rather take silver of this man, then his flesh,” shrugs them off, and “will onelie say, that by his obligation he oweth it me” (Bullough, 1964, 484).

10. In, perhaps, the most virulent expression of anti-Bassanian sentiment among critics, A. D. Moody observes of Bassanio that “[i]t would not be inappropriate if his name came to be suggestive of baseness, in the sense of ‘opposed to high-minded’; and perhaps also to suggest the bass, ‘the common perch’, which catches the shallow and callow aspect, and also ‘a voracious European marine fish’, which catches the more serious underside” (1964, 23-4). A. D. Nuttall puts the case of Bassanio's apparent materialism in more silken accents when he notes, “There is a certain repellent ingenuousness about Bassanio. He can trust his own well-constituted nature. It would never allow him
to fall in love with a poor woman; for, after all, poor women are not attractive” (1983, 122).

11. In Il Pecorone, after all, we also find an interesting admixture of Eros and commerce, though it could be argued that the Merchant is an inversion of the fable of its source. For in Il Pecorone what begins as a commercial venture turns into an erotic adventure; in the Merchant what we would presume to be an amatory quest seems persistently mixed with material considerations.

12. To take but one example, Bassanio’s very appeal to Antonio for a renewal of his loan appropriates the vocabulary of investment. Were Antonio to give Bassanio the funds with which to replace the money Bassanio has already wasted, Bassanio promises either “to find both, / Or bring your latter hazard back again,” while the thought of his courtship of Portia “presages me such thrift / That I should questionless be fortunate” (I. i. 150-1, 175-6).

13. For a brief discussion of this statute, see Draper (1935), 41.

14. For two quite complementary discussions of Shylock as the figure of the scapegoat, see Girard (1978), 108-14; and Barber (1959), 177-84.

15. Indeed, has Shakespeare given greater definition to the analogy between Bassanio and the prodigal son, he might have affiliated the fable of the play with a concern evident in the anti-usury complaints of the day, namely, that the profits of usurers were a threat to familial legacies and, thus, to nothing less than social continuity. Lodge, who may have been especially sensitive to the overthrows familial fortunes could suffer, exclaims that “Purchased arms now possess the place of ancient progenitors, and men made rich by young youth's mispendings doe feast in the halls of our riotous young spend thighs” (1584, 48).

16. At the heart of Macherey's position on the nonideological nature of “literary language” is the assumption that “literary language” is essentially nonrepresentational. Indeed, to Sidney's self-exculpatory claim that the poet never lies because he “nothing affirmeth,” Macherey might well add that the poet—or playwright—can only lie whenever he seems to affirm. “Literature is deceptive,” Macherey argues, “in so far as it is evocative and apparently expressive. … Making us take the word for the thing, or vice-versa, it would be a fabric of lies, all the more radical for being unconscious” (1978, 61).

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Stephen A. Cohen (1994)


[In the essay below, Cohen argues that The Merchant of Venice should be examined from a legal point of view in order to better understand the cultural changes that began to occur in Elizabethan England—specifically, the increasing use of common law by the “rising classes” to thwart the “ruling classes.”]

The interdisciplinary study of literature has received considerable impetus over the last two decades from the rise of New Historicism. Particularly in Renaissance studies, the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Adrian Montrose and others has illuminated the relation of such diverse matters as exorcism, colonialism, architectural design and primogeniture to the cultural work performed by literary texts. One subject largely neglected by the New Historicists, however, is the law. This neglect may in part be attributable to the prominence of the law in older, positivist historical readings of Renaissance literature, and in turn to the New Historicists' desire both to distance themselves from this reflectionist model and to investigate unexplored areas of Renaissance culture. In any case, by conjoining the considerable work done by Renaissance legal scholars with New Historicism's characteristic questions—what are the sociopolitical functions of the cultural phenomenon in question, and how are those functions employed or adapted through the literary text—we may shed considerable light on both the law and the literature of the Renaissance.

Not surprisingly, given its explicitly economic central conflict and its intricately detailed legal climax, The Merchant of Venice has had considerable appeal for interdisciplinary critics. As O. Hood Phillips's investigations have shown, for over a century legal scholars and historians have studied the trial scene's relation to contemporary jurisprudence, debating its verisimilitude and its position in the period's jurisdictional and philosophical disputes, especially the conflict between the common law and equity (91-118). More recently, historical critics like Walter Cohen, Leonard Tennenhouse and Thomas Moisan have explored the play's relation to Renaissance social and economic history and ideology, and particularly its role in the period's transition from the cultural and financial structures of late feudalism to those of early capitalism. These two lines of inquiry have, however, remained almost entirely separate: legal readings of the trial scene tend to treat its legal significance in both cultural and textual isolation, failing to link it to the social and economic issues prominent in both text and cultural context; and socioeconomic readings of the play as a whole give little or no attention to the role of the trial's legal background in that framework.
A contemporary audience, however, would have made no such separation. The late 16th and early 17th centuries in England were notable both for unprecedented economic and social change and for a marked increase in legal activity; the connection between the two developments was sufficiently clear at the time that Francis Bacon could note almost as a commonplace that “times of peace, for the most part drawing with them abundance of wealth, and fineness of cunning, doe draw also in further consequence multitudes of suits, and controversies … [which] do more instantly sollicite for the amendment of lawes, to restraine and represse them” ("Epistle Dedicatorie," n.p.).

Nor were such associations beyond the bounds of the theater. In the case of The Merchant of Venice, the susceptibility of the play's legal content to sociopolitical interpretation is attested to by no less a legal and political authority than Lord Chancellor Ellesmere, who in a 1615 judicial dispute over the power of King James to legislate economic policy without the concurrence of Parliament advised his fellow judges “to maintain the power and prerogative of the King; and in cases in which there is no authority and precedent, to leave it to the King to order it according to his wisdom and the good of his subjects, for otherwise the King would be no more than the Duke of Venice” (qtd. in Andrews 41). The significance of the reference—to the Duke's legal inability to act on his sympathy for Antonio—would not have been lost on James and his court, for whom The Merchant of Venice was performed twice in 1605 (Knight 108n8).

For its contemporary audience, then, the trial scene's legal conflict was firmly connected to the economic and political issues in which the period was increasingly embroiled. By bringing together the historical particularity of the play's legal critics and the ideological sensitivity of its newer historical readers, I hope to recapture the significance of this connection; and in shedding new light on the meaning of the trial scene's common law-versus-equity debate I will attempt to illuminate the role that The Merchant of Venice played in the culture of which it was a part.

The case that Shylock makes for the enforcement of his bond rests on three claims: 1) the self-evidence of the law's application to the case at hand; 2) the supremacy of that law over any other power, personal or governmental; and 3) the importance of that supremacy to the foundations of the state itself. “I [have] sworn / To have the due and forfeit of my bond,” he tells the Duke as the trial opens; “If you deny it, let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom!” (4.1.36-39). These three claims were the foundation of the case presented by the champions of the common law in their jurisdictional and philosophical conflict with the courts of equity. In supporting the inviolability of the common law's authority they argued that the order and security of the nation rested upon the adjudication of its increasingly complex web of rights and obligations by—as Sir Edward Coke phrased it—“the golden and straight mete-wand of the law, and not the incertain and crooked cord of discretion” (qtd. in Ives 125).

While acknowledging the technical legality of Shylock's suit—"Of a strange nature is the suit you follow, / Yet in such rule that the Venetian law / Cannot impugn you as you do proceed” (177-79)—Portia counters his claims by decrying the cruelty of the bond and the severity of the law that enforces it and insisting on the need for mercy “to mitigate the justice of thy plea” (203). The necessity of such mitigation was the basis of the argument presented by the advocates of equity's appellate superiority to the common law, in order, in the words of Lord Keeper John Williams, “to mix & temper mercie and equitie with the black and rigorous L[ette]re of the Law” (qtd. in Thomas 526). Consequently, Portia's victory has been read by legal critics like Mark Edwin Andrews, Maxine McKay and W. Nicholas Knight as Shakespeare's endorsement of the ethical importance of equity to mitigate the impartial but at times overly-strict justice of the common law.

As Lord Chancellor Ellesmere recognized, however, behind the ideological trappings of blind-but-strict law and corrective equity, the issue at stake in the trial plot is political power—specifically, the power of the Crown to further its social and economic agenda in the face of the legal challenge presented by the common law. As the complex, large-scale financial operations of early capitalism began to emerge in the middle years of the 16th century, its practitioners became acutely aware of the value of a comprehensive and predictable
legal system that offered protection from arbitrary interference. As Max Weber notes:

The modern capitalist concern … requires for its survival a system of justice and an administration whose workings can be rationally calculated, at least in principle, according to fixed general laws. … It is as little able to tolerate the dispensing of justice according to the judge's sense of fair play in individual cases or any other irrational means of principles of administering the law … as it is able to endure a patriarchal administration that obeys the dictates of its own caprice, or sense of mercy. …

(qtd. in Whigham 107-08n14)

The common law, particularly after it began to recognize and incorporate the jurisprudence of the increasingly important international mercantile legal system (Hill 238), was clearly the law that best offered this protection, given its fundamental concern with meum et tuum property rights: “The person, goods and possessions of a man (as yow know) are the things which the Common lawes of England doe protect,” wrote Edward Hake in the late years of Elizabeth's reign (69).

The Crown's difficulty with this conception of the common law was that the very same principles which facilitated the new economic activity could also be—and increasingly were—employed to protect the profits of that activity from royal exploitation. The value to the nation of this new commerce and industry provided the Crown with a strong disincentive to violate or abrogate the common law; yet with the steadily growing financial pressure on the royal treasury in the late 16th century, the maintenance of state power came increasingly to require the diversion of the profits of English capitalism into the government's coffers. The means by which the Elizabethan state attempted this diversion—ad hoc financial and commercial regulation, extra-parliamentary taxation and forced loans that were never repaid—brought it into direct conflict with the necessary predictability and inviolability of the common law, and those profiting from the new economy were quick to invoke those principles in their own interest. Even Hake, who was by no means a wholehearted ally of the new capitalists (his revised Epieikeia was presented to King James), held that “concerning the subiect's goods, neither subsidyes, taxes, contributions nor loans are by the lawe to take hold thereof or to be imposed upon any Englishe subiect without his free consent”; thus “any seisures to be made of an Englishe subiect's goods to the King's use withowt iust and lawfull tytle” were not to be considered (83-84).

Coupled with the ideological prestige of the common law's status as England's unique and indigenous legal heritage (insightfully described by J. G. A. Pocock), the Crown's reliance on the new economy made a royal attack on the common law in general both undesirable and impracticable. Instead, the Crown for the most part restricted its response to the particular instances in which the common law was used to oppose the Crown's will: thus while common-law tacticians cast their legal resistance to the state's unpopular financial devices as the defense of property rights against royal tyranny, the Crown countered by depicting that resistance as the economically self-interested misuse of the law contrary to the unity, order and security of the state. Equity, as the theoretical remedy for injustice produced by the misuse of the law, was consequently an essential component of the Crown's legal arsenal. While other legal weapons like the royally-dominated ecclesiastical courts, Star Chamber and the considerable direct prerogative power of the ruler himself would provide the Crown with greater practical power in the increasingly contentious years leading up to the Civil War, equity's established jurisprudential credentials allowed it to become one of the Crown's earliest and most powerful ideological tools in its efforts to stave off the political implications of capitalism's use of the common law.

Seen in this light, the broader social conflict behind the common-law/equity dispute is not the primarily economic battle between capitalism and feudalism, but the primarily political battle between two socioeconomic factions for the spoils of the nascent capitalist economy. These two factions were defined less by social status (aristocracy versus gentry or nascent bourgeoisie) than by a combination of economic interest and ideological affiliation. On one side were the merchants, financiers, landed gentry and even aristocrats who
profited directly from the new economy and who perceived their interests—financial and otherwise—to be at least on occasion different from the Crown's (Stone, Causes 114-15). This group may be designated the “rising class,” provided that we understand “rising” primarily in the economic rather than social sense and “class” as a taxonomy based on neither birth nor wealth but on economic activity.

Their opponents were the large landowners—Crown and older aristocracy—that for reasons both economic and social had been unable to adapt their financial practice to the new economy and who were consequently forced into an increasingly parasitical relationship to that economy—the Crown in the ways discussed above and the aristocracy as royal competing for monopolies and state offices (Tawney 9-13; Stone, Crisis 199-207). Despite the growing challenge posed by the rising class, this second group may still be referred to as the period's ruling class, for since Henry VII and Henry VIII subjugated the great noble families to the Crown, this royal-aristocratic bloc had wielded a nigh-hegemonic political and social power which in the late 16th century continued to hold most of the nation under its official or ideological sway.

Thus, while the immediate stakes in the conflict between the two groups were financial, the ultimate prize was much greater: the ability of the independent rising class to use the common law to thwart the sociopolitical will of the ruling class. Not simply a clash of legal principles or jurisdictions, the contest between common law and equity was one of the first and most important sites of the conflict between the rising and ruling classes that would climax (but not conclude) with the Civil War. As one of the earliest articulations—literary or otherwise—of this ideological struggle, the victory of Portia in the trial scene of The Merchant of Venice is not a simple reflection of a jurisprudential dispute or an all-but-complete economic shift but rather a highly partisan intervention in a growing cultural crisis.

As in the contemporary legal dispute, the trial's battle lines are drawn not between capitalism (Venice) and feudalism (Belmont), but between the socially and politically independent rising class (Shylock the Jew) and the ruling class and its ideological allies (the Christian aristocrats and Antonio). Even before the trial scene itself, the play makes clear that its target is neither capitalism nor common law per se. In response to Solanio's certainty that the Duke will void Shylock's bond, Antonio pointedly establishes not only the close connection between common law and nascent capitalism but also the importance of both to the economic survival of the state:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;  
For the commodity that strangers have  
With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
Will much impeach the justice of the state,  
Since that the trade and profit of the city  
Consisteth of all nations.

(3.3.26-31)

During the trial, the legality of the contract itself, exemplar of both capitalist economics and common law, is never challenged: Antonio “confesses” the bond (181-82) and Portia declares, “Why, this bond is forfeit” (230)—that is, forfeited by Antonio upon his nonpayment. Instead, Shylock is vilified for the particular use to which he puts the law of contract: the enforcement of the bond's horrific stipulations at the expense of the Christian “royal merchant” Antonio.

The trial scene opens with a reassertion of its central sociopolitical division. Referring to Antonio by name, the Duke says: “I am sorry for thee” (3); the merchant responds by acknowledging the pains the Duke and the other “magnificoes” have already taken on his behalf (7-9; see also 3.2.279-83). Shylock, in contrast, is first referred to simply as “the Jew” (14), an epithet used throughout the trial to underline his social alienation. Despite (or more precisely because of) its prominence in the play's definition of his character, Shylock's religion is not to be taken at face value, but rather as an exemplary illustration of the play's mediation of
Elizabethan sociopolitical reality for presentation on the stage. Without dismissing the importance of the considerable literature debating *The Merchant of Venice*’s anti-Semitism, I would argue that it is difficult to see Shylock primarily as a representative of Judaism. Shylock's Jewishness throughout the play is less theological than cultural: he is not identified by (and reviled for) his failure to accept Christ or the New Testament, but by his “Jewish gaberdine,” his unwillingness to dine with his Christian business associates and especially his usury—in short, his social, economic and ideological alienation from Venice's dominant sociopolitical group.

Rather than a transparent religious designation, Judaism (certainly a flexible signifier in an England virtually devoid of professed Jews) functions in the play as a derogatory marker for a group extant but not fully delineated in the cultural consciousness of the late 16th century, a group characterized by its economic self-interest and its willingness to further that interest by opposing itself to the dominant social ideology: the rising class. If the play partakes in contemporary anti-Semitic stereotypes (greed, social separatism), it does so not in the service of their own furtherance, but in order to transfer those negative associations from the religious to the socio-economic sphere.

The Duke's first speech to Shylock (17-34) employs this transference in linking the trial's economic foundations to its larger social significance. Lacking the prerogative power to pardon Antonio—a power that belonged to the ruler only in criminal cases—the Duke resorts to the considerable extra-legal social power wielded by the ruling class. Antonio's financial straits, he says, should elicit pity and mercy not only from Christian hearts, but “from stubborn Turks, and Tartars never train’d / To offices of tender courtesy” (32-33). The Duke offers Shylock the following choice: either to remain more alien than even the Turks and Tartars in pursuing his suit, or to enter—as has Antonio—the hegemonic penumbral of the aristocracy by changing his pagan “malice” for Christian “courtesy” and economic cooperation. The full weight of the social pressure that the ruling class could bring to bear upon a recalcitrant individual is focused in the speech's final line (particularly in light of the recurring pun on gentle/gentile): “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew!”

In the not-too-distant Tudor past such a threat might well have proven the trump card that the Duke intends it to be. By the 1590s, however, the inviolability of the common law was providing the rising class with an increasingly effective shield with which to resist the Crown's efforts to assert its will over the law. Shylock's response to the Duke links the common law's economic domain, its class affiliation and its ideological status as foundation of the state:

> by our holy Sabaoth have I sworn
> To have the due and forfeit of my bond.
> If you deny it, let the danger light
> Upon your charter and your city's freedom!

(36-39)

Throughout the trial scene, Shylock invokes the shield of the common law in the face of Christian attempts to coerce or cajole him by emphasizing his social exclusion or offering him inclusion at the price of his bond. “Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond,” he admonishes Gratiano, “Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud. / … I stand here for law” (139-42).

The lack of formal social submissiveness and regard for hierarchical distinctions implicit in both the substance and the tone of Shylock's response to his aristocratic opponents suggests the ultimate consequence of his common-law defense: the weakening of the sociopolitical hegemony that preserved royalist-aristocratic privilege. In keeping with the play's ideological agenda, this use of the law is presented as a threat to the safety and stability of a Venetian society whose social and juridical similarities to late 16th-century England would not be overlooked by a contemporary audience. This threat is clearest in Shylock's famous “Hath not a
Read in context—as a response to Salerio's suggestion that Shylock has nothing to gain by enforcing the bond—the speech is not the appeal to universal brotherhood it is often taken to be. Antonio's hostility towards Shylock is rooted in the latter's social alterity—“You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine” (1.3.111-12)—and it is this distinction between Jew and Christian that the speech rhetorically effaces. The result of this effacement, however, is not a pledge of mutual forbearance but a promise of retaliatory violence: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that” (3.1.66-68). For Shylock, the bond's utility is not economic—“A pound of man's flesh,” he tells Antonio and Bassanio, “Is not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (1.3.165-67)—but sociopolitical, through its power as an instrument of the common law to nullify the class privilege that protects Antonio from Shylock's vengeance. This association between the common law and violent social disruption is a crucial element of the play's ideological work.

The ruling class's response to Shylock's threat is presented by Portia. She begins by acknowledging both the validity of the bond (177-79) and the ideological power of the common law's promised consistency that underpins Shylock's confident intransigence. In reply to Bassanio's appeal to the Duke to “Wrest once the law to your authority” (215) she insists:

It must not be, there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established.
’Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state. It cannot be.

(218-22)

Consequently, her solution to Shylock's legal challenge—“Then must the Jew be merciful” (182)—at first seems identical to the Duke's. The mercy Portia seeks, however, is not the Duke's unconditional Christian mercy. While the Duke demands that Shylock forgive Antonio not only the interest owed but “a moi’ty of the principal” as well (26), Portia seeks not the abandonment of the bond but its payment, with justifiable interest, in place of the legal but abhorrent penalty Shylock demands. “Be merciful,” she tells Shylock, “Take thrice thy money, bid me tear the bond” (233-34). It was precisely this type of mercy—that which does not mitigate justice for the sake of pity but mitigates (common) law for the sake of true justice—that the courts of equity claimed to dispense. Knight notes the distinction: “The ‘mercy’ of the High Court of Chancery's equitable decisions by the Lord Chancellor is not to be confused with … simple clemency or empathetic pity … for William West says: ‘there is a difference between Equitie and Clemency: for Equitie is alwaies most firmly knit to the evil of the Law which way soever it bends, whether to clemency, or to severity’” (“Equity” 95-96). Many in the play's contemporary audience would have recognized Portia's suggested compromise—the payment of appropriate interest rather than the contractually stipulated forfeiture—as a solution typical of the equity courts of the day (Keeton 137).

Like Shylock's use of common law, Portia's invocation of equity has social as well as legal significance. According to the theory of equity which emerged during Elizabeth's reign, while equitable mercy assured the justness of the law, equity's own justness was in turn guaranteed by its origin in the royal conscience (Thorne viii). The monarch's conscience itself was validated by his role as the earthly conduit for divine justice, which by virtue of its source was necessarily superior to, and thus the ultimate venue of appeal from, the merely human common law. William Lambarde, in his Archeion, writes:

And considering that the Prince of this Realme is the immediate minister of Iustice under God, and is sworn at his Coronation, to deliver to his subjects aequam & rectam Iustitiam; I cannot see how it may otherwise be, but that besides his Court of meere Law, he must either
reserve to himselfe, or referre to others a certaine soveraigne and preheminent Power, by
which he may both supply the want, and correct the rigour of that Positive or written Law. …
if onely streight Law should bee administred, the helpe of GOD which speaketh in that Oracle
of Equitie, should be denyed unto men that neede it.

(42-44)

Accordingly, the court of Chancery was considered the “court of the King's conscience,” its Chancellor
deputized by the monarch to implement the justice of the royal will, correcting when necessary the injustices
perpetrated by the common law by overruling the decisions of its courts. Contrary to the levelling effect of the
common law that placed even the sovereign under the law, this construction of legal authority offered a
hierarchical ideology which situated the monarch at the terrestrial pinnacle of the legal system.

Portia's response to Shylock's use of the common law is thus the jurisprudential reassertion of the fundamental
value and necessity of social hierarchy, replacing his vision of inter-class violence with one of
royally-regulated harmony. It is in this light that we must understand Portia's famous “quality of mercy”
speech:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred way,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

(184-97)

Mercy, in short, descends from heaven into the heart of the monarch, allowing him to fulfill his role as the
terrestrial conduit of God's justice, with which he “seasons” flawed human justice. In addition to justifying
ideologically the supremacy of royal equity, however, Portia's speech also makes clear its practical
implications. Her juxtaposition of the monarch's divine equitable authority with his “temporal power” sets up
the speech's concluding union of Christian piety and realpolitik intimidation: “We do pray for mercy, / And
that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy” (200-02). The power that equity gives to the
Crown by reinstating royal will as the ultimate legal authority assures that one can no more hope to prosper
without the king's mercy than without God's, and that one who hopes for such mercy should be prepared to
make concessions of his own. Some seven years after the play's composition, King James would make this
same point less subtly in his July 1604 rebuke to a recalcitrant Parliament: “Justice I will give to all, and
favour to such as deserve it … in cases of equity, if I should show favour, except there be obedience, I were
no wise man” (qtd. in Kenyon 60).

While Portia replaces the social coercion of the Duke's Christian mercy with an equitable mercy which
responds to Shylock's legal defense in kind, the ramifications of both threats are the same for him. To accept
Portia's equitable resolution is to surrender his equal legal standing and accede to the existence of a higher
legal and social authority. Not surprisingly, then, Shylock spurns Portia's veiled threat, preferring to rely on
the power of his position under the common law to indemnify him from the need for royal mercy: “By my
soul I swear / There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me: I stay here on my bond” (240-42). What
follows is one of the most dramatic—and ideologically potent—scenes in Shakespearian comedy, in which
judgment is pronounced not once but twice, juxtaposing for the audience the results of the competing legal
philosophies presented in the first half of the scene.

Portia's deliberations proceed first in accordance with the common law. When she declares the bond forfeit,
Shylock esteems her for her knowledge of the law, suggesting the common law's justification of its judges'
authority not by their own discretion but by their preeminent ability to administer consistently a time-tested
body of law: “It doth appear you are a worthy judge; / You know the law, your exposition / Hath been most
sound” (236-38). As the impartiality of the common law requires, Portia's ruling is pointedly faithful to the
law of contract, despite her personal desire to offer mercy:

Por: 
... lay bare your bosom.
Shy: 
Ay, his breast,
So says the bond, doth it not, noble judge?
“Nearest his heart,” those are the very words.
Por:
It is so. Are there balance here to weigh
The flesh?
Shy:
I have them ready.
Por:
Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge,
To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.
Shy:
Is it so nominated in the bond?
Por:
It is not so express’d, but what of that?
’Twere good you do so much for charity.
Shy:
I cannot find it, ’tis not in the bond.

(252-62)

Alongside this emphasis on the strict legality of the procedure, however, is the no less insistent emphasis on
the materiality of its outcome: the mutilation and almost certain death of Antonio. Present throughout the trial
scene, this linking of common-law principle to its horrific results is unmistakable as the scene reaches its
climax. As Shylock approaches Antonio with whetted knife, Portia again reminds us that what we see is the
result of the court's obligation to proceed according to the law: “The law allows it, and the court awards it”
(303). The result is a vivid and ideologically charged illustration of the irrelevance of the common law's
human consequences to its inflexible requirements.

The clear injustice of this strictly legal proceeding is, of course, precisely what the flexible, case-specific
judgments of the courts of equity claimed to remedy. Before Shylock can strike, Portia halts him—“Tarry a
little, there is something else” (305)—and the trial shifts from the procedures of a common-law court to those
of equity. Portia's famous “quibble”—Shylock may have his pound of flesh according to the bond, but on the
condition that “if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are by the laws of
Venice confiscate / Unto the state of Venice” (309-12)—is a stratagem typical of the equity courts. While the
common law traditionally held that if the law granted an individual a right (including the right to take
possession of property) it also granted him the means to exercise that right (Andrews 77nA), the courts of
equity would often thwart a common-law award by placing such stringent restrictions and protections on the
property to be seized as frequently to make the path of least resistance that taken by Shylock, the “voluntary”
non-collection of the award (Andrews 66; Keeton 145). The relief and amazement, both on stage and off, at
Portia's dramatic aversion of the travesty of justice almost perpetrated by the common law underscores the contrasting results of the two legal systems.

The audience's pleasure in Portia's victory is heightened by the irony of her use of Shylock's insistence on strict interpretation against him: “For as thou urg'st justice, be assur'd / Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st” (315-16). In doing so, however, Portia has vexed legal scholars by belying the equitable principle most often associated with the trial scene, the mitigation of the strict letter of the law through recourse to its gentler spirit. The reason for this seeming contradiction lies in the political significance of Portia's legal device. While the mitigation of the letter of the law by its spirit or intent was indeed a central tenet of traditional equitable jurisprudence, in Shakespeare's time it was chiefly associated not with royally-controlled equity but with the judges of the common-law courts. Throughout the 16th century, as the limitations placed upon the common law by its codification into written rules became apparent, its judges began to revivify a procedure utilized by their predecessors in the 13th and 14th centuries: the interpretation of a law based on its intent rather than its precise wording (Thomas 515-16). Such an approach was entirely congruent with common-law ideology, basing the authority of the common-law judges to interpret rather than simply apply the law on their unmatched knowledge of its history and principles.

The practice of common-law equity was, of course, opposed by the equity courts, whose authority was based on the inadequacy of the common law to the requirements of justice and the necessity of an alternate source of justice—royal conscience—to remedy that inadequacy. To correct the letter of the law with its spirit was merely to affirm the ultimate wisdom of the common law. For this reason the principle of intent is emphatically not the basis of Portia's equitable decision. Portia herself discounts intent as a means of correcting the defects of the letter of the law when she pointedly acknowledges that the spirit as well as the letter of the law supports Shylock's claim: “the intent and purpose of the law / Hath full relation to the penalty, / Which here appeareth due upon the bond” (247-49). As the play takes pains to indicate, the intent of the law of contract is to protect the sanctity of contracts from external interference in order to ensure the rights of those who do business in Venice, regardless of the specific contents of those contracts.

The principle that Portia applies in reaching her verdict is not the mitigation of the letter of the law by its spirit, but the equally venerable equitable doctrine which holds that equity may mitigate the unjust results of the law's necessary generality by taking into account the aspects of a specific case of which the law takes no notice. This conception of equity is traceable to Aristotle's *Ethics*, in which he argues that “all law is universal but about some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which shall be correct. … this is the nature of the equitable, a correction of law where it is defective owing to its universality” (133; bk. 5, ch. 10). Elizabethan advocates of the courts of equity argued that the common law, in its quest for comprehensiveness and consistency, must operate on a general level and thus could never be made to take account of the “collateral circumstances” of individual cases (Hake 123). As a result, equity was both necessary and necessarily superior to the common law, overruling the latter when the application of its general rules to a specific case produced evident injustice.

It was this theory of equity that was at the heart of the Crown's claims to legal authority: for even if superior knowledge of both the letter and the spirit of the common law must be conceded to the common-law judges, the individualized requirements of justice were the province of conscience: “the examination of the case by circumstances … doth necessarily appertaine to the high courte of Chauncery … by an Equity that is drawne from the only conscience of the Lord Chauncellor” (Hake 123). The stipulations in Portia's ruling concerning the spilling of blood and the removal of an exact weight of flesh underline the gruesome specifics excluded from the common law's generality even as they correct the injustice produced by that exclusion. Neither the letter nor the spirit of the law make allowances for contracts like Shylock's; it is left to Portia and equity to mitigate the effects of the law's generality by considering the circumstances of the case at hand, overruling the requirements of the law in order to satisfy those of justice.
The sociopolitical consequences of equity's victory over the common law are immediately and decisively registered in the treatment of Shylock by a legal system once again under the control of the ruling class. During the first half of the interpretational contest, Portia in her role as common-law judge sets aside the scene's emphasis on Shylock's cultural difference, addressing him not as “Jew” but by name. The shift to equity, however, returns social difference and discrimination to the law, indicated by Portia's invocation of the statute specifically criminalizing the shedding of “Christian blood.” For the remainder of the trial Shylock goes unnamed, referred to only as “Jew” not merely by his avowed Christian enemies but also by Portia, the representative of justice. This connection between equity and social differentiation casts the freeing of Antonio as a reassertion of the distinctions between classes that Shylock's use of the law attempted to erase.

As Shylock tries to leave the court—“Why then the devil give him good of it! / I'll stay no longer question”—he learns that “The law hath yet another hold on [him]” (345-47). Because Portia's equitable reading of the bond has disallowed the shedding of Christian blood as a contractually protected act, Shylock is guilty of attempted murder and thus subject under the criminal law to the forfeiture of life and property. The social basis of Shylock's predicament is suggested by the statute to which he falls prey, the law “against an alien, / That by direct or indirect attempts / [Seeks] the life of any citizen” (349-51).

Such a law is present in none of the sources of the pound-of-flesh plot; moreover, in the 16th-century England all felonies, including attempted murder, were punishable by death and loss of property no matter who the perpetrator (Auden 228; Keeton 146). There is thus no dramatic or historical justification for a law specifically targeting aliens except to emphasize the link between Shylock's social status and his fate forged by the power of the law to discriminate between—and against—social groups or classes: having resolutely maintained his status as cultural outsider, he now finds himself trapped by it. The pleasure we take in Shylock's resultant comeuppance reinforces the play's implicit rebuttal to the common law's central justification, the economic necessity of a law predictable and impartial even to the “strangers” whose “commodity” is so important to the nation. Punishing Shylock's abuse of the common law with a statute that explicitly discriminates against such “strangers” answers the economic arguments of the rising class by implying that despite its potentially deleterious effect on commerce a certain amount of regulation is necessary for the security and moral order of the state.

The reestablishment of the legal authority of the ruling class is complete when the statute places discretionary judicial power directly in the hands of the monarch: “the offender's life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke only” (355-56). Stripped of the common law's protection, Shylock is subject to Portia's earlier threat: his failure to grant mercy to Antonio puts him at the mercy of the Duke. That this mercy is not Portia's equitable mercy but instead the clemency which was the Crown's prerogative in criminal cases (as indicated by the Duke's use of the word “pardon” [369]) merely confirms the sociopolitical complicity of the two juristic principles.

Their legal power over him established, Shylock's antagonists immediately use it to nullify his socioeconomic threat: the loss of half of his wealth now to Antonio and the other half upon his death to Lorenzo places his economic power in the hands of the aristocracy and its allies, and his forced conversion symbolically completes his absorption by the dominant Christian-aristocratic culture. Notably, despite his earlier denunciation of Shylock's usury, Antonio makes no provision at this point to prevent its continuance; it would seem that the eventual appropriation of any profit made therein by the ruling class does much to mitigate usury's sinfulness. The Christians' true target is not Shylock's economic practice but the social and political ends to which it is employed.

Finally, the trial concludes with a further demonstration of the coercive power granted the Crown by the supremacy of equity that Portia intimates in the “quality of mercy” speech, as the Duke requires Shylock's acquiescence to Antonio's terms, “or else I do recent / The pardon that I late pronounced here” (391-92). Legally at the mercy of his enemies, Shylock can only accede to Portia's ironic query, “Art thou contented, Jew?” (393). Thoroughly humbled, he leaves the court not with the unregenerate curse of his attempted exit.
prior to the invocation of the law against aliens but with the entreaties of a broken man: “I pray you give me leave to go from hence, / I am not well” (395-96). The trial's last word, however, is given to Gratiano: “In christ'ning shalt thou have two godfathers: / Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, / To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font” (398-400). This taunting valediction, while reemphasizing the “mercy” granted Shylock in sparing his life, at the same time underlines the contingency of that mercy, suggesting how easily his fate could have been that which Gratiano prefers. That it was not is due less to the principles of equity than to the dramatic and ideological appropriateness of a punishment befitting Shylock's social and economic crime.

Seen from the dual perspective of legal and political history, the threat posed by Shylock to the Venetian social order is fundamentally the same threat that Lord Chancellor Ellesmere recognized nearly twenty years later in what was by then one in a growing number of legal challenges to the Crown's sociopolitical hegemony. Shylock's use of the common law represented to a contemporary audience a question not simply of jurisprudential principle, nor even of economic practice, but ultimately of “the power and prerogative of the King.” And despite the efficacy of his defeat at Portia's hands in defining and resolving the conflict for the theater-going public in the interests of royal authority, the ideological battle fought in Shylock v. Antonio would prove to be but an early skirmish in the war between the rising and the ruling classes that was to dominate the next century of English politics.

Notes

1. All quotations from The Merchant of Venice are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans. References to the trial scene (Act 4, scene 1) will be cited by line number only.

Works Cited


Thorne, Samuel E. Preface to Hake. v-xii.


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 53): Further Reading

CRITICISM


Discusses the fact that while these two “problem plays” end with marriage—the classic solution to Renaissance comedies—neither ends with complete social harmony.

Examines the treatment of the character Shylock in Shakespeare's play, in performances throughout the history of the play, and in popular culture.


Looks at the complex relationship between Antonio and Shylock, noting their similarities and differences as well as their struggle for power over one another.


Analyzes the rings episode in the play as the second and final “trial” necessary to make all the characters repentant.


Demonstrates how Shakespeare experiments in this play with more complex characters whose natures change during the course of the action.


Argues that the interpretation of the play as either anti-Semitic or critical of those who are anti-Semitic depends upon the audience.


Observes that even in the love scenes, the play emphasizes economics, material exchange, and power.


Surveys the influence of The Merchant of Venice on the public debate of England's Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753.

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 66): Introduction

The Merchant of Venice

Among Shakespeare's most popular dramas, The Merchant of Venice remains a contentious piece to critics, who generally categorize it as a “problem play.” Its plot centers on the merchants Antonio and Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Finding Antonio unable to repay his loan, Shylock demands a pound of the Christian's flesh, as stipulated in his contract. Portia, the drama's heroine, arrives disguised as a male law clerk at the ensuing trial, and overturns the agreement. While essentially a romantic comedy concerning Antonio, Portia and the Venetian gentleman Bassanio (whom Portia eventually marries), the drama nevertheless depicts a number of troubling aspects chiefly related to the harsh punishment of Shylock, including his forced conversion to Christianity. Additionally, the ambiguous qualities of the three major figures in the drama have
led to numerous conflicting interpretations of the characters. Such varying interpretations tend to be born out by modern productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, as directors privilege either Portia's comic triumph or Shylock's tragic defeat. Furthermore, contemporary critics have continued to explore the play’s extensive themes, including conflicts of ethnicity, religion, and social exclusion, as well as the fundamental tensions it depicts between love, money, law, and mercy.

Over the course of its critical history, scholars have focused on the play's three principal figures—Antonio, Portia, and Shylock. Antonio, despite his status as the Venetian merchant of the work's title, has only infrequently been considered its most significant character. Cynthia Lewis confronts this exclusionary tradition in her 1997 study, which views Antonio as the locus of equivocation and contradiction in a play rife with ambivalence. More often, Antonio's character has been discussed in conjunction with Portia by commentators who emphasize the generic status of *The Merchant of Venice* as a romantic comedy. Characterizing Antonio and Portia as competitors for the love of Bassanio, Michael Zuckert (1996) sees this comic rivalry as providing the fundamental structure of the drama. Accordingly, Zuckert deems the bond between Antonio and Shylock as secondary to Portia's triumph. Such observations, however, are balanced by those of commentators who, captivated by the figure of Shylock, make an interpretation of the Jewish moneylender vitally important to the work. Robert Alter (1993) represents a number of critics who place Shylock at the center of *The Merchant of Venice*. Alter examines the range of interpretations elicited by his character: from comic villain to sympathetic and even tragic figure, vilified as an outsider for his religion and profession. Martin D. Yaffe (1997) offers an alternative to the traditional view that Shylock's depiction in *The Merchant of Venice* is anti-Semitic. Instead, Yaffe acknowledges perceptions of both positive and negative qualities in this complex character. Charles Edelman (1999) takes a somewhat revisionist position in regard to Shylock, contending that Elizabethan audiences would not necessarily have viewed his character as a stereotypical object of derision or a stock, comic stage villain.

The array of possible character interpretations offered by *The Merchant of Venice* has certainly contributed to the drama's continued theatrical popularity. In his review of Richard Olivier's 1998 staging of the play at the New Globe Theatre, John W. Mahon (1998) notes the centrality of Portia to the performance as well as its harsh portrayal of early modern anti-Semitism. Lois Potter's (1999) observations on the same Globe season include comments on Portia's asides to the audience and on the overall carnivalesque quality of the production. Director Trevor Nunn's interpretations of character for his 1999 staging of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Royal National Theatre, in contrast, were viewed as considerably less light-hearted than Olivier's. In his assessment, Hal Jensen (see Further Reading) remarks on Nunn's effective treatment of the darker elements of the play, including his nuanced exploration of character psychology and Shylock's Jewishness. Reviewer Matt Wolf observes the politicized quality of Nunn's staging in its depiction of the brutality inflicted on Shylock. For her 1998 Royal Shakespeare Company production, Barbara Gaines created an urban, American atmosphere evocative of the Roaring Twenties, a geographic and temporal location that reviewer Davi Napolean (1998) observes could be considered analogous to one Elizabethan audiences might have associated with Renaissance Venice.

Thematic criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* has touched on a wide range of subjects. Keith Geary's analysis (see Further Reading) treats the play's theme of love versus friendship, as Portia dons the clothing of a young man in order to both rescue Antonio and displace him as the principal object of Bassanio's affections. Seymour Kleinberg (1983) provides a similar, if somewhat more radical, interpretation of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, regarding the merchant as a homosexual whose love for his friend is again displaced, but in this reading by the social norms of heterosexual love and marriage. The dynamics of social exclusion figure prominently in a number of recent critical discussions of the drama. Susan Oldrieve (1993) notes the marginalization of Portia and Shylock as, respectively, a woman and a Jew, in a society dominated by patriarchal and Christian tradition. Alan Rosen (1997) presents a complementary analysis based on language, in which the Jewish Shylock and the Moorish Prince of Morocco are presented as outsiders in the play, both in terms of their ethnic differences and of their unique modes of expression, which vary sharply
from standard Venetian discourse. Richard H. Wiesberg (1999) represents judicial appraisals of *The Merchant of Venice* by arguing for an ironic interpretation of the drama that eschews simple associations of Christianity with compassion and Judaism with strict or unfeeling legality. Updating critical interest in the setting of the play, Tony Tanner (1999) concentrates on tensions between the dramatic worlds of mercantile Venice, Shylock's Jewish ghetto, and the fairy-tale enchantment of Belmont.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Cary B. Graham (essay date 1953)**


*[In the following essay, Graham maintains that shifting standards of moral, economic, and social value in *The Merchant of Venice* provide a fundamental insight into the variety of interpretations and responses the drama has elicited.]*

Recently Professor E. E. Stoll remarked, “… nearly everything certain in Shakespeare scholarship has in some quarters been disputed, as nearly everything uncertain has been affirmed.”¹ Although the statement was not applied especially to *The Merchant of Venice,* it is obvious that this play is a fruitful source of disagreement. It may be called either comedy or tragedy. Shylock may be regarded as a villain, a comic figure, or a martyr. Bassanio may be either an idealized Renaissance lover or a wastrel who recoups a squandered fortune by risking the life of a dear friend who in turn may be either a good businessman or a fool. Jessica is a charming young Jewess who is justified in leaving an unhappy home to elope with a handsome Christian lover, or she is an ungrateful wench who robs a provident father and who proves a traitor to her own religion. Indeed, as the reader will be reminded in the pages which follow, all of these varied conclusions have been reached.² But comparatively little attention has been paid to Shakespeare's use of standards of value in *The Merchant of Venice.*³ A glance at the values employed, their relationships within the play, and their connection with the intellectual background of the Renaissance may explain in part the technique of Shakespeare in appealing to an audience and may help to show why interpretations have varied so widely.

In the bond story, the first value to be established is that of friendship. Antonio, offering his purse, his person, his extremest means, values the friendship of Bassanio far more highly than material wealth. When Antonio says to Shylock,

*If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not*  
*As to thy friends, for when did friendship take*  
*A breed for barren metal of his friend?*  
*But lend it rather to thine enemy,*  
*Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face*  
*Exact the penalty*  

(I. iii. 133-138)

the comparative worth of money and friendship has been used to suggest a penalty, an extreme form of which is proposed by Shylock a moment later. Again, in II. viii, Salanio and Salarino emphasize the friendship of Bassanio and Antonio in contrast with the mercenary values endorsed by Shylock. Later, in the trial scene when Antonio appears doomed, he comments first upon the kindness of Fortune, which is about to cut him off from the misery of an old age in poverty, and then upon the superior value of Bassanio's friendship.

In the same story appears another value which was a familiar topic in Renaissance literature and which Shakespeare himself employed in other plays—that of appearance as compared or contrasted with reality.⁴
When Antonio agrees to the bond, appearance and reality should be the same, but they are not. “I like not fair terms and a villain's mind,” says Bassanio. At the opening of the trial scene, the converse is true: appearance and reality are the same, but they should not be, as the Duke points out:

Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,
That thou but lead' st this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act; and then 'tis thought
Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty.

(IV. i. 17-21)

Meaningful though the values of friendship and of appearance and reality may be, even more significant and certainly more complex is the problem of the value of money as an interest-bearing commodity. What Shylock calls interest, or thrift, Antonio regards as usury, or excess; and, as he says, “I do never use it.” As Professor John W. Draper has pointed out, the conflict of values in Shylock and Antonio, based partly upon religion but even more upon mercantile ideals, would be especially significant to Elizabethans, who were caught in the midst of the change from the medieval economic system to the modern capitalistic system. A specific treatment of this conflict of values appears in the Jacob-and-Laban story, with which Shylock responds to Antonio's reluctant offer once to break a custom and pay interest. The complexity of this apparently simple story is indicated in such varying interpretations as the following: the story conceals the workings of Shylock's mind as he tries to concoct a bond that will allow him to “collect interest without taking interest”; the story is a “sophistical and specious defense of what to an Elizabethan was manifestly wrong”; the story exposes the fallacy of “the formal principles underlying the Christian condemnation of usury.” But the analogy serves not merely to emphasize opposing values; it is also a fitting preliminary to the pound-of-flesh penalty and to Shylock's direct attack after Bassanio has objected to the bond.

O father Abram, what these Christians are
Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others! Pray you, tell me this:
If he should break his day, what should I gain
By the exaction of the forfeiture?
A pound of man's flesh taken from a man
Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.

(I. iii. 161-168)

This speech serves as a forceful reminder that, although Antonio earlier had offered to pay interest, in the final arrangement it is Shylock who has foregone his own values by lending money without charging interest. “This is kind I offer.” Note at this point, too, the opposed conclusions: either Shylock the money-lender has met Antonio the merchant on his own ground—friendship, not profit in the form of interest—or he has deliberately trapped Antonio into a possibly fatal agreement.

Despite conflicting interpretations, Shylock's renouncing of his values, for whatever reason, sets the precedent for later shifts in value needed to motivate his actions. In II. viii, Salanio reports the lament of Shylock for the loss of ducats and daughter. In addition to suggesting that here Shylock's sense of values is confused, Salanio predicts that Shylock will transfer his resentment to Antonio, who was in no way responsible for the elopement.

Let good Antonio look he keep his day
Or he shall pay for this.
In III. i, the report is verified and the prediction is fulfilled: Shylock concludes by vowing to cut out the heart of Antonio. But the shifting of values which leads to this conclusion is by no means one-sided in its implications. The taunting words of Salanio and Salarino about the flight of Jessica and about the loss of Antonio's ships lead Shylock to utter the “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, and this may be interpreted as a plea for tolerance. However, as various critics have noted, the speech in its entirety is a plea not for charity but for revenge. Now the flesh of Antonio does have a greater value than that of “muttons, beefs, or goats.” But even if revenge is rejected on principle, it is difficult to ignore Shylock's charge that revenge is a Christian practice. There is enough truth in the statement to emphasize a balancing of values not entirely complimentary to the good Antonio and the handsome Bassanio. The ensuing dialogue between Tubal and Shylock stresses alternately the financial losses of Shylock and those of Antonio. As a result Shylock is driven to the point of valuing revenge above everything else. III. iii, reveals Shylock in exactly the same state of mind (note the reiteration of “I'll have my bond”), and the way is clear for the battle of values in the trial scene. Here Shylock defends his claim to Antonio's flesh by forcefully reminding the Christians that they own slaves. Just as in his plea for revenge, there is sufficient truth in the analogy to make it dramatically effective. The next value in the scene is that of mercy as compared with strict justice, developed in Portia's speech; and this value, together with that of Shylock's revenge and the Antonio-Bassanio friendship, is used to build up to the surprise reversal, where Shylock's own words—“A Daniel come to judgment, etc.”—are echoed by Gratiano. Obviously Shylock, valuing his revenge above all else, shows no mercy for Antonio. But do the Christians, valuing so highly the “quality of mercy,” exhibit no revenge toward Shylock? Conflicting opinions on this point are responsible, at least in part, for the question of whether or not Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic.

Dr. S. A. Tannenbaum, recalling uncomplimentary references to Jews in Macbeth, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Much Ado About Nothing, Love's Labour's Lost, and 1 Henry IV, says, “Shakespeare's anti-Semitic prejudice is clearly shown in The Merchant of Venice.” Professor H. B. Charlton calls Shylock's punishment a callous one which shows Shakespeare's antipathy. Opposed to this opinion is that of Professor T. M. Parrott, who finds “no tinge of race-hatred” in Shakespeare and who believes that the audience would consider the enforced conversion of Shylock a means of salvation for him. Professors William A. Neilson and Charles J. Hill believe “...it is impossible to accuse Shakespeare ... of anti-Semitism.” Professor Norman Nathan sees no evidence of anti-Semitism in Shylock's punishment, and reminds us that according to law he would have lost both his money and his life. Others maintain that, whether or not Shakespeare himself was prejudiced, he sharply criticised both Jew and Christian. This is the conclusion of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who finds the intended victims “as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock's passionate excuse,” and of John Palmer, who says that when the bond story is concluded, both Christian and Jew have charged each other with “an inhumanity which is common to both parties.”

In the casket story the comparative values of appearance and reality are fundamental. The choice of the right casket is far from a mere gamble; it is a test of the suitor's ability to evaluate appearance. In each case the procedure is the same: the candidate explains carefully that appearance may not reflect reality, he tries to apply the principle in the casket situation, and his failure or success is emphasized in the scroll found in the casket he has chosen. Morocco correctly argues that the outward appearance of his complexion should not obscure the inward reality of his bravery, but in choosing the gold casket he violates the principle that the apparent value may not coincide with the real value. Arragon rejects the lead casket because it does not look fair enough; he rejects the gold casket with a caustic reference to “the fool multitude, that judge by show”; then, quite unaware that the basis of his first rejection places him in the group he has scorned in the second, he selects the silver casket whose inscription promises him as much as he deserves. Both Morocco and Arragon are misled by apparent values: Morocco fails because he wrongly evaluates the caskets; Arragon, because he wrongly evaluates himself. The decision of Bassanio is somewhat more involved. Portia has clearly indicated her preference for him (III. ii. 1-24), and some critics believe that by means of the song, which contains words rhyming with lead and which warns the hearer against fancy, Portia gives Bassanio the clue to the proper choice. However, the acceptance of this conclusion does not preclude the emphasis upon values.
discourses at length upon the theme,

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceived with ornament

(III. ii. 73-74)

as it applies in law, in religion, in morality, and in beauty—in short, the subjects to which the values of the play are closely related. His thoughts point logically to his choice of the lead casket. Of the three suitors only Bassanio, as Professor Thomas M. Parrott has remarked, employs “the understanding which pierces below the surface and fastens upon reality.”\(^{19}\) At the same time, just as in the bond story, the values in the casket scenes have formed the basis of conflicting estimates of character. The English critic John Palmer looks upon Bassanio merely as a young man whose quest of beauty and fortune forms one of the “ingredients in a tall story.”\(^{20}\) Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch considers him a fortune-hunter whose lofty speeches are not in keeping with his nature.\(^{21}\) Professor Charles Read Baskervill, tracing the background of the casket scenes in the Renaissance conception of Platonic idealism,\(^{22}\) sees Bassanio as an ideal lover whose standards of value are exalted by contrast with those of Morocco and Arragon. At this point in the play (III. ii), Shakespeare shifts the emphasis from appearance and reality to the comparative values of love, wealth, and friendship. Portia, learning of Antonio's danger, unhesitatingly sends away her newly acquired husband and some of his newly acquired wealth:

Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond;
Double six thousand, and then treble that,
Before a friend of this description
Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.
.....For never shall you lie by Portia's side
With an unquiet soul.

(III. ii. 302-308)

As the casket story ends, both dialogue and action connect the values of this story with those previously employed in the bond story. Money, love, friendship—the greatest of these, in true Renaissance tradition, is friendship.

As noted previously, the elopement episode is mainly responsible for the shifting of Shylock's standards so that revenge alone has any value for him. But Shakespeare has shown also that in the home life of Shylock and Jessica there is little harmony. Jessica's values are not those of Shylock, and it is not merely financial standards that separate them. Jessica's suggestion of tediousness and unhappiness is substantiated by the Shylock who goes to dinner in “hate, to feed upon the prodigal Christian,” who releases Launcelot to help impoverish Bassanio, who scorns music and merriment, who instructs Jessica to “Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter my sober house,” and who leaves his daughter behind locked doors with the threat that perhaps he will return immediately. Shylock's reaction to the elopement and the robbery, as reported in II. viii, by Salanio, emphasizes about equally the father's loss of his daughter and his loss of ducats and jewels; and Salanio is prejudiced against Shylock. However, in III. i, the very scene in which appears Shylock's so-called plea for tolerance, Shylock himself emphasizes mainly his financial loss. Of the approximately seventy-five lines spoken by Shylock in this scene, only ten refer to Jessica; and even these lines express Shylock's bitterness and rage rather than love for his daughter. In the remaining scenes he speaks of her only once—to express the wish that she had been married to any of the stock of Barabas rather than to a Christian. Indeed, there is not one line in the entire play in which Shylock directly expresses affection for his daughter. Thus the picture of Shylock at home and the revelation of his changing values after the robbery tend to balance, in the eyes of reader or audience, the fact that Jessica is a thief and an apostate. However, once more conflicting standards of value have led to opposed estimates of character. For example, Sir Walter Raleigh, who sees
Shylock as a tragic figure, says that his heart “is stirred with tender memories in the midst of his lament over the stolen ducats”; Professor Harold R. Walley, who considers Shylock the villain in a romantic comedy, says that he “laments loudest the gold that has gone with her [Jessica] and anxiously computes the cost of recovery.”

The ring episode, which concludes the play, is primarily a comic treatment of the comparative values of appearance and reality and those of love and friendship, especially the latter. The mock quarrel involving both pairs of lovers is carefully prefaced first by the dialogue of Jessica and Lorenzo which turns upon fidelity in love and upon other values, next by Portia’s comments about the nature of true value, and finally by her vow of faith, all of which are ironically effective preliminaries. As the quarrel proceeds, it becomes evident that the ring story is an ingenious combination of parallels and reversals, based upon values previously employed in the bond story and the casket story, and made amusing by the device of dramatic irony. In the bond story the value of friendship leads Antonio, at the request of Bassanio, to risk and apparently to lose everything in helping his friend to win Portia. In the ring story the value of friendship leads Bassanio first to leave his bride and then, at the urging of Antonio, apparently to lose her. In the bond story Antonio himself suggests a penalty and thus leads Shylock to propose the pound-of-flesh forfeit. In the ring story Bassanio insists upon the civil doctor’s accepting some remembrance, and thus leads Portia to ask for the ring. Even the threatened loss of Antonio’s flesh in the bond story is recalled by the rueful remark of Bassanio:

Why, I were best to cut my left hand off  
And swear I lost the ring defending it.

(V.i.177-178)

Finally, the exposure of disguise which resolves the ring story also reveals to Bassanio that his successful judging of appearance and reality in the casket story has been balanced by his failure in the ring story: Portia’s request was not what it appeared to be. Thus, the play ends with comic emphasis upon values introduced earlier in the play for serious purposes.

Probably no one would contend that Shakespeare was interested merely in dramatizing values. However, his use of them is surely one of the important elements in this play. As is apparent from the connections mentioned, the pattern of related values helps to unify the effect of four stories probably drawn from at least three different sources. These values are employed for both serious and comic effects, for both adventure and romance. They are fundamental in almost every scene of the play. They involve every major character and most of the minor figures—even Launcelot Gobbo offers a somewhat dubious evaluation of the standards represented by Shylock, Bassanio, and Jessica. They help to indicate the significance of the play in its own age by reflecting the Renaissance interest in such topics as the proper value of material wealth, the comparative worth of love and friendship, and the problem of judging reality by appearance. Finally, the extent, the variety, and the complex relationships of these values provide at least a partial explanation for the fact that thoughtful readers, sensitive actors, and responsive audiences—themselves influenced in turn by the standards of their own environment—have arrived at widely different conclusions about the central figures in the play.

Notes

2. Adapted from a paper read at the May 1950 meeting of the Indiana College English Association. All textual quotations are from The Complete Plays and Poems of Shakespeare, ed. William A. Neilson and Charles J. Hill (Cambridge, 1942).
3. Alfred Harbage, As They Liked It (New York, 1947), and Donald A. Stauffer, Shakespeare's World of Images (New York, 1950), have discussed moral values in Shakespeare, but neither of them has given
detailed treatment of the values in this play.

4. Shakespeare's use of this idea has been pointed out by Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1942), pp. 84-85, *et passim.*

5. “Usury in *The Merchant of Venice,*” *MP* [Modern Philology], XXXIII (1935), 38, 46-47.


11. Charlton, p. 128. For a brief list of others who hold similar opinions, see Norman Nathan, “Three Notes on *The Merchant of Venice,*” *SAB*, XXIII (1948), 160-161.


17. For example, John E. Hannigan says that Portia “had loaded the dice in violation of her father's will,” (“Shylock and Portia,” *SAB*, XIV, 1939, p. 173), and Hardin Craig says that the song contains “a plain indication of the nature of the choice” (*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, New York, 1951, p. 504).

18. Thomas M. Parrott doubts that the song was intended to guide Bassanio's choice, and he suggests that, even so, it was Bassanio's “quick intelligence that caught the clue” (*Shakespearean Comedy*, New York, 1949, p. 141).


21. Quiller-Couch, p. 75.


**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Michael Zuckert (essay date 1996)**


*[In the following essay, Zuckert views *The Merchant of Venice* as a highly unified work that depicts Antonio and Portia as rivals for the love of Bassanio, a competition in which Portia is victorious.]*

Partly because of its clever plot, striking characterizations, and moments of beautiful poetry, *The Merchant of Venice* has remained one of Shakespeare's best known, most often performed, and most discussed plays. It is also one of his most troubling plays. It is troubling in form because it presents a series of actions that are difficult to integrate into a coherent and unified whole. It is troubling in substance because it presents a Christian society in the ugliness of its anti-Semitism, and while Shakespeare clearly has a broader view than his Venetians, his presentation of the Jew nonetheless appears to draw from the same unsavory and stereotypical prejudices that move the Christian Venetians. Moreover, among the comic resolutions of the
play, the “setting to rights” of all the disruptions that have impelled the play's action, are the forced conversion of Shylock to Christianity, and the desertion by Shylock's daughter, Jessica, of both her father and her ancestral religion. Hers is a voluntary conversion to be sure, but it seems to carry the same point as Shylock's coerced conversion: Jews and Judaism are not worth the respect of Christian men and women.²

The focus on Shylock is not merely a product of our post-holocaust sensibilities, but seems to have been part of the reception of the play from the outset.³ Perhaps it is the lure of the exotic, or perhaps it is a reaction to the character who seems to suffer most and to show the strongest and most complex passions, but it is in some ways a puzzling focus, for the play's title directs us not to Shylock, but to the merchant of Venice, that is to say, to Antonio. The focus on Shylock also contributes to the formal puzzles the play has provided, for if the play is taken to revolve centrally around Shylock and the pound of flesh pledge, then aspects of the play like the courting of Portia and the casket test seem extraneous, or at least very difficult to relate to the main story.⁴

If we follow Shakespeare's indications, we see that the focus on Shylock is largely misplaced, and the puzzlement over the formal unity of the play mistaken. Indeed, *The Merchant of Venice* is a marvel of formal coherence, and once we grasp that, we can come to a better understanding of the substantively troubling elements of this play as well. As is frequently the case in Shakespeare's dramas, he uses the opening scenes to set the problem the main action of the play attempts to resolve.⁵ The problem is this: both Antonio and Portia love Bassanio; Antonio and Portia are rivals for the love of Bassanio. The play gives us the contest between the two for Bassanio. The winner of that contest, of course, is Portia, but judging from Shakespeare's title if nothing else, there is something about the losing contender that particularly requires attention. The various major events in the play are phases of the contest between Antonio and Portia. She triumphs in three stages: first, in the trial of the caskets, where Bassanio, with her help, selects the right casket and thus “wins” her; or rather, is won by her. Then in the legal trial of Antonio where Portia saves Antonio from Shylock and thereby saves Bassanio from an overwhelming and unending debt to Antonio; had Antonio lost his case to Shylock, he would therein have triumphed over Portia.⁶ Finally, in the ring episode, Portia triumphs for the third and final time, achieving at last Antonio's concession of defeat.⁷ Such is the story of *The Merchant of Venice*; of course the story of Shylock, the elopement of Jessica, and all the rest must find a place in this story, but this is the story in which they must find their place.⁸

With an economy suited to the chief site of the play Shakespeare quickly, if a bit subtly, establishes the problem of *The Merchant* in the opening words of each of the first two scenes. Antonio, the merchant of Venice, and therefore the central figure in Venice, the mercantile city, begins in medias res, in answer to a question he has just been posed: “In sooth I know not why I am so sad” (1.1.1).⁹ Portia, the beautiful mistress of the “beautiful mountain,” opens in a way remarkably close to Antonio's: “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world” (1.2.1-2). Despite the great difference between Venice and Belmont, the two worlds of the play, the central figures in each of these worlds are seized by the same deep sadness.

The opening laments by Antonio and Portia set in motion the chief actions of the two opening scenes—the quest for the source of the sadness of each. Antonio's sadness is something very recent and not some abiding quality of his. Solanio has just now asked about it, and even complained of it. As Antonio tells us: “you say it wearies you” (1.1.2).¹⁰ Gratiano soon after reinforces our impression of Antonio's sudden seizure by melancholy: “Believe me, you are marvelously changed” (1.1.76).

Antonio's sadness is apparently as mysterious as it is sudden. Antonio professes himself such a “want-wit” on its account that he cannot say how he “caught it, found it, or came by it.” As he concludes, “I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.3-7). Nonetheless, he thinks he knows himself well enough to reject out of hand his friends' repeated suggestions that his melancholy derives from anxiety over his mercantile ventures, a natural enough state of mind in venturesome Venice.¹¹ Almost like the birds of the air, or the lilies of the field, Antonio is not anxious over his worldly affairs; he has taken such care of them that he need not fear fortune (1.1.8-45, 73-75).¹² He parries his friends’ other suggestions so they too come to accept the mystery of it.
The search to plumb Antonio's sadness ends when he is left alone with his friend Bassanio; here we indirectly discover the sudden source of his sadness when we discover what Antonio has been looking forward to, or rather dreading, all that day:

Well, tell me now, what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage
That you today promised to tell me of?

(1.1.119-21)

Bassanio, a younger and “noble kinsman,” is especially dear to Antonio; the older man has been a regular benefactor to the younger and both speak of the love Antonio has shown toward Bassanio (1.1.57, 130-55). As is said later in the play, “I think he [Antonio] only loves the world for him [Bassanio]” (2.8.50). The expectation that his friend wishes to court a lady, a wish he must understand to be both rightful and inevitable, leads him to see his situation as fated, scripted, as it were, by the broader patterns and laws of life. “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano—/ A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.76-78).

Portia's opening scene is much the same as Antonio's—the same world-weary sadness, the same effort by her companion to plumb her sadness. Yet there is an important difference, too: Portia is perfectly aware of the causes of her world-wearyness; from the outset she is much more self-knowing than her Venetian counterpart. Her sadness derives from her father's will, according to which she may marry only the man who successfully passes the test of the caskets. Like Antonio, she feels her fate lies in the hands of external forces (1.2.22-25). Nerissa, her servant, has more confidence in the dead father's judgment than Portia does. Only “one who you shall rightly love” will choose rightly among the caskets. It is, Nerissa thinks, good protection for a very rich heiress against the wrong sort of gold-digger. Portia resents her lack of autonomy, and perhaps the lack of confidence in her judgment, but it appears she also does not wish so much protection against gold-diggers. Part of her uncommon self-knowledge consists in her awareness of the conflict within herself between what we might call her head and her heart. “I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree” (1.2.15-19). Portia, it appears, resents the constriction, or rather nullification of her right of choice not only in the abstract, for she has her eye on someone in particular. It is none of the six suitors already come to Belmont from all over Europe (1.2.108-9). Yet there is one whom she fancies, as even Nerissa well knows: Bassanio, who, both women agree, is “best deserving a fair lady” (1.2.117-18; cf. 2.9.100).

Antonio mopes because Bassanio wishes to court Portia. Portia mopes because the casket test may keep her from Bassanio. It is unclear at this point whether she fears that another will succeed before Bassanio can, or whether she fears he will be unwilling to take or unable to pass the test himself. Antonio and Portia both suffer for Bassanio, both want Bassanio. Although neither knows the other, they are rivals for Bassanio.

I

“Shall I then betray my father's throne … ?”

In that rivalry Antonio has the first move. At first glance his move is surprising. To Bassanio's request for aid Antonio is all cooperation, all generosity. At second glance, his reaction is perhaps not so surprising. It is, after all, his habitual way to be generous, especially to Bassanio, who prefaces his request with a reminder of how much Antonio has given him in the past. As Allan Bloom observes, “Antonio … bases his whole life on
generosity. … Antonio has money; it is, however, not for his own enjoyment, but rather for his friends.” Along the same lines, David Beauregard identifies Antonio as the very embodiment of the Aristotelian virtue of liberality or generosity, the proper mean between prodigality and avarice, represented within the play respectively by Bassanio and Shylock.17

Nonetheless, the depiction of Antonio's generosity falls somewhat short of Aristotle's description of that virtue, the possessor of which “will give to the right persons the right amounts at the right times.” On this criterion, Antonio must be judged deficient in virtue, for he gives to a self-professed prodigal, one who has wasted and, for all Antonio has reason to believe, will continue to waste. “He who gives to those he should not … is not generous but may be given another name,” pronounces Aristotle.18 The genuine virtue of generosity benefits the recipient where the pseudo-virtue does not. Antonio and Bassanio illustrate Aristotle's concern, for Antonio's repeated aid does not help Bassanio become a more responsible and self-sufficient, that is to say, virtuous, individual, but instead contributes to his lack of self-control with regard to spending and appearances, and encourages in him a tendency to view others as means toward satisfying his own pressing needs.

If Antonio's aid cannot be understood as a manifestation of the virtue of liberality, his response to Bassanio's request must be examined more carefully. Although Antonio fears Bassanio rushes to make a “secret pilgrimage” to a lady, that is to say, that Bassanio wishes to journey to the lady as to a shrine, as to one he adores or reverences, Bassanio assures him that his “chief care is to come off fairly from [his] great debts,” the “most” of which are owed to Antonio. Although Bassanio speaks of Portia's beauty and virtues, he does not speak of his love for her—in marked contrast to his frequent references to the love he owes Antonio and has received from (but not given to?) Antonio (1.1.130-31, 146-47; cf. 161-76). Bassanio presents his case almost entirely as an investment opportunity for Antonio.19 He is especially concerned to convince Antonio that further supplies would not amount to throwing good money after bad: by shooting a second arrow after the lost first arrow both men might hope to recoup what has already been lost. Bassanio has reason for hope: Portia is “richly left,” and has sent him “fair speechless messages … from her eyes” (1.1.161, 163-64). Bassanio guessed Portia's feelings just as Nerissa did; he is adept at discerning, and quick to take advantage of, the love others have for him.

Antonio reacts not so much to the promise of repayment—no doubt he has heard such talk before—but he seems to be set much at ease by Bassanio's general approach to Portia: he is going a-courting not for the sake of his love for the lady, but for the sake of his obligation of money and love to Antonio. Antonio's feeling of relief is increased when Bassanio substitutes for the older man's image of a pilgrimage the new image of a “quest.” She is not a quasi-deity but the “golden fleece,” and he will become one of the “many Jasons come in quest of her” (1.1.170-72, cf. 3.2.241).20 Bassanio, the new Jason, wishes to outfit an expedition like that to Colchis. He needs money, servants and finery, not a troop of heroes, but this, after all, is Christian, mercantile Venice, not pre-Trojan War Greece.

Under the circumstances of the quest, Antonio's reply to Bassanio's request is not surprising at all. Rather than a threat to their bond of friendship, as a marriage of love might be, it is an expression of Bassanio's deep sense of the continuing power and obligation of that bond. For Antonio to respond with his wonted generosity, moreover, is to bind anew in the very moment and in the very deed by which Bassanio attempts to discharge (some of) the bond already in place.21

Portia's first move is not against Antonio—she has no idea he is part of the story—but is, or seems to her to be against her father. To the new Jason, Portia is the golden fleece, but in her feelings and actions she is Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes, the possessor of the fleece. Like Portia, Medea too falls in love with the Jason who visited her father's court.
... the daughter of King Aeëtes conceived an overpowering passion ... and when by reason she could not rid her of her madness she cried: ... “I wonder if this is not what is called love, or at best something like this.”

Like Portia, Medea sees in herself the old conflict between head and heart:

“Come, thrust from your maiden breast these flames that you feel, if you can, unhappy girl. ... But some strange power draws on against my will. Desire persuades me one way, reason another.”

Indeed Portia even comes very close to stealing some of her lines from Medea's:

“I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse.”

Like Portia's father, Medea's sets a formidable test between the questers and the object of their quest. Like Portia, Medea decries her father's test:

“For why do the mandates of my father seem too harsh? They certainly are too harsh.”

Medea does not merely lament her situation, however. She “gave [Jason] the magic herbs, gave him instruction / In how to use them,” helped him to yoke the “bronze-footed bulls, fire breathers,” and to sow the serpent's teeth, and to resist the armed men who spring from the teeth, and finally, to put to sleep the dragon who guarded the golden fleece itself. All this she did for love and in exchange for a promise of marriage.

But does Portia follow Medea's love-struck lead and help her new Jason overcome the barrier set up by her father? In the literature on the play this is surely one of the two or three most controverted questions. One of the strongest pieces of evidence against her acting the part of Medea to this extent is Portia's explicit vow to do no such thing: “I could teach you / How to choose right, but then I am forsworn. / So will I never be” (3.2.10-12). Yet there is some ambiguity in what she says here. Just what does it mean to “teach him how to choose right”: she surely does not come right out and give the correct answer, and thus under a literalist interpretation of her oath (and we see later that Portia is quite capable of giving and taking advantage of literalist interpretations) she can avoid being “forsworn” even if, as I (and many other readers) believe, she gives Bassanio a good deal of help.

Her denial is too ambiguous to settle the question whether she follows Medea this far, and thus we must consider both the casket scene and its context with greater care. In marked contrast to the treatment the other suitors get, Portia does not rush Bassanio to undergo the test: “I pray you tarry; pause a day or two / Before you hazard” (2.7.1-3; 2.9.1; 3.2.1-2). As she thinks further on it, she would have him tarry even more: “I would detain you here some month or two / Before you venture for me” (3.2.9-10).

As eager as she is to be rid of the first two, she is welcoming of the company of her Venetian swain. Yet her desire for delay bespeaks even more than her fondness for Bassanio. She wishes him to wait, “for in choosing wrong / I lose your company. Therefore forbear a while” (3.2.2-3).

Portia here finally answers a question she left us with in her opening appearance in the play: she dreads the casket test not so much because she fears it will give her to another, but because she fears it will not give her to the one she favors. In a few moments Portia will project a new image for herself and Bassanio—not Medea and Jason, but Hesione and Heracles. Hesione was daughter of Laomedon, king of Troy in the generation before the Trojan War. In order to expiate the anger of the gods and the demands of his subjects, Laomedon chained Hesione to a rock on the Trojan shore as a “virgin tribute ... / To the sea monster” (3.2.53-60).

Portia's new metaphor redefines the situation considerably; the casket is not something set up by a loving and
wise father for her benefit, as Nerissa had urged, but is, to say the least, hostile to her best interests. It is easy enough to see how Portia can understand it so. She might well envisage the intention, not just the likely effect of the casket test to be to exclude Bassanio as a suitor. The Venetian, after all, visited Belmont while the father still lived, and had he known and approved of Portia's liking, then the whole rigmarole of the caskets would make no sense. Nerissa (and Bassanio, too) knew of Portia's feelings and perhaps, she suspects, the father did, too.

Even if he did not know that Portia's affections turned in Bassanio's direction, the young Venetian seems the very sort of chap from whom he must have been attempting to guard his daughter. The wealthy heiress is a natural target for young men who are deeply in debt and without the means to continue in the style of life to which they have been accustomed. To see the application to Bassanio, we need only recall the circumstances of his quest, and his image of Portia as the golden fleece: Bassanio seeks to cut a figure in the world, or in nautical Venice, to “show a more swelling port” than he can afford (1.1.124). Marriages to such young men, a father might reason, do not promise well for young heiresses; they are anything but love matches. Thus the father set the winning casket as the one about giving, not about getting, as the one that did not promise outward wealth.

So Portia-Hesione is threatened with the denial of her heart's desire by her father-Laomedon via exposure to the casket test-sea monster. Her sadness goes as deep as it does because she knows, or at least intensely fears that her father's ploy will succeed, as directly or indirectly intended, in eliminating Bassanio. Her doubts about Bassanio pop through the surface of things when he responds to her awkward but clearly heartfelt request for delay with an ultraconventional lover's image: “Let me choose, / For as I am, I live upon the rack.” To which she retorts: “Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess / What treason there is mingled with your love” (3.2.24-27).

She speaks better than she knows, for she has not heard the earlier negotiations between Bassanio and Antonio nor has she yet experienced Bassanio's treason of the ring. She knows her man … and yet. … When Bassanio returns with another stock profession of love she again opens her troubled mind: “Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack, / where men enforced, do speak anything” (3.2.32-33). It is all so playful, and yet she speaks her real doubts here; justifiable ones at that if we recall the “force” under which Bassanio is (at least in part) acting. He is, in Belmont, as part of his “plots and purposes … to get clear of all the debts” he owes. These, not the rack, are his “necessity.”

The next exchange is the pivot of the whole scene, and we must therefore attend to its nuances with some care.

BASSANIO:

Promise me life, and I'll confess the truth.

PORTIA:

Well then, confess and live.

BASSANIO:

Had been the very sum of my confession!

(3.2.34-36)
As many critics have noticed, Bassanio's "confession" is pretty lame: no soaring love poetry (or even love prose) here. Among the striking features of the exchange, however, is Portia's straining to allay her own doubts about Bassanio, her own suspicions about his loyalties and his sincerity. "Confess and live," she says; perhaps against her better judgment she commits herself in advance to being satisfied with the merest gesture of an answer—which is pretty much all she gets, too, as Bassanio punningly echoes back to her promise (cf. also 3.2.54). Because he builds his answer on her answer Bassanio completes the rack image by almost reversing it: "O happy torment, when my torturer / Doth teach me answers for my deliverance" (3.2.37-38). She "taught" him the answer that freed him from the rack, where she had earlier refused to teach him the answer to the casket test. But let us note how she taught him; she gave him a clue, a word ("live"), which he is able to translate into the required profession of love. Bassanio has shown her how she can "teach" him "answers for deliverance" without telling him them directly, and therefore without being foresworn.

Bassanio is the third to try his wits at the caskets, and as in most fairy tales, the third time is a charm. Some critics go so far as to suggest that because he is third, he is the inevitable victor, and therefore has no need for Portia's help. This is surely a foolish argument. Even if there is something formally foreordained for Bassanio in coming third, this does not settle the issue of how or what makes him successful. That is an entirely separate matter. That Goldilocks finds that the porridge, chair, and bed are "just right" consistently on her third try does not imply, after all, that there is no significance to the fact that it was, consistently, the one that was the mean that was "just right."

As has been noticed by many previous readers, Portia's hints, if there are such, come in the form of the song she sings as Bassanio ponders the alternatives. She prefaces her song, however, with an indispensable clue: "If you do love me, you will find me out" (3.2.41). To the other contestants she gave no such guidance. Just as Bassanio had taken her comment about love as a hint in the preliminary banter that was the playful foreshadowing of the casket test itself, this hint about love proves invaluable to Bassanio.

Portia's statement about love is so important because it helps set the contrast between that and "fancy." She sings of fancy, but, she has made clear, the casket test is about something else, about love. Love is the unspoken but implicit contrast to the point she makes in her song: fancy is born in the eyes, not in the heart or head. Its birth is in the sphere of appearance, and so fragile is it that it fails to survive its infancy. Fine appearance, external promise—gold and silver—engender not love, but only its poor surrogate fancy. This is enough to tell the attentive Bassanio what he must do, but just in case he or some of the critics fail to get the point Portia opens her song with her oft-noted triple rhyme: "bred," "head," and "nourished."

Not to worry, however, for Bassanio proves himself an exceedingly apt pupil. He picks up her thought exactly: "So may the outward shows be least themselves; / The world is still deceived with ornament" (3.2.73-74). After a longish survey of the many cases where fair, but false, exteriors conceal corrupt interiors, Bassanio draws just the point:

Therefore then, thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge
'Tween man and man. But thou, thou meager lead,
Which rather threaten'st than dost promise aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;
And here choose I.

(3.2.101-7)

If Bassanio has not been cued by Portia, then this chain of reasoning must be his own. But is that plausible? Is Bassanio the man to voice those sentiments? Does Bassanio really reject Midas's "hard food"? Does Bassanio turn away from external appearance and show?
Bassanio's reflections are not only remarkably unlike himself, but they are altogether unlike the reasonings of the other suitors. Both Morocco and Aragon produced long speeches to justify their choices, and both reasoned entirely in terms of the legends on the caskets. Bassanio says nothing at all relating to the legends; his speech picks up entirely from Portia's song about fancy and appearance. In selecting the lead he shows neither understanding nor acceptance of the teaching about love its legend proclaims.32

Portia, we must conclude, extends her Medea-like behavior to helping her Jason overcome the trial established by her father to protect his treasure from adventurers like Jason. This is relatively easy for her to do because she sees herself as Hesione, the victim of her father, and not as the beneficiary of a wise and provident plan. Nonetheless, both images, Medea and Hesione, promise poorly for her. The one won by Jason, the other by Heracles, both were deserted by their respective heroes. Both images foreshadow Portia's almost fate.

II

And when Medea saw this, Medea unsheathed her knife and cut the old man's throat; then, letting the old blood all run out, she filled his veins with her brew.33

The second phase of the contest for Bassanio culminates in the play's most famous scene, the trial in Venice over Antonio's forfeit of his bond. This incident is thematically important, moreover, for in it the broader significance of the love contest between Antonio and Portia begins to become clear: the struggle between Antonio and Portia is concealed here beneath a struggle between Antonio and Shylock, whose struggle in turn brings in the competing visions of the Old and New Testaments.34

It is not, perhaps, immediately apparent that the trial is part of the contest over Bassanio, because the antagonists are not Antonio and Portia, but rather Antonio and Shylock, with Portia as the judge who ultimately sides with Antonio. The news of the impending trial intrudes itself suddenly and violently on the scene of love; hardly have the lovers exchanged vows and rings, hardly have Nerissa and Gratiano joined the love fest than the emissaries from Venice arrive with Antonio's letter and the announcement of his default to Shylock. The letter distresses Bassanio and well it might. His friend and benefactor is to die on account of the debt Antonio incurred on his behalf. Portia notes his distress immediately.

But Bassanio's grief is not merely the grief a friend suffers at the misfortune of a friend; it is misery multiplied by guilt. As he confesses to Portia: “I have engaged myself to a dear friend, / Engaged my friend to his mere enemy / To feed my means” (3.2.261-63).

Bassanio's natural and creditable feelings are thus strong as it is, but Antonio has a knack for saying the very things that will heighten both Bassanio's misery and his guilt. Antonio's letter not only reports his situation, but refers directly to the bond of debt and guilt between them: “all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death” (3.2.318-20). Surely there is something ironic in Antonio's wish: how can Bassanio and he be quits if Antonio goes “the last full measure” for Bassanio by dying for him? And how can Bassanio ever feel free of this debt if he is there to see this death for which, Antonio reminds him, he is responsible?35 All these questions prove more than justified when we look ahead to discover what Antonio wishes Bassanio to see and, more importantly, to hear in his last moments. When it looks as though the trial will surely go against him Antonio delivers what appears to be a prepared statement. He responds to Portia's invitation to address the court as a whole, but his words are to and for Bassanio alone. He opens and closes his speech the same way: “Give me your hand Bassanio; fare you well. / Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you …” And at the end: “Repent but you that you shall lose your friend, / And he repents not that he repays your debt” (4.1.264-65; 277-78).36 Just in case Bassanio does not feel sufficiently responsible, and thus not sufficiently grateful, Antonio reminds him at this awful moment for whose sake he undergoes this fate—and how willingly at that.
He reserves the chief point of these, his dying words as he thinks, for the middle of his speech, however.

Commend me to your honorable wife.
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her to be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(4.1.272-76)

This speech makes perfectly clear what Antonio is doing: why does he, after all, drag Bassanio's "honorable wife" into it? Why does he insist that Bassanio recount his death to her, and wring from her a confession that indeed Antonio loved Bassanio ... better than she or any ordinary lover could do. Who can match, who will match Antonio's gesture of love? As Solanio once said, Antonio “only loves the world” for Bassanio. He so loves Bassanio that facing the threat of the loss of Bassanio he will lose the world, or, better yet, to prevent the loss of Bassanio, he will sacrifice the world. In the contest with Portia, Antonio has raised the stakes, infinitely, and then has played the ultimate trump card.37

It may seem a desperate and hopeless ploy, but in fact it succeeds, for Bassanio answers Antonio with the very declaration Antonio is seeking:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(4.1.281-86)

Antonio is not given a reply, but this must be very gratifying to him. Where earlier on Bassanio spoke much of the debts of love he owed, he never spoke of the love he felt; now, this light young man has offered to sacrifice his own life for his friend, and, it must not be overlooked, the life of his wife as well. At least for the moment Bassanio is so overwhelmed with gratitude and guilt that he renders Antonio all the esteem and attachment the older man has sought, and declares him victor in the contest for his affection between Antonio and Portia.38 Antonio has gained all by “giving and hazarding all he hath.” Antonio is the true and proper winner of the casket test.39

Nonetheless, the audience can see more clearly than Bassanio and probably than Antonio himself the paradoxical, if not self-contradictory, character of Antonio's self-sacrificing love. He gives up all—to get all. His selflessness is only a more subtle form of selfishness, for he wishes not merely to possess the object of his love, but to establish himself as the most lovable human being, as the one most worthy of love and thus as the one whose love supplants all others and lasts indefinitely.40

The only character in the play who seems clear-eyed about Antonio is Portia. From the moment that she observes Bassanio's reaction to Antonio's letter, she knows she does not have the full devotion of her husband. Portia shows the same wisdom in the face of Bassanio's feelings toward Antonio as Antonio showed when Bassanio resolved to court Portia. She does not in any way attempt to thwart Bassanio in his efforts to aid his friend. Indeed, her first words once she understands the situation is her offer to pay the debt, to pay double or more so that Antonio will be free from Shylock. We must see her offer in terms of her self-interest as well as her generosity. To keep her husband, or rather, to win from him the kind of loving attachment she seeks, she must save Antonio.41 Before they can consummate this marriage, Portia insists, Bassanio must go to Antonio; the matter of Antonio must be taken care of before the marriage of Bassanio and Portia can be properly
fulfilled (3.2.303-6).

Instead of paying off the debt Portia will have to preside over a trial where Shylock prosecutes Antonio to receive legal satisfaction on his contract. As most readers of the play have noticed, this trial concerns not only the two parties to it, but their respective religions and religious laws. That is to say, in the midst of this play about the rivalry between Portia and Antonio arises this most serious and far-reaching consideration of the meaning and relative merits of the two elements of what we have come to call the Judeo-Christian tradition.

We can understand the appearance of this apparently extraneous set of themes as follows. Antonio, as has often been noted, acts upon a model of human existence rooted in Christianity. He not only engages in the acts of charity prescribed by Christian precept, but, in his willingness to undergo sacrifice of his life for the sake of his love he engages in a particularly powerful form of the imitation of Christ. Antonio's justification and explanation are to be found in Christianity. As Jesus says in order to explain his upcoming passion to his followers: “greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” This self-sacrificing love is not merely the extraordinary act of the extraordinary god-man, but is the model for all humanity: “‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

The New Testament authors, however, understand the life, death, and teaching of Jesus in terms of their relation to the older Jewish law, as both the completion and rejection of the old Jewish law. The defense and justification of Christianity originally appears in the form of a critique and attack on Judaism. Portia must defeat Antonio, but, strangely enough, she can do this only if Antonio can defeat Shylock; that is to say, only if Christianity can defeat or appear to defeat Judaism.

Antonio not only adheres to Christian doctrine, but, as Barbara Lewalski emphasizes, he imitates or even plays the part of Christ at various important moments in the drama. “Antonio, who assumes the debts of others … reflects on occasion the role of Christ satisfying the claim of Divine Justice by assuming the sins of mankind.” The trial is one such occasion: Antonio-Christ is once again put on trial, accused by the Jew, who seeks his life. Portia too has her part in this emblematic episode—in this case not as Medea or Hesione—but as Pontius Pilate. But she is a Pilate who prevents the passion of Christ. She is a new or reverse Pilate and thereby she will ultimately prove a new or nontragic Medea.

The tension between Antonio and Shylock obviously predates the action of the play and enters it from almost the very moment Shylock does. Upon first catching sight of Antonio, Shylock announces, “I hate him” (1.3.39). The feeling is, apparently, mutual, for Shylock complains of Antonio's extraordinarily uncivil treatment. “You that did void your rheum upon my beard / And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur / Over your threshold!” (1.3.114-16). The feelings of extreme enmity are related in both cases to the religion of the other: “I hate him for he is a Christian,” says Shylock; Antonio abuses Shylock in turn as a “misbeliever” (1.3.39, 108).

Shylock mentions two other reasons, reasons that have led some critics to discount the importance of the religious issue. In addition to hating him as a Christian, Shylock also says: “But more, for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice” (1.3.40-42). Many readers conclude from these lines that Shylock's real complaint is the economic harm Antonio does to him. However, this is to read Shylock's “But more” as though he means “a greater reason for my hatred”; a better reading, given the list of reasons Shylock is presenting, is to take “more” as “in addition.” These additional points are all related: “He hates our sacred nation, and he rails, / … On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift, / Which he calls interest” (1.3.45-48). Shylock attributes Antonio's practice of lending money gratis to “low simplicity,” that is to say, to a base motive; he almost certainly means to accuse Antonio of acting out of enmity to Jews, specifically to harm them by decreasing their earning power (also cf. 3.1.45-47).
Shylock is thus not impressed by Antonio's pretenses to virtue and high principle. This appears to be Shylock's general perspective on the Christians and particularly on Antonio. Two issues in the play specifically divide Shylock from the Christians. They refrain from taking interest, which the Jews do not, while the Jews refrain from eating pork, which the Christians do not. The dietary laws of the Jews prompt Shylock to respond harshly to Bassanio's dinner invitation: “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” (1.3.33-35). It is most telling that Shylock conjures eating and drinking with praying; the dietary restraints are part of the holiness of the holy people. Those who do not keep to the dietary laws are unclean, that is to say, unfit to approach God. Shylock believes he even has the testimony of Jesus on his side, for he refers to a biblical story in which “your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into” a herd of swine (1.3.31-33). Even Jesus understood the uncleanliness of pork, yet his so-called followers fail to.

At the same time, the Christians refrain from taking interest; yet, as Shylock makes clear, the Venetians—and especially Antonio—have no hesitation about engaging in high-flying commerce aimed at economic gain. Shylock rehearses Antonio's various ventures, argosies bound for Tripoli, the Indies, Mexico, England—all directions of the compass, all continents—all with the intention of enriching himself. The Christian attitude toward money and gain is, in a word, hypocritical. Gain from lending money is in principle no different from gain for other kinds of economic activity, and, Shylock believes, the story of Jacob the patriarch testifies to the divine favoring of enterprise and the legitimacy of gain (1.3.86-87). Usury is merely a way of thriving, and all thriving is legitimate, if it is not done unjustly. Such is Shylock's view.

Antonio more than returns Shylock's feelings, and sees the latter's hateful qualities as rooted in his Jewishness. Antonio's most comprehensive statement occurs at the end of the scene: “The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind” (1.3.175). Antonio is unkind to Shylock because Shylock, as a Jew, is himself unkind. The greatest evidence or manifestation of that unkindness is Shylock's practice of taking interest on the loans he makes to the Christian merchants of Venice. Contrary to Shylock's theory, Antonio does not oppose usury merely to vex and harm the Jewish money-lenders, but rather he despises the money-lenders because they take interest. As he understands it, the different practices he and Shylock stand for stem from their respective faiths. Antonio seems to understand well the Jewish law regarding usury: “‘You shall not lend upon interest to your brother. … To a foreigner you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest.’”

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends—for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?—
But lend it rather to thine enemy …

(1.3.129-32)

Antonio translates the law's “brother” into “friend” and “foreigner” into “enemy,” but he brings out a central thought in the Jewish law nonetheless. By forbidding usury within the people, the law recognizes the evil of usury. By allowing an evil toward the “foreigner,” the Jewish law indeed treats them as “enemies.”

The evil in charging interest to friends remains obscure so long as attention remains exclusively focused on the essentialist issue centering on the “barren” and “non-breeding” character of metal. That is relevant only indirectly: if money “bred,” that is, increased naturally, then it would not be unreasonable or unjust for the owner of the money to be able to reap the natural increase. But because money does not increase in this way, it is “unjust,” because there is an “inequality” in the transaction “which is contrary to justice.” The lender receives more than he gave. The one who pays usury does not restore (a part of) natural increase, nor does he act voluntarily (as Shylock implies), but rather he acts “under a certain necessity insofar as he needs to borrow money which the owner is unwilling to lend without usury.” No wonder Antonio (and Bassanio too)
treats it largely as a matter of “kindness”; the usurer is unkind, for he takes advantage of the pressing necessities of his debtor.\textsuperscript{50} In the exchange among Antonio, Shylock, and Bassanio this last aspect is much emphasized (1.3.60, 111, 152).

Thomas Aquinas expresses Antonio's understanding with great lucidity in his discussion of the “sin of usury.”

The Jews were forbidden to take usury from their brethren, i.e., from other Jews. By this we (Christians) are given to understand that to take usury from any man is evil simply, because we ought to treat every man as our neighbor and brother.\textsuperscript{51}

Antonio understands Christianity to involve both a broadening and a deepening of the Jewish law. It is broader because it is universal—injunctions to treat the other as neighbor or brother are not limited to one's own narrow nation. It is deeper in that the benevolence human beings owe to one another has no calculating quality to it; it is selfless. It is more sublime in that, as becomes clear later, the ultimate expression of Christian love is not merely disinterested benevolence, but self-sacrifice. Antonio is thus an apostle of Christian love, who uses Shylock and the Jews as a foil against which to define his moral vision, and uses the issue of usury as a vehicle for that moral vision.\textsuperscript{52}

This is the abiding view each has of the other as the play opens. Yet almost immediately a new dynamic is introduced by Antonio's application to Shylock for a loan to aid his beloved friend. The Jew and the Christian agree to a loan with no interest, but with the pound of flesh pledge for collateral. This “deal” has led to one of the greatest controversies about the play: just what is Shylock up to in proposing these terms? Whatever Shylock's motives, after the elopement of Jessica, he is resolved to take advantage of Antonio's forfeiture of his bond.

Shylock and Antonio, Jew and Christian—just when it looks as though Shakespeare is setting up a contest between these two versions of the biblical religion, the terms of the relationship change. Most importantly, Shylock falls away from his status as paradigmatic Jew; the confrontation between the two in Portia's court in Venice is thus an aborted moment of judgment between those two great religions.

Shylock had raised two criteria to distinguish Jew and Christian. The Jews as the holy people, as the people of the law, are especially concerned with the clean and the unclean, sanctifying all their lives to God under the law.\textsuperscript{53} That means, in particular, that the Jews must keep their special dietary laws; they do not eat in friendship and intimacy with other men of other nations; they are the nation set apart.\textsuperscript{54} Shylock at first prided himself on his observance of the distinction between the clean and the unclean, the permitted and the forbidden. Yet suddenly and with little explanation, Shylock admits that he has agreed to dine with the Christians (2.5.11). We must understand this in relation to his bargain with Antonio. He has, as Antonio implied, in effect become a Christian. Just as he violates the dietary laws, so he violates the law respecting usury. True, the Jewish law legitimates interest taken from non-Jews, but it forbids what Shylock has potentially done in the “merry bond” and actually does in his resolve to collect his debt after Jessica runs off with Lorenzo: one may not indirectly, and thus a fortiori directly take what amounts to the life of another as a pledge in loan.\textsuperscript{55} The Jewish law recognizes (at least some) moral claims of human beings as such. Shylock has done what the Law explicitly forbids. And this is to say nothing of the commandment, “you shall not kill,” a closely related provision of the law.\textsuperscript{56} Shylock reveals himself to be a bad human being, a devil incarnate, not because he is a Jew, but because and insofar as he falls away from the Jewish law.

Portia's courtroom triumph over Antonio—that is to say, Antonio's triumph over Shylock—cannot be a triumph of Christianity over Judaism, for Shylock no longer represents Judaism, as is made perfectly clear in his most famous speech.
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 … ? If you prick us, do we not bleed? … And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

(3.1.55-63)

This angry and moving speech must be contrasted with Shylock's earlier claim to Antonio: “sufferance is the badge of all our tribe” (1.3.107). So far as that is true, Shylock's speech about revenge, and his resolve to exact fully Antonio's pledge indicates a break with this forbearing attitude. Moreover, Shylock here speaks not as a Jew, nor even as a quasi-Christian; the standard is a purely human standard: “If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge!” (3.1.65-68). Despite the ways or teachings or precepts of the two biblical religions, the human way is revenge. Shylock no longer even pretends to take his bearings and find his justification in the law. He has, in his own way, become a political philosopher, discerning a harsh and universal nature beneath the varying laws of the nations.

The judgment Shylock undergoes at the hands of Portia is thus not a judgment on him as a Jew, or on Judaism as such. This is not to say there is no such judgment in the play—his loss of his daughter fulfills that role. Jessica enters a forbidden relation and forsakes her family, people and God (cf. 3.1.30, 32, 80-85). Her initial situation is rather like that of so many tragic lovers—Romeo and Juliet, Pyramus and Thisbe—forsaken by her love by her parents or her people, yet not Jessica the lover, but Shylock the parent suffers the tragic fate in this case. Jessica lives in a community where her love is to be controlled by the laws. She is to marry inside the community and defer to her parents in choice of mate. Yet her love escapes these restraints; love cannot be so readily bidden. Like Shylock himself in his revenge, she learns and teaches something of the universality of nature in her love. The Jewish notion of a holy people, a people set apart, gives too little notice to nature, both in its higher manifestations like love, and in its lower, like revenge. No people can be simply holy; no people can be simply set apart. This is Shakespeare's judgment on Shylock. The perspective of that judgment shares something important with the Pauline Christian condemnation of Judaism as particularistic, but it is not necessarily the same as that perspective and surely not the same as Antonio's virulent anti-Jewish pronouncements.

Shylock is a Jew who violates his own law, the observance of which would at least have saved him from the inhumanity to which he sinks in his hatred for Antonio. Likewise, just as Shylock's defeat cannot stand for the defeat of the Jewish way, so Antonio's triumph does not represent a triumph of Christian principles. Although the disguised Portia delivers a lovely speech on mercy, the outcome of the trial does not in fact depend upon mercy, Christian or otherwise. Shylock's suit fails in two respects, on two legal technicalities. Both of these derive from the Jewish law, whence Portia has imported them into Venetian law. She first grants Shylock the right to his pound of flesh, but “in the cutting of it” he is allowed not “one drop of Christian blood” (4.1.305-9). Now this literalism is frequently decried as contrary to the reasonable meaning of the law; if Shylock has a right to the flesh, he must have a right to any necessary appurtenances of the flesh. Yet this fine-honed distinction is not of Portia's making; it derives instead from the Jewish dietary laws: “‘However, you may slaughter and eat flesh … Only you shall not eat the blood.’” If the distinction between the flesh and the blood is valid, as the Jewish law insists that it is, then the conclusion Portia draws is valid as well. No wonder Shylock cries out “Is that the law?” (4.1.313).

The second part of Portia's verdict comes when she turns the tables on Shylock: an alien may not directly or indirectly attempt the life of a citizen. Shylock has quite openly done that very thing, and thus must pay the penalty for it. But as we have noted above, this law, especially as applied to the circumstances at hand is part of the Jewish law as well: one may not take “‘a life in pledge.’” One may supply various theological interpretations of Portia's legal maneuverings—interpreting her as attempting to illustrate, for example, the Pauline principle that righteousness under the law is not possible for sinful man. Although that interpretation
resonates with Portia's speech on mercy, it does not fit so well the way the scene develops: the insistence that the Jewish law is perfectly sufficient to produce the just—and merciful—outcome.

One must instead view the trial as a reenactment of the trial of Jesus, with Antonio in the title role, Shylock in place of the Jews prosecuting Jesus, and Portia taking the part of Pontius Pilate. Shylock insists on the law (“I stand here for the law”) under which Antonio must pay the penalty of his default, i.e., must die; his predecessors urged much the same: “The Jews answered [Pilate], ‘We have a law, and by that law he ought to die …‘” In the trial of Antonio Portia urges Shylock to recognize that if he presses his claim, “this strict [code] of Venice / Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there,” to which Shylock replies, “My deeds upon my head” (4.1.203-5). Wittingly or unwittingly, he thus echoes the very thought of his predecessors, who responded to Pilate's resolve to “wash his hands” of the matter, “‘His [Jesus'] blood be on us and on our children.'”

Antonio casts himself as decisively in the role of Jesus as Shylock does in the role of Jesus' Jewish accusers. From his opening lines in the scene until the moment when Portia's verdict goes against Shylock, Antonio takes the part of one who suffers a fated martyrdom, a martyrdom, as we have seen, of self-sacrifice motivated by love.

I do oppose [says Antonio]
My patience to his fury, and am armed
To suffer with a quietness of spirit
The very tyranny and rage of his.

(4.1.10-13, cf. 83)

He calls himself “the tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death,” like the scapegoat on whom the community heaps its sins, and which is an image of Jesus' redemptive mission (4.1.114-15).

Yet the trial of Antonio does not end as did the trial of Jesus, because Pontius-Portia plays her part differently. Two things are particularly striking in the behavior of the original Pontius Pilate. First, he repeatedly proclaims his conviction of Jesus' innocence. “And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes, ‘I find no crime in this man,’” a conclusion he repeats twice more after further inquiry. Judging Jesus under the relevant law, the Jewish law, Pilate found no grounds to condemn him. Yet he gave in to the repeated urgings of the Jews: “But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted. … Jesus he delivered up to their will.”

Portia, the new Pilate, breaks with her predecessor on one central point: unlike Pilate, who sacrificed his judgment of the law to fear of the mob or concern for politics, she sticks to the law, the Jewish-become-Venetian law. Under that law Antonio is free from Shylock's bond. Portia gives Antonio a victory of sorts, although it is also a most telling defeat, by sticking to the letter and spirit of the old law. She thus doubly thwarts the new Jesus: she neither vouchsafes him his longed-for martyrdom, nor does she appeal to specifically Christian principle to do so.

III

I am abandoned; I have lost my throne, my native soil, my home, my husband—who alone for me took the place of all!

The trial is a great triumph for Portia, and yet she is never closer to suffering the tragic fate of Medea—abandonment by the one she loves, by one who has sworn eternal and complete devotion to her.
Despite the fact that she has prevented Antonio from rendering that “last full measure” of his devotion to his beloved, Bassanio has yet been deeply affected by Antonio's gesture. He confesses to esteeming Antonio more highly than her and would sacrifice her life (and his own) in order to save Antonio's. Bassanio apparently has taken to heart the injunction to love as Antonio has loved him. Although Portia has defeated Antonio, it yet might appear that he has gotten all he could have hoped for from the episode. He has won Bassanio's love with his offer to sacrifice his life, without needing to carry through on his offer.

Feeling victorious, Antonio provokes the third round in his contest against Portia by intervening in the post-trial exchange between Bassanio and the disguised Portia over the ring Portia has requested from Bassanio as a reward or remembrance for her service to the two friends. Bassanio is most reluctant to part with the ring:

Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,
And when she put it on she made me vow
That I should neither sell nor give nor lose it.

(4.1.440-43)

Should he do any of these things, Portia had meaningfully observed earlier, “Let it presage the ruin of your love…” (3.2.171-73). As soon as he hears the reason for Bassanio's refusal to surrender the ring Antonio enters the discussion in order to loosen his friend's resolve.

My lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
Let his deservings, and my love withal,
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

(4.1.448-50)

A more calculating move can hardly be imagined. Both to register the implications of Bassanio's declaration at the trial and to reinforce his supreme position Antonio prods Bassanio to do the thing that most concretely symbolizes his triumph. He makes the point perfectly explicit: his “love” is to be weighed against Portia's “commandment.” In accord with his declaration Bassanio accedes. What Bassanio said at the trial was thus not idle talk—he is more devoted to Antonio than to his wife.

Here then is Portia's greatest moment of crisis. She must act decisively in order to restore her love, a need with which the audience are in full sympathy, for we cannot willingly accept an Antonian victory in this contest. Portia has our sympathies because we have seen the less attractive underside to Antonio's love. The claim he raises is the claim of sacrifice and selflessness, yet we see this to be largely fraudulent; beneath the selflessness is a deep and potent self-seeking. The deficient character of Antonio's love is visible in at least two of its effects. First is his “spoiling” of Bassanio: he seeks to render Bassanio dependent rather than good. His “selfless” love is selfish in that it does not produce the good of the beloved, but of the lover. Secondly, we see, perhaps with surprise, the virulence of his hatred for Shylock. While Shylock is not entirely attractive either, his most vicious acts are the consequences of the attitudes of the Antonios of the world. Antonio is a genuine anti-Semite, a genuine hater. He displays what Machiavelli had earlier denounced as “pious cruelty.” His philosophy of love ironically issues in acts of hatred.

Portia returns from Venice to Belmont in a darkly melancholy mood. Her melancholy is foreshadowed in a remarkable dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo, in which these two newlyweds celebrate the night and their love by recounting the tales of ill-fated lovers of note from the past. These reminders of failed and betrayed loves reflect both on their own love and on the unfolding betrayal of Portia by Bassanio. It is probably no coincidence that the central item in this exchange concerns Medea: “In such a night / Medea gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew the old Aeson” (5.1.12-14). Aeson was Jason's father, a very old and dying
man to whom Medea brought new youth and salvation through her magic. Nonetheless, Jason’s gratitude did
not prevent his subsequent abandonment of Medea. The parallel to Portia and Bassanio is clear: as Medea
saved Aeson, so Portia saved Antonio.

“In such a night as this . . . ,” a moonlit night, a night for lovers, and yet a night that reveals the unsteadiness,
the evanescence, the unreliability of love. A night for recalling disloyal lovers. Even Lorenzo’s famous and
quite lovely rapture on the music of the spheres fits the mood. Even though: “There’s not the smallest orb
which thou behold’st / But in his motion like an angel sings,” nonetheless this heavenly

Harmony is [only] in immortal souls,
[And] whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(5.1.60-65)

Perhaps it is Jessica’s keen appreciation of how far earthly love falls below Lorenzo’s heavenly harmonies that
leads her to confess, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.69). In this comic celebration of love,
Shakespeare comes to the very brink of exposing love in its lunar, that is, false and fleeting, cold and changing
character.

By the time Portia arrives, the brightness of the moon, which so impressed Lorenzo and Jessica, is shown for
what it is—unsteady and unreliable. Not the moon, but a “little candle” from her own hall, is all she can see
now. By her yet lesser light, Portia stands much deeper in her despair of love than Lorenzo and Jessica.

That light we see is burning in my hall;
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

(5.1.89-91)

Can there be any doubt that she is the “little candle”—Portia reduced to a little candle!—casting little light,
having little good effect in herself and yet shining brightly by contrast with the “naughty world,” the
betrayers, the self-promoters, adventurers and hypocrites—the Jasons and Antonios—around her. Despair
gnaws at her heart; all the world empties itself of meaning and goodness. “Nothing is good, I see, without
respect” (5.1.99), that is, but by contrast. The good is merely what appears better by contrast to something
worse or less.\footnote{72}

Despair gnaws at Portia, yet she does not give way to it. On hearing of the approach of her husband, she
resolves, “Let me give light.”\footnote{73} In this now dark night, the moon obscured, “the sun . . . hid,” Portia will
attempt to bring the world back to light. But this requires something of her as well: “Let me give light, but let
me not be light” (5.1.129). Portia requires a certain weightiness, a moral seriousness, in order to bring the
world back into light. One is tempted to say that she must repent her earlier lightness, that lightness that did
not, for example, take sufficiently seriously her father’s warnings and her father’s efforts to help her find a
suitable husband. Both she and Bassanio must grow beyond where they were at the opening of the play in
order to be worthy of love—solar rather than lunar love, let us say. She must grow to transcend her alter-ego
Medea; Medea the enchantress, associated with the moon, must give way to Portia, the Sun, source of
illumination.\footnote{74} Portia resolves to be the light by being weighty; not Antonio, but she, is to be “the true
light.”\footnote{75}

From the moment Portia greets Bassanio on his arrival at Belmont, the delicate negotiation between them
commences. Bassanio once again signals how things stand with his curt return of Portia’s greeting (“I thank
you, madam”) and his far more expansive introduction of Antonio: “This is the man, this is Antonio, / To
whom I am so infinitely bound” (5.1.133-35). 76

Portia, however, quietly corrects him: “You should be … much bound,” but not apparently, “infinitely bound” (5.1.136). If Bassanio is infinitely bound to Antonio, then, of course, he has no bond left for Portia. She is less forthcoming to Antonio, however, than Bassanio would apparently have her be: she “scants this breathing courtesy,” that is, elaborate words of welcome. How welcome he is “must appear in other ways than words,” in part because he is welcome in order to be part of the final showdown over Bassanio, and in part because just how welcome he is will depend on subsequent events (5.1.139-41).

Before Portia even mentions Bassanio’s infidelity, Nerissa and Gratiano erupt into an argument over their parallel situation. This proves most useful to Portia (did she preconcert it with her maid?), for it allows her to accuse Bassanio, indirectly at first in the guise of accusing Gratiano, of the great violation of trust he has committed.

You were to blame—I must be plain with you—
To part so slightly with your wife’s first gift,
A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger,
And so riveted with faith unto your flesh.

(5.1.166-69)

Her lines echo earlier images of the almost crucified Antonio, but it is Bassanio she casts now as the central actor in the moral drama. It is he who is “riveted”; it is he who receives “faith.” Bassanio needs to see himself as a serious moral agent in a serious moral relationship with Portia. Before the trial he was little given to this kind of moral seriousness in any form, because of the general levity of his character. In the wake of Antonio’s gesture, Bassanio is equally little given to the kind of moral agency Portia calls forth, for he sees Antonio as the center and himself as the merely reflected image, infinitely bound to the original.

Bassanio at first inclines to defend himself in terms that reflect the very Antonio-centeredness she must overcome.

If you did know to whom I gave the ring, …
And would conceive for what I gave the ring …
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

(5.1.192-98)

Although many critics are entirely appeased by this defense—indeed some see it as a sign of Bassanio’s understanding and acceptance of the burden of love—Portia is not in the least satisfied—and rightly not.

If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honor to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring.

(5.1.199-202)

In giving it away, Bassanio has undervalued the ring itself and what it means—“a thing held as a ceremony,” a symbol of their love and its hoped-for abidingness. As such a thing, no reasonable person would demand it and no service can be commensurable with it. It was, of course, Antonio, who prevailed on him to present the ring to Balthazar/Portia, precisely to get Bassanio to make the point Portia now blames him for. Thus Bassanio also undervalued Portia relative to Antonio in giving up the ring, whereas, she implies, she is more
worthy than Antonio. Bassanio is guilty of disloyalty, but also of poor judgment; he does not see through the character of Antonio's "selfless" love, but is flattered by the appearances he does discern. He thereby misses the true source of human value. Accordingly, she also accuses him of undervaluing himself by so lightly setting aside his own oath; a man's oath and his resolve to keep it are tokens of his true dignity as a moral agent. To be bound by one's own word is to legislate for oneself and to commit oneself to being the kind of human being that can determine itself to its own commitments, to its vision of its own future. But in the shadow of Antonio Bassanio takes himself as little seriously as he took his love or the character of his wife.

Bassanio takes up only part of the immediate challenge posed by Portia's accusation: it was not a smirch upon his honor to give away the ring but a requirement of it (5.1.218-19). So much was this a demand of his honor that had Portia, who now claims to speak on behalf of his honor, "been there [he] thinks [she] would have begged / The ring of [him] to give the worthy doctor" (5.1.221-22). He replies to her charge about his honor, but she no doubt notices that he has said not a word about the other two points of her accusation, that he slighted both their love as symbolized by the ring, and herself. She is therefore not in the least appeased by his defense.

If he will stand on his honor as a thing apart from their marriage, then she will threaten his honor in a way that will remind him that his honor is now at least in part in her keeping:

Let not that doctor e'er come near my house.
... I will become as liberal as you;
I'll not deny him anything I have,
No, not my body nor my husband's bed.

(5.1.223-28)

This is not merely a threat to his honor, but an expression of hers: "Now by mine honor, which is yet mine own, / I'll have that doctor for mine bedfellow" (5.1.232-34). If Bassanio attempts to treat his honor as his own, that is, independent of her and their marriage, then she can treat her honor in the same way. But, of course, the premise of her speech is precisely the opposite, that both their honors are now inseparably bound up with the other's; her first need is to get Bassanio to see and understand at least this much. By standing up for her own honor, she at the same time attempts to make him see and understand something of her undervalued worth.

Before Bassanio can reply, Nerissa, Gratiano, and Antonio intervene. Antonio's brief interjection—"I am th' unhappy subject of these quarrels"—is especially important, because the discussion between Portia and Bassanio has been moving in the direction of the recognition of Antonio's role in the incident. At first Bassanio defended himself for giving the ring away "unwillingly," constrained by the "civil doctor's" unwillingness to accept anything but the ring (5.1.196, 210). After Portia reminds him of the unreasonable quality of such a gift, Bassanio subtly shifts ground. In his next speech he refers to the "enforced" character of his gift, but no longer is the doctor implied to be the source of the compulsion. It is left at the vague admission, "I was enforced to send it after him" (5.1.216). But the audience knows and Portia knows or suspects that the compulsion came from Antonio. This is just what Portia is attempting to make Bassanio see and to truly understand. She can free Bassanio from the bond of Antonio's love only by exposing its grasping underside.

As in the casket scene, Bassanio proves a remarkably apt pupil of Portia's subtle instruction. She brings him to the self-knowledge he has thus far almost completely lacked: "I swear to thee, ever by thine own fair eyes, / Wherein I see myself" (5.1.242-43). He sees himself and his situation in her eyes, that is to say, he sees himself as she does; as Portia puts it, he sees himself as a double-dealer: "In both my eyes he doubly sees himself, / In each eye one" (5.1.244-45). Because of this newly acquired self-knowledge, he capitulates completely. He no longer protests that Portia would have willed he do as he did, but twice within ten lines he
asks her pardon. The first time he continues to speak of it as an “enforced” deed, but he now calls it a “wrong.” The second time he drops all reference to compulsion, and calls it not merely wrong, but a “fault” (5.1.240, 247).

Bassanio at one and the same moment has broken Antonio's spell and become a man, responsible for himself and the moral character of his actions. He has finally become worthy of Portia, who has herself become worthy of the love of another mature adult by facing her own errors and despair. By this last scene she is no longer the talented, beautiful, wealthy but spoiled heiress of the opening of the play and the casket scene, just as he is no longer the fortune-hunting adventurer. Neither Medea nor Jason, Portia and Bassanio become fit heroes of a comic world where love thrives.78

In order to recognize his deed as a “fault,” Bassanio must see in Portia's eyes not only himself, but his susceptibility to Antonio and the character of Antonio's love game. She helps him to see both by making him relive and ponder deeply his own and Antonio's deeds, but also by making him look into himself and reconsider the nature of love. He discovers not only the underlying will to power in Antonio's professed selfless love, but he discovers a core of selfishness in love itself.79 The lover seeks an exclusive possession—sexual, but more than sexual—of the beloved. Love is of and for the other, but it is of and for the self, as well. This was true even of Antonio's love, but only illicitly so. By becoming more self-consciously selfish in his understanding of love, Bassanio also becomes more genuinely loving. He gives up not only Antonio, but that pride that prevented him from admitting fault and asking pardon. To paraphrase a much less insightful, more modern statement, Bassanio discovers that love is learning to say you're sorry. Bassanio comes to understand the kind of risk and hazard that, according to the lead casket, love entails.

Contrary to first impression, Antonio's kind of love does that much less well. Bassanio and Portia learn that love has an indissolubly exclusive character. It can never be the foundation for society as a whole. Human beings cannot build their lives on the purely selfless or sacrificial love which Jesus and Christianity command. In the final analysis, The Merchant of Venice, while not overtly a political play, has deep political implications. Those implications are emblematized most of all in the outcome of the trial: the law provides a solider basis for just and decent social life than the replacement of the law with love can do. A humanely just society is far more the achievement of good laws than of love.80

The promise of The Merchant of Venice nonetheless is the promise of love, through which pleasure, duty, and honor can find harmonious reconciliation. In love and the responsibility it breeds lies the good of the soul and whatever of eternity human beings can attain.81 The culminating moment of the decisive scene is Bassanio's final apology and acceptance of the meaning of his marriage. “Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee” (5.1.248-49). In that “never more” lies the real moral of this lovely tale of love and marriage: and they lived happily ever after.

Notes


2. On The Merchant of Venice as “the most scandalously problematic of Shakespeare's plays,” and the only one of Shakespeare's plays ... which a sizable body of sane people might consider unfit to be seen or read,” see Lawrence Danson, The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 2-3; Derek Cohen, Shakespeare's Motives (London: Macmillan, 1988),


7. Thus Lyon is quite mistaken to say that the ring incident represents “a new and independent plot [that gets] fully underway only in [the] last act” (*Merchant*, 117); or to call it “the tangential ring plot” (118).


14. Danson rejects the conception that Antonio's love for Bassanio underpins his melancholy because this is “not coherent with the play's overall shape and tone” (*Harmonies*, 36, 38, 40). This is, of course, a circular argument. Lyon, *Merchant*, 47, accepts Antonio's love for Bassanio as the cause of sadness, however, as does Keith Geary, “The Nature of Portia's Victory: Turning to Men in The Merchant of Venice,” *Shakespeare Survey* 37 (1984): 58-59.


24. Danson rejects in the strongest terms the notion that Portia can have hinted at the right answer: “The imputation … that Portia through the most blatant trick makes her … father's dying inspiration
nugatory—is one which … would make the rest of the play inexplicable.” In other words, it conflicts with Danson's sense of the larger patterns and meanings in the whole (Harmonies, 117-18). This is a perfectly reasonable approach, but its circularity must again be noted. The position Danson merely takes for granted is that there is no plausible construal of the whole consistent with this “imputation.” That, I believe, is false, and indeed, to go further, it is Danson, I will suggest, who ignores many elements of the play that are not only consistent with this imputation, but insistently point toward it. A more balanced approach to the question is in Lyon (Merchant, 92-97). Lyon also contains a good discussion of the scholarly to and fro on the issue.


27. So far as I know, Lewalski is the critic to pay the most attention to the Hesione image, but she does not much analyze what this implies about Portia's stance toward the casket test (“Biblical Allusion,” 336).


30. Tovey, “The Golden Casket,” 217.

31. Contra Holmer: “Only Bassanio, his wisdom revealed in his soliloquy over the caskets, is capable of loving wisely, and therefore his character guarantees the right choice …” (“Loving Wisely,” 59); and Donow, “Shakespeare's Caskets,” 91.

32. Cf. the contrary reading in Lewalski, “Biblical Allusion,” 335. She does not note Bassanio's complete failure to attend to the legends or to show any signs of absorbing their point. Also contra Hyman, “Rival Lovers,” 114.


34. Cf. Tovey, “Golden Casket,” 229.

35. Cf. Tovey: “Such a letter is calculated to make Bassanio spend the rest of his life in remorseful remembrance” (“Golden Casket,” 225).

36. Emphasis added.


38. Cf. Tovey: “Bassanio's preference for Antonio could hardly be stated in starker terms” (“Golden Casket,” 229).


40. In his portrayal of Antonio, Shakespeare has come very close to Nietzsche's understanding of self-denying love in 1.13 of The Gay Science: “Even if we offer our lives, as martyrs do for their church, this is a sacrifice that is offered for our desire for power or for the purpose of preserving our feeling of power” (trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1974], 87); also cf. 1.14. Cf. Tovey, “Golden Casket,” 224-225, 233; Bloom, Shakespeare's Politics, 19-21; Geary, “Nature of Portia's Victory,” 64.

41. Cf. Tovey: “As soon as she hears of Antonio's predicament, Portia clearly recognizes the threat that his imminent martyrdom poses to her married life.” (“Golden Casket,” 228); cf. Bloom, Shakespeare's Politics, 29; Delgado de Torres, “Reflections on Patriarchy,” 343; Geary, “Nature of Portia's Victory,” 64; Booze, “Comic Contract,” 250.


46. On Shylock's use of the story of Jacob, see Engle, “Exchange and Explanation,” 32.
47. Deut. 23.19-20; cf. Deut. 28.12. Note that Deut. 23 joins the very two issues that Shylock
joins—usury and uncleanness.
50. On Shylock, see 1.3.110; on Bassanio, see 1.3.140; cf. 139, 150, 165, 175.
51. *Aquinas* 2-2 Q. 78 A1 ob. 2.
52. On Antonio's Christian vision see St. Paul, *Letter to the Galatians*, who sees Christianity as a
counter-movement to Judaism along three dimensions:

- **Jewish**
  - Particularistic
  - Worldly Prosperity (Flesh)
  - Law

- **Christian**
  - Universalistic (cf. esp. Gal. 3.28)
  - Spiritual Prosperity
  - Faith-Love (cf. Gal. 3.13; 5.13-14)

According to Antonio's lights at least, Shylock embodies all three of the Jewish traits, and he the
Pauline triad.

56. Deut. 5.17 RSV.
58. Deut. 12.15-16 RSV.
59. Deut., 24.6 RSV.
60. See Tovey, “Golden Casket,” 232.
61. John 19.7 RSV.
62. Matt. 27.24-25 RSV.
65. *Contra* Tovey, “Golden Casket,” 237.
67. Cf. esp. 5.1.47: Bassanio's "horn full of good news."
68. Thus Tovey considerably understates the situation when she says all that remains for Portia is a
"chastising" of her unfaithful husband (“Golden Casket,” 230). Cf. Hyman: “The climax of the play,
Portia's turning the tables on Shylock, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio” (“Rival
Lovers,” 112).
70. This is quite independent of any suggestion of a homoerotic character of Antonio's feelings for
Bassanio. Given the echoes of Christianity in the play, I do not believe this is the point Shakespeare is
66. Note that even though Antonio is denied his Christlike sacrifice, he continues to cast the situation
in Christian (love) vs. Jewish (commandment) terms.
71. Cf. Plato *Symposium* 177-185; Tovey, “Golden Casket,” 233.
72. Boone misses Portia's near despair and near failure in her presentation of Portia as the source of “the
castrating manipulations of the benefactress who has strategically orchestrated all such acquisitions”
(“Comic Contract,” 249).
73. Cf. Gen. 1.3 RSV.
75. Cf. John 1.9 RSV.
Cf. John 19.5 RSV.

Thus Holmer seems to miss almost entirely what has happened in the ring episode when she says that in giving away the ring “Bassanio is as firmly devoted to Portia as ever; … the bond is still intact” ("Loving Wisely," 71).


Consider Hyman, “Rival Lovers,” 115; in his otherwise fine treatment of the play, Geary misses the real dynamic of this episode when he puts its weight on the revelation of Balthazar's identity ("Nature of Portia's Victory," 66). The decisive things have happened before that revelation occurs. Also see Aristotle Ethics 1170b30-1171a21.

Contra Boose, who sees the ending of the play as showing “an anxiously defensive hostility directed against … the social bond itself” ("Comic Contract," 251).

Contra Tovey’s identification of Belmont and Portia with Platonic philosophy. At this point this otherwise excellent essay loses touch with the play, as in the judgment that Portia acts "to emancipate the potential philosopher [Bassanio!] from the religion of his city" ("Golden Casket," 234-37).

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Tony Tanner (essay date 1999)


In the following essay, Tanner analyzes the three crucial locations in The Merchant of Venice—Antonio's Rialto Venice, Shylock's Venetian ghetto, and harmonious Belmont—and discusses the troubling elements of this romantic comedy that arise through the juxtaposition of these settings.

see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?

(King Lear IV.vi.151-4)

When Portia, disguised as Balthasar, “a young and learned doctor”, enters the Court of Justice in The Merchant of Venice, her first, business-like, question is “Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?” (IV.i.173) It is an astonishing question. We know that Shylock would have been dressed in a “gaberdine”, because, we are told, Antonio habitually spits on it. This was a long garment of hard cloth habitually worn by Jews who, since 1412, had been obliged to wear a distinctive robe extending down to the feet. Shylock would have been, literally, a ‘marked’ man (in a previous century he would have had to wear a yellow hat). Antonio, a rich merchant who, we are again told, habitually comes “so smug upon the mart” (where ‘smug’ means sleek and well-groomed, as well as our sense of complacently self-satisfied), is more likely to have been dressed in some of the ‘silk’ in which he trades (look at the sumptuously dressed Venetian merchants in Carpaccio's paintings to get some idea). It would have been unmissably obvious which was the merchant and which was the Jew. So, is that opening question just disingenuousness on Portia/Balthasar's part—or what?

The first act is composed of three scenes set in the three (relatively) discrete places, or areas, each of which has its distinct voices, values, and concerns. Together, they make up the world of the play. I will call these—Rialto Venice; Belmont (Portia's house, some indeterminate distance from Venice; probably best thought of as being like one of those lovely Renaissance palaces still to be seen in the Veneto); and Ghetto Venice (Shylock's realm: the word ‘ghetto’ never appears in the play, and, as John Gross has pointed out, Shakespeare makes no mention of it. But the name Ghetto Nuovo (meaning New Foundry) was the name of the island in Venice on which the Jews were, effectively, sequestered (and from which the generic use of
‘ghetto’ derives); and, clearly, Shylock lives in a very different Venice from the Venice enjoyed by the confident Christian merchants. Hence my metaphoric use of the name for what, in Shakespeare, is simply designated as ‘a public place’). The opening lines of the three scenes are, in sequence:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you ...  
By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.

Three thousand ducats—well.

Sadness and weariness on the Rialto and in Belmont; money matters in the Ghetto. Is there any inter-connection? Can anything be done?

Antonio speaks first, which is quite appropriate since he is the ‘Merchant’ of the title—not, as some think, Shylock. Had Shakespeare wanted Shylock signalled in his title, he could well have called his play The Jew of Venice, in appropriate emulation of Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta (1589), which was playing in London in 1596 when Shakespeare (almost certainly) started his own play, and which he (most certainly) knew and, indeed, deliberately echoed at certain key points (of which, more by and by). But Shylock is a very different figure from Barabas, who degenerates into a grotesque Machiavellian monster. In fact, Shylock only appears in five of the twenty scenes of the play; though he is, overwhelmingly, the figure who leaves the deepest mark—‘incision’ perhaps (see later)—on the memory. He shuffles off, broken, beaten, and ill—sadder and wearier than anyone else in Venice or Belmont—at the end of Act Four, never to return. But, while the triumph and victory belong unequivocally to Portia, it is the Jew's play.

However, Antonio is our merchant, and very Hamlet-ish he is, too. He sounds an opening note of inexplicable melancholy:

But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn ...

(I,i,3-5)

We might later have a guess at at least some of the ‘stuff’ it is made of, but for now Salerio and Solanio (another of those effectively indistinguishable Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern couples Shakespeare delights in—it offers another ‘which-is-which?’ puzzle in a lighter key), try to commiserate with him and cheer him up. And in their two speeches, Shakespeare—breathtakingly—manages to convey a whole sense of mercantile Renaissance Venice. Of course, they say, you are understandably worried—“your mind is tossing on the ocean”—about your “argosies” (a very recent English word for large merchant ships, coming from the Venetian Adriatic port of Ragusa—and also used in Marlowe's play). Salerio, packing all the pride and confident arrogance of imperial, incomparable Venice into his lines, imagines those ships as “rich burghers on the flood”, or “pageants [magnificent floats in festival and carnival parades] of the sea”, which

Do overpeer the petty traffickers
That cursy [curtsy] to them, do them reverence,
As they fly by them with their woven wings.

(I,i,12-14)

Other sea-faring traders are “petty traffickers”: Venetian merchants, attracting and exacting world-wide admiration and deference, are something quite superbly else. Solanio chimes in, evoking a merchant's necessary anxieties about winds, maps, ports, piers, and everything that, he says, “might make me fear /
Misfortune to my ventures”—‘ventures’ is a word to watch. Salerio develops the theme, imagining how everything he saw on land would somehow remind him of shipwrecks:

Should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
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?

(I,i,29-36)

“But now a king, now thus”, says Salisbury when he watches King John die, pondering the awesome mortality of kings (King John V,vii,60). In this Venice, there is much the same feeling about the loss of one of their argosies, monarchs (or burghers—it was a republic) of the sea as they were. And what a sense of riches is compacted into the lines imagining spices scattered on the stream, and waves robed in silk—an image of spilt magnificence if ever there was one.

It is important to note Salerio's reference to “church … the holy edifice of stone”. In one of those contrasts dear to artists, the stillness and fixity of the holy edifice of stone is to be seen behind the flying ships on the tossing oceans and flowing streams—the eternal values of the church conjoined with, and in some way legitimating, the worldly wealth-gathering of the sea-venturing, transient merchants; the spiritual ideals sustaining the material practices. For Venice was a holy city (the Crusades left from there), as well as the centre of a glorious worldly empire. It was an object of awe and fascination to the Elizabethans. Indeed, as Philip Brockbank suggested, Venice was for Renaissance writers what Tyre was for the prophet Isaiah—“the crowning city, whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth” (Isaiah 23:8). But Tyre was also a “harlot” who made “sweet music”, and Isaiah prophesies that it “shall commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world” (Venice was also famed, or notorious, for its alleged sensualities—in Elizabethan London there was a brothel simply named ‘Venice’). But, also this about Tyre:

And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord: for it shall not be treasured nor laid up; for her merchandise shall be for them that dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing.

(23:18)

Traditionally, religion is ascetic and preaches a rejection of worldly goods. But here we see religion and the ‘use of riches’ creatively reconciled—and by spending, not hoarding. As Tyre, so Venice. But there is, in Isaiah, an apocalyptic warning—that God will turn the whole city “upside down” and “scatter” the inhabitants—

And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest … as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him. The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the Lord hath spoken this word.

(24:2,3)

Ruskin would say that that was effectively what did happen to Venice. But that is another story. The point for us here is that the Venetian setting of his play allowed Shakespeare to pursue his exploratory interest in (I
the relationship between the values of empire and those of the aspiring affections, human and
divine; those of the City of Man and those of the City of God ... between the values we are
couraged to cultivate in a mercantile, moneyed and martial society, and those which are
looked for in Christian community and fellowship; between those who believe in the gospel
teachings of poverty, humility and passivity, and those who (as the creative hypocrisy
requires) pretend to.

Returning to the play, Solanio says that if Antonio is not sad on account of his “merchandise”, then he must
be in love. Antonio turns away the suggestion with a “Fie, fie!”. As it happens, I think this is close to the
mark, but we will come to that. Here Solanio gives up on trying to find a reason for Antonio's gloom—

Then let us say you are sad
Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy
For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry.

(I.i,47-9)

And he leaves with Salerio, who says to Antonio—“I would have stayed till I had made you merry”. ‘Merry’
is a lovely word from old English, suggesting pleasing, amusing, agreeable, full of lively enjoyment. “To be
merry best becomes you,” says Don Pedro to the vivacious Beatrice “for out o’ question, you were born in a
merry hour” (Much Ado II.i,313-4)—and we feel he has chosen just the right word. The princely merchants of
Venice favour the word, for, in their aristocratic way, they believe in ‘merriment’. It is an unequivocally
positive word; it has no dark side, and carries no shadow. Yet in this play, Shakespeare makes it become
ominous. When Shylock suggests to Antonio that he pledges a pound of his flesh as surety for the three
thousand ducat loan, he refers to it as a “merry bond”, signed in a spirit of “merry sport” (I.iii,170,142). The
word has lost its innocence and is becoming sinister. The last time we hear it is from Shylock's daughter,
Jessica in Belmont—“I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (V.i,69). After her private duet with
Lorenzo, nobody speaks to Jessica in Belmont and these are, indeed, her last words in the play. It is hard to
feel that she will be happily assimilated into the Belmont world. Something has happened to ‘merry-ness’, and
although Belmont is, distinctly, an abode of “sweet music”, a note of un-merry sadness lingers in the air.

When Bassanio enters with Gratiano, he says to the departing Salerio and Solanio, as if reproachfully, “You
grow exceeding strange; must it be so?” (I.i,67) It is a word which recurs in a variety of contexts, and it
reminds us that there is ‘strangeness’ in Venice, centring on Shylock, whose “strange apparent cruelty”
(IV.i,21) is some sort of reflection of, response to, the fact that he is treated like “a stranger cur” (I.iii,115) in
Venice. And he is, by law, an alien in the city—the stranger within. Gratiano then has a go at Antonio—“You
look not well, Signior Antonio” (“I am not well”, says Shylock, as he leaves the play—IV.i,395: now the
merchant, now the Jew. Sickness circulates in Venice, along with all the other ‘trafficking’).

You have too much respect upon the world;
They lose it that do buy it with much care.
Believe me, you are marvelously changed.

(I,i,74-6)

His scripture is a little awry here: what people lose who gain the whole world is the soul, not the world. A
mondain Venetian's slip, perhaps. But we are more likely to be alerted by the phrase ‘marvelously changed’. Shakespearian comedy is full of marvellous changes, and we may be considering what transformations, marvellous or otherwise, occur in this play. In the event, the ‘changes’ turn out to be far from unambiguous ‘conversions’. Somewhere behind all these conversions is the absolutely basic phenomenon whereby material
is converted into ‘merchandise’ which is then converted into money—which, as Marx said, can then convert, or ‘transform’ just about anything into just about anything else. It is perhaps worth remembering that Marx praised Shakespeare, in particular, for showing that money had the power of a god, while it behaved like a whore.

Jessica willingly converts to Christianity, hoping for salvation, at least from her father's house, but it hardly seems to bring, or promise, any notable felicity or grace. Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity—which, however construed by the Christians (he would thereby be ‘saved’), is registered as a final humiliation and the stripping away of the last shred of his identity. When Portia gives herself to Bassanio, she says:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted.

(III,ii,166-7)

and this is to be felt as a willing conversion, a positive transformation—just as she will, like a number of other heroines, ‘change’ herself into a man to effect some genuine salvation. Sad Antonio, it has to be said, is not much changed at all at the end—though his life has been saved, and his ships have come sailing in. Venice itself, as represented, is hardly changed; not, that is, renewed or redeemed—though it is a good deal more at ease with itself for having got rid of Shylock. If that is what it has done. One hardly feels that, as it were, the realm has been purged, and that the malcontent threatening the joy of the festive conclusion has been happily exorcised. The play does not really end quite so ‘well’ as that. It is not a ‘metamorphic’ celebration.

It is Bassanio's plea for financial help from Antonio that concludes the first scene, and the way in which he does so is crucial to an appreciation of what follows. He admits that he has “disabled mine estate” by showing “a more swelling port” than he could afford. ‘Swelling port’ is ‘impressively lavish life-style’, but I think we will remember the ‘portly sail’ of the Venetian argosies just referred to, also, no doubt, ‘swollen’ by the winds (cf the ‘big-bellied sails’ in A Midsummer Night's Dream). The Venetian princely way of life is both pregnant and distended—fecund and excessive. As Bassanio is, however inadvertently, recognising by using a key word: he is worried about his ‘great debts’

Wherein my time, something too prodigal,
Hath left me gaged.

(I,ii,1490-50)

Shylock calls Antonio a “prodigal Christian”, and it was always a fine point to decide to what extent ‘prodigality’ was compatible with Christianity (think of the parables of the Prodigal Son, and the Unjust Steward), and to what extent it contravened it. It is one of those words which look two ways, pointing in one direction to the magnanimous bounty of an Antony, and in the other to the ruinous squandering of a Timon. Clearly, the munificent prodigality of Antonio is in every way preferable to the obsessive meanness and parsimony of Shylock. But there is a crucial speech on this subject, tucked away, as was sometimes Shakespeare's wont, where you might least expect it. Salerio and Gratiano are whiling away the time in front of Shylock's house, waiting to help Lorenzo in the abduction of Jessica. Salerio is saying that lovers are much more eager to consummate the marriage than they are to remain faithful (‘keep obliged faith’) subsequently. “That ever holds” says Gratiano:

All things that are
Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed.
How like a younger or a prodigal
The scarfed bark puts from her native bay,
Hugged and embraced by the strumpet wind!
How like the prodigal doth she return,
With over-weathered ribs and ragged sails,
lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind.

(II,vi,12-19)

An apt enough extended metaphor in a mercantile society, and the Venetians must have seen many ship sail out ‘scarfed’ (decorated with flags and streamers) and limp back ‘rent’. It may be added that Gratiano is something of a cynical young blade. But the speech stands as a vivid reminder of one possible fate of ‘prodigality’, and of marriage. Ultimately of Venice too, perhaps.

Bassanio, whatever else he is (scholar, courtier) is a ‘prodigal’, and he wants to clear his ‘debts’. Antonio immediately says that “my purse, my person” (a nice near pun, given the close inter-involvement of money and body in this play) “lie all unlocked to your occasions” (I,i,139). This open liberality might be remembered when we later hear the frantically retentive and self-protective Shylock (a name not found outside this play) repeatedly warning Jessica to “look to my house … lock up my doors … shut doors after you” (II,v,16,29,52). The difference is clear enough, and need not be laboured. Antonio also positively invites Bassanio to “make waste of all I have” (I,i,157)—insouciantly negligent aristocrats like to practise what Yeats called ‘the wasteful virtues’. The contrast with ‘thrifty’ Shylock, again, does not need underlining.

But Bassanio has another possible solution to his money problems; one which depends on ‘adventuring’ and ‘hazard’.

In Belmont is a lady richly left;
And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues …
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift
That I should questionless be fortunate!

(I,i,161-176)

Antonio, all his wealth at sea, at the moment has neither “money, nor commodity”; but he will use his “credit” to get “the means”. He will borrow the money from Shylock to finance Bassanio's quest of a second golden fleece. So it is that the seemingly discrete worlds of the Ghetto, the Rialto, and Belmont are, from the beginning, indeed, interinvolved.

Venice, as we have seen it and will see it, is overwhelmingly a man's world of public life; it is conservative, dominated by law, bound together by contracts, underpinned by money—and closed. Belmont is run by women living the private life; it is liberal, animated by love, harmonised by music and poetry (‘fancy’), sustained by gold—and open. However cynical one wants to be, it will not do to see Belmont as “only Venice come into a windfall” (Ruth Nevo). It is better to see it as in a line of civilised, gracious retreats, stretching from Horace's Sabine farm, through Sidney's Penshurst, Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, up to Yeats's Coole Park. As Brockbank said, such places ideally offered “the prospect of a protected life reconciling plentitude, exuberance, simplicity and order.” It was Sidney who said that “our world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden”, and you might see Belmont as a kind of ‘golden’ world which has been ‘delivered’ from the ‘brazen’ world of trade and money. Yes, somewhere back along the line, it is all grounded in ducats; but you must
think of the churches, palaces, art works and monuments of the Renaissance, made possible by varying forms of patronage, and appreciate that the “courtiers, merchants and bankers of the Renaissance found ways of transmuting worldly goods into spiritual treasure” (Brockbank). Belmont is a privileged retreat from Venice; but, as Portia will show, it can also fruitfully engage with it.

In scene two, we are in Belmont, and Portia is weary. Partly surely, because she must be bored stiff with the suitors who have come hopefully buzzing round the honey-pot—the silent Englishman, the mean Scotsman, the vain Frenchman, the drunken German, and so on, as she and Nerissa amuse themselves discussing their different intolerabilities. But, more importantly, because she is under the heavy restraint of a paternal interdiction (familiar enough in comedy, though this one comes from beyond the grave). She has been deprived of choice—and she wants a mate. Then we learn from Nerissa about the lottery of the casquets, which she thinks was the “good inspiration” of a “virtuous” and “holy” man. We shall see. But we note that, in this, Belmont (in the form of Portia) is as much under the rule of (male) law as Venice. There are “laws for the blood” in both places, and they may by no means be “leaped” or “skipped” over (I,ii,17ff.). In other comedies, we see inflexible, intractable, unmitigatable law magically, mysteriously melt away or be annulled. Not in this play. Here, the law is followed, or pushed, to the limit—and beyond. Indeed, you might say that Belmont has to come to Venice to help discover this ‘beyond’ of the law.

And now, in scene three, we are in Shylock’s Venice; and we hear, for the first time, what will become an unmistakable voice—addressing, as it were, the bottom line in Venice: “three thousand ducats—well”. Shylock speaks in—unforgettable—prose, and this marks something of a crucial departure for Shakespeare. Hitherto, he had reserved prose for, effectively, exclusively comic (usually ‘low’) characters. With Shylock, this all changes. For Shylock is not a comic character. He has a power, a pain, a passion, a dignity—and, yes, a savagery, and a suffering—which, whatever they are, are not comic.

On his first appearance, Shylock establishes his ‘Jewishness’ by, among other things, revealing his adherence to Jewish dietary rules—“I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (I,iii,34-5). But when Antonio appears, Shylock reveals a darker side of his nature in an ‘aside’:

I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
......He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him.

(I,iii,39-49)

Shylock gives three good reasons for his hating of Antonio—insofar as one can have good reasons for hatred: personal, professional, tribal. This is interesting in view of his response during the trial scene, when he is asked why he would not prefer to have ducats rather than Antonio’s flesh:

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio ...

(IV,i,59-61)

His opening exchange with Antonio really defines the central concern of the play, and is crucial. He has already mentioned ‘usance’ (‘a more cleanly name for usury’), ‘thrift’ (which means both prosperity and
frugality—‘thrift, Horatio, thrift’), and ‘interest’. And ‘usury’, of course, is the heart of the matter. Any edition of the play will tell you that the law against lending money at interest was lifted in 1571, and a rate of 10 made legal. Queen Elizabeth depended on money borrowed at interest, so did most agriculture, industry, and foreign trade by the end of the sixteenth century (according to R H Tawney). So, indeed, did Shakespeare's own Globe Theatre. Plenty of Christians lent money at interest (including Shakespeare's own father); and Bacon, writing “Of Usury” in 1625, said “to speak of the abolishing of usury is idle”. Antonio, scattering his interest-free loans around Venice, is certainly an ‘idealised’ picture of the merchant, just as Shylock sharpening his knife to claim his debt, is a ‘demonised’ one. But Aristotle and Christianity had spoken against usury, and there was undoubtedly a good deal of residual unease and ambivalence about it. Ruthless usurers were thus especially hated and abused, and since Jews were identified as quintessential usurious money-lenders, (and, of course, had killed Christ), they were available for instant and constant execration. This must certainly be viewed as a collective hypocrisy—one of those ‘projections’ by which society tries to deal with a bad conscience (not that Shakespeare would have seen many Jews in London; it is estimated that there were less than two hundred at the time). Shakespeare was not addressing a contemporary problem; rather, he was exploring some of the ambivalences and hypocrisies, the value clashes and requisite doublennesses, which inhere in, and attend upon, all commerce.

The play is full of commercial and financial terms: ‘moneys’, ‘usances’, ‘bargains’, ‘credit’, ‘excess’ and ‘advantage’ (both used of usury and profit), ‘trust’, ‘bond’ (which occurs vastly more often than in any other play: curiously ‘contract’ is not used—Shakespeare wants us to focus on ‘bond’), ‘commodity’ and ‘thrift’. Launcelot Gobbo is “an unthrifty knave”, while Jessica flees from her father's house with “an unthrift love”. This last serves as a reminder that both here and elsewhere in Shakespeare the language of finance and usury could be used as a paradoxical image of love (happiness accrues and passion grows by a form of natural interest). You will hear it in Belmont as well as on the Rialto. When Portia gives herself to Bassanio, she, as it were, breaks the bank:

I would he trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,
That only to stand high in your account,
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account.

(III,ii, 153-7)

Rich place, Belmont; generous lover, Portia!

The absolutely central exchange occurs when Antonio and Shylock discuss ‘interest’, or ‘borrowing upon advantage’. “I do never use it” declares Antonio (what is the relationship between ‘use’ and ‘usury’? Another consideration.) Shylock replies, seemingly rather inconsequentially: “When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep. …” Antonio brings him to the point. “And what of him? Did he take interest?” Shylock seems to prevaricate: “No, not take interest—not as you would say / Directly int'rest” and then recounts the story from Genesis. This tells how Jacob tricked—but is that the right word?—his exploitative uncle, Laban: they agreed that, for his hire, Jacob should be entitled to any lambs, in the flocks he was tending, that were born “streaked and pied”. Following the primitive belief that what a mother sees during conception has an effect on the offspring, Jacob stripped some “wands” (twigs or branches), so that some were light while others were dark, and “stuck them up before the fulsome ewes” as the rams were impregnating them. In the subsequent event, a large number of “parti-coloured lambs” were born, which of course went to Jacob. Nice work; but was it also sharp practice? Or was it both, and so much the better? Or, does it matter? Not as far as Shylock is concerned:

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;
And thrift is blessing if men steal it not.
‘Ewes’ may be a pun on ‘use’; and for Shylock, it is as legitimate to use ewes in the field as it is to use usury on the ‘mart’. Not so for Antonio:

This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven.
Was this inserted to make interest good?
Or is your gold and silver ewes and lambs?

(88-92)

And Shylock:

I cannot tell; I make it breed as fast.

(88-93)

Antonio's last line effectively poses the question of the play. It was a line often quoted, (or more often, slightly misquoted), by Ezra Pound in his increasingly unbalanced vituperations against usury and Jews. The root feeling behind it is that it is somehow unnatural for inorganic matter (gold, silver, money) to reproduce itself in a way at least analogous to the natural reproductions in the organic realm (“they say it is against nature for Money to beget Money”, says Bacon, quoting Aristotle). This enables Antonio to reject Shylock's self-justifying analogy: Jacob's story does not “make interest good”, because he was having, or making, a “venture”, and the result was, inevitably, “swayed and fashioned” by—heaven? nature? some power not his own. This, revealingly, was how Christian commentators of the time justified Jacob's slightly devious behaviour (as Frank Kermode pointed out)—he was making a venture. Antonio's ships are 'ventures', and Bassanio is on a venture when he 'adventures forth' to Belmont. It seems that the element of 'risk' (= to run into danger) and 'hazard' purifies or justifies the act. As 'hazard' was originally an Arabian word for a gaming die, this would seem to enable gambling to pass moral muster as well. Perhaps it does. Whatever, there is seemingly no risk, as well as no nature, in usury. Shylock's answer, that he makes his money “breed as fast”, is thought to tell totally against him; and Bassanio's subsequent remark, “for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?” (I.iii.130-1), is taken to orient our sympathies, and values, correctly. But this won't quite do.

Because, like it or not, money most certainly does 'breed'. It may not literally copulate, but there is no way round the metaphor. Sigurd Burckhardt is the only commentator I have read who has seen this clearly, and he wrote: “metal ['converted’ into money] is not barren, it does breed, is pregnant with consequences, and capable of transformation into life and art”. For a start, it gets Bassanio to Belmont, and the obtaining of Portia and the Golden Fleece (or Portia as a golden fleece). And, as if to signal his awareness of the proximity, even similitude, of the two types of ‘breeding’, with the lightest of touches: when Gratiano announces he is to marry Nerissa at the same time as Bassanio marries Portia, Shakespeare has him add—“We'll play with them the first boy for a thousand ducats” (III.ii.214). You ‘play’ for babies, and you ‘play’ for ducats. Which also means that when Shylock runs through the streets crying “O my ducats! O my daughter!” (choosing Marlowe's Barabas who cries out “oh, my girl, my gold”, but when his daughter restores his wealth to him), we should not be quite so quick to mock him as the little Venetian urchins. He may not use his money to such life-enhancing and generous ends as some of the more princely Venetians; but he has been doubly bereaved (which literally means—robbed, reaved, on all sides, be-).

Having mentioned that robbery, I will just make one point about the Jessica and Lorenzo sub-plot. However sorry we may feel for Jessica, living in a ‘hell’ of a house with her father; the behaviour of the two lovers is
only to be deprecated. Burckhardt is absolutely right again: “their love is lawless, financed by theft and engineered by a gross breach of trust”. Jessica “gilds” herself with ducats, and throws a casket of her father’s wealth down to Lorenzo (“Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains” II,vi,33)—another echo-with-a-difference of Marlowe’s play, in which Abigail throws down her father’s wealth from a window, to her father). This is an anticipatory parody, travesty rather, of Portia, the Golden (not ‘gilded’) Fleece, waiting to see if Bassanio will pass the test of her father’s caskets (containing wisdom, rather than simple ducats). He ‘hazards’ all; this couple risk nothing. They squander eighty ducats in a night—folly, not bounty. Jessica exchanges the ring her mother gave her father as a love-pledge, for—a monkey! They really do make a monkey out of marriage—I will come to their famous love duet in due course. Their’s is the reverse, or inverse, of a true love match. It must be intended to contrast with the marriage made by Bassanio and Portia.

This marriage also, admittedly, involves wealth—as it does paternal caskets; but, and the difference is vital, wealth not gained or used in the same way.

Those caskets! Shakespeare took nearly everything that he wanted for his plot (including settings, characters, even the ring business in Act V) from a tale in Il Pecorone (The Dunce), a collection of stories assembled by Giovanni Fiorentino, published in Italy in 1558—everything except the trial of the caskets. In the Italian story, to win the lady, the hero has to demonstrate to her certain powers of sexual performance and endurance. Clearly, this was not quite the thing for a Shakespearean heroine. So Shakespeare took the trial-by-caskets from a tale in the thirteenth-century Gesta Romanorum, which had been translated into English. Here, a young woman has to choose between three vessels—gold, silver, lead—to discover whether she is worthy to be the wife of the Emperor’s son. All we need note about it is one significant change that Shakespeare made in the inscriptions on the vessels/caskets. Those on the gold and silver ones are effectively the same in each case—roughly, “Who chooseth me shall gain/get what he desires/deserves”. But in the mediaeval tale, the lead casket bears the inscription “Thei that chese me, shulle fynde [in] me that God hath disposid”. Now, since the young woman is a good Christian, she could hardly have been told more clearly that this was the one to go for. It is, we may say, no test at all. Shakespeare changes the inscription to “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (II,vii,9). This is a very different matter. Instead of being promised a placid and predictable demonstration of piety rewarded, we are in that dangerous world of risk and hazard which, at various levels, constitutes the mercantile world of the play. And to the prevailing lexicon of ‘get’ and ‘gain’ has been added the even more important word—‘give’. One of the concerns of the play is the conjoining of giving and gaining in the most appropriate way, so that they may ‘frutify’ together (if I may borrow Launcelot Gobbo’s inspired malapropism). “I come by note, to give and to receive”, Bassanio announces to Portia (III,ii,140—my italics). Which is no less than honesty.

While she is anxiously waiting as Bassanio inspects the caskets, Portia says:

Now he goes,  
With no less presence, but with much more love,  
Than young Alcides [Hercules], when he did redeem  
The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy  
To the sea monster. I stand for sacrifice;  
The rest aloof are the Dardanian wives,  
With bleared visages come forth to view  
The issue of th' exploit. Go, Hercules!

(III,ii,53-60)

The “virgin tribute” was Hesione, and her rescue by Hercules is described in Book XI of Ovid’s Metamorphoses (where it is preceded by stories concerning Orpheus, who turned everything to music, and Midas, who turned everything to gold—they are both referred to in the play, and are hovering mythic presences behind it). Portia’s arresting claim—“I stand for sacrifice”—resonates through the play; to be darkly echoed by Shylock in court—“I stand for judgment … I stand here for law” (IV,i,103,142). When she says
“stand for”, does she mean ‘represent’, or ‘embody’; or does she imply that she is in danger of being ‘sacrificed’ to the law of her father, unless rescued by right-choosing Hercules-Bassanio? Or is it just that women are always, in effect, ‘sacrificed’ to men in marriage, hence the “bleared visages” of those “Dardanian wives”? Something of all of these, perhaps. In the event, it is Portia herself who, effectively rescues, or—her word—‘redeems’, not Troy, but Venice. Bassanio (courtier, scholar, and fortune-seeker) is, as we have seen, if not more, then as much Jason as Hercules. The point is, I think, that he has to be both as cunning as the one and as bold as the other. The ‘both-ness’ is important.

This is how Bassanio thinks his way to the choice of the correct casket:

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what pleas so tainted and corrupt,
But being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil?

(III,ii,73-7)

This, mutatis mutandis, is a theme in Shakespeare from first to last—“all that glitters is not gold”, and so on (II,vii,65). Bassanio is on very sure grounds in rejecting the gold and silver and opting for lead, in the context of the test. But—‘ornament’: from ornare—to equip, to adorn. Now, if ever there was an equipped and adorned city, it was Venice. It is aware of dangerous seas and treacherous shores, of course; but it is also a city of beauteous scarves, and silks and species—and what are they but ‘ornaments’ for the body and for food? Bassanio is an inhabitant and creation of an ornamented world, and is himself, as we say, an ‘ornament’ to it. So why does he win by going through a show of rejecting it? He wins, because he realises that he has to subscribe to the unadorned modesty of lead, even while going for the ravishing glory of gold. That was the sort of complex intelligence Portia's father had in mind for his daughter. Is it hypocrisy? Then we must follow Brockbank and call it “creative hypocrisy”. It recognises the compromising, and willing-to-compromise, doubleness of values on which a worldly society (a society in the world) necessarily rests, and by which it is sustained. The leaden virtues, and the golden pleasures. Bothness.

Such is the reconciling potency of Belmont; and Portia seals the happy marriage with a ring. But, meanwhile, Shylock is waiting back in Venice for his pound of flesh, and he must be satisfied. Must—because he has the law on his side, and Venice lives by law; its wealth and reputation depend on honouring contracts and bonds—as Shylock is the first to point out: “If you deny [my bond], let danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom”. Portia, as lawyer Balthasar, agrees: “There is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established” (IV,i,38-9,220-1). “I stay here on my bond” (IV,i,241)—if he says the word ‘bond’ once, he says it a dozen times (it occurs over thirty times in this play—never more than six times in other plays). We are in a world of law where ‘bonds’ are absolutely binding. Portia’s beautiful speech exhorting to ‘mercy’ is justly famous; but, as Burckhardt remarked, it is impotent and useless in this ‘court of justice’, a realm which is under the rule of the unalterable letter of the law. Her sweet and humane lyricism founders against harsh legal literalism. The tedious, tolling reiteration of the word ‘bond’ has an effect which musicians know as ‘devaluation through repetition’. The word becomes emptier and emptier of meaning, though still having its deadening effect. It is as if they are all in the grip of a mindless mechanism, which brings them to a helpless, dumb, impasse; with Shylock’s dagger quite legally poised to strike. Shylock, it is said, is adhering to the old Hebraic notion of the law—an eye for an eye. He has not been influenced by the Christian saying of St Paul: “The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.” For Shylock, the spirit is the letter; and Antonio can only be saved by the letter. It is as though Portia will have to find resources in literalism which the law didn't know it had.

Tarry a little; there is something else.
The bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are “a pound of flesh.”
Take then thy bond ...  
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more  
But just a pound of flesh.  

(IV,i,304-7, 324-5; my italics)

Ex-press: to press out. Portia squeezes new life and salvation out of the dead and deadly law—and not by extenuation or circumvention or equivocation. “How every fool can play upon the word!”, says Lorenzo, in response to Launcelot's quibbles. But you can't 'play' your way out of the Venetian law courts. Any solution must be found within the precincts of stern, rigorous law. “The Jew shall have all justice … He shall have merely justice and his bond”. (IV,i,320,338) And, to Shylock: “Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st”. (315) Portia makes literalism yield a life-saving further reach. Truly, the beyond of law.

Life-saving for Antonio—and for Venice itself, we may say. But not, of course, for Shylock. He simply crumples; broken by his own bond, destroyed by the law he “craved”. But prior to this, his speeches have an undeniable power, and a strangely compelling sincerity. Necessarily un-aristocratic, and closer to the streets (and the ghetto life back there somewhere), his speech in general has a force, and at times a passionate directness, which makes the more ‘ornamented’ speech of some of the more genteel Christians sound positively effete. Though his defeat is both necessary and gratifying—the cruel hunter caught with his own device—there is something terrible in the spectacle of his breaking. “I pray you give me leave to go from hence. I am not well.” (IV,i,394-5) And Gratiano's cruel, jeering ridicule, with which he taunts and lacerates Shylock through the successive blows of his defeat, does Christianity, does humanity, no credit. Like the malcontent or kill-joy in any comedy, Shylock has to be extruded by the regrouping, revitalised community, and he is duly chastised, humiliated, stripped, and despatched—presumably back to the Ghetto. He is never seen again; but it is possible to feel him as a dark, suffering absence throughout the final Act in Belmont. And in fact, he does make one last, indirect ‘appearance’. When Portia brings the news that Shylock has been forced to leave all his wealth to Jessica and Lorenzo, the response is—“Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people.” (V,i,293-4) ‘Manna’ was, of course, what fell from heaven and fed the children of Israel in the wilderness. This is the only time Shakespeare uses the word; and, just for a second, its deployment here—at the height of the joy in Christian Belmont—reminds us of the long archaic biblical past stretching back behind Shylock—who also, just for a second, briefly figures, no matter how unwillingly, as a version of the Old Testament God, providing miraculous sustenance for his ‘children’ (a point made by John Gross).

But why did not Shakespeare end his play with the climactic defeat of Shylock—why a whole extra Act with that ring business? Had he done so, it would have left Venice unequivocally triumphant, which perhaps he didn't quite want. This is the last aspect of the play I wish to address, and I must do so somewhat circuitously. Perhaps Shylock's most memorable claim is:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passion?—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?

(III,i,55-61)

That last question, seemingly rhetorical (of course you do), but eventually crucial (Shylock seems to have overlooked the fact that if he pricks Antonio, he will bleed too), is prepared for, in an admittedly small way, by the first suitor to attempt the challenge of the caskets. The Prince of Morocco starts by defending the “shadowed livery” of his “complexion”, as against “the fairest creature northward born”:

And let us make incision for your love

And let us make incision for your love
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

(II,i,6-7)

So, a black and a Jew claiming an equality with white Venetian gentle/gentiles (another word exposed to examination in the course of the play), which I have not the slightest doubt Shakespeare fully accorded them (the princely Morocco, in fact, comes off rather better than the silvery French aristocrat who follows him). And Morocco's hypothetical ‘incision’ anticipates the literal incision which Shylock seeks to make in Antonio. When Bassanio realises that Portia is going to ask to see her ring, which he has given away, he says in an aside:

Why, I were best cut my left hand off
And swear I lost the ring defending it.

(V,i,177-8)

So, there may be ‘incisions’ made ‘for love’, from hate, and out of guilt. Portia describes the wedding ring as

A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger,
And so riveted with faith unto your flesh.

(V,i,168-9)

‘Rivetting on’ is, I suppose, the opposite of Shylock's intended cutting out; but, taken together, there is a recurrent linking of law (oaths, bonds, rings)—and flesh. The play could be said to hinge on two contracts or bonds, in which, or by which, the law envisions, permits, requires, ordains, the exposing of a part of the body of one party to the legitimate penetration (incision) by the other party to the bond. If that party is Shylock, the penetration/incision would be done out of hate—and would prove fatal; if that other party is Bassanio it should be done out of love—and give new life. Shylock swears by his ‘bond’; Portia works through her ‘ring’.

It should be noted that, in the last Act, when Bassanio is caught out with having given Portia's ring away to Balthasar, he stands before Portia as guilty and helpless as Antonio stood before Shylock. And, like Shylock, she insists on the letter of the pledge, and will hear no excuses and is not interested in mercy. Like Shylock too, she promises her own form of ‘fleshly’ punishment (absence from Bassanio's bed, and promiscuous infidelity with others). As with the word ‘bond’ in the court scene, so with the word ‘ring’ in this last scene. It occurs twenty-one times, and at times is repeated so often that it risks suffering the semantic depletion which seemed to numb ‘bond’ into emptiness. Both the word ‘bond’ and the word ‘ring’—and all they represent in terms of binding/bonding—are endangered in this play. But the law stands—and continues to stand; bonds must be honoured or society collapses: there is nothing Bassanio can do. Then, just as Portia-as-Balthasar found a way through the Venetian impasse, so Portia-as-Portia has the life-giving power to enable Bassanio to renew his bond—she gives him, mysteriously and to him inexplicably, the same ring, for a second time. (She has mysterious, inexplicable good news for Antonio, too, about the sudden safe arrival of his ships.) A touch of woman's magic. For Portia is one of what Brockbank called Shakespeare's “creative manipulators” (of whom Prospero is the last). Like Vincentio (in Measure for Measure), she uses “craft against vice”. She can be a skilful man in Venice (a veritable Jacob), and a tricky, resourceful, ultimately loving and healing woman in Belmont (a good Medea with something of the art of Orpheus—both figures invoked in the scene). She can gracefully operate in, and move between, both worlds. Because she is, as it were, a man-woman, as good a lawyer as she is a wife—more ‘both-ness’; she figures a way in which law and love, law and blood, need not be mutually exclusive and opposed forces. She shows how they, too, can ‘frutify’ together.

The person who both persuades Bassanio to give away his ring, and intercedes for him with Portia (“I dare be bound again”) is Antonio. He is solitary and sad at the beginning, and is left alone at the end. He expresses his
love for Bassanio in an extravagant, at times tearful way. It is a love which seems to be reciprocated. In the
court scene, Bassanio protests to Antonio that

life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil to deliver you.

Portia, (she certainly does “stand for sacrifice”!), permits herself an understandably dry comment:

Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer.

(IV,i,283-8)

Perhaps this is why she decides to put Bassanio to the test with the ring. I do, of course, recognise the
honourable tradition of strong male friendship, operative at the time. I also know that ‘homosexuality’, as
such, was not invented until the late nineteenth century. I am also totally disinclined to seek out imagined
sexualities which are nothing to the point. But Antonio is so moistly, mooningly in love with Bassanio (and so
conspicuously uninvolved with, and unattracted to, any woman), that I think that his nameless sadness, and
seemingly foredoomed solitariness, may fairly be attributed to a homosexual passion, which must now be
frustrated since Bassanio is set on marriage. (Antonio's message to Bassanio's wife is: “bid her be judge /
Whether Bassanio had not once a love”, which implies ‘lover’ as much as ‘friend’; revealingly, Antonio's one
remaining desire is that Bassanio should witness the fatal sacrifice he is to make for him.) Even then, we
might say that that is neither here nor there. Except for one fact. Buggery and usury were very closely
associated or connected in the contemporary mind as unnatural acts. Shylock is undoubtedly a usurer, who
becomes unwell; but if Antonio is, not to put too fine a point on it, a buggerer, who is also unwell, well. …

Perhaps some will find the suggestion offensively irrelevant; and perhaps it is. But the atmosphere in
Venice-Belmont, is not unalloyedly pure. The famous love duet between Lorenzo and Jessica which starts Act
Five, inaugurating the happy post-Shylock era—“In such a night …”—is hardly an auspicious one, invoking
as it does a faithless woman (Cressid), one who committed suicide (Thisbe), an abandoned woman (Dido),
and a sorceress (Medea whose spells involved physical mutilation), before moving on to a contemporary
female thief—Jessica herself. I hardly think that she and Lorenzo will bear any mythological ‘ornamenting’.
And that theft has become part of the texture of the Belmont world. It is a place of beautiful music and
poetry—and love; but with perhaps just a residual something-not-quite-right lingering from the transactions
and ‘usages’ of Ghetto-Rialto Venice. (The very last word of the play is a punningly obscene use of ‘ring’ by
Gratiano, the most scarbous and cynical voice in Venice—again, a slightly off-key note.) There is moonlight
and candle-light for the nocturnal conclusion of the play, but it doesn't ‘glimmer’ as beautifully as it did at the
end of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Portia says:

This night methinks is but the daylight sick;
It looks a little paler. 'Tis a day
Such as the day when the sun is hid.

(V,i,124-6)

A little of the circulating sickness has reached Belmont. The play is a comedy; but Shakespeare has here
touched on deeper and more potentially complex and troubling matters than he had hitherto explored, and the
result is a comedy with a difference. And, of course, it is primarily Shylock who makes that difference.

Now, let's go back to the beginning. “Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?” It turns out to be a
good question.

Bibliography


**Criticism: Character Studies: Robert Alter (essay date 1993)**


[In the following essay, Alter focuses on Shylock as the central figure of The Merchant of Venice, contending that the source of the play's enduring popularity can be found in the variety of theatrical interpretations of Shylock’s character.]

*The Merchant of Venice* has inspired a certain ambivalence through much of its four-century history, and that ambivalence is sharply inscribed in the changing interpretations of the play. What is more surprising is that it has been one of Shakespeare's two most popular plays (the second being *Hamlet*), as the English literary critic John Gross shows through careful documentation in his highly instructive new study, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*. Why this should be so is something of a puzzle.

An account of the plan of John Gross's book might make it sound like one of those tedious chronological surveys of the “reception history” of a familiar literary work. In fact, Gross handles his subject with such urbane intelligence and wit, such fine alertness to the telling detail and anecdote, such a nice balance of both aesthetic and moral judgment, that his survey becomes a deeply interesting case-study of the ambiguous relations between literature and historical reality.

*Shylock* is divided into three roughly equal sections. The first deals with the play itself and its original contexts; the second mainly with stage productions from the 17th century to the present; and the third with the archetype of Shylock and critical, fictional, and dramaturgical interpretations of it. There is a certain Germanic thoroughness to all this—as supposed literary specialists within universities increasingly limit their reading to the same dozen or so texts of Continental theory, the crown of scholarship may well be passing to literary journalists like Gross—but it is carried out with an engaging English lightness of touch.

Thus, we learn all the pertinent facts about Shakespeare's sources; the actual condition of Jews in England (what few there were) and in Venice in the 16th century; Shakespeare's own possible involvement in lending money for interest and venture capitalism. The middle section patiently reconstructs from the available sources the principal English and American productions of the play and their critical reception, and some attention is also accorded to German and French stage interpretations. The final section casts its net wide
enough to include various fictional extrapolations from Shakespeare's story; a discussion of Jews in Proust; the psychoanalyst Theodore Reik's free associations, triggered by the play, about his relationship with his daughter; and the British critic M. C. Bradbrook's dumbfounding proposition that “The concentration camps of Nazi Germany bred many heroes and martyrs but also a few Shylocks.” Throughout, Gross has a gift for bringing out the absurd and the outrageous through tersely acerbic understatement, though there are a few points (as in his pillorying of Jonathan Miller's 1970 National Theater production) where his sense of moral and aesthetic seamliness leads him to vigorously explicit judgments.

In broad terms, one can speak of two underlying versions of Shylock between which stage productions have oscillated over the centuries. The first, which dominated productions throughout the 18th century, conceived the Jew demanding his pound of flesh as an embodiment of “savage fierceness, a deadly spirit of revenge,” in the words of Nicholas Rowe's 1709 essay on Shakespeare. That conception was memorably realized in the middle of the century in the treatment of the role by the famous Irish actor Charles Macklin. “There was such an iron-visaged look,” a contemporary of Macklin's observed, “such a relentless, savage cast of manners, that the audience seemed to shrink from the character.”

But in 1814, a hitherto unknown actor in his early twenties named Edmund Kean effected a revolution in the stage interpretation of Shylock by casting off the traditional red wig that had linked the Jew with the devil of the medieval mystery plays and endowing him (in Gross's words) “with a large measure of dignity and humanity.” William Hazlitt, present at the performance as a reviewer, was thunderstruck with admiration. Another contemporary, Douglas Jerrold, said that Kean's sympathetic interpretation of the Jew seemed to the audience “like a chapter of Genesis.”

Later in the century, the actor Henry Irving picked up a cue from Hazlitt in proclaiming, “I look upon Shylock as the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used.” Irving's forceful playing of the role became the interpretation that dominated the latter part of the Victorian age. Gross associates this philo-Semitic Shylock with the growth of liberalism in 19th-century England, accompanied by a reflex of conscience about earlier ill-treatment of the Jews and an increasing acceptance of Jews in social and political life. One might add to these plausible reasons a certain imaginative sympathy on the part of the Romantics with the outsider, the figure of the cursed or hunted man, the image of suffering humanity entrammeled in the demonic.

The more or less neat swing from antipathy to sympathy between the 18th and 19th centuries disappears in our own century amid a welter of critical and stage interpretations. At least since the 1920's, there has been no preponderant version of Shylock. Sundry variations on the old diabolic conception alternate indiscriminately with new efforts to render the long-suffering human dignity of the Jew, and there have even been occasional reversions to the oldest stage notion of Shylock as a grotesque figure of fun.

The curious thing about all this, as Gross has occasion to note at several points, is that critics and directors in our time have very often been entirely unaffected by what happened to the real Jews of Venice and Berlin and Warsaw in the terrible middle decades of the century. Shakespeare of course did not write his comedy with an eye to possible future catastrophes of European history, and the play as he framed it certainly has its own thematic and dramaturgical integrity. Gross cites a delicate case in point in the comments on the play, written in 1939, by the eminent American critic Mark Van Doren.

Shylock’s voice, Van Doren observed, however differently it might sound in another universe, must, in the world of the play, be “nothing but a snarl, an animal cry sounding outrageously among the flute and recorder voices of persons whose very names, unlike his own, are flowing musical phrases.” This is beautifully and precisely put (Shylock in fact expresses a petulant distaste for music; his speech-rhythms are abrupt, emphatic, and unmusical; Belmont in the play is a realm of enchanting song; and so forth). Nevertheless, Gross is troubled that Van Doren—an admirably humane critic and personally sympathetic toward
The extraordinary magnetism exerted by this play on audiences and directors is hard to explain in intrinsic literary terms. If one assumes that the work bracketed with Hamlet at the center of the Shakespeare canon would have to be a comedy (the histories and the late romances being perhaps too hybrid in form to win all-time popularity contests), more compelling candidates readily come to mind. The Taming of the Shrew and Much Ado About Nothing are livelier and more witty by far. A Midsummer Night's Dream is a more splendidly extravagant deployment of the fairy-tale elements in which The Merchant is supposed to excel, just as both Twelfth Night and As You Like It outstrip it in the rich celebration of a world of song, play, and love's fulfillment. And for the sheer funniness of boisterous farce, The Merry Wives of Windsor makes The Merchant's efforts at stage humor look stale and unprofitable.

There are, of course, magnificent moments in The Merchant of Venice: Shylock's famous speeches, Portia's courtroom address, and Lorenzo's magical evocation of the harmony of the heavens near the end of the play (the speech beginning “How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!”). But in between, much of the poetry is no more than serviceable, and the comic byplay is often labored and unfunny—dreadful, drearily repeated puns on words like “Moor” and “more,” mechanically insistent malapropisms, crude jeering like Gratiano's taunt to Shylock that he will have to hang himself at the state's expense because the court has not left him the value of a cord. Then the double plot of the creditor's pound of flesh and the fair lady's three caskets is a compounding of contrivance with contrivance. Either one must say, as many critics have done, that folk-tale fantasy makes good theater, or one has to conclude that the mixed marriage of genres here strains even the loose boundaries of comic plausibility.

The Merchant of Venice, then, has its artistic as well as its moral problems. Nevertheless, there must be something about its plot and its central figure that has a powerful hold on the imagination and that accounts for its perdurable popularity. When I refer to the play's central figure I mean Shylock, even though it is Antonio who is the merchant of the title and Bassanio who is the romantic lead, and even though the Jew is only intermittently on stage, entirely excluded by the fifth act. But Gross's history—which provides a starting point for the reflections that follow—offers ample evidence that it was Shylock who was the constant lodestar for actors and audiences: all the great male performers wanted to play him; most critical accounts are, above all, responses to this compelling figure.

The one explanation which I think can be dismissed out of hand is that the play's appeal derives from its exploitation of anti-Semitic fantasy, here tapped into by the greatest dramatic poet in the language. This will...
not wash because, as Gross shows, many of the most spectacular successes of the play from 1814 onward were passionately philo-Semitic productions. Nor, surely, can anti-Semitism account for the popularity of the play in cultures quite unfamiliar with Jews, or in adaptations that have effaced the Jewish identity of the villain.

With regard to the surprising exportability of *The Merchant of Venice* to exotic regions, Gross suggests that the fairy-tale elements of the story may explain its universal appeal. (I shall have more to say below about the intertwining of different generic strands in the play.) Still, if the play works its magic for some of the same reasons in kabuki as at the Old Vic, it must also in other respects have a distinctive freight of meaning for the Christian West. Among the frequent reminders Gross provides of that fact, perhaps the most sobering is his report of the spate of productions in Nazi Germany—though with some directorial squirming at the miscegenation allowed by the nonracist anti-Semitism of the plot.

The ultimate power of *The Merchant* resides in Shylock; and Shylock, as the history of the play's interpretation indicates, is an explosively unstable figure, both as comic villain and as Jew. Let me propose that there is at once a poor fit and a synergy between Shylock's dramatically archetypal role as ill-spirited obstacle in the comic plot—the old man, *senex*, of Roman comedy who tries to withhold his fair daughter as well as his wealth from her destined lover—and his ethnically archetypal role as bloodsucking Jewish moneylender. There is, I suspect, something about the transgression of boundaries in the ambiguous dynamic between those two roles that gives the play its peculiar fascination.

The catalogue of negative attributes exhibited by Shakespeare's Jew is, alas, what could be expected almost anywhere in Christendom from the First Crusade to the Enlightenment. Shylock is, from his first appearance, the sullenly obdurate outsider (“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”). So far, so good, at least in regard to the historical record: resentment against the Jew as stubborn alien belongs to what the historian Gavin Langmuir has called “anti-Judaic” feeling, in contradistinction to anti-Semitic animus which instead of reacting to the real condition of Jews projects lurid fantasies on to them.

Such fantasies, however, soon abound in the play. The Jew is demonic—“the very devil incarnation,” his servant Launcelot Gobbo announces, with considerable corroboration from the plot; his house is represented as a kind of hell, the antipodes of the aristocratic *paradiso* of Portia's Belmont. He is also repeatedly referred to in bestial terms, as a cur or wolf (Van Doren's “snarl” is quite to the point). In the algebra of archetypes, the combination of beast of prey and devil yields vampire, an identity Shylock is prepared to claim for himself in his first speech to Jessica—“I'll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian.”

Usury itself, the play suggests (in historical bad faith, for it was widespread among Christians by the late 16th century), is a kind of vampirism, and Shylock's implacable demand for his pound of flesh is a horrific literal translation of that metaphor. In turn, Gross plausibly suggests that Shylock's murderous bond is a proposal “to commit ritual murder at one remove.” Portia's courtroom denial to Shylock of any drop of blood thus goes to the very core of the anti-Semitic nightmare image. The fantasy of the Jew battening on Christian blood is interfused in the tale of the pound of flesh with the hostile stereotype of the Jew as usurer—as it would continue to be in a wide variety of texts, from Marx's notorious essay on the Jews to Nazi and Communist propaganda.

Beyond this cluster of repellent traits that are drawn from age-old anti-Semitic imaginings, Shylock exhibits one salient characteristic more closely associated with comic villains than with Jews: he is a dour hater of the revels that are at the heart of the comic world. He is mistrustful of the masked carnival figures surging through the Venetian streets; he despises music (“the vile squealing of the wry neck'd fife”) and is suspicious of metaphor, with an odd little tic of literally “translating” the ones he uses himself; and he sternly disapproves of all forms of risk-taking, whether in business or in games of chance. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, he
is a man with a rigidly fixed identity who abhors disguises and exchanged identities. Hence his hostility to the Venetian masks, and hence the poetic justice of his being foiled in justice by a woman got up as a man. The ultimate pain of his forced conversion at the end of Act IV may be the violation not of his creed but rather of his hard-set sense of self. Shylock is the man who insists on being one thing alone in a comic world that celebrates multifariousness and a playful conjuring with appearances.

Now, to all this it is essential to add the dimension of Shylock that has been so abundantly noted by critics since Hazlitt and by actors since Kean—that Shakespeare, with his unrivaled gift for endowing his characters with life, bestowed more touching humanity on Shylock than the prejudices of his culture might have allowed. The most frequently cited prooftext is of course the great “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, and though that ends in justifying vengeance, Shylock also observes that he has learned the code of vengeance from the Christians—by no means a historically implausible claim in the 16th century.

A more succinct, almost startling, instance in which Shylock's humanity suddenly shines through is when he is told that Jessica, after eloping with much of the family treasure, has traded a particular turquoise ring for a monkey: “It was my turquoise,” he cries out in distinctly uncomic anguish. “I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” This is no villain who speaks here but a man who truly loved, and was loved by, a wife he still mourns in his long condition as widower, who left him this only daughter, now become his heartless betrayer.

We will remember the ring given Shylock as a pledge of love later on, when Portia and her companion Nerissa give rings to their betrothed lovers, making them solemnly vow that nothing will lead them to part with the rings; the two women then cunningly extract these very tokens of love when they appear in men's disguise in the trial scene. At the very end, with amorous rebukes and teasing sexual puns, the women restore the rings to their bridgrooms and forgive their trespass—but in comparison with Shylock's naked pain over the loss of his dead wife's token of love, there remains a lingering sense of gratuitous monkey business in Belmont. This is a detail in no way required by the comic plot or the larger thematic design, but which Shakespeare's humane genius drew him into imagining.

The character of Shylock, then, bursts through the conventional limits of the comic senex in two opposite directions—in the representation of the suffering of a much-wronged outsider (the “tragic” Shylock, as some critics would have it) and in the demonization of what in other comedies would be the figure of fun (the mythic Shylock). It is hard to think of another comedy that pushes so powerfully against the boundaries of genre in these two opposite ways. Before the fact, one might imagine that such a contradictory conception of character could not work; but in the incandescence of Shakespeare's imagination, the alternating tragic and mythic Shylock comes vividly to life, and perhaps the contradiction at the core of the character explains the power of this strange figure.

But I have been speaking of the play as though the genres and archetypes of literature evolved in a vacuum, without any relation to history. My account so far may say something about the fascination with The Merchant experienced by audiences in Tokyo and Beijing, but for theatergoers in mid-18th-century London or in New York after the Civil War, not to mention Berlin of the 1930's, there were obviously other potent considerations involved. Jews, too, would come to be fascinated with The Merchant of Venice—John Gross offers some piquant anecdotes, for example, about Yiddish productions—but the history of the reception of the play is above all a history of responses by a culturally and often creedally Christian audience.

In this regard, I would argue that there is a deep if somewhat murky correlation between the transgression of the limits of comedy in the play and its intermittent transgression of the boundaries between self and reviled other, insider and outsider. Those contradictory excesses in the characterization of Shylock remind us that comedy's world, where all tigers turn paper, and all obstacles to sweet fulfillment are in the end gracefully overleaped, is only make-believe. In the real world that comedy displaces, there are nightmarish terrors that
cannot be dispelled, and pleasure is all too often bought at the price of someone else's pain. Shakespeare in
this fashion plays a kind of dangerous game with the genre in which he is working while he nevertheless
affirms its logic, rounding out the play with the moonlit postlude of the fifth act in which the figure of
Shylock has been entirely exorcised and love sounds its bantering lute song on the threshold of
consummation.

Something roughly equivalent occurs in the play's treatment of the cultural conventions of anti-Semitism. It
was clearly not part of Shakespeare's conscious design to question the received wisdom of Christian hostility
toward the Jews. Living in a country from which they had been banished for four centuries, he had little or no
opportunity for firsthand acquaintance with them, and so what he “knew” about Jews was what his culture
knew—that they were rapacious, greedy, cunning, and inhumanly cruel. All this is Shylock. There is nothing
new about the hostile stereotypes, but, as Gross soberly observes, Shylock the Jewish villain, imbued with the
force of Shakespeare's intrinsic poetic power and subsequent prestige, “helped to spread [the stereotypes] and
to keep them vigorously alive. He belongs, inescapably, to the history of anti-Semitism.”

If this bleak truth were the whole truth, one might sympathize with the protesters who have emerged from
some modern Jewish communities in response to productions of The Merchant of Venice. But Gross is quick
to remind us of Shakespeare's inclination, as a playwright who disliked one-sided conflicts, to “build up”
Shylock. He could not resist trying to imagine what it might be like to be a Jew, and “dramatic imagination,
when it is pitched at the Shakespearean level, becomes a moral quality, a form of humanism.” The disparity
between the antipathetic and the empathetic representation of Shylock leaves, in Gross's view, a lingering hint
of nastiness in the play. Portia, Antonio, Bassanio, Lorenzo embody the comic virtues of grace, playfulness,
intelligence, and loving friendship, but they are also utterly cold, callous, and exasperatingly blithe in seeing
the Jew as no more than a vile cur to be driven off with cudgels. It is hardly a prejudice that can have a claim
to historical innocence.

Yet it could well be that this peculiar dissonance between the anti-Semitic conception of Shylock and the
moments of incipient or genuine empathy is precisely what has excited the imagination of audiences over the
centuries. One must remember that it was the Jew who was constantly the archetypal alien in the mind of
Christian Europe. There were, to be sure, other candidates: the Muslims, who were actual imperial
adversaries; the Orientals, of inscrutable repute; and still more exotic, purportedly savage, types, like black
Africans and American Indians. But all these stood on the other side of a distant cultural horizon.

The Jew alone was in the midst of Christendom, speaking Christian languages, conducting trade with
Christians, often looking and acting far more “Christian” than the stereotypes of prejudice were willing to
admit. And it was thus the Jew, stubborn in his particularism, despised by Christians, who raised disturbing
questions about the boundaries of Christian collective identity. Hence a certain persistent edginess about the
Jewish other, which could generate anything from a simple perception of difference, or similarity in
difference, to genteel discrimination, active persecution, forced conversion, even mass murder.

What happens in The Merchant of Venice is that the accepted definition of self by way of contradistinction to
the excluded other is buoyantly sustained, as one might expect in a comedy, while the two-sided
representation of Shylock flashes an intermittent, stroboscopic light on a radically antithetical possibility of
identity. Perhaps there might be hidden affinities between self and other; perhaps the very otherness of the
other is largely a cultural construct.

The intimations of such a possibility in Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock are quite unsentimental. If there
are moments when he provides insight into Shylock's very human anguish as an outsider, this invitation to
identify with the Jewish villain may also suggest that the predatory aspects of the character, his unbending
cruelty, are not to be so patly identified as the exclusive property of the hated alien, but may comfortably nest
as well in the Christian heart. If in Shylock the diabolic is made human, perhaps what the culture assumes
definitionally to be human may have its own dark part in the diabolic. It is not mere coincidence that the first sympathetic portrayals of Shylock in criticism and on the stage came at the very moment that the blighted Byronic hero was dominating the English literary imagination.

The plot of the comedy, of course, keeps Christian community and Jewish outsider perfectly distinct. In Belmont, far above the mire of Venetian trade with its shady Jewish practitioners, the circle of melodiously named heroes and heroines is happily drawn tight. No Jewish foot is allowed to profane these precincts, except for that of the lovely Jessica, cleansed by baptismal waters. But down in the savage give-and-take of the commercial world of Venice, the barriers between insider and outsider are not always impermeable, and there are fleeting hints that the savagery exists on both sides.

Thus, in Act III, Scene III, Shylock visits Antonio in jail to warn him that on the morrow he will have his pound of flesh. Antonio, ever the perfect gentleman, addresses his Jewish adversary courteously as “good Shylock,” hoping he will persuade the moneylender to show compassion. The Jew, in an ecstasy of triumphant vengefulness, scarcely lets him get a word in edgewise, repeatedly insisting, “I will have my bond.” Antonio quickly abandons the attempt to address Shylock, and with a kind of shrug, explains to his friend Solanio that the Jew hates him because he, Antonio, has given loans without interest.

In all these respects, the scene is entirely an anti-Semitic set-up: Christian nobility, reasonableness, and charity over against “Old Testament” vengeance; pre-capitalist Christian lending as a kind of philanthropy over against Jewish usury. But even when he is playing with loaded dice, Shakespeare cannot refrain from giving Shylock one quick fair throw. “Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause, / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.” It is a very small gesture in a scene designed to expose Shylock's inhumanity, but it is nonetheless astonishing. For the fact of the matter is that every Christian in the play, given half a chance, is happy to call Shylock dog, and would clearly do so even without the excuse of his insistence on his terrible bond.

The plot revolving around the pound of flesh preserves the simple and pernicious cultural opposition between bestial Jew and human Christian, or, in theological terms, between the old dispensation of implacable law and the new dispensation governed by the quality of mercy which is not strained. Mercy, however, as exercised by the Christian characters, is conspicuous for not dropping as the gentle rain from heaven on any Jewish head. Shylock, treated like a beast of prey as a matter of Christian cultural practice, defiantly tells Antonio that this, then, is what he will become.

*The Merchant of Venice*, not through Shakespeare's intention but through his uncanny dramatic intuition, invites Christian audiences to a kind of out-of-self experience. If the looming, sinister other embodies all the hateful qualities that Christian culture would like to think are alien to it, there are also brief but powerful intimations that the other may be the moral and psychological consequence of treatment by the self; that the self may harbor the fearsome attributes it habitually projects on the other; and that both participate profoundly in a vulnerable human condition which the self is usually predisposed to see as its own private property.

Actual productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have generally opted either for the humane, suffering Shylock or for the diabolic one. But it seems plausible that the magnetism of the work is generated by the interplay between the two perspectives, with all the freight of historical and psychological ambiguities that I have tried to describe. This is by no means Shakespeare's most satisfying play, but the ultimate source of its strange appeal, so finely traced by John Gross, may perhaps be found in the very tensions and disjunctions of its underlying conception.
Criticism: Character Studies: Cynthia Lewis (essay date 1997)


[In the following excerpt, Lewis regards The Merchant of Venice as an ironic tragicomedy, concentrating on Antonio as the focus of the drama’s ambiguities, contradictions, and equivocations, while also tracing developments in Shakespeare’s characterization of Portia.]

I

Antonio opens the play by speaking three times in seven lines of how little he understands himself:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad;
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.

(1.1.1-7; emphasis added)

Thus, he immediately establishes the play's keen interest, which runs throughout, in the inadequacy of human knowledge. As readers and audiences, our first impulse is to provide the reason for Antonio's sadness—in most cases (cases too numerous to mention individually), the cause advanced is Bassanio's imminent departure. To assume so, however, is to remain deaf to Antonio's emphasis and to the dynamic of the entire first scene, which points to the absence of adequate explanations for Antonio's melancholy. In the first part of the scene, Salerio, Solanio, and Gratiano all repeatedly guess at what is ailing Antonio. Clearly, none of them wholly succeeds. In rejecting their theories, Antonio reaffirms his self-estrangement: he does not know himself.

Nor does he appear to know the world in which his ships traffic. Salerio's speech about the perils of the sea (22-40), although familiar to the point of cliché, is nevertheless compelling. What's more, it is readily accessible, indebted as it is to the popular conceit of the sea as fortune and built on two simple metaphorical vehicles, “broth” and “church” (22, 29). A rhetorical tour de force, it speaks true: earthly life and goods, “even now worth this, / And now worth nothing,” are at the mercy of earthly change (1.1.35-36). Yet, Salerio's persuasive speech does not move Antonio, who, although manifestly steeped in what Lyon calls an “ordinary and ‘worldly’ world” (31), is nonetheless out of step with that world. He is imprudently confident of his “fortune” (41):

My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

(42-45)

Two scenes later, with like oblivion, he impawns his flesh to Shylock.
Antonio's unskillful maneuvering in a world fraught with danger is pronounced but hardly unique. If he is, as his friends assert, a "strange fellow" and "marvellously chang'd" (51, 76), then he reflects the alienation and unpredictability portended even by the well-adjusted Bassanio as he greets his friends: "Good signiors both, when shall we laugh? say, when? / You grow exceeding strange. Must it be so?" (66-67). All human attachments, the play demonstrates from the start, are precarious. Nor does Venetian Christian culture fully protect its members from social alienation. For, although to themselves they are all natives, to an Elizabethan audience they would have been considered "merchant-strangers," the term applied by Londoners from midcentury on to "foreign or alien traders." The concepts of native and foreign are relative, dependent upon perspective. Whatever sense of their impregnability may be afforded to the Venetians by their luxury, leisure, and power, it is continually undermined and exposed as contingent.

The effect of such undermining is dramatic irony, the tone that, in turn, dominates the play. In the particular case of the opening scene, the audience is being prepared for the crucial irony to follow, when the Venetians, themselves "strangers" in a variety of senses, treat the Jewish usurer increasingly as a foreigner, naming him "Jew" (passim), then "stranger" (3.3.27), finally "alien" (4.1.349). Moreover, one of the chief purposes of such dramatic irony is to expose ostensible binaries in Merchant—like Christian versus Jew, or Venice versus Belmont—as suspicious, perhaps artificial. The more an audience probes the characterization of the Christian Italians in act 1, which Shakespeare takes obvious pains to elaborate at length before introducing Shylock at all, the more they resemble their Jewish counterpart.

Take, for example, the conversation in 1.3 where Bassanio, approaching Shylock in Antonio's behalf, misunderstands Shylock's remark, "Antonio is a good man," by replying, "Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?" (12-14). Almost universally, critics have cited this passage to show the difference between Jew and Christian, who, as Shylock's retort to Bassanio implies, do not even speak the same language: "Ho, no, no, no! my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient" (15-17). Shylock's orientation is financial, we read repeatedly in the criticism on Merchant, whereas Bassanio's is moral. But this interpretation is misleading because it ignores Bassanio's attitudes and language as early as 1.1. There, in fact, Bassanio's request to Antonio and his description of Portia appear every bit as mercenary as are Shylock's ruminations over Antonio's suitability as a borrower. Only Bassanio's language is dressier. It is the language of spiritual venturing put to the service of obscuring his motive, which is to gain financial independence from Antonio by attaching himself to "a lady richly left" (161). Read closely, Bassanio's plans to woo Portia through Antonio's renewed generosity are couched in metaphors that are misleadingly high-minded and big-hearted: he wants to "get clear of all [his] debts" to Antonio by "hazard[ing]" another loan from Antonio (134, 151); his object is a woman of "worth" (167); and his "thrift" promises to render him "fortunate" (175-76). Not coincidentally, thrift is Shylock's word for "usury," as the audience is about to hear in 1.3 (50, 90).

In effect, Bassanio and Shylock do not speak differently but share the same vocabulary, which Bassanio seems better at manipulating to blur his intent. He may well be attracted to Portia's "fair" looks and "wondrous virtues"—additional elements of her "worth"—as well as to her inheritance (1.1.162-63, 167). Yet, his language of financial speculation in 1.1 fits his professed love for Antonio and Portia only uncomfortably, if at all.

The immediate purpose of the dramatic irony that such implicit comparison between Jew and Christian creates is to puncture any character's pretensions to being essentially different from any other. Such claims to distinctiveness are often made in earnest—for instance, by the duke of Venice, as he pronounces Shylock's sentence at the trial: "That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, / I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it" (4.1.368-69). They are also parodied by Launcelot Gobbo in 3.5. According to the clown, the conversion from Jew to Christian is of no more consequence than an increase in the price of pork (21-26). In the same scene, moreover, Launcelot is revealed to have easily crossed racial boundaries himself by impregnating the Moor (37-42). In no case are the actual similarities between apparently disparate characters more extensive,
however, than in that of Shylock and Antonio, who are far less divided by cultural barriers than bound naturally by their strangeness and estrangement. The one is alienated from Christian society, the other from this world altogether.

Antonio's discomfort in this world has its positive associations with ideal charity, like that of Saint Anthony, and, generally, unlike Shylock's miserliness. The merchant's willingness to dispense interest-free loans is legendary in Venice (1.2.43-45), and his devotion to Bassanio is widely recognized within his social sphere (2.8.35-50). Indeed, a large part of the point about Antonio's willingness to practice hypocrisy in borrowing from Shylock in the first place is that his high regard for Bassanio compels him to. In this sense, he is a conventional wise fool, ruled by irrational love. At the same time, however, his is an obsessive attachment to Bassanio; as Solanio says, Antonio “only loves the world for” his friend (2.8.50). Such recklessness proves at least as harmful to some other characters—Shylock and Portia especially—as Shylock's overt hostility. And perhaps not all of Antonio's indiscretions can be attributed to his heedlessness; some seem every bit as calculated as Shylock's aggressions.

Antonio's affinity with Shylock is first evinced in 1.3, where his nature is disclosed through his open hypocrisies. He will “neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess”—that is, unless he needs to (61-64). He will also borrow from a man he has publicly abused, both verbally and physically, and will likely mistreat again (106-31). He will, in other words, practice the usury he reviles. Presumably, he satisfies his conscience by rationalizing the interest he will owe Shylock as adequate payment for his persecution of the Jew:

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty.

(132-37)

Antonio thus justifies the contemptuous “face” with which he uses Shylock's money. Worth noting here is Shylock's unwillingness to practice hypocrisy of his own until this point. He has refused Bassanio's hollow invitation to dinner and drawn a telling comparison between himself and the prototypical trickster Jacob, alerting the careful listener to his attitude toward his would-be clients (33-38, 71-90). In addition, he confronts Antonio's hypocrisy directly (106-29). Only after Antonio insists on contracting with Shylock despite his loathing does Shylock assume his own mask of “kindness” (143):

I would be friends with you, and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,
Supply your present wants, and take no doit
Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me.

(137-41)

Shylock can match Antonio move for move, ever deepening his resemblance to him.

In fact, Shylock's shift in attitude toward the bond—from “merry sport” to earnest—hinges on another Christian hypocrisy, the central one in Shakespeare's plot (1.3.145). Having finally consented to dine with the Christians in the spirit of “hate” (2.5.14), Shylock discovers too late just how much they have “flatter[ed]” him with their invitation (2.5.13). The dinner turns out to have been a subterfuge to expedite Jessica's elopement, as Shylock bemoans to Solanio upon entering after she has fled: “You knew, none so
well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight” (3.1.24-25). Significantly, at no time hereafter is this hoodwinking of Shylock addressed. Even though it is, in the best light, a morally questionable ruse, the Christians are never held in the least bit accountable for it. Only Shylock is reproached in subsequent scenes for his violent, vengeful reaction to it. What might have happened to Shylock's “stony” heart if a Christian or two in the trial scene had apologized for participating in the earlier scheme against him (4.1.4)? Shylock's public humiliation of Antonio—and the firm control over his nemesis that it requires—are partly, as the usurer maintains, “villainy” that the Christians “teach” him (3.1.71).

I am not excusing Shylock's vengeance, which he clearly harbors from the very beginning: he “hates” Antonio “for he is a Christian; / But more, for that … / He lends out money gratis” (1.3.42-44). Nor do I intend to vilify Antonio and his Christian company. Neither do I mean to ignore conventional sixteenth-century depictions of Jews as monstrous or to pass over or minimize genuine cultural differences in any society, including Shakespeare's Venice. They do exist. Yet, differing cultural practices may be mistaken as human differences. I am trying to show that many of the supposed distinctions in Merchant, which attach themselves to categories like Christian and Jew, or victim and villain, are just such mistaken disparities. They are relatively superficial, and they invite disproof. For all the acrimony they arouse among the characters and the disagreement they elicit in audience members, attempts to validate them turn quickly into vain exercises in hair-splitting and, worse yet, detours from recognizing the dramatic irony at hand and the uses to which it is put. The profound correspondences among the characters in Merchant ultimately redirect the audience's attention from a cultural dilemma to a universally human one. It is the larger problem of feeling at home in the inhospitable world of the flesh, beginning with the body, which, as Shylock's unpleasant analogy to his vengeful humor indicates, may easily betray and “shame” us: “Some men there are … / … when the bagpipe sings i’ th’ nose, / Cannot contain their urine” (4.1.47-50). The worldly world of Merchant imposes such severe difficulties as to encourage withdrawal from it.

Put another way, Shylock's social alienation—in some ways caused by himself as much as by others—leads him to a madness much like Antonio's folly. Both become increasingly isolated, even imprisoned. As Shylock becomes enslaved to vengeance, his passion finds bizarre reflection in Antonio's passive resignation to it:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;  
For the commodity that strangers have  
With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
Will much impeach the justice of the state,  
Since that the trade and profit of the city  
Consisteth of all nations.

(3.3.26-31)

The essential truth of these lines notwithstanding, Antonio's specific explanation as to why Shylock must take his pound of flesh, rendered nearly impenetrable by his tortuous language, provides further evidence of his maladjustment to the material world. Yes, he must be shaken here by Shylock's carnivorous presence in the scene, but his contorted syntax owes to more than his present situation. For instance, is the subject of “will impeach” the “denial of commodity” or “the denial of the course of law”? The construction is muddled. Furthermore, the reason that the court might be “impeached” for a decision against Shylock is not, exactly, that Venice relies on “all nations” for trade; more specifically, it is because Venice must protect the foreigners who have relocated in Venice and who contribute to Venetian wealth and security, as Antonio means, but only vaguely relates. His wording mirrors his malaise, seen especially in his consistent impulse to deal half-heartedly with the complexities of his existence by evasion, if not altogether removing himself. His readiness to die at Shylock's hands in the trial scene is expressed in the terms of Pauline wise folly: “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me” (4.1.114-16). As numerous sequels to this speech demonstrate, however, Antonio's self-negation is not
“You cannot better be employ'd, Bassanio, / Than to live still and write mine epitaph” (4.1.117-18). Antonio still has an ego; in this case, he channels it toward raising himself in others’ opinions.

What Antonio projects as his wisely foolish abandonment of self-interest is actually a truly foolish sacrifice of self-protection. He would rather die self-righteous than engage with Shylock, the law, and other worldly concerns, saving whatever face he can by manipulating Bassanio’s public display of gratitude toward him. Likewise, the Shylock of acts 3 and 4 foolishly forfeits whatever standing he does enjoy in Venice to satisfy his loathing, as Stephen Greenblatt writes, “against all reason and self-interest.” In 1.3, Shylock has appeared attuned to and adept at dealing with life's perils, enumerating the reasons that contracting with Antonio would be unwise (17-25), while Antonio blithely ignores the dangers to his ships and to himself. But by act 4, both men have lost their heads. They are equally at odds with, adrift in, this world.

Their unease, merely an extreme version of that visiting all the major characters, also emerges in Belmont. There it is handled more lightly and yet is enough in evidence to erode the apparent dissimilarities between the play’s two settings. Portia’s first line echoes Antonio’s—both are “weary,” predisposed by their fatigue in “this great world” to retreat from it (1.2.2). As reasonable as are Nerissa’s objections to Portia’s complaints (1.2.3-9, 27-35), we may well sense, as Portia rehearses the relentless list of suitors to whom she has extended entertainment, that her world-weariness is deserved (1.2.39-111). Being stuck in a country house with a pack of unattractive suitors (one of whom just might choose the right casket) is no one’s idea of fulfillment. Yet it is one of the play’s many metaphors—others including the Venetian law—for the constrictions that accompany this life. No wonder, in a sense, that Antonio is so ready to leave it.

Still, Portia seems gently mocked for traces of the same characteristics that eventually render Antonio ineffectual in the world. Foremost is her tendency to rush headlong into judgments based on shallow differences, especially race and culture. That Bassanio, a Christian Italian, eventually chooses successfully among the caskets should not be misread as the play’s complicity in Portia’s xenophobia (3.2). For indeed, as Sinead Cusack has written of her own challenges in performing 1.2, the script leaves little opportunity to rescue Portia from close-mindedness:

For Portia [the problem] is to escape the effect of a spoilt brat maliciously destroying her suitors. Both in rehearsal and in performance this scene [1.2] caused me more trouble than any other. I think we finally made it work, although it was at the price of cutting out the Scotsman, and perhaps one or two others.

Those “others” are all Others—foreigners who, although they may fail the casket test and make miserable husbands, are deemed “strangers” in Portia’s household not on those grounds but for reasons more trivial, like, “He hears merry tales and smiles not” (1.2.123). Portia’s crush on Bassanio is also implicitly derided when Nerissa omits his name, citing him as the companion of the Marquis of Montferrat (1.2.114)—an “evocative family name,” writes Moelwyn Merchant, for its associations with a powerful but financially drained Italian aristocracy. Marquis Boniface of Montferrat had accumulated quite a debt of his own, at the turn of the thirteenth century, while participating in the Crusades; he eventually paid what he owed Venice by scheming with King Philip of Swabia, pocketing in the process “considerable personal gain” (all in the name of Christ, of course).

The dramatic irony at work in scenes where Antonio and Shylock judge each other, then, is also operating in 1.2. Portia, too, falls back on false or incomplete assumptions about what constitutes genuine difference from one person to the next and about how much difference is acceptable. Through involving her in the problem of feeling alienated in the world, Shakespeare adds a new element to the equation. Not only is she wistful by virtue of her immersion in the world, and not only does she long to skirt the difficulties of navigating this life that tire her—difficulties implicit in her father’s will. But also, like Antonio and Shylock, she copes with the daunting complexities, dangers, and pain of her situation with oversimplifications: all suitors are worthless but
Bassanio, who is flawless. Such a response to the complicated challenge of enlightened courtship is particularly characteristic of youths, who, as Portia herself says, “skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple” (1.2.20-21). In addition, her next line implies that it is a mannerism that she will outgrow, cooling her “hot temper” and accepting responsibility for herself: “But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband” (1.2.21-22).

The extent to which Portia does manifest growth in discernment over the play's course is a question set in motion by her first scene. Whatever the final answer to it, Shakespeare has illustrated many times over, in act 1 and beyond, that, when faced with confusion, the human inclination is to impose an order that can only fail to contain the confusion. The unruly world defies the characters' strategies for ordering it. The ultimate effect of the dramatic irony in Merchant is perhaps to alienate the audience from the characters enough to confuse and delay its judgment of them, lest that judgment, too, decay quickly into false appearance.

II

Shakespeare's dominant metaphor in Merchant for artificial constructs that appear to promise stability is the theater. The stage metaphor recurs throughout the first scene, persistently calling attention to the affectation about Venetian manners. First, Salerio fashions an image of Antonio's argosies as the “pageants of the sea,” playing “signiors and rich burghers” to the “petty traffickers,” or smaller ships (10-12). That tableau of courtliness and control, however, instantly gives way to Solanio's reminder that Antonio's ships are indeed vulnerable (15-22), whereupon Salerio abandons his initial scenario and pursues another (22-40), this one more in tune with “[w]hat harm a wind too great might do at sea” (24).

Only a few lines later, Antonio makes his own comparison between the world and the stage: “I hold the world but as the world, … / A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (77-79). Like Salerio's first description of Antonio's argosies, and like Jaques's celebrated “All the world's a stage …,” Antonio's analogy too is reductive. Through casting himself in a “sad” “part” (78-79), he believes he has satisfied curiosity as to his melancholy and cleared his future of mystery. Gratiano's reply, fittingly, is to try to break down Antonio's reserve by enacting the part of the “fool”; he also accuses his friend of playing another role than he admits to, that of “sir Oracle,” a man whose “wisdom, gravity, profound conceit” are merely feigned, through his deceptively august silence, in order to cloak his ignorance (92-93). When Gratiano concludes his lecture by advising Antonio to “fish not with this melancholy bait / For this fool gudgeon”—that is, for an inflated “opinion” of his sagacity—he assumes that Antonio has a choice and is not necessarily so scripted as he maintains into a certain way of life (101-2).

Bassanio follows on the heels of this speech with his own categorization of Gratiano, who, he says, “speaks an infinite deal of nothing.” This is a tag that critics have, to my knowledge, never questioned but that seems dubious (114). Gratiano's depiction of Antonio appears on target. Bassanio is about to ask Antonio for money, however, and would thus hasten to smooth any feathers that Gratiano had ruffled. What's more, Bassanio, as we have seen, is himself largely performing here, play-acting, as Gratiano has just described Antonio. He would naturally want to write off the perceptiveness of Gratiano's speech. As Bassanio unfolds his plans to Antonio for wooing Portia, he sets up his characterization for the rest of the play as someone who is always, in part, putting on a show and around whom theatrical language hovers. When he later welcomes Launcelot Gobbo into service by giving him a new “livery,” it is with flair purchased by Antonio's loan, which also, presumably, underwrites his final Venetian “feast” for his “best esteem'd acquaintance” (2.2.154, 171-72). In 2.9, he is said to be approaching Belmont with “(besides commend's and courteous breath), / Gifts of rich value,” which he cannot afford, and arriving like a “day in April … / To show how costly summer” is approaching (90-91, 94-95). Such are the “fair ostents of love” (2.8.44)—Antonio's words for the production he has subsidized—that later embarrass Bassanio when, having won Portia's hand and learning of Antonio's distress in Venice, he must own up to his role-playing:
dear lady,

Rating myself at nothing, you shall see
How much I was a braggart: when I told you
My state was nothing, I should then have told you
That I was worse than nothing.

(3.2.256-60)

To argue that Bassanio chooses the lead casket because he knows firsthand that “outward shows [may] be least themselves” is too cynical (3.2.73). Clearly, his character is delineated to illustrate how even the best of men—including one worthy of Portia’s love—may easily be tempted to lie rather than risk rejection. He at least eventually tells her the truth about owning “nothing.” And that he continues, even after his confession of his indebtedness, to deal with his discomfort through “outward shows” serves at least one positive purpose: it presents Portia with repeated perceptual tests and lessons through which she can gain experience (3.2.73). Having discovered the element of play-acting in his financial situation (3.2), she is then privy during the trial to his reneging on his vow of love to her (4.1.282-87), and after that to his forfeiting her ring for love of Antonio and for gratitude to Balthazar (4.1.450-51). These instances can only temper her earlier, girlish conviction in Bassanio’s perfections, which, just before he makes his choice of caskets, she likens to those of Hercules.16

But, even more than providing a catalyst for both Bassanio’s and Portia’s maturation, Bassanio’s continual reliance on theatrics to make his way in the intimidating world forms part of a much larger web in Merchant, where action is usually acting. I have discussed already the pressures on both the Christians and Shylock in 1.3 to alternate between honesty and hypocrisy as they formulate the bond. Other instances abound. Jessica elopes disguised, while the Christians, “with varnish’d faces,” plan to put on a masque (2.5.33). Portia’s father’s lottery serves as a skeletal script: it repeatedly prompts suitors to write their own lines within a narrowly defined formula, and it deposits Portia within similar legal confines, which are represented by the casket that encases her picture.17 Portia’s own attempt to swindle her ring from Bassanio is a consciously staged event (4.1). But the theatrical extravaganza in Merchant is, of course, the trial, which Portia, with Bellario’s help, carefully orchestrates.

The specifics of Portia’s conduct in the trial scene temporarily set aside, we should not miss several of the episode’s general traits as calculated performance. Much like the final scene in Measure for Measure, where Duke Vincentio secretly directs his subjects’ reactions to his gestures, 4.1 of Merchant is also a virtual play-within-a-play. It thus necessarily reminds the audience that the larger work is also fiction, thereby inviting inspection of the characters’ various uses of theatrics. In the trial scene, Portia’s advance knowledge of how to overturn the bond not only buys her the time to try coaxing Shylock out of his vengeance; it also rigs the other characters’ responses to the court’s proceedings—or, at least, severely limits the possibilities of their responses. Shylock, for example, never truly has a chance to persuade his “second Daniel” of his cause. But even more to the point, Portia’s control over the trial’s outcome, artistic in its breadth and resourcefulness, alerts us to how provisional—illusory, really—are all the constructs that are relied upon to stave off social and personal disorder.18 Countless details of the scene—from Shylock’s pathetically blind trust in the law’s letter to the deliberate instruction with which Portia calls upon first the duke, then Antonio, to sentence Shylock—point up how easily the verdict, but for Portia’s firm hand, might have gone the other way. Having done her homework and prepared for the worst, she has guarded against loss; her strategy, akin to that of the contract or bond, is meant to minimize risk.

So is, I would argue, the love for Bassanio that Antonio flaunts in the courtroom, which is of suspicious mettle, if only because of its proximity to so many other examples of feigning, like Portia’s role-playing. But Antonio himself offers more grounds for doubting his professions of liberality in love because his words and actions hint of the role-playing he has discussed with Gratiano as the play began. Furthermore, in styling himself a saint, ready to sacrifice his life for friendship, he employs the sort of absolute and ideal terms that,
like Salerio's metaphor of "pageants" for "argosies" (1.1.11, 9), suggest a pose. No one can be that virtuous—not in the menacing waters of this world, vividly portrayed in Merchant. Like Antonio's casting of himself in the role of a sad man and like Portia's close direction of the trial, Antonio's playing the martyr seems devised to eliminate risk—the risk of not having his love returned. Significantly, this lack of risk was the factor that made Christian moralists deem usury corrupt.\(^{19}\) Once again, for all of Antonio's labors to distance himself from such worldly imperfections, he appears far more like than unlike Shylock. At the same time, cultural stereotypes receive another lick: Christian liberality, hazarding in love, and perhaps even mercy, versus Jewish miserliness, legalism, and revenge seem more than ever like so many theatrical props. As for Antonio, unless the image of himself that he projects is truer than it seems, it will sooner or later crack. In this case, it is sooner, and the exposure of the man behind the staged type shows much about how the rest of Merchant is played out.

III

The height of Antonio's role-playing coincides with the point where he most manipulates Bassanio's emotions—that is, when his letter, horrendously timed, intrudes upon the betrothal of Bassanio and Portia, usurping center stage. As Bassanio reads the letter aloud, he may as well be reading a part from a script—in this case, a revision of his life's course:

Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.

(3.2.315-22)

The letter shows Antonio's love to be conditional. His Christian "kind[ness]," trumpeted by his loyal supporters Salerio and Solanio (2.8.35), craves Bassanio's gratitude in return. It thus represents what Thomas Wilson's Discourse Upon Usury refers to as "Mentalis usura, an usurie of the mynde, when one hopeth for gayne although no contracte be made," gain not in money but in "thankfull recompense."\(^{20}\) Antonio's protestations of charity, although they surely embrace some truth about his esteem for Bassanio, also reveal, as Geary puts it, "a desperate attempt to hold on to Bassanio"\(^ {21}\) and thereby raise himself in Bassanio's esteem. Such angling may be read as self-interest disguised as selflessness. It compares to his statement in the next scene, 3.3, that he has "oft deliver'd from [Shylock's] forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me" (22-23)—a line that appropriates the religious language of salvation ("deliver'd"), that stresses the abundance of his benevolence ("oft," "Many," "at times"), and that, therefore, sets himself up to appear a kind of Christ. But Antonio's self-consciousness mars his charity.

Throughout the trial scene, Antonio continues to display what Lyon calls his "talent for the … self-advertising whine."\(^ {22}\) His demeanor of long suffering is undercut by his repeated plays for Bassanio's affection, as well as by startling reminders of how ill at ease he feels in the world. His melodramatic puns, which Portia's verbaladroitness throws into relief, again betray his distress at the prospect of not belonging:

Most heartily I do beseech the court
To give the judgment.

For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart.

(4.1.243-44, 280-81; emphasis added)
Such painful awkwardness portrays Antonio at his most foolish, unable to feel or to express a love that entails true risk—unconditional love—and unable to trust that he could be loved without manipulating Bassanio into it.

Antonio's masquerade as a man of infinite patience, toleration, and charity is loaded with implication in a scene that takes up the “quality of mercy” at its center. How much of what passes for Christian kindness in 4.1, the audience might well ask upon witnessing Antonio's exhibition, is the real thing? That question is urged by no character's attitude in the scene more than by Gratiano's. With a name connoting grace itself, Gratiano is the enemy of Antonio's pretensions to love, echoing Shylock's denigration of Antonio's false humility as the fraudulence of a “fawning publican” (1.3.41). Gratiano, in fact, is the entire play's enemy to theatrical spectacle. Shakespeare's alteration of Il Pecorone, wherein the Antonio figure (Ansaldo) marries the lady's maid, tempts an audience to think of Gratiano as a branching off of Antonio's character, a kind of twin. Both characters, indeed, expose the play-acting in Merchant for what it is—the one, through pretense; the other, through brutal honesty.

I believe that Gratiano has yet to be explored satisfactorily in criticism, though his behavior, especially during the trial, bears significantly upon Antonio's characterization. Gratiano is almost unfailingly regarded as, at best, a Jew-baiting boor and, at worst, proof that Christians can hate as violently as Jews. In either case, he is seen as socially coarse and strident. But depictions of him that stop here take their cue, as implied above, from Bassanio's curt dismissal of Gratiano's observations as “chaff” (1.1.116). In reality, however, not only do Gratiano's statements in 1.1 hit home, but, later, he also speaks the most eloquent lines in Merchant. Significantly, that same speech encapsulates most faithfully the play's constant concern with the desolation that results in a world of change and instability:

All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd.
How like a younger or a prodigal
The scarfed 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!

(2.6.12-19)

In addition to prophesying the fate of Antonio's argosies, Gratiano discloses the kernel of truth in Merchant that perhaps comes closest to being unimpeachable: that as worldly conditions change, so do human appetites.

This gift of Gratiano's for tapping into the essence of things looks forward to another such unlikely truth-teller in Shakespeare's canon: Lucio, the “fantastic” who dogs the friar/duke throughout Measure for Measure. Many differences attain between the two—most especially, that Lucio receives a stiff comeuppance for slandering Duke Vincentio, while Gratiano is never judged for what he says. Yet, much as Lucio has an odd way of speaking factually about the duke (or seeming to)—even as, in ignorance of the duke, he manufactures lies about him—so Gratiano remains mysteriously incapable of forgery. And, like Lucio, he sometimes appears to mirror the truth without trying or meaning to.23 In 2.6, for instance, just after Jessica exits to “gild” herself with “some moe ducats,” Gratiano muses, “Now by my hood, a gentle, and no Jew” (49-51). Although he intends to compliment Jessica, he inadvertently characterizes Gentiles as “gilded,” preoccupied with the material wealth that Jessica is now adding both to her costume and to Christian coffers.

Gratiano's irrepressible honesty, again like Lucio's, adheres where it is least wanted, though possibly where it is most needed. Duke Vincentio tries in vain to shake off this “bur,” who will nevertheless “stick” (4.3.179), and although reprehensible for slurring the duke, Lucio is still valuable for what he can teach the duke about
how his subjects really see him. In a sense, Lucio unveils the duke verbally and does so quite literally in 5.1, when he physically lifts the friar's hood, discovering the real duke beneath his theatrical disguise. Such, I think, is also Gratiano's dramatic function: to resist attempts to suppress truth under a veneer of civility. Bassanio suggests as much when he cautions Gratiano about being himself in Belmont and advises him to play a part instead:

Thou art too wild, too rude, and bold of voice—
Parts that become thee happily enough,
And in such eyes as ours appear not faults,
But where thou art not known, why, there they show
Something too liberal. Pray thee take pain,
To allay with some cold drops of modesty
Thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behavior
I be misconst'red in the place I go to,
And lose my hopes.

(2.2.180-89)

This is all eerily familiar. Wild? Rude? Bold of voice? Thus far, Gratiano has not born out Bassanio's adjectives, although he will fulfill all such epithets during the trial; Bassanio has reason to exaggerate here because, as a nervous suitor, he wants his “show” to be just so (185). Otherwise, he stands to lose his “hopes” (189)—yet another perfectly ambiguous word for what he could gain, financially or spiritually, through marriage to Portia. And the cost to Gratiano of dispelling Bassanio's illusion of suitability? Life as a social outcast, cut off from Portia's fortune and the conduit of Bassanio's friendship. Naturally, he agrees to “put on a sober habit,” to role-play along with his benefactors (2.2.190).

Yet, ironically, Gratiano seems to have less to hide than anyone. Never mind that, until the trial scene, he appears, objectively, to be the most socially well adjusted character in Venice; never mind that Gratiano sails into marriage, which eludes Antonio. He is persona non grata. His very presence is seen to imperil the charades that promise wealth, stability, and prosperity amidst the flux. In the end, however, Gratiano proves unable to don a socially acceptable façade, such that his character comes to embody a principle that pervades the play—the habit of truth to assert itself. His impulse to be himself and to utter the realities that other characters may intuit, but would rather suppress, calls to mind Launcelot's words to Old Gobbo in 2.2, as he attempts, finally, to reveal himself to his father: “truth will come to light; … in the end truth will out” (79-80). Whatever particular truth Gratiano may impart in a given scene, he always somehow displays the darker forces at work behind the cloak of order, normalcy, and reason. Ultimately, Gratiano's truth is the same truth that spoils the masquers' play when, Antonio announces, “the wind is come about” (2.6.64)—the truth that human artifice can exert precious little control over nature's vagaries.

This trait of Gratiano’s does not surface fully until 4.1, where he becomes obstreperous: “O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog!” (128). On the face of things, the abrupt switch in his characterization may seem puzzling: the only overt link between the Gratiano of the first three acts and that of act 4 are Bassanio's depictions, which, we have seen, do not square with the actual Gratiano on the page, who initially appears well-meaning, perceptive, and even capable of poetry.24 How appropriate if the play's chief mouthpiece for discontinuity were himself Janus-faced, composed of irreducible and inexplicable contradictions. That possibility notwithstanding, at least one common thread does unite the earlier and later Gratianos, however sensible or vicious they may be. As in the first three acts, Gratiano can still be counted on in one way or another to demystify what he, along with the audience, sees, thereby uncovering certain truths. Once he and Bassanio have become engaged in Belmont, for instance, Gratiano does not hesitate to use the candid terms of material gain for their “success”: “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (3.2.240-41). In the trial scene, Gratiano is likely unaware of how effectively he continues to disrupt illusion. Yet he does so by giving frank, passionate voice to the hostility and racism that the trial as play-within-a-play and Antonio as spurious saint
are concealing. Gratiano's aspersions may be vile, but, like Shylock's malicious attack on Antonio, they have the virtue of honesty. In this, Gratiano strangely, paradoxically, lives up to his name. “Mercy is not itself, that oft looks so”; Gratiano's inability to pretend is, in some sense, grace indeed. Recalling the socially repugnant fool in book 1 of Utopia, who blurts out the proposition that churchmen ought to minister to the needy rather than to their own desires, Gratiano may well be the character in Merchant who most closely approximates the Pauline wise fool. In this he is a foil to the folly-fall'n Antonio.

Yet this is not to say that Gratiano's insults toward Shylock speak equally accurately for all the characters' feelings at the trial or that whatever mercy surfaces during the trial is purely sham. The perspective lent by Gratiano on the multiple, complex occurrences in 4.1 is but a wedge of the entire circle, albeit a sizable wedge. It invites examination of the court proceedings as to their real, versus their ostensible, fairness. How do we understand more precisely the degree to which Shylock's treatment under first Portia, then Antonio, translates into either justice or travesty? The letter from Bellario that introduces Balthazar to the court—another disguised script, juxtaposed against Antonio's letter to Bassanio (3.2)—not only commends the young judge's precocious achievement. It also suggests that the youth's judgment is still being tested: “I leave him to your gracious acceptance, whose trial shall better publish his commendation,” writes Bellario to the duke (4.1.164-66). The pun on “trial” enables the word to refer to both the trial over which Portia will preside and the scrutiny with which the audience is urged to evaluate her judgments by virtue of participating in 4.1 as audience-accomplices.

Measuring Portia's success at dispensing authentic justice, as opposed to fakery, requires further explanation of what, exactly, she aims to accomplish in court. Foremost, as indicated at the close of 3.2, she seeks to release her husband's friend from Shylock's tyranny, as much to benefit Antonio (3.4.10-21) as to comfort Bassanio (3.2.305-6). Although her primary goal is private, however, she also clearly takes care while pursuing her own ends to preserve the law's integrity, as when she denies Bassanio's request to bypass the contract entirely and “[w]rest once the law to [her] authority” (4.1.215). Already, then, even before she enters the courtroom, she is at pains to balance private against public concerns. Once the trial is underway, she quickly confronts another, similar challenge—the summons to arbitrate between the letter and the spirit of the law, an objective all the more vexed by the demands on her from both private and public spheres.

At merely a cursory glance, Portia's predicament, caught as she is between opposing and equally valid claims, registers as difficult. Indeed, it epitomizes the situation in which all the characters in Merchant repeatedly find themselves: that of making impossible choices. At every turn, various characters face one impasse or another. Jessica must choose between restrictive loyalty to her father or a carefree life with a Christian, a dilemma recapitulated in Portia's deciding whether or not to abide by her father's will. Portia's line in that context—“O me, the word choose!” (1.2.22-23)—expresses her dismay at lacking, rather than having, free choice. But she will soon covet the structured choice afforded her by her father's lottery, since she will freely turn to Bellario, her father reincarnated as uncle, for preinstructions about handling the intricacies of the trial. Choice between seemingly irreconcilable options also presses upon Bassanio, dividing his loyalties between Portia and Antonio. That dilemma is more playfully refigured later, in Bassanio's double desire to keep his word to Portia and yet still reward Balthazar, who are, doubly perplexingly, one and the same (4.1, 2). Furthermore, as 3.2 begins, Bassanio, in what can only be construed as the play's near self-parody, must even choose whether and when to choose. Finally, he would rather know his fate than delay it: “Let me choose, / For as I am, I live upon the rack” (24-25). The trial scene, then, is a culmination of this pattern of impossible choice.

Launcelot Gobbo, further fulfilling his dramatic function in Merchant as the mirror of crucial themes, takes the parody of feeling deadlocked to new heights as he struggles with whether to exchange masters:

The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me, saying to me, “Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot,” or “good Gobbo,” or “good Launcelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away.” My conscience says, “No; take heed, honest Launcelot, take heed, honest Gobbo, …

(2.2.2-9, 19-22)

The terms of this parody are those of the old morality drama, Launcelot the Everyman being torn between heavenly and hellish alternatives. The point of the parody is how much more troublesome is the problem of choice in the new drama, which more faithfully renders the world's complexities than do the clear-cut absolutes of moral allegory. In his own rudimentary way, Launcelot suggests the overwhelming confusion that choice entails when he scrambles his moral categories: he aligns the “fiend” with the decision to abandon Shylock, who himself is called “devil” and whose house is “hell” (1.3.98, 2.3.2). “Confusions” continue to reign in 2.2 once Old Gobbo enters and Launcelot plays the role of a befuddling God to his father's blind humankind (37). Launcelot's game of ventriloquizing his own shifting identity in his father's mind cleverly mimics all the characters' sense of dislocation as they fade in and out of apprehension, as well as the audience's continual feeling that reliable knowledge of the characters eludes them (33-101). The punch line that resolves this episode of mistaken identity in 2.2 underscores the very fluidity of identity; Old Gobbo exclaims, on feeling Launcelot's beard: “Lord, how art thou chang'd!” (99).

However humorous is Launcelot's rendition of the quandaries that human judgment visits on the other characters, the problem of choice in Merchant is no laughing matter. It is the plight that, perhaps more than any other condition of being human, most binds the characters together as human, underlying and belying their more superficial differences. It is, in other words, the truth behind the mask of racial, cultural, and sexual distinctions that, in this treacherous world of deceptive exteriors, transience, and myopia, to boot, everyone must not only choose but choose between two cherished possibilities, letting one go forever, and also make such choice in a mist. This is the hard, tragic fact at the core of human existence in Merchant. The cruel necessity of choosing blindly and with finality informs every character's experience equally and, totally without discrimination, alienates them all from their world and from one another. “Joy” is sometimes the “consequence” of judgment, as in Bassanio's happy choice of caskets (3.2.107). One false move, however, and his history would play out like Shylock's, which illustrates how easily a decisive stance, like complete faith in a bond's legality, may bring loss and sorrow. In Merchant, choice persistently entails the possibility of lost and irretrievable opportunity. At its most cynical, the play can even imply that neither of two choices will prove gratifying. Launcelot, again, offers a light handling of a dark notion when he tells Jessica that she is damned whether she claims kinship to Scylla, her father, or to Charybdis, her mother (3.5.15-18). Maneuvering through such narrow straits leaves a wide margin for error.

A comic vision, in which extremes are shown to be reconcilable, is not entirely alien to Merchant. Under a comic star, two opposites give enough to produce cosmic or social harmony, as Portia is attempting to do in the trial scene: she works to negotiate a slender pass between the Scylla of Shylock's fury, lack of pity, and adherence to an unjust law, and the Charybdis of Antonio's peculiar passivity, the Christians' readiness to dispense with the law, and her own private bias in the defendants' favor. In striving to mediate between the letter and the spirit of the law, she is hoping to vindicate Antonio through strictly legal means and, perhaps, add Shylock's education in flexibility to the bargain: she does, after all, give him plenty of time to withdraw his claim voluntarily before she subjects him to his own legalese.27

But what is so remarkable about Portia in the trial scene is her very willingness to take on such a formidable task, especially since, no matter how well, or comically, she satisfies the various, contrary demands upon her judgment, she will likely fall short of the mark. Her partial inadequacy is virtually guaranteed. Whatever comic impulse may inform Portia's skill at judgment or her inclination to effect peace, it will remain at odds with the tragic discontent sown in the play's first lines and cultivated thereafter. For, in addition to whatever personal failings may inhibit Portia's clearer judgment, she has been placed here, as judge, in an untenable position. If the quibble on “blood” that she plays close to her vest stacks the deck against Shylock, then Portia
herself has been no less finessed. Any decision she handed down to the court would be hard-pressed to elude the circumstances handed down to her by the play: namely, the unlikelihood that any choice can fully resolve antipathy or thoroughly erase a sense of bereavement.

Put another way, Portia's judgment, no matter how wise, is bound to savor of some theatrical artificality because she cannot hope to reach an ideal ruling—that is, a thoroughly convincing resolution. She is not so foolhardy as Antonio, whose display of spirituality is at least partly counterfeit. Her performance in court is far more substantial and credible. Indeed, her appearance at the trial exhibits genuine self-sacrifice, as opposed to Antonio's hollow shows of generosity; she has forfeited her wedding night and now risks considerable damage to everyone by taking the responsibility for Antonio that he refuses to take for himself.28 This substitution, truly Christian in spirit, evinces her noble recognition that, come what may, someone must step up, settle the contest between Antonio and Shylock, and save Antonio's life. But the conditions of her choice—which are largely out of her control—stipulate that, in some measure, her verdict be implicated as mere pretension to truth, pretension signaled even by her theatrical costume. That disguise brings into incisive focus the bind in which Portia finds herself: she must lean on the power of fiction to perform her office and yet can never shake free of the element of fiction—of untruthfulness to the ideal of justice—in her arbitration.

Judgment in Merchant, particularly in the trial scene, most resembles theatrical illusion in this way, in its failure to contain all desires, to embrace all aspects of truth, to satisfy from all points of view. To be sure, some strategies minimize error and narrow-mindedness: slow and patient deliberation, mature awareness of life's impermanence, adopting the widest possible angle from which to perceive. Executed with even the best of intentions and with optimal tactics, however, human judgment is merely relative in quality. So must be, then, the quality of mercy. For this imperfection the audience is prone to hold Portia and her fellow Christians wholly responsible. Yet, if the audience, too, is invested in making the best possible judgment of the proceedings, it may benefit from carefully sorting out the factors for which the characters can be held accountable from those for which they cannot. Finally, the “poor rude world” stakes its claim on Portia as forcibly as it does on Antonio, and human nature, hers included, tends to deny the unpleasant realities of that world through substituting a fiction for them. At the same time, those realities persist, gnawing away at the fragile fictions. Although Portia’s shortcomings as an individual and as a member of her culture are conspicuous, her human weaknesses encourage sympathy. If, for the former, she remains a foolish fool, then, for the latter, she becomes a wise one, undertaking a largely thankless job at considerable personal expense and at high risk of the censure that Antonio abhors.

IV

Portia’s development as a character over the course of the play traces, in essence, her growing familiarity with and ease in the “poor rude world.” At her youngest, in 1.2, her lack of sophistication is implied by Nerissa’s more extensive worldly experience (“for aught I see,” [5]) and intuition about the advantages to Portia of her father’s will (27-33).29 Even here, however, Portia’s appreciation of human limitations is realistic beyond her years: “If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces” (12-14). Yet her awareness that human inadequacy requires compassion comes and goes. Intolerant of her suitors’ gullibility, for instance, she fires off a comment to Arragon that not only puts him down but also runs counter to her own convictions: “To offend and judge are distinct offices, / And of opposed natures” (2.9.61-62). If such were the case, then human sympathy would never be able to temper rigid judgment, as Portia strenuously argues it should when promoting mercy in 4.1 (for example, 184-205). Then again, Portia’s suitors, intent as they are on idealizing her into a “mortal breathing saint,” do little to discourage her curt dismissals (2.7.40). For Portia, as for Morocco and Arragon, the other is not fully human.

Not until Bassanio enters in 3.2 does Portia noticeably begin to bend, growing more accepting of another’s weaknesses and more modest toward her own. Without any cooling of ardor for Bassanio, she acknowledges that he stands to choose the wrong casket (1-24), and she readily forgives him his indiscretion on learning of
his indebtedness (299-314). Likewise, she offers herself to Bassanio acknowledging both her merits—"the full sum of me / Is sum of something"—and her shortcomings: she is "unlesson'd …, unschool'd, unpracticed," though "she can learn" (157-59, 162). Such concessions to imperfection are intermixed with Portia's increased willingness to accommodate the demands on her of living in a flawed society and an unpredictable world. During Bassanio's choice of caskets, she first pronounces the warning to "tarry," to "pause"—that is, to approach choice as the perceptual challenge it is (1). She will later, of course, reprise this sound advice in the courtroom: "Tarry a little," "Soft, no haste," "Tarry" (4.1.305, 321, 346). In 3.2 she confides to the audience her attempt to heed her own counsel by curbing her "joy" at Bassanio's success:

[Aside.] O love, be moderate, allay thy ecstasy, In measure rain thy joy, scant this excess! I feel too much thy blessing; make it less, For fear I surfeit.

(111-14)

These are the words of a budding realist. Still inclined toward fantasies of Bassanio as a Herculean hero (53-62), she has nevertheless undertaken to mature from and learn through experience, as she promises Bassanio she will (149-65).

And indeed, even in 3.2, which is a prelude to the trial scene, Portia's fortitude of mind and character are clearly superior when measured against her peers'. The other characters surrounding her at the scene's end, all of whom have their own attractions, cannot compete with her impressiveness. Bassanio appears more mature when, earlier in the scene, he chooses "substance"—the real and imperfect Portia—over her effigy, a poor "counterfeit" in which she is drawn as a "demigod" (115-30). But having thus rejected mere "show" at last, his former theatrics ambush him when he is forced to confess his debt to Antonio and is once again brought low in the audience's opinion (256-63). Bassanio's good judgment has somehow outstripped his practical behavior, leaving his actual experience to catch up; he is destined now to learn through trial and error what his choice of truth over "ostent" means pragmatically. At the same juncture in the scene, Jessica has just entered with her Lorenzo (219), the couple presenting a portrait of stolen love next to the earned love of Portia and Bassanio, who seem their elders. Add to this company Antonio, who even in absentia makes his presence felt through his cloying letter (315-22). In a telling gesture, Portia asks to hear the letter read aloud (314). She probably craves to know what she is up against. Here again, she sets herself apart in this group of seemers, all of whom seek out ways to skirt the practical difficulties and responsibilities, the complexities of human life. Never again is the specific contrast between Portia and Antonio more lucid than at the close of 3.2: for, while Antonio can conceive of realizing his devotion to Bassanio only through sacrificing his existence, Portia intends to enlist her "little body" in the service of saving Antonio's, toward the ultimate end of physically consummating her marriage with a tranquil husband.30

Portia's characterization as one who braves the hard vicissitudes of life in order to enjoy its rewards reaches a turning point in 3.4. Easily deceiving Lorenzo and Jessica, she proposes to "abide" in a "monast'ry two miles off," where she may "live in prayer and contemplation" (26-32). In context, her choice to do just the opposite is crucial. Given the play's larger contention between the active life, which requires risk and flexibility, and the passive life, wherein contemplation breeds dangerous idealism, the monastery is richly symbolic. It represents the literal origins of Antonio's martyrdom, implicitly connecting his saintly behavior with the likes of Saint Anthony, and it suggests the figurative roots of his maladjustment to the material life in which he is engaged. By rejecting the monastic, contemplative life in the guise of embracing it, Portia rejects much about Antonio's values without denying his feelings their validity. She separates the man from his conduct, explicitly extolling his "spirit" (3.4.11-21), though implicitly condemning his destructive behavior by electing to participate in the life he shuns. Affirming her attachment to that life, as well as her self-conception as a servant in it, she borrows as her pseudonym the real name of her man Balthazar.
Such signs bode well. In particular, the suggestions in Portia's choices of reconciling extremes—withdrawal and engagement, censure and approval, master and servant, even male and female—adumbrate an official verdict at the trial that just might avoid the pitfall of all other judgments in the play: that of choosing one option at the exclusion of another. If Portia is indeed trying to achieve private ends without doing damage to public structures, if her deliberations are directed toward serving both the law's spirit and letter and toward bringing Jew and Christian closer to mutual understanding, then earlier scenes would seem to allow her a fighting chance to make some progress on those fronts. Her first substantive statement in the trial scene, which is actually a question, also appears to uphold the characterization of Portia/Balthazar as impartial and poised to recognize the legitimacy in each of two opposing perspectives: “Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?” (174). What less biased opening could she employ than this one, which denies outward appearance as a factor in her arbitration? Her question indicates her readiness to look beyond misleading racial and cultural distinctions and into the pith of the arguments before her.

Yet I would argue, first, that Portia's question is far more complicated in its significance than I have just said and, second, that the question's tonal ambiguity speaks accurately for that, running throughout the scene, toward Portia's approach to judgment. For not only does her question imply her disinterestedness, but it also exemplifies her theatricality, which continually flirts with false sincerity. In fact, the most obvious point to make about her initial question is that it is a gag—and at Shylock's expense: in late sixteenth-century performance, Shylock's gaberdine and accompanying stage-Jew costuming would have stood out in a crowd of Gentiles. Operating simultaneously on a more serious level, however, Portia's apparently innocent question even more subtly raises suspicions about her neutrality, since her terms for Antonio and Shylock—that is, “merchant” and “Jew”—are not comparable, the one referring to a common means of sustenance in Venice and the other to a set of religious and cultural traits that help to alienate Shylock from within Venice. Thus, Portia, from the start, throws the proceedings somewhat athwart the search for justice. She also alerts the audience to the tension, which prevails from here on out, between catering to private interests and heeding the interests of others.

One way to talk about this tension is in terms of how Portia instructs Shylock. Does she, for example, truly attempt to include Shylock's viewpoint in her consideration? Her speech on the “quality of mercy” can be read as such a gesture (184-205), a generous effort to “mitigate” Shylock's severe legal rigor (203). It also contains undeniable elements of tribalism. In a very real sense, before the trial concludes, Shylock “must … be merciful” (183; emphasis added). He can either volunteer to render mercy as an ideal Christian does, without “strain” (184), or he will be required to give it “by compulsion,” legally (183). In any case, his dissent from the “[w]e” who “do pray for mercy” will not be so much as minimally tolerated. Once Portia unhinges Shylock's leverage, depriving him of legal recourse, his forfeiture of his bond and his control of his fortune, are, absolutely, enforced. One could argue that Shylock always has the opportunity, until Portia plays the trump card of her quibble on “blood” (306-7), to relent and soften his cruel demands of Antonio. And many have so argued. But the only authentic opportunity that Shylock has in the trial is to become a Christian—and not the sort of flawed, real Christian represented by other characters in the courtroom but a perfect Christian who lets go of grudges, sprinkles mercy and good will freely, has no property to speak of, and therefore can pose no threat to organized Venetian society. He is also expected to turn the other cheek to those who deceived him in promoting Jessica's elopement and who themselves make no apologies. In effect, Shylock finally has no choice at all and, as a consequence, no audible voice in Venice, no visible role in its fashioning.

All of this reasoning, of course, perverts the audience's direct experience of the scene because it rests on selective evidence. Naturally, we do not want Antonio to die, we do not want Shylock to commit a killing, and we do not want Portia to fail. But what, in our most enlightened moments, we do want instead—the execution of an unbiased justice that validates Shylock's anger as well as Antonio's right to live despite that anger—is not going to happen. Such a resolution of conflict is the stuff of fantasy, not The Merchant of Venice. In fact, if Portia is going to rescue Antonio, she will not—cannot—succeed completely through reconciling him to Shylock. She must resort to hard choices, choices that effectively exclude Shylock, empowering Antonio and
his peers to run roughshod over Shylock's feelings of betrayal and desertion and involving Portia's final treatment of the Jew as the “alien” to whom she finally, explicitly, gives the name (349). Many of Portia's statements in 4.1 are capable of being read as judiciously inclusive of Shylock's sentiments; some of those statements may well contradict that ostensible meaning beneath their outward show.

Why Portia must make decisions that exclude and then even misrepresent some of Shylock's identity is the crucial question. Without doubt, she is compelled to her behavior partly by the peculiar weaknesses of her character that have surfaced earlier. To go from despising “all” of Morroco's “complexion” to manipulating Shylock on grounds that he is an “alien” is a fairly small move (2.7.79, 4.1.349). Moreover, Portia's objectivity toward Shylock is surely challenged by the dynamic she witnesses firsthand between Antonio and Bassanio, who needs little coaxing to switch his devotion from his wife to his friend:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(282-87)

Not only has Bassanio adopted Antonio's self-sacrificial stance, but he has also absorbed from Antonio the religious language of love—as in “deliver” (257)—that marks the very removal from this world and its stringent responsibilities that have brought Portia to court in the first place. Here Shakespeare seems deliberately to confound Portia's identities as both judge and wife, demonstrating how lightly the rules of either marriage or of civilization can be abandoned once they prove challenging, as they inevitably and quickly do. Bassanio would just as soon “[w]rest once the law” and “sacrifice” his material life than accept what he cannot change (215, 286). Such far-reaching denial exerts no little stress on Portia's judgment, both private and public. Something has to give or go, lest even the mere semblance of domestic and social order evaporate. That something is Shylock's personality.

Portia's capacity for resolving the controversy at all, given its magnitude, thus deserves admiration. But neither will the attentive audience be able to ignore the abundant details of the scene that tarnish the vision of Portia as custodian of law and marriage alike, because during the trial she is revealed to have compromised standards that, as a judge, she purports to defend. When Shylock denounces morally flaccid “Christian husbands” in an aside, for instance, he briefly transports us to a small but valid arena of dissent against Portia's values (295-97). He fleetingly displays how she has gone to all of this trouble for a man who will disappoint her. At moments like these, Shylock's authority weighs in equal to, if not greater than, his opponents'. Hence, when he is later defeated altogether by Portia's trick and then stripped of legal rights as an “alien,” the audience perforce senses grievous loss. Venice preserved means Shylock dismissed.

Such is Shakespeare's strategy for characterizing Portia's mixed triumph in 4.1. Refusing to retreat from Shylock’s savagery, as Antonio and Bassanio are wont to do, she proceeds to make good on her theatrical portrayal of a judge to a point. That point lies somewhere beyond fulfilling only her private agenda and yet falls short of accommodating the public good, in the widest sense. She may slip across that point here and there throughout the trial, but she plants herself there solidly when she dredges up “yet another hold” of the law on Shylock (347), whereupon, in Lyon's words, her perseverance at the “ceremonial formalities of the trial to the end” and her “humiliating denial of Shylock's dignity” exhibit a certain “sadism.” Beyond that point, then, her pose as judge is empty affectation. Yet Shakespeare enlarges on the issue of what motivates Portia's actions in the trial and of how to assess her actions with a second strategy: by implicitly comparing and contrasting them with Antonio's judgments on Shylock. The overall outcome of this additional strategy, overlaying the other, is to enhance the positive perspective on Portia's performance as arbiter. To watch the
duke and Antonio follow Portia in delivering verdicts is to be reminded of the perils that confound not just Portia but anyone who presumes to pass judgment. In this context, relative to her rival Antonio, Portia seems unusually bold and competent.

Still, confusion of tone dominates as Antonio assumes judicial power. That Portia should relay it to Antonio in quite the way she does, for example, underscores her sacrifice of justice for expediency's sake: by handing over formal, legitimate control to Antonio, she seems to license Shylock's elimination from Venetian society by the very man who has most despised him. If so, she has dispensed with justice. Since Shakespeare is making up his own Venetian law to suit his purposes, he could have seen to it that Portia was legally bound to collaborate with Antonio, rather than surrender her judicial office to him; he could have written the scene so that Portia was interjecting obviously fair, friendly advice to help shape Antonio's judgments. Instead, he leaves Antonio solely to his own devices and, through Portia's acquiescence to Antonio's sentences on Shylock, portrays her as sanctioning them. Perhaps Shakespeare is generously creating the chance for Antonio to display how much he has learned about kindness through his own suffering, as Holmer and others have argued. At the same time, however, Shakespeare exposes Portia to greater disapproval from her audience than she has already elicited, should that audience recoil from Antonio's responses to Shylock. It probably does.

As for those responses, neither are they clear-cut; they are not unabashedly steeped in the loathing that Antonio formerly paid Shylock or that Shylock has been directing at Antonio. For starters, that Antonio is willing to take an active step of any kind toward Shylock testifies to his renewed spiritual health; even his honest expression of spite would be preferable to utter passivity, since it would plant Antonio firmly in the world that threatens him and perhaps inaugurate a life-altering introspection. Yet the privilege over Shylock that Portia has surrendered to Antonio is absolute, in that Shylock is suddenly and thoroughly in Antonio's debt, under his control. Such conditions do not make for a true test of Antonio's moral growth any more than they justify whatever ruling he settles on Shylock, since he is now free of imperative to treat Shylock humanely. This lack of constraint coats any apparent kindness on Antonio's part with a sheen of magnanimity, as though he "droppeth" mercy "as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath" (4.1.185-86). But for all we know, Antonio may again be feigning charity: if Shylock were at liberty to rebel against his pronouncements, Antonio might once again shrink from, rather than deal with, a challenge to his professed kindness. In truth, Antonio is taking no risk in judging Shylock, unless it be that of garnering his peers' disapproval. And since Gratiano is already being the boor, nearly anything Antonio says will seem enlightened by contrast. The only real pressure on Antonio is to keep up appearances, conforming outwardly to the rules of civilized conduct that Gratiano has, conveniently, already blurred through transgressing them himself.

Not surprisingly, then, the substance of Antonio's response to Shylock is enwrapped in equivocation:

So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more, that for this favor
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift,
Here in the court, of all he dies possess'd
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.

(380-90)
In fact, the very concept of halving that Antonio takes from the law on which he is putting his personal stamp suggests doubleness about his verdict. On the one hand, he hastens to meet Shylock in the middle, as though he can now see his way clear to settling his differences with his enemy by turning the other cheek. Specifically, in as much as he petitions the duke to dismiss Shylock's debt to the state of half of his wealth (380-82), Antonio opens on a note of liberality. He does not have to make this request for Shylock but, by doing so anyway, seems to favor charity over any private vendetta he may harbor. He further cancels his self-interest by turning his attention to Jessica and Lorenzo, for whom he proposes a trust founded on the other half of Shylock's estate (382-85).

Presumably, then, he intends for everyone to win: Shylock will lose little during his lifetime, since he will be sustained by half his fortune and earnings from the other half, and Jessica and Lorenzo will ultimately inherit all (388-90), including the half that Antonio, apparently, assumes he can manage to their financial benefit, despite his own recently problematic investments. This insistence on Shylock's charity not just to his flesh and blood but also to his son-in-law, is of a piece with Antonio's ultimatum that Shylock convert to Christianity (386-87). Both provisions (to borrow Antonio's word in line 386) can be interpreted as newfound broad-mindedness, a genuine attempt on Antonio's part to bridge the gulf that separates him from Shylock. Nothing about Antonio's speech invites this reading more than his choice of the word use to define the trust he means to establish for Jessica and Lorenzo (383). By selecting, rather than disparaging, the single word that most identifies Shylock as “alien,” he would seem to be supplanting his former vituperation and rejection of Shylock's person and financial practices with a new acceptance. His diction may well indicate both forgiveness and sympathy.

On the other hand, even while Antonio employs the word, he also redefines it, much as he seeks, in effect, to recreate everything about Shylock in his own image, even if doing so entails forcible baptism. To take control over half of Shylock's investments and to demand his religious conversion is to halt his usury altogether and to coerce his conformity with the rest of Venetian society. From this angle, Antonio's conditions for Shylock are not liberal, liberated, or liberating. They are suffocating. They step up Portia's approach to treating Shylock as an “alien” by prohibiting even that meager distinction, which, though not much, is at least Shylock's proper. Withholding even so much as alienation from Shylock, he doubly alienates him; exacting his own figurative pound of flesh, Antonio pushes Shylock into a culture where full participation is, as we have seen, a mixed blessing. Nor does Antonio's vision of Shylock's future at all obligate the existing society to include the newly converted Jew: as Antonio snidely reminds Shylock, Lorenzo “stole” his daughter (385); now he is going to be rewarded for it with everything Shylock can earn until he dies. Some incentive.

In this light, Antonio has not grown in understanding. Were he truly merciful to Shylock, as the whole dramatic situation is set up here to imply he is, he would simply be merciful without meddling in Shylock's personhood. His penchant for doing so, however, recalls his attitude toward Bassanio, to whom he promises unconditioned love that, in reality, involves plenty of urgent provisos. In 4.1, as well, Antonio places conditions on his “favor” toward Shylock (386), conditions so restrictive as to bind the other party in virtually total obligation to his terms. Once released from his bond to Shylock and given the chance to act freely, he even takes it upon himself to advise and manipulate the duke's decision about the half of Shylock's goods that are forfeit to the state. Portia has just told the court in no uncertain terms that the half in question is properly “for the state, not for Antonio,” although “humbleness” on Shylock's part may induce the duke to lower such a large sum to only a “fine” (373, 372, 371). As though deaf, Antonio immediately presumes to address his first statement not to his own business but to whether the duke should collect all that the state is owed or just the fine (380-82); furthermore, he makes his next judgment, which does concern himself (382-85), contingent upon the duke's enactment of his opening request: thus, between lines 380 and 385 he tells the duke, in so many words, “Please reduce what Shylock owes the state so long as I am permitted to do what I wish with what he owes me.” Subtly but surely, Antonio has interposed himself again where he might take over, whether or not he belongs there.
Such bids for control suggest that, even now, Antonio remains subject to his fears of exclusion. He seems threatened, rushing to alienate Shylock first, as if doing so will preclude his own dispossession. In a matter of minutes, he has pivoted from dealing with the world through emotional paralysis and death-wish to reentering the hardships and confusions of this life by stage-managing. Calm as he may outwardly seem in this scene, his inner panic would appear to endure as he dictates once again how Bassanio should demonstrate his love for his friend: “My Lord Bassanio, let [Balthazar] have the ring. / Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued ‘gainst your wive's commandement” (4.1.449-51).

Thus, a definable pattern in Antonio's characterization from beginning to end comes into focus. His eleven lines about Shylock in 4.1 go by quickly and are overly dense for a first-time audience to grasp fully, but, studied carefully, they, too, substantiate his determination to direct the play's events or to die trying. The theatrical metaphor with which he describes himself in 1.1 has become completely apt by the end of 4.1. Whether Antonio is behaving submissively or asserting himself, he is often practicing some form of passive aggression. The only occasion on which he displays his antagonism outright is in 1.3, and even there it is second-hand, glimpsed through the window of Shylock's narration and affirmed by Antonio himself, who almost, but not quite, loses his temper (106-31). Ordinarily, he is not given to confessing his feelings openly, a habit behind his hypocrisies, like professing love for Bassanio, whose wife he discounts. For his lingering social awkwardness, Antonio is pitiable. But for resorting to misleading emotional and moral theatrics, which are nothing akin to the wise folly he pretends, he verges on abusiveness. In his foolish consistency, he is, at least potentially, as dangerous to social cohesiveness as are large rocks to argosies. Here, too, he is an unrecognized version of Shylock, who differs mainly in that he wears his anger on his sleeve.

If Portia both shares in and countenances Antonio's hypocrisy toward Shylock, she does not abide it toward her marriage. Through appending the substance of act 5 to the action of the trial, Shakespeare fleshes out just how much more competent in judgment has been Portia than we may have thought or than Antonio has proved to be. She accomplishes with the ring trick far more nearly the reconciliation of opposites that also occupied her in the trial. Earlier, her choice resulted in the almost tacit exile of Shylock's variety, albeit menace, from the Venetian order. In act 5, where she forms the triple bond among herself, Bassanio, and Antonio, she comes closer to harmonizing antinomies—here, those of marital love and male friendship. The most prominent feature of Portia's judgments, however, as well as all instances of choice in Merchant, is their relative failure or success. No single judgment is completely satisfactory. Some are simply more satisfying than others.

V

The whole of act 5 is informed by the notion of relativism. Introduced as it is by the rhapsody between Jessica and Lorenzo (1-24), the scene is designed to subvert confidence in the image of an ideal world or ideal love within it. The tragic note sounded by each reference to mythical lovers—Troilus and Cressida, Pyramis and Thisby, Dido and Aeneas, Medea and Jason—resonates with the misunderstanding that has plagued the characters' relationships prior to this point, as well as with the distrust sown by Antonio between Bassanio and Portia. Much as the sweetness in the rhapsody is qualified, but not subsumed, by the bitter, so is the ensuing music (68), symbolic of universal harmony, tempered by Portia's remark that Lorenzo recognizes her “as the blind man knows the cuckoo, / By the bad voice!” (112-13). Her self-effacing humor, while not thoroughly at odds with Lorenzo's more grandiose references to “the poet,” “Orpheus,” and the power of music to raise human nature (79-82), nevertheless introduces a realistic element of flawed human nature into Lorenzo's more philosophic (and naive) meditations.

Portia herself values the idealism and romanticism about Lorenzo's vision, if for no other reason than that it supplies a fixed standard of judgment and a goal for human ambition:

A substitute shines brightly as a king
Until a king be by, and then his state
Empties itself, as doth an inland brook
Into the main of waters. ...
Nothing is good, I see, without respect.

(94-97, 99)

Even so, Portia expresses keen awareness that human action is destined to fall short of the ideal. The perspective that she brings to the scene's idealism, a perspective "season'd" by her recent experiences, repeatedly adds an antiromantic, slightly deflating dimension to the higher-flown diction and sentiments of the characters in her midst (107). The moon seems to the less experienced Jessica and Lorenzo to light the sky as though setting the stage for love. To Portia, however, this night, which is "such a night" to the others, seems hardly extraordinary: "This night methinks is but the day light sick, / It looks a little paler. 'Tis a day, / Such as the day is when the sun is hid" (124-26). Same night, different impressions.

The difference, moreover, amounts to much. Most important, it characterizes Portia as one who can accept imperfections not by ignoring hobgoblins but by flexing standards just enough to make them attainable. For Bassanio, her attitude means a mild chastening and the forgiveness that yields a second chance (199-255). For Antonio, it also means another chance but not a chance to interfere again in her marriage. When Antonio admits, "I am the unhappy subject of these quarrels," Portia does not disagree but lends him hospitality despite his error: "Sir, grieve not you, you are welcome notwithstanding" (239). Portia's graciousness and grace expand further, as far as they will go, while she witnesses Antonio rebind himself in friendship to Bassanio, this time spiritually instead of physically but, more to the point, to safeguard, not spoil, the marriage (249-53).

This is something of a breakthrough for Antonio, since his pledge to uphold Portia's faith in Bassanio requires his own acceptance of imperfection and, at that, a difficult form of imperfection for him to tolerate: his desire to be included is only partly realized, and his dread of being left out thus only partly allayed. Yet the necessary consequence of Portia and Bassanio's choice to wed is Antonio's loss of status. Although not rejected, he must remain second in Bassanio's regard. As if to represent the compromise at hand, Portia announces (through what agency, who knows?) that three of Antonio's original six argosies have come to port (275-79).

In his last line, Antonio would seem to be commemorating not only his final ostracism from the social bonds that continuously elude him but also, for once, his unwillingness to indulge in play-acting: "I am dumb" (279). Not even a sixteenth-century audience, for whom that word had yet to connote witlessness, could be expected to hear the line without a shudder or an uncomfortable laugh. Owing to his peculiar personality and to the conditions urged on him by Portia, Antonio is still somewhat alienated. His situation, like his muteness, is embarrassing. And yet his silence, recalling the harsh choice yoked upon the resigned Shylock in 4.1, also betokens Antonio's moment of greatest happiness and fulfillment. Settling for what he has been given without another word, he finally becomes a wise fool—dumb and dumbfounded, content with his place in a world whose vastness cannot be overestimated and, when it cannot be controlled, must evoke awe. Paradoxically, Antonio now seems more at ease with his alienation.

What Portia's acceptance of such human limitation means for her is the luxury of sleeping at night without an "unquiet soul" (3.2.306). Whether she planned all along to dispose swiftly of Shylock toward expediting the retrieval of her marriage or whether she did her best and still failed to cajole Shylock out of his destructive humour, Portia never looks back. Many of us, of course, do. The aftertaste of gall is the play's most potent reminder to the audience of the fact of choice and all that it intimates—our lost opportunities and our misgivings that the wrong history is being made, inexorably, against our wishes. Perhaps, ideally, Portia could and should have refrained from conspiring to alienate Shylock. Yet she, too, is ultimately an alien, held
hostage by a mutable world and the submission of her judgments to fickle standards. If she undertook another judgment in act 6, she might go on evolving, never fully reaching the “right praise and true perfection” that she herself envisions as the crown of experience (5.1.108). Finally, I do not quite think, as Lyon contends, that Merchant portrays “different” and incompatible Portias. Rather, the play seems to me to record fictionally, though impressively realistically, a segment of time during which a capable young woman, in contrast to her foil Antonio, makes repeated, active forays into the distressing territory of judgment and, by fits and starts, becomes a bit better at an essentially impossible task. With every trial of her skills, she sees more clearly and speaks more frankly.

To censure Portia for her inadequate choices, in fact, is a form of self-disgust, unfair though understandable. The Merchant of Venice, a tragicomedy until the end and even after the end, assaults the audience with the inherent injustice of its own situation, so much like Portia’s, in a mercurial world so much like the play’s, a world that consistently makes fools of us all. By implying that apparent differences belie deep-seated likenesses, Merchant coaches us to think of presumed opposites as a cinch to reconcile. In the same breath, it takes back what it gives, indicating that the material, mortal world will always prove unruly, will always swerve wayward of forms like law, government, choice—even poetry and drama.

Antonio’s efforts to remove himself from such frustrating contradictions or to believe his choices can evade or rise above them are, though understandable, a fruitless turn at cheating human life. That sort of arrogant callowness is the object of no little irony, as it is one last time, now in Lorenzo’s response to learning of his inheritance: “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (5.1.294-95). This unsettling line betrays the speaker as flagrantly self-absorbed, misapplying sacred terms to his own worldly needs (as has been Bassanio and Antonio’s wont) and misadvertising himself as needy at all, coddled as he is at present in the lap of Portia’s luxury. Lorenzo’s line escapes the explicit retort that it deserves (although Portia might well wince at it). But the play isn’t about to let us forget that the self-satisfied speaker is ripe for sobering, if not now, then soon. For the pattern of Merchant has been that of disabusing credulity and overturning such self-idealizations as Antonio’s saintliness and Lorenzo’s fond portrait of himself and Jessica as God’s chosen. The closer Portia ventures toward acknowledging the disparity between “what were good” and what actually is, the more trust she earns from her audience and, unavoidably, the more sorrow she elicits for fading illusions. As if to ratify the abiding value of such earthiness, however, the play’s last word belongs to Gratiano, who has always been most at home in the “rude world” and who concludes with a final demystification, calling a “ring” a “ring” (5.1.307). His candid reference to Nerissa’s anatomy purges the air of any residual delusions about love and securely grounds spiritual faith where it is “riveted”—in the “flesh” (5.1.169).

Notes

1. Moreover, as John Doebler points out, the “melancholy man without cause” was a Renaissance “stock character” (Shakespeare's Speaking Pictures: Studies in Iconic Imagery [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974], 41).

Since John Russell Brown attributed Antonio’s melancholy to Bassanio’s departure for Belmont (The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare, New Arden ed. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955], xlv on 1.1.119), many critics have followed, thereby raising the inevitable question about the nature of Antonio’s and Bassanio’s feelings for each other. Are those feelings friendly or erotic, at least on Antonio’s part, if not on Bassanio’s? Here is likely an instance where labels are more self-defeating than helpful, as Marjorie Garber has recently argued about the futility of efforts to categorize sexual identity (Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995]). Even so, I must agree with Joseph Pequigney about the absence of any recognizably erotic language in Antonio’s and Bassanio’s speeches to and about each other (“The Two Antonios and Same Sex Love in Twelfth Night and The Merchant of Venice,” English Literary...
Renaissance 22 [1992], see especially 210-21). Their relationship seems a friendship. In any case, I am relying on the assumption that the emotional bond between the two men as it conflicts with Bassanio and Portia's marriage bond is of central concern, whatever the specific nature of the male bonding at hand. Shakespeare is perennially interested in how male-female relationships are negotiated with same-sex relationships to form a workable (if neither completely harmonious nor absolutely fixed) social structure—as in, for example, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, and other works, including two more in this study, Twelfth Night and Antony and Cleopatra. In my opinion this negotiation is both troublesome and troubling in Merchant; I disagree with Pequigney's assertion that the resolution brought about in the love relationships here is relatively trouble-free (see “The Two Antonios,” especially 218-21). On these relationships see also the essays of Alice N. Benston (“Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Quarterly 30 [1979]: 367-85), Geary (“The Nature of Portia's Victory”), and Newman (“Portia's Ring”).

3. Christopher Spencer shows that the Christians refer to Shylock as “Jew” sixty-one times in Merchant and only fifteen times call him by his proper name (The Genesis of Shakespeare's “Merchant of Venice,” in Studies in British Literature, vol. 3. [Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1988], 95).
4. For a reading of Bassanio’s motives similar to mine, see Terry Eagleton: “Having improvidently thrown his money around, Bassanio has come to Belmont to buy up the well-heeled Portia with the aid of Antonio’s loan, rashly jeopardizing his friend's life in the process” (William Shakespeare [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986], 45).
5. David Beauregard has recently read Antonio as an Aristotelian-Thomistic embodiment of the very virtue of liberality. Beauregard adds to the list of Antonio’s sacrifices his patient endurance in 4.1 in the face of injustice (Virtue’s Own Feature: Shakespeare and the Virtue Ethics Tradition [Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1995], 88, 99).
6. So much has been written about Shylock’s appropriation of Jacob and Laban’s story that some acknowledgment of the variety in critical opinion is in order. In brief, critics tend to disagree over whether Shylock’s apology for usury is in any sense defensible or is, rather, specious; the latter view is adopted more often, most notably by Joan Ozark Holmer in a brief article (“‘When Jacob Graz’d His Uncle Laban's Sheep’: A New Source for The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Quarterly 36 [1985]: 64-65). My own sense of Shakespeare’s purpose is informed by other parallels in Merchant between Shylock and Jacob. In particular, that Shylock’s wife was named Leah does not reflect ironically on Shylock but positively (see Gross, Shylock, 68-69). All told, neither the association between the two men nor Shylock’s narration of the story in 1.3 seems to me to be charged with a particular tone, but, rather, both seem mixed in tone, capable of evoking irony and sympathy. Hence my use of the word trickster for Jacob and Shylock both: it incorporates several overtones and looks forward to Shylock’s defeat by Portia, another trickster.
7. Evidence that Jews were regarded in Elizabethan England as the devil’s kin continues to arise, as in Ruth Samson Luborsky’s recent note “The Pictorial Image of the Jew in Elizabethan Secular Books” (Shakespeare Quarterly 46 [1995]: 449-53).
8. One recent director of the play has observed that it “can be seen as a warning, as a picture of how we allow our religious beliefs to mask our God-given humanity” (quoted in Felicia Hardison Londré, “Confronting Shakespeare’s ‘Political Incorrectness’ in Production: Contemporary American Audiences and the New ‘Problem Plays,’” in Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama, ed. Marc. Maufort, American University Studies, series 26, vol. 25 [New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995], 90).
9. Many critics remark on Shylock’s role in alienating himself, perhaps most interestingly Mullaney, “Brothers and Others,” 82. Other critics have also noticed, as I do, Antonio and Shylock's deeper resemblance beneath their enmity—for example, Jan Lawson Hinely: “Antonio, looking at Shylock, sees himself, distorted but still recognizable” (“Bond Priorities in The Merchant of Venice,” Studies in English Literature 20 [1980]: 223).
10. See Brown, *Merchant*, note to 3.3.27. Brown also notes the difficulty of Antonio's language here in notes to 3.3.19, 30-31.

11. Stephen J. Greenblatt, “Marlowe, Marx, and Anti-Semitism” in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43. In fairness to Greenblatt, I must admit that I have lifted his words from a context antithetical to mine, where he is arguing that “the Jew seems to embody the abstract principle of difference itself” (43).


Most critics who have taken up the matter of Portia's racism have apologized for it, but I think it is pronounced in 1.2 by being repeated through hints in 2.1.1-3 and more overtly in 2.3.79. Furthermore, why would all the suitors except Bassanio be foreigners to Italy unless to present a perceptual problem to Portia comparable to that posed by the casket test (of which she is herself skeptical)? Surely the lesson that appearances can deceive is not confined to young men.

15. *As You Like It*, 2.7.139-66. As Anne Barton has stated so well: “[Jaques's] words are no sooner spoken than Orlando enters bearing old Adam: a man enfeebled by his years, dependent now upon a younger life, but also the living image of all that Jaques has left out of his type picture: loyal, honest, and discriminating” (introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974], 367).

16. The dramatic irony of Portia's comparison of Bassanio to the “young Alcides” is subtle but true (3.2.54-57): as the note in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) points out, “Hercules' motive in rescuing the Trojan princess Hesione [the “virgin tribute” of 1.56] … was not love for her but a desire to possess the horses which Laomedon, her father, had promised him as a reward.” Here again is the familiar strain of Bassanio's mixed motives (unless, of course, Shakespeare did not know or remember the story faithfully, which is a distinct possibility).

17. Many critics have read Bassanio's casket choice as a complete theatrical performance, contending that Portia drops pregnant hints to her love throughout 3.2, which include her reference to Bassanio's choice as a “hazard,” echoing the inscription on the lead casket (2); her admonition to “[b]eshrow your eyes” (14); the rhyme of “lead” with “bred” and “head” in the round sung during Bassanio's apparently sincere deliberations (63-107); and Portia's line, “I stand for sacrifice” (57). Yet I must agree with other critics who believe that Bassanio's decision is relatively free of assistance and that Portia does her best to uphold the letter and spirit of her father's will. For me, the most convincing evidence lies in her having used the word *hazard* in describing the same lottery to both Morocco (2.1.45) and Arragon (2.9.18). Surely she does not intend to coach either one of them.

18. For much of the material in this paragraph, I am indebted to the fine work of Mullaney and Eagleton. Throughout “Brothers and Others, or the Art of Alienation,” Mullaney remains intrigued by the confluence of fictions in the *Merchant*, especially that in the staged trial scene and that in the regime of Elizabeth I. He also notices the benighted Shylock's impotence in the face of an opponent, Portia, who only appears impartial (82-84). Eagleton stresses the notion that systems such as language and law are, in *Merchant* as well as in life, always subject to interpretation (*William Shakespeare*).

The idea that the play's systems are as mutable as are its concepts about issues like individual identity and human existence is refracted in the feminist criticism of Catherine Belsey and Newman. The latter wonders whether certain aspects of the “Elizabethan sex/gender system” are in fact questioned by this play's peculiar version of transvestism (Newman, “Portia's Ring,” 32). Belsey speculates that all examples of transvestitism in Shakespearean comedy “can be read as disrupting sexual difference, calling in question that set of relations between terms which proposes as inevitable an antithesis between masculine and feminine, men and women” (“Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and


23. Evidence of Lucio’s uncanny insight into the duke’s identity and machinations is scattered throughout the play but concentrated in 3.2.86-184. I have argued elsewhere that Lucio reflects the duke’s aloofness from his subjects and his corresponding need to become more directly involved with his subjects; Lucio’s lies about the duke, in a profound sense, tell the truth about the duke’s weaknesses as governor (see Cynthia Lewis, “‘Dark Deeds Darkly Answered’: Duke Vincentio and Judgment in Measure for Measure,” Shakespeare Quarterly 34 [1983]: 271-89).

24. Interestingly, in this aspect too Gratiano parallels Lucio, whose apparent split in personality from the beginning of Measure to the end makes his characterization seem incoherent. In the first two acts, he is Claudio’s friend and Isabella’s advocate; later, his character turns much darker as he slanders the duke and is revealed to have fathered a child for whom he intends to take no responsibility.


26. Richard Horwich has observed that “The Merchant of Venice is filled with difficult choices” (“Riddle and Dilemma in The Merchant of Venice,” Studies in English Literature 17 [1977]: 191), although he builds differently on this point than I do, citing that, “where Belmont is full of riddles, Venice is the natural habitat of dilemmas” (197). He also maintains that, in the case of dilemmas, “the alternatives are equally desirable or … undesirable,” availing themselves of no solutions (196), while “riddles have single and wholly correct answers, … however hard those answers may be to come by” (198). As useful as I find this distinction, I still think that Belmont is not devoid of dilemmas, as I believe my examples testify. Hinely offers yet a different approach to the play’s interest in the “problem” of “evaluating the claims of contradictory demands” (“Bond Priorities,” 218-19)—that of how this problem influences the presentation of bonds in Merchant. Both Horwich and Hinely notice that Launcelot Gobbo’s initial speech in 2.2 mimics lightly the difficult decisions, as that between “fiend” and “conscience,” forced upon all the characters (Horwich, “Riddle and Dilemma,” 197; Hinely, “Bond Priorities,” 219).


29. I do not mean to glide over the implications of the father’s lottery as if they were exclusively advantageous to Portia. As Leventen, Newman, and others have shown, the will is an especially enticing metaphor for patriarchy, including the most stifling, repressive confinements thereof. I do believe, however, that the negative and positive connotations of the will are inseparably entangled. For example, perhaps Portia cannot take control of a trial otherwise dominated by patriarchs without having first been immersed in and irritated by a patriarchal structure like the will.

30. Lawrence Normand, in his provocative essay on the body as scripture in Merchant, phrases this idea thus: “Were [Antonio] to realize the scenario he projects, his love for Bassanio would be inscribed in his living body, and its truth proved by incisions which would be neither deletable nor reversible. … [This] exchange … would turn his physical death into social discourse aimed at recording and validating a certain meaning for it” (“Reading the Body in The Merchant of Venice,” Textual Practice 5 [1991]: 67-68). In other words, Antonio is attempting to freeze emotion in a fluid world; the act of preservation, ironically, perverts the feeling.
31. Exactly how to understand this passage dramatically is a bit baffling, since, in its entirety, it suggests that Portia's question—"Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (174)—is offhand and posed before she has taken opportunity to look about the room. Hence, probably, the duke's follow-up order: "Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth" (175). By the same token, however, she has too much to lose by not speaking deliberately to begin with; her question is no doubt partly calculated to produce one effect or another. Finally, no matter how harmless may be Portia's intent, her question cannot avoid all dramatic irony, since to the audience (at whom Shakespeare aims the joke) Shylock is so very prominent in appearance.


34. My remarks about Antonio in act 4 are meant in part to address the sanguine conviction of Holmer and others that, when Antonio judges Shylock, "We observe none of Antonio's former vindictiveness" (Holmer, "Education," 317). Cf. Beauregard, who envisions Antonio's "division of [Shylock's] wealth," which jeopardizes Shylock's very "life" (4.1.376), as a just recompense for Shylock's having sought to take Antonio's life (Virtue's Own Feature, 100-101).

35. While I see Walter Cohen's point that the "romantic comedy" of act 5 acts to "obliterate the memory of what has preceded" it ("The Merchant of Venice," 777), I also agree with the many critics who see act 5 as integrated thematically and through its action into the whole play. In particular, Lyon senses that the ties between act 5 and the body of the play are even more intrinsically knotted than is often thought—for instance, by the recapitulation between Bassanio's wedding ring and the ring that Leah once gave Shylock ("Merchant," 117).

36. I hesitate to overread this detail, lest I commit the same sort of indiscretion that I have taken to task at the beginning of this chapter. One does wonder, however, whether Shakespeare was conscious of the delicious parallel between this numerical detail and all manner of references to relativism throughout act 5. Why three out of six, only half?

The name of the rocks on which Antonio's ships wreck is also an intriguing detail in view of any personal growth that may be seen to result for Antonio from his ordeal: the name "Goodwins"—or Goodwin Sands—literally means "good friends" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Place Names [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960]).


**Criticism: Character Studies: Martin D. Yaffe (essay date 1997)**


[In the following excerpt, Yaffe argues against the conventional view that the depiction of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice is anti-Jewish.]

The figure of Shylock is like some secondary figure in a Rembrandt painting. To look sometimes with absorption at the suffering, aging Jew alone is irresistible. But the more one is aware of what the play's whole design is expressing through Shylock, of the comedy's high seriousness in its concern for the grace of the community, the less one wants to lose the play Shakespeare wrote for one he merely suggested.

—C. L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy
In this book I analyze the figure of Shylock, the unfortunate Jewish villain in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. My immediate aim is to challenge the widespread presumption that Shakespeare is, in the last analysis, unfriendly to Jews. In so doing, my larger hope is to rescue Shakespeare's play as a helpful guide for the self-understanding of the modern Jew.

What modern Jewish readers find most unpalatable and upsetting about the dramatic fate of Shylock is his forced conversion to Christianity. Shylock, a wealthy moneylender, is made to convert to Christianity as part of the surprising outcome of his personal lawsuit in retaliation against a Christian merchant, the play's title character. The merchant has been waging a vehement one-man crusade on the Rialto against him for his putatively un-Christian business practices. Shylock's harsh and humiliating punishment might be more merited, one suspects, if the moral and legal circumstances surrounding it were more clearcut. But they do not seem to be. Despite its otherwise happy ending or perhaps because of it, Shakespeare's Venetian comedy leaves us unsettled and perplexed over the place of the Jew in the modern city.

Shylock's offense in the eyes of the city is in the end not just civil or even religious. It is criminal. He has granted the merchant an emergency loan of three thousand ducats, interest free but with a sinister, life-threatening penalty clause for late payment. The penalty, for which Shylock eagerly sues, is a pound of the merchant's flesh. Yet his suit proves in court to be treasonous. It is tantamount to the seeking of a Venetian citizen's life by a resident alien—and is therefore punishable by death and by forfeiture of the offender's estate, half to his intended victim and half to the city. Nor is this all. Although the court mercifully waives the death penalty and offers to reduce the claim on its half of Shylock's estate, it soon withholds the waiver pending Shylock's agreement to a counterproposal by the merchant. The latter recommends extending the court's mercy even further. But he adds three constraints. In return for the city's forgiving all penalties, Shylock must now allow the merchant trusteeship over half his estate so long as Shylock lives, must immediately convert, and must designate the Christian bridegroom of his recently converted and eloped daughter as his sole heir. Even so, questions here arise.

To begin with, why does the court ignore Shylock's repeated subjection to publicly tolerated harassment concerning both his religion and his means of livelihood (personal lending, we might call it; loansharking, as Shakespeare's Venetians seem to regard it)? During the trial, moreover, why do spontaneous Jew-baiting outbursts from one of the merchant's friends go uncensured? And why does the court fail to forewarn Shylock about the imminent likelihood of self-incrimination, into which it eventually entraps him? Finally, why has the merchant, admittedly prominent and well liked in Venice, been allowed the final say to determine Shylock's punishment in accord with his own biblically inspired anti-usuriousness? In short, is not Christian Venice itself party to the abusive conduct of its citizens toward Shylock? Shakespeare's play makes us wonder: why can't the city just let Shylock be?

In order to know from the foregoing circumstances whether Shakespeare's play deserves its anti-Jewish reputation, we must face such questions and try to answer them squarely. Our task first and foremost is therefore to look in a scholarly way at the answers, if any, the play itself provides. In my view, the play's own remarkable answers have not been well understood or appreciated by modern scholars. Although it is reasonable to expect some help from the accumulated scholarly literature about the play, when we turn to it with our questions, we find that it has not succeeded very well in answering or even in facing them. A few recent examples will serve to illustrate.

Harold Bloom, in his introduction to an anthology of critical essays on Shakespeare's Shylock, castigates the playwright severely. He calls the play “both a superb romantic comedy, and a marvelously adequate version of a perfectly Christian, altogether murderous anti-Semitism” (1). He is particularly incensed by Shakespeare's having inflicted on his protagonist a “false conversion,” an imposed acceptance of Christianity without any word of defiance or complaint (1f.). He finds Shylock's quiet acquiescence here dramatically implausible, on the grounds that Shylock is a “proud and fierce Jew” for whom conversion is entirely out of character. “We
sooner could see Falstaff as a monk, than we can contemplate Shylock as a Christian” (2). Where Shylock’s character lacks consistency, Shakespeare’s art fails. Bloom the critic therefore turns to *ad hominem* speculation about the playwright’s “agonistic context” and infers a “need to compete with and overgo Marlowe’s superb villain, Barabas, the Jew of Malta” (5). Shakespeare, we are told, chiefly meant to outdo his literary rival in fashioning a vivid and memorable portrait of (what he took to be) a Jew. Yet in so doing, and especially in succeeding as well as he did, he could not help appealing to the ruling anti-Jewish prejudices of his Christian contemporaries. “In this one play alone,” Bloom concludes, “Shakespeare was very much of his age, and not for all time” (6).

Leaving aside the suggestive comparison with Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* …, I limit myself here to noting a significant omission in Bloom’s summary description of Shylock as a “proud and fierce Jew.” How, we must ask, are we meant to understand Shylock’s Jewishness? Neither Bloom in his introduction nor anyone he selects for his anthology has pursued this question very far—though it is central to Shakespeare’s play.

Shylock’s Jewishness first comes up in act I, scene iii, during his preliminary encounter on the Rialto with Bassanio, the young man for whose sake the merchant, Antonio, needs the emergency loan. When Shylock asks whether he might speak with Antonio directly, Bassanio at once invites him to dinner for that purpose. Evidently the young man does not expect what Bloom would undoubtedly characterize as Shylock’s “proud and fierce” reply:

**BASSANIO:**

*If it please you to dine with us.*

**SHYLOCK:**

*Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into! 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.*

(I.iii.29-34)

Yet from Shylock’s point of view, his insistence that he will do business and otherwise associate with Venice’s Christians but will not eat or drink or pray with them implies, in the first instance, not pride and ferocity so much as a strict loyalty to Jewish law, which among other things forbids eating pork (evidently a staple in Shakespeare’s Venice) and prescribes the prayers that Jews in particular must recite before eating and drinking. Shakespeare identifies Shylock’s Jewishness here with his law-abidingness, that is, with his pious deference to the legal demands of Jewish orthodoxy. Even so, in act II, scene v, when Shylock next appears, we are given occasion to question the steadfastness of Shylock’s piety.

Once the terms of the loan have been agreed on and sealed, Shylock returns home to tell his daughter that he has decided to accept an invitation to eat at Bassanio’s after all, albeit “in hate” and for an ulterior motive:

*I am bid forth to supper, Jessica. These are my keys. But wherefore should I go? I am not bid for love; they flatter me. But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon The prodigal Christian.*

(II.v.11-15)

Shylock’s ulterior motive, “to feed upon / The prodigal Christian,” is connected as well with a second reason for having returned home, namely, to announce to his household servant that he will gladly let him switch to the “prodigal” Bassanio’s employment:
The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder,
Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day
More than the wildcat. Drones hive not with me;
Therefore I part with him, and part with him
To one that I would have him help to waste
His borrowed purse.

(II.v.44-49)

Shockingly enough, the motive for which Shylock is prepared to give over his household servant and which is, at least in part, a further extension of that for which he is prepared to suspend his observance of the dietary laws is that of “help[ing] to waste / [Bassanio's] borrowed purse.” Shylock's intent to add to Bassanio's overhead in these ways would have the net effect of increasing the likelihood, however slim, of Shylock's extending yet another loan for Bassanio, this time interest bearing, or even under certain conditions (which almost do transpire) of his collecting on his sinister penalty clause with Bassanio's benefactor. At this point, Bloom might well wish to raise the larger question of whether Shakespeare means to imply that Jewish orthodoxy sanctions hatred or revenge against non-Jews; yet as we shall soon see, it is a question the play answers sufficiently clearly in the negative. Meanwhile, contrary to Bloom, we must say that far from simply succumbing to putative Elizabethan stereotypes concerning Jews, Shakespeare evidently understands both Shylock's piety and his departure from it (which appears to begin well before the forced conversion) by the standards of Jewish orthodoxy itself.

But Bloom notwithstanding, whether or not Shakespeare's play is anti-Jewish cannot be decided by a single argument. Controversy over the treatment of Shylock is not confined to questions of character but permeates the entire fabric of the play. With an eye to the considerable range of disagreement about the play among scholarly critics, John Lyon, in his monograph on The Merchant of Venice in Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare, sounds a timely warning against one-sided readings.5

The play has suffered from the aggressive justifications of its champions no less than the dismissals of its detractors. It seems a rich play where the potential multiplicity of meanings is in excess of any full realization. And to actualize any single interpretation of the play is to stress, and perhaps overstress, one of its parts at the cost of ignoring or doing violence to parts of the play developing in other, equally interesting ways.

Lyon's book calls attention, in general, to the rich mix of particulars as the playwright meant us to savor them. He is properly averse to scholarly arguments that would, in effect, dissolve those particulars into thick generalities for the sake of some bland unifying gloss that looks good from a distance. At the same time, we are admonished that the particulars of the play themselves solicit our subsequent wonderment and inference: “The Merchant of Venice is no piece of theatrical ephemera: the play is of a substance to merit and require the kinds of sustained recollection and speculation which occur subsequent to our enjoyment of the play in the theatre” (105). Lyon therefore proposes to “characterize, rather than resolve, the play's puzzles” and to “raise questions about the limits of plausible interpretation” (5). Proceeding somewhat idiosyncratically, the central chapters of his book may be described as a freewheeling tour of Shakespeare's plot, which sometimes fends off, sometimes embraces the views of scholarly critics, depending on whether they block or widen a scenic path through the play's main contours. Lyon justifies his procedure by the assertion that the play is “not finished” (8). He finds its dramatic action unpolished and its philosophical perplexities left unresolved. Hence, he infers, it is best approached tentatively, as a play-in-progress, whose chief merit is to testify to the creative and provocative genius of its author.
The practical result of Lyon’s argument, however, would seem to be the opposite of the full openness to the dramatic and philosophical richness of the play which he has intended. Instead of encouraging us to venture wide eyed and alert into the play’s “puzzles,” guided above all by Shakespeare’s many-layered text, Lyon effectively discourages us from making the necessary effort to explore whether any one speculation is better than another so far as an understanding of the play as a whole (at least as we have it) is concerned. By simply denying that the play is a finished whole, he denies to us from the outset any standard for judging which interpretations are good or better or best beyond our private fancies. And yet that same denial scarcely prevents him (or anyone else) from interposing judgments that may well block our view of the richness of what Shakespeare has left us.

A single example must suffice. Lyon rightly disputes the answer offered by Harold C. Goddard to one of the questions I began by raising, about the propriety of the Venetian court’s legal entrapment of Shylock—at the hands, moreover, of a surprise amicus curiae (secretly Bassanio’s newly wedded wife, Portia, in disguise): why “didn’t she invoke immediately the law prescribing a penalty for any alien plotting against the life of any citizen of Venice instead of waiting until she had put those she supposedly loved [namely, Bassanio and, by extension, his benefactor] on the rack?” To Goddard’s hastily advanced claim that “the only possible answer is that she wanted a spectacle, a dramatic triumph with herself at the center,” Lyon fittingly adds that there may be forensic reasons as well: “With an opponent as legalistically precise as Shylock, Portia needs as much evidence of the reality of Shylock’s malevolent intent as he can be brought to give, and it is perhaps only at the last moment that the last-moment solution can be safely and effectively revealed” (105).

Nevertheless, faithful to his general caveat that any solution to a given “puzzle” in the play can be only tentative, Lyon immediately expresses his misgivings about what he has just said and meanwhile drops the issue—except to salvage what he takes to be one incontrovertible point. “Certainly,” he assures us, “Portia suffers when considered with hindsight” (ibid.). Yet the assurance Lyon offers follows not from the particulars of Portia’s actions during the trial but rather from the doubtful premise that he accepts without argument from Goddard, that Portia’s actions are largely self-centered. In her admonitory speech to Shylock about the “quality of mercy” (IV.i.182-203), however, Portia emphasizes that her actions are guided not only by the legalities of the case, of which she is evidently the master, but also by justice seasoned with mercy (cf. IV.i.200f.). Contra Goddard, the prospect therefore opens up that Portia’s cross-examination of Shylock, while fulfilling the obvious requirements of justice, is at the same time a high-minded act of mercy on the part of someone, indeed the only one in the courtroom, who knows the law. As I argue later, Portia’s words give Shylock himself every opportunity to render a spectacular act of mercy so as to render nugatory the law under which she alone knows he stands guilty. Recalling Lyon’s previous words (105), we cannot help wondering whether his offhand suppression of this possibility is a consequence of his unsupported insistence that our receptiveness to the play’s details and our thinking about them are two separate things—an assumption belied by anyone whose attention is drawn to the thoughtful details of Portia’s speech to begin with.

Lyon does not mention the only other full-fledged monograph on the play, Lawrence Danson’s, which might have provided him with a direct challenge to the view that The Merchant of Venice lacks a dramatic unity. Danson argues for its unity on the basis of “the fact that the play was written by a Christian for a Christian audience, and that it is about Christian issues” (13). According to Danson, Shakespeare’s Christianity does not narrow but broadens his understanding of things; it is “an amplifier, not a deadener of conceivable meanings” (15). Nor need we then presume that Shakespeare’s thought is a prisoner of (the Christianity of) his time, for as in those plays that consider issues of kingship, “he is drawing upon ideas common to his time. But that is very different from saying that Shakespeare’s ideas are common” (16). Against critics who would impute to Shakespeare a Christian teaching that sets itself in opposition to Judaism and seeks to triumph over it, as mercy over justice or the New Law over the Old, he looks instead to the teaching of “completion or fulfillment” (17f.), that is, of the reconciliation or harmony of souls among themselves and with the divinely ordered cosmos. The main evidence, so far as Portia’s aforementioned “quality of mercy” speech is concerned, is that the warrant for her appeal to the need for mercy to temper justice is the Lord’s Prayer (66f.), whose...
theme as she understands it is common to both Jewish and Christian worship, as her words imply:

That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all [sic] to render
The deeds of mercy.

(IV.i.197-200)

Danson's argument has the further merit of indicating why the play cannot end with Shylock's defeat in the trial scene of act IV but must conclude in the pastoral setting of act V, at the wealthy Portia's estate in Belmont. There the three newlywed couples—Portia and Bassanio, Portia's maid, Nerissa, and Bassanio's companion Gratiano, and Shylock's eloped daughter, Jessica, and her poet husband, Lorenzo—each for the moment at odds, soon become reconciled. In a moonlit setting under the stars, Lorenzo woos Jessica with a speech about cosmic harmony that prepares us for that reconciliation:

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(V.i.58-65)

The Christian overtones of Lorenzo's words are undeniable, as Danson points out (186f.): the stars are "patens" (or communion dishes); the harmonics of their geometrically ordered motions are angels' songs; and the reason we hear only intimations of those sounds is our "fallen" earthly condition.

Nevertheless Danson does not take into account the chief evidence against his view, namely, that the play contains at least as many allusions to classical mythology and philosophy as to Christian doctrine. Lorenzo's speech about the harmony of the stars is a case in point, for the notion in terms of which that speech becomes intelligible—that the stars are embedded in invisible concentric spheres surrounding the earth—is ultimately of pre-Christian, Pythagorean origin. To be sure, Danson might easily reply that those same Pythagorean allusions are also found in certain Christian authors who have appropriated them, such as Boethius, to whom he refers briefly (187f.). Still, to the claim that Shakespeare's Christianity is the play's final word there is a further objection from the play itself.

During the tense moments of the trial, when Shylock's insistence on the letter of the law seems to be holding sway, an outraged and frustrated Gratiano exclaims against what he takes to be Shylock's inhuman inflexibility:

O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog,
And for thy life let justice be accus'd!
Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Govern'd a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And, whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus'd itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous.
It strikes Gratiano that Shylock's "currish spirit" is evidence for the pagan Pythagoras's view of the transmigration of souls between animals (in this case wolves) and humans. Exasperated, he is on the point of "waver[ing] in [his] faith" to accommodate that view. To Gratiano, at least, Christianity and Pythagoreanism are not simply compatible. Indeed, if Lorenzo is Gratiano's erstwhile teacher in these matters, as the play's description of their close companionship suggests (see I.i.69-71, 106ff.), the same may need to be said of Lorenzo's moonlit speech about harmony and perhaps other Christian-sounding speeches as well. Pace Danson, we shall have to explore how Shakespeare faces and seeks to resolve the evident tension between Christianity and philosophy in the play before we can determine to what extent or in what way its teaching may be said to be Christian.

This last would seem in part to be the aim of Edward Andrew, a political scientist, who also reads the play in the light of what he takes to be its implicit Christian teaching, though unlike Danson he finds that teaching one-sided and faulty. It is the teaching of Christian charity, which Andrew understands to mean the doing of acts of kindness or mercy to others with or without their consent. He follows the literary critic Harry Berger Jr., who adduces the term mercifixion to describe Shylock's forced conversion insofar as it is meant for his own good. Shakespeare's scriptural precedent here is said to be Luke 14:23: "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled." Andrew's interpretation is guided by an appeal to the authority of St. Thomas Aquinas, who appears to him to cite this verse in support of the church's position that it is just to compel unbelievers into the Christian communion. Meanwhile, Andrew also notices an opposing view in the play, which he finds spelled out only incompletely. It is the "possessive individualism" personified by Shylock. As usurer, Shylock embodies the "heartless greed" and "limitless acquisitiveness" at the root of modern entrepreneurial capitalism. At the same time, in Shylock's attempts to justify his retaliation against his Christian tormentor, he anticipates the philosophical arguments for religious toleration later articulated in Benedict Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise (1670) and John Locke's Letter on Toleration (1689). Throughout, however, Shylock also shares in his own way the old-fashioned charitableness of his Christian persecutors. According to Andrew's admittedly unconventional analysis of the play, Shylock would like nothing better than to marry his daughter Jessica to a nice Jewish husband. Andrew's Shylock is therefore driven at bottom by a charitable wish to befriend the merchant in order to convert him to Judaism for that purpose.

But Andrew's attributing the merchant's own conversion-seeking zeal to traditional Christian teaching is overly hasty and seriously misleading. In the very passage that Andrew cites in support of his contention that Christianity authorizes the compulsory conversion of Jews, Thomas Aquinas emphasizes exactly the opposite. Here are Thomas's words in response to the question, "Whether the faithless are to be compelled to the faith?"

I respond that it should be said that certain of the faithless are those who have never taken up the faith, such as gentiles [i.e., pagans] and Jews. And such people are in no way to be compelled to the faith, in order that they might believe for themselves—since believing is a matter of the will. Nevertheless they are to be compelled by the faithful, if the means are there, in order that they not impede the faith, whether by blasphemies or by bad arguments or even by open persecutions. And on this account faithful Christians frequently make war against the faithless, not in order to compel them to believe (since even if they were to conquer them and hold them captive, they would leave them at their liberty concerning whether they wished to believe) but in order to compel them not to impede the Christian faith.

According to Thomas, Jews and pagans alike are exempt from forcible conversion at the hands of Christians, though not from acts of force if they impede the Christian faith by means of slanders, dubious propaganda, or overt harassments. Even so, they are to be left "at their liberty" so far as matters of belief are concerned, if
only that they might eventually come to Christian belief on their own. Because belief as such is voluntary, Thomas insists, neither Jews nor pagans can be forced into it.

True, immediately following the passage just quoted, Thomas goes on to justify the punishment of heretics and apostates. But these differ from non-Christians by being deviant and lapsed Christians, who have already put themselves under the authority of the church. In any case, Andrew overlooks Thomas's indication that “liberty” or tolerance is in some sense part of traditional Christian teaching. Despite what Andrew suggests, then, tolerance of Jews can hardly be said to receive its first, to say nothing of its best, philosophical treatment in the theologico-political arguments of Spinoza and Locke. Indeed, in looking later on at the speeches of Shylock to which he calls our attention, we shall have occasion to wonder how well such intimations of the case for religious toleration as Andrew rightly discerns in The Merchant of Venice can be understood in terms of the political and religious liberalism of those modern thinkers (as instructive as their arguments might otherwise prove to be). As the example of Pythagoras has already indicated, we shall have to weigh in addition the considerable merits of certain premodern philosophical and theological views that Shakespeare has evidently inherited from thinkers such as Thomas.

It is admittedly possible to read The Merchant of Venice as a Christian or quasi-Christian play and yet to defend Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock as being not quite so derogatory toward Jews as it might have been in the hands of another at that time—Marlowe, for example. Such is the approach of the literary journalist John Gross. Shakespeare, he writes, “simply tried to imagine, within the confines of his plot, and within the limits that his culture set him, what it would be like to be a Jew” (349). What is chiefly missing from Shakespeare's Shylock is any “hint … of an inner faith, or of religion as a way of life, as opposed to a set of rules” (45). In contrast, the Christian characters in the play are said to “have admirable ideals, and on the whole—in their dealings among themselves, as opposed to their dealings with Shylock—they live up to them” (350). However that may be, the result, to Gross at least, is “tragic,” inasmuch as the “anti-Semitism” shown by the other characters “coexists with so many admirable or attractive qualities” (351).

Thankfully, Shakespeare's Shylock is cut somewhat larger than his stereotype. Gross makes much of the playwright's investing his Jewish character with unforgettable habits of speech, including the staccato repetitions and symmetrical constructions of the money-lender's angry outburst promising revenge against the merchant:

— and what's his reason? 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.

(III.i.50-59)

Gross comments: “Where else, in Shakespeare's time, can you find such sentiments?” (66). True, they are uttered in the service of an “inhuman purpose” (67). And they are followed by an ugly conversation with Shylock's own banker and fellow Jew, Tubal, who presses Shylock mercilessly with reports of looming financial disasters stemming from his eloped daughter's free spending and from the merchant's losses at sea. “Yet,” Gross insists, “nothing that happens in the rest of the play cancels out ‘Hath not a Jew?’ The words have been spoken; the stereotype will never be the same again” (ibid).

Unfortunately, the conclusion Gross would have us reach—that Shakespeare perhaps couldn't help being just a bit anti-Jewish—becomes plausible only if we overlook much of the detailed content of the play. Among Gross's dubious factual claims are that Shylock lacks any “inner faith” (here Harold Bloom seems on stronger
ground) and that the Christian characters are by comparison meant to be admirable. (I shall have much to say on the latter point about Gratiano in particular, as well as about the merchant himself, later on.)

Most egregious, because most decisive for his argument, appears to be Gross’s erroneous assertion that “at no point [in the play] does anyone suggest that there might be a distinction to be drawn between [Shylock’s] being a Jew and his being an obnoxious individual” (351). Portia aside, to whom I have already referred, it is enough for the moment to quote the highest ranking authority of the court, the Duke himself, in his introductory plea for Shylock to show mercy to the merchant:

Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,
That thou but leadest this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act; and then 'tis thought
Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty;
And where thou now exacts the penalty,
Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh,
Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
But, touch'd with humane gentleness and love,
Forgive a molety of the principal,
Glancing an eye of pity on his losses,
That have of late so huddled on his back—
Enow to press a royal merchant down
And pluck commiseration of his state
From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint,
From stubborn Turks and Tartars never train'd
To offices of tender courtesy.
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

(IV.i.17-34)

Here Antonio is said to deserve Shylock's “pity” in light of his overwhelming shipping losses, the putative cause of his failure to repay on time. In the circumstances, the Duke adds, Shylock ought to forgive not only Antonio's penalty but some of his principal too.

What are important here are the Duke's announced reasons for expecting some last-minute, out-of-court refinancing from Shylock. First, he says, everyone including himself believes that Shylock is merely stalling so as to make his eventual show of compassion more spectacular. That is, the Duke attributes to Shylock a sense of theatrics. Second, there is also the depressing magnitude of Antonio's reported losses—enough, as he says, to make even hardboiled, crudely raised observers act compassionately (Turks and Tartars come to the Duke's mind). Hence, he concludes, “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.” The pertinent question is whether the Duke's concluding reminder that Shylock is a Jew means that he manifestly includes Jews among those who are by nature or upbringing ungentle. Two reasons suggest he does, but then again a third seems to override these. First, a pun on “gentle” yields “gentile,” implying that the Duke is seeking a gentile or un-Jewish answer from Shylock.14 Second, the Duke has already confided to Antonio privately that he considers Shylock incorrigible (IV.i.3-6). Still, third, the Duke, whatever his private opinion, cannot admit publicly that Shylock as Jew was “never trained” to be gentle that is, by Jewish law, without weakening his earlier argument that Shylock's apparent lack of compassion was a deliberate theatrical delay. The inescapable conclusion, then, is that the Duke is forced to give the public impression to Shylock and everyone else that Jewish law does after all teach moral decency, including compassion, and that Shylock, being uncompassionate, is simply being a bad Jew. Evidently Gross's approach, which (in contrast to, say, Danson's) looks not much further than the putative stereotypes Shakespeare is said to share with his contemporaries, blurs just that point in the Duke's speech which goes contrary to stereotype.
In other words, the Duke makes a public effort to compliment Shylock's Jewishness and pleads with him simply to live up to it. As with Portia's subsequent speeches in court, a possibility here emerges that is entirely different from any that Gross seems willing or able to acknowledge. Perhaps the possibility is best put by way of our denial of a remark made in passing by an articulate but overly sympathetic reviewer of Gross's book: “It was clearly not part of Shakespeare's conscious design,” writes Robert Alter, “to question the received wisdom of Christian hostility toward the Jews.” But the facts we adduce, and which Gross and others ignore, suggest just the opposite.

Even so, the question remains today to Shakespeare's apparent moral obtuseness, his lack of sensitivity (as we say) about Jews and Judaism, whether we ultimately ascribe to him a reformer's intention or not. Once the most obvious incidents of the play, such as we first take note of them, are seen for what they are morally, it is hard to resist interpreting *The Merchant of Venice* as a whole simply in their terms—that is, morallistically. How could anyone who writes such stuff, we tend to ask, have been very nice to Jews? The play undeniably draws from an appalling legacy of Jew-hatred in England from, say, 1290, when Jews were officially expelled, till at least 1753, when the ill-fated Jew Bill, as it was called, momentarily dropped professing the sacraments as a naturalization requirement and so opened citizenship to Jews, who had begun to be formally readmitted under Cromwell a century earlier. Perhaps the most convenient place to begin to acknowledge the bearing of that legacy here is James Shapiro's recent *Shakespeare and the Jews*. Shapiro draws from abundant references to Jews in chronicles, sermons, stories, plays, legal opinions, political tracts, and the like surrounding what he calls the “cultural moment” of the play's first staging (10). He disclaims any overall interpretation of the play, or of Shakespeare's private intentions, for that matter. Still, his comments on passages seen to dovetail with the historical evidence he adduces suggest much by way of innuendo which is morally damaging. Although the passages he cites are few and far between, they are worth listing, so that one can see both the force of the argument to which he contributes and its limitations.

That Jews sometimes suffered brutal reprimals for alleged ritual murders of Christians around Easter time, for example, serves to explain a report in the play of an ominous predawn nosebleed on “Black Monday,” or Easter Monday, by Shylock's clownish ex-servant, Launcelot, in his chatterbox cover-up of an impending elopement of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and her Christian lover, Lorenzo (II.v.22-26) (258 n. 71). Launcelot's report resonates a few lines later during his coded message to Jessica, “There will come a Christian by / Will be worth a Jewess' eye” (II.v.40-41)—the “worth” here alluding less, Shapiro argues, to “the value of a lover than the revenge exacted upon the Jewish community for its crimes” (109). That Shakespeare's contemporaries were generally aware that there was no strictly female counterpart to male circumcision as the sign of Jews' covenant with God, moreover, explains the relative ease with which Jessica could break that covenant in marrying Lorenzo (120). And yet the short-lived contemporary belief that women's earrings could somehow substitute for ritual circumcision, Shapiro thinks, might explain Jessica's absconding with Shylock's jewels and Shylock's afterward lamenting that he would rather see her dead at his feet with the jewels in her ear (III.i.77-79) (ibid.). In any case, the further suspicion that a Jewess who could easily convert might just as easily revert to the old covenant seems to Shapiro to underlie the disturbing exchange between Jessica and Lorenzo comparing their hasty marriage to several thwarted love affairs of classical antiquity (V.i.1-24) (58f.). Finally, contemporary theological discussion over the meaning of “circumcision of the heart” in Paul's Letter to the Romans leads Shapiro to speculate that Shylock's insistence on a pound of Antonio's flesh might be a metonym for genital circumcision or even castration (114-21).

The historical import of these and other derogatory images of Jews, according to Shapiro, was to cast doubt over whether Jews could ever be trusted as fellow denizens, much less citizens, alongside Englishmen. To the extent that Shakespeare may be said to have given further currency to such images, he also seems to have lent them further credibility as his national stature rose. Or so Shapiro finds when looking at the public debate over the Jew Bill more than a century and a half later (195-224). The same images continued to be invoked by opponents of the bill, Shapiro notes, and led to its repeal barely two years after its passage, despite arguments in its favor drawn from more enlightened thinkers such as John Toland, Daniel Defoe, and John Locke.
Shapiro leads us to infer, though he does not put it in so many words, that the bill might have had an easier time of it had Shakespeare thought better than to write *The Merchant of Venice* in the first place. For these and other moral reasons, he has no hesitation about calling the play “anti-Jewish” (216).

Here is where the limitations of Shapiro's argument become apparent. Assuming that the popular images as Shapiro describes them were as decisive politically as he suggests, there seems a further need to explain why Parliament itself was not altogether dazzled by them, at least for a time. Why, in short, did public life become as receptive as it was to the position in favor of tolerance of Jews as articulated by Toland, Defoe, Locke, and others? Here Shapiro is comparatively silent. It is testimony to the difficulty of this question that it would require him to widen the scope of the inquiry, to move from the narrower question of the popular prejudices latent and prevailing at a given hour (what Shapiro calls “cultural history”) to the broader question of how responsible statesmanship would have to discern and guide such prejudices on important public issues such as the Jew Bill.

Let us come closer to the point at hand. Given at least the modest success of enlightened statesmanship in 1753 in overcoming the derogatory images of Jews admittedly found in Shakespeare's then popular play, wouldn't we have to ask—as Shapiro does not—whether Shakespeare himself might have had enough statesmanlike insight to be able to anticipate and even encourage these same possibilities, however modestly, in his dramatic presentation of Shylock? The moment this question occurs to us, unless we simply decide to rule out certain answers beforehand, we are forced to look again at the manifestly derogatory things said of and by Jews in Shakespeare's play, to see whether they are indeed the play's last word or whether instead they might also call to mind other, more salutary images of the behavior of Jews—and of Christians—embedded as well in the psyches of his viewing and reading audience. But this last question can be answered one way or the other not by insinuation from evidence outside Shakespeare's play, but only by firsthand examination of the play itself. …

Notes

3. Cf. III.v.21-23, 30-33; IV.i.47, 54.
4. Cf. also IV.i.204, 221f., 226f., 233ff., 312.
7. Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). I omit from fuller consideration Grebanier, who defends the play on the too narrow grounds that Shakespeare understands his Shylock as a banker in conflict with a merchant prince rather than as a Jew in conflict with a Christian: “No one expects compassion from a bank” (Truth about Shylock, 213; cf. 95). See, however, I.iii.37, 41-43, with IV.i.17-34 and my remarks on Gross, below.


14. For a useful discussion of Shakespeare's "verbal usury" in the play, that is, his habit of generating added meaning from given words, see Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economics from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 47-83.


17. Cf. ibid., 43, with 83, 110, 189 ("the play as a cultural safety-valve"), 228 ("*The Merchant*'s capacity to illuminate a culture").

**Criticism: Character Studies: Charles Edelman (essay date 1999)**


*[In the following essay, Edelman reconstructs Elizabethan perceptions and expectations of Jewish theatrical characters, offering evidence that Shakespeare's Shylock was more likely a tragic figure than simply a comic villain.]*

As John Gross remarks in *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*, ‘everyone who writes about the stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* is doomed to quote, sooner or later’, the couplet supposedly spoken by Alexander Pope upon seeing Charles Macklin’s portrayal in 1741:

This is the Jew
That Shakespeare drew.(1)

Pope's comment shows that he considered Macklin's hard and bitterly malevolent interpretation to be a welcome corrective to the Shylock of Thomas Doggett and his successors in George Granville's adaption, *The Jew of Venice*, a lurid burlesque of the role that had held the stage since 1701. It also shows a yearning, shared by all students of the play, to reconstruct somehow the first Shylock, about whom there is no reliable contemporary information whatsoever—the actor Thomas Jordan's doggerel description,

His beard was red ...
His habit was a Jewish gown,
That would defend all weather;
His chin turned up, his nose hung down,
dates from 1664, when the theatre was not, contrary to the view of E. E. Stoll, ‘still swayed by the tradition of Alleyn and Burbage’.  

Given that any role is going to be significantly altered from its conception in the dramatist's imagination once it is in the hands of an actor and an audience, this essay is not concerned with the Jew that Shakespeare ‘drew’—that Shylock was forever lost the moment the play was performed. My topic is the Jew that Shakespeare ‘knew’, the Shylock whom he, Francis Meres, and other spectators saw some time before September of 1598, when the role was reinvented by Richard Burbage or another actor of the ‘Lord Chamberlaine his Servants’.  

In all that has been written about The Merchant of Venice, one point has remained virtually constant: however sympathetic the portrayals of Edmund Kean, Henry Irving, Laurence Olivier, or any number of others may have been, the original Shylock would have conformed to the so-called Elizabethan stereotype of the villainous stage Jew. Gross writes

… to an Elizabethan audience, the fiery red wig that he almost certainly wore spelled out his ancestry even more insistently than anything that was actually said. It was the same kind of wig that had been worn by Marlowe's Barabas, and before that by both Judas and Satan in the old mystery plays.

Similarly, Jay L. Halio, in the introduction to his Oxford edition, notes that ‘Shakespeare's initial conception of him was essentially a comic villain, most likely adorned with a red wig and bottle nose.’ Halio is at pains to point out, however, that ‘the evidence for Shylock as a comic villain’ is not to be found in the play, but ‘partly in the literary and dramatic traditions which Shakespeare followed, that lie behind the character, and partly in certain generic and other considerations’. He then provides a lucid account of the qualities held in common by such fictional Jews as Zadoch and Zachary in Thomas Nashe's The Unfortunate Traveller, and Abraham, the Jewish poisoner in Greene's Selimus (both 1594), these three characters probably having been influenced by the notoriety of Dr Roderigo Lopez, tried and executed in the same year, and above all by the popularity of Marlowe's extraordinary creation, Barabas, first seen c. 1589.

As cogent as the views of Gross and Halio are, there is a troubling premise behind them: a portrayal possible in 1814, when Kean stunned Drury Lane, and obviously possible, even obligatory nowadays, could not have been done four hundred years ago; one would be hard pressed to think of any other Shakespearian character who is thought to have changed so completely as to be unrecognizable from Elizabethan to modern performance. In questioning this premise, I am not arguing for a ‘tragic’ Shylock as the correct one, or arguing that the play is pro- or anti-Semitic; my sole object is to challenge the a priori assumption that Shylock must have conformed to a particular theatrical tradition, or that he must have been played in a certain way to satisfy the expectations of that wonderfully malleable group, who always think and believe whatever we want them to, Shakespeare's audience.

Assuming that the text remains the same (a point I will take up later), what are the variables that might separate the 1590s Merchant from those of the nineteenth century onwards? They might be divided into three categories: (1) limitations imposed by literary or theatrical tradition; (2) limitations imposed by audience beliefs, attitudes, or expectations; and (3) theatrical limitations imposed upon the range of performance options by acting style, costume, the shape of the stage, or any of the many other historically discrete theatrical conventions and technical considerations associated with Elizabethan performance practice.

Earlier I referred to the ‘so-called’ stereotype of the Elizabethan stage Jew, for it is far from certain that there ever was such a thing. When considering Jews in the early modern drama, we are struck first by how few of
them there are, and then by how different these few are from each other. In the twelve years leading up to The Merchant of Venice, there are exactly three Jews in extant plays: one of them is a tiny part, the aforementioned Abraham in Greene's Selimus. The others are, of course, Barabas in The Jew of Malta, and Gerontus in Wilson's Three Ladies of London (1584).

Barabas' villainous attributes are too well known to require description here, but Gerontus is by far the most honest and admirable, one might even say ‘Christian’, character in his play. E. E. Stoll, in his oft-cited argument for the ‘traditional’ Shylock, summarily dismisses Gerontus as ‘the single instance in the Elizabethan drama of an honourable Jew’, which is easy for Stoll to do since he has already established that ‘to get at Shakespeare's intention (after a fashion) is, after all, not hard’, and that ‘Shakespeare, more than any other poet, reflected the settled prejudices and passions of his race’. But whatever Stoll may think about Three Ladies of London, Gerontus shows that single instance or not, even if there was a stereotypical stage Jew, the Elizabethan theatre was capable of accommodating alternative portrayals.

This leads us away from Jews on the stage and in literature to the far more controversial topic of how Jews were seen in Elizabethan England. Is it true, as James C. Bulman writes in his valuable contribution to the Shakespeare in Performance series, that ‘some knowledge of the history of anti-Semitism in England is critical to an understanding of the stereotype with which Shakespeare appealed to his audience’s prejudices’? Here I am indebted to Laurence Lerner, who in his essay ‘Wilhelm S and Shylock’, suggests in a most engaging way that the perceived anti-Semitism of the play could be more a product of audience appropriation than anything in the text itself. Had the Elizabethans, all of whom were predisposed to think of Jews as devils and ritual murderers, read enough Terence Hawkes to know that the meaning of the play resided not in the author or actors, but entirely in themselves?

If they had, then it is not hard, as so many have done, to construct a picture of the first Shylock as the archetypical villain, for it is all too true that along with the execution of Dr Lopez (although it should be noted that Lopez's religion was hardly mentioned at his trial), there was pamphlet after pamphlet, sermon after sermon, and story after story, from Chaucer's Prioress’ Tale to Nashe's Unfortunate Traveller, encouraging people to see Jews in the worst possible light. If that is the picture we want, though, we have again gone outside The Merchant of Venice to see it, since, as Gross reminds us, however ubiquitous stories about Hugh of Lincoln and well-poisoners might have been, none of the traditional charges are alluded to in the play: nothing about Christ-killers, sorcerers, ritual murderers, crucifiers of children, or host-desecrators.

This brings me to one of the central points of my argument: that it is simply not true that everyone in Elizabethan England, and hence everyone on the stage and in the audience at The Merchant of Venice, was an anti-Semite. As James Shapiro shows in Shakespeare and the Jews, by the late 1590s a significant number of Jews lived in or visited England, exactly how many depending on how one defined the group. Many were, of course, Marranos, Jews who had to some degree converted to Christianity, including Lopez, and there were others who were considered at least in some respects to have retained their Jewish identity, such as the descendants of the Jewish musicians brought to England from Italy by Henry VIII. There were also the many contacts that merchants, ambassadors, and other English travellers had with Jews—Laurence Aldersey's description of a service he attended at the Venice synagogue in 1581 is one of total respect:

For my further knowledge of these people, I went into their Sinagogue upon a Saturday, which is their Sabbath day: and I found them in their service or prayers, very devoute: they receive the five booke of Moses, and honour them by carying them about their Church, as the Papists doe their crosse. Their Synagogue is in forme round, and the people sit round about it, and in the midst, there is a place for him that readeth to the rest: as for their apparell, all of them weare a large white lawne over their garments, which reacheth from their head, downe to the ground. The Psalmes they sing as we doe, having no image, nor using any maner of idolatrie: their error is, that they beleev not in Christ, nor yet receive the New
Documents such as this one encourage us to conclude that no matter how pervasive anti-Semitic literature may have been, the idea that a universal ‘Elizabethan horror of Jews’ must have informed the reception of *The Merchant of Venice* is simply one more Tudor myth, similar not only to the supposed Elizabethan horror of rebellion said to have dictated the reception of the history plays, but also, as I will argue, to the equally mythical Elizabethan horror of usury.

Virtually everything, and worse, that was said about Jews in Elizabethan England was said about Moslems, and yet throughout her reign Elizabeth was busy establishing trade relations with whoever would deal with her, from Morocco to Constantinople, buying saltpetre for gunpowder from the Emperor of Morocco and selling him munitions in return, munitions that were used to annihilate the Portuguese and their fellow Christians at the Battle of Alcazar. And, as most editions of *Othello* point out, in 1600 she received an embassy of sixteen Moors, the portrait of their leader now hanging in the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon.

How could this have been possible if Islam was, in the words of the Reverend Joseph Hall, ‘a rude ignorance and a palpable imposture … their laws, full of license, full of impiety: in which revenge is encouraged, multitudes of wives allowed, theft tolerated … a monster of many seeds, and all accursed’? Whatever one’s private feelings might be, the history of international commerce shows that overt prejudice flies out of the window when there is money to be made.

But what if there is money to be lost? If Shylock's religion, in itself, is not enough to give him automatically the attributes of a Herod or a Barabas, there is still the matter of Shylock as usurer to be considered. Even if most, or at least some, Elizabethans did not in fact feel all that strongly about Jews, perhaps they all, along with Philip Stubbes, thought that ‘he that killeth a man, riddeth him out of his pains at once, but he that taketh usury is long in butchering his pacient, suffering him by little and little to anguish, and sucking out his hart blood … an Usurer is worse than a Jew, for they to this daye, will not take any usurie of their Brethren, according to the lawe of God’.

Stubbes has done us a favour by distinguishing between Christian and Jewish usurers, since there are actually very few Jews amongst the many usurers in early modern drama. As Garry Wills has noted,

> some who discuss this play believe that only Shylock and his coreligionists are the usurers in Venice. There would be no reason for Elizabethans, so familiar with their own Christian usurers, to assume that. In fact, the usurer, a common figure in the drama of Shakespeare's age, is normally a Christian.

Still, Lawrence Danson writes of ‘the Elizabethan horror of the idea of taking interest for the loan of money’, going on to say that writers, ‘depending for their view of economics upon the most venerable of classical and medieval sources, were unanimous in their condemnation of the practice of usury’.

This might be true, but whether or not Shylock is, in fact, a usurer requires far more careful interrogation than has so far been given to the point. The word ‘usury’ does not occur in *The Merchant of Venice*, while ‘usance’ is heard three times: Shylock hates Antonio most of all for bringing down the ‘rate of usance’ (1.3.43) in Venice, and for having ‘rated’ him for his ‘moneys and [his] usances’ (1.3.106). In the third and last use of the word, Shylock is prepared to take

> ... no doit

Of usance
for his loan to Antonio. The only person to use the word ‘usurer’ is, by report, Antonio:

He was wont to call me usurer: let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy: let him look to his bond.

To Shylock, then, ‘usance’ is a straightforward synonym for ‘interest’, which Shylock freely admits he takes—Shakespeare's choice of one term or the other in each case could be purely for metrical reasons. ‘Usury’, however, is an epithet delivered by the same man who called Shylock ‘misbeliever’ and ‘cut-throat, dog’ (1.3.110), after he spat on him, and openly states his willingness to do the same again (1.3.128-9).

The way Shakespeare employs the words ‘usance’ and ‘usurer’ in The Merchant of Venice epitomizes what was a major public debate of Elizabethan England, for although Elizabethan writers were, as Danson says, ‘unanimous in their condemnation of the practice of usury’ they were anything but unanimous in defining it. As Norman Jones writes in his endlessly fascinating book, God and the Moneylenders, ‘all good Christians agreed that usury was wrong, but they could not agree on what it was and when it occurred’.

Until 1545, any charging of interest was considered usury, and hence illegal, with the obvious effect of keeping interest rates extremely high. In response, Henry VIII's 1545 statute defined the offence as interest in excess of 10 per cent, although most loans were for periods much shorter than a year, so the nominal annual interest was actually far higher. Enforcement proved very difficult, however, and rates remained high, so the lawmakers did what they always do when they cannot regulate something—they outlaw it again. In 1552 Henry VIII's statute was repealed and replaced by total prohibition, with the same effect as that other well-known prohibition, so in 1571, a year after one John Shakespeare of Stratford was fined 40 shillings for charging an astonishing £20 interest for a one-month £80 loan, Elizabeth's parliament, after extensive debate, restored the legal limit at 10 at the term of the loan was. (If there was a New York Daily News in those days, it would have reported that ‘Johnny Gloves’ was busted for nailing his customers on a ‘vig’ of six points a week.)

In reading God and the Moneylenders and Laura Caroline Stevenson's Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature, one learns that writers such as Miles Mosse, who saw usury as the charging of any interest, rather than excessive interest, were what we would call today the extreme right wing, or even a ‘lunatic fringe’. Still, interest rates, like taxes, are always too high, so we might easily assume that many in Shakespeare's audience would have known the difficulty of repaying a loan, and would have seen Shylock as a usurer. But for every borrower there is a lender, and there were no banks or credit unions then—ordinary people who needed money borrowed from a neighbour or acquaintance, or found an acquaintance to act as broker to negotiate the loan with someone else. Given the diverse social makeup of the Elizabethan theatre-going public, it is quite probable that some in the audience, since they were engaged in the practice themselves, believed that lending money at the going market rate, or receiving a commission for arranging a loan, was a socially useful and even honourable thing to do. One member of the original audience at The Merchant of Venice would surely have thought so, presuming he was not acting a part on stage—the play's author.

It has been established beyond doubt that like his father, William Shakespeare loaned out, at interest, what were sizable sums of money, and he was prepared to sue when he was not paid back. He also, as the Quiney correspondence shows, acted as a broker on occasion, arranging loans of what would be, as E. A. J. Honigmann notes, ‘five-figure’ sums today. When Antonio says
Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow  
By taking nor by giving of excess

(1.3.59-60)

would not the play's author have expected, even wanted, at least someone in the audience, in those very inflationary times, to ask what Antonio was doing with a shirt on his back?

It is ironic that Stubbes is so often cited as speaking on behalf of the Elizabethans and their horror of charging interest, since his eleven pages on the evils of interest are closely followed by ten pages on the evils of plays and playing, a reminder that moral tracts tell us far more about what audience preconceptions were not, rather than what they were. If we are looking for books to tell us about prevailing social values of early modern England, we might consult those containing tables of interest rates, freely available by the early 1600s, rather than The Anatomy of Abuses or The Arraignment and Conviction of Usurie. 

My last category, theatrical limitations imposed upon the range of performance options, requires discussion of another argument that has been offered for the traditionally villainous Shylock—perhaps the most potent argument in that it relies, to a degree, on the text itself rather than things external to it. I refer to Shylock's famous ‘aside’, labelled as such in every modern edition of the play I have seen:

How like a fawning publican he looks.  
I hate him for he is a Christian ...

(1.3.39-40)

In Understanding Shakespeare's Plays in Performance, Halio writes that

omission of this passage is usually a clear indication of how the director has conceived Shylock's role—and with it, much else in the play. The script is then tailored accordingly, so that Shylock can emerge, as in Henry Irving's famous portrayal, as a tragic hero.

Specifically referring to both Olivier and Irving, he adds that cutting this speech ‘is of course essential for this interpretation’.

Unfortunately, neither Irving, nor Kean, nor Booth, cut a single word of the speech—indeed it was the centrepiece of Irving's portrayal, as described by his grandson:

His anger grew keener and more savage at the beginning of the aside, ‘How like a fawning publican he looks …’. For a moment he recovered his self-control, and then, on the words, ‘If I can catch him …’ his spleen once more got the better of him.

How did these great ‘tragic’ Shylocks leave the ‘aside’ intact, and still manage to stun audiences with their sympathetic portrayals? The answer, I believe, is that the speech is not an ‘aside’ at all, as the word is usually defined by editors and critics. As is well known, the first quarto of The Jew of Malta shows many asides, labelled as such, for Barabas, but this stage direction is used indiscriminately for what are actually two separate conventions. When Barabas is feigning distress over Abigail's entry into the convent, the asides are secret ‘whispers to her’:

Wilt thou forsake mee too in my distresse,  
Seduced Daughter, Goe forget [not].

Becomes it Jewes to be so credulous,
To morrow early It'e be at the doore.

No come not at me, if thou wilt be damn'd,
Forget me, see me not, and so be gone.
Farewell, Remember to morrow morning.

(d1r, lines 18-19, 28-32)

Other asides, however, invite Barabas to speak directly to the audience, conspiring with them, as it were, with a series of ‘one-liners’ (in both senses of the term) such as:

I, like enough, why then let every man
Provide him, and be there for fashion-sake.
If any thing shall there concerne our state
Assure your selves I'le looke unto my selfe. aside

(B4r lines 6-9)

and

I must make this villaine away: please you dine
With me, Sir, & you shal be most hartily poyson'd. aside

(H3r lines 28-9)

Must Shylock imitate Barabas and speak directly to the audience in his twelve-line speech? Can he not, in what we would call a soliloquy if he were alone, think aloud to himself? The one-word stage direction ‘aside’ appears exactly once in the Folio, in Titus Andronicus, when Tamora addresses Titus in her imagination while musing.

Why thus it shall become
High witted Tamora to glose with all: aside
But Titus, I haue touch'd thee to the quicke,
Thy life blood out: If Aaron now be wise,
Then is all safe, the Anchor's in the Port.

(tln 2027-31)

There are only two such directions in the various Quartos, both within one speech in Pericles q1, as Simonides addresses Thaisa, the first ‘aside’ sitting one line below where it should be:

Yea, Mistris, are you so peremptorie?
I am glad on't with all my heart,
Ile tame you; Ile bring you in subjection. Aside.
Will you not, having my consent,
Bestowe your love and your affections,
Upon a Stranger? who for ought I know
May be (nor can I thinke the contrary)
As great in blood as I my selfe: Aside.

(D4v, lines 2-9)

As in Titus, the context implies thinking aloud rather than addressing the audience.31
While the very word ‘soliloquy’ indicates that only the speaker is on stage, there are countless examples in Shakespeare, unmarked by any stage direction, of this other convention for which we have no convenient label—thinking aloud while others are present. It is hard to imagine any Claudius saying

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!

(3.1.52-6)

directly to the audience.

It is all too easy to confuse Shylock with the great Elizabethan villains such as Barabas, Richard III, and Iago by assuming that in the theatre, he, as they almost certainly did, spoke directly to the spectators. While such generalizations about performance practice are admittedly dangerous, I would suggest that one major limitation of the proscenium arch theatre is that the long aside is most difficult to manage. Further to this point, in the nineteenth century direct address to the audience would have carried with it strong associations of that nineteenth-century descendant of Barabas, the stock villain—‘curses! foiled again!’—of the melodrama.

For Kean, Booth, or Irving to turn to the audience and secretly whisper his hatred while Bassanio and Antonio sit there feigning conversation would have been most inimical to a sympathetic portrayal, so they changed the aside into a soliloquy by having Bassanio leave the stage before ‘How like a fawning publican’ was spoken. This, however, would not have been necessary in the far larger, more flexible, and multi-dimensional space of the Shakespearian theatre, where thinking aloud in a serious mode, at some length, while others are on stage, was common.

If Kean, or indeed Olivier, had played Shylock at the Globe, he would have been able, as the Folio text indicates, to have Antonio and Bassanio on stage while he spoke ‘How like a fawning publican he looks …’ without automatic association of villainy. Indeed, the lines denied Olivier at the National could easily have been restored for the television production through the simple device of the voice-over, television's equivalent of this Elizabethan theatrical convention. ‘Fawning publican’ and all, he might still have been, as I believe Kean might have been, very much like ‘the Jew that Shakespeare knew’.

Notes

4. Francis Meres, Palladis Tamia (entered 7 September 1598), in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974), p. 1844; the title page of q1 (1600) claims that the play is printed ‘as it hath been divers times acted by the Lord Chamberlaine his Servants’.
5. Gross, Shylock, pp. 16-17.
6. Halio, Merchant of Venice, p. 10.
8. Ibid., p. 262, 280.
14. ‘The first voyage or journey, made by Master Laurence Aldersey, Marchant of London, to the Cities of Jerusalem, and Tripolis, &c. In the yeere 1581. Penned and set downe by himself’, in Richard Hakluyt, The Principal Navigations Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation, vol. 5 (Glasgow, 1903), pp. 204-5. Brown (pp. xxxvii-xxxviii) discounts anti-Semitism as a large part of the Elizabethans’ day to day lives.
17. Philip Stubbes, Anatomy of Abuses (London, 1583), sig. k7v; k8v.
26. N. Jones, God and the Moneylenders, p. 78.
28. Halio, Merchant of Venice, p. 10.
30. On the aside, see Alan Dessen, Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 51 ff.
31. There is also an ‘aside’ in the ‘bad’ Quarto of Merry Wives of Windsor—see Dessen, Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary, p. 51.
32. Mahood, introd., Merchant of Venice, p. 44.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Davi Napoleon (review date 1998)
Although Barbara Gaines decided to place the Shakespeare Repertory Theatre's *The Merchant of Venice* in a 1920s American city, she encouraged to adapt period and place to the play. Synthesizing authentic details that suggested the superficiality of the era with anachronistic elements that evoked the Roaring 20s, design stayed true to the feel of a period rather than the time itself.

Costume designer Nan Cibula-Jenkins says the design team brought pictorial research to the table early, and they knew why they deviated from historical accuracy in every instance. “Even though we were manipulating colors and styles, we wanted the audience to think they were watching people in the 20s. [Back then], all the bathing suits would have been navy or black,” she says; she used tropical colors to create a lighthearted ambiance for the Belmont scenes. “Navy would have given the piece a different feeling.”

Cibula-Jenkins, who built all the women's clothing and rented the majority of men's garments from the Royal Shakespeare Company, didn't use period undergarments in dance scenes; these would have “distracted from the period ideal. Barbara wanted us to grasp the period in its most idealistic form, so the world seemed almost pushed. She said, ‘It's like you're at a party, where everyone is forcing themselves to have a good time.’”

Avoiding visual clutter while suggesting a frenzied state, the design team created “a world force to the point that it was almost frenzied. Barbara wanted us to take the audience to the conclusion, to get on the train and go right to the station,” says Cibula-Jenkins.

Gaines opened her production at a rooftop party, where Antonio eventually separates himself from dancing revelers to reflect on his contrasting sadness. Seeking colors and textures that would reflect a world out of kilter, Cibula-Jenkins balanced the languorous middle Belmont scenes with forced gaiety in party scenes that framed them at the end as well as its start. … Middle Belmont scenes featured pastels and soft flowing silk chiffons, the more relaxed textures echoing the times. Men wore tail coats in many scenes.

The first time in Western history that women discarded corsets, skirts in the 20s were “incredibly short compared to those worn ten years earlier. Women cut their hair off, an amazing idea. They had been quietly painting their lips, but now they came out and wore makeup overtly. It was a huge breakthrough.”

Cibula-Jenkins notes that women capable of changes in style were also capable of taking matters in their own hands, as Portia and Nerissa do. “As soon as you pick the 20s, you're in an age when anything goes, a new age of liberation.”

But while people celebrated the end of the war and what they imagined would be a carefree future, immigrants struggled with harsh conditions, and the racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Christianity of the times matched those in Shakespeare's Venice.

Because Elizabethan audiences knew Venice as a place of the kind of monetary exchange we associate with present-day Wall Street, and we have romantic visions of the Italian city, Gaines relocated the play spatially as well as temporally. Cibula-Jenkins and set designer Neil Patel exchanged swatches and talked about yellows and blues in Belmont, with cool grays and metallic for city scenes. Patel took his cue from 30s Art Deco, as furniture with hard edges provided the austere look he wanted. His public place resembled a bank lobby, undecorated and cold. Using the same space as the courtroom with minor adjustments, mainly the addition of a few benches, Patel didn't try to hide the public space but allowed it to resonate throughout the
climactic scene. The same space functioned as Shylock's home, again by moving a few pieces of furniture.

Patel provided contrast in the Belmont scenes, for which he used a water motif. We meet Portia on a beach, and revelers dance around a reflecting pool during the final party scene. Again, little changed by Robert Christen transformed the space with warm lights.

Instead of asking sound designer Robert Neuhaus to locate period songs, Gaines commissioned an original score from Aleric Jans, who matched the frenzy of the scenography with an over-the-top driven score, consistent with the sound of the times.

Design elements combined to create an effect that is different from any one of them. “Take that music,” says Cibula-Jenkins, “and the 30s furniture and my costumes, and it feels like the 1920s.”

**Criticism: Production Reviews: John W. Mahon (review date 1998)**


*[In the following review of Richard Olivier's 1998 production of The Merchant of Venice, Mahon comments on the director's "colorblind" casting, decision to make Portia the play's central figure, and efforts to recreate a historically authentic theater-going experience at the New Globe.]*

The son of Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright, Richard Olivier has worked in the theatre for some years, both in England and in the United States. He directed *Henry V* at Shakespeare's Globe last summer. He has published several books, including the memoir *Shadow of the Stone Heart: A Search for Manhood.* During a conversation with me in his London home on 15 June, Olivier reflected on his approach to directing *Merchant* at the New Globe on Bankside this summer. His remote preparation for the assignment began much earlier and included a trip last winter to the University of Lecce, in the Italian province of Puglia, where he conducted a workshop on the play for drama students. The Italian students provided insight into the energy of Italian character and expressed satisfaction with a dramatic action that moved from carnival toward the “Passion”/Easter of the courtroom scene. Students in Lecce readily perceived Shylock as a villain.

These responses reinforced Olivier's determination to present *The Merchant of Venice* in terms of what the play would have meant in the 1590s, to release the story in the way it was intended to be told, to serve as a storyteller rather than as an interpreter. Such goals complement the Globe's sacred “a-word,” authenticity. They also acknowledge the fact that the Globe space is an actors' space, so that the director's task is to empower the actors to do their jobs.

This space also provokes interaction: seeing the play makes viewers confront their own prejudices. The colorblind casting reflects the reality of Venice at the time: it was a multicultural society in which many servants were Armenians. The Globe of 1998 should reflect the cultural “mix” in England now just as the Globe of the 1590s did then.

Asked how his father might have influenced his concept of the play, Richard Olivier responded that Sir Laurence influenced him to the extent that he wanted to avoid a star like his father or Dustin Hoffman in the Shylock role—that immediately emphasizes the character. (In fact, the Globe's Shylock, the German actor Norbert Kentrup, had long been Sam Wanamaker's choice for the role.) Modern productions tend to “over-weight” the Shylock.
It is Portia's play, even in terms of number of scenes. More importantly, the play highlights her effort to change a masculine world, to move the society from an “either/or” stance to a “both/and” one. Most people seem to agree that feminine intuition like Portia's needs to be disguised in order to succeed in a male world. In general, Olivier observed, Shakespeare surely intended audiences to feel ambiguity about the motives of his characters.

Richard Olivier explained that Globe Education offers workshops for students that explore the anti-Semitism of the play, including the problem that the Christians never apologize for their behavior nor retract their treatment of Shylock. Workshops for business people focus on male/female role-playing and its impact on corporate leadership. Cranfield U's School of Management offered a two-day seminar last June at the Globe's Education Centre. Three Cranfield lecturers joined Richard Olivier to present the program, which cost each participant £1,025!

Addressing other aspects of the production, Olivier noted that, on the Globe stage, costumes become the set and music becomes the lighting; music denotes location—bells for Venice, lutes for Belmont. Operating on the assumption that everything behind the back wall is part of a magic space, Olivier deliberately positioned the three caskets in the discovery space, where they probably would have stood in the original production, not visible to some in the audience, now as then.

Finally, Richard Olivier acknowledged that the Globe space promotes the danger of overplaying to the groundlings and neglecting the audience seated in the galleries. Since the text of the play is performed virtually uncut (only about 5Merchant was cut), too much “business” unduly lengthens the performance time. The performance tends to evolve over the course of the summer; in the case of Henry V in 1997, ten minutes of “business” was shaved off over the course of the production.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Lois Potter (review date 1999)**


*In the following excerpted review of the 1998 Globe season, featuring Richard Olivier's production of The Merchant of Venice, Potter comments on the overall carnivalesque quality of the production, and mentions the exceptional Shylock of Norbert Kentrup.*

Reviewers of the first two seasons at the Globe in Southwark, whether in the printed and electronic media or in formal and informal talks at the International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford-upon-Avon, focused more on the new theater's audience than on its productions. Advance discussions of the project had suggested that this was likely to be the case. Paul Nelsen, in a well-informed report from one of the conferences of theater scholars which preceded the official opening, cited various speculations that were being floated there. Would Globe audiences act like fans at a sporting event? Should actors try “warming up the crowd before performances”? Perhaps, some feared, “a stadium-like atmosphere might provoke actors to adopt a fustian style.”1 Accurate predictions, self-fulfilling prophecies, or simply fantasies? The discussions I heard and read in the summer of 1998 were an uneasy mix of the anecdotal (“Well, it wasn't like that on the afternoon when I went”) and the abstract: a surprising number of people were ready to claim, on the basis of one visit, or indeed none, that the whole enterprise was irretrievably flawed.

In attempting to fill out the picture of the Globe's 1998 season, I shall have to begin where many others have begun (and indeed ended)—with the controversial production of The Merchant of Venice. This production was clearly the centerpiece of the season. Three of the four plays in repertory (The Honest Whore and A Mad
World, My Masters being the other two) dealt in part with money and the world of business; James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* was prominently displayed in the theater shop; and a series of readings of complementary plays about Jews was offered by the Globe's educational branch. There was, then, the opportunity to compare Antonio and Shylock to dramatic characters ranging from Londoners such as Middleton's Shortrod Harebrain and Sir Bounteous Progress (apparently a retired usurer) to Dekker's supposedly Milanese linen-draper Candido, the Hebrews who suffer the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus and Vespasian in William Heminge's *The Jews' Tragedy*, and the sophisticated anonymous German or Dutch traveler who finally reveals himself to be one of the title characters of G. E. Lessing's remarkable dark comedy *The Jews*. The small Bear Gardens theater was rarely full for these readings, perhaps because of their low-budget publicity. They were very well done but did not throw much light on the subject of Renaissance anti-Semitism: the Heminges play is a longwinded, sub-Fletcherian dramatization of the more sensational parts of Josephus's *History of the Jews*, while Lessing, of course, belongs to a later age. In any case, it was difficult for visiting academics to take full advantage of all the opportunities offered by the Globe and Bear Gardens. The two Shakespeare plays, playing to standing-room-only by the time I arrived in early August, were completely sold out soon thereafter. This may be one reason why few seem to have explored the relationships among the four plays in the main theater, and I should add that no explicit parallels were drawn among them in performance. Nevertheless, recognizing their existence added considerably to the pleasure of my visits to the Globe.

Though none of the plays have written prologues, the opening moments of each performance offered a prologuelike experience. That of *Merchant* was particularly significant. As the audience was assembling, an Italian madrigal group could be heard performing in the musicians' gallery, while down on the forestage a masked carnival character (Marcello Magni) was teaching the audience a ribald popular song. Eventually the madrigal group descended to perform on the stage level, only to be confronted by Magni's rival group encouraging the audience to join in its aggressive raucousness. High and popular culture, initially separated as neatly as in Robert Weimann's *locus* and *platea*, were now competing for the same space and for our attention. It was both funny and embarrassing; we weren't sure whether we really wanted to participate in this attempted sabotage of high art. How were we "meant" to respond?

Richard Olivier's production of *Merchant* comprised a series of variations on that question. By making the audience take part in the battle between Lent and carnival, it seemed to co-opt them into the pro-laughter position that the play's first scene shows Gratiano urging on Antonio. Yet this Antonio (Jack Shepherd) was clearly in a seriously depressive state (he burst into tears as he asked "Is this anything now?") and this Gratiano (Andrew French) was almost maniacal in his laughter. Laughter continued to be problematized: the play's second scene invited us to laugh at a series of national stereotypes and to share Portia's horror at the prospect of a suitor with "the complexion of a devil"; the third scene introduced Shylock, no more a carnival figure than Antonio, suddenly attempting to turn a business deal into "a merry sport"; the fourth brought the Prince of Morocco onstage as a caricature of the oversexed black man. Moreover, the disruptive carnival character who started all the trouble at the beginning turned out in the next scene to be Launcelot Gobbo, or rather Marcello Magni, a gifted *commedia dell'arte* improviser and movement artist, who was not so much doubling as illustrating the relationship between anarchic stage clown and household servant/fool. As Launcelot he not only asked for a show of hands to help him decide whether to leave his master Shylock but kicked the cane out from under his blind old father. This was surely the epitome of carnivalesque behavior, with its overturning of traditional models of social and familial behavior, and we were supposed to be on the side of the carnivalesque, weren't we? But the text itself is likely to divide audiences: when Launcelot announces his own death in order to laugh at his father's grief, some will find it comically absurd while others will see it as proof of Bergson's view that laughter requires "an anaesthesia of the heart."

The carnivalesque continued during the intermissions, provoking equally mixed reactions. Magni (again!) raided people's backpacks, attacked illegal photographers with a water bottle, and danced with the spectators. The day I was there, he seemed to be pretty good at guessing which spectators would be least likely to object
to ice-cream cones in their hair, but I later heard that some victims had suffered anxiety attacks while others had threatened to sue. (Outside the Globe was an equally carnivalesque character: a street vendor urging audiences to come and get their snacks at half the price being charged inside the theater precincts.) The Merchant of Venice, even more than most comedies, gets a lot of its laughs from cruelty; whether or not Shakespeare himself was drawing attention to this fact, I have no doubt that Olivier's production was doing so. It might be argued, of course, that, even if I'm right about the intention of the production, the effect in practice was not to contextualize the cruelty but to justify it. There is no real answer to such objections, since performance criticism is based on spectator response, not directorial intention. Some people apparently felt hurt and alienated by the production, to the point of not wanting to discuss it at all; their feelings are real. But so are the feelings of those who were stimulated by it, of whom I was one.

That Norbert Kentrup played Shylock, having learned English especially for the purpose, was apparently the result of a longstanding wish of Sam Wanamaker's, and one could see why: despite his strong German accent, the actor had a magnificent presence and a dry sense of humor that fitted well into the style of the production. Nevertheless, the time lag between his delivery of his lines and the audience's understanding of them often meant that their full effect was lost. Even so, his finely nuanced interpretation gave the character not only dignity but an element of mystery. What this Shylock had in common with his antagonist Antonio was a capacity for human affection as well as for hysterical hatred. What he had in common with his other antagonist, Portia, was a respect for argument. Kentrup, after Portia's “Then must the Jew be merciful,” asked, “On what compulsion must I?” like a teacher politely pointing out a pupil's failure in logic; nevertheless, he listened to, and seemed moved by, the famous speech with which she answered him. One could almost believe that the bond really was just a joke gone wrong. Unlike most Shylocks, this one did not seem terminally ill when he left the courtroom, and it was possible to feel that the story was not yet over.

In the run-up to the trial scene both Antonio and Shylock made their cases directly to the audience, sometimes darting significant glances upward. Kathryn Pogson as Portia also played many lines, literally, to the gallery. (This was one feature of Globe performances that some reviewers criticized, but I couldn't see why. Do we really want to bring back the fourth wall?) Since the gallery auditors are, traditionally, “the gods,” the relation between addressing God and addressing the audience was even clearer than usual. For instance, Portia shared with both God and the audience her very real anxiety as the first two suitors deliberated over the caskets. As the old Prince of Aragon droned soporifically on, she started to pray; and when it became apparent that he was going to talk himself into the wrong choice, she didn't forget to glance upward and say a quick “thank you.” What put the audience on her side in the courtroom was the fact that she was as isolated as Shylock. Bassanio and Gratiano were furious to learn that an inexperienced youngster was taking the place of the distinguished lawyer they had been expecting, and her notorious “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” gave them immediate proof of incompetence. It was possible to see the moment at which Shylock's “Nearest his heart”; those are the very words made her look again at the bond, realizing that its precise wording would be the key to the case. The fifth act fully exploited the comic gifts of both Pogson and Mark Rylance (as Bassanio) in a genuinely funny treatment of the ring scene. Though Lilo Baur as Jessica seemed silently troubled in the final moments, the performance ended with the entire cast (including Launcelot and even Jessica herself) happily singing a madrigal in unison. This might have been meant to signify the final coming together of high and low culture, carnival and Lent—but, as at other times, it was not clear whether it was the characters or the actors who were taking part.

Notes

Among the many special relationships talked about in England, perhaps it's time to acknowledge the unique theatrical symbiosis between Shakespeare and Trevor Nunn. The Bard seems to breathe more easily when directed by Nunn, as evidenced over the better part of two decades at the Royal Shakespeare Co. and now at the National Theater. Also, as his present staging of *The Merchant of Venice* definably proves, Nunn has the effect on Shakespeare of wiping a time-honored canvas clean, revealing colors whose clarity is sometimes shocking: After all, when was the last time that *Merchant*—for all its abundant mournfulness—was packed so full of high spirits?

The larkiness of the gentile community is one of the unsettling masterstrokes of a production that has followed Olympia Dukakis in Martin Sherman's “Rose” as the second show in the Cottesloe studio to receive an ovation at a performance attended by this critic. True, there are moments when the casting doesn't deliver the textual insight felt throughout, and one wishes particularly for a stronger Jessica than Gabrielle Jourdan to deliver an effective closing punch here accompanied by some clever tinkering with the text. (As her suitor, Daniel Evans' fey Lorenzo is comparably out of his league.)

Mostly, however, Nunn works not by altering what, in the wake of the Holocaust, remains a problematic source but via absolute fidelity to the shifting moods of a play whose moments of good cheer, as everyone knows, exact an awful price.

Gratiano (Richard Henders), for instance, may possess a “skipping spirit,” but that's only as long as he's hanging out with his mates Bassanio (Alexander Hanson), Salerio (Peter de Jersey) and Solanio (Mark Umbers), whose own approach to money is to drink their coffees and run before anyone notices they haven't paid the bill. When these suited anti-Semites confront the Jew Shylock (Henry Goodman), however, they can't go in for the kill fast enough, amid a community that finds even Shylock's servant, Launcelot Gobbo (Andrew French), ready to crack a joke at his master's expense.

As played by Henders, this Gratiano is a sartorially well turned-out thug who thinks with his fists: Significantly, he throws a playful punch to Alex Kelly's Nerissa, newly got up in legal garb as male clerk to Portia (Derbhle Crotty), wearing her own masculine disguise. Portia, by contrast, begins as a slinky siren dressed by designer Hildegard Bechtler in body-hugging black. (Bechtler is responsible, too, for the sparsely appointed traverse set.)

But there's something scary about the zealous embrace of “the law” of this one-time minx during a trial scene that debases everyone involved, and one only wishes Crotty communicated radiance as easily as she does a strict reading of the law that cannot but be—to co-opt her own word—“strained.”

The style and sound of the show evoke a jazz-flecked 1920s that incorporates a Klimt canvas for the casket scenes and a drunken, louche ambiance by way of “Cabaret.”

Against the period specifics, there's a properly timeless feel to Goodman's fierce and hunted yarmulke-wearing Shylock, which errs only in a tendency to build from whisper to roar that begins to resemble a vocal trick. Sharing a Yiddish exchange with Jessica, Shylock is later subjected to nothing less...
than emotional rape: the moneymolder stripped of everything that matters, starting with family and faith. Goodman doesn't shy away from the hardening of a man who ends up surrendering much more than a pound of flesh in the painful closing-off of his heart. The silencing of Shylock—preceded by his ally Tubal (John Nolan) walking out on him in disgust—casts its inevitable chill over the final scene, which doesn't need a roll of thunder to remind us that the lovers' putative cuckoldry pales next to the “Christianity” imposed upon Shylock.

It's Nunn's strength to sustain interest to the finish, and he is helped no end by Hanson, who cuts easily the most complicated Bassanio I have seen—his decency adrift in a Venice of thwarted loyalties and misplaced loves as embodied by Antonio (David Bamber), the lovesick “merchant” of the title apparently milquetoast demeanor is capable of real rage.

Indeed, though the Jew-baiting in Merchant is what resounds through the centuries, it's possible to read the play in its entirety as a so-called “comedy” of reconciliation that leaves at least some of its inhabitants a wreck. Shylock is exiled from the amorous milieu with which The Merchant of Venice concludes. But his presence lives on in those unexpected final notes floated by a daughter lost to him in a play that on this occasion sings no less troublingly to us today.

Criticism: Themes: Seymour Kleinberg (essay date 1983)


[In the following essay, Kleinberg claims that The Merchant of Venice dramatizes “the triumph of heterosexual marriage” over homoeroticism, the latter represented by Antonio and his love for Bassanio.]

When I first read The Merchant of Venice, I was dismayed by the anti-Semitism and the materialism of the Venetian world. The play held no charm for me, and I decided that it was simply not very available for someone like myself. Twenty years later, in 1978, after a summer as an NEH fellow at Berkeley, researching the subject of sodomy in the Renaissance, I reread the play. I still found it to be about anti-Semitism under mercantile capitalism, but now just as clearly it was also about homosexual eroticism in conflict with heterosexual marriage, about the rivalry of romantic male friendship with the claims of conventional marriage. This paper explores the relationship of these themes—money, ethnic hatred, sexual rivalry—and argues that they are analogous to one another; they are the matter and the feelings that define the merchant of the title.

Literally, that merchant is Antonio, though in the popular mind the title always invokes Shylock. Part of my argument is that the popular response is also the literal one: Shylock is Antonio. They are psychological counterparts. Antonio is a virulently anti-Semitic homosexual and is melancholic to the point of despair because his lover, Bassanio, wishes to marry an immensely rich aristocratic beauty, to leave the diversions of the Rialto to return to his own class and to sexual conventionality. Antonio is also in despair because he despises himself for his homosexuality, which is romantic, obsessive, and exclusive, and fills him with sexual shame.

For decades now, scholars and critics have noted Antonio's peculiarities. Most see an innocent infatuation in a lugubrious melancholiac, a type Shakespeare was fond of exploiting and an infatuation that was time-honored, dating back to the blood brotherhood of the Germanic tribes on one hand and to the classical Greeks on the other. But in the 1950s, literary critics came under the influence of psychoanalytic thought, and the wholesome nature of Antonio's feelings was questioned. His passivity was the hallmark of neurosis, a defensive pose against “strong homosexual inclination.” It was further argued that Antonio's latent
homosexuality was really a defense of Shakespeare's, as was the anti-Semitism of the play: Antonio and Shylock were two defenses of the poet against the anxiety he had portrayed in the sonnets, where homoeroticism and usury were complicated metaphors for each other.3

In the next decade, the reading of the plays and the sonnets as emotional biography was dismissed as naive. But too much discussion had taken place to dismiss Antonio as unimportant to The Merchant of Venice. Typically, a scholar decided that “there is, of course, no need to suggest an active homosexuality between the two men.”4 Some critics admitted that perhaps on Antonio's part, but never Bassanio's, the love bordered on the passionate, an “incipient homosexual relationship … less innocent than conventional Renaissance friendship.”5

This is still the dominant reading today: Antonio may be repressed and perverse, but Bassanio is innocent. And it is consistent with contemporary attitudes toward Shylock, which sentimentalize the play by seeing Shylock as the victim rather than the villain. Such distortions enervate all the readings of character and relationship. Antonio and Bassanio are just the dearest friends; Portia is completely noble when she isn't being delightfully playful. Of course, the play then is a failure, a mishmash of contradictions, inconsistent about character and confused in its moral vision.

Despite the discomfort of affirming Shylock's villainy after the fate of European Jewry during World War II, critics are once again insisting on describing him with the accurate harshness he deserves. But once Shylock's unattractiveness is restored, it is possible to reconsider Antonio and, finally, Portia herself. It is possible to play Shylock with sympathy without ruining the play entirely, as Laurence Olivier did some years ago for an English televised version, in which Shylock's final “speech” is off-stage and off-camera, his true response to his enforced conversion to Christianity at the end of the trial scene: a terrifying scream so shocking that the play dissolves into prophecies of Auschwitz. At that moment, even if we do not hate Portia and condemn all of Venice, they are permanently outside our sympathy. That is an interesting play, but not the one Shakespeare wrote. It may even be a better play, more suitable to modern ideas of justice, but I doubt it. It is a less complex drama, simpler, flatter. The play Shakespeare wrote does look to the future rather than back to the work that preceded it, but it is the future ambiguities of Twelfth Night, the enigma of Measure for Measure, the despair of Troilus and Cressida, perhaps even the cynicism of All's Well That Ends Well.

If one wishes to see the plays refracted in the sonnets, assuming the lyric poetry is less masked, then the erotic triangle of the sonnets and the ambiguous sexual character of the speaker's feelings for the young man can serve as a mirror of The Merchant of Venice.

It is unmistakable that Antonio and Bassanio are “lovers”; a number of characters, especially Lorenzo, say so. The question is whether Lorenzo and the others, including Antonio, are using the word in its rarer sense of intimate but platonic friends, or whether they use it to denote that friendship while slyly suggesting the erotic nature of the true relationship.

In the canon, of the nearly 150 times Shakespeare uses the words lover, lover's, lovers, and lovers', only nine of those instances can be argued as sexually innocent, and four of them are in the play under discussion. Three others occur in Julius Caesar, one in Coriolanus, and one in Love's Labors Lost.6 In these three plays there is no evidence of sexual suggestion. The term carries the meaning given it by Malone when he glossed it in his edition: “In Shakespeare's time this was applied to those of the same sex who had an esteem for each other.”7 Malone cites Ben Jonson's letter to John Donne in which he signs himself, “Your true lover.”

The lexicons, however, note that the overarching meaning of lover is the modern one, and examples of Shakespeare's lack of reticence about homoeroticism are everywhere in the sonnets and the plays. Even the casual line by the fool in King Lear, “He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love or a whore's oath” (III, vi, 19),8 acknowledges the ordinariness of pederastic infatuation in a society that
seemed to tolerate homosexuality or bisexuality for men who had already done their service to society and posterity in marriage and paternity.

Until recently, scholars have been so diffident or so evasive about the subject that their speculations often seem senseless. The modern line is articulated by J. W. Lever: intense male friendship at the end of the sixteenth century in England emerged as a major literary theme; the new seriousness about friendship owed much to Italian Platonism, to the idea of a new kind of love marked by an “absence of physical homosexuality,” *Amor Razionale.*\(^9\) Platonic homosexuality belonged to an Italianate culture that was casual about bisexuality, but the new love was not a euphemism for erotic homosexuality. This has been the basis for the standard reading of the sonnets: he loves him but sleeps with her; or he loves him but does not want to sleep with him because the beloved’s sex is an odd, unlucky accident, so he sleeps with her in frustration or guilt or lust, but without much affection. That is a valid reading of the ambiguity surrounding the bond between the men in the triangle of the sonnets, but the drama tells another story of the triangle of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia. Here the conflict is between an assertion of sexuality that is shameful or dangerous and the institution of marriage, between the anarchy of sterile romantic passion and the lawfulness of wedlock.

Critics like Lever presume the friendship must be platonic because the penalties for sodomy were so severe that no poet could venture such sentiments as those in Shakespeare’s plays and poems without enormous risk unless the behavior of those involved was innocent, regardless of their inclinations. *Sodomy* by the late sixteenth century always meant “buggery,” and sometimes the terms were used interchangeably, as in the English Act of 1533, reissued in 1563, whereby sodomy/buggery was again made a capital offense. *Buggery* is a corruption of *bougrerie,* a reference to the Albigensians, whose religious heresies were supposed to have come from Bulgaria. Thus, sodomy as buggery has its roots in heresy. This is why it was held as so abhorrent, worse even than incest, with which it was compared.\(^{10}\)

How then are we to account for the openness of Marlowe, both in the life and in the drama, no less James’s court and Buckingham’s career (“Elizabeth was king; now James is queen”)?\(^{11}\) Nor was this exclusively the *vice anglais.* Pope Julius III (1500-55) was notorious, and the story of Henry III of France, who escaped from Poland dressed as a woman to claim the French throne on the death of his brother, was widely known. There is a mysterious schism between the law of the land, with its penalty of burning at the stake (reserved for heretics, witches, and sodomites) and the evidence of pederasty and bisexuality among Elizabethan aristocrats, for example, the circle centering around the Earl of Southampton and the Jacobean court. Southampton, one of the likeliest candidates for the young man of the sonnets and Shakespeare’s sometime sponsor, was a patron of homoerotic and pornographic verse as well.\(^{12}\) Perhaps he and his circle escaped censure and danger because they married. All upper-class men married. Their duties to property, propriety, and posterity demanded an heir. After that, their romantic predilections were less important socially as long as they were reasonably discreet. Even Richard Barnfield (1574-1627), whose life and career span both reigns and who wrote the most blatant pederastic poetry of the period, *The Affectionate Shepherd* (1594), married and retired to the country to rear a family.

It is on this subject that *The Merchant of Venice* begins: the need to marry. The immediate opening involves Antonio and his friends, who are trying to discern the cause of his melancholia, which Antonio confesses even he is bored with. The temperament Shakespeare and the Elizabethans called melancholia we would paraphrase as depression or neurosis. It is suggested that his sadness is caused by love, the conventional cause, and Antonio does not absolutely deny it when he says, “Fie, fie” (I, i, 46).\(^{13}\) As soon as he is alone with Bassanio, they investigate a plan by which Bassanio can repay his enormous debts, the largest of which he owes Antonio—if only Antonio will lend him still more money. The yoking of money and love is made explicitly and immediately in the first scene; Bassanio says he owes Antonio “the most in money and in love.” Antonio, more frankly, replies that “My purse, my person, my extremest means lie all unlocked to your occasions.” In the sonnets, such a line with so much innuendo would be the moment of complicated ironies, and of much scholarly comment: for example, of Shakespeare’s fondness for using debt and usury as metaphors for sexual
longing. Here in the play, the line elicits no comment; its boldness is so literal it may need none. Plainly, everything is available: Antonio's purse and his person are interchangeable.

When the solution to Bassanio's debts is revealed to be Portia, the heiress of Belmont, Bassanio presents her first as wealthy, then as fair and good; he adds casually that she already seems disposed toward him. Tactfully, he does not elaborate, nor does he mention his feelings, if any, for her. He merely states that she rivals the Golden Fleece, and many Jasons, that emblem of constancy, come to woo her. On these conditions, Antonio is satisfied. Bassanio is a proper young aristocrat: spendthrift, flighty, charming, and beautiful, and he must marry sometime. Only merchants like Antonio can afford to remain single.

Antonio is not married, nor is there ever any hint of such a possibility. Knowing how difficult they are to live with, Shakespeare rarely marries off his melancholiacs. Coincidentally, while there is no clear evidence that these melancholiacs share an aversion to women, they are often more comfortable in exclusively male company, preferably that of a beloved friend (see Jacques in As You Like It, Antonio in Twelfth Night, Hamlet and Horatio).

Antonio's first characteristic is his melancholia and singularity. His second characteristic is that he hates Jews, notably Shylock. True, all of Venice is casually anti-Semitic, as it is racist in Othello, but Shylock tells us that Antonio is special, particularly vicious toward him, spitting on him in public while calling him a misbeliever and a cutthroat dog. Indeed, “Jewish dog” is Antonio's favorite curse for Shylock. Even when he is asking for desperately needed money for his beloved Bassanio, he cannot control his contempt for Shylock. Antonio promises him that even with a loan he is just as likely to spit on him, call him names in public, and worse, undercut Shylock's usury by lending money interest-free—when he has it again. He combines bravura and tactlessness.

This web of money and love, homoeroticism and anti-Semitism, is established as the context of the play before the first scenes are finished. Love exists only on the condition of money, a case made more than once in the play. When Shylock's daughter, Jessica, elopes with her gentile lover, Lorenzo, she not only takes full caskets with her, she jokes as she climbs out her window, “I will … gild myself / With some moe ducats, and be with you straight” (II, vi, 49-50), to which Lorenzo replies that he loves her heartily. Later, when Shylock is told of the elopement, his confusion of his love for Jessica and his passion for his money is intended to be comic. We are told, not shown, that he does not know which grieves him more, the loss of the daughter or the ducats. Our reporters, Salerio and Salanio, find such confusion of money and feeling absurd because Shylock is so coarse about it, apparently so vulgar in his failure to make the distinction. Later in the play, when he refuses to translate feelings into cash, when his grief has turned into hatred and no amount of money can buy that from him, he is no longer amusing. Then, depending on one's sentiments, he is nearer to monstrousness or tragedy. Certainly, he is no longer vulgar.

In the third act, when Shylock has his grand moment of rhetoric about Jewish humanity, presumably falling on the deaf ears of the two Jew-baiters he is speaking to, he makes his feelings very clear. All that he has left of his dignity is his hatred of Christians, especially Antonio. This is interesting but not a subject for compassion. When Tubal enters to tell Shylock of Jessica's profligacy, her spending spree in Genoa where she threw money to the winds to celebrate her honeymoon, we also learn of her contempt for her father, her mother, and her past. She swapped a ring for a monkey on a chain. Shylock cries, “Out upon her!—thou torturest me, Tubal!—it was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (III, i, 125-28). More than one reader has agreed that this is Shylock's really redeeming moment of humanity, his memory of himself as a man in love, who solemnized that love in the symbol of a ring.

The next scene is Bassanio and the three caskets; he chooses correctly. Freud's essay on this scene is one of the masterpieces of psychoanalytic criticism. His thesis is that this choice is simply love over death, that in
fact death is transformed into love in the universal wish of mankind to find immortality in the denial of mortality. In simpler terms, it is the choice of marriage and generation, which is also the choice of life and is perhaps the only life eternal.

In Venice, gold and silver are currency; but in Belmont, a world of love and music, they seem to have no meaning except as ornament. Yet at the moment Bassanio chooses the lead casket, Portia has an aside in which she prays that her love for him will be moderate, within the bounds of reason and not subject to the passions of jealousy or despair:

O love be moderate, allay thy ecstasy,
In measure rain thy joy, scant this excess!
I feel too much thy blessing. Make it less,
For fear I forfeit!

(III, ii, 111-114)

This anxiety is odd, since she is in love with Bassanio and helpless to change her situation. Why does she want the ecstasy of love, “this excess,” to be scanted, a term borrowed from the idiom of usury?

The moment is swept away with the joyous discovery that Bassanio has guessed correctly; he is now engaged and a millionaire. The two swear oaths of loving loyalty symbolized by the exchange of rings. One assumes that the destiny of engagement rings in Belmont will be different from that of turquoises in Venice, but the fate of Leah's ring casts a shadow on this emblem of love exchanged in the presence of Jessica and Lorenzo. Then comes news that Antonio is forfeit to Shylock, and Portia, immersed in her feelings, manages to make an extraordinarily vulgar quip that eclipses Shylock's confounding of daughters and ducats. When she learns the background of Bassanio's debt to Antonio and of the odd security Shylock demanded, Portia tells Bassanio that after they are married he can have all the gold he needs to ransom his friend, even twenty times the original “petty debt” of 3,000 ducats. Then she puns, “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear.” So much for Jewish monopolies on vulgarity or confusions of feelings and money.

As the act ends, we learn that Antonio is helpless because Venetian law must honor all issues connected with money, otherwise the justice of the state will be “impeached.” The honor of mercantile capitalism is spelled out: it demands the compulsive adherence to the letter of the law, regardless of how unjust the consequences may be. If money has already been deeply confused with feeling, it has now locked into the issue of honor.

In Bassanio's absence, Lorenzo tries to cheer Portia up, saying that “if you knew to whom you show this honor / How true a gentleman you send relief” (i.e., Antonio), “how dear a lover of my lord your husband,” then she'd not mind the separation though it occurred before their wedding night. Again, the pun on dear is raised: beloved, expensive, rare. Portia is now inspired; she must save this man herself. She announces that she is going into retreat for a few days, assuring Lorenzo that “this Antonio / Being the bosom lover of my lord, / Must needs be like my lord” (III, iv, 16-18). But she will see for herself. Lorenzo's description of so “dear a lover” resonates with suggestion for her. This triangle is best completed in person. It is not that Portia suspects her husband of sodomy; such suspicion is too vile for the delicate air of Belmont, though Portia is neither naive nor prudish. But she is ignorant; the mysteries of male affection, with its remarkable loyalty and apparent selflessness, are as foreign to her as the mysteries of marriage. She has heard of both and experienced neither.

At the trial scene in Act IV, all the themes of the play are brought together. Antonio reiterates his hatred of Jews in a line that even the most apologetic of Shakespeare's critics cannot ignore. He tells the court it is wasting its time trying to dissuade Shylock: “You may as well do anything most hard / As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—/ His Jewish heart” (IV, i, 78-80). When Shylock is told by the Duke that
he cannot expect mercy in heaven if he renders none here, Shylock replies that he has done nothing that will require mercy. He goes on to argue by analogy: would the Venetians treat their slaves as their children? would they marry them to their heirs? Of course not. And now Shylock “owns” Antonio, to do with as he wishes, for this pound of flesh is “dearly bought”—an eerie, exact echo of Portia's pun and a poetic linking together of Shylock, Antonio, and Portia in some dim emotional bond for which the complications of the plot merely serve as metaphors.

When Bassanio gallantly if meaninglessly offers to lay down his life for his imperiled friend, Antonio answers the gesture with “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death—the weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me” (IV, i, 114-116). A “wether” is a sterile male sheep. Why has Antonio abandoned his stoicism? Why does he regard himself as sterile and sick, “tainted,” weak, deserving of death? Why is he in despair and self-loathing?

His sense that he is sick and therefore deserves death is his confession of sin, of sexual shame, his veiled admission that he deserves to die because he is a sodomite. It is irrelevant what Bassanio and Antonio have actually done under the guise of their publicly admired courtly friendship. It is entirely relevant that Antonio thinks himself disgusting.

Portia saves Antonio by finding the law pertaining to aliens who threaten the lives of Venetian citizens: those aliens automatically forfeit all their wealth and their lives. A law that presumed alien criminals would be wealthy surely had Jews in mind. If Shylock had been a Venetian citizen, nothing could have saved Antonio. But Jews are not citizens. Shylock forgot that he is at best a guest, and none too welcome. As long as he is Jewish, he is alien and vulnerable.

Antonio hates Shylock not because he is a more fervent Christian than others, but because he recognizes his own alter ego in this despised Jew who, because he is a heretic, can never belong to the state. He hates Shylock, rather than himself, in a classic pattern of psychological scapegoating. What Antonio hates in Shylock is not Jewishness, which, like all Venetians he merely holds in contempt. He hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has come to identify symbolically as the Jew. It is the earliest portrait of the homophobic homosexual. The basis for that identification between Antonio and Shylock is complex. They are both merchants of Venice, both lend money, both are involved with Bassanio, and both indirectly and painfully become involved with Belmont. Most of all, they have in common that they are heretics. Shakespeare equates the sodomite and the Jew symbolically and psychologically, as they were already equated under Elizabethan law, which allotted the common fate of burning to witches, heretics, and sodomites.

But another, older, more crucial connection between sodomites and Jews was available to the Elizabethan mind. Prior to the Renaissance, sodomy had meanings other than buggery; it was once used to include the sin of bestiality, bestialitas, which had the same sexual meaning it does in modern usage, but which had special theological meanings as well. There were cases of men tried and burnt for bestiality. In an obscure work of the turn of this century, Professor E. P. Evans in The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals remarks:

It seems rather odd that the Christian lawgivers should have adopted the Jewish code against sexual intercourse with beasts, and then enlarged it so as to include the Jews themselves. The question was gravely discussed by jurists whether cohabitation of a Christian with a Jewess, or vice versa, constitutes sodomy. Damhouder (Prax., res. crim. c.96 n.48) is of the opinion that it does, and Nicholas Boer (Decis., 136, n.5) cites the case of a certain Johannes Alardus, or Jean Alard, who kept a Jewess in his house in Paris and had several children by her: he was convicted of sodomy on account of this relation and burned, together with his paramour, “since coition with a Jewess is precisely the same as if a man should copulate with a dog.
Shylock, the Jewish dog, already a heretic, is also symbol for the sodomite; conversely, Antonio the sodomite with his heretical desires is linked to the other alien in Venice, the not quite human Jew.

At the same moment that Antonio confesses his guilt and desire to die, converting his despair into a martyrdom of love, Portia is faced with a struggle for her husband. She must rescue him from this infatuation with Antonio, so steeped in noble sentiment, romanticism, and perhaps erotic power, so that he can be fully free to enter marriage. She listens carefully while Antonio says farewell to Bassanio:

Commend me to your honorable wife.
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(IV, i, 273-77)

Antonio is confident that Portia will be able to judge, since both of them feel alike; he does not say that Bassanio had a friend beyond compare: he had a love beyond compare. Perhaps he puns when he says “honorable” wife, inferring he was the dishonorable one. What is really important is his resurgent bravura, his assurance that she will never be able to do for their beloved what he has, despite her fabled wealth. His request to Bassanio demands that all the parties concerned acknowledge that there has indeed been a triangle of emotional power, which only decorum has prevented from being fully understood. It is not Portia, but Antonio who has made Bassanio rich, and therefore happy.

Bassanio is so deeply moved that he offers to sacrifice everything he owns: his fortune, his life. He even throws in his wife's life, “sacrifice them all to this devil to deliver you.” Both Shylock and Portia are astonished by this extravagance. Shylock mutters in contempt and aside, “These be the Christian husbands!” thinking of Jessica and her fate; for such as this she betrayed her father, mother, past. Portia, as the young lawyer, interjects, “Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer.” She came to Venice to find out what was between her husband and his friend, who she suspected may have been “alike”; well, now she knows.

It will be even trickier to rescue Bassanio than it was to free Antonio. Portia is struggling for mastery now, and it is far more than the conventional mastery of reason over passion, the passion she feared would reduce her to the same abject dependence that her father and his will had placed her in before. Is she always to be a chattel? Is she never to be her own mistress? If she must be married without choice or consent, if she must love her beautiful husband even if his past is shadowed in sexual secrecy, she will at least have a husband all her own, one whose loyalty is exclusively hers: he is to remember whose millions he now has access to, and he is to reevaluate that extravagance which would fling everything, her and her money, to the Jews.

In this charged atmosphere of ethnic hatred, sexual mystery and jealousy, self-loathing, and revenge, Portia succumbs. Despite the lovely rhetoric about mercy that is the most famous speech in the play, when Shylock is vanquished, forced to convert to what he has always hated, she adds the most sadistic line in the scene: “Art thou contented, Jew?” She turns her anger at Antonio on Shylock, expressing it as contempt, and expressing it with a cruelty she does not have to mask. In one stroke she confirms for us Shylock's view of Christians and their society: wretched as he is, what should one expect of Jews if Christians behave this way? It is not that Shakespeare is for Shylock; it is that he is contemptuous of all Venice.

When Portia, still in disguise, demands the ring as payment for her lifesaving work, it is no trivial prank. She wants back the ring she gave Bassanio and that he swore would never leave his finger while he was her
husband. She also wants him to refuse. She wants the ring because she no longer trusts her happiness to him, but she wants him to refuse it so that she can forget his extravagance, dismiss it as hyperbole. It is her crucial moment. If he refuses to give her the ring, it means he remembers his vow, and that both she and he can enter the institution of marriage in true conformity. If he gives her the ring, his broken vow annuls her own. For a moment Bassanio resists, but he surrenders to Antonio's persuasion in the play's most overt moment of sexual competition: "My lord Bassanio, let him have the ring, / Let his deservings and my lord withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (IV, i, 449-451). Bassanio yields the ring to one "man" at the behest of another, the ring that linked him to the world of women and marriage. His loyalty to Portia is remiss compared to what he feels for Antonio. Bassanio has many assets; he is beautiful and generous and sincere, but he is also shallow. Out of sight, out of mind. When he was at Belmont, he forgot about Antonio until he was arrested. Now he is with Antonio in Venice, and Portia seems very far away.

For Portia, Bassanio's failure is her victory; the terms of the marriage are void. She has lived up to the agreement of her father and society, and until now has agreed to be dispensed as men saw fit. Her husband replaced her father as her legal master, but he has broken faith, her faith in his word. She is free to negotiate for her freedom. In the fifth act, the issue of sexual competition is mirrored in the agon between men and women and in the conspiratorial bonding between men, the real subject of the squabbling. The ring is now more than a symbol; it is a key. Who has the ring is master of the bedroom. Portia makes that plain; she will yield herself only to the man who has the ring. Since she herself has it, she means to yield to no man ever again. Instead, she will show that she is free to bestow herself as she wishes.

When Bassanio and Antonio arrive, Bassanio introduces his lover to his wife: “This is the man, this is Antonio, / To whom I am so infinitely bound” (V, i, 134-135). Portia observes wryly, “You should in all sense be much bound to him, / For (as I hear) he was much bound to you.” Emotional loyalty is identified with the money that has passed between Shylock and Antonio. With that money borrowed from one merchant by another, Antonio has given Bassanio away in marriage only to keep him bound to himself as firmly as ever, perhaps even more. Without Shylock, it could never have been accomplished. Bonding, senses, money are punned upon as issues of loyalty and honor, erotic preference, and emotional commitment rise to the surface of the scene.

Portia pretends to quarrel; Antonio ruefully observes it and remarks, “I am the unhappy subject of these quarrels.” Portia agrees with him but says, “You are welcome notwithstanding.” That is, despite the fact that you are a guest in my house, that you are alive entirely because of my intervention, you have come between a lawful husband and wife: what further claims can you now have? While Bassanio swears that he will never again be careless about his promises to her, submitting entirely to her (“Pardon this fault and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee”), she is not satisfied—not until Antonio offers security for Bassanio's promise, as he did once before:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,  
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,  
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,  
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord  
Will never more break faith advisedly.

(V, i, 249-253)

It is what she has been waiting to hear; if he once offered his body to Jews, it is only fair that he now offer his soul.

The happy ending of the play is the triumph of heterosexual marriage and the promise of generation over the romantic but sterile infatuation of homoeroticism. In this competition, Shakespeare as ever is conservative. Portia must rescue her beloved and guarantee that as corrupt as the world is, with its translation of every
feeling into cash, at least she and Bassanio will live to perpetuate it. Though Belmont appears to be different from Venice, it is really the same world, but here Jews like Jessica are welcome converts and sodomites like Antonio brief guests.

If *The Merchant of Venice* is filled with mitigated resolutions for its lovers and villains and fools, that is the way of the world. Antonio of Venice is the symbol of the corruption of erotic feeling under nascent mercantile capitalism, a world where melancholia is romance and sexual guilt is translated into ethnic hatred.

What difference does such a reading of this play make? Is it better because it concerns a homosexual Jew-hater, rather than a monstrous Jew who is practically a butcher? (To be sure, either view is more cogent than one that sees the play as being about a pompous young woman who quotes Scripture about Christian mercy and never understands the subject, that is, the conventional reading, which makes the play a sentimental failure, a thematic mess unable to link together the Rialto and the moonlit terraces of Belmont.) Here is a reading without sentiment. The play is filled with ambiguities about sexuality and money, love and hatred. Nothing is simple, least of all who we are or what we are. What links us to both the Rialto and Belmont is our recognition of our painful complexities and our terrible vulnerabilities before the coldness of the world.

**Notes**


For a full scholarly but entirely unpsychological view of the subject of male bonding, two useful works are Laurens J. Mills, *One Soul in Bodies Twain: Friendship in Tudor Literature and Stuart Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1937) and Lu Emily Pearson, *Elizabethan Love Conventions* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1933). For a discussion of the psychological and social implications of the subject, see C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936): “The deepest of worldly emotions in this period is the love of man for man, the mutual love of warriors who die together fighting against odds, and the affection between vassal and lord” (p. 9). Lewis' discussion refers to *The Song of Roland*, the work that exemplifies the tradition of male bonding. Alistair Sutherland and Patrick Anderson, eds., *Eros: An Anthology of Friendship* (London: Anthony Blond, 1961) define their subject as “any friendship between men strong enough to deserve one of the more serious senses of the word ‘love’” (p. 8). Thorkil Vanggaard, *Phallos: A Symbol and Its History in the Male World* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972) has a lengthy and definitive discussion of male bonding in Norse culture, which he claims included “a genital aspect, based on mutuality and equality between the partners” (p. 119), but which precluded buggery. Most recently, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980) discusses the subject of Platonic love: “only love between persons of the same gender could transcend sex” (p. 27). Boswell adds, however, that there was a definite but not necessarily conscious sexual nature to the many intense male friendships he documents (p. 134).

3. While biographical readings of the sonnets are increasingly unfashionable or uninteresting to scholars and critics, the lyrical poetry and the drama have been used to enlighten each other since the eighteenth century; usually the sonnets are used to discuss the plays. The latest scholarly edition of the sonnets, edited by Stephen Booth (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), continues to see all of the canon as one continuous work but disdains biographical inquiry as naive.

The use of usury as an elaborate metaphor for sexuality has long been noted. Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972) was the first to write extensively of usury as both moneylending and copulation in the sonnets and the play. John Boswell has an interesting comment on the mutual unnaturalness of usury, heresy, and sodomy (p. 331). The most articulate and thorough discussion of this subject is Marc Shell, “The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Kenyon Review*, 1 (1979), 65-92.


9. *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1956, 1966), p. 204n. Lever seems to understand the issue but is too decorous or timid to pursue it. See the discussion on p. 103 f. and p. 164 f. The subject of erotic friendship was usually referred to as an issue of “bisexuality,” first by Lu Emily Pearson, p. 254 f., and later by G. Wilson Knight, *The Mutual Flame* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 35 f. Fiedler is the first to have taken up the subject succinctly and lucidly. He puts the homosexual Antonio in a context of aliens like Jews and women, and gives a brilliant reading of the play, particularly of the last act. He also notes that there are two homosexual lovers called Antonio in Shakespeare and concludes that the later character in *Twelfth Night* is the same psychological person as the merchant. Fiedler sees the relationship as platonic and Antonio as an “advocate of an austere Uranian love for whose sake the older lover educates to manliness the boy he adores, and in whose name he is prepared to die, though he knows he cannot ask as much in return, since that boy must rather die to him by marriage” (p. 132).


John Boswell argues that in the thirteenth century *bougrerie* would not have meant “sodomy,” though it could have meant “usury” (usurers were cited as “bougres”) and may generally have meant “heretic,” p. 290.


Lithgow, “Rare Adventures and Painful Peregrinations” (Glasgow, 1906), which was first written between 1609 and 1622 and describes his travels. Lithgow praises the Venetians for their anti-Jewish attitudes and remarks on the “unfortunate rifeness of sodomy” in the city; cited by Taylor, p. 141, and by Sutherland, p. 144. See also John J. McNeill, S.J., The Church and the Homosexual (Kansas City, Kan.: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976).


Criticism: Themes: Lawrence Normand (essay date 1991)


[In the following essay, Normand contends that the tensions and conflicts of The Merchant of Venice are depicted through references to the body and its association with language.]

When Morocco challenges a hypothetical fair-skinned suitor ‘to make incision for [Portia’s] love, / To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine’ (II.i.6-7), he invokes the human body as a place where certain disputed questions can be tested and decided: ‘What is Morocco’s real nature?’, ‘What is Morocco’s real value?’ The question who the better man is, the ‘fairest creature northward born’ (II.i.4) or the ‘tawny Moor’ (s.d. II.i), might be settled by cutting their bodies and comparing their blood: Morocco’s redder blood will show his greater courage, and prove his personal value despite his devalued skin colour. His challenge is couched in the Petrarchan rhetoric he uses throughout this scene, and the ‘body’ is merely verbal; yet a fleeting threat to bring his real body into the scene is voiced. Morocco is challenging the prevailing racist depreciation of his ‘complexion’ by turning to another conventional corporeal sign, redness of blood. The call for incision invokes a figurative body as a means of asserting personal value, and is typical of many moments in the play when a body is invoked.

Stephen Greenblatt has written that Shakespearean comedy ‘constantly appeals to the body and in particular to sexuality as the heart of its theatrical magic’. But, he goes on to argue, there ‘is no unmediated access to the body’, for sexuality ‘is itself a network of historically contingent figures that constitute the culture's categorical understanding of erotic experience’. It is through the mediation of a commonplace cultural figure concerning blood that Morocco brings his body into play in order to demonstrate a case about his human value. When Launcelot scrutinizes the palm of his hand (II.ii.150ff.), he reads his destiny through the figure of palmistry inscribed in his body. Greenblatt's notion that the body makes its appearance through the mediation of familiar cultural figures in language is the starting-point for this essay, which is concerned not only with sexuality but also with wider questions of human value and identity. It is a startling exception to this rule of mediation when Portia commands Antonio in the courtroom to ‘lay bare your bosom’ (IV.i.248), and Antonio's naked human body appears in the actor's person. A concern with the culturally figured body focuses attention on the relation between language and reality, the interactions between verbal bodies and real ones. But language and its relation to reality is clearly problematized in the play, as the plot's depending on the interpretation of difficult words on the caskets and in the bond easily shows. Language is a bar to communication as much as its easy medium, and its manifestations (speaking, writing, and silence) are areas in which conflicts are actualized and resolutions sought. The play's bodily discourse interpenetrates linguistic discourses such as the legal, theological, and amatory, functioning as a supplement to language, or offering an
alternative articulation of the struggles of desire and dominance. The entanglements of the action are brought about through a discourse of figured and real bodies; and disentanglement requires a systematic rearticulation of this discourse in order to arrive at a resolution.

I

Portia starts the play with the power to dispose her own property and voice, but not her body in a sexual relation of her own choosing. She experiences this subjection in her body: ‘By my troth Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world’ (I.i.1-2). Language and body interact as her father's will holds her in confinement. Portia is caught within the inscribed word of patriarchal power, ‘under the bind of the law, deprived of her will because of her father's will, inscribed in the living force of his dead letter, locked in a leaden casket’. Opposed to the restriction of his ‘cold decree’ (I.i.18-19) are pitted the warm desires of her body, her ‘blood’ and ‘hot temper’ (I.i.18). Portia's resistance to these restrictions lies in mocking, subversive wit, what Lacan calls deriding the signifier. She finds a kind of freedom in mocking the doltish suitors and deriding her father's word by punning on ‘will’ itself: ‘I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father.’ (I.i.22-5). The opposed meanings of ‘will’ as ‘sexual desire’ and ‘testament’, reveal the conflicting desires of a physically active body and a dead father. Portia's mockery of the suitors has no perlocutionary force since it is powerless to change her situation. Like the speech of a Fool, it makes no mark on the world. In her linguistic play Portia protests at her situation without being able to imagine any solution to it:

he hears merry tales and smiles not, (I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher when he grows old, being so full of unmannier sadness in his youth), I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth, than to either of these: God defend me from these two.

(I.i.46-51)

It is Shylock who most consistently draws the body into his discourse. As Portia is subjected by her father's will, so Shylock is subjected by the dominant antisemitic discourse of Venice, which characterizes him as inhuman. To Launcelot ‘the Jew is the very devil incarnation’ (II.i.26); and to Solanio he is ‘the dog Jew’ (II.viii.14) and ‘the devil … in the likeness of a Jew’ (III.i.19-20). Characterization of Shylock as sub-human voices itself in Launcelot's catachresis (‘incarnation’ for ‘incarnate’), which ungrammatically misbodies the idea of the monstrous. In the court scene, Gratiano imagines Shylock's birth as a monstrous fusing of human and animal, as a wolf's soul enters his mother's womb. Shylock becomes Antichrist in this parody of the anomalous human-divine union of the Virgin Birth:

Governed a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter—
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam
Infus’d itself in thee …

(IV.i.133-7)

When Shylock comes to defend himself, his counter-definitions entail the body.

Shylock defends his practice of usury to Antonio and Bassanio in Liii when he is asked to lend money, by arguing that the increase it involves is analogous to the natural processes of animal procreation. Antagonism erupts over the word ‘interest’ as Shylock and Antonio attempt to arrange a loan, and there is a struggle over the interpretation of certain biblical texts. Shylock's account of the story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis seeks to present a counter-gloss of Antonio's word ‘excess’ (57) as Shylock's ‘thrift’ (45). The crux of Shylock's interpretation of Jacob's actions lies in its representation of production as a bodily process. Shylock thinks of
Jacob's skill in sticking 'wands' (79) before the sheep while they are mating, which exploits an analogy in nature between 'parti-colour'd lambs' (83) and partly stripped twigs, as demonstrating both human skill in understanding those laws of analogy, and divine approval in Jacob's profiting from the resulting lambs. Shylock's narrative remains open to various interpretations, but his idea of thrift lies in seeing production which takes place through the body, of either sheep or coins, as natural and ultimately part of God's will. Coins are like sheep in that their use may produce profit. For Shylock the body, understood to be the physical substance of something and its powers of generation, is a site of truth, evidencing human and divine nature. The argument over interest ends with neither side winning. Antonio merely stops Shylock from speaking further: ‘Mark you this, Bassanio, / The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.’ (92-3).

‘Shylock does treat Antonio as if he were from a group of human beings other than his own Jewish one, but Antonio treats Shylock as if he were from a species of animal other than the human one (a dog)’. Shylock is denied a human body, and therefore possession of human rights. At the same time he is denied the right to coherent speech. In III.i, when he enters distraught at news of his daughter's ‘flight’ and accuses Solanio and Salarino of complicity in it, they attack the integrity of his speech by cruel quibbling:

SHYLOCK:

You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.

SALERIO:

That's certain,—I (for my part) knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

(III.i.22-5)

As Shylock's words are rendered ineffectual and their coherent sense destroyed, he resorts to the literal meanings of words, in an attempt to make a perlocutionary utterance with the force of assertion:

SHYLOCK:

She is damn'd for it.

SALERIO:

That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.

SHYLOCK:

My own flesh and blood to rebel!

SOLANIO:

Out upon it old carrion! rebels it at these years?

SHYLOCK:

I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.

(III.i.29-33)

Shylock's assertion is the discursive counterweight to the disintegrating attacks being made on his speech and on his body in general by the two Christians, whose replies subvert his discourse and dissipate its emotional
and ideological force. In the face of this, Shylock foregrounds the very act of speaking in order to affirm that his daughter partakes of the same physical substance as himself, and so shares the same racial identity. But Salarino denies even the biological relatedness of father and daughter:

There is more difference between thy flesh and hers, than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods, than there is between red wine and Rhenish …

(III.i.34-6)

Shylock's relatedness to his daughter is threatened by Salerio and Solanio's assaults on the integrity first of his speech, then of his figured body. Shylock defends his speech by apparently literal statements, and by presenting family ties as irrefutably corporeal. The attack on the cultural meanings of Shylock's body prompts another defence which again uses his body as evidence, this time of human identity. ‘I am a Jew’, Shylock states and goes on to claim a human identity with the Christians on the basis of shared parts and functions of the body: ‘eyes … hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions’ (III.i.53-4). Since the Venetians do not see a Jew as being human, Shylock anatomizes himself, disintegrating his body into separate functionings which are then presented as neutral and innocent of guilt that attaches, in Christian eyes, to a Jewish body. The Jewish Gestalt, more than the sum of its parts, is offensive; but bodily parts might seem innocent of the general guilt. But to Christians who do not recognize a Jew as human this argument is unpersuasive, as Stanley Cavell explains: ‘one who does not already know that the other's body “is connected with” sentence cannot be convinced by this argument, or rather cannot understand what it is an argument about, the existence of others’. In this scene the struggle for the recognition of one's speech is implicated in the struggle for the recognition of one's body. The violations of Shylock by the Venetians are directed at his physical body (‘You that did void your rheum upon my beard, / And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur’ (I.iii.112-13)), his speech, and his cultural body. Shylock ends the scene by swerving from a rhetoric seeking empathy for himself as a human body to a declaration of spiritual affinity for Christian revenge: ‘If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example?—why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.’ (III.i.63-6).

The forfeit Shylock asks, should Antonio default on the loan, is a fragment of his body: ‘an equal pound / Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me’ (I.iii.145-7). When he suggests this condition, Shylock can have no expectation of ever claiming the forfeit, for Antonio confidently expects his ships to return with handsome profits. For Shylock the bond is a carnivalesque bargain, a form of words which is indeed at the moment he mentions it a ‘merry sport’, for the terms are self-evidently absurd and unreal. Despite the malice Shylock voices in an aside that he ‘will feed fat the ancient grudge’ he bears Antonio (I.iii.43), no narrative extension is imaginable between words and flesh, between the condition inscribed in the bond and the real body which might suffer its effect. Yet the terms of the bond spring from the real relations between Shylock and Antonio, for they will return to Shylock the mutilation of the self which he has suffered from Antonio in the past, and suffers again in this scene. As Cavell argues, Shylock's terms for ‘A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off / Nearest the merchant's heart’ (IV.i.228-9) is the exact counterpart of what he thinks Antonio in particular has done to him. Shylock ‘is telling us that he perceives Antonio's refusal of acknowledgement as mutilation—the denial, the destruction, of his intactness.’

Shylock is a subject mutilated by the Venetians' hostile discourse; Antonio is a subject not securely in discourse at all. Shylock counters Venice's denigration of him, by asserting a secure counter-self in the deployment of his cultural body. Antonio is a decentred self who speaks of himself as inscrutable and mysterious: ‘In sooth I know not why I am so sad’ (I.1). He sees himself as an actor whose part is ‘a sad one’ (I.79) and whose true self is therefore at one remove from his role. His mental state at the start of the play is a pre-discursive one, for its origin and nature are not yet articulated: ‘But how I caught it, found it, or came by it, / What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, / I am to learn’ (I.3-5). While Antonio offers no discursive version of himself, his friends give voice to possible selves for him. In a deliberate game of speech-making he
is the subject of attempts to account for his being ‘marvellously chang’d’ (76). The speeches project verbal
forms meant to capture the mysterious melancholy, and they are offered as half-serious self-explanations.
Gratiano, whose name recalls the comic doctor of *commedia dell’arte,* generates diagnostic fantasies on Antonio's self-presentation, the first of which suggests a cause for melancholy in the body's inactivity. His garrulous discommendation of silence warns that a body which is still and silent turns into a funerary statue, as the blood cools and the living form becomes an effigy: ‘Why should a man whose blood is warm within, / Sit like his grandsire, cut in alabaster?’ (I.i.83-4). Accordingly, Antonio's alienation from Venetian speech threatens a sort of death. Gratiano focuses on Antonio's ‘wilfull stillness’ (90) and ‘saying nothing’ (97), and associates silence with sexual impotence, in allusions to a shrivelled penis and an old maid: ‘for silence is only commendable / In a neat's tongue dried, and a maid not vendible’ (111-12).

The real source of Antonio's sadness, of course, springs from the change in his relation with Bassanio. His identity as Bassanio's friend is put at risk by Bassanio's imminent journey to Belmont to win a wife, for Antonio would thereupon be displaced from first place in Bassanio's affections. Antonio's passionate declaration that ‘My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlock'd to your occasions’ (I.i.138-9) represents a way of reaffirming his love for Bassanio and remaining involved in his affairs at the very moment when Bassanio’s ‘venture’ might lead to Antonio's displacement. It is under threat of this displacement that Antonio agrees so recklessly to Shylock's bond. Antonio brushes aside his friends' attempts to put him into words, and offers no discursive version of himself; instead, he responds to his melancholy by putting his body into the bond. The terms of the bond which Shylock suggests implicate Antonio's body into the financial and legal practices of Venetian society:

```
Go with me to a notary, seal me there
Your single bond, and (in a merry sport)
If you repay me not on such a day
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.
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(I.iii.140-7)

Antonio's promise to commit his flesh for three thousand ducats reaffirms his bond of friendship with Bassanio at the very moment when Bassanio's turning to the lady might well lead to its dissolution. His passionate attachment to Bassanio is now inscribed in the bond, and authenticated by the body with the promise of his corporeal ‘person’ in exchange for three thousand ducats. Antonio breaks his silence by means of the bond in which his love is invisibly lodged in a displaced discourse, a financial-cum-legal agreement. What Foucault writes of the workings of sixteenth-century language is true of the bond, for ‘what it says is enclosed within it like a promise, a bequest to yet another discourse’. The ‘condition’ (141) writes Antonio's body as a figure which is a joke, whose transformation into reality is unimaginable. As events will show the body latent in the bond becomes manifest and that body itself ‘speaks’.

II

Freud thought that the caskets symbolize the body of a woman: ‘If we had to do with a dream, it would at once occur to us that caskets are also women, symbols of the essential thing in woman, and therefore of a woman herself.’ The caskets not only symbolize what the suitors seek, they also have inscribed on them texts which the suitors must successfully interpret in order to reach their desired object. As in the case of the bond, textuality and the body are overlaid. The caskets are simultaneously the destination of the suitors' desire, as symbols of woman, and the path along which desire must travel to reach its destination. The reward
for correct textual interpretation is possession of Portia's body and her wealth.

Portia's picture is hidden in one of the caskets, shielded by the metal and by her father's inscription. The suitors trace a perilous path through language to seek to arrive at the body. They struggle with a complex set of inscriptions which invites definition of the woman as well as themselves, and in which the body is crucially involved. Morocco's unsuccessful negotiation of the casket test results from his ideological orthodoxy, which holds that there should be a correspondence between the fairest lady and the fairest metal, 'never so rich a gem / Was set in worse than gold' (II.vii.54-5). In Petrarchan terms the choice of the gold casket is logical, but Morocco's way of thinking makes him ignore the person herself and re-present her in coded love-language. Portia's physicality disappears and she is re-inscribed as a purely transcendent value: a 'breathing saint', whose 'heavenly picture' Morocco seeks, and 'an angel' (II.vii.40-58). Edmund Spenser uses the image of woman as an angel swathed in gold in Epithalamion, published in 1595, the year before The Merchant of Venice was probably first produced:

Some angell had she beene.
Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre,
Sprinckled with perle, and perling flowers a tweene,
Doe lyke a golden mantle her attyre ...(16)

Spenser inscribes his future wife as a creature of pure spirit, as Morocco does to Portia. But this aristocratic mode of writing is misplaced in the bourgeois world of the play in which money has a precise value. In fact, Morocco specifically rejects comparison of Portia with another kind of angel which is a coin—'They have in England / A coin that bears the figure of an angel / Stamp'd in gold, but that's insculp'd upon' (II.vii.55-7). The comparison is rejected because the angel on the English coin is merely on the surface of the metal, and therefore not truly part of it. In Morocco's trope of the angel inside the casket, the angel is like the soul which lies deep inside the body, as what animates it and is its truest reality. In this way of thinking, the soul is accorded a far greater value than the body, the angel much more than the gold casket. His discourse of love separates spirit and body, and privileges spirit over body. The figure of the monetary angel, which Morocco specifically rejects, stands in fact as a more accurate image for Portia, for the coin has its beauty marked on its surface, and once put into exchange has financial value, just like Portia herself when she marries.

Arragon fixes on the silver casket because its inscription, “‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves’” (II.ix.36), prompts him into enunciating his own worth:

And well said too; for who shall go about
To cozen Fortune, and be honourable
Without the stamp of merit?

(II.ix.37-9)

The metaphor of ‘the stamp’ refers to the authenticating of a document, and its validation for social use: Arragon thinks of himself as inscribed. In this metaphor of Arragon as a document on which is written the account of his value lies the fantasy that his body has received a ‘stamp of merit’. The stamp is irreversible and publicly attested, and Arragon imagines he can invoke his powers as an imaginary document and employ them to win Portia: he can exchange himself for a fortune—‘I will assume desert; give me a key for this, / And instantly unlock my fortunes here’ (II.ix.51-2).

The suitors all struggle with the same problem of how to arrange the signifying elements arranged before them—caskets of different metals, and inscriptions—into an order which arrives at the ‘correct’ answer which is already determined by the father. Morocco aims too high, assembling the elements into a discourse of the transcendent, splitting the spiritual from the material. Portia's body is thereby lost in the Petrarchan mode into which she is cast. Arragon's response combines the material and immaterial in an image which represents his
body textually as a legal document; but he excludes Portia from his response and mistakes his own social value. Morocco reads the gold casket as being Portia, Arragon reads the silver casket as being himself, but Bassanio reads the lead casket and its inscription as being a comment on the ironic discourse of choosing. Bassanio is in the best position to grasp the ironic meaning of the lead casket's inscription, and of lead itself, because he is the figure 'in whom outside appearance and inside reality are most unlike'.

'So may the outward shows be least themselves' (III.ii.73). Bassanio and Portia have already discovered each other by falling in love, demonstrated in the amorous banter which precedes the choice. There is no need, then, to involve 'ornament' in the choice when love has already been discovered and actualized in verbal exchanges:

ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea …

The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest.

(III.ii.97-101)

Bassanio does not seek a secreted signified in the inscriptions or the metals themselves. He recognizes lead as signifying the redundancy of 'ornament' to symbolize a love which has already been realized: 'but thou, thou meagre lead / Which rather threaten'st than dost promise aught, / Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence, / And here choose I,—joy be the consequence!' (III.iii.104-7).

The process of choosing nevertheless presents dangers which are expressed as threats to the lovers' living bodies. As Bassanio moves towards the caskets to make his choice Portia participates by announcing herself to be threatened at that moment by death. Invoking the story of Hercules' rescue of Hesione from the sea monster (Ovid, Metamorphoses, xi) she effects a metaphorical transformation on the scene. In this textual superimposition she becomes Hesione, and Bassanio Hercules; and just as Hesione was mortally threatened by the sea monster, so she is threatened with an emotional death if Bassanio fails to overcome the monstrous impositions of the will:

I stand for sacrifice,
The rest aloof are the Dardanian wives,
With bleared visages come forth to view
The issue of th' exploit: go Hercules!
Live thou, I live.

(III.ii.57-61)

If Hercules fails to slay the sea monster then Hesione will be its victim. The threat of death, albeit a figurative one, recalls Antonio's figurative death-in-silence at the start of the play.

Bassanio's response to discovering the picture of Portia focuses on his body; he speaks of the dissolution of the corporeal boundaries between himself as perceiving subject, and the picture as perceived object:

Fair Portia's counterfeit! What demi-god
Hath come so near creation? move these eyes?
Or whether (riding on the balls of mine)
Seem they in motion?

(III.ii.115-18)

Bassanio imagines the picture not simply as a static similitude but a source of power in its own right, with painted hair 't'entrapping the hearts of men' (III.ii.122); and as it was being painted it threatened to disable the
painter who was painting it, depriving him of his eyes:

How could he see to do them? having made one,  
Methinks it should have power to steal both his  
And leave itself unfurnish'd.

(III.ii.123-6)

The picture, the image of a body, is imagined as entering into relationships with real bodies and capturing parts of them for itself. Bassanio's speech plays over the interrelationships of bodies and their representations. At this moment of most intense pleasure, Bassanio focuses on the tremulous relation of his body and the image of Portia's; and announces a moment of blissful physical merging with Portia. The bliss is the counterpart of erotic bliss, but it is doubly displaced: Bassanio's body moves only in his language, not his actions, and Portia appears as a picture not as herself. The fullness of erotic pleasure which his language implies falls away in the end as language's inability fully to represent experience reasserts itself. Bassanio ends by articulating a chain of representations—his praise, the picture of Portia, and Portia herself—which shows his desire pursuing its object along the chain and always failing to capture its fullness:

The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow  
In underprizing it, so far this shadow  
Doth limp behind the substance.

(III.ii.126-9)

Bassanio is completely in control of his discourse; indeed, his value as Portia's lover is demonstrated dramatically by this very discursive dominance and subtlety. This part of the scene, the expressive climax of Portia and Bassanio's love, achieves its dramatic persuasiveness through its intelligent self-consciousness about language. Bassanio's discourse advertises the inadequacy of language to capture the real; expressing love not as full of self-presence, but as something beyond and outside the play of language. It does not inscribe love directly, but speaks instead of the impossibility of love's full inscription in language, picture, or bodies.

Words fail Bassanio when Portia hands everything, including herself, over to him: ‘Madam, you have bereft me of all words’ (III.ii.175). The consequent ‘confusion’ in Bassanio's 'powers' (177) is a disruption of the normal workings of his body, and it is represented as the noise of a crowd in which the meanings of the separately spoken sentences of praise are lost in a blur of speech-noise:

Among the buzzing pleased multitude,  
Where every something being blent together,  
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy  
Express'd, and not expressed.

(III.ii.179-83)

Bassanio's sense of joy has temporarily exceeded his body's ability to muster the power of language to capture and express it. The experience nevertheless exists as a confused energy inside his body which is stirred like the crowd, but unable to direct it to a coherent speech act. But Bassanio still communicates his feelings in the pre-linguistic state of the body's own workings, which form another kind of speech: ‘Only my blood speaks to you in my veins’ (III.ii.176). The body's blood-flow is the authenticating sign of his intense responsiveness which cannot at that moment find its way into language. These ambiguities are resolved by a simple return to
the body, the note in the casket commanding the successful suitor to ‘Turn you where your lady is, / And
claim her with a loving kiss’ (III.ii.137-8). The body authenticates the moment. Gratiano's suggestion for a
wager on the first boy the couples can produce anticipates the lovers' physical absorption into the social life of
Venice.

At this moment when a double marriage is anticipated another body enters the scene which blocks that
outcome. Bassanio receives a letter from Antonio giving news that he is subject to Shylock's forfeit. Bassanio
describes the letter to Portia as a mutilated and dying body:

The paper as the body of my friend,
And every word in it a gaping wound
Issuing life-blood.

(III.ii.262-5)

Bassanio represents the letter as Antonio's body, and that body in turn as a kind of writing. The paper marked
with inked words is like a body cut with wounds from which flows its 'lifeblood'. Each wound is also
'gaping', a mouth shaped for speaking, or signalling pain. This is truly a speaking body. The letter's material
signifiers—paper and inkmarks—produce meaning prior to its signifieds, and are more emotionally
compelling. The wounds gaping like mouths are an emptiness that cries out for Bassanio's presence.
Bassanio's strong writerly response, tracing a figurative dying body, shows his profound emotional
responsiveness to Antonio's plight. However, the entry of this spectral body, represented in writing, disrupts
the imminent marriage and signifies the emotional and practical obstacles that will have to be overcome
before it can take place.20 This letter has a similar power to the bond, for each calls in its debt, and each has as
its real aim something in excess of what it seems to signify. In his letter Antonio's focus is on Bassanio, not on
the money owed nor his own impending death: ‘Sweet Bassanio, … my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and (since
in paying it, it is impossible I should live), all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my
death’ (III.ii.314-18). Antonio's letter points to the real nature of the favour he did Bassanio in borrowing
money for his venture: it seeks the return in the form of love on Antonio's pledging of 'person'. Antonio's
claim for Bassanio's presence represents the calling in of the excess of their agreement, that for Antonio is
Bassanio's love. For Antonio the process is now in hand by which the writing of his body into the bond to
maintain his place in Bassanio's affairs, now unexpectedly promises to realize the desires underlying it.

Antonio does not explicitly speak of his relation to Bassanio; but others do. Lorenzo had evidently been
discussing the subject with Portia when he enters at the start of III.iv. His phrase 'god-like amity' (3), derives
from Renaissance neo-platonic ideas of friendship, and shows ‘the exalted tone of much Renaissance writing
on male friendship’.21 In such accounts of male friendship the sexual is banished, leaving only the spiritual.22
However, the account which Portia proceeds to give of this kind of male friendship does recognize a particular
sort of shared physicality in friendship:

That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an egall yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit;
Which makes me think that this Antonio
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty!
Her notion of friendship is that between friends who love equally there must also be a similarity of bodies, manners, and spirit. Two friends are supposed to be alike physically and temperamentally, and are also supposed to correspond in their souls. Portia can therefore call paying off Antonio's debt, 'purchasing the semblance of my soul', for she and Bassanio, now married, are one soul, and Antonio's soul exactly corresponds to Bassanio's. The conflict of friendship and marriage arises precisely out of two different kinds of merging that are represented by marriage and friendship. In Christian marriage two different bodies and souls are thought of as becoming one; in neo-platonic friendship two similar bodies and souls become as one in an identity of exact similarity. Bassanio is here poised between the conflicting demands of marriage and friendship. It is Portia's assuming the male sexual identity of Balthazar which enables her 'to displace Antonio's hold on Bassanio's affections and loyalties', and to replace friendship with marriage.

The action in the courtroom is an interpretive contest over the bond. Shylock's refusal to tell the hostile court his reasons for pursuing the bond to its bloody conclusion in Antonio's body should be seen in the same light as Bassanio's warning to Gratiano, before they leave for Belmont, not to be 'too rude, and bold of voice' (II.ii.172) when he goes 'where [he is] not known' (175), and thus risk being 'misconst'red' (179). Shylock refuses to risk being 'misconst'red' by the court, and represses any historical account of himself. Instead he short-circuits the question by locating his motives in nature rather than culture, in corporeal humours not historical influence:

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?

Shylock's refusal to answer has similar effects to Antonio's silence in the first scene in that both thereby become inscrutable to others. The incomprehensibility to the Christians of Shylock's seeking his bond is expressed as his having an irregular body which is both unnaturally hard and empty. The Duke calls him a 'stony adversary' (IV.i.4) and speaks of his being like those with 'brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint' (IV.i.31). For Antonio Shylock's impenetrability is located at the vital organ of the heart: 'You may as well do any thing most hard / As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—/ His Jewish heart!' (IV.i.78-80). And Gratiano demands, 'can no prayers pierce thee?' (IV.i.126). Along with hardness goes emptiness. The Duke wonders if Shylock can be 'void, and empty / From any dram of mercy' (IV.i.5-6). When Shylock's resistance is greatest to the persuasions of Portia/Balthazar and the insults of Gratiano and Antonio, he declares himself to be immune from the effect of their words. Secure in the absolute efficacy of the bond, he declares himself to be beyond the reach of language: 'by my soul I swear, / There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me' (IV.i.236-7).

In the courtroom Antonio is willing to lose his life for Bassanio's sake: 'Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you' (IV.i.262), he says. Facing death, Antonio makes his farewell to Bassanio; but his attention is actually focused beyond death, for the corporeal mutilation he is about to suffer is to have its real point of arrival in social discourse, as a narrative. He is not concerned with Shylock's malevolence, but rather at the way in which his death will be transformed into discourse. Furthermore, his attention is directed not at Bassanio but at Portia who will hear the story of his death which Bassanio will tell. Antonio utters a string of imperatives which lay down the track and destination for the story which his death will produce, projecting a hypothetical process which runs from bodily mutilation through death to discourse:

Commend me to your honourable wife,
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death:
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(IV.i.269-73)

Antonio projects a transformation of his death into a story and a question, in which the word ‘love’ is finally uttered. Were he to realize the scenario he projects, his love for Bassanio would be inscribed in his living body, and its truth proved by incisions which would be neither deletable nor reversible. The speech anticipates an exchange which would turn his physical death into social discourse aimed at recording and validating a certain meaning for it. On the brink of death, Antonio imagines a future scene in which his physical mutilation would be productive of a certain created value of ‘love’. That authenticated love, passing through his physical body to a transcendent verbal body of Bassanio’s discourse, would require Portia’s response, interpretation, and judgement; and would thereby produce its own life-after-death effects. Antonio’s rhetorical question would make Portia the judge in the case of the competing claims between her love and Antonio’s for Bassanio; and in his scenario she would deliver and face a judgement already weighted against herself.

Of course, Portia-Balthazar releases Antonio from the bond. She takes the bond’s signifiers and reduces them to their barest signifieds, at which point the bond breaks down in non-sense. When Portia prevents Shylock’s forfeit by telling him that he may take ‘a pound of flesh’ and no more, she is setting limits to the meanings of words and to the interpenetration of bodies: words are defined with absolute literalness; the integrity of a body is defended. Exchange, one of the characteristic actions of the play, is halted: a pound of flesh is not taken in exchange for three thousand ducats.

It is then Shylock’s turn to have his life endangered for the offence of seeking the life of a Venetian citizen: ‘the offender’s life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke only’ (IV.i.351-2). Although the Duke’s pardon frees him from the threat of judicial violence, it subjects him to the power of the court’s words. Shylock is not beyond the reach of language as the court strips him of half his wealth, confirms the stealing of his daughter, and enforces his conversion to Christianity. The court does not destroy Shylock’s physical body, but destroys instead the complex cultural body in which his identity inheres. By his forced conversion to Christianity (in which he will be silenced as the words of baptism are spoken over him) he loses the power to define himself as a Jew; at the same time as he loses the offspring of his body to Lorenzo, who ‘lately stole his daughter’ (IV.i.381). He protests at the destructiveness of the court’s conditions:

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that,—
You take my house, when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house: you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

(IV.i.370-3)

The ‘house’, as a metaphor for life, has the double sense of building and clan; ‘the image and the thing imaged fuse with great dramatic force’. Shylock has earlier shown the same habit of fusing image and thing in the figure of his house as a body when he tells Jessica not to ‘thrust [her] head into the public street / To gaze on Christian fools’ (II.v.32-3):

But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements,
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
My sober house.

(II.v.34-6)
His house is his body which he would defend from penetration by the sounds of Christian music. These links between house as body, clan, and life itself show the interconnectedness of the parts of Shylock's identity, and are precisely what the court destroys in its judgements on him.26 The court's mercy in sparing his body must be set against its decisions which disintegrate his social identity: livelihood, religion, and succession will all be barred. Shylock's body is not destroyed but his self-identity is disintegrated and deleted, and this deletion is confirmed by Act V.

III

In the first four Acts the body is written into the interlocking struggles of personal desire and social practices; and its power is real but uncertain as long as those struggles continue. In Act V, out of the crises of entanglement posed by the interdependence of bodies, resolutions are offered which define the boundaries of body and spirit, and articulate what is socially legitimate and dominant. As Walter Cohen has shown, the dramatic effects of the last act are radical and extensive, as the ‘construction of the pastoral world’ of Belmont ‘ideologically reconciles the socially irreconcilable. … The aristocratic fantasy of Act V, unusually sustained and unironic even for Shakespearean romantic comedy, may accordingly be seen as a formal effort to obliterate the memory of what has preceded.’27 Shylock's person (and name) disappears from Act V along with traces of Jewishness. Lorenzo's reference to manna when he is told of the will of 'the rich Jew' (V.i.292) is the exception—‘Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people’ (V.i.294-5)—which shows the appropriation into Christian discourse of the Jewish element that with Shylock's undoing has been deleted from Belmont. Christian dominance is thereby confirmed.

Lorenzo's notion of music has effects which assume the interpenetration of corporeal and incorporeal: he calls for music to ‘Creep in our ears’ with ‘touches of sweet harmony’ (V.i.56-7), and directs Stephano, ‘With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear’ (V.i.67). But boundaries between bodies and the abstract harmonies of music are clearly established as he directs Jessica's (and the audience's) attention to the music of the spheres:

Sit, Jessica,—look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold,
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins ...

(V.i.58-62)

The harmony of the spheres is a figure in Act V which effects ideological reconciliation. The spheres are a totalizing image which renders unimaginable anything which is not of it. It is thus a falsifying general analogy for the conflictual social scenes of Venice and Belmont grounded on differences of religion, citizenship, and race. Lorenzo goes on to define the relationship between the music of the orbs and its perception:

Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(V.i.63-5)

The play invokes the music of the spheres as an image of universal harmony, but it places the perception of that harmony in the soul, a human part which lies outside ordinary human consciousness; and simultaneously debases the body by calling it the ‘muddy vesture of decay’, an impediment to perceiving the ‘highest’ truth. In Lorenzo's rhetorical construction the idea of comprehensive harmony, located in ‘cherubins’ and human ‘immortal souls’, is concomitant with devaluing the human body. Heavenly bodies are supposed to produce
music representing fullness and highest truth, while the corporeal is debased and the truth it can produce ignored.

In Act V words and bodies are redefined in the new circumstances of Belmont, a name which suggests ‘the beautiful mountain’ of a fairy-tale, as well as the beautiful female pubic mound. The redefinition of the value of bodies is seen in the ring episode. Portia threatens to give her body to the lawyer since her husband has given the lawyer their ring:

Since he hath got the jewel that I loved, ...
I will become as liberal as you,
I'll not deny him any thing I have,
No, not my body, nor my husband's bed.

(V.i.224-8)

The threat expresses the impossibility of a wife's sharing her body with another man and still being a wife. Bassanio learns the lesson of bodily exclusivity that marriage signifies, and as part of this process friendship is subordinated to marriage. Portia's clear view of friendship sees that male friends exactly correspond—'a like proportion / Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit' (III.iv.14-15)—and it is the impulses of friendship that prompted Antonio 'to lend [his] body for [Bassanio's] wealth' (V.i.249), and Bassanio to give the ring to Balthazar-Portia. Bassanio learns that in terms of marriage men are not identical and equivalent and therefore not freely exchangeable by their wives. Friendship, on the other hand, imagines men as equivalent to each other. In the microdrama of the return of the rings Bassanio is inducted into the ideology of marriage which represents each husband as separate and different, and accorded unique right of sexual access. Understanding this idea is said by Portia to be more than just a matter of words, but as being a fusion of words, ring, and body itself: she tells Bassanio that his ‘wife's first gift’ of the ring is ‘A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger, / And so riveted with faith unto your flesh’ (IV.i.167-9). The ring riveted to flesh fixes the body's meaning within the ideology of marriage; it creates a self embodied in marriage. The separation of Antonio's body from the scene of his friendship with Bassanio is effected when he pledges his soul that Bassanio will be true to his wife:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

(V.i.249-53)

Antonio's body disappears from the scene and with it his material involvement in Bassanio's affairs. His penultimate words—'I am dumb' (279)—echo Shylock's defeated last words, 'I am content' (IV.i.389), and ominously return him to the silence in which he began.

The play ends with words and the body being put into parodic conflict. As the two married pairs prepare to leave the stage Gratiano sets up a question:

—the first inter'gatory
That my Nerissa shall be sworn on, is,
Whether till the next night she had rather stay,
Or go to bed now (being two hours to day) ...
The question is a real one inasmuch as the pleasure of the night will lie in talking about making love as well as in making love itself. No doubt consummation will take place, but for a moment consummation is teasingly delayed. In a play in which the body has passed fleetingly in and out of discourse it is appropriate that the telos of desire in the body should once more be deferred. Gratiano's last words bring back the body—‘Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring’ (V.i.306-7)—and recall the knowledge that bodies continue to produce problems of value and identity even after marriage.

Notes

3. ibid.
8. ibid., p. 53.
9. Cf. King Lear's wish to discover if the body will show the source of guilt if it is anatomized: ‘Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard-hearts?’, *King Lear*, III.vi.34-6.
11. ibid., p. 480.
12. See note to I.i.79 of *The Merchant of Venice* ed J. R. Brown.
13. M. M. Mahood's note on these lines is ‘lack of activity is only proper to a sexually impotent old man or a sexually unmarketable woman’, *The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 62. She also notes that ‘neat's tongue dried’ is ‘cured ox tongue (and so a withered penis incapable of excitement)’, ibid.
17. Cf. John Donne's ‘Aire and Angels’, which uses the trope of the relation of angels to corporeal things to complicate and thereby diminish clear boundaries between flesh and spirit.
19. ibid.
23. Geary, op. cit., p. 64.
24. Cf. Hamlet's concern at the point of death that Horatio should ‘Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied’ (V.ii.291-2); and Othello's providing an interpretation of his actions to be reported to the Venetian state after his death (V.ii.347-65).
25. Note to IV.i. 371 of \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, ed. Mahood.
26. Other examples of Shylock's thinking of his identity as connected with his body occur when he calls the jewels Jessica stole ‘two stones, two rich and precious stones’ (II.viii.20), thus unconsciously associating them with his testicles and seed; and when he hears of his daughter's profligacy from Tubal: ‘Thou stick'st a dagger in me’ (III.i.100).

\textbf{Criticism: Themes: Susan Oldrieve (essay date 1993)}


\textit{[In the following essay, Oldrieve reads both Shylock and Portia as social outcasts alienated from the Christian and patriarchal world of Venice/Belmont in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}.]}

\textbf{I. INTRODUCTION}

In \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, Shylock and Portia both represent marginalized groups, the one an ethnic and religious minority, and the other women. As Marianne Novy points out,

\begin{quote}
 Women and Jews could be seen as symbolic of absolute otherness—alien, mysterious, uncivilized, unredeemed. Although women could be praised for being as virtuous or intelligent as men, or Jews for converting to Christianity or behaving as Christians ought, nevertheless femaleness and Jewishness as qualities in themselves had negative meanings in this tradition—both were associated with the flesh, not the spirit, and therefore with impulses toward sexuality, aggression, and acquisitiveness. …
\end{quote}

Novy argues that these were “all qualities becoming more evident in Renaissance society” and that in rejecting the Jew and finally repressing the power of women, the play reflects a desire to contain its own movement toward individualism.

While I do not entirely agree with Novy's reading of Act V, her association of Jews and women as outsiders is significant. Their legal and economic conditions, as well as their emblematic connotations, support the analogy. Women were the property of their fathers, and Jews the property of their rulers. The mid-12th century “Laws of Edward the Confessor” (assuming that Shakespeare was adhering to English law, and placed his story in Venice as part of his poetic license) describe clearly the legal position of the Jew in England:
All Jews, wherever in the realm they are, must be under the King's liege protection and 
guardianship, nor can any of them put himself under the protection of any powerful person 
without the King's licence, because the Jews themselves and all their chattels are the King's. If 
therefore anyone detain them or their money, the King may claim them, if he so desire and if 
he is able, as his own.3

Similarly, in The Merchant of Venice, Portia is her father's property: even from the grave he has the legal and 
moral right to decide the most intimate concerns of her life. Furthermore, when married, she is expected to 
transfer control of her life and living from her father's hands to the hands of a man who might well be 
completely unknown to her.

Portia's first appearance onstage shows her struggling to balance her needs as an individual against the 
demands of the patriarchal society in which she lives. She knows she should conform to her father's will, but 
she desperately wants to control her choice of a husband. Harry Berger's excellent explication of the casket 
scene in Act III sensitively reveals Portia's conflict between independence and submission. He suggests that 
Portia is caught between her desire to give Bassanio clues about how to choose and her reluctance to betray 
her father's will. She is also torn between her desire for Bassanio and her anxiety about submitting herself to 
him. As Berger explains, “Portia plays the inquisitor, but this is a role which, if she were more crass, she 
could conceivably induce upon Bassanio, assigning him the function of torturing out of her the answers for 
deliverance (for her deliverance as well as his) which she would have too many scruples to offer voluntarily, 
not only the scruple about being forsworn but also the scruple about crowning Bassanio over her as her 
monarch.”4

In spite of Portia's scruples and her determination to live by the rules, her discussion with Nerissa in Act I 
admits the possibility of rebellion against her father's authority. Whether the director chooses to emphasize the 
clues in the song or not, this scene and her tense conversation with Bassanio make us aware that Portia could 
choose to ignore her father's will and dispose of herself according to her own wishes. Shylock's situation 
seems much less flexible. He must convert or die.

While Novy believes that the play rejects the Jew,5 it seems that in juxtaposing Shylock's dilemma with 
Portia's, Shakespeare suggests that it is possible for all “Others” to conform in public but at the same time to 
establish a private realm in which they can successfully satisfy their emotional needs. Berger concludes that 
Portia finally asserts her individuality and power by “mercifying” Antonio in the last scenes. She simply 
outgives both him and Bassanio, and in so doing puts them under her power.6 My reading differs from 
Berger's in that I believe she exhibits this power not just for her own sake but also for Shylock's.

II. SHYLOCK AND THE CHRISTIAN PATRIARCHY

Shylock's counterpart in the Christian business world is Antonio, who represents the dominant élite. He is the 
successful businessman of Venice, totally immersed in the city's financial and social life. Antonio first appears 
surrounded by friends who are deeply concerned about his melancholia. In Act I, Bassanio's entrance with 
Lorenzo widens Antonio's socio-commercial circle. The men on stage are obviously part of a well-knit and 
familiar group who both do business and socialize with each other. Antonio is the most successful of them, 
and the most respected. A true “Old Boy Network” is portrayed during the friendly exchanges of I,i,57-73.7 
The stage is full of men of various ages who share common interests, values, and daily pursuits, and who give 
each other both the emotional and the financial support that enable them to retain their social and commercial 
security. Antonio is the center of their concern in every scene in which he or they appear, until Act V. 
Bassanio is the newest member of the group, favored by Antonio and encouraged by all the men to succeed in 
their world of commerce. When he says, “To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and in love” (emphasis 
added), his words imply that he has received help from others as well, but that Antonio is his primary mentor. 
Their conversation extends the tone of mutual bonding established at the rise of the curtain, culminating in
Antonio's slightly reproachful, “You know me well … do but say to me what I should do / That in your knowledge may by me be done, / And I am prest unto it.” (I,i,153-160) Antonio is willing to devote both his material and emotional resources to ensure Bassanio's success.

Whether Antonio is motivated by more than his mentorship and his enthusiasm for business cannot be told from the text alone. However, the mentor-protégé relationship does not necessarily need overtones of homosexuality to radiate strong emotion. In such a relationship, the protégé's success is a reflection of the mentor's, and it can be difficult for the mentor to dissociate his professional self-image from the success or failure of the protégé. When Antonio is engulfed in his losses, he wishes to see Bassanio, because in so doing he can assure himself that he has not completely failed in his economic ventures: he can affirm that his loans to Bassanio have secured the young man's social and financial position. He rejects Bassanio's offers of sacrifice, telling him, “You cannot be better employed, Bassanio, / Than to live still and write mine epitaph.” (IV,i,117-18) In writing Antonio's epitaph, Bassanio would preserve his friend's reputation, and through his success, carry on Antonio's role in the world.

In this sense, Bassanio is more Antonio's son, continuing the family name and tradition, than his lover. Such a relation is borne out by one of Shakespeare's sources, Il Pecorone, where the relationship between the mentor and protégé is one in which a rejected younger son finds a surrogate father. Bassanio and Antonio thus stand in comparison not to Portia and Bassanio, but to Portia and her father, and to Shylock and Jessica. The need to perpetuate one's estate—to control it after one's death by handing it on to an obedient child—is a motif that runs throughout the play. The will of Portia's father and Shylock's grief over the loss of both his daughter and, through her, his ducats, clearly reflect the play's concern with perpetuation. Antonio, too, can reflect this concern, particularly if a director follows Shakespeare's source and portrays him as an older man. Beneath Antonio's intense interest in Bassanio may be a homosexual attraction or a doting friendship, but he also may be motivated by a bachelor's desire for a surrogate child who will ensure his immortality.

III. PORTIA AND BELMONT'S PATRIARCHY

Perpetuation is also an issue for Portia, as we move from a predominantly male world to a predominantly female world. Portia's father has tried to ensure that his daughter and his rich estate will continue to prosper after his death. While Antonio trusts Bassanio's judgment in spite of indications that his “son” wastes more money than he preserves, Portia's father takes the care of his estate totally out of his daughter's hands, completely disregarding her intelligence and common sense. Portia cannot even veto her father's choice of a husband, a right increasingly accepted in Elizabethan times. Certainly with both her parents dead, and apparently competent of age and capable of managing the estate well, Portia could expect to have some influence over her marriage.

Portia chafes against this patriarchal control but eventually accepts it, partly out of trust and duty, and partly because she finds that it ultimately works to her advantage. When she discovers that her father's will has chased most of her distasteful suitors away, she resolves, “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will.” (I,ii,104-6) David Sundelson argues that her submission to her father is a form of identification that enables her to cope with his death. She recreates him within herself by taking upon herself his characteristics and values. Carol Leventen also argues that Portia internalizes her father's will, but attributes her motivation to cultural imperatives:

> Quite literally, Portia makes a virtue out of what once was perceived as necessity. In Freudian terms, Portia's words to Nerissa in I,ii and to Bassanio in III,ii, demonstrate the power of the super ego: the internalisation of cultural imperatives. Guilt is so internalised that one can never “get away with it” because one punishes one's self; the sanctions are no longer “out there.”

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With or without the influence of guilt, when Nerissa announces that at least some undesirable suitors have been driven away by Portia's father's demands, the will and the patriarchal and economic system it reflects seem to have worked for her. It is this success that makes her more willing to accept the demands of the patriarchal authority and to submit both her possessions and her person to her husband. The ring that she gives Bassanio is a symbol of her trust in him and in the institution of marriage in her patriarchal world. It is also, as Newman points out, “a representation of Portia's acceptance of Elizabethan marriage which was characterized by women's subjection, their loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel.”

Her faith in the patriarchal view of marriage extends to Antonio and to the exclusively male socio-commercial relationships with which the play begins. She tells Lorenzo,

Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty!

(III.iv,16-21)

Her trust in Bassanio makes her willing to trust Antonio, and her generous financial offers mimic the financial and emotional support the play's Christian merchants give each other. Portia becomes “one of the boys” even before she takes on her disguise as a male to defend her new group of friends from an outside threat.

What Portia does not realize at first is that Antonio is not exactly like her lord—or like what she has seen of Bassanio so far. Nor does she understand that the man who is threatening Bassanio's friend has been victimized by the Christian merchants just as she could have been victimized by her father's patriarchal control. Shylock is a businessman in Venice, too, but conducts his business very differently than do his Christian colleagues. Not only does he charge interest while Antonio does not, but he also for the most part works alone, without the social, financial, and emotional support of mainstream Venetians. Antonio is threatened by Shylock's business practices; he resorts first to vehement anti-semitism and then to the legal opportunities Portia affords him to eliminate that threat.

IV. THE CONTRACT AND ITS ENFORCEMENT

Both Shylock and Antonio are highly successful, and the fact that Antonio sends Bassanio to Shylock shows that even in Antonio's mind, Shylock is an important business force on the Rialto. Shylock says he hates Antonio because he “brings down the rate of usance,” (I.iii,42) but also because he berates Shylock in public, “even there where merchants most do congregate.” (I.iii,46) One result of Antonio's behavior would be to drive customers away from Shylock and into his own fold; therefore, his berating Shylock in public would reflect not just anti-semitism, but an anti-semitism used to give the Christian an economic advantage. If Antonio were not threatened professionally by Shylock's business abilities, he would have less motivation to denigrate him in front of customers.

Their rivalry emerges directly as they briefly vie for Bassanio early in scene three. Shylock has just told the Laban and Jacob story, parrying Antonio's pointed questions with a good joke underscoring his financial success. That Bassanio responds by laughing, as he does in the 1981 BBC television production of the play, is signaled by Shylock's line “But note me, signor.” Shylock has gotten Bassanio's attention and wishes to extend their moment of comraderie. Antonio immediately interrupts him with “Mark you this, Bassanio,” drawing the young man's attention back to himself and reminding him to which camp he belongs.

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For a short moment, then, Bassanio is caught between two potential mentors, and the rivalry between Shylock and Antonio becomes not just a matter of business practice and success, but of the gathering and losing of friendship and prestige. Shylock is not really interested in stealing Antonio's protégé from him; he seeks only professional respect for his way of doing business. His rival needs a loan and is willing to adhere to conditions he has vehemently denounced in public. Antonio, faced with his economic vulnerability and perhaps smarting from Shylock's ability to attract Bassanio's attention, berates Shylock's methods even as he is asking for help.

Shylock's bond proposal comes out of his emotional reaction to this insult. He has said that he wants to “catch him once upon the hip” (I,iii,43) for the way in which Antonio has damaged his business reputation; and here he finds himself subjected to worse scorn. He is justifiably angry, and he wants to find a way to stop Antonio's behavior once and for all. The unusual bond that he offers both satisfies his anger and will prevent future public outcry. He begins by accepting Antonio's way of doing things. The implication is that if he can compromise, Antonio should also, especially since he wishes to profit by Shylock's practice:

To buy his favor I extend this friendship.
If he will take it, so; if not, adieu.
And for my love, I pray you, wrong me not.

(I,iii,167-9)

If Antonio does not accept the loan without monetary interest, then he can no longer berate Shylock for demanding interest, for Shylock can counter Antonio's public criticism by claiming that he offered him a no-interest loan and was refused. And if Antonio is willing to “play” with Shylock by accepting the bond and the “merry sport” that it represents, then perhaps he will voluntarily come to treat Shylock with more respect. In either case, Shylock will get what he most desires: the silencing of Antonio's public criticism of his business practices.

On the other hand, Shylock is deeply and justifiably angered by Antonio's insults and some part of him would probably enjoy cutting into Antonio's “fair flesh.” Because Shylock's social and legal position prevents him from taking a more direct action for revenge, his anger expresses itself in a dare that also allows Shylock the opportunity subtly to insult Antonio by stating that his “fair flesh” is worth less than an animal's.

Antonio accepts the dare, sure that he cannot lose and pleased that he may have pressured Shylock into conforming to the “proper” way of doing mercantile business. As long as Shylock operates according to his own rules, he threatens Antonio's business supremacy. When Antonio thinks Shylock may be persuaded to change his business practices, he no longer feels threatened; perhaps he believes that he can then compete with Shylock on his own terms and win.

In the trial scene, the Duke, speaking for “the world.” (IV,i,17) also expects Shylock to play by Antonio's rules. Not only does he tell Shylock that everyone expects him to change his mind about exacting the forfeiture, but also to

Forgive a moiety of the principal,
Glancing an eye of pity on his losses
That have of late so huddled on his back ...

(IV,i,26-28).

The Duke seems to have forgotten that Shylock is motivated by his own great losses. Not only has he lost ducats and jewels, but in losing Jessica, he has lost both a daughter and the means by which to control his estate after his death. Antonio can still hope to perpetuate his image in Bassanio, and Portia has behaved as an admirable image of her father and of Bellario her mentor, but Shylock has had all hope of the future torn from
him. The Duke ignores Shylock's grief and tells him that loyalty to business associates—even if they have betrayed him—should come before personal concerns. Shylock refuses this argument, and in a forceful speech argues that his feelings are all that matter in this case. His private and personal emotions are going to take precedence over social and political amenities, and he is there to see that the system that allowed him to be humiliated is forced to recognize his personal experience.

Portia enters the scene in the service of that system, intent upon saving her husband's friend and punishing his enemy, upon showing that the feelings of the individual must give way to the larger cause of social harmony. Portia has her plan clearly worked out before she enters the courtroom. She hopes, like the Duke, that she can talk Shylock into relenting and conforming to the expectations of the establishment, but she is prepared to “throw the book at him” if he should not.

However, by defeating Shylock, Portia learns that the very system she upholds would make a victim of her as a woman and a mockery of the marriage to which she has trusted her life and living. The warnings begin with Bassanio's offer to sacrifice her for Antonio. Her aside, even if jocular in tone, expresses some concern over this offer, a concern echoed by Nerissa and by Shylock's comment about Christian husbands. Pausing only momentarily, Portia returns to her primary task and offers the Duke a chance to render the mercy he previously asked of Shylock. The Duke meets her expectations, but she does not allow him to speak for Antonio. “Ay for the state, not for Antonio” (IV,i,371) she says of the Duke's reducing Shylock's punishment to a fine. Antonio is to have his own opportunity to demonstrate the charity which he has so vehemently argued Shylock should show.

When Portia turns to Antonio, she asks for his demonstration of mercy, expecting it to exceed the Duke's. Instead, Antonio not only appropriates half Shylock's wealth, but proposes to settle it on his protegé Lorenzo, thus making Jessica, in effect, his rather than Shylock's daughter, and completely divesting Shylock of the right to control his estate. Portia, who has so painfully accepted the patriarchal right to dispose of a daughter, suddenly sees that when it suits them, powerful men care little about that right when it belongs to a member of a marginalized group. The father-daughter relationship for which she risked great unhappiness disappears in the game of power. This moment reminds Portia that she is the property of the dominant male. From the grave or in the courtroom, he has the legal right to pick her up or lay her down; she is completely subject to his whim. When Antonio demands Shylock's conversion, Portia suddenly recognizes the similarity between the Jew's plight and her own. That recognition gives her reason both to devise and to resolve the dilemma of the rings with which the play ends.

V. FORCING A CONVERSION

Shylock's conversion must be accounted for in any comprehensive reading of The Merchant of Venice. In the trial scene, when Antonio stipulates “… that for this favor / He presently become a Christian,” (IV,i,384-5) the audience inevitably feels tremendous tension. From that point on, the dynamics of the scene depend heavily upon the characters' non-verbal reactions to Antonio's words. Interpretation of the subtext depends upon one's feelings about conversion in general and upon the relationship one sees between Shylock's forced conversion and the play's themes.

The Merchant of Venice reflects an era in which conversion resonated differently than it does today, and it is therefore useful to understand what a religious conversion might have meant to the Elizabethan audience of Shakespeare's play. Barbara Lewalski, Lawrence Danson, and others (including myself) have argued that Shylock's conversion reflects an allegorical representation of harmony; that because Shakespeare knew no Jewish people, he thought of the conversion of a Jew primarily in theological and abstract terms; and therefore, that Shylock's conversion was not meant to generate the degree of emotion it often elicits from the modern reader. However, the issue of religious conversion in Elizabethan England was not merely a theological concern in which the Jew represented the Old Law and the Christian the New Law. It was a life
experience for many in Shakespeare's own audience, and a political and social issue that affected their daily lives.

Henry VIII had required that his subjects repudiate the Pope, opening the door for the influence of zealous Continental Protestantism upon the English Church. The short reign of Edward VI continued the conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism, but Mary radically reversed that process. Under the influence of Mary and her Spanish husband, English men and women again found themselves worshipping as Catholics, or risking accusations of treason. When Elizabeth came to the throne, she came as a strong Protestant leader, soon to be excommunicated and marked for death by the Pope who encouraged all English Catholics to reject her as their sovereign. Nevertheless, most English people donned their Protestant cloaks in compliance with the orders of the state. Some Catholics retained their faith as secret recusants, caught between theological belief and national loyalty. Shakespeare's own father is believed to have been among these recusants, indicating that the issues of religious conversion for political and social reasons may have been more experiential than theoretical for our playwright. If William Shakespeare were raised in a Catholic household that secretly held onto its faith in spite of Elizabeth's ascension to the throne, the playwright himself would have experienced having to disguise or change his faith, his heritage, and his manner of worship in order to comply with the law of the land or risk losing both his living and his life.

Religious conversion in Renaissance Europe was inextricable from political and social conformity and practical daily living, both for Christians and for Jews. If a person wanted to be socially accepted, politically safe, and economically stable, conformity to the politically correct religion of the day was imperative. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that Elizabethan anti-semitism, like that of its European cousins and medieval predecessors, was grounded upon the Jewish refusal to convert, that is, their refusal to conform to the political and religious unity of the state. However, just as there were English recusant Catholics who outwardly conformed to Protestantism, or earlier, Protestants accepting Catholic trimmings to please their monarch, so too, some Jews compromised by converting outwardly while practicing their preferred religion in secret. Such “converted” Jews were known as conversos, ostensible Christians whom everybody knew as Jews.

It is impossible to estimate how many such conversos were present in London while Shakespeare was there. One who was well-known was Dr. Roderigo Lopez, physician to the Queen, translator, and spy, best known for his grisly death as a (probably wrongfully) accused traitor in 1594. Richard Popkin argues that Shakespeare may have known of the Jewish hostage, Alonso Nuñez de Herrera (Abraham Cohen de Herrera) whose situation and learning were much discussed in certain Elizabethan court circles. Also, both Cecil Roth and Maurice Freedman tell of small groups of Jews from Antwerp who settled in London and Bristol as conversos, officially either “Portuguese” or “Protestant” although even the authorities knew them to be Jewish. Evidently, these groups lived comfortably enough in England until 1609 when an internecine quarrel led one faction to report to the authorities that the other faction was practicing Judaism. The whole community was then expelled from England. Once these groups were exposed, they became a threat to the political and social unity of the state and were expunged.

So to say that Shakespeare knew only of the theological treatment of Jews and their conversion is probably not entirely accurate. He may have known more than one Jewish converso. Certainly he knew conversion as a way to achieve political and social unity through at least an outward conformity. Thought of in this way, religious conversion becomes part of the larger theme of how individuals might cope with authoritarian political, social, and economic pressure. Shylock's dilemma is therefore not entirely different from Portia's. He struggles under the political and economic sanctions of Christian authority; she copes with a patriarchal system that similarly exerts economic and social control over individuals.
Christian mercy has been traditionally given as Antonio's motivation in his demand for Shylock's conversion. However, in the bond scene, Antonio was more concerned with Shylock's business practices—and weakening them—than with his religion, and there is no reason for him to have changed his motivation here. In forcing Shylock to become a Christian, he thinks he is demanding that Shylock give up his practice of charging interest. Since the court has already diminished Shylock's capital by as much as half, Antonio's demand for conversion would ideally force Shylock to stop charging interest. This would destroy Shylock's means of increasing that capital quickly, effectively eliminating Antonio's most threatening business rival. Rather than respond to Portia and the trial scene by rendering mercy, Antonio continues his business competition with the man and uses his rival's vulnerability to assert further dominance.

VI. PORTIA AND SHYLOCK LINKED

I fully appreciated the reaction of Joanne Comerford, as Portia, during the trial scene of Peter Royston's staged reading of Bonds—Made and Broken. She was shocked at both the Duke's and Antonio's offers of “mercy,” and pained by the effect of her judgment upon Shylock. Portia suddenly sees how the law “being seasoned with a gracious voice, / Obscures the show of evil,” (III,ii,76-77) and is horrified to have been a part of it. When she asks Shylock, “Art thou contented Jew? What dost thou say?” (IV,i,391) she is making a hopeless plea for a way out. Shylock, of course, cannot offer her one, but his concerned look draws attention to their common understanding of oppression. Shylock's “I am content” then becomes a fatherly response meant to indicate that sometimes conformity is the only choice that can be made. For a brief moment, Shylock regains a child—one who understands and will listen to him—and Portia a father.

After a moment of silence, the emotional connection between Portia and Shylock dissipates with Portia's somber “Clerk, draw up a deed of gift.” (IV,i,392) Shylock, shaken by the swiftness of his defeat, asks leave to go and resignedly departs amid Gratiano's heartless taunts, a picture of personal emotion crushed beneath public displays of power. Portia's eyes follow him out the door as she realizes that her feelings as a woman have been just as easily dismissed by the dominant patriarchal system she has worked to support, and could as easily again be disregarded.

At this point, the winning party approaches to ask her to dinner. Impressed with this young “man,” they want to make him part of their social and business circle. Suddenly aware of her femininity and of her distaste for the cliquishness of these men, Portia begs off, only to be accosted by Antonio and Bassiano, who try to pay her off for the work she has suddenly found so distasteful. She asks only that Bassanio recognize her when they meet again, a line that can be taken to express the hope that he will look past her feminine exterior to the personhood beneath, rather than to forget the humanity masked by her otherness as his friends forgot Shylock's. Novy argues that the pun on “know me,” which relates sexuality to recognition, anticipates her emphasis on sexual identity in the return to Belmont and her implicit victory over Antonio. In the trial, the threat of aggression has been removed by projection onto a scapegoat; at Belmont, it can be dissolved in play—mock hostility which unites the married couples more closely.

The pun instead underscores the intimacy Portia requires and links to it the ability to see behind appearances to people's real feelings. Unless Bassanio can recognize her, he will never develop true intimacy with his wife. In Act V, Portia literalizes her point by making the sexual knowing contingent upon Bassanio's acceptance of her emotions, her intelligence, and her financial power.

Immediately after the trial scene, though, she only fears that Bassanio cannot be trusted to see beyond the materialistic comraderie of the business world. She therefore tests him by asking for his ring. Will he sacrifice his wife's trust to the demands of the “Old Boy Network?” He seems to pass the test at first, but immediately Antonio insists that their friendship take precedence over Bassanio's vows to his wife. When Gratiano brings
her the ring, Portia finds that her fears were justified—business and power, coated with friendship, are more important to her husband than emotional, domestic bonds. Men count more than women. Berger points out that Bassanio's giving Antonio Portia's ring indicates “man's assumption that men are superior to women, that it is men who save each other and the world and who perform great deeds and sacrifices; the pledge to a woman can be superseded by the debt of gratitude owed a man.” When that exchange occurs in Act IV, Berger explains, “Once again we see how a culture dominated by the masculine imagination devalues women and asserts male solidarity against feminine efforts to breach the barrier. In her own way, Portia is no less an outsider than Shylock and her “I stand for sacrifice” is finally not much different from Shylock's “I stand for judgment.” Too feisty and too angered by her experience in the courtroom to accept this subjugation, she resolves with Nerissa that “we'll outface them and outwear them too.” (IV,i,17)

The ring plot thus becomes Portia's version of what Shylock wanted to accomplish in the trial scene, but, as Novy suggests, with the violence removed. In the privacy of Belmont, Portia again takes control of her estate and her life, and ensures that her marriage to Bassanio will be conducted upon hers and not Antonio's terms or the terms of the patriarchal system under which she was wed. As Richard Weisberg explains, Portia is fed up with the mediation of others:

The legal relationship adopted as a commercial matter by Antonio as the play began now threatens to mediate the most personal of human relationships. Portia, exhausted by her own courtroom tactics on behalf of the mediators, will have none of it. It is time for Bassanio to stand for himself; it is time for the couple, unhindered by third-person intervention, to consummate their marriage.

Weisberg argues that Portia's annoyance comes from her disillusionment with social and legal mediation, and from her growing impatience with the way in which it has delayed the fulfillment (represented as sexual consummation) of Bassanio's commitment to her.

I would argue, however, that her impatience arises from the way in which Antonio's world, including its legal system, ignores the humanity and emotional concerns of the outsider. Her husband was willing to sacrifice her for a business associate. Business competition easily displaced the father's right to dispose of his property—for which she had been willing to risk her life's happiness. Disguised as a man, she was accepted and admired for her perceptive logic and presence of mind; but she knows that as a woman she could never have exercised her intellectual gifts in the Venetian court any more than she had been permitted to exercise them in choosing a husband. The public world has denied her feelings, her intelligence, her right to life (Bassanio wishes she were dead for Antonio's sake). These experiences send her back to the privacy of Belmont determined to make her husband and his friends acknowledge—in both word and deed—the interests of those whom their public world has marginalized.

She does not again submit herself and her estate to male governance. Portia takes advantage of her private power over Bassanio's economic and patrilineal success to gain and maintain control over her life. Her husband must depend upon her chastity to maintain his reputation, his line of descent, and his control over his estate after his death. Only as long as her children are his children will Bassanio's public influence endure. Portia returns to Belmont as its mistress and retains her power as a woman and a wife to the close of the play. She also refuses to promise sexual fidelity until Antonio commits more to Bassanio's private and emotional well-being than he did to his public business ventures. She rebels not so much against her husband as against the Venetian values which Antonio has taught him. In order to purge those values from Belmont, she must ensure that Antonio as well as Bassanio is made to recognize the importance of people outside his commercial coterie. When Antonio offers his soul as surety for Bassanio's vows, Portia has won. The world of men has been forced to acknowledge the importance and power of woman.

VII. THE MOVE TO THE MARGINS
In Act V, Portia also sees to it that Antonio finds himself obliged to her for his life and living. Ronald Sharp suggests that the “return” of Antonio's ships is in fact a gift from Portia, one that she disguises as “good fortune.” It is difficult to imagine how Antonio's ships could have returned, since everyone on the Rialto—Solanio, Solario, and Tubal—seem certain that they have all sunk. However, even if the ships have survived, Portia's revelation that she was Balthasar and her control over the news about Antonio's good fortune force him to recognize that he is no longer center stage. There is more to the world than the Rialto, and his life depends upon the hidden power in the margins. He is duly humbled and perhaps even humiliated by the realization that the brilliant young clerk who saved his life was no more than a woman, and that this same woman wields more control over the life of his friend and over his business transactions than he can.

On another level, Newman explains that “Portia's unruliness of language and behavior exposes the male homosocial bond the exchange of women insures, but it also multiplies the terms of sexual trafficking so as to disrupt those structures of exchange that insure hierarchical gender relations and the figural hegemony of the microcosm/macrocosm analogy in Elizabethan marriage.” Portia's demand that her feelings and power be recognized disrupts not just Antonio's view of the world, but also that of patriarchy and authority in general. Her triumph in Act V is thus in some ways a recap of Shylock's powerful “gaping pig” speech of Act IV.

Ann Parten argues that the resolution of the ring plot and Gratiano's concluding pun on “Nerissa's ring” dissolve the fear that Portia will remain dominant. Her point is convincingly stated, but for me that joke always falls flat, even amidst the most comic of performances. In contrast to the serious sexual and financial concerns that Portia's authority and dignified language have just laid to rest, it is simply too lewd to be funny. The time for such masculine flippancy is long past, left behind in Venice at the conclusion of the trial scene. Gratiano's tone seems uncomfortably out of place, as if an important point has just gone over his head. The joke's consequent failure seems to reinforce the powerlessness of the men in the face of Portia's strength. They may try to laugh off her threat to their exclusively male world, but their effort does not succeed. Sundelson's view of the joke as an uneasy effort to resist being engulfed by the feminine reflects more clearly my experience of the play. Antonio doesn't lose Bassanio or his power to Shylock in public, but in private, he loses both to Portia.

Shylock's accepting his conversion stresses the necessity of submitting to authority, but the play's comic conclusion is comic because it holds out the hope that in spite of this necessity, ways can be found to retain control over personal and private concerns. It is for this that we all—male or female—enjoy Portia and Nerissa's putting down of Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio. The play would end upon a celebratory note except for the lingering regret over Shylock's fate. The public pain we have felt for him in Act IV still overshadows the private resolution in Act V too darkly for the play to feel wholly comic. Thinking of Shakespeare's own father, I am not sure that that pain should be resolved, but if a director wishes to convey a more fully comic closure, the text provides a way to make it possible.

When Lorenzo hears of Portia's return to Belmont, he asks who comes with her. Stephano replies, “None but a holy hermit and her maid.” Who is this holy hermit? Few productions bother with him at all, so why does Shakespeare mention him? Portia and Nerissa did say they were going to a convent during their husbands' absence, but in fact they went to visit Bellario, and then on to Venice. Where did they pick up a holy hermit?

The last person Portia and Nerissa saw before returning to Belmont was Shylock. Could Shylock be the holy hermit, disguised in a friar's robe like the “fantastical Duke of dark corners” in Measure for Measure? The idea is far-fetched if one conceives of the play as it has traditionally been staged, but given the Elizabethan experience of religious conversion, it is possible. In this context, Shylock, disguised in a way that identifies him as a converso, observes Portia exert in private the personal autonomy that he was forced to give up in public. She conveys his deed of gift to his daughter Jessica, humbles his enemy, and shows that conforming to authority need not entail total abdication of individual power. Although bound publicly to the role of wife,
Portia maintains individual power in her home.

Disguised as a hermit, Shylock would also represent an outward conformity that does not necessitate abandonment of personal autonomy, either religious or economic. As long as Shylock maintains his Christian disguise, he will be free to go on believing and even practicing religion as he wishes. Roth reports that “During a lawsuit brought in 1596 against one of the Marrano merchants who had been trading with the Peninsula in partnership with an Englishman, the Jewish ceremonies observed at his home in Duke's Place, London, were alluded to in Court without any sense of incongruity and (what was more remarkable) without any untoward results.”32 Apparently, in some cases at least, the practice of Judaism was allowed in the private sphere, even when the authorities were aware that it was occurring.

Furthermore, in spite of the Christian injunctions against usury and Antonio's insistence that loans should be made freely and business conducted without the contamination of interest charges, it is likely that an Elizabethan Shylock could have continued to charge interest on his loans. In his chapter, “Property and the Grasp of Greed,” Max James discusses 16th and 17th century treatises against usury. He explains that “even though both Stubs and Smith declare that the government placed a cap on interest rates at ten percent maximum to restrain greed, in actual fact, ten percent was usually the minimum, and many devices were used to circumvent the law and to charge a much higher percentage. …” He also points out that not all usurers were Jews: “… most usurers were merchants, and … merchants were often criticized and excoriated as severely as usurers.”33 According to Elizabethan legal practice, then, Shylock as a Christian merchant could have continued to charge at least ten percent interest. So, Antonio has not gained his presumed victory when he forced Shylock to convert. In Elizabethan society, even a judgment such as that rendered in the play would not have necessitated a change in Shylock's methods. Instead, Antonio's desire to live according to his period's economic ideals might have been seen by many in the Elizabethan audience as nice, but impractical. If so, then The Merchant of Venice, like Richard II, pits ideology against practicality. However one reads Richard II, the ideals that Antonio preaches in The Merchant of Venice are undercut by his satisfaction in victimizing Shylock. Seeing a disguised Shylock achieve his revenge both non-violently and practically might help to relieve an audience of any discomfort with which the last act might otherwise leave them.

As the lovers enter the house with Antonio trailing awkwardly behind, the hermit throws back his cowl. He walks slowly off stage, alone, isolated, and still in pain, but satisfied with the revenge he has observed, and resigned to his fate as actor of conformity, as converso, in an authoritarian world. Portia's private victory thus becomes Shylock's, and not just Shylock's, but also the victory of the public playwright/London actor torn between acknowledging the necessity for political and religious conformity and his personal drive to recognize and celebrate individual human experience.

Notes

2. Id.
5. Novy, supra note 1 at 151. Novy concludes her essay by stating that “Like the threat of Shylock, whose trial postpones the consummation of marriages, otherness may seem an obstacle to love and indeed Shylock’s exorcism may be intended to remove it as an obstacle. But the acceptance of Portia's self-assertion that we find at the end of The Merchant of Venice is also a celebration of otherness and of the means it depends on—financial, sexual, verbal—to give and to receive.”
6. See Berger, supra note 4 at 161-162.
8. Karen Newman, “Porcia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice,” 38 Shakespeare Quarterly 19, 22 (1987). Karen Newman looks at The Merchant of Venice in the light of Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological theory of cultural exchange (in which he defines the origin and sustenance of society to be the authorized exchange of women to ensure male bonding) and of Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of his theory. From this perspective, Newman concludes that “Instead of choosing one interpretation over the other, idealized male friendship or homosexuality, Irigaray's reading of Lévi-Strauss allows us to recognize in Antonio's relationship with Bassanio a homosocial bond, a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails.”
9. See Stone, supra note 3 at p. 118. In concluding his chapter on “Family Characteristics,” Stone explains that children were often sent out of the home to be raised by other families. As a result, nuclear family bonds were weakened so bonds based upon mutual political or economic interests could be strengthened. He writes that “This was a family group [which] was held together by shared economic status and political interests, and by the norms and values of authority and deference. This was a family type which was entirely appropriate to the social and economic world of the 16th century, in which property was the only security against total destitution, in which connections and patronage were the keys to success, in which power flowed to the oldest males under the system of primogeniture, and in which the only career opening for women was in marriage. In these circumstances the family structure was characterized by its hierarchical distribution of power, held together not by affective bonds but by mutual economic interests.” To an Elizabethan audience, therefore, Antonio's paternal bond to Bassanio would seem much more logical and familiar than it does to us today.
10. See Bevington, ed., supra note 7 at 104 for a translation of this story.
15. The Merchant of Venice (BBC television broadcast, 1981).
17. See F. W. Brownlow, “John Shakespeare's Recusancy: New Light on an Old Document,” 40 Shakespeare Quarterly 186 (1989). The document naming John Shakespeare as a recusant is dated 1592, a date close to the earliest date of 1594 given for the composition of The Merchant of Venice. Brownlow also points out that the authorities tended to deal gently with most recusants, and that a common explanation for their absence from church was debt. In the law and social culture of Elizabethan England, there was evidently a connection between debt and religious nonconformity that may have laid the groundwork for Shakespeare's development of a similar connection in Merchant.
Fratricide (New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1974). Cecil Roth also traces the origin of anti-semitism to the Jews' refusal to convert, but shows that under John's reign, political and economic concerns also became powerful motivators. See Roth, supra note 3 at 32.


21. Bonds—Made and Broken (New York Bar Association reading, December 11, 1992). The reading was part of a symposium on “Legal Aspects of The Merchant of Venice.” See “Editor's Preface” to this number.

22. Novy, supra note 1 at 147.
23. Berger, supra note 4 at 161.
24. Id.
25. See Novy, supra note 1 at 148-149.
27. Id. at 101.
29. Newman, supra note 8 at 32.
31. See Sundelson, supra note 12 at 252-257.
32. Roth, supra note 3 at 141-142.
33. James, supra note 11 at 97-98.

Criticism: Themes: Samuel Ajzenstat (essay date 1997)


[In the following essay, Ajzenstat evaluates The Merchant of Venice as a romantic comedy featuring a number of significant oppositions, the most fundamental being that between “the conditional and the unconditional.”]

The Merchant of Venice is widely interpreted as a Christian parable about the power of selfless love to raise us above the loveless inflexibilities of the legal and commercial orders.¹ The account I shall offer is the precise opposite of this interpretation: The Merchant makes more sense as a play about love's inability to allow us to dispense with a loveless realm of hard necessity and, even more, about love's dependence on a loveless realm for its own survival. But the rejection of the idealistic account does not make The Merchant a cynical play. It remains a romantic comedy because it shows that love does not require the myth of its invulnerability and all-conquering power to remain meaningful both in the here-and-now and as a pointer to something beyond it.

The Merchant intertwines two distinct stories, a very pleasant and a very unpleasant one. The pleasant story takes place in the beautiful estate of Belmont where the young Venetian nobleman Bassanio wins Portia's hand by passing the test specified in her father's will, picking from among a golden, a silver and a lead casket the one which contains her picture. The unpleasant story takes place in a dark, ugly Venice where the merchant Antonio, in order to finance his beloved friend Bassanio's trip to Belmont, puts himself under the power of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender whose hatred he has earned by reviling him as a Jew and a usurer.
Antonio risks his life, pledging a pound of his flesh if the debt is unpaid. Shakespeare brings the two stories together by having Portia, disguised as a man, go to Venice to defend Antonio in the law courts. Shylock is defeated and forced to convert to Christianity and the victors return to Belmont. Shylock's daughter Jessica, having run away to marry the Christian, Lorenzo, is also allowed to make the passage from Venice to Belmont.

To idealistic critics, the two stories work against each other. However, compassionate the Christians may think they are being by making Shylock convert, it is clear enough to us in the modern audience that they are destroying him. It takes something away from the beautiful triumph of pure love—which such critics think must be the point of the play—to see it purchased at the price of the destruction of someone for whom we have come to have considerable sympathy. Consequently, the play seems either to fall apart dramatically or to be a unity only if anti-semitic. Such critics adopt a number of expedients, trying to get us to see Shylock as a simple, generalized villain, or viewing the play as anti-semitic but falling back on the historicist, Shakespeare-couldn't-have-known-any-better line, or else arguing that the play's incoherence is praiseworthy because Shakespeare's human sympathy overcame his skill as a playwright. But once we recognize, as I shall argue, that the ubiquity of something less than love is as present in the love story taken by itself as it is in the Shylock story, the sense of incoherence disappears. As for anti-semitism, it is surely an element in the play. But when we see it as a consequence of the Christian characters' attempt to separate themselves from what the play shows us to be an inseparable aspect of human life, we can understand that the play not only opposes anti-semitism but offers an astute philosophical analysis of it.

The play's fundamental opposition, often characterized as between love and commerce, is more revealingly seen as an opposition between a need for unconditional commitments and the equally pressing need to fence our commitments with conditions. The conditional is rooted in that aspect of ourselves—part of what we call justice—that tells us it is only fair for us to be self-interested enough to expect a return for what we give, reward for good, punishment for bad, measure for measure. Its basic metaphor is the contract. The unconditional is rooted in our sense of the grandeur of being able both to give and to get without demand of a return on either side, each entirely transcending need for the sake of the other. The Christian characters are not necessarily wrong to see the unconditional as spiritual perfection and the conditional as a taint on spiritual perfection. Their mistake—which the idealistic critics share—is to think that spiritual perfection is open to them. The mistake has two sides: the belief that they can distance themselves from what they find most dubious in commerce by identifying it with the Jew Shylock, and the belief that human love is sustainable without a conditional, tit-for-tat component. The play destroys both beliefs, the first in its way of telling the Shylock-Antonio story, the second in the Portia-Bassanio story. In both, we see the Christian characters being eased in the direction of a more rueful, less utopian conception of the spiritual possibilities open to them than they were reaching for at the beginning. At the same time our recognition that this reaching resulted in the casual and hypocritical demonization of others need not rob the Christian characters of our sympathy once we see that the harm they do comes from no worse a motive than the desire to be able to think well of themselves.

The play shows us that the life of purely unconditional relationships, however exalted it may be, is unreachable and the attempt to reach it corrupting, but it resists a complacent reaction to the realization that this is how things must be. In a grand tradition, perhaps now on the wane, it is profoundly anti-utopian without quite letting us give up longing for a purer world. And though it is the Christian Portia who in many ways most fully represents the divided soul, Shakespeare will find a way of hinting that the spirit that blows through the play is an Old Testament spirit.

I

In The Merchant, as often in Shakespeare, issues emerge most clearly and subtly in incidental set pieces easily overlooked and sometimes cut in performance. Such episodes do not so much add to the plot as permit Shakespeare to comment unobtrusively on the main action. My account of the play hangs on four such episodes. The first of these, I wish to suggest, can best be seen as a “comment” on the demand in the trial
scene that Shylock convert to Christianity. It occurs at the beginning of Act III, Scene v, when Shylock's daughter Jessica tells Launcelot Gobbo, the clown and ex-servant of Shylock, of her conversion to Christianity.

Audiences find Shylock's forced conversion extremely distressing. Yet this occurrence gives the true measure of Shakespearean irony—an irony more often saving than cynical. The saving irony here is that what is literally the cruelest persecution Shylock undergoes marks symbolically the collapse of the system which finds it useful to cast him as an object of persecution in the first place. Portia, we shall see, undergoes a similar turnabout. Both reversals reveal the instability of the Belmont-Venice dichotomy. This implication emerges not in the trial scene itself but in Launcelot's reaction to Jessica's talk of conversion. When she tells him that her husband, Lorenzo, “hath made me a Christian,” the clown responds:

Truly the more to blame he; we were Christians enow before, 'en as many as could well live one by another; this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs,—if we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.

(III.v.19-23)

A bad joke, maybe. But a revealing one. Antonio may well think of Shylock's conversion in spiritual terms. Launcelot helps us see that it also has an economic consequence—a much more interesting one than the price of bacon.

What would be the economic consequence of a conversion of all Venetians to Christianity? Clearly, either that all money lending would cease, with the consequent collapse of the Venetian commercial empire—something that Antonio has already told us he is willing to give his life to avoid (III.iii.26-36)—or else that Christians would become moneylenders. Launcelot's joke points to the increasingly explicit entry of Christians into usury, henceforth to be dignified with the name of banking. Of course, for this to happen there is no literal need for the conversion of all or any Jews. What Shylock's conversion points to symbolically is not a spiritual change in Jews but a spiritual change in Christians.

It is not that Christians become moneylenders for the first time. In the twelfth century, St. Bernard had written: “We are pained to observe that where there are no Jews, Christian moneylenders ‘Jew’ worse than the Jews, if indeed these men may be called Christians and not rather baptized Jews.” The historian who reports this statement comments that though “the Jews always formed a tiny minority of the people so engaged,” squeamish Christians could console themselves with the fiction that Christian moneylenders must really be Jews. The spiritual change that is taking place is that they will soon no longer need the fiction.

Some may wish to explain this ironically as nothing more than the replacement of traditional squeamishness with a modern complacency that does not worry itself over spiritual ambiguities. We cannot be sure that this is not the direction in which Shakespeare sees his characters heading; many of them have a strong streak of complacency. But we have yet to point to some hints in the play to suggest a different explanation of what is happening.

The explanation I wish to explore is well suggested in a remark of the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr about St. Augustine's *The City of God*. Augustine speaks of two cities or ways of life, the city of God and the city of man, and has seemed to many of his readers to believe—just as the separation between the two “cities” of Belmont and Venice helps the Christian characters and idealistic critics of *The Merchant* to believe—that the human race can be fairly neatly divided into two categories: those who live in the community of unconditional love and those who live in the community of self-love and who, among other things, do the dirty work of law and order by which the ungodly control each other so that the godly can live in peace. Niebuhr offers a criticism which, whether or not fair to Augustine, seems to me to crystallize the
movement of our play precisely:

When Augustine distinguished between the “two loves” which characterize the “two cities,” the love of God and the love of self, and when he pictured the world as a commingling of the two cities, he did not recognize that the commingling is due not to the fact that two types of people dwell together, but because the conflict between love and self-love is in every soul.3

For all that Belmont is a poor counterfeit of the city of God, Niebuhr's remark helps us see The Merchant of Venice as a parable in which the idea that pure Virtue and pure Vice are exemplified in “two types of people,” Shylock and Portia, is replaced by the realization that vice and virtue are in conflict within each soul. This realization allows for a more concrete account of all human beings as unpurifiable mixtures of good and ill who, instead of pretending to banish contradiction from their hearts, will have to embark on the project of learning how to live torn by the struggle between the unconditional and the conditional.

To be able to see the play in these terms we must be able to keep alive our sense that there is something despicable about the conditional, contractual life. There must be something capable of moving us in Antonio's essential criticism of lending at interest:

If thou wilt lend this money lend it not
As to thy friends—for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?

(I.iii.127-129)

To say of the Renaissance Venetians that they wish to live golden spiritual lives full of beauty and mutual regard far above the life of crass, competitive money-grubbing but that they can see no way of doing so except through the proceeds of those crass activities is not to situate them historically or geographically but to understand them as exemplars of a more generally familiar dilemma. What hangs over Antonio's head surely is the injunction to “sell all you have and give to the poor.” It makes him a better man and a worse one. He cannot live with it and he cannot live without it.

We may miss the advantages of the Belmont-Venice system, which are mainly two: first, that it keeps up the morale of at least some members of the society, by allowing them, however artificially, to think well of themselves without asking them to forgo the benefits of wealth. And secondly, along with this, that it is able to keep alive, even if only by lip-service and only among an elite, an exalted conception of human relationships. If they had been more honest with themselves both of these things might have been more difficult for them.

But Shakespeare does not endorse this self-deception. So, though he allows us to see, in spite of everything, the graces of Belmont, he also shows us the unworkability of the separation of Belmont from Venice. We have yet to see the fatal flaw that will bring the system crashing down. Before we can do so, we need a further understanding of how the basic principle at issue is brought into the play and an examination of Portia's role in bringing out the collapse of the social structure she is trying to save.

II

A second “incidental” episode points us towards a deeper view of what is at issue in The Merchant. Once more it involves Launcelot Gobbo, the play's wry philosopher-clown, and should also be read as a comic commentary on a serious scene, the only one in which Antonio and Shylock debate the issue of usury. In the comic episode, Launcelot meets his father coming to visit him (II.ii.31-94). The high-spirited son cannot resist confusing the blind old man. He first pretends not to be Launcelot, then, acknowledging that he is, kneels
down and asks his blessing. The father, feeling the top of Launcelot's head expresses surprise that his son has grown such a long beard. Truly, as Launcelot remarks, “It is a wise father that knows his own child.”

This episode is a comic acting out of the biblical scene (Genesis 27) in which Jacob wears goatskins so that his blind father Isaac will feel him, think he is his elder son, the hairy Esau, and be deceived into giving him Esau's blessing. The point of this scene begins to emerge when we recall the serious scene in which Shylock tells Antonio that by usury he is following Jacob's example and Antonio's reply that Jacob, unlike Shylock, did nothing unjust and was in any case guided by God (Liii.66-90). The scene between Launcelot and his father functions as Shakespeare's invitation to us to consider Antonio's rosy, idealizing picture of Jacob as not quite what Scripture intended, indeed as a deep misunderstanding of the religious tradition.

It is not possible here to give a full account of the story of Jacob. Of all the Biblical patriarchs he most conspicuously lives out a double bind. In order to fulfill his spiritual calling of being one of the founders of a holy nation he must lie and cheat. At the same time, the God he serves with his lie is a god who demands truth so Jacob and his mother must be punished.

The biblical text lays out the structure of the punishment with wonderful clarity. In the story of Jacob's marriage, the same kind of trick he had used to supplant his elder brother (Genesis 29: 16-27) is used against him to supplant a younger of two sisters.

Reading Jacob's marriage to Leah as punishment suggests that his original act of lying was evil. But the story also suggests that the lie was necessary. This seems to be the reading that emerges from Launcelot's scene with his father, for just before their meeting Launcelot has been debating with himself whether he should obey his conscience and remain Shylock's servant or obey the devil and run off and enter Bassanio's service (II.ii.1-24). He decides that the devil's advice is altogether better just as his father enters. This suggests in a comic way that it may be necessary to disobey one's conscience.

This account can be usefully juxtaposed with the Shylock-Antonio debate. Antonio thinks that Jacob did not cheat but could and did leave everything in God's hands, hence he cannot be used to justify usury. Shylock thinks that Jacob's practices were justified by their results. Neither of them seems to think of Jacob as morally ambiguous, doing what was both wrong and unavoidable. The idea of moral ambiguity is what Launcelot points towards. The scene between the Gobbos offers Shakespeare's account of Jacob in opposition to both Shylock's and Antonio's. The Jacob of this interpretation is, as it were, a combination of Shylock and Antonio within one person, practicing out of necessity what must also be seen as a falling away from perfection. That we are meant to take Jacob as a person who must suffer the consequences of a divided heart is suggested by his dream (Genesis 28: 11-15) of a ladder connecting a high place with a low place with beings moving up and down on it continually but never simply in an upward direction and never reaching God, who is not at the top of the ladder but above it.

The question, then, that the Shylock-Antonio part of the story poses for us is whether a full ethical life can be unified and consistent or must of necessity exhibit a tense and never quite consistent duality. Turning now from the Shylock story to the story of Portia's wedding, we shall see further reasons for reading The Merchant as a demonstration of inescapable human duality and the less than perfect but nevertheless genuine good available to us by living in terms of it.

III

The third of our set pieces is the ring episode at the very end of the play. The crisis past, the main characters (except, as often noted, Shylock) gather in Belmont. The atmosphere of relief is briefly disturbed when Portia and her maid Nerissa ask for the rings they had given their husbands and made them promise never to part with. Bassanio and Gratiano have reluctantly given the rings to the lawyer and his clerk who had saved
Antonio. The women who, of course, were the lawyer and “his” clerk, and had demanded the rings to test their husbands, put the poor men through hell for a few moments. They can say truthfully that since the lawyer and his clerk now have the rings they will sleep only with them. But they soon take pity on Bassanio and Gratiano and tell all. The men promise, once more, never to part with the rings. As Nerissa and Gratiano run off to consummate their marriage, Gratiano ends the play with an obscene remark in which a ring on a finger represents the joining of sexual organs:

Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing
So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

These jokey threats of tit-for-tat infidelity hold an important clue to the rest of the play. I do not doubt that Portia's marriage is a love match. But what does that imply in a play that is supposed to be pitting tit-for-tat contractualism against unconditional love? The inscription on the leaden casket, the one containing Portia's picture, makes reference to unconditional love by demanding of the chooser that he “give and hazard all he hath” (II.vii.16). Is Portia required to “give and hazard all [she] hath” or ought she to try, if possible, to state her conditions? Is a mating of souls spoiled if an element of tit-for-tat enters it? To think so would be remarkably similar to the idealistic attitude we have seen Antonio take towards money-lending (I.iii.128-129). But this is not Portia's answer. Among the different interpretations of her action, depending on whether we like or dislike her, it is open to us to believe that she states her conditions in the faith that she is not thereby relinquishing the unconventionality of her relationship with Bassanio. For all her bantering tone she delivers a deadly serious and, in the context of the rosy glow of dawn at Belmont, a very poignant threat: my sexual fidelity is conditional on yours. We need not think that she actually would retaliate in this way if the issue arose. She may well be incapable of it. All the more reason, we might say, to threaten.

It may be helpful to think about Bassanio and Portia in the light of some of our own recent confusions about marriage. The idealistic insistence that marriage should not state conditions on either side was one of the more permanent legacies of the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s. A certain measure-for-measure backlash redeemed the legalities of marriage when many women found themselves facing such realities as the need for child support payments. In our times—and not only in ours—both unconditional love (as long as it lasts) and liberal contractualism have been applied to marriage with a vengeance and often with an uneasy sense that they were not quite compatible.

Realism about the need for guaranteed security would have been entirely unproblematic if the idealistic or utopian view were simply wrong. Unfortunately for any simple account, it seems to be as important for human beings to give and get unconditional love as it is for them to be able to hedge it around with conditions for the sake of security. Is it possible to satisfy both requirements?

The Merchant's last episode answers with a qualified yes. The yes is that the combination of self-surrender and self-preservation is a human necessity that we are able to cobble together. The qualification is that it is after all a kind of makeshift, an ambiguous joining of two very different spiritual attitudes, requiring considerable moral equilibrium—something Portia luckily possesses to a fault—so as not to be overwhelmed when utopian temptations make ordinary marriage seem like mere hypocrisy.

Right at the end, then, the play brings us gently back to the ubiquity of contract. The ring episode invites us to consider that pure unconditional love by itself cannot and never could provide the cement for normal, human relationships and yet can draw aid and support from the lower, or less idealistic, conditional part of ourselves. It suggests that even in our most personal and intimate relations we have to make room in our hearts for the external constraints of the contractual, even when it seems to us a less beautiful and more grasping way of life than the pure refusal to enforce conditions. But that the low can help the high to survive is part of what makes The Merchant a comedy—even if a bittersweet one.
In her marriage Portia gently calls a threat of retaliation to the aid of a love which an idealist or a romantic might think was incompatible with such threats. In retrospect she seems from the very beginning of the play to have been the sort of person who would be able to temper the demand for the unconditional with contractual realism. As such, rather than as a presumed agent of Christian mercy, she is an appropriate person to offer Shylock an acceptably contractual compromise when they confront each other in the courtroom. But the hostility of others has turned Shylock from a person who lives by conditionality into an agent of unconditional hatred in the service of which he has twisted the very idea of contract. After he refuses to accept twice his money back (IV.i.84-87), he is beyond the pale of the contractual and will have to be destroyed. The trial is a prefiguring of the collapse of the system under which Shylock was made a pariah. But that collapse will come too late to help him.

IV

The fatal flaw that will bring down the Belmont-Venice system is that it depends vitally on the participation of two people, Shylock and Portia, who can hardly be expected to be very pious towards it. They are both in a position to see through the roles they are expected to play as quite a bit less than God-given. Portia's golden existence in Belmont requires, at least as her father sees it, that she and her wealth be handed over to a man (or manager) whose main qualification is to be wised-up enough to the hypocrisies of others so that he can survive his forays into Venice. Bassanio reflects in front of the caskets (III.ii.73-105) not on how good externally plain things may be inwardly but on how corrupt beautiful-looking things often are within, an odd reflection with which to win a woman he thinks both “fair, and (fairer than that word) / Of wondrous virtues” (I.i.162-163). The choice of the caskets is cunningly arranged to appear to reflect the values of Belmont—which are supposed to be Portia's—while actually attracting someone who not only has a fair amount of Venice in his soul but also knows how to hide it. For the protection of Belmont, Portia cannot be allowed to marry according to her own will. And Shylock is allowed to make a living in Venice only at the cost of ostracism and humiliation. Both have good cause to see the price they are paying in order to represent what the Christian males need them to represent, an allegory of pure Virtue versus “pure” Vice.

Because this allegory makes Shylock an outsider, it takes the chance that he may want to pull it down and will find the opportunity to do so in its own weakness, the inflexible legalism that underlies the commercial contract. But Shakespeare adds a twist. As it turns out, the system can be saved only by someone who is as much an outsider as Shylock, someone as willing as he is, and as Antonio is not, to find a loophole in the letter of the law. That other outsider is, of course, Portia. What makes it impossible to see the confrontation between Shylock and Portia as a clash between law and mercy is simply that both of them use the law shamelessly for their own purposes. In a further irony it is Antonio, though a Christian, who is the play's committed legalist; he considers the commercial law of Venice untouchable:

The duke cannot deny the course of law:
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.

(III.iii.26-31)

If Portia had had that much respect for the law she would have been unable to play with it enough to save it from the consequences of its own mechanical rigidity. This suggestion seems outrageous to those critics who believe the Belmont-Venice allegory and therefore believe that Portia can only act on the highest standards of purity. These are the same critics—a surprisingly large number—who think it merely cynical to suggest that Portia gives Bassanio a hint as to which casket to choose by having a song containing rhymes for “lead” sung to him. But once we are ready to take the play as teaching that we live in a world where we must be willing
to marshal the impure on behalf of the pure if anything pure is to survive, it becomes extremely plausible to see the trial of the caskets as Portia's dry run for the trial of Antonio, a dry run in which she displays an understandable unscrupulousness, cheating her father as surely as Jacob cheated his—in her case in the interest of a true love.

Very gently Shakespeare here touches the theme of unscrupulousness in defense of a world where scruples are to have a chance to survive, a theme which becomes crucial in his histories. What is in question is Machiavelli's teaching that a legal order can be created and defended only by someone who does not feel bound by it, the unscrupulous founder who stands outside the law. The point is put delicately by King Henry V (a student of Falstaff in seeing through the law) to Katherine of France: “you and I cannot be confin'd within the weak list of a country's fashion; we are the makers of manners” (Henry V, V.ii.266).

Anyone who gets to know Portia must feel that she too, in her heart “cannot be confined within the weak list of a country's fashion.” But in her dealings with Venice she thinks of herself as acting to save her country's fashion. It seems that though she has seen through the conventions of Venice she knows that the self-esteem of the man she loves depends on the maintenance of the world in which he has his noble status. The mixture of conditional and unconditional she is able to admit into her marriage—if indeed she knows she is doing it—she does not here force on the Christian males. It is against her will that she sows the seeds of destruction in the Belmont-Venice system's way of dealing with commerce.

The trial scene has an almost epic quality. Two great antagonists, Shylock and Portia clash, both empowered because they have seen through the laws of their community, he to pull down at least one of its pillars, she to save it. Victory is Portia's. But Shakespeare has one more saving twist of irony. Portia's victory like Shylock's conversion has a double meaning.

Portia the woman takes on in pretense the figure of a man just as Shylock the Jew takes on in pretense the figure of a Christian. She symbolically unfits herself to play the role mapped out for her in the society she is supposedly saving—even though she largely returns to playing it. Just as Shylock's conversion tells us that in the future Jews will not be able to be placed at the low end of the Belmont-Venice system, Portia's appearance in Venice in male dress tells us that she or her descendants will not willingly stay put on the pedestal in Belmont. Shakespeare is tangibly predicting the demise of the Belmont-Venice dichotomy.

But even if the dichotomy does die, we are not meant to think that love and contract simply join hands and become mutually supporting. It may be that to be able to love at all one must be able to state one's conditions. But it is not the case that in order to state one conditions one must be able to love. So, even when the conditional and the unconditional come to reside in the same heart, the conditional, especially in the form of commercial life, will retain an independence that the unconditional does not have. Love will need contract more than contract needs love. The melding of Venice and Belmont cannot eradicate the division between those we love and those we do not love. But it can stop us—sometimes—from believing that only those we do not love have contractualism in their souls. In this world at least, the conditional is a more inescapable power than the unconditional. The ubiquity of commerce may now open the way for Shylock to become a respectable businessman. The exclusiveness of love makes it extremely unlikely that he will ever be invited to even the new, more ambiguous Belmont.

V

Some hint of what Shakespeare may think of the social order whose death he anticipates lies in the references to Christian hypocrisy which the more cynical critics have noted in almost every scene of The Merchant. To these critics they suggest simple condemnation of the Christians. More likely, I think, they are there to shore up the message that we live out our lives in a not quite harmonious double-mindedness.
But for many, double-mindedness is just a euphemism for hypocrisy and may well come to seem morally intolerable. Is there anything that can ease the tension of living with the necessity of duplicity? Is dividedness the last word about us?

At one point Shakespeare suggests otherwise. This is the last of the episodes I shall consider. At the beginning of Act V, the scene that ends with the rings, Lorenzo, lying out under the stars at Belmont, speaks to Jessica of the music of the spheres:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(V.i.60-65)

Lorenzo elegantly calls up a world that transcends the double bind, that is harmonious rather than conflictual, but is unavailable to us while we wear “this muddy vesture of decay.” For the idealists these words will be discredited by being spoken by a frivolous playboy consoling himself complacently for his own grossness with the drug of religion. But if the play is about double-mindedness it is appropriate that Lorenzo should speak these lines. When Lorenzo continues:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils …
Let no such man be trusted

(V.i.83-88)

he may think he is talking about someone like Shylock, who speaks of the “vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife” (II.v.30) and the dire effect of the bagpipes (IV.i.49-50). But since he has just said that none of us can hear the real music, we are apparently all “fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.”

Here Lorenzo sums up the double-mindedness of the play and moves it for a moment to a cosmic plane. Lorenzo's dream is not unlike Jacob's. We only know what is low in our world because we have glimpsed something high. Our ability to see ourselves from above is an element of our worth even when what we see from that perspective is our worthlessness. Even if Lorenzo is not fit to speak these words or doesn't believe them in any but the most superficial sense, one would have to be an intensely serious deconstructionist not to be glad he says them or not to like him a little better for saying them.

VI

I have argued that The Merchant of Venice is best understood in the context of a tension between the conditional and the unconditional. A tension of this kind continues to reverberate through our philosophies and theodicies. We vacillate between thinking that goodness is rewarded and thinking that reward would demean it; of love we think both that it endures all but that we may demand good behavior from those who say they love us; in commerce, the profit motive can seem both reasonable and crass. One need not be a Christian to feel the tug of living like the lilies of the field. But one will also feel the tug of having a retirement savings plan at a respectable interest rate. Controlling the future, which requires laying down conditions, and letting the future look after itself, which is what makes unconditional commitment possible—both of them answer to something powerful in our natures that helps to define our self-understanding. Our hearts are torn by the tension between them.
The utopian cure for the torn human heart can hardly be better put than in Hamlet’s “throw away the worser part of it / And live the purer with the other half” (Hamlet, III.iv.159-160), and many would identify that as The Merchant’s teaching. This is certainly how the Christian characters in the play see themselves. But much of Shakespeare's work can be seen as showing that we cannot “throw away the worser part” and that trying to do so is disastrous. But to let “the worser part” in the form of our less generous, more self-centered, more unscrupulous impulses run rampant would also be disastrous in the world of Shakespeare, who does not seem as optimistic as later thinkers that such impulses will act on each other as checks and balances. Instead, at least in The Merchant, a different sort of impulse—one of unconditioned love—is what offers a counterweight to the ungenerous, conditional impulses, though it also loses something by existing in tension with them. In The Merchant this counterweight operates, reasonably enough, only in what we would call the private world of marriage and personal friendship. The fate of the more public world of relations between strangers remains uncertain as it is seen moving in the direction of a more openly acknowledged contractualism. But the utopian cure is unambiguously set aside. If “the worser part” is the contractual life, then neither Portia nor Antonio can throw it away. Antonio projects it onto Shylock and in the process creates an implacable enemy who might well have destroyed him. And though the surface symbolism of Belmont suggests that the man who would win Portia must be a devotee of unconditional love who will “give and hazard all he hath.” Portia has learned by the last scene that for her to give and hazard all she has would be hazardous indeed.

The world into which we are introduced at the beginning of The Merchant is both in Venice and in Belmont a make-believe world that depends on clear-cut social distinctions between Jews and Christians and between men and women based on clear-cut social roles. It is Shakespeare's anti-utopianism to show us that this world is a fool's paradise. But his anti-utopian attitude is not one of moralistic indignation. Post-Holocaust critics, anxious to acquit Shakespeare of the charge of anti-semitism, have tried to show him “taking sides” against the Christian characters. In fact, he does something more useful. Without moralizing, he offers an analysis, a brilliant piece of social science, identifying an important spiritual function that intolerance tries to serve and also showing—from our vantage point one might say predicting—exactly how the Venice-Belmont system comes to collapse. Nor does he flatten out the dilemma. Tit-for-tat contractualism is not seen as untainted. Nor does Shakespeare suggest, as some critics do, that money-lending itself is unambiguously moral as long as the rate of interest is not exorbitant and pounds of flesh are not brought into the bargain. Antonio despises Shylock long before there is any pound-of-flesh contract. Nor are the Christians condemned for wishing to think of themselves—however unrealistically—as untainted either by the profit motive or by a measure-for-measure conception of love relations. The project is simply shown collapsing under its own weight.

For some commentators the political teaching of The Merchant of Venice is that the society in which we live has been bought at the price of the driving out of love and friendship. But Lorenzo's and Jessica's rueful reflection in the final scene (V.i.1-22) on legendary lovers who came to a bad end—Troilus, Thisbe, Dido, Medea—is perhaps meant to remind us that there was never a time when love and friendship did not have a hard time maintaining themselves against the necessities of nature and commerce even while depending on those necessities for support. They do not list these lovers to give themselves an excuse for infidelity. Rather, having caught a hint of perfection in the night and the stars, they are pledging themselves not to betray the only life they can know just because it is mixed and imperfect. A few minutes later Portia, in the ring episode, will also pledge her loyalty to a life that is something less than the music of the spheres. That they can settle for less without forgetting the more is one of the things that after all makes The Merchant of Venice a comedy and not a tragedy.

Notes

5. I adopt the general view that Portia uses a legal trick in her defense of Antonio since a contract that granted a pound of flesh would also grant the right to shed blood in taking the pound.
6. John Russell Brown, for example (note on III.ii.63, p. 80) says that such a hint “would belittle Bassanio and Portia and cheapen the theme of the play.”

**Criticism: Themes: Alan Rosen (essay date 1997)**


[In the following essay, Rosen remarks on the rhetorical strategies of *The Merchant of Venice’s* racial outsiders, emphasizing Shylock’s recursive and literal mode of speaking and the Prince of Morocco’s eloquence as beyond “the borders of legitimate discourse” in the play.]

In the 1590s, both Jew and Moor remained for English Christians exotic infidels, whose obstinate unbelief and cultural difference continued to challenge, boldly or surreptitiously, Christian hegemony in Europe.1 In Shylock the Jew and the Prince of Morocco the Moor, *The Merchant of Venice* presents these two kinds of infidels and thus brings together within this problem comedy two groups for whom Renaissance England felt a special fascination and repulsion. That the play forges and exploits a link between the two groups is not self-evident, for Shakespeare assigns Shylock and Morocco to separate realms—Venice and Belmont respectively—and thereby seems to place in the background any meaningful association between Jew and Moor. I wish, however, to foreground this association and argue that the distinctive rhetoric of each character—for Shylock, plainness; for Morocco, eloquence—threatens in its own way to undermine the linguistic foundations of the play. Although this threat is contained, dramatic juxtaposition works to connect the two characters, blurring the boundaries between them. Once linked, shared aspects of their language challenge the play’s discourse of insider/outside while simultaneously reinforcing the threat that the infidels pose.

1

Despite varying assessments of Shylock's language, critics share two assumptions: first, Shylock is made by Shakespeare to speak differently from other characters in the play; second, he speaks more plainly than other characters.2 This plain speaking is evidenced particularly in Shylock's propensity to repetition.

The play foregrounds Shylock's repetitions from his first appearance on stage in 1.3. For the scene quickly establishes a pattern in which Bassanio initiates and Shylock repeats the financial terms of the proposed agreement. Moreover, the constant pattern of Shylock's repetition makes the audience retroactively aware that, although Shylock speaks the first words of the scene—“Three thousand ducats”—even these words echo an implied off stage proposal by Bassanio.3 In the first eight lines of the scene, then, Shylock speaks words that are not his own.
This appropriation of another character's words at the moment of dramatic introduction blurs the distinctions that one expects to obtain between Bassanio and Shylock, noble Christian and miserly Jew, frustrating at least for a time the expectation that Jews speak differently, that they have in Sander Gilman's phrase “a hidden language” uniquely their own. By repeating Bassanio's words, Shylock also makes use of them. It is this aspect of use which, as Burckhardt and Shell have argued, is a defining characteristic of Shylock's approach to language as well as to money. From the very first utterance, then, Shylock's role is to keep things (and words) in circulation.

Shylock continues to echo Bassanio, yet he also introduces a note of self-repetition, a mode of iteration that becomes conspicuous in Shylock's next scene, in which he calls for Jessica several times. Although the repeated call serves at first as an anxious summons for his daughter, it is soon taken up by Lancelot, parodying Shylock's earnestness. In the next scenes, as Jessica flees, this pattern of repetition and parody intensifies. Solanio quotes Shylock repeating the features of his losses and Salerio notes that boys echo Shylock's repetitions (2.8.12-24). As Shylock repeats himself with increasing frequency, seemingly in search of a language to express his loss, other characters parody his iterations, resulting in what one critic refers to as the denial of “the right to coherent speech.” Even as Shakespeare ritualizes Shylock's language, the choric procession of children simultaneously establishes a parody of that ritualization.

In act 3, the climax of Shylock's self-repetition, Shakespeare complicates the variations on this technique. To the Christians, Shylock responds to taunts with the “Hath not a Jew” speech, in which the repetitions are arranged in a complex rhetorical schema: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands? …” (3.1.46-47). To Tubal the Jew, by contrast, Shylock merely repeats words, bereft of this larger rhetorical framework:

TUBAL.

Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—

SHY.

What, what, what? ill luck, ill luck?

TUBAL.

—hath an argosy cast away coming from Tripolis.

SHY.

I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?

(3.1.77-81)

Shylock's repetitions embody language at a reduced and primitive level: “An even more primitive way than punning,” suggests Sigurd Burckhardt, “to strip words of their meanings is repetition. Say ‘a rose is a rose is a rose’ a few more times, and what you have is a meaningless sound, because you have torn the word out of its living linguistic matrix and so are left with nothing but a vile phonetic jelly.” Repetition emphasizes material corporeality, “mak[ing] the word malleable, ready to take the imprint the poet wants to give it.”

Burckhardt's emphasis on the corporeality of language enforces Shylock's association with the corporeal; a Jew, in other words, whose materiality symbolizes for Christians an unredeemed carnality, would fittingly speak a language itself carnal. Appropriately, Shylock reaches the climax of such “primitive” speech in the only scene in which he speaks at length with another Jew.
According to A. R. Braunmuller, however, the rhetorical strategies of Renaissance drama point in a different direction, not enforcing but subverting the conventional system of meaning. Dramatists carried out this subversion by emphasizing “alliteration, repetition, echo, reversal,”—language that privileged sound over sense. “This similarity of sound,” writes Braunmuller, “among words and phrases overrides the semantic, conventional, unthinkingly assumed difference between them.” While these rhetorical strategies informed other modes of public discourse in Renaissance England, the plotted nature of drama exploited “patterned speech” in ways that significantly undermined conventional systems of linguistic meaning, keeping audiences in “a continuous rhetorical anxiety,” a linguistic limbo “puzzling and possibly terrifying.”

Braunmuller's comments suggest that Shylock's discourse is not only to be viewed as signifying a perverse materiality but also as concretizing the vertiginous aspects of Renaissance dramatic rhetoric. Made to speak an ever more heavily patterned speech, Shylock embodies the unfamiliar system of meaning, the “continuous rhetorical anxiety,” produced by this rhetoric. As he repeats more frequently, his idiom threatens to subsume the system of semantic difference which continues to inhere in the language of other characters. The repetitions of his repetitions—Solanio's account and the boys' cries—acknowledged the threat of Shylock's idiom but also keep it in check through parody. Seen in this light, the force of Shylock's meeting with Tubal is that here, as Shylock comes to repeat almost every line, there is no parody, no repetition of his repetition, no policing of his alternative system of meaning. At this point, not only does Shylock's passion for revenge endanger Antonio, but his iterative language, multiplying without check, threatens to overwhelm all other language.

But Shakespeare himself polices Shylock's phonic language. Just as the court scene defuses the danger that Shylock poses to Antonio's well-being, so it also constrains Shylock's language, compelling him to speak in proper rhetorical formulas. Even if Burckhardt and other ironic readers are correct in claiming that Shylock's courtroom rhetoric outshines that of Antonio and Portia, it is also the case that Shakespeare eliminates the subversive repetitions. Indeed, the elimination of what had become an increasingly frequent sign of Shylock's distinctiveness is startling and perplexing. The answer may lie in the way the institution of the courtroom shapes the language spoken. For, as the play implies, the courtroom represents the Venetian law which allegedly applies equally to all. As the law applies to all equally, so, one may speculate, do all participants in the court proceedings share the same discourse. Hence, this legal discourse preempts Shylock's repetitions before they are set in motion.

If the courtroom eliminates the repetitions, there nevertheless remains an imagistic trace of the threat they posed. Telling the Duke why he cannot explain his passion for revenge, Shylock suggests that “Some men there are that love not a gaping pig; / Some that are mad if they behold a cat; / And others when the bagpipe sings in ithe nose / Cannot contain their urine: for affection / Masters oft passion, sways it to the mood / Of what it likes or loathes” (4.1.48-52). Shylock's list—pig, cat, and bagpipe—enumerates what are generally benign aspects of culinary, domestic, or musical culture. But what is benign to most makes dysfunctional an idiosyncratic few. In the case of the bagpipe, the special sound causes the victim to lose control of natural functions. This association of unnerving sound and a threat to control recalls the “rhetorical anxieties” which confronted the audience faced with “patterned speech,” that is, repetition. Braunmuller indicated that, by replacing semantic difference with phonetic identity, repetition subverted the conventional system of linguistic meaning, a subversion which occasioned a “possibly terrifying” feeling in the audience. Similarly, the bagpipe foregrounds an unusual type of sound which assaults the listener, causing a breakdown of normal functioning. Both bagpipe and repetition figure in the play as sources of phonic subversion. Even though Shylock himself is no longer given to repetition, then, the analogy he chooses to represent his motivation continues to intimate the threat embodied by it. It is suggestive, furthermore, that the only other reference in the play to bagpipes comes in association with the creature most emblematic of repetition: “Now by two-headed Janus,” says Solario, also trying to account for abnormal behavior, “Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time: / Some that will evermore peep through their eyes, / And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper” (1.1.50-53; emphasis added).
The difference between Shylock's recursive speech and that of other characters has frequently been described in terms of plainness versus eloquence: where Shylock the Jew speaks unpoetically, realistically, plainly, the Christians in the play speak lyrically, beautifully, eloquently. Most critics valorize eloquence, understanding Shylock's deviant plain-speaking as reinforcing his villainy. But the dichotomy drawn between plainness and eloquence has its proponents as well among those who see Shylock as the play's victim, a view culminating in Burckhardt's extended contrast between Antonio and Shylock. Suspicious of Antonio's flaccid grandiloquence, Burckhardt favors Shylock's plainness, supporting his reading by indicating that the play itself puts forth a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding eloquence. Additionally, Burckhardt argues that the plainness with which Shylock speaks registers Shakespeare's achievement as a dramatist: "But the qualities which make us rank Shylock's lines over Antonio's have long been accepted among the criteria by which we seek to establish the sequence of Shakespeare's plays, on the assumption that where we find them we have evidence of greater maturity and mastery."

Though most critics have not shared Burckhardt's radical suspicion of eloquence in the play in general, they have shown a marked suspicion of the eloquence of one specific character: the Prince of Morocco. According to this view, Morocco's eloquence indicates his concern with appearances; just as his language is full of ornate rhetorical flourish, valuing surface over substance, so he chooses the gold casket, again valuing surface over substance. Language reflects action, and vice versa. Besides testifying to Shakespeare's multilevel control of plot, this reading of Morocco's language often attempts to assign it a psychological or moral significance, confirming his unworthiness to win Portia.

Initially, Shylock and Morocco seem as much separated by style as by setting, the rhetoric of the former shaped by the absence of ornament, that of the latter formed by the excess of it. But by associating Shylock with plainness and Morocco with eloquence, Shakespeare positions both outsiders at the opposite extremes of the rhetorical continuum, equally, if contrarily, pressing against the borders of legitimate discourse. On the one hand, this positioning allows the other characters in the play to speak comfortably within the limits that the Jew and Moor articulate. On the other hand, Shylock and Morocco are compelled linguistically as well as culturally to inhabit a place on the margins of discourse.

Having established this linguistic extravagance, glosses on Morocco amplify this suspicion of eloquence by indicating that his language recalls Marlowe's Tamburlaine, an intertextual resonance initially noted by M. C. Bradbrook and subsequently applied by numbers of readers. Frank Whigham, for instance, sees Morocco handicapped by his race, his lack of sophistication and his outmoded style. The attribute of his style most relevant here is his lavish claims made for his own desert. In the early days of Elizabethan drama the non-European setting and character, presented with extensive rhetorical ornament, gave the exotic an incantatory power over Elizabethan audiences. In the courtly context, however, the imperialistic titanism of Tamburlaine is ill-adapted to purposes of wooing.

This judgment implies that Shakespeare chose to outfit his suitor with a clumsy language, one more appropriate to conquest than romance. But the association with Marlowe also suggests that for Morocco's lines Shakespeare turned to an earlier, more primitive dramatic language. Morocco's eloquence, then, not only represents a psychological or moral flaw but also Shakespeare's parody of the bombastic vocabulary that Tamburlaine spoke and Marlowe wrote. Just as Bassanio displays his romantic merit by choosing the right casket, so does Shakespeare display his dramatic merit by surpassing his predecessors in the fit choice of language, not gaining the fortune of Belmont but rather containing the influence of his greatest competitor and asserting his authorial mastery.
In his reading of the play, Freud also connects the casket scene with mastery, arguing that the choice of the caskets is actually the choice of a beautiful woman and that the scene dramatizes the attempt to master death—which here masquerades as its opposite, beauty. The emphasis for Freud is on choice: “Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually.”

The casket scene registers the move from non-choice to choice, from a passive relation to what is determined to an active mastery over it. The scene becomes the site where psychological overcoming works in conjunction with stylistic mastery. In both instances, mastery is achieved by containing what is other: on the one hand, death represents the metaphysical other; on the other hand, Morocco (and Tamburlaine and Marlowe) represents the cultural other. Even these realms converge, however, in Morocco's second appearance, in which, after a speech replete with images of burial and death, Morocco chooses the casket containing “A carrion Death” (2.7.63). By having Morocco choose a death's head, Shakespeare links what is culturally other to what is metaphysically other, doubly enforcing repulsion while simultaneously mastering it.

While the play admittedly encourages the association of Morocco and Tamburlaine, it also questions the aptness of the parallel and consequently provokes doubt in Morocco's position as an absolute other. Significantly, Morocco styles himself as a kind of Hercules, the Renaissance ideal of a warrior (and a prototype of Tamburlaine as well), a self-identification that would seem to reinforce his “titanic” status. But the association does not promote his warrior status but rather undermines it, for the Hercules that Morocco invokes renounces acting as a warrior, consenting instead to “play at dice” and be led by “blind Fortune” (2.1.36). Bassanio, moreover, is also identified with Hercules (3.2.53-62), and in this identification Shakespeare emphasizes the more familiar, martial side of the Greek hero. Tellingly, where Morocco's link to Hercules highlights an uncharacteristic submission, Bassanio's dramatizes a stereotypical aggression, provoking the audience to see not Morocco but Bassanio as the emblem of heroism, as the one who brings into the “courtly context … imperialistic titanism.” This link to Bassanio via Hercules further destabilizes Morocco's status as Other, for it makes it difficult to clearly distinguish one suitor from another, effacing to a degree the difference between winner and loser and between familiar Venetian and exotic Moroccan.

In the Prince of Morocco, Shakespeare represents a Moor who is liminal and transitional, coming between the demonization of Aaron in Titus Andronicus and the heroic, if problematic, characterization of Othello. The critical dispute concerning two pivotal traits, color and religion, attests to this liminal status. Morocco is described as “tawny,” a term which some critics argue indicates “light-skinned, as distinct from a ‘blackamoor’”; others believe the linguistic and even dramatic evidence demonstrates that Morocco is black. Morocco's religion is less subject to dispute; but the lack of an explicit religious designation has led at least one recent critic to assume that Morocco is Christian, a judgment which in essence nullifies his outsider status. Morocco's position vis-à-vis stage and social history reinforces this transitional status. Significantly, Morocco is one of the first “non-villainous” Moors to appear on the English stage a stage which had previously dramatized Moors as villains and in which blackness served as an emblem of evil. Morocco as a noble suitor contravenes this stereotype. Nevertheless, the representation of Morocco as an exotic “tawny” Moor continues to reinscribe the alien traits of previous stage Moors (including Shakespeare's own Aaron in Titus Andronicus) and thereby to provoke suspicion, particularly suspicion concerning sexual propriety that would be aroused in watching a black alien attempt to marry a white heroine.

Although the play eschews the direct representation of the Moor as villain, it enforces suspicion of Morocco by linking him dramatically with Shylock the Jew, a strategy which blurs the boundaries between one outsider and the other. At the beginning of 1.3 Shylock enters the play, a Jew in a Christian world; at the beginning of act 2, Morocco enters, a black in a white world. As Shylock intrudes upon the homogeneity of Christian Venice, so Morocco intrudes upon the homogeneity of white Belmont. The discomfort caused by the intrusion of one enforces the discomfort caused by the intrusion of the other. In addition, reference to Morocco's “complexion” frames Shylock's first appearance. In 1.2, Portia shows her repulsion of Morocco by quipping, “If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” (1.2.123); next Shylock has his scene (1.3); then act 2 begins by Morocco in effect answering Portia's
quip: “Mislike me not for my complexion” (2.1.1).

Shylock’s scene both postpones and substitutes for Morocco’s. If we recall that prior to MV black men on the English stage were conventionally villains, the postponement of Morocco’s arrival intensifies anxiety over what kind of black man will appear on stage. Where Portia’s racial strictures initially seem to apply only to marriage in contrast to religion (“rather he should shrive me than wive me”), the substitution of Shylock for Morocco problematizes this formula, exposing the way the discourse of exclusion governs religion as well as matrimony. The substitution of one intruder for the other also means that Shylock arrives in a drama whose discourse is already in place to distinguish insider from outsider. Consequently, Shylock enters the play caught not only in the stage conventions associated with Jews but also in those associated with Moors.

The play further promotes this association of Jew and Moor by linking the way they themselves manipulate the discourse of insider/outsider. Morocco claims his right as a suitor by questioning the criterion chosen by Portia—“complexion of a devil”—and offering his own: “Let us make incision for your love / To prove whose blood is reddest” (2.1.6-7). As with the caskets, Morocco’s new criterion also takes the form of a contest, a contest in which Portia would be compelled to distinguish one thing from another. The shift from “complexion” to “blood,” from outer surface to inner substance, links Morocco’s claim with the other gestures in the play (caskets, bonds, rings) which require one to go beneath a deceptive surface. More specifically, however, Morocco’s contest prepares for Shylock’s challenge to Salerio: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” (3.1.58). Significantly, both Moor and Jew claim that what seems different on the surface can be better judged by what is beneath it; that the less favorable exterior which they present can be neutralized by reference to an interior dimension: the blood which flows in all people’s veins.

By rejecting surface and privileging depth, Moor and Jew attempt to use the operative discourse of the play—outside/inside—to redefine their relation to other characters. This discourse works generally to make clear who is the resident and who the intruder. In the case of Morocco, his skin color excludes him from Portia’s (and the Elizabethan audience’s) favor. His ornamental language and choice of the golden casket allegedly betray a concern with surfaces that reinforces his rightful exclusion. In the case of Shylock, his literalism highlights concern with the letter rather than the spirit, with the outer form rather than the inner meaning. In this attempt to challenge their marginalization, then, Morocco and Shylock mobilize the very discourse that enforces the distinction between insider and outsider and which confers on them, Moor and Jew, the status of Other.

But this attempt to turn the discourse of exclusion back on itself fails, as both Morocco and Shylock use images of violence—“incision” and “pricking,” acts committed with a sharp, invasive instrument—to exhibit their solidarity with the rest of human kind. The two intruders, moreover, are the ones who brandish weapons in the play, a detail which enforces the association of alien and violence. Even as Moor and Jew try to undermine and overcome the terms that set them apart from the Christian characters, these images of violence continue to dramatize the danger they pose, justifying their exclusion. The images of violence also enforce the fantasies of the audience, for the wounds which Morocco and Shylock envision are rhetorically inflicted upon themselves (Morocco will make an “incision” on himself; Shylock will be “pricked”), thereby substantiating the belief in an alien threat while simultaneously having the danger recoil upon those who are believed to threaten. Taken to its furthest point—as some critics have done—the recoil of the violence causes both Morocco and Shylock to undergo a symbolic castration (again scenically juxtaposed): the Moor, who has pledged not to marry, leaves Belmont uttering “farewell heat and welcome frost” (2.7.75); the Jew, whose fortune has been stolen, is reported to focus his grief on the loss of his “two stones, two rich and precious stones” (2.8.20).35 The punishment, then, links the two intruders even as it renders them impotent.

This impotence no doubt underscores failure. Yet, through the eccentric discourse of its intruders, MV sets forth alternative systems of meaning that challenge more conventional ones: Shylock’s repetitions begin to erode the order articulated by semantic difference,36 while the juxtaposition of Moor and Jew indicates the
attempt to rewrite the categories of exclusion. Neither challenge meets with success. But the play must work hard to neutralize the threat posed by these outsiders. Indeed, one may speculate that the threat to conventional meaning tested here in MV becomes more fully realized in the later tragedies, in which Shylock’s repetitions modulate into Lear’s maddened iterations and Morocco’s eloquence informs Othello’s captivating tales.

Notes


3. This and all subsequent citations are from M. M. Mahood, ed., The Merchant of Venice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

4. “Well, thou shalt see, thy eyes shall be thy judge, / The difference of old Shylock and Bassanio—” (2.5.1-2). The elaborate form of Shylock’s salutation to Lancelot reinforces the fact that the difference between Shylock and Bassanio, while discernible, is not to be taken for granted.


7. James Bulman notes in his volume on The Merchant of Venice in the Shakespeare in Performance series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), that in Komisarjevsky’s iconoclastic production of Merchant, not only Lancelot but old Gobbo echoes Shylock here, creating a “double echo” (60).


10. Burckhardt, Shakespearean Meaning, 29; Shell’s attempt in “The Wether and the Ewe” to analyze Shylock’s “verbal usury” sees puns (rather than repetition) as his emblematic verbal gesture, 66-67.


13. Ibid., 63.


16. From a different perspective than the one I am pursuing here, Lawrence Danson emphasizes the relation between courtroom and language in The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice” (New
Interestingly, the two-faced Janus also hints at repetition. Sarah Kofman has recently examined the Janus figure in relation to *The Merchant of Venice*: her analysis, however, does not consider repetition as such but emphasizes instead how doubleness is the real theme of the play. See “Conversions: The Merchant of Venice Under the Sign of Saturn,” tran. Shaun Whiteside, in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 142-66.


Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings*, 209.

While critics generally say little about Morocco, the little they do say tends to comment on his eloquence. See, for example, Donawerth, *Shakespeare and the Sixteenth-Century Study of Language*, and Frank Whigham, “Ideology and Class Conduct in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 10 (1979): 93-115; also James Shapiro, “‘Which the Merchant Here, and Which the Jew?’: Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence,” *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1987): 269-79. While Emily Bartels, in “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990) does not discuss Morocco, she does note the role of eloquence in relation to Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*: “What threatens to undermine Aaron's function as an absolute sign of the Other is his cultural literacy and … his eloquence. … [But] Aaron's speech simultaneously declares his malign differentness.” Aaron's “malign differentness,” however, is betrayed not by exaggerated eloquence but by a “purposelessness that makes his villainy all the more insidious” (445). In contrast, such commentators as Donawerth or Shapiro suggest that Morocco's otherness is represented not by motivation (or its lack), but by style (or its excess).

A. D. Moody's small casebook on *The Merchant of Venice* (Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's Educational Series, 1964) is the only commentary I have encountered which does not psychologically or morally justify Morocco's failure to choose the winning casket; on the contrary, Moody argues that Morocco deserves to win Portia.


James Shapiro focuses on the contention between Marlowe and Shakespeare in “‘Which the Merchant Here, and Which the Jew?’”


Ibid., 299.


Raymond Waddington draws attention to the association of Hercules with Morocco and Bassanio, only to argue ingeniously that the shared attribution is meant not to link but to distinguish the two suitors and their contrasting views of fortune, in “Blind Gods: Fortune, Justice and Cupid in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *ELH* 44 (1977): 458-77.

In her study of Shakespeare's Moors, Bartels argues that, in *Titus Andronicus*, the early Shakespeare unironically demonizes Aaron but, in *Othello*, the late Shakespeare exposes the process of demonization. Bartels notes, 435n, that she does not consider Morocco because he is a minor character.


34. Barthelemy emphasizes that even though Morocco is not a villain, he continues to present “an obvious and unwelcome sexual threat to Portia,” a threat directly associated with his Moorishness (149-50).

35. Zvi Jagendorf links Morocco's departing words to castration in “Innocent Arrows and Sexy Sticks: The Rival Economies of Male Friendship and Sexual Love in *The Merchant of Venice*, Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 19, no. 2 (1991): 37. More graphically, Shell, “Wether and the Ewe,” writes of Shylock's castration: “the two sealed bags and stones … are confused with his two testicles. … Shylock lost his *Geld* when Jessica ‘gilded herself with ducats’ (2.6.59-50) and has also been ‘gelded’” (77).

36. I am currently at work on an article which will consider the application of other theories of repetition (e.g., Derrida, Freud, Deleuze, Miller) to Shylock's language. Additionally, James Shapiro argues that castration plays a central role in the play and, more generally, in the image of the Jew in early modern England. See “Shakespeare and the Jews.”

**Criticism: Themes: Marc Berley (essay date 1999)**


*In the following essay, Berley examines Lorenzo's statements concerning music and harmony alongside Jessica's dark response to “sweet music,” finding in this contradiction a thematic dissonance in *The Merchant of Venice.*

With Lorenzo's famous lines about harmony in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare offers, as he often does, his uncommon treatment of a Renaissance commonplace. Nevertheless, scholars have long agreed that Lorenzo's speech about harmony in the last scene of *Merchant* is a traditional praise of music that enacts dramatically the play's fully harmonious resolution. Long ago, C. L. Barber asserted that “No other comedy, until the late romances, ends with so full an expression of harmony as that which we get in the opening of the final scene of *Merchant.* And no other final scene is so completely without irony about the joys it celebrates.”¹ This remains a standard reading of Lorenzo's speech and the final scene. In this essay, I mean to show that the play does not support such readings. A harmonious resolution “completely without irony” requires the harmonious assimilation of Jessica in Belmont; and Jessica is excluded from the celebration. What is most important, she excludes herself, with her response to Lorenzo's speech: “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.69).² Critics have been hesitant to see the dark aspects of Jessica's last line. Shakespeare, however, builds a pattern of responses to music that culminates in Jessica's important response. Jessica is excluded from the musical celebration at Belmont, and the final scene makes *Merchant* an early comedy by Shakespeare that questions with ironic dissonance the joys some of its characters too forcibly celebrate.

James Hutton first identified Lorenzo's speech as merely a conventional mixture of speculative (chiefly Neoplatonic) musical theories in praise of music.³ “Much has been written … about Lorenzo's almost too familiar lines,” Hutton writes. “Everyone recognizes that the topics are traditional, but, if I am not mistaken, it is always assumed that Shakespeare himself has brought them together. … [I]t has not … been made clear that this speech not only contains traditional topics, but that the arrangement is traditional. … [I]n short,” Hutton concludes, “we have here to do with a coherent literary theme that Shakespeare has taken bodily into his play … [s]o familiar a theme, indeed, that Shakespeare permits himself to treat it in a kind of shorthand.” After

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quoting Ronsard on the subject of the “unmusical man,” Hutton concludes that “It is as one more of these laudes musicae that an Elizabethan audience would hear Lorenzo's familiar words.”

Hutton's valuable study influenced the criticism of Lorenzo's speech and Shakespeare's allusions to speculative music in particular, as well as Renaissance discussions of music in general, in two important ways. First, scholars such as John Hollander, S. K. Heninger, and Lawrence Danson furthered Hutton's reductions: of Lorenzo's speech to Neoplatonic “shorthand”; of Lorenzo to Shakespeare; and of Shakespeare's view to Lorenzo's speech. Second, they followed Hutton's assumption that Shakespeare's “shorthand treatment” is a version that typifies the thought of an age that extends from Ronsard to Milton. Such readings of Lorenzo's speech fail to account for the considerable innovations, not only of Merchant but, more generally, of Shakespeare and Milton.

Lorenzo's speech is filled with Neoplatonic elements, but it is not a disembodied summary of Neoplatonic treatises that “Shakespeare has taken bodily into his play.” Lorenzo speaks for neither Shakespeare nor the play. Lorenzo speaks for himself, and the dramatic context of his speech is complex. The relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo and the pattern of allusions to music and merriment throughout the play provide the larger context in which not only Lorenzo's speech but also the general harmony of Belmont must be considered.

Jessica's response to both Lorenzo's speech and the music of Portia's musicians addresses crucial questions raised by what is anything but an unambiguous play that celebrates joys without irony. What precisely does Jessica mean when she says, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.69)? And what does her reply mean within the play? What, furthermore, is the relationship between music and merriment within the play? On this important question, Jessica, as much as Lorenzo, speaks for the play.

During the last forty years, various critics and diverse schools of criticism have either ignored Jessica or fit her into their readings. Even recent feminist studies do not give Jessica the attention she demands. Some critics have suggested that the harmony of Belmont is suspect, but the matter—like Jessica—still has not been considered adequately. Jessica's last response, one of many reactions to music and talk about music within the play, is the most inharmonious, and important; for too long it has been attuned by scholars to the dazzling speech that surrounds it.

Shakespeare was, among other things, a brilliant and subtle orchestrator of dramatic form—and by the time of Merchant, he was getting mighty good. Indeed, he was beginning to write comedies in which problems—rendered with precise innovations of dramatic form—resist the dramatic resolution of the play. Shakespeare used this tension to involve his audience in its own moral and cultural dilemmas. Throughout Merchant, reactions to music form a coherent pattern, building tensions that climax in Lorenzo's speech and Jessica's reaction to it. Reactions to music—and talk about music—reveal the quality of merriment achieved by its characters. Finally, an audience's reaction to Lorenzo's speech reveals much about the quality of merriment an audience may achieve for itself.

We must begin any consideration of Lorenzo's speech by placing it within its immediate dramatic context, the echoic exchange of “In such a night …” that precedes it. The exchange centers on classical stories of love-turned-bitter; the subject speaks against the harmony of the echoic form. Lorenzo speaks of Troilus and Cressid, which turns Jessica to Thisbe. Lorenzo mentions Dido, which turns Jessica to Medea, and Jessica's insinuation that she has risked everything for him leads Lorenzo to their case:

Did Jessica steal from the wealthy jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
As far as Belmont.

Jessica speaks directly to the core of what seem to be real troubles:

Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
And ne'er a true one.

(5.1.15-22)

If the others can be explained away as playful literary allusions, Jessica's last, direct charge cannot. Lorenzo responds with similar direction: “In such a night / Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrow / Slander her love, and he forgave it her.” But Jessica appears unforgiving, concluding the exchange by remarking her unwillingness to conclude it: “I would out-night you, did nobody come: / But hark, I hear the footing of a man” (5.1.23-24). By 5.1, real trouble is afoot; playful banter has turned dark. Moreover, given the thematic analogies to the plot of Portia and Bassanio, this exchange between Jessica and Lorenzo has its further dark resonance.

The serious subject of the exchange pushes the limits of its playful banter, signaling a conflict between beautiful form and ugly content, between the charm of sound and the trouble of its meaning. The exchange ends with Jessica promising to “out-night” Lorenzo, interrupted by Portia's servant Stephano. Before Stephano is gone, Lorenzo begins a speculative speech about musical harmony. Rather than a disembodied piece of Neoplatonism, Lorenzo's speech is part of Shakespeare's intricately woven dramatic context. An attempt to make Jessica merry once again, the speech is spoken by the play's hottest lover at a time when his lady appears, with reason, to be getting cold. Lorenzo tries to effect a transition to a better, more harmonious aspect of “such a night.” Using speech and music, Lorenzo tries to get Jessica to see that “such a night” becomes “the touches of sweet harmony” rather than the will to “out-night.”

The “sweet power” of speech and music were deeply linked in Shakespeare's day. Both were considered modes of seduction, and Lorenzo now has need for grander, sweeter promises, bigger vows that might make Jessica forget about broken ones:

Sweet soul, let's in, and there expect their coming.
And yet no matter; why should we go in?
My friend Stephano, signify, I pray you,
Within this house, your mistress is at hand,
And bring your music forth into the air.

Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Come ho, and wake Diana with a hymn!
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear
And draw her home with music.
Rather than mere Neoplatonic shorthand, the speech is dramatic recapitulation. Lorenzo first promises the “the touches of sweet harmony.” The phrase seems at first to refer to actual music to be played by the musicians, but Lorenzo eventually links it to the heavenly harmony they cannot hear: “Such harmony” (which “is in immortal souls”) refers back to the “sweet harmony” that (“whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in”) they cannot hear. Six lines after offering Jessica heavenly harmony, Lorenzo begins to explain why he may offer only earthly discord. Lorenzo, in short, offers Jessica something he cannot provide, and the exchange of “In such a night …” suggests he has done this before. The speech is dazzling, but it confirms a pattern of promising more than he will deliver.

Lorenzo continues to elicit harmony where there appears to be discord, moving from musical speech to the power of music itself. After he tells Jessica that we cannot hear the music of the spheres, the musicians enter, and Lorenzo gives them specific directions. Speaking to Portia’s musicians at Portia’s house, Lorenzo is telling them to draw her home. But he is also speaking, in Neoplatonic terms, about the theory according to which the actual “sounds of music” can pierce the ear, touch the soul, and re-attune it, thereby drawing it home to the heavenly harmony. The Neoplatonic theory of the “sweet power of music”—namely, that music can penetrate one’s soul and draw it to heaven—merely complicates the matter of wooing with false vows, for it is deeply related to seduction by false music, as well as, more generally, penetration of Jessica’s body.

Lorenzo attempts to placate Jessica not by winning an old argument but by dazzling her with beautiful new promises and lascivious music—both of which had worked well before. As Robin Headlam Wells observes, “a man of eloquence is capable of persuading people to do whatever he wishes. However, the real mark of his power is not his ability to force people ‘to yeeld in that which most standth against their will’, but rather,” as Thomas Wilson asserts in his influential Arte of Rhetorique, “his skill in inducing them ‘to will that which he did.’” Jessica, however, continues the tone she establishes during the echoic exchange by asserting that music does not make her merry. Given the common association of music and rhetoric, Shakespeare is juxtaposing—indeed, likening—the forced conversion of Shylock with Lorenzo's attempt to re-seduce Jessica in the final scene. Shylock never wills what Portia does, but Jessica early on appears to will what Lorenzo does. By the last scene, though, she has reasons not to, and Lorenzo has a need to steal her soul again. Stealing one’s “soul with vows of faith” is akin to wooing one with music and musical language. Neoplatonic theory promises momentary ecstasy by penetration. But Jessica, as she says, won't be merry.

Lorenzo's speech has long been seen as traditional (Neoplatonic) praise of music, but it is only within this dramatic context that we can appreciate its significance. It cannot be seen as “the most purely religious utterance in the play.” Lorenzo offers a seductive speech. He knows to seize every opportunity to throw in the adjective sweet. But in Shakespeare's plays, such excess serves to mock precisely the subjects most relevant here. To be excessively sweet is not to be sweet at all; music becomes an illusion, and any love it induces becomes a foible. A good example is Troilus and Cressida 3.1. Similarly, in Cymbeline, Shakespeare has Cloten mock the hyperbole of both the Neoplatonic idea of penetration and the literary conventions derived from it. Cloten—like Lorenzo, but in direct, ribald, language—alludes to the musicians as surrogate seducers: “Come on, tune. If you can penetrate her with your fingering, so; we'll try with tongue too.” Once they play, Cloten hedges: “So, get you gone. If this penetrate, I will consider your music the better; if it do not, it is a vice in her ears which horsehairs and calves' guts, nor the voice of unpaved eunuch to boot, can never amend” (2.3.11-31). Comically rendering the conflict between deceptively false and beautifully true music, Cloten razes the system of musical powers established by Neoplatonists such as Ronsard. The music shall prove itself good and powerful, says Cloten, only when it shall have penetrated his lady.

Shakespeare's interest in the prurient mocking of Neoplatonic theory is evident as early as Love's Labor's Lost. The King decrees that he and his lords will be “brave conquerors … / That war against your own affections,” devoted to a contemplative life: “Our court shall be a little academe, / Still and contemplative in
living art.” Berowne, however, troubled by the prospect of there being no ladies, voices his doubt about the austerity: “But is there no quick recreation granted?” Offering a substitute, the King answers that in lieu of ladies the men shall recreate themselves by means of musical language:

Our court you know is haunted
With a refined traveller of Spain,
A man in all the world's new fashion planted,
That hath a mint of phrases in his brain;
One who the music of his own vain tongue
Doth ravish like enchanting harmony;
A man of complements, whom right and wrong
Have chose as umpire of their mutiny.

(1.1.159-66)

A man who “hath a mint of phrases in his brain” and a “vain tongue,” a man who “ravish[es] like enchanting harmony” is a rhetorician. He may be an umpire of mutiny, but his skill points to another mutiny: between “quick recreation” (wine, women, and song) and slow moral “contemplation in living art” (recreation), between “purposing merriment” and enduring the much ado it takes to attain self-knowledge. This conflict is one of Shakespeare’s major themes throughout his plays—another way of speaking about the mediation of appetite and reason, frenzy and self-rule, evasion of shame and painful self-reflection.

The music plays in Belmont, and Jessica responds, both to Lorenzo and to the music for which he has made his great Neoplatonic claims. Jessica tells Lorenzo—in language more subtle than the language of her father, but less than subtly—that all is not “sweet” for her in Belmont. Whereas Shylock sticks to his rough idiom, Jessica can adopt the harmonious utterance of the Italians; she can speak poetry, echo Lorenzo. But, finally, she answers in blunt prose to Lorenzo’s dazzling blank verse; her response is poignantly unmusical in both its meaning and its form: “I am never merry when I hear sweet music.” Jessica offers, in the manner of her father, rough idiom to Lorenzo’s mellifluous “vows of faith.”

Jessica’s response puts Lorenzo in a predicament. Lorenzo resumes his speech, turning his focus to the Neoplatonic theory of the “unmusical man”:

The reason is, your spirits are attentive.
For do but note a wild and wanton herd
Or race of youthful and unhandled colts
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
Which is the hot condition of their blood:
If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,
Or any air of music touch their ears,
You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,
Their savage eyes turned to a modest gaze
By the sweet power of music. Therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods;
Since naught so stockish, hard, and full of rage
But music for the time doth change his nature.
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

(5.1.55-88)
With her last line, Jessica leaves Lorenzo to deliver a stock Neoplatonic answer that, rather than resolve the matter, shows that he is in deeper trouble than commonplace sweet-talk can get him out of.

In the two parts of his speech, Lorenzo speaks for himself, not for the play. Here we can begin to see Shakespeare's original, dramatic use of the commonplace praise of music. In the first part of his speech (while he is trying to charm Jessica), Lorenzo blames a universal human nature, the "muddy vesture of decay." After Jessica says she is not merry, in contrast, Lorenzo blames Jessica specifically, making the dark (Neoplatonic) suggestion that she has no music in herself—whether due to momentary attentiveness or the essential unmusicality of her Jewish soul. The two parts of Lorenzo's speech speak to an important question: is there something irreparably wrong with Jessica? Shakespeare never directly gives us an answer, but he has Lorenzo insinuate one early. Lorenzo alludes to the problem of Jessica's Jewish soul in 2.4; and by 5.1, Jessica has shown herself fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. According to Ronsard, the "unmusical man" is "not delighted and is not … sweetly ravished and transported," giving "proof thereby that he has a … depraved soul, and is to be guarded against as one not happily born."¹¹ *Merchant* raises important questions: is Jessica "unhappily born"? Can she be merry?

That Shylock cannot be happy is a basic fact required by the plot of the play. Jessica's happiness is a different matter—it is in no way certain, and its uncertainty is a central part of the play. One reason “Shylock's enforced baptism is disconcerting,” as John Gross observes, “is that it is contrary to predominant Christian tradition. … The treatment meted out to Shylock belongs at the harsh end of the spectrum.”¹² Jessica's failure to be merry, if the result of treatment that belongs to the kinder end of the spectrum, stands as a significant, ironic counterpoint to Shylock's defeat. And none of the darkness comes as a surprise by 5.1. The likely failure of Jessica's assimilation is, as we will see, registered with irony in every scene in which she appears before 5.1.

One can say with good reason, as has Frank Kermode, that *Merchant* is a play about justice, but *Merchant* is also chiefly a play about characters who seek, in their various ways, merriment. The theme befits a comedy, especially a play Kermode rightly links with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*.¹³ Antonio begins the play by saying, "I know not why I am so sad," confessing that he has “much ado to know myself.” His friend Solanio offers tautology as counsel, “Then let us say you are sad / Because you are not merry …” (1.1.47-48). In the second scene, Nerissa has to tell Portia, who has long been seeking merriment, to be careful not to let hastiness keep her from striking an Aristotelian “mean.” It is in this context that one must see the attempts of all the characters to be merry—especially Jessica's.

The question whether “sweet music” should make Jessica “merry” contains within it the larger question on which the play is centered: what does it mean to be “merry”? *Merchant*, after all, is a play about conflicting attempts to be “merry”—and the antipodal world-views on which these attempts are based. The crux of the play, of course, is that Antonio and Shylock cannot both end the play “merry.” The Christians are, as Bassanio himself exclaims to Gratiano, “friends / That purpose merriment” (2.2.189-90). For Shylock, who rejects such purposing, the possibility for merriment exists only in the “merry sport” of his “bond” (1.3.139-47). It is clear that the “merry sport” of the bond is not “merry.” It is less clear, though clearly as true, that forcible conversion of a Jew is another form of “merry sport” that is not truly “merry” or “gentle”—and that such a lack of gentleness is as possible for gentiles as for Shylock “the Jew.”

*Merchant* is a play about polarizing views that would make one the true and the other the false pursuit of merriment. But, as Maynard Mack observes in his essay, “Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays,” “the usual lesson of comedy [is] that overengagement to any obsessive single view of oneself or the world is to be avoided.”¹⁴ Shakespeare has written, I am arguing, a play that is neither a simple attack on Jews nor a subtle defense of them. *Merchant* depicts merciless Christians seeking merriment as well as a merciless
Jew. The play considers not why one of the two pursuits is true, but why both potentially are destructive. And it is Jessica, I suggest, who most comes to feel, if not understand, the reasons why.

The pun on gentle and gentile made consistently in the play suggests that Shylock could improve his fortune by assimilating, by being gentle. The plot requires that we accept not only Shylock's forced conversion as a comic resolution, but also his forced response to Portia's question: “Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?” Shylock says, “I am content” (4.1.391-92), and we all know he is not. Jessica, in stark contrast to her father, not only converts willingly but twice accepts this promise that a change of religion will bring a change of fortune: “O Lorenzo, / If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife, / Become a Christian and thy loving wife”; “I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian” (2.3.20-22; 3.5.17-18). Jessica looks to conversion as an answer to her troubles, which appear to her to be rooted in her life with her repressive Jewish father. The first time we hear her, Jessica says, “Our house is hell” (2.3.1). Whereas Shylock's conversion is forced, Jessica's is willing—but her willingness is rooted in a flight from tedium. She gives away her father's turquoise ring, voiding with this gesture the union that made her a Jew, trading, symbolically, a world of rigidity for a world of lascivious joys. But when we see her in 5.1, the final scene of the play, sweet music—precisely the same music that first caused her to “thrust [her] head into the public street”—no longer makes Jessica merry. Forced to convert, and forced to speak, Shylock's penultimate utterance in the play—“I am content”—is clearly ironic. Jessica's last line—“I am never merry when I hear sweet music”—is also ironic. She cannot say never.

The dramatic counterpoint created by the last utterances of father and daughter is significant. Much depends on whether Jessica is truly unmerry at the end of the play—and whether her failure to be merry is a result of a failure in her (a natural failure of her impenetrable Jewish soul?) or a failure in Lorenzo. Shakespeare, moreover, provides us with a clear pattern that suggests that blame is to be placed on both Jessica and Lorenzo. Not only does it appear that something has changed for the worse between Jessica and Lorenzo in 5.1; to this point, the play has hinted consistently at the likelihood of such trouble. In the elopement scene, for example, the first scene in which Jessica and Lorenzo appear together, Gratiano and Salerio preface the elopement with foreboding truisms about love. As Salerio says, “O ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly / To seal love's bonds new-made than they are wont / To keep obligèd faith unforfeited” (2.6.5-7). Gratiano replies with his speech

With Jessica, Shakespeare presents us with another Jew, one who willingly converts; yet, still, Lorenzo sees the need to account early for the possibility of her future misfortune:

If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven,
It will be for his gentle daughter's sake;
And never dare misfortune cross her foot,
Unless she do it under this excuse,
That she is issue to a faithless Jew.

(2.4.33-37)

Even before the two appear together in the play, Lorenzo warns that Jessica might not be “merry” even as his bride. The “excuse” will be Jessica's Jewish nature, which, despite her hope that marriage and conversion will change it, Lorenzo says plainly cannot be changed. Similarly, Launcelot helps Jessica leave her father, but not without telling her that “the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children” and “truly I think you are damned” (3.5.1-6).

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on the effects of “the strumpet wind,” including his maxim “All things that are / Are with more spirit chasèd than enjoyed” (2.6.12-13). Indeed, as soon as Jessica reenters, Lorenzo quickly confirms what Gratiano had said, that “lovers ever run before the clock” (2.6.4): “What, art thou come? On, gentlemen, away! / Our masquing mates by this time for us stay” (2.6.58-59). It is time, says Lorenzo, to be in time for merriment, for merriment is fleeting.

The elopement scene shows a Jessica eager for merriment, but it also imparts misgivings about Jessica's self-knowledge, as well as deeper matters of shame and conscience that might come to her when she knows herself better. Jessica naively expects Lorenzo to change her Jewish identity and thus her fortune, as she says to Launcelot before leaving Shylock's house:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife!

(2.3.16-21)

Jessica puts all her hope for future merriment in Lorenzo's vow and her associated conversion. In short, a new life hangs on the promise of a man. But Jessica confuses strife, which can end, with facts about her life that cannot be erased—facts which, if she refuses to acknowledge them, promise, rather, to increase her strife.

In saying farewell to her father, Jessica tries to change her identity, and hence her fortune: “Farewell; and if my fortune be not crost, / I have a father, you a daughter lost” (2.5.54-55). But in the elopement scene, ironically, Jessica shows herself to be very much “to his manners”: while trying to rid herself of the shame of being her father's child, Jessica “gilds” herself with her father's ducats.

Whether a Jew can exchange her fortune by assimilating, by changing her manners, is a question central to the play. Jessica's “Here, catch this casket” (2.6.33) suggests her possession of an unburdened, merry spirit. She is rejecting a penurious, fruitless pursuit of merriment for a fruitful one. But the rest of what Jessica says in the elopement scene is laden with dark hints of repression: “I am glad 'tis night—you do not look on me—/ For I am much ashamed of my exchange” (2.6.34-35). Jessica then offers a truism that hints at the future troubles the blindness of love can bring: “But love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit …” (2.6.36-37). Because Jessica sees the shame of cross-dressing (“my exchange”), the lines register a latent concern that what she does not see might in the future be of greater consequence. Jessica uses the word shame twice in this scene, and both times it resonates with her earlier mention of the “heinous sin. … To be ashamed to be my father's child”:

What, must I hold a candle to my shames?
They in themselves, good sooth, are too too light.
Why, 'tis an office of discovery, love—
And I should be obscured."

(2.6.43-44)

The lines have their obvious, as well as deeper, meaning. Clearly, Jessica wishes to hide her cross-dressing from her lover, and this seems natural. Jessica, however, appears overly concerned with her “shames,” rather than naturally concerned with the single shame of cross-dressing. There is disparity, moreover, between Jessica's worry “I should be obscured” and Lorenzo's assurance, “So are you, sweet. / Even in the lovely garnish of a boy.” Jessica, as Lorenzo says, is already obscured. Further, Lorenzo knows what he is getting—a pretty Jewish girl who is wearing pants and sporting the ducats of her “father Jew” (2.6.22). What Jessica
seems anxious to obscure, rather, is a more general need to obscure herself. Lorenzo tells Jessica to “come at once,” but Jessica—thinking her shames “too too light”—delays, risking, in effect, a greater light, the sun: “I will make fast the doores, and gild myself / With some moe ducats, and be with you straight” (2.6.49-50).

Shakespeare highlights Jessica's worries about the exchange she makes with Lorenzo; the stakes are so high already that to gild herself with more ducats is worth the risk.

Gilded in her father's ducats, Jessica endeavors to close forever behind her the doors of her father's house. But the scene suggests that Jessica may not get away from her father's house with the mere consequence of the shame of cross-dressing. Like Launcelot, Jessica leaves her old master, Shylock, for a new one, Lorenzo. Indeed, Shakespeare has Launcelot offer his clownish wisdom on two subjects very important to Jessica: leaving one's Jewish master and the conscience that attends any attempted flight from one's identity. “Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master” (2.2.1), says Launcelot in his first line. He then encounters his father, Old Gobbo, and proceeds to ask him, “Do you know me, father?” The Launcelot-Gobbo subplot suggests, however glibly, that where identity, conscience, and shameful fathers are concerned, “Truth will come to light … in the end truth will out” (2.2.74).

Jessica seems, in short, to lack an understanding of the exchange she is making. (Exchange, of course, is her father's hated skill.) Jessica seems, in fine, to cloak the “heinous sin” of being ashamed to be who she is under the shame of her cross-dressing. This becomes a common proto-Freudian theme in Shakespeare: to be ashamed to be ashamed of shame.

Jessica's identity—as a woman, as a lover, as a convert—appears to be in flux in 2.6. Jessica, like Lorenzo, knows only that she is her father's child. The central problem seems to be that Jessica does not know the true value of what she is giving Lorenzo in “exchange.” Another problem is that she worries too little about what she is getting in Lorenzo.

The notion that love is an office of discovery suggests that, in time, through the foibles of blind love, there is truth to be known by Jessica—about Lorenzo and about herself. Just as there is irony in Jessica's last response to Lorenzo, so is irony in Jessica's first response to Lorenzo in the play, in the balcony scene: “Who are you? Tell me for more certainly, / Albeit I'll swear that I do know your tongue” (2.6.26-27). As the play goes on, it becomes clearer that Jessica knows the tongue, the dazzling vows, but not the man. By 5.1, there is the strong suggestion that something has happened since 3.5, that Lorenzo is the main reason Jessica is not merry when she hears sweet music. Self-knowledge and conscience appear to be other reasons.

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Throughout Merchant, reactions to music are linked to one's merriment, for they display one's knowledge of oneself and the world. And, just as Shylock and Lorenzo offer competing theories about what will keep Jessica from being merry, they also offer competing views of music. Sensing “some ill a-brewing towards my rest,” Shylock warns: “Jessica my girl, Look to my house” (2.5.15-17). Informed by Launcelot about “a masque,” Shylock warns, more specifically, about the danger of music:

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What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica:
Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces;
But stop my house's ears—I mean my casements;
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
My sober house. By Jacob's staff I swear
I have no mind of feasting forth to-night;
But I will go. Go you before me, sirrah.
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Say I will come.

(2.5.27-38)

Jessica is part of Shylock's house; her maidenhead is one of his doors. With words that anticipate, in both form and matter, Lorenzo's speech in 5.1, Shylock gives his daughter his last command: “Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter / My sober house.”

Jessica, we see, is called on to choose between these antithetical views. What is more important, Jessica is twice called upon to see through the discrepancy between form and content apparent in the articulation of each view. In the first instance, Jessica shuns her father's disharmonious “manners” and is led to a kind of merriment by the “vile squealing.” Finally, however, at Belmont, music and musical speech lose their formerly seductive power: sweet music—and sweet vows—do not make Jessica merry. An untrue lover cannot speak persuasively about harmony, having already taught a harsh lesson about discord.

Shakespeare uses Lorenzo's speech to build dramatic tension; the end of the play puts Jessica back where she began. Just as Lorenzo's vows turn to lies, his seductive exhortations turn to commands. Lorenzo's commands replace Shylock's. They are more subtle, and tempered by the music of his speech, but they are commands: “Sit, Jessica. … Mark the music.” Jessica's reaction to music is again her form of resisting the man who commands her, her rejection of a particular world-view that would govern her reaction to music, and thereby her reactions to all things. Moreover, Jessica's claim that she is never merry when she hears sweet music reveals that Shylock's view of music turns out to be more nearly true for her than Lorenzo's view.

Writing about Jessica and Lorenzo in 5.1. in his study The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice, Lawrence Danson, following John Hollander in assuming that Lorenzo speaks for Jessica, writes that “[it is] this pair of lovers who speak about that music of the spheres which the play's other harmonies imitate.” Such a conclusion is based on the assumption that the talk about false vows is merely playful banter (Danson calls it “easy banter and serious intimacy”). The critical consensus represented by Barber and Danson is expressed by Kermode. Merchant, he writes, “begins with usury and corrupt love” and “ends with harmony and perfect love.”

As Danson knows, the question of Lorenzo's “moral fitness” is crucial to “our response to teasing banter at the opening of the fifth act.” Danson sees that his fitness has “been established,” but the only proof he can adduce is the encomium of a hot lover, Lorenzo's praise of Jessica in 2.6.52-57. Danson bases his assessment of Lorenzo's “moral fitness” on an assumption that his famous speech is an enactment of religious harmony: the “union of the Gentile husband and the daughter of the Jew suggests the penultimate stage of salvation history described by St. Paul.” But a Christian's theft of a soul “with many vows of faith / And ne'er a true one” speaks, ultimately, not for the “harmony in his immortal soul” but for the impenetrable grossness of his “muddy vesture of decay.” Jessica's response that she is not merry is not a confirmation of her salvation—not even a playful one. We are reminded, after all, of the County Palatine, who “hears merry tales and smiles not” (1.2.44-45), whom Portia therefore deems unfit to marry.

An unambiguous resolution of the play requires harmony between Jessica and Lorenzo. And it is for this reason—a circular one—that scholars have for so long thrown Jessica over to the side of the Christians, despite what she says. Gross is one critic who sees the darker aspects of Jessica's marriage to Lorenzo, and of the troubling edges in their dialogues; but even he suggests “[o]ne should not make too much of” it. One should be reminded of Leo Spitzer's warning in Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony about the “harmonizing tendency” that frequently attends the study of ideas of Christian harmony. Even if one persists in playing down Jessica's dissent, there is no justification for saying that Jessica speaks with Lorenzo—or that
Lorenzo speaks for Jessica. Jessica says she is not merry; thereafter, she does not speak at all. She is present at the final celebration at Belmont, but she is not part of it.

As Norman Rabkin writes, “As the entire critical history of the play has made equally apparent, the play’s ultimate resolution of [its] conflicts is anything but clear or simple.” Even Rabkin, however, sees the critical challenge as a demand for allegiance on one of two sides; and he, too, reads Lorenzo’s speech as the signal of harmonious resolution of Lorenzo’s side: “On the one side, as we have seen, we find Shylock, trickery, anality, precise definition, possessiveness, contempt for prodigality” as well as “distrust of emotion and hatred of music, bad luck, and failure.” “On the other,” writes Rabkin, “we find Portia, but also Antonio, Bassanio, Lorenzo, Jessica, and Gratiano; freedom, metaphorical richness of language, prodigality” as well as “love of emotion and music, supreme trickery, a fondness for bonds, good luck, success.” In this common reading, Jessica is thrown in—here, just before Gratiano—as Lorenzo’s happily instructed wife.

Catherine Belsey, in “Love in Venice,” appears ready to reverse the sway of this “harmonizing habit.” But while she questions the assumptions of Barber and Danson, Belsey offers a sweeping description of love in Venice that leads her to reduce Lorenzo’s talk about the “muddy vesture of decay” to putatively historical truths about the body and desire. Belsey writes that “the older understanding of love leaves traces in the text, with the effect that desire is only imperfectly domesticated” and the “consequence” that “Venice is super-imposed on Belmont.” Belsey astutely identifies the consequence, but she ignores the particular exclusion of Jessica. She suggests that all the characters in the play look “back to a world, fast disappearing in the late sixteenth century, where love was seen as anarchic, destructive, dangerous.” Apparently, Belsey does not uphold Jessica’s distinction between false and true vows. Belsey argues instead that the play speaks nostalgically (historically) about a desire that, in accordance with historical indicia, can no longer be fulfilled. According to Belsey, Jessica and Lorenzo, an otherwise harmonious couple, are deprived of an allegorical harmony, or granted only a trace of it—for, in the late sixteenth century, just as now, one may get no more than a trace of anything. Merchant, however, does not treat an essential crisis in the history of desire; it depicts the particular, contextualized problems the women in the play have with particular men.

There is something peculiarly wrong with all the male characters in Merchant. Portia shows herself to be superior to all the men in the play, and Jessica seems to be. Each, however, is hampered by her father’s rules for choosing men, opposing sets of rules that specify different reactions to music, reactions that are central to the resolution of the play. Moreover, both Portia and Jessica are also morally flawed.

As we have seen, Jessica’s response to Lorenzo’s speech and the music of Portia’s musicians raises questions that are crucial to any thorough reading of the play. Does Jessica’s response to the music at the end of the beginning of act 5 confirm that a Jewish soul is “not happily born,” unmusical? Or is Jessica’s failure to be merry a good thing? Does she exhibit a noble melancholia that distinguishes her from those flighty wenches who, when they hear the strains of a lascivious lute, giggle, roll their eyes, and fall wholly for the man who brings the strains about—as Jessica once did? Do we listen now to a young woman whom love has discovered to herself, a woman made wiser by brief experience, a woman who is ready to register her dissenting view? And might she somehow speak for the play? These questions are necessary to any study of Merchant.

As Keith Geary writes, building on the insight of Rabkin, “We must, critics tell us, take sides either with Shylock or with Portia and the Christians, and stand by our choice.” But such “black-and-white judgement seems peculiarly inappropriate to a play that argues the falsity of such neat and absolute distinctions,” for Merchant, as Geary writes, “deals in shades of grey and continually raises the problem of appropriate response and judgement, most acutely, of course, in relation to Shylock.” Jessica, I am suggesting, is the character who most feels and portrays what becomes the obvious falsity of neat distinctions.

Merchant contrasts the Christians’ gift for musical speech with the rough idiom of Shylock. Lorenzo is dazzling; Shylock is blunt. Merchant, however, demands that we distinguish the harmony of form (“In such a
night …”) from the force of real discord. At the same time, the play reveals to us our inability to distinguish them. Shylock's nasty “contempt for prodigality” and “hatred of music” is an extreme antithesis to the dangerous trust in music shown by the Christians. They demonstrate a Neoplatonic trust in music and musical language that becomes suspect. With Jessica's final rejection of Lorenzo's claims, the play suggests that the “sweet power” of “sweet music” is a potentially destructive illusion for Christians as well as Jews. The case of Portia is apposite.

*Merchant* is neither spoken for nor resolved by the seductive harmony Lorenzo so dazzingly proclaims. As he does in other plays, Shakespeare involves the audience in the moral dilemma of the play. He compels us to take sides even as he warns of the dangers of doing so. In *Merchant* he gives us a character whose middle position is, even more dangerously, easy to ignore. By living between “Antipodes,” by reacting nakedly to music, Jessica learns the most in the play, and yet she is the least pedantic character in the play. She is, moreover, the least likely to seduce us: as a Jew Jessica is eclipsed by her father; as a woman by Portia; as someone who might tell us something about being merry, she is eclipsed by Antonio; as someone who might tell us something about the “power of music,” by Lorenzo. By the end of the play, Jessica can neither be disassociated from nor identified with her father—or Lorenzo. Jessica's is the strange suffering of one who dares to live between the “Antipodes.” A tug on the audience from two sides can make for great drama, but Shakespeare does even better in *Merchant*. If all the other characters demand our taking one side or another, Jessica does not, for she herself is tugged by both. As Launcelot says, her mother and father are Scylla and Charybdis: “Well, you are gone both ways” (3.5.15-16).

The wonder of the play, I am suggesting, is its ability to bring the audience around to Jessica's experience in the middle of undesirable extremes. In many ways, *Merchant* is a precursor of *Measure for Measure*—a comedy with a troubling comedic resolution; a comedy with a trenchant focus on the virtue of moving from Hebrew justice to Christian mercy; a comedy about the trouble Christians can have being merciful as they seek merriment. It would only be a few years, we must remember, before Shakespeare would write his “problem plays.”

In *Merchant*, one character, a minor character, Jessica, tries unsuccessfully to arbitrate the merciless extremes of Jewish rigidity and Christian frivolity. Act 5 begins (and the play ends) by developing the problems the play presents, not by fully resolving them in a traditional praise of musical harmony. Lorenzo offers a dazzling speech by which we, like Jessica, are liable to be seduced. But Shakespeare allows us to see through Lorenzo, and forces us to consider large and important questions raised both by Jessica and the dramatic themes and tensions within the play. In the end, Lorenzo delivers a speech about heavenly harmony that succumbs to the earthly conflict it tries to resolve.

*Merchant* is a difficult play, and has long been a divisive one. Many critics have, along with Lorenzo, praised a pristine harmony; some critics have grudgingly acknowledged it; and a few critics have briefly remarked hints of discord. But these various readings have persisted in seeing (or not seeing) Jessica in much the same way. When we examine Jessica and her role, moreover, we see that *Merchant* is a play about undesirable extremes over which even competing schools of criticism might come to some consensus.

We must remember, in the end, that Jessica's last line—like the second part of Lorenzo's speech—competes for our attention with the seductive sounds of the musicians. At the conclusion of a play that pushes its dramatic content to the limits of comic form, a play that juxtaposes the harmony of form with the reality of discord and coerced harmonies, we must listen with an ear to the seductive music of both Lorenzo's speech and Portia's musicians, and with our soul bent toward deeper, more speculative matters—in short, like Jessica, with attentive spirits.

*Notes*
4. Ibid., 1-5.
15. Some criticism written from Marxist and cultural materialist perspectives sheds further light on Jessica's “exchange.” Even these studies, however, do not give Jessica the attention she requires. See, for example, Karen Newman, “Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structure of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* #38 (1987): 19-33. Newman offers intelligent analysis of the role of Portia's ring, as well as of “exchange” more generally. But Newman does not even mention Jessica's “exchange” as a point of comparison or contrast.
19. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 158-59, remarks only briefly the possibility that Jessica “might revert to her Jewish nature.” The possibility, of course, is only hinted at; and it is part of Shakespeare's skill here to resist closure. To consider the matter fully, one has to pay more attention to the dramatic structure of the play than Shapiro does.
“musical illusion of happiness.” Picker's consideration of music, however, is general and brief, for his subject is the more general one of closure. He concludes, moreover, by bringing Jessica too close to Shylock's world-view.

26. See, for example, Newman, “Portia's Ring,” 32.

Criticism: Themes: Richard H. Weisberg (essay date 1999)


[In the following essay, Weisberg appraises the legalistic elements of The Merchant of Venice, and finds "non-ironic" interpretations of the play's opposition between Christian mercy and rigid Judaic law to be reductive and misleading.]

INTRODUCTION

The law and literature movement now involves hundreds of scholars across the disciplines. Among the movement's contributions to scholarship and teaching in literature has been its attention to several well-worked “legalistic” stories. Particular success has been achieved in the debates about Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor, where an established critical perspective on Captain Vere has been challenged by recourse to legal materials and closer readings of the story's legalistic passages.

In recent years, a similar methodology has been applied to The Merchant of Venice. Abjuring the mainstream critical insistence on “non-ironic” readings of what is clearly one of Shakespeare's most complex and ironic plays, law and literature scholars have again simply noticed what the text affords in rich abundance: passages of legalistic complexity that—once engaged—reverse traditional patterns of understanding.

So, in Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature (94-104), I endeavored to show that Act V's legalistic language—epitomized by Portia's rejection of Antonio's persistent intermeddling in her relationship with Bassanio—evokes Shylock and leaves the audience wondering at Belmont's new usages: “surety”; “deed of gift”; “inter'gatories.” The Jew, with his insistence on oathkeeping, bonds, and the law, must be defeated at trial, for his verbal directness contradicts Christian linguistic maneuvering as much as his excessive legality offends their notion of “mercy”; yet he seems in the final act quite to have overpowered (on the level of language) the Christian characters and their earlier rejection of him. Portia will not tolerate yet another episode of Antonio's “suretyship” for his young friend, her new husband. She prefers, and will probably enforce on Belmont as best she can, the more directly committed system of the old Jewish moneylender, who has never been able to stomach “Christian intercessors” and their flouting of the law.

On this reading, however appropriate it is to the play's comic medium, which mandates the defeat of Shylock's bond, Portia is at trial always alert to the Jew's constancy and ethics in the domain of human relations. Although she briefly becomes a fellow traveler herself along the path of Christian distortions of law—where ostensible “mercy” quickly is debased to forms of legalized cruelty unimaginable in Jewish communities—she does so merely to solve the comedy's central problem and then to move ahead as ethically as she can toward her marriage to a typical Christian whom she happens to adore. But to do this, she must reject on the island of Belmont the nagging presence of Antonio, whose main aim is, precisely, to keep Bassanio from direct commitments to others.

Debate on many of these issues ensued in a spirited exercise of interdisciplinary wit, where the likes of Lawrence Danson and Jay Halio took on some lawyers at the Association of the Bar of the City of New York.
in late 1992 (Proceedings). And it has spilled over into a series of readings by professional actors in which a proper emphasis has been placed on the relationship of Act IV to Act V, with their legalistic origins of course in the “contract formation” scene, I.iii. 4

CHRISTIAN LEGALISM IN THE TRIAL SCENE

What I like to call “the turn to legalism” among Christian characters in The Merchant of Venice begins midway through the trial scene itself. Looked at this way, the prevalent critical dichotomy between some rigid Jewish “law” and some more humane Christian “mercy” breaks down on the most obvious textual level.

Portia, perhaps fascinated by Shylock's excessive yet somehow solid insistence on his bond, is committed to undoing the moneylender's extreme application of what might otherwise be a righteous and ethical reliance on written law. But she is equally repulsed by the overly flexible oathbreaking of the Christian characters, which she sees in open court before her eyes when Bassanio and Gratiano assert their willingness to sacrifice their new wives to save the beleaguered Antonio. Like the old Jew, who remarks in a striking aside (as he is supposedly hell-bent at the time for revenge), “These be the Christian husbands,” Portia notes their willingness to compromise not only the marriage vows but tons of her own ducats, which Bassanio constantly offers the obdurate plaintiff. Later in this same Act, she will deduce that Antonio's baleful influence on Bassanio has moved the latter to give her the ring that symbolized those vows; the audience to the play will also compare that easy traducement to Shylock's ethical unwillingness to give his wife's ring away “for a wilderness of monkeys.” 5 So Portia watches all these men in open court, and it cannot be that she wishes to adopt the easy oathbreaking of her spendthrift husband and his flighty circle of friends, nor that she comes to detest everything that Shylock represents in the domain of ethics and law.

Portia begins in court a process that carries her through to the Belmont of Act V: the emulation of Shylock's ethical system once—through her efforts—it has been drained of its excesses, which she perceives to be less legalistic than situational. She comes quickly to learn that Shylock's villainy consists in a Christian-imposed condition of ostracized resentment. Neither she nor any even-handed observer of the play as a whole needs find any necessary linkage of “legalism” to vengeance. On the contrary, she perceives the very opposite: the source of the deepest resentment and the most violent hatred derives from Christian applications to moral outsiders of a superficial and self-serving “mercy.” Although personally unaware of Antonio's cruelty to Shylock on the Rialto, Portia will have sufficiently good reason to associate with the merchant this degradation of Christian love. Once the trial and its immediate aftermath reveal his threat to her values, she moves as graciously as possible to remove Antonio from her husband's circle. But this must await the “happy resolution” of Shylock's vengeful lawsuit.

It is clear to most analysts that Portia follows Shylock's legalistic method in open court, where she reads his bond so narrowly, so literally, that it cannot be enforced on its terms. Then, reveling perhaps in her mastery of a complex situation irresolvable by men, she hauls out a statute and continues, with an excess of zeal that parallels Shylock's in a way, to defeat his cause. This “Alien Statute” gives the state the right to take the Jew's life and half his property—but the Duke instantly forgives the former and virtually returns to Shylock all but a small “fine” for the latter. Touched perhaps by the state's graciousness, she turns to the merchant, who is entitled to the other half. Portia explicitly begs Antonio to make the theoretical Christian move beyond law for which she is better known to audiences than for her contractual legalisms. She asks him to undo the legalistic persecution of the Alien Statute by reducing its effect on his enemy: “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (IV. i. 394)

It is here that Antonio, ostensibly the model of Christian courtesy and otherwise the voice of what I have called Christian “mediation” (Poetics) throughout the play, might be fully expected to outdo the Duke's generosity.
Instead, Antonio proceeds to fail every test of moderation, mercy, and forgiveness that Portia has imposed upon him. (She was not, of course, privy to his earlier similar failure in rejecting Shylock's offer of friendship in I. iii.) She fathoms what happens when Christian intercessors are given sway over earthly law. She hears, feelingly, the following amazing cruelties, which—in the absence of legal understanding—critics have taken as signs of Christian generosity:

So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content, so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter,
Two things provided more: that for this favor
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift,
Here in the court, of all he dies possessed
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.

(IV. i. 396-406)

The chief hurdle to understanding this bizarre show of “mercy” is its opening two and one-half lines, which are “precatory”—they mean nothing at all to the law. Antonio merely reiterates the Duke's disposition of the half of Shylock's goods that are to go to the state! Antonio has no power over, nor any interest in, that half. Thus he is in fact forgiving the “fine” that only the state has a right to get. So Antonio begins his speech by winning the hearts of his listeners through a gracious disposition of that which he does not own.

The legally irrelevant opening rhetorical gambit might be understandable in one untrained in the law. But Antonio turns out to be no ingenu: his false generosity is but the preface to a highly legalistic maneuver that will totally destroy Shylock. Furthermore, the first two and one-half lines deliberately evoke earlier examples of Christian rhetoric masking self-interest, greed and theft. To take three such cases only: in Act I, Bassanio succeeds in getting Antonio's support for the loan of 3000 ducats not by using direct speech, such as “Lend me this; I'll pretty myself up, head over to Belmont, win the hand of the rich heiress and return to you not only this loan but the previous ones I have welched on.” Instead, he uses the graceful image of the bow and arrow, a lovely figure that couches in ethereal language what is in fact a grimy purpose. In the same act, Shylock's usury is seen as evil, but the plundering of colonials engaged in by Antonio's ventures is masked by the romantic imagery of “ships at sea.” As Judith Koffler has masterfully shown in a leading law and literature piece on the play, the Christian contribution is one of elevated rhetoric, not improved human relations (116-34). And, finally, Lorenzo spirits away Jessica and much of Shylock's wealth, robing with some of the play's loveliest lines the breach of at least two Commandments.

So Antonio uses the opening moment of his response to Portia to do what he—and the Christians generally—are best at: rhetorical but not actual generosity. (Shylock's method, unfortunately for him, is that of the comedic villain but not always the earthly wrongdoing: he speaks what is on his mind, often in a more literal language than would please the Christians.) He merely mimics Bassanio, who throughout this same scene has managed to hide through rhetorical flourishes that the ducats he constantly offers Shylock are, of course, Portia's (and her avoiding the loss of this wealth goes a long way to explain why she instead brings Shylock down). How sweet of Antonio to forgive even the meager “fine” that the Duke fashioned for Venice (“Ay for the state,” says Portia, “not for Antonio”) as a way of reducing Shylock's penalty in the face of an already humiliating and procedurally questionable reversal of fortune. Generations of critics, if not necessarily the play's audiences, have been hoodwinked by the opening rhetorical move. The rest of the speech, replete with legalistic exactitude, usually goes unexamined.
Let us pay Shakespeare the compliment of understanding the substance of his merchant's “mercy” to Shylock. Antonio fleshes out the Alien Statute—and I've chosen my verb carefully—as follows:

1. Shylock must place half of his present wealth into a trust, with Lorenzo and Jessica receiving the principal at Shylock's death;

2. Shylock must convert to Christianity;

3. Shylock must pledge to will all of his after-acquired wealth to Lorenzo and Jessica.

To make this Draconian “mercy” more comprehensible—and putting aside for the moment Shylock's forced conversion—we'll assume that Shylock currently is worth 1,000,000 ducats. Recall that, under the Alien Statute, half of that was to go to the state, but that the Duke reduced the penalty to a fine of undetermined amount. We can assume further, then, that Shylock has been permitted by the state to keep 400,000 ducats and required by Venice to pay 100,000 as his fine.

Compared to that scenario, as we shall see, Antonio's disposition of Shylock's present wealth is by no means generous.

THE “SHYLOCK TRUST”

The merchant, apparently knowledgeable in the intricacies of property law, seizes the half of the moneylender's present wealth under his dominion and places it in “use”—the Elizabethan and indeed the present synonym for a “trust.” We will call this the “Shylock Trust.” Shylock's wealth provides the res, or subject matter of the Trust (namely 500,000 ducats). Antonio will be the administrator of the trust (the “trustee”). Under his direction alone, subject only to a use of the wealth that will be deemed responsible by some eventual court of equity, the 500,000 ducats will be invested, and they will provide both income and preservation or growth of the principal itself. The Trust provides for two categories of “beneficiaries,” the income beneficiary and the remaindermen, that is, those who will get the principal upon the death of Shylock.

Who gets the income from the Shylock Trust? Antonio's failure to name the income beneficiary is not fatal to the formation of the trust. In fact, he seems either to be giving Shylock the income benefit or else himself. This can be clarified later. What Antonio makes clear is that he is vesting the remainder interest, i.e., the right to take the principal upon Shylock's death, in Lorenzo and Jessica.

So—since this is the fairer reading of his words—if we assume that Antonio is keeping the income interest for himself, the Shylock Trust would be enforceable as follows:

1. 500,000 ducats, yielding approximately 5ear, provides an annual income of some 25,000 ducats to Antonio for as long as Shylock lives. Antonio would thus be the income beneficiary pur autre vie (bad lawfrench for “for the life of another,” i.e., for as long as Shylock lives).

2. Meanwhile, through careful investment, the 500,000 ducat principal is preserved. At Shylock's death, Jessica and Lorenzo get these monies. The Shylock Trust is terminated.

THE “SHYLOCK WILL”

Antonio goes much further, however. Exceeding the terms of the Alien Statute, he insists that even Shylock's after-acquired wealth be subject to his command. Recall that Shylock, although elderly, is still active and successful on the Rialto. He may be stripped of 60his present wealth, but he may well go on to earn millions more. Furthermore, he may receive gifts from others or in some different manner acquire new property. The
Alien Statute gives neither the state nor Antonio the right to control these future earnings or possessions. Antonio, drunk with legalistic power, grabs them anyway, imposing the following scheme: Shylock must pledge immediately that he will bequeath to Jessica and Lorenzo all of his after-acquired wealth. Of course, this permits him to continue to earn and to live from those earnings. (If he finally gets himself good legal counsel, which he now knows he should have done before going into court, Shylock may also be able to plan his estate so that there's nothing left when he dies. Or he may covertly amend his will, which lawfully may be done until the moment of his death, to leave his wealth to someone who has truly loved him.) On the other hand, if really forced to convert to Christianity, he may not be able to pursue his work as a moneylender. In any event, what is left in Shylock's estate at his death must presently be pledged to Lorenzo and Jessica.

Few late-twentieth-century audiences applaud Antonio's insistence upon Shylock's conversion to Christianity. Once heeded and understood, these property arrangements seem almost as odious. Shylock, whose acuity with language surpasses most of the Christian characters—but who errs, as we have seen, by refusing to adjust his own direct speech to their hypocritical patterns—knows that “You take my life / When you take the means whereby I live.” Although the conversion must strike him as disgusting, its enforced effect plays equally upon his profession. Antonio, of course, also understands that Christians do not take money for interest; they leave this to the Jews, having monopolized other and more covert forms of plunder. Shylock is left only with what the Duke has provided him. And he must face the additional torment of being the enforced benefactor of a young couple he has every good reason to despise.

“These be the Christian mercies.”

THE COMEDIC CIRCLE SQUARED: MERCY TO LEGALISM TO LAW

Yet the play remains a comedy. As I have elsewhere argued, Shylock must be brought down; his comedic villainy consists in equal parts of vengeful excess, linguistic directness, and ethical precision. Oathkeepers and direct talkers, as everyone from Shakespeare and Molière to Stoppard and Ionesco know, do not fare well in a comic arena. Nor do monomaniacs, although that term is too strong for Shylock, whose obsession about the pound of flesh commences only as his daughter elopes and is mediated even at the trial by accurate reflections upon the Christians that are as keen as his sharpened knife. Shylock must fall because ethical behavior, which can often seem compulsive to an observer, sits poorly on a religious outsider trying to exert himself lawfully in a comedic environment.

The audience to a comedy wants and deserves the defeat of such a character. Having received that in the trial scene, in Act V it expects nothing but music, poetry, and conjugal bliss. Shakespeare provides, instead, discords, arguments, and still unconsummated marriages. These peculiar elements alone make the play “ironic” despite the flawed and even transparent attempts of mainstream critics to find harmonies, dances, and resolutions.

As we have seen, the disharmonies of Act V conjoin with a strange move, led by Portia, to the language of law otherwise embodied in the play largely by the comedic villain himself. It is as though her dealings with the Christians during the trial have left her at least as exasperated with their cruelties as with the single excess she disguised herself to remedy. Now speaking in her own voice, she adopts for Belmont neither the “mercy” of her own most famous speech nor the legalisms of her (and Antonio’s) victory over Shylock. Instead, she leads her world of Venice to law—to an insistence on the primacy of language used directly to promise and to commit one individual to another.

To do this, Portia must, of course, accomplish more than the mere imparting of legal language she has learned from Shylock. But even this is far from trivial. When the curtain virtually falls with Gratiano calling for an “inter’gatory”—formal legalized questioning under oath—as to whether he and Nerissa should finally bed down, the most extreme anti-Semitic Christian in the play has adopted Shylock's legalistic turn of phrase.
Portia must also, however, reject Antonio. There is little doubt, now that we have read carefully the trial scene and its aftermath in the giving away of the rings, that Portia sees Antonio as a direct threat to her still unconsummated relationship with Bassanio. When the merchant absurdly thrusts himself again between them, she is much too intelligent not to see the grotesque repetition of Antonio’s earlier commercial mediation. She remains polite, but the following dialogue should be read as her ironic rejection of the mediated “surety” relationship that permits one party to stand in the place of another:

ANTONIO:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never break faith advisedly.

PORTIA:

Then you shall be his surety.

(V. i. 268-73)

A surety is, somewhat like a guarantor, a “middleman” who can be sued in the place of the actual debtor. The implications of Antonio’s excessive, repetitive impulse to “stand in” for Bassanio are all too clear to Portia. She sees that the merchant’s urge to mediate is as compulsive as the Jew’s impulse to “stand on the law.”

Which is better? For Portia, as for the thoughtful member of this play's audience, there is no easy answer. But she now feels empowered, in her own domain and voice, to try out the regime of law and to see if—stripped of an excess forced upon it by the mainstream culture—Jewish ethical modes might be less formalistic and less cruel than Christian “mercy” of the Antonio variety.

CONCLUSION

Law and literature crosses disciplinary borders to seek enlightenment where important sections of stories have remained mere inkblots to decades and even centuries of otherwise sentient readers. In the case of the text we have just been examining, law—as Shakespeare's precision in these matters makes clear—is meant to help identify character. We cannot emerge from Antonio's legalisms without wondering about his cruelty. If, instead, we stop reading the end of the trial scene before embracing the language of property law as it is given to us, we are likely to mistake Shylock's fidelity for intractability, Antonio's technical manipulation for graciousness, and Portia's increasing dislike of the merchant of Venice for a loving friendship or even a three-way “dance” of comedic alliance. The stakes are, at the least, the meaning and staging of Act V and, at the most, the comprehension of the play's values as attuned to those of the defeated litigant.

Notes

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the suggestions of Peter Alscher, Lawrence Danson, and Jay Halio, none of whom, however, is responsible for any of the opinions expressed in what follows.
2. See, for example, the Symposium Issue with articles on the story by Judith Koffler, Robin West, James Warren, Brook Thomas, Steven Mailloux, Richard Posner, Michael Hancher, and the present
author, whose work on the story in the earlier The Failure of the Word has been discussed in Sealts 39-61 and Appendix 3: “With regard to Vere's conduct of Billy's trial and execution [our 1962 'generic text'] concluded—perhaps somewhat hastily—that Melville ‘simply had not familiarized himself with [naval] statutes of the period’” (51). In a similar vein, see Milder 77-79.

3. See Proceedings with articles on the play by Peter Alscher, Jay Halio, Charles Spinosa, Susan Oldrieve, Clayton Koelb, Judge David B. Saxe, Marci Hamilton, and Daniel Kornstein. All these sources point to the origins of legal analysis of the play dating to the natural lawyer Von Ihering (who took Shylock's side in the late 19th century) and various English and American explanations of the contract formation scene (I. iii). My analysis below focuses on Antonio's disposition of Shylock's wealth in IV. i.

4. Productions influenced by lawyerly readings of the play include those of the Peter Royston Players (New York, 1992-93) and of the Hofstra Theater Department (1996).

5. The famous “ring plot” has been much discussed by critics and with recent excellence by Kahn 107-111. Kahn's view that Portia deems Antonio an unworthy rival for Bassanio's affections parallels mine here. But it is significant to me that Kahn barely touches on Shylock as a player in this plot, despite the text's obvious association of the Jew with values connecting ethical marital behavior to the ring, values everywhere betrayed by the Christians (led by Antonio) until Portia formally espouses them in Act V. Yet there, Kahn—allowing that “ironic similarities between Jew and Christian abound”—places these less in the realm of a positive morality in fact espoused by Portia than in the negative vengeance Portia displays toward her transgressing husband (110).

6. See Danson.

Works Cited


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 66): Further Reading

CRITICISM

Evaluates The Merchant of Venice as an agonistic (or “punitive”) comedy, with critical attention principally focused on the bond between Shylock and Antonio, Antonio's apparent defeat, the reversal of fortunes, and Shylock's punishment.


Documents performances and interpretations of Shylock by Yiddish-speaking actors and directors in American theater during the first half of the twentieth century.


Traces parallels between Jessica's status in the society of The Merchant of Venice and that of pets (specifically dogs) in Elizabethan England.


Observes the symbolic function of Shylock's (i.e. a Jew's) house in The Merchant of Venice with a view to early modern English texts on the subject.


Examines the anti-Semitic discourse of The Merchant of Venice.


Discusses Reinhardt's radical 1905 production of The Merchant of Venice at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, in which he centered the setting of the play, rather than the characters, as the focus of the drama.


Probes allusions to classical romantic tragedies (stories such as those of Troilus and Cressida, Aeneas and Dido, and Jason and Medea) in the ostensibly comic interlude between Jessica and Lorenzo at the beginning of the final scene of The Merchant of Venice.


Investigates Portia's role in The Merchant of Venice—particularly while she is disguised as a man in the latter portions of the drama—in the context of the play's theme of love versus friendship.


In-depth study of the origins of Shakespeare's Shylock and interpretations of the character on British and American stages from the early seventeenth century to the end of the twentieth.

*Investigates elusive and ironic references to the religious holiday of Shrovetide and doctrinal controversies related to Christian Communion in* *The Merchant of Venice.*


*Book-length examination of* *The Merchant of Venice* *that examines the play’s aesthetic, religious, and economic contexts, and includes an extensive textual analysis.*


*Appraises the ethnic categories of Jew and Moor in The Merchant of Venice, while acknowledging the anachronism of applying such terms as race and genetics to a Shakespearean text.*


*Reviews the 1999 Royal National Theatre production of The Merchant of Venice, observing that director Trevor Nunn's bleak interpretation illuminated the nuances of Shakespeare's characters, but obliterated the light-hearted qualities of the play.*


*Concentrates on Shylock's character in light of the medieval and early modern myth that Jewish men menstruated.*


*Reads Antonio as “a prototype of the lovesick homosexual.”*


*Comments on director Trevor Nunn's “problematic” updates to The Merchant of Venice for his National Theatre production.*


*Psychoanalytic discussion of The Merchant of Venice that explains character anxieties in terms of post-Freudian object obsession.*


*Legalist-literary analysis of the trial scene in The Merchant of Venice that takes into account social developments related to English law courts at the beginning of the seventeenth-century.*
The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 77): Introduction

The Merchant of Venice (c. 1596-97) has been labeled a problem play by many critics due to its combination of comic, tragic, and romantic elements as well as its ambiguous treatment of racial and religious differences. In the play, the merchant Antonio borrows money from Jewish moneylender Shylock in order to assist his friend Bassanio. Bassanio, a Venetian gentleman, borrows the money from Antonio in order to finance his pursuit of Portia, the heiress of Belmont, whom he wishes to marry. Ostensibly a romantic comedy centering on Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio, The Merchant of Venice explores darker issues as well, such as the treatment of Shylock, who is portrayed as a stereotypically greedy Jew and a social outcast. For attempting to enforce his contract with Antonio, a contract stipulating that a pound of flesh be removed from Antonio for failure to repay his loan, Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity. Critics often observe that, unlike many modern viewers and readers, the play's original audiences were not offended by the characterization and fate of Shylock. However, Shylock and his punishment have been the source of major critical debate since the nineteenth century and continue to be today. His standing as both a racial and religious “other” figures prominently in critical analyses of the play's treatment of ethnicity, religion, and social exclusion. Just as Shylock serves as a springboard for investigations of racial and religious issues, Antonio—whose affection for Bassanio is often seen as homoerotic—serves the same function in critical studies of the play's depiction of homosexuality. In addition, critics are interested in the play's exploration of economic issues. One of Shakespeare's most frequently performed plays, modern productions of The Merchant of Venice are presented with the challenge of depicting the character of Shylock, who is often portrayed as either a villain or a victim, as well as balancing the play's tragic and comic elements.

Many contemporary character-based studies of The Merchant of Venice have focused on Antonio and Shylock. Gary Rosenshield (2002) argues that Antonio, the Christian merchant, is presented as an economic ideal within an emerging capitalist society. The critic maintains, however, that Shakespeare questioned the possibility of such an ideal through Antonio's association with Shylock and the corruption of the world of finance. Rosenshield demonstrates that while Antonio is a true Christian in terms of his friendship with and love for other Christians, his personal hatred of Shylock underscores his un-Christianlike nature, just as his experience in Belmont places his merchant standing in a less-than-noble context. In assessing Shylock's position in the play as a social pariah, Bruce Boehrer (1999) combines an analysis of the play's bestial language and imagery with a study of Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes toward the possession of dogs as pets. Boehrer contends that Shylock is associated with the mongrel or cur, a beast excluded from the society of humans, whereas Shylock's daughter Jessica is presented as a lapdog, an animal welcomed as a companion to humans but without the duty, or right, to contribute in a meaningful way to society. Boehrer maintains that for Shylock, the position of lapdog is unacceptable. Richard Abrams (1996) examines Shakespeare's characterization of both Antonio and Shylock, suggesting that Antonio's sadness is partially an affectation and that Shylock seeks love and understanding from Antonio and Bassanio.

Despite the play's challenges, The Merchant of Venice remains one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed plays. Reviewers often focus on the treatment of Shylock's character. Peter Marks (1999) praises Andrei Serban's “daringly unapologetic” production of The Merchant of Venice for the American Repertory Theater, which broke from recent portrayals of Shylock as a victim and rendered the moneylender as a knife-wielding villain. Marks contends that Shylock's sinister characterization was the most compelling aspect of the production. Robert Smallwood (1999) reviews Gregory Doran's Stratford staging, and finds that it had no new insights into the play, but featured exceptional performances by the actors playing Antonio, Shylock, and Portia. Trevor Nunn's production of The Merchant of Venice for the National Theatre has won a great deal of positive criticism. Hal Jensen (1999) describes the way Nunn's direction emphasized the isolation of the main characters and notes that Henry Goodman's praiseworthy Shylock dominated the production. Matt Wolf
(1999) applauds Nunn's ability to sustain the audience's interest to the end of the play. Robert Smallwood (2000) also notes Goodman's excellence in portraying Shylock, and finds Nunn's production as a whole "brilliant." John Simon (2000) praises most of the acting in Nunn's production, but finds fault with some of the elements—particularly aspects of the court scene—which he finds to be too contrived. Alvin Klein (2000) assesses Richard Corley's production of The Merchant of Venice for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, contending that although it attempted to develop the play's romantic and comic features, it failed to offer an original take on Shakespeare's ambivalent treatment of Shylock.

Recent thematic criticism regarding The Merchant of Venice has focused on issues of race, religion, and sexuality, as well as economic issues. In his examination of The Merchant of Venice as a flawed romantic comedy, Walter Cohen (1982) suggests that the play may be viewed as a reflection of the socio-economic problems in late Elizabethan English society. Through the play, Cohen argues, Shakespeare criticized the worst elements of the emerging capitalist system. Cohen additionally stresses that while the play explores social and economic issues, it remains at its core a study of love, friendship, and religion. According to Martin Japtok and Winfried Schleiner (1999), the issues of race and religion are inextricably linked in The Merchant of Venice. The critics argue that play demonstrates that "racism was already fully operational" in the late Elizabethan era, despite the fact that "race" as a concept had not been fully developed. Both Shylock and the Prince of Morocco represent the "other" in the play, the critics show, and contend that Morocco is rejected by Portia as a suitor because of his racial difference. Thomas H. Luxon (1999) also assesses the play's treatment of racial and religious otherness, focusing on Shylock and his depiction as a greedy financier. Luxon notes that Elizabethan Protestants would have regarded Shylock, his greed, and his "misreading" of the Bible as typically Jewish. The critic also finds that the disguised Portia plays the role of the "true" Jew, or Christian Jew—one who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. Steve Patterson (1999) centers his study on the early modern concept of homoerotic friendship, demonstrating that the play's depiction of Antonio's relationship with Bassanio reflects the shifting attitudes toward this type of relationship in Shakespeare's time. Patterson asserts that homoerotic friends, which Antonio appears to be an example of, found it increasingly unacceptable to voice or act on their desires.

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 77): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies


[In the following essay, Cohen views The Merchant of Venice as a flawed romantic comedy and suggests that the play may be viewed as a reflection of the socio-economic problems in late Elizabethan English society.]

Traditional historical scholarship has not fared well with many contemporary literary theorists. Jonathan Culler concludes: "The identification of historical sequences, while an inevitable and indispensable aspect of literary study, is not just open to oversimplification; it is itself an act of oversimplification." What is rhetorically striking in this passage is the comfortable coexistence of the author's characteristic moderation with the extremity of the position. Under the influence of the work of Louis Althusser in particular and of structuralism and post-structuralism in general, similar doubts have penetrated Marxism, long a bastion of historical interpretation. Terry Eagleton argues that "Marx initiates a 'genealogical' break with any genetic-evolutionist conception of the historical materialist method, and, indeed, of its object—'history' itself." For Eagleton, "history is not a classical narrative: for what kind of narrative is it that has always already begun, that has an infinitely deferred end, and, consequently, can hardly be spoken of as having a middle?" Fredric Jameson (although he begins with the injunction "Always historicize!") is at pains to demonstrate that Marxism "is not a historical narrative." And his own "historicizing operation" presupposes a fundamental bifurcation:
we are thus confronted with a choice between study of the nature of the “objective” structures of a given cultural text (the historicity of its forms and of its content, the historical moment of emergence of its linguistic possibilities, the situation-specific function of its aesthetic) and something rather different which would instead foreground the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text in question.3

In partial opposition to these claims, I hope to show that it is possible to have it both ways, to combine history with structure and to connect “the historical moment” with “the interpretive categories” through which that moment has been understood. Such innovative critical strategies as symptomatic reading, metacommentary, and the elucidation of the ideology of form acquire their full force only when explicitly located within the larger framework provided by the Marxist notion of the mode of production. Jameson, in fact, comes close to this position in asserting that “Marxism, … in the form of the dialectic, affirms a primacy of theory which is at one and the same time a recognition of the primacy of History itself.”4 The resulting procedure may also be viewed as a modified version of the approach recently proposed by Robert Weimann.5 More particularly, the present discussion proceeds from a detailed account of The Merchant of Venice to a brief look at broader issues. It concludes by reversing gears and summarily considering not the utility of contemporary theory for the study of Renaissance literature, but the implications of Renaissance literature for the development of theory.

I

The Merchant of Venice (1596) offers an embarrassment of socio-economic riches. It treats merchants and usurers, the nature of the law, and the interaction between country and city. But since it is also about the relationship between love and friendship, the meaning of Christianity, and a good deal more, a thematically minded critic, regardless of his or her persuasion, may be in for a bit of difficulty. In the most comprehensive and compelling study of the play yet produced, Lawrence Danson attempts to solve this problem by arguing that The Merchant of Venice dramatizes not the triumph of one set of values over another, but the transformation of conflicts into harmonies that incorporate what at the same time they transcend.6 Shakespeare's procedure thus resembles both medieval figural and Hegelian dialectics.7 Because the intellectual and structural design posited by Danson elegantly accommodates not only thematic diversity but also our ambivalent responses to both Shylock and the Christian characters, it is the appropriate object of a skeptical scrutiny of interpretation in The Merchant of Venice.

Shakespeare needs to be interpreted, it may be claimed, simply because of the antiquity and complexity of his art. Yet far from being ideologically neutral, such an enterprise, by juxtaposing an alternative and richer reality with our own, involves an implicit critique of the present. Even more, we may recall that Shakespeare's plays, despite their elaborateness, appealed to a broadly heterogeneous primary audience: an achievement that depended on a comparative social and cultural unity, long since lost, in the nation as well as the theater. This underlying coherence emerges in the logical and, it would seem, inherently meaningful unfolding of the dramatic plot,8 a strong example of which is provided by the rigorously interlocking, causal development of The Merchant of Venice. Presumably, then, the best criticism would deepen, rather than overturn, a sense of the play's meaning widely shared in space and in time.9

This is, however, precisely what we do not find in discussions of The Merchant of Venice. The play has been seen as the unambiguous triumph of good Christians over a bad Jew;10 as the deliberately ambiguous triumph of the Christians;11 as the unintentionally ambiguous, and hence artistically flawed, triumph of the Christians;12 as the tragedy of Shylock, the bourgeois hero;13 and as a sweeping attack on Christians and Jews alike.14 No other Shakespearean comedy before All's Well That Ends Well (1602) and Measure for Measure (1604), perhaps no other Shakespearean comedy at all, has excited comparable controversy. Probably the most promising way out of this dilemma is to see the play as a new departure for Shakespeare; as his earliest comedy drawn from the Italian novelle; as the first of several not quite successful attempts to introduce more
powerful characters, more complex problems of conduct, more realistic representation, and a more serious vision of life into a traditionally light genre. Such a perspective is not without its drawbacks. Nonetheless, it has the virtue of suggesting that the play is by and large a romantic comedy; that it is partially flawed; that it calls for an unusual set of critical questions; and, most important, that it requires us not so much to interpret as to discover the sources of our difficulty in interpreting, to view the play as a symptom of a problem in the life of late sixteenth-century England.

Critics who have studied The Merchant of Venice against the background of English history have justifiably seen Shylock, and especially his lending habits, as the embodiment of capitalism. The last third of the sixteenth century witnessed a sequence of denunciations of the spread of usury. In The Speculation of Vsurie, published during the year Shakespeare's play may first have been performed, Thomas Bell expresses a typical sense of outrage. “Now, now is nothing more frequent with the rich men of this world, than to writhe about the neckes of their poore neighbours, and to impouerish them with the filthie lucre of Usurie.” Behind this fear lay the transition to capitalism: the rise of banking; the increasing need for credit in industrial enterprises; and the growing threat of indebtedness facing both aristocratic landlords and, above all, small, independent producers, who could easily decline to working-class status. Although the lower classes were the main victims, it may be as inadequate to describe opposition to usury in Shakespeare or elsewhere as popular in character, as it is misleading to argue that “Elizabethan drama, even in its higher ranges, was not the expression of a ‘class’ culture at all.” Rather, we are confronted with the hegemonic position of the nobility, whose interests the ideology ultimately served. Artisans and peasant smallholders might fall into the proletariat, but once the majority of the traditional ruling class had adapted to capitalism, the issue of usury faded away.

This had not occurred by 1600, however, and The Merchant of Venice offers a number of specific parallels to the antiusury campaign, most notably in its contrasts between usury and assistance to the poor, and between usurers and merchants. Miles Mosse, for example, laments that “lending upon vsurie is growne so common and usuall among men, as that free lending to the needie is utterly overthrowne.” The distinction between merchants and usurers, also of medieval origin, could be drawn on the grounds that only the former operated for mutual benefit, as opposed to self-interest. Or it might be argued, in language recalling Shakespeare's high valuation of “venturing,” that the usurer does not, like “the merchant that crosse the seas, adventure,” receiving instead a guaranteed return on his money.

A number of dubious consequences follow from concentrating too narrowly on the English background of The Merchant of Venice, however. From such a perspective, the play as a whole seems unproblematic, noneconomic issues unimportant, and related matters like Shylock's religion or the Italian setting irrelevant. Even explicitly economic concerns do not make adequate sense. An emphasis on the difference between trade and usury might imply that Antonio and his creator are resolutely medieval anticapitalists. But not only do Shakespeare's other plays of the 1590's show few signs of hostility to capitalism, The Merchant of Venice itself is quite obviously procapitalist, at least as far as commerce is concerned. It would be more accurate to say that Shakespeare is criticizing merely the worst aspects of an emerging economic system, rather than the system itself. In this respect, moreover, he deviates from the antiusury tracts and from English reality alike. Writers of the period register both the medieval ambivalence about merchants and the indisputable contemporary fact that merchants were the leading usurers: suspicion of Italian traders ran particularly high. It may be that Shakespeare intends a covert parallel between Shylock and Antonio. Yet no manipulation will convert a comedy in which there are no merchant-usurers and in which the only usurer is a Jew into a faithful representation of British economic life.

Similar trouble arises with Shylock, whom critics have at times allegorically Anglicized as a grasping Puritan. The identification is unconvincing, however, partly because it is just as easy to transform him into a Catholic and, more generally, because he is too complex and contradictory to fit neatly the stereotype of Puritan thrift. It is also unclear what kind of capitalist Shylock is. The crisis of the play arises not from his
insistence on usury, but from his refusal of it. The contrast is between usury, which is immoral because it computes a charge above the principal from the moment of the loan, and interest, which is perfectly acceptable because it “is never due but from the appointed day of payment forward.” Antonio immediately recognizes that Shylock's proposal falls primarily into the latter category, and he responds appropriately, if naively: “Content in faith, I'll seal to such a bond, / And say there is much kindness in the Jew.”

In addition, the penalty for default on the bond is closer to folklore than to capitalism: stipulation for a pound of flesh, after all, is hardly what one would expect from *homo economicus*. To be sure, Shakespeare is literalizing the traditional metaphorical view of usurers. Moreover, Shylock's desire for revenge is both motivated by economics and possessed of a large degree of economic logic (e.g., I.iii.39-40; and III.i.49, and 117-18). But when the grasping moneylender refuses to relent in return for any repayment—“No not for Venice”—he goes beyond the bounds of rationality and against the practices of a ruthless modern businessman (IV.i.226). In short, although it is proper to view *The Merchant of Venice* as a critique of early British capitalism, that approach fails even to account for all of the purely economic issues in the work. Can tolerable sense be made of the play's economics, or was Shakespeare merely being fanciful? To answer these questions, we need to take seriously the Venetian setting of the action.

To the English, and particularly to Londoners, Venice represented a more advanced stage of the commercial development they themselves were experiencing. G. K. Hunter's telling remark about the predilections of the Jacobean theater—"Italy became important to the English dramatists only when 'Italy' was revealed as an aspect of England"—already applies in part to *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet Venetian reality during Shakespeare's lifetime contradicted almost point for point its portrayal in the play. Not only did the government bar Jewish usurers from the city, it also forced the Jewish community to staff and finance low-interest, nonprofit lending institutions that served the Christian poor. Funding was primarily derived from the involuntary donations of Jewish merchants active in the Levantine trade. The Jews of Venice thus contributed to the early development of capitalism not as usurers but as merchants involved in an international, trans-European economic network. Ironically, elsewhere in the Veneto, the public Christian banks on which the Jewish loan-houses of Venice were modeled drew most of their assets from interest-bearing deposits by the late sixteenth century.

From a longer historical view of Italy and Venice, however, *The Merchant of Venice* assumes a recognizable relationship to reality. Between the twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries in Italy, international merchant-usurers were often required by the church to make testamentary restitution of their profits from moneylending. Thereafter, this occupation decomposed into its constituent parts. Without changing their financial transactions, the merchants experienced a sharp rise in status, eventually evolving into the great philanthropical merchant princes of the Renaissance. The other descendants of the earlier merchant-usurers, the small, local usurer-pawnbrokers, suffered a corresponding decline in social position. This latter group, the main victim of ecclesiastical action against usury in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, increasingly consisted of immigrant Jews.

Jewish moneylenders benefited the Venetian Republic in two principal ways. They provided a reliable, lucrative source of tax revenues and forced loans to finance the state's military preparations; and they also drove down interest rates for private citizens, rich and poor, underselling the Christian usurers, whom, consequently, they gradually replaced. The Christian banks referred to above, founded beginning in the late fifteenth century, were designed not only to assist the poor but also to eliminate Jewish moneylenders by providing cheaper credit. Although never established in Venice itself, the *Monti di Pietà*, as they were called, were soon widespread in the cities and towns of the Republican mainland. They rarely succeeded in completely replacing Jewish pawnbrokers, however.

This, then, is the other, Italian historical background to *The Merchant of Venice*. None of Shakespeare's probable sources refers to any prior enmity between merchant and usurer, much less to a comparable motive.
for the antagonism. English discussions of Italy, on the other hand, regularly mention both Jewish usury and Venetian charity, while Bell, among others, speaks of the *mons pietatis*, a bank where the poor can “borrow money in their neede, and not bee oppressed with usury.” From this point of view, the hostility between Antonio, the open-handed Christian merchant, and Shylock, the tight-fisted Jewish usurer, represents not the conflict between declining feudalism and rising capitalism, but its opposite. It may be seen as a special instance of the struggle, widespread in Europe, between Jewish quasifeudal fiscalism and native bourgeois mercantilism, in which the indigenous forces usually prevailed. Both the characterization and the outcome of *The Merchant of Venice* mark Antonio as the harbinger of modern capitalism. By guaranteeing an honorable reputation as well as a secure and absolute title to private property, the exemption of the Italian merchant-financier from the stigma of usury provided a necessary spur to the expansion of the new system. Shylock, by contrast, is a figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval. Shakespeare's Jacobean tragic villains—Iago, Edmund, Macbeth, and Augustus—are all younger men bent on destroying their elders. Shylock is almost the reverse, an old man with obsolete values trying to arrest the course of history.

Obviously, however, the use of Italian materials in *The Merchant of Venice*, for all its historicity, remains deeply ideological in the bad sense, primarily because of the anti-Semitic distinction between vindictive Jewish usurer and charitable Christian merchant. Shylock's defense of usury is not so strong as it could have been, nor was Shakespeare's preference for an Italian merchant over a Jewish usurer universally shared at the time. Indeed, the very contrast between the two occupations may be seen as a false dichotomy, faithful to the Renaissance Italian merchant's understanding of himself but not to the reality that self-conception was designed to justify.

We can understand the apparently contradictory implications of British and Italian economic history for *The Merchant of Venice* as a response to the intractability of contemporary life. The form of the play results from an ideological reworking of reality designed to produce precisely the intellectual and structural pattern described at the beginning of this discussion. The duality we have observed, especially in Shylock, is absolutely necessary to this end. Briefly stated, in *The Merchant of Venice* English history evokes fears of capitalism, and Italian history allays those fears. One is the problem, the other the solution, the act of incorporation, of transcendence, toward which the play strives.

A similar, if less striking, process of reconciliation is at work with Antonio, whose social significance varies inversely to Shylock's. As a traditional and conservative figure, he nearly becomes a tragic victim of economic change; as the embodiment of progressive forces, he points toward the comic resolution. But Antonio cannot be too progressive, cannot represent a fundamental rupture with the past. Giovanni Botero attributed his country's urban preeminence partly to the fact that “the gentleman in Italy does dwell in Cities,” and indeed the fusion in the towns of nobility and bourgeoisie helped generate the Renaissance in Italy and, much later, in England as well. The concluding tripartite unity of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia enacts precisely this interclass harmony between aristocratic landed wealth and mercantile capital, with the former dominant. A belief that some such relationship provided much of the social foundation of the English monarchy accounts for Shakespeare's essentially corporatist defense of absolutism in the 1590's.

A brief consideration of Marx's views on Jews, on usurers, on merchants, and on *The Merchant of Venice* will enable us to restate these conclusions with greater theoretical rigor and to point toward additional, related issues. In the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” Shylock is an exploiter of the lower classes. Characterizing the German historical school of law, Marx comments: “A Shylock, but a servile Shylock, it swears upon its bond, its historical, Christian-Germanic bond, for every pound of flesh cut from the heart of the people.” The Second part of “On the Jewish Question” basically equates Judaism with capitalism, a position that Volume One of *Capital* reasserts in a discussion of the efforts of nineteenth-century British manufacturers to force children to work long hours. “Workmen and factory inspectors protested on hygienic and moral grounds, but Capital answered: ‘My deeds upon my head! I crave...
the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond.’ This Shylock-clinging to the letter of the law …,” Marx adds, “was but to lead up to an open revolt against the same law.” But the extended discussion of usury in Volume Three of *Capital* implicitly reaches a very different conclusion. Usurer's capital, Marx claims, arises long before the capitalist system itself, its parasitic action weakening the precapitalist mode of production off which it lives. But unassisted it cannot generate a transition to capitalism. When that transition does occur, however, usury inevitably declines, partly as a result of the determined opposition of mercantile capital. Finally, commercial capital itself is, like usury, an early and primitive form of capital and, as such, ultimately compatible with precapitalist modes of production. Thus, Marx's comments in effect recapitulate our entire argument on the economics of *The Merchant of Venice*.47

In one instance, however, they lead beyond that argument. Up to now, we have been primarily concerned to show how dramatic form, as the product of an ideological reworking of history, functions to resolve those contradictions that prove irreconcilable in life. But, of course, many critics have been unable to feel a final coherence to *The Merchant of Venice*. In Volume One of *Capital*, after showing how industrial capital endangers the worker, “how it constantly threatens, by taking away the instruments of labour, to snatch from his hands his means of subsistence,” Marx quotes Shylock's reply to the Duke's pardon: “You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live.”48 The passage implies exactly the opposite of what is suggested by the lines previously cited from the same volume. There, Shylock was identified with capital, the Christians with labor; here, the Christians represent capital, Shylock labor. Such a reversal cannot be assimilated to the dualisms we have already discussed: instead, Marx's use of selective quotation succeeds in capturing Shylock as both victimizer and victim.

As many critics have observed, the fact that Shylock is grand as well as pitiable does not in itself imply any structural flaw in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare needed an antagonist possessed of sufficient, though perhaps not “mythical,” stature to pose a credible threat.49 The sympathy elicited by the Jewish usurer, often a consequence of his mistreatment by Christian characters who resemble him more than they would admit, also serves a plausible formal purpose in the overall movement toward mercy and harmony. In fact, by the end of the trial scene most of the Christian characters have fairly settled accounts with Shylock.50 The trouble is that Christianity has not. Although the Christian characters in the play are better than Shylock, the Christian characters *not* in the play are not. In his famous “Jew” speech and in his declamation on slavery to the court, Shylock adopts the strategy of equating Christian with Jew to justify his own murderous intentions (III.ii.47-66, and IV.i.89-103). But by the end of Act IV, his analogies are strictly irrelevant to most of the Christian characters in the play. They have either given up the practices that Shylock attributes to them, or they have never been guilty of them at all: certainly, we meet no Christian slaveholders in *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet Shylock's universalizing accusations are never challenged in word by his Christian auditors, nor can they be sufficiently answered in deed by the individual charitable acts with which the trial concludes. The devastating judgments, particularly of the second speech, are allowed to stand; and they tell us that although Shylock is defeated and then incorporated in the world of the play, in the world beyond the play his values are pervasive.

This bifurcation is a consequence of the fundamental contradiction in Shakespeare's social material. English history requires that the threat embodied in Shylock be generalized; Italian history, that it remain localized. Yet if Shakespeare had fully responded to both imperatives, *The Merchant of Venice* would have lapsed into incoherence. If the play revealed that merchants were as exploitative as usurers, that they were in fact usurers, then its entire thrust toward harmonious reconciliation could only be understood as a fiendishly oblique instance of ironic demystification. But if instead Shakespeare intended the movement toward transcendent unity to be taken at least as seriously as the dangers of nascent capitalism, he needed to present the latter in a way that would not undermine the former. He needed to transform materialist problems into idealist ones (Antonio cannot very well give up commerce, but he can learn to be more merciful) or to project them harmlessly away from the Christian characters in the play (some Christians whom we do not meet own and mistreat slaves). To achieve a convincing resolution, Shakespeare had to begin with a partly imaginary
dilemma. But only partly. For had his premise been wholly imaginary, his treatment could easily have been relatively free of contradiction. That it is not is a testimony to both his strengths and his limitations.

Such a perspective enables us to understand and in a sense to justify the opposed responses to *The Merchant of Venice*, to see in its flaws not signs of artistic incompetence but manifestations of preformal problems. It also suggests answers to the questions with which we began. We need to interpret this play particularly because its formal movement—dialectical transcendence—is not adequate to the social conflict that is its main source of inspiration and one of its principal subjects. Some of the merit of *The Merchant of Venice* ironically lies in the failure of its central design to provide a completely satisfying resolution to the dilemmas raised in the course of the action. We have seen that one purpose of the form is to reconcile the irreconcilable. Similarly, one effect of interpretive methods that view explication as their primary end is a complicity of silence with the play, in which the ideology of the form is uncritically reproduced and the whole, *The Merchant of Venice* as we have it, is replaced by the part, Shakespeare's possible intention.

These inferences may be related to the debate on organic form and artistic totality that has troubled Marxist criticism since the 1930s. It would seem that the above argument aligns itself with those theories that see in the sense of closure or wholeness sometimes produced by a work of art an analogue to reactionary corporatist ideologies designed to suppress awareness of class conflict. An antiorganicist orientation, however, must deny in principle the possibility that the realm of aesthetics can deliver an experience of a contradictory totality or, for that matter, of demystification followed by retotalization. Few plays if any completely accomplish so much: the achievement of *The Merchant of Venice* is oblique and partial. But it would be a mistake to overgeneralize from a single example: some of the greatest works of the early seventeenth-century theater, most notably *King Lear*, do in fact approach this elusive ideal.

Nonetheless, our consideration of the ideology of form in *The Merchant of Venice* from the vantage point of economic history has primarily constituted an act of demystification. An exclusive preoccupation of this sort fails to do justice to the play, however. To locate the merit of the work in Shakespeare's inability to accomplish precisely what he intended hardly corrects the deficiency; it merely betrays the critic's wish that *The Merchant of Venice* were *The Jew of Malta*. The positive value of Shakespeare's comedy naturally includes the significant concerns that it voices, a prominent example of which is the problem of usury. But at least as important is the utopian dimension of the play: what may seem escapist from one perspective, from another becomes liberating. Although the effort of art to transcend the constraints of its time is not necessarily apparent, in *The Merchant of Venice* much of this tendency is right on the surface. For instance, the play persistently attempts to establish a congruence between economic and moral conduct, between outer and inner wealth; to depict a society in which human relationships are not exploitative. Such a vision, quite literally a fantasy, simultaneously distracts us from the deficiencies of our lives and reveals to us the possibility of something better. Utopian mystification and liberation are always inseparable and often, as here, strictly identical.

Similar lines of analysis could be extended to the other major issues in the play. Here, however, we need only suggest the outlines of such an inquiry. The supersession of justice by mercy, of the letter by the spirit, and of the Old Law by the New in the trial that occupies Act IV at once reveals the fairness of the legal system and the ethical premises of the entire plot. Shakespeare's demonstration that the principle of equity is inherent in the rigor of the law is rooted “in the adjustment of the common law to the practice of Equity in the Court of Chancery” during the sixteenth century. Beginning in the 1590's, however, the officials of the old, comparatively popular common law courts and their counterparts on the newer, royally dominated courts like Chancery entered into a struggle that ultimately resulted in the common lawyers joining the militant opposition to the crown. In this respect Shakespeare's ideological project represents an anticipatory and, in the event, futile attempt to reconcile absolutist values with popular, traditional, but ironically revolutionary institutions, so as to prevent civil war. Another version of this compromise is implicit in Shylock's demand of his bond from the Duke: “If you deny it, let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom!”
On the one hand, the case acquires such political reverberations because Shakespeare assumes a feudal conception of law, in which justice is the central peacetime conduit of aristocratic power. On the other, Shylock's threat becomes so grave because the trial is based on a bourgeois commitment to binding contracts. Portia's integrative solution reveals the compatibility of rigor and freedom, of bourgeois self-interest and aristocratic social responsibility. But the profound allegiance to contractual law can make this ideological yoking seem either unjust or precarious, responses that indicate the tension between the limits of reality and the promises of utopia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The relationship between country and city, perhaps the other major, overtly social issue raised by the action, situates the play in the tradition of Renaissance pastoral, a literary and theatrical reaction by the nobility to the two dominant trends of the age—the rise of capitalism and the partly complementary growth of absolutism. The construction of the pastoral world resolves the intractable dilemmas of aristocratic life in the city or at court: the form ideologically reconciles the socially irreconcilable. Rather than representing a species of escapism, however, this enterprise is transformed into a fully conscious process in *The Merchant of Venice*. The strictly causal logic of the action, noted earlier, is identical to the interplay between Belmont and Venice. Because the multiple plot extends the social range of representation, the traditional ruling class, ensconced in the second or “green” world, is tested and validated by its ability to master the deepest conflicts of the first world. Shakespeare's goal is thus, once again, to rebind what had been torn asunder into a new unity, under aristocratic leadership. The symbolic repository of value is the great country house, home not of reactionary seigneurial barons but, especially in England, of a rising class increasingly dependent for its revenues on capitalist agriculture and soon to align itself against the monarchy. The play, of course, remains oblivious of these developments: no one does any work at Belmont; there is no source of Portia's apparently endless wealth; and all comers are welcome to a communism of consumption, though not of production. The aristocratic fantasy of Act V, unusually sustained and unironic even for Shakespearean romantic comedy, may accordingly be seen as a formal effort to obliterate the memory of what has preceded.

The treatment of love is also socially hybrid. The fairy-tale-like affair between Bassanio and Portia is constrained by the harsh will of a dead father, is motivated by a concern for property, and is premised upon the traditional sexual hierarchy. But largely for these very reasons, it produces a love match in which virtue counts for more than wealth or beauty, and the wife is, in practice at least, the equal of her husband. Shakespeare's typical synthesis here represents a response to the unsettled position of the late sixteenth-century aristocracy, whose practices and ideology were in the process of transition from a feudal to a bourgeois conception of marriage. The striking characteristic of love in *The Merchant of Venice*, however, is that it is not unambiguously primary. For Leo Salingar, Shakespeare's comedies regularly enact an unresolved conflict in their author's mind “over the claims of love and the claims of law in Elizabethan society.” But in this play the controlling intellectual pattern requires what is partly a romantic and personal solution to a social problem. From this perspective, however, Act V may also be viewed as a playful and graceful effort by the aristocratic heroine to carry out the serious business of reestablishing the bourgeois assumptions of her marriage, assumptions endangered by the very romantic solution to a social problem that she has just provided.

Since our discussion has been designed to complicate and at times to challenge a Christian interpretation, it is appropriate to conclude by examining directly the religious dimension of the action. The problem is not particularly the tendency of some critics to overemphasize the allegorical meaning of the plot's unfolding, although attempts to incorporate such moments as Shylock's anguished response to Jessica's sale of his ring or his forced, as opposed to his daughter's voluntary, conversion may seem a bit strained. It is rather the difficulty of transforming the play into a paraphrasable meaning of any kind. Founding his argument upon the critical controversy over *The Merchant of Venice*, Norman Rabkin has questioned “the study of meaning” and the “bias towards rationality” in general, pronouncing “all intellection … reductive” because of “its consistent suppression of the nature of aesthetic experience.” Although Rabkin's position is obviously opportunistic in its reliance on a notoriously hard case, it is quite true that “aesthetic experience,” especially when induced by
more than words alone, cannot be adequately converted into argumentative meaning. At any rate, religious interpretation has proven symptomatically incapable of understanding the play as a comedy, except to the limited extent, suggested above, that romantic comedy and Christian myth share a common ritual movement. On the other hand, as part of an effort to elucidate the overall significance of the work, including its aesthetic value, a demystification of allegorical reading can specify the comic side of *The Merchant of Venice*, in its integral relationship to the popular tradition in the theater.

Allegory may be viewed as a utopian drive to assimilate alien experience, to create or restore unity where only incoherence and fragmentation are felt, to confer meaning upon a secular existence that seems intrinsically meaningless. Shakespeare's intermittently quasi-allegorical mode in *The Merchant of Venice*, in its moving revelation of the correspondence between human agency and divine plan, represents the most profound version of the Christian Neoplatonism that flourished especially in the pastoral tragicomedy of the Counter Reformation court. The providential pattern of Neoplatonism in turn moralizes the intrigue, a dramatic genre that at times confirm the Russian Formalist insistence on the primacy of form. When the intrigue serves as an end in itself, rather than merely as a means, issues are raised and then dropped not for their cognitive importance, but for their contribution to the plot, whose elegance is meant to point only to the playwright's ingenuity. Ideologically, the intrigue, unlike Shakespearean comedy, proclaims that people are not responsible for their conduct, that social rules have no consequences, that things will work out, that the status quo is secure. But the intrigue itself actually domesticates a still more anarchic impulse toward misrule and liberation that returns us to the root of comedy. Today, literature often censors some fantasy about work; in the Renaissance, however, when hierarchy was more open and alienated labor not yet the norm, dramatic form often submerged an aspiration toward freedom from social convention and constraint. Shakespeare's own religious interpretive strategy in *The Merchant of Venice* thus simultaneously constitutes an act of humane sophistication and a process of repressive concealment.

But the repression is incomplete, and the internal distancing produced by the subversive side of the play justifies our transformation of the learned surface, a comedy mainly in the Dantean sense, into a deep comic structure with affinities to popular festivity, folklore, and ritual. In general, Shakespeare's synthetic enterprise in an age of transition ran a considerable risk: the ultimately antiabsolutist implication, invisible to the playwright, of even a qualified allegiance to the country or to the common law is an obvious example. But these conflicts mainly concern the upper classes, and much of the material that we have considered and still more that could be cited place the work within the neoclassical literary and dramatic tradition. To understand the tensions generated within the synthesis by the popular heritage, to explore the consequences of what we will later identify as the inherent contradiction between artisanal base and absolutist superstructure in the public theater for which Shakespeare wrote, we must attend to matters of stage position and of dramatic speech, to deviations from the norms of blank verse and Ciceronian prose.

It is easy to demonstrate that the clown, Launcelot Gobbo, has an integral role in *The Merchant of Venice*, that, for example, his abandonment of Shylock for Bassanio foreshadows and legitimates Jessica's similar flight from Jew to Christian. Nonetheless, his physical, social, ideological, and linguistic proximity to the audience comically challenges the primary mimetic action and intellectual design. Launcelot's function may first be illustrated by his penchant for malapropism. In seeking service with the understandably bewildered Bassanio, the socially mobile clown explains that “the suit is impertinent to myself” (II.ii.130). Having somehow obtained the job, he revisits his old employer to invite him to dinner with his new one: “I beseech you sir go, my young master doth expect your reproach”; to which Shylock replies, “So do I his” (II.v.19-21). Shylock's recognition that the apparent misuse of “reproach” for “approach” is at some level intentional points to the linguistically and socially subversive connotations of young Gobbo's double meanings, to the “impertinent” quality, again in two senses, of his speech and conduct.

In his final major appearance, Launcelot begins by expressing his theological concern for Jessica: “I speak my agitation of the matter: therefore be o' good cheer, for truly I think you are damn'd,—there is but one hope in it...
that can do you any good, and that is but a kind of bastard hope neither” (III.v.4-7). The confusion of 
“agitation” and “cognition,” the proposed response of “good cheer” to the prospect of damnation, the ironic 
play on bastardy—all hopelessly jumble and thus demystify the serious religious issues of the plot. Later in 
the same scene the clown systematically and wittily misconstrues Lorenzo’s apparently straightforward order 
that the kitchen staff “prepare for dinner” (III.v.43). His quibbling replies range from an aggressive assertion 
that the servants, too, are hungry (“they have all stomachs!”) to a pretended retreat into deferential humility 
(“I know my duty” [III.v.44 and 49]). In general, then, from his very first appearance, significantly in 
soliloquy, when “the devil himself” prompts him to run from his master “the Jew … the very devil 
incarnation” (II.ii.25-26), Launcelot provides an alternative perspective on the related matters of Christian 
orthodoxy and social hierarchy. On the one hand, his nonsense parodically demystifies; on the other, it 
uniquely combines archaic memories and utopian vistas.

This complex vision is compatible with the disturbingly ambiguous implications of Shylock, himself a figure 
with important ancestors in the popular tradition. Like the vice, he is associated with the devil; is the leading 
manipulator of the action; elicits from the audience fascination as well as revulsion, laughter as well as terror; 
functions as both homiletic foe of Christianity and incisive critic of Christian society; and, accordingly, ranges 
linguistically from rhetorically polished, mimetic dialogue to popular, self-expressive monologue. Thus, 
insofar as The Merchant of Venice combines a formally dominant, Christian, aristocratic ideology with that 
ideology’s qualification by the alternative and partly oppositional conduct and values of other social classes, 
the play escapes standard categories of interpretation while strikingly embodying the central creative tension 
of Shakespearean drama.

II

The preceding comments rest on a number of assumptions that have not been explicitly stated. It may be 
useful, then, to sketch in some of the mediations between drama and society that make it plausible to think of 
The Merchant of Venice as a response to a conflict between two modes of production. I propose to move from 
the play to the form of romantic comedy; from there to the theater as an institution; and from there, finally, to 
the larger contours of late Tudor England and of Renaissance Europe in general.

Any attempt to assimilate The Merchant of Venice to a conventional generic category like romantic comedy is 
bound to be problematic, however. The work stands apart from Shakespeare’s other comedies of the 1590’s, 
romantic or not, and, in addition, from most other comedies of the period, both in the gravity of its subject and 
in its socio-economic emphasis. Yet the play is entirely typical of comedy in its movement toward resolution 
and reconciliation, and typical of specifically romantic comedy in its reliance on married love as a means to 
those ends. Indeed, it is on the embattled terrain of the love-marriage that the ideological significance of the 
form of romantic comedy is to be located. On the one hand, married love represented a progressive step for 
women and men alike, consequent upon the relative liberation of women—at least in the realm of 
ideas—during the age of the Renaissance. On the other, the concluding matrimony of many a comedy may be 
viewed as a transference, defusing, or suppression of conflict. Romantic comedy, firmly founded on marital 
love, its climactic weddings presided over by great lords, dramatizes the adaptation of the nobility to a new 
social configuration, an acceptance of change inextricable from a reassertion of dominance.

The form carries out this function in self-consciously theatrical fashion. First, the characters’ frequent recourse 
to disguise or acting is in part a response to the simultaneous instability and rigidity of the aristocracy’s 
position. The improbable situations confronted by the protagonists are at once signs of uncertainty and 
insecurity, and preferred alternatives to the imposed constraints of daily life. Pastoral, intrigue, lower-class 
disguise, acting, the atmosphere of holiday or of release—all testify to a utopian impulse toward freedom and 
an extended range of self-expression. In the end, playing and pretense often help resolve the problems of the action: the main characters forego masquerade and return to the common conduct of a class whose collective sense of purpose has been renewed and reformed by their experience. Yet the conventional resolutions do not
entirely negate the liberating moments that have preceded. From this perspective, it is possible to understand a distinctive feature of the form: that its power primarily resides not in social mimesis but in the representation of comic, anarchic freedom issuing in an ideal solution. It is from here, moreover, that its most enduring social criticism usually derives. As a rule, the festive side of a play is inversely proportional to both the social seriousness of the subject and the prominence of other, potentially antagonistic classes. Hence, *The Merchant of Venice*, by its very atypicality, reveals the formal and ideological limits of Renaissance romantic comedy.

At least in England, most such plays were performed in the permanent, public, commercial theaters that emerged in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. What was the character of this new institution? The monarchy, the nobility, the clergy, and the bourgeoisie all crucially shaped the cultural, political, social, and economic functioning of the theater industry. Yet on matters of immediate production and consumption—actors and companies, stages and playhouses, playwrights and audiences—popular influences were paramount. More precisely, the theater combined widespread commercialization, relative absence of a proletariat, and extensive regulation of the conditions of production. It most closely approximated, in other words, the postfeudal, precapitalist, fundamentally artisanal mode of economic organization known to some historians as petty commodity production.

As such, the public theater constituted part of both the base and the superstructure, and its function in one conflicted with its role in the other. However aristocratic the explicit message of a play might be, the conditions of its production introduced alternative, lower-class effects. For members of the audience, a trip to the theater was a festive occasion, a species of escape, a form of aspiration, an embodiment of an ideal. Romantic comedy in particular could evoke recollections of popular pagan ritual and thus inspire often legitimate upper-class fears of religious heterodoxy. The same interaction of dramatic form and theatrical mode of production generated socially subversive effects from the recurrent use of lower-class disguise as a means of aristocratic validation; yet stage performance also rationalized and contained such implications, not only by the specific resolution of the plot, but also by the channeling of anarchic instincts that is an inherent part of attendance at a play. The public theater in this respect offered communal affirmation and social ratification, a means of confronting fear and anger in a manner that promoted reassurance about the existence and legitimacy of a new order. The theater within the nation, like theatricality within the play, at least in part served to restore a stratified social unity.

That unity was ultimately guaranteed by an incomplete but stable absolutist state that had temporarily abandoned centralizing efforts after the unrest of the middle of the century and the still earlier era of initial national consolidation. Like the public theater, though on a far grander scale, the monarchy both reinforced and depended on the relative cultural homogeneity of town and country, of upper class and lower. Its social basis was thus at least as complex as the stage's. We might note in particular the presence of an increasingly powerful ensemble of capitalist classes, whose crucial influence is unmistakable everywhere from the broadest issues of national policy to the narrowest details of a play such as *The Merchant of Venice*. But in the end, emphasis on the bourgeoisie or analogies between the state and the theater are profoundly misleading. In England as elsewhere in Europe, absolutism served the interests of the neofeudal aristocracy against those of all other classes, in the epoch of western Europe's transition from feudalism to capitalism. *The Merchant of Venice* is of a piece with this international pattern of development. An English play with an Italian setting, it attempts to come to terms with a stage in the process by which western Europe was undergoing an internal transformation that was soon to make it the dominant power on earth.

III

At this point, it may reasonably be asked what guarantees of validity are possessed by the interpretive categories and procedures that govern the present discussion. Metacommentary, for example, can obviously be turned against itself, opening up a process of infinite regress. The primacy claimed for modes of production would seem to be vulnerable to a similar, if not quite identical, challenge. The reply to these objections, such
as it is, is the traditional one: the validity of the overall argument offered above depends on that argument's explanatory power. Put another way, the organizing hypotheses are designed to provide a paradigm for, and thus to risk falsification across, the range of European drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Ariosto to Racine. Yet explanatory power is hardly a neutral or independent concept, inextricably bound as it is to such questions as what sort of knowledge is being sought and why. And the answers to these questions will ultimately be determined by the critic's sense of what matters most. The founding premise of this essay is—to quote Fredric Jameson once again, this time apparently contradicting his opposition between Marxism and historical narrative—that “the human adventure is one; … a single great collective story; … for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.”

Finally, if we attempt to use The Merchant of Venice to interrogate literary theory, rather than the other way around, it will be evident from what already has been said that the play imposes upon us, in a particularly forceful fashion, the need to account for both its familiarity and its otherness. But it seems more profitable to ask instead what problems the work raises for the specific perspective adopted here. We may approach this matter by noting that Renaissance dramatic theory was fundamentally incapable of grasping the nature or significance of Renaissance dramatic practice, at least in England. This failure was largely a consequence of an inability to theorize the social heterogeneity, and especially the popular elements, that gave the drama its distinctive quality and that have always made it an attractive subject for a radical, activist-oriented criticism. Yet the distance between Renaissance and Marxist theory may not be as great as this formulation suggests. In both instances, the problem is the gap between theory and practice. Marxist theory, whatever its intentions, will tend to reproduce the defects of Renaissance theory whenever it remains isolated, as it currently does, from a now scarcely existent, larger, contemporary movement for social and political transformation capable of once again uniting learned and popular culture, and thereby both justifying a theoretical project like the present one and providing Shakespearean drama with its most resonant context at least since the early seventeenth century.

Notes

7. For figural interpretation, see Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 11-76. The dialectics of the trial scene are stressed by Danson, p. 70; the more general “dialectical element in Shakespeare's comic structure” is noted by Northrop Frye, A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 133.

11. Danson's argument is a sophisticated version of this approach.


18. Thomas Bell, The Speculation of Vsurie (London, 1596), A2r. For similar statements, see Thomas Lodge, An Alarum Against Vsurers (London, 1584), E1r, and Roger Fenton, A Treatise of Vsurie (London, 1611), B1r.


21. Some of these are pointed out by Draper, pp. 45-46, and Pettet, pp. 26-27.

22. Miles Mosse, The Arraignment and Conviction of Vsurie (London, 1595), C3v. See also H. A. [Henry Arthington?], Provision for the Poore, Now in Penurie (London, 1597), C2v, and Philip Caesar, A General Discovrse Against the Damnable Sect of Vsurers (London, 1578), the title page of which refers to “these / later daies, in which, Charitie being ba- / nished, Couetousnes hath got- / ten the vpper hande.”


36. Pullan, pp. 431-537.

37. Wylliam Thomas, The Historie of Itale (London, 1549), U4v-X1r, Y2v, and Y3v; Lewes Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contarini, The Commonwealth and Gouvernment of Venice (London, 1599), T2r; and Moryson, An Itinerary (London, 1617), H1v-H2r.

38. D4v. See also Fenton, P4v, and, for background, Tawney, Introd., pp. 125-27, and Religion, p. 53; Draper, pp. 45-46; and Nelson, The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 73 n. 2. Greenblatt seems to be the only critic to suggest a parallel between Antonio and the Monti di Pietà.

39. For fiscalism versus mercantilism, see Immanuel Wallerstein, The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century (New York: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 137-38 and 149. For possible problems with this hypothesis, as applied to Italy, see Pullan, p. 451. Greenblatt employs Wallerstein's paradigm to help explain The Merchant of Venice, but he does not seem aware that his argument consequently contradicts the position of those scholars, whom he also cites, who rely on the antiusury tracts. See his n. 5.


41. For similar perceptions, see Barber, p. 191, and Frye, p. 98.
42. Curiously, Brown, Introd. to his edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, p. xxxix, denies that the play is anti-Semitic.
43. Danson, pp. 148-50, argues that Shakespeare allows Shylock a fairly strong case, but Draper, pp. 43-44, seems more persuasive in taking the opposite position.
44. See, for example, *Three Ladies*, D3v.
46. Danson, p. 55.
50. This position is most fully developed by Danson. See especially pp. 123-25.
52. A recent attempt to define the meaning of the plot in terms of Act IV is Alice N. Benston's “Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of *The Merchant of Venice,*” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30 (1979), 367-85. See also Brown, Introd., p. li, and Danson, pp. 82-96 and 118-25. On the relationship between trial and drama, see Herbert Lindenberger, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature to Reality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 21-23.
57. Stone, *Causes*, pp. 105-08, and Williams, pp. 22-34.
58. Stone, Crisis, pp. 589-671.
59. Salingar, p. 312.
60. On the special role of love in this play, see R. F. Hill, “The Merchant of Venice and the Pattern of Romantic Comedy,” Shakespeare Survey, 28 (1975), 75-87. For the problem of marriage in Act V, see Shell, pp. 86-87.
62. See Danson’s efforts, pp. 136-39 and 164-69.
71. Frye, p. 93, sees the affinity between the two characters, though in somewhat different terms. Bernard Spivack, Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), generally tends to exclude Shylock from the vice tradition, but he neglects most of the relevant evidence.
72. Although this conclusion rests on the work of a number of contemporary scholars, most of the relevant data may still be found in E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).
73. Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Richard Abrams (essay date 1996)**


[In the following essay, Abrams examines Shakespeare’s characterization of Antonio and Shylock, suggesting that Antonio’s sadness is partially an affectation and that Shylock seeks love and understanding from Antonio]
and Bassanio. The following essay is a revision of the original published version, which was reprinted in Shakespearean Criticism, Volume 66.

My topic is sadness in The Merchant of Venice—Jewish sadness, ultimately, though it is with Antonio's sadness that the play begins.

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.

(1.1.1-7)

Of course there have been attempts at explanation. Antonio anticipates losing Bassanio; he has presentiments of disaster, or “some sort of rich man's melancholy”; he is assailed by conscience for failing to live up to his Christian code. All these explanations are suggestive and some work well in combination, but, to my mind, they give Antonio too much credit. Whether they attribute his sadness to neurotic suffering or to the operation of a higher instinct, they mark him as a man of sensibility, ratifying the character's own pretensions. By these accounts Antonio becomes not just a rich man, i.e., possibly self-made. Rather, as he tosses on his featherbed, they confirm him in his resemblance to the born-rich, especially his soon-to-be rival in love, whose princess-and-the-pea discriminatory refinement will appear in the next scene. While one might otherwise have taken Antonio merely for a successful businessman, his melancholy proclaims him the possessor of that most prized of status markers, un cor gentil. Like the pampered Portia whose “little body is aweary of this great world” (1.2.1-2), Antonio shows aristocratic veining in his propensity to distill sadness from the very air.

That Antonio's sadness may be partly an affectation is hinted early on, but by so boorish a spokesman as to have escaped a hearing. Advised that he has “too much respect upon the world,” Antonio answers, “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano—/ A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.77-79). Notwithstanding the egalitarian bow, Antonio patently views his sadness as tragically individualizing, as a cosmically assigned affliction, not of this world. That is to say, he already models the resemblance he will later play to the hilt, his resemblance to the “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Yet not everyone is stirred by the performance. Discounting Antonio's pretensions of otherworldly woe, Gratiano whistles as though he has just come through a train wreck, “Let me play the fool”:

Why should a man whose blood is warm within
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
......There are a sort of men whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
And do a willful stillness entertain
With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit—
As who should say, 'I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!'

(1.1.83-94)

That Antonio postures for status becomes a distinct possibility, though even if Gratiano's instincts are right, we need not conclude that Antonio's sadness is entirely faked. Sadness you think you have, you do have; living the lie makes it true. Still, there's a gulf between the sadness that worms its way in the heart and the sadness that's dug out for bait; Gratiano again: “fish not with this melancholy bait / For this fool gudgeon, this opinion” (101-02). Antonio's inclination to capitalize on grief will become evident when he uses his
predicament with Shylock to bind Bassanio; and even in his entry in scene 1, I would argue, he is already using sadness for effect. Despite its appearance of world-weary candor, Antonio's feckless apology constitutes a vigorous staking of social ground.

Addressing the “petty traffickers” of the Rialto, Salerio and Solanio, Antonio above all is courteous; he wears his sorrow lightly, prefers not to burden his companions. Yet Antonio will show identical courtesy when, joined by “worthier friends” (Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano), he hurries Salerio and Solanio on their way (“Your worth is very dear in my regard. / I take it your own business calls on you” [1.1.62-63]).³ The important point to bear in mind in negotiating scene 1's genteel hypocrisies is that this is Venice, where men are damned with the accusation, “You grow exceeding strange” (67). In fending off Salerio and Solanio's unwelcome inquiries, Antonio is chiefly concerned to avoid an appearance of difference lest the appearance erode his status. As sad as Antonio may be, and as different as that makes him, he insists that his sadness is not really his, that it's an other—indeed, an “it”—to which his own response respectably replicates his interlocutors': “It wearies me, you say it wearies you.” Moreover, as Antonio dilates on his non-ownership of the thing of darkness he coincides with, his “it” takes on substance and a history:

… how I caught it, found it, or came by it
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.

An “it” you “find” or “come by,” a sadness made of alien “stuff,” no one can decently blame you for possessing. Antonio's unconscious rhetorical tactic of hypostatization thus allows him to hold his grief at arm's length, to keep “it” from infecting him. The figure of contagion is particularly apt in that the first and last terms of Antonio's sequence betray his conception of his sadness as having been “caught” or contracted from a foreign source, “born” elsewhere. In this respect, Antonio's opening lines already display the mechanism that drives his character: his penchant for scapegoating. If one believes oneself subject to foreign contagion, one may wish to expel the infected and infecting outsider; hence Antonio's antidote to sadness—to harass Shylock.⁴ As has often been observed, Antonio's character suffers from a kind of albinism; for a title figure he is surprisingly bland and uninteresting. Yet if Antonio is customarily ineffectual, his wonted passivity throws in relief his outbursts of vehemence. Only when Antonio loses himself in persecuting Shylock does he come to life; only by pursuing the remedy of viciousness can he escape the jaws of his own melancholy.

A play whose opening announces a sadness which soon mutates to its opposite implicitly invites its audience to seek the initially-evoked sadness elsewhere; though Antonio's apology turns out to be turf-protection, his case invites comparison with other, possibly more authentic forms of sadness in the play. Consider Edgar's platitude in King Lear, “The worst is not / So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst.’” Edgar's point, that by representing grief you belie it, is probably best borne out in Shakespeare's plays by Richard II when he abdicates his throne. Insisting that his grief is insupportable, Richard nonetheless possesses the presence of mind to send for a mirror to “show me what a face I have / Since it is bankrout of his majesty” ([Richard II], 4.1.266-67). The impression is distasteful; we feel, with Bolingbroke, that we are watching shadow-play. And though Antonio's modest sadness is a far cry from Richard's exhibitionism, if I am right to argue that, in his own way, Antonio too is engaged in wan display, we may prefer to distrust all instances of self-exhibited sadness (at least, all onstage-instances), crediting only those cases in which, as Kafka writes, the subject weeps without knowing it [“weint er, ohne es su wissen”].⁵ Thus, over against Edgar's punctual reports on his own progress toward annihilation, critics frequently set up the touchstone of Edgar's father Gloucester's despondency. When Edgar rallies Gloucester with the slogan, “Ripeness is all,” Gloucester's pathetic response, “And that's true too,” admits of no rebuttal ([King Lear], 5.2.8-11). The old man's surprising readiness to concede the point confirms his dejection.
*The Merchant of Venice* presents many instances of soreheartedness to set against Antonio's studied sorrow. After Portia hears Bassanio in court offer to sacrifice his new wife to save his friend, she returns home and remarks wearily, “How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world” (5.1.90-91). Indeed, by play's end even Antonio moves in this direction; observing the ills his manipulation has caused, he comments feebly, “I am th'unhappy subject of these quarrels” (238). And there is Jessica: when Portia returns home and the gentiles gather at Belmont, she simply recedes; no one opposes her presence, but neither does anyone speak to her. Finally, there is the sadness of Old Gobbo asking the way to the house of his son and “Master Jew.” (What a world of hopes, to judge by Launcelot's name, must have been present at his christening—all disappointed!) After Launcelot teases his poor blind father by giving him incomprehensible directions, the old man tries again:

Be God's sonties, 'twill be a hard way to hit! Can you tell me whether one Launcelot that dwells with him [Shylock], dwell with him or no?

(2.2.40-42)

Accustomed to hardship, Old Gobbo takes nothing for granted. Evidently he has seen so many disappointments that he builds an expectation of them into his inquiry. Even as he tags Launcelot—for reference's sake—as dwelling with Shylock, he questions whether Launcelot dwells with Shylock. The voice is familiar. In its long exposure to an adversity which it domesticates, makes tolerable, it's the voice we've come to associate with Jewish humor.6

My association may not be as farfetched as it seems. The basis of Launcelot's deception of his blind father in Jacob's deception of Isaac (down to the old man's feeling his son's head to identify him) is well-established, and to this may be added a second, less well-known allusion to the Jewish Bible. Though the Quarto and Folio stagedirections and speech-prefixes of *The Merchant of Venice* give the old man's name as “Gobbo,” in the dialogue his name appears as “Iobbe,” “an Italianized form of Job” according to the Arden editor (xxii). Hence, the poor, patient father becomes a type of long-suffering Jewry. (And the son—what a monicker! Lancelot Job: a macaronic oxymoron of a name!) The hint of Jewish suffering in Launcelot's “true-begotten father” is suggestive and points in an obvious direction. If the sad Antonio of scene 1 gives way to the ferocious Antonio of scene 3, then Antonio's demonized counterpart reverses the movement. Though the Venetians denigrate Shylock as Antonio's opposite, an “unfeeling man,” nothing “harder” than “His Jewish heart” (4.1.63, 79-80), and though Antonio seems bent on staging his own difference from the Jewish moneylender, many critics have been duly skeptical, regarding the distinction on which Antonio's esteem depends as self-serving.7 Though Antonio considers his own inexplicable sadness as his personal cross to bear (“… every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one”), the emotion he lays claim to is Shylock's. To be sure, when Shylock bids for sympathy on this ground, declaring “suffer'nce … the badge of all our tribe” (1.3.106), he loses us; the exhibitionist factor, evident in “badge,” cancels any pity we may feel. But at other times Shylock is less self-conscious, not only not knowing why he is sad (like Antonio), but not even knowing that he is sad. And at these times, Shylock becomes truly affecting. He radiates a sadness that we are asked to recognize as abiding.

Take the famous speeches. If I ask my students, books closed, why Shylock hates Antonio they will tell me that Antonio kicked and spat on him. But Shylock doesn't give that as his reason—at least not at first; he seems not always in full possession of the fact of his own persecution. Instead, in explanation he offers the reasons of the stereotyped Jew: “I hate him for he is a Christian; / But more, for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis” (1.3.38-40). In Antonio's phrase, Shylock, repressing, may be said to be made a want-wit by his sadness.

Or consider Shylock in court when he tauntingly explains his reasons for seeking revenge:
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others, when the bagpipe sings i'th' nose,
Cannot contain their urine

(4.1.47-50)

Many people hear this as a justification of anger but I hear it as a plaint. Timelessly, the bagpipe wails, and old men have trouble with their bladders. More historically, Shylock's images connect to Jewish suffering via the disturbing traditional figure of the Judensau, as Gustav Ungerer has shown, building on Irving Massey's understanding of the gaping pig not as a roast pig but the living barnyard animal, “stretching [its] jaws, almost as if … trying to loosen the joint … the same position [pigs] fall into when they squeal or scream” (11). When Shylock rages he “weeps without knowing it”; like Antonio incapable of deciphering his own sadness, he cannot say where he “caught” this grief, “What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born.”

In my first example above, Shylock explains in soliloquy his reasons for hating Antonio; in my second, although he addresses the court, he might as well still be in soliloquy for all the hearing he will receive. My point, as underscored by the quantity and variety of Shylock's actual and virtual soliloquies, is not only that Shylock is often alone in the play, but that he needs to be listened to, needs to be made sense of to himself. Again and again, in a character trait scanted by criticism, Shylock looks for love in the wrong places. In scene 3, just before clenching in hatred toward Antonio, he abandons his habitual sarcasm, becoming positively expansive on his favorite subject of the patriarchs. He seems to reach out for understanding, letting an insult pass (Ant.: “And what of him [Jacob]? Did he take interest?”) as he continues his digression in a hopeful voice. For a moment we cannot be sure what Shylock wants. Then, when a preaching Antonio interrupts him a second time (“Mark you this, Bassanio, / The devil can cite Scripture”), Shylock himself tells us: “I would be friends with you and have your love” (134). Only now, of course, Shylock is beyond wanting friendship; he is being manipulative, whereas moments before, in his relaxed story-telling mood, his explanation would almost have been true. (In this vein I might also cite Shylock's often-quoted justification of his revenge. Shylock is sometimes accused of “using” his humanity to justify evil. But from a standpoint of Jewish identity, i.e., Jewish pride, Shylock's assimilationist appeal for Christian sympathy to the dullards Salerio and Solanio, whom he far outclasses, is disappointingly complaisant, “a weak disabling of [him]self” [2.1.30]. Shylock gives away too much. Hath not a Jew brains?)

And Shylock seeks understanding and love not just from Antonio but from Bassanio, all the while questioning why he should accept an invitation to Bassanio's feast (but he accepts anyway):

I am bid forth to supper, Jessica.
There are my keys. But wherefore should I go?
I am not bid for love—they flatter me—
But yet I'll go in hate

(2.5.11-14)

Moments later, stung by Launcelot's announced departure, Shylock even spends a good thought on the schnorrer's behalf: “The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder” (44): Well, half-a-thought, but that's still a half-thought more than Launcelot spends on Shylock. Finally, even from a quarter from which Shylock might have expected kindness, he receives only pain. I am always astonished by Tubal's pleasure in twisting the knife. Though the role is often played to a different effect, in reading the scene it's hard to escape the impression that Tubal finds something not altogether displeasing in his co-religionist's suffering.⁸ (A Hasidic saying: “No man's beard ever grows grey worrying about another's troubles” [Jacobson, 19]).
The example of Shylock’s intimate enemy Tubal brings us to the pivotal event in Shylock’s life: his crushing betrayal by Jessica. Though Shakespeare manages the offstage scene of horrified discovery so as to induce audiences to accept at face value Solanio’s report of Shylock’s confused passion, and thus to conclude that Shylock rates the loss of his money at par with the loss of his flesh-and-blood—

“My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! my ducats and my daughter!’

(2.8.15-17)

—evidence elsewhere in the play points up the meanspiritedness of this all-too-easily induced response. Critics have regularly noted the hate-filled Solanio’s unreliability as a reporter of the crying old man he terms “the dog Jew” (14), and have noted, too, the evidence of Shylock’s own curse on Jessica. Shylock wishes to bury his recovered jewels with his daughter, not to retrieve them (3.1.78-80): “A terrible curse—but it is a curse, and not an expression of greed. … In his self-punishing, self-pitying fury, Shylock calls down destruction on everything that he has lost” (Gross 74). To these, I would add two fresh pieces of evidence. Shakespeare’s intent to entrap viciousness, to show complacency its face, appears in Salerio’s adulatory description of Antonio not twenty lines later:

A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.
I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:
Bassanio told him he would make some speed
Of his return; he answered, ‘Do not so.
Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
But stay the very riping of the time …’

(2.8.35-40)

Business! Although audiences stereotype Shylock as rating money above love, it is Antonio, rather, who does so; Antonio conceives Portia’s wooing purely as a business proposition (a view in which Bassanio has encouraged him). Then too, to recall our earlier discussion of Shylock’s characterization, from what we have already seen of Shylock’s reluctance to delve his hatred of Antonio, it is unsurprising that he cannot now locate the true source of his pain: namely, that Jessica seems no longer to love him, that she has left him naked to his enemies. Instead of gazing on that Medusa, Shylock self-protectively converts his grief to grievance. His sadness, again “want-wit,” leaves him impotently raging, with “much ado to know [him]self.”

I’d go further: a moment ago I quoted John Gross describing Shylock's “call[ing] down destruction on everything that he has lost.” Gross assimilates Jessica to the ducats. Petulant, Shylock wants to see the last of her and them, to have everything he once believed is his own, now, finally and decisively, out of his life and heart. I think this gets it backwards. It's not Jessica as object that Shylock assimilates to the ducats. It's the ducats he assimilates to her in what he constitutes as another failed love-relationship. Shylock’s lament for his lost ducats is usually read as a lapsus linguæ: for “Christian ducats” read Christian daughter. But the idea that Shylock’s money has betrayed him along with Jessica, that it too has converted to Christianity (cf. Portia: “Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted” [3.2.166-67]), is not uninteresting. If Shylock’s money has sustained and protected him, if his “living” has long watched over his “life” (cf. 5.1.286), then his genial guardian now goes over to the enemy. His ducats, as they once seemed, betray him by becoming Christian; they can no longer be counted on to keep the wolf from the door.

In the Christianization of his ducats conceived as a kind of a tutelary deity (a reading strengthened, incidentally, by the association of the two sealed bags of ducats with testicles, hence, the protecting spirit of the paterfamilias) Shylock finds cause for despair. In the imagined betrayal of things there may be something
nearly as wrenching as the betrayal of loved ones, especially if, as Freud and many before him have believed, those “things” are at bottom a stabler substitute for loved ones, undoing our narcissistic wounds with promises of their magical support. To draw a Shakespearean analogy, among Richard II's griefs perhaps the unkindest cut is struck by Richard's horse “roan Barbary,” which in a seeming betrayal permitted Bolingbroke to ride his back, and “Would … not stumble … fall down, / … and break the neck / Of that proud man” (R2, 5.5.78ff). Richard had already given up on people some while ago (cf. 4.1.168 ff). But for a dumb beast not to live up to its anthropomorphic potential—this is occasion for a woe that for once eludes even Richard's powers of articulate self-pity (“Forgiveness, horse! Why do I rail on thee” [5.5.90]).

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I want to close on a speculative and sentimental note by musing—beyond the scope of what the play allows—on what could have made poor Shylock happy. Certainly not Jessica's continuing loyalty, which he took for granted till she left him; nor, after she betrays him, could he delight much in her return. At no time can his money-bags have provided great pleasure, but only security, especially if, as argued, his money draws its main significance from its surrogacy for love. (For Shylock to take solace in possessions, though, is not a total lost cause; Leah's ring is the obvious case, and beyond that, I for one would like to know what Shylock collects.) Of course, acceptance from Antonio and his kind is out of the question; and even if it were offered provisionally (say, as a result of his enforced conversion) Shylock would have to be “a soft and dulleyed fool” (3.3.14), a dummy, to trust it. Yet lest my question by now seem frivolous, let me suggest that the play does at one point invite us to imagine Shylock brought closer to human community. Old Gobbo, who like no one else in The Merchant of Venice coins a term of respect for Shylock, is on his way to bringing “Master Jew,” a gift when Launcelot intercepts him (“My master's a very Jew. Give him a present? Give him a halter”). The unsolicited gift, “a dish of doves,” falls within Kosher law and would appear to be offered entirely without ulterior motive. If, in Shylock's view, even a Launcelot is “kind enough, but a huge feeder,” then to Launcelot's father bringing food, the reservation would not apply. To be sure, Shylock would not know what to say to the poor blind rustic, and he might not think much of the cooking, but I suspect he would be touched by the kindness. It is pleasant to imagine a moment of fellow-feeling growing between the two old men, but that may be hoping for too much. At worst, though, not even “old Shylock” (as he fondly calls himself) could find cause for hurt in Old Gobbo's unexpected generosity. A pity the dish of doves never arrived! It was a kindness “lost / As offered mercy is” (Cymb. [Cymbeline], 1.3.3-4).

Notes

1. My text for Merchant of Venice and other Shakespearean citations is the individual play editions of The Pelican Shakespeare, general ed., A. Harbage; the text of MV is edited by Brents Stirling.
2. For Antonio's affliction by conscience, Danson (30-34 et passim); the citation is from Barber (180); the first three views are already evidenced by 1888 in the Variorum note on the passage, and have appeared with innumerable variations since then.
3. Ralph Berry has an interesting discussion of the tempo of social pressures in scene 1, though fails to discuss Antonio's motive of avoiding stigma.
4. Gillies comments that “Antonio as the ideal Venetian (sic) is … systematic in representing Shylock as other. More than just a ‘Jew,’ Shylock is a ‘stranger,’ an ‘alien’ and an ‘infidel’. His Jewish otherness has [a] pandemic quality” (128). Further, “the confrontation between Antonio and Shylock amounts to a struggle over the political and economic heart of Venice. Thus the forum of Antonio's many assaults on Shylock is always the market-place. … Like Christ chasing the money-changers from the temple … Antonio seeks to recover the sacred core of the city from the twin abominations of ‘interest’ and intrusion” (129).
5. Franz Kafka, “Auf Der Galerie” (154-55); I thank Al Cook for rounding up the citation.
6. Old Gobbo's phrasing further tangs of Hebraism at 2.2.86-87, “Lord worshipped might he be, what a beard hast thou got!”
7. Typically, Novy writes, “But if in general Antonio denies or sublimates his own sexuality and instead supports Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, he also denies the acquisitiveness inherent in being a merchant.
and instead attacks Shylock, the double who shares and exaggerates his mercantile profession and marginal social status. Even in this respect, however, he generally presents himself as self-denying, patiently holding in check his hostility to Shylock everywhere but in the scene where he arranges the loan. In his verbal attack on Shylock there, his speech takes on unusual energy; this is the one scene in which Antonio does not speak about being sad. His temporary recovery resembles the relief from a sense of powerlessness and depression that modern psychologists have often found to be one function of anti-Semitic outbursts” (71).

8. In recent productions I've seen, Shylock is played (rightly, I feel) as a Jewish stereotype but then, compensatorily, Tubal is turned into nature's nobleman. The effect is reminiscent of the old television series, All in the Family, in which the producers presented a comically-bigoted Archie Bunker but then leaned over backwards to make the other characters impeccably liberal. Of Shylock's grudging fondness for Launcelot, Harley Granville-Barker writes, “he has a niggard liking for the fellow, is even hurt a little by his leaving, touched in pride, too, and shows it childishly: “Thou shalt not gormandize / As thou hast done with me,” cited by Barber (191).

9. See Muensterberger for interesting and relevant Freudian discussion of the mania of collecting. For “hallowed” consumer items bringing “a benediction to the buyer,” WT [The Winter's Tale], 4.4.594-95.

10. Hassel remarks that “As in no other Shakespearean play, characters so frequently refer to dining together that such dining becomes our sense of the natural Christian condition. Dinners are consistently focal points for celebration and companionship.” He cites nine instances, concluding, “Like Communion these dinners celebrate and reward shared love” (193). My own sense is that nothing so attractive is going on; most of Hassel's nine cases savor of “networking”: sleazy characters “do lunch.” Old Gobbo's reaching out, on the other hand, which Hassel fails to mention, seems to me convivial in the radical sense, an attempt to extend community.

This essay is dedicated to Irving Massey.

Works Cited


In 1615, while visiting Cambridge University, King James I attended a public debate between John Preston and Matthew Wren on the question of “whether Dogs could make syllogismes.” Wren took the negative and Preston the affirmative, the latter carrying the day in part with the following argument:

an Ethymeme [sic] (said he), is a lawfull & reall syllogisme, but dogs can make them; he instanced in a Hound, who hath ye major proposition in his minde, namely, the hare is gone either this way, or that way, smells out the minor wth his nose, namely, she is not gone that way, & follows the conclusion, “Ergo,” this way, wth open mouth.

As Keith Thomas has observed, such questions, far from being frivolous, formed “a topic of notorious philosophical perplexity” for centuries. The young John Milton, for one, traces Preston’s argument to its locus classicus in Plutarch’s Moralia: “Plutarch tells us that in the pursuit of game, dogs show some knowledge of dialectic, and if they chance to come to cross-roads, they obviously make use of a disjunctive syllogism.” Apparently Milton’s God agrees, for in Paradise Lost the Son likewise maintains that animals “reason not contemptibly.” Moreover, in 1615 such a topic was guaranteed to please the monarch of the moment. It was James I, after all, who, when presented with a copy of John Caius's De Antiquitate Cantabrigiæ, reportedly exclaimed, “What shall I do with this book? Give me rather Dr. Caius' De Canibus.” Despite his reputation for pedanticism, King James remained a dog-lover first and a scholar second.

In this respect, as in many others, James helped to set the fashion for aristocratic behavior in his realm, and indeed by the Elizabehan and Jacobean periods, dogs had become popular companions for Englishmen and women of all social ranks. As Thomas has remarked, “It was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that pets seem to have really established themselves as a normal feature of the middle-class household” in England, and the vast majority of the pets in question were canine. I intend to explore here the cultural and
literary ramifications of this trend, with particular reference to the social position of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. This focus is compelling and possibly inevitable; Shylock is relentlessly bestialized by the language of his play, with the result that perhaps only Caliban, of all Shakespeare's other characters, is as firmly associated with the brute orders of creation. But the really remarkable thing about this pattern of association is what it does not offer the audience: a register of the household pet's emergent status as an object of emotional investment. I will argue that the absence of such investment is fundamental to Shylock's dramatic situation, which posits an antagonistic relation between economic productivity and personal companionship; that this antagonism likewise informs the Jew's claims to human dignity; and that, as a result, Shylock refigures the conditions of a social order in which household animals could begin to function as a source of affective fulfillment.

1. A PRETTY PET

On the philological level, this argument gains resonance when set against the shifting semiotic fortunes of the noun *pet* itself. When Keith Thomas alludes to the growing popularity of pets within the early modern English middle-class household, he comes close to anachronism, for non-working, non-eaten domestic animals are only just in the process of acquiring this designation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first reported usage of the substantive *pet* in connection with beasts occurs in 1539 and is, in fact, a Scottish reference—appropriately so, given that the word itself enters standard English through Scottish and northern-English dialects and remains an exclusively northern usage until the early eighteenth century. Thus the royal account books of James V of Scotland mention “Thomas Mervillis Wiffe, in Falkland,” as maintaining “certane Pettis,” among them “Parroquets, monkeys, peacocks, swans, & c. & c.,” and such language does not reappear in the *OED*'s entries until 1710, when Richard Steele can refer in the *Tatler* to an elderly woman who has “transferred the amorous passions of her first years to the Love of cronies, petts, and favourites, with which she is always surrounded.” In this latter case, the “cronies” and “petts” in question include classic examples of the sorts of beasts popularly kept in the eighteenth century for personal companionship; they are

four of the most mischievous animals that can ever infest a family; an old shock dog with one eye, a monkey chained to one side of the chimney, a great grey squirrel to the other, and a parrot waddling in the middle of the room.

By Steele's day, in short, the modern household pet seems to have been firmly established both in social practice and in the linguistic register; during the preceding one hundred and eighty years, however, behavior and language are both far from settled.

To consider the behavior first: the conceptual category of household pet is rendered ambiguous in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England because individuals may and often do form personal attachments to animals that cannot be kept indoors, are wild or only semidomesticated, and can perform productive labor or be consumed as food. By the time of Addison and Steele such personal attachments certainly have not ceased to exist; on the contrary, they persist to the present day in forms too numerous and obvious to list. By the early eighteenth century, however, such attachments have come to assume secondary status within social arrangements that designate hearthside animals as a court of first resort for the emotionally bereft. In the sixteenth century, by contrast, these arrangements are not yet firmly in place; and the ambiguity here is compounded by shifting modes of domestic life that make it unclear what constitutes a household animal and what does not. The lamb, for instance, seems to have played a key role in the evolution of the concept of the housepet; indeed, in northern dialects the word *pet* initially referred to an abandoned—or “cade”—lamb that is raised by hand, serving as a particular focus of nurturance and affection within rural households until the day when it may be returned to the fold. But while cast-off lambs might be both common and relatively manageable in country homes given over to farming or grazing, they suffer poorly the transition to urban life; and it is through this very transition that the modern notion of the housepet comes into its own. Thus, on the
level of social history, the evolution of the household pet leads in a desultory way from the rural to the urban; from farmhouse to city dwelling; from native or near-native animals, secured by one's own efforts and ultimately less comfortable within the household than in the surrounding countryside (the abandoned lamb, Lady Melville's swans and peacocks), to exotics, secured through economic exchange and increasingly divorced from the surrounding environment (Steele’s parrot and monkey).

Moreover, such instabilities in the practice of keeping animals as household pets are further aggravated by a level of linguistic ambiguity, for in its earliest recorded usage the noun pet can refer not only to animals but also to people. This latter application of the term, recorded in the *OED* as early as 1508,12 carries moderately derogatory overtones (as it still does today), most often with respect to spoiled children. Such usage of the noun pet (and the etymologically distinct synonym peat) seems fully contemporaneous with the term's reference to beasts. Thus the history of this noun, which is equally applicable to animals and to their owners, nicely signals the quality that, more than any other, distinguishes housepets as a class: their elevation to the status of honorary people, endowed with names, personalities, privileges, and even possessions of their own. But further, the pejorative associations of the substantive pet also suggest something else about household animals as a class: that their elevation to quasi-human status is not an unconditional move up the social or ontological ladder but also involves a concurrent element of belittlement and even ridicule. In short, if household animals are permitted to become honorary human beings, it is with the understanding that they may become only a certain kind of human being: the allowed fool, the pampered darling, the ornamental nonproducer who is tolerated precisely because s/he cannot be taken too seriously.

This is the social space designated in Shakespeare's only surviving use of any cognate of the word pet, Katharina's contemptuous comment on her sister, Bianca, in *The Taming of the Shrew*: “A pretty peat! it is best / Put finger in the eye, and she knew why” (1.1.78-79).13 As Bianca reluctantly obeys her father's command to return indoors, safely out of sight of her suitors, Katharina derides her as a pampered and useless fool, the object of attention she has never earned or deserved. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, on the other hand, the behavior of housepets becomes a singularly vexing issue, although the animals in question are never referred to as such. Here, as low-comic counterpoint to a plot whose central features include cross-wooing (when Proteus abandons Julia to pursue Silvia) and crossdressing (when Julia dons male attire to follow and regain Proteus), Shakespeare introduces a case of what can only be called cross-petting, in which Proteus's servant, Launce, charged with carrying a lapdog to Silvia as a wooing gift, loses the beast in the marketplace and replaces it with his own dog, the unmannerly Crab.14 The resulting misadventures explore a rich vein of modern comedy based on the principle that animals take after their owners; Crab, like his servingman-master Launce, has little sense of proper drawing-room etiquette, and his lack of intestinal and urinary restraint, in particular, horrifies the play's gentlefolk. As Launce complains,

> If I had not had more wit than he, to take a fault upon me that he did, I think verily he had been hang'd for't. … You shall judge: he thrusts me himself into the company of three or four gentleman-like dogs, under the Duke's table. He had not been there (bless the mark!) a pissing-while, but all the chamber smelt him. “Out with the dog,” says one. “What a cur is that?” says another. “Whip him out,” says the third. “Hang him up,” says the Duke.

(4.4.13-22)

Having thus announced his presence in privileged company, Crab takes his leave by urinating on Silvia's farthingale (ll. 37-39), such antics proving conclusively that he is a “cur” (ll. 21, 48), unfit for the companionship of “gentleman-like dogs.” In the process, moreover, Crab activates a series of oppositions that are fundamental to the present study and that inevitably call into question “the distinction between man, dog, and the mimetic offices appropriate to each.”15 To begin with, the opposition between cur and lapdog, which of course recapitulates discriminations between the socially unacceptable and the acceptable, between baseness and gentility, also articulates itself along spatial lines as the difference between dining and hanging,
the table and the gallows. This difference, in turn, parallels an affective distinction whereby Crab—“the sourest-natur'd dog that lives” (2.3.5-6), “a stone, a very pibble stone, … [who] has no more pity in him than a dog” (ll. 10-11)—is contrasted with Proteus’s lapdog—a “little jewel” (4.4.47), whose status as a wooing gift carries with it an inevitable charge of tender emotion. Still further, Crab’s lack of emotion evokes an ethnic association of central importance to The Merchant of Venice; as Launce observes when recalling his recent departure from his family, “this cruel-hearted cur [did not] shed one tear. He … has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting” (2.3.9-12). And, finally, the opposition between cur and lapdog in Two Gentlemen of Verona arguably plays itself out in terms of gender difference and domestic economy. Thus Proteus’s “little jewel” serves as the canine expression of an ideal femininity grounded in leisure, etiquette, and economic consumption, while Launce’s idea of the proper fit between dogs and women locates itself, on the contrary, within the realm of productive labor:

I am in love … she is her master's maid, and serves for wages. She hath more qualities than a water-spaniel, which is much in a bare Christian. Here is the cate-log of her condition. “Inprimis, She can fetch and carry.” Why, a horse can do no more.

(3.1.266-76)

In sum, the dogs of Two Gentlemen of Verona are a valuable comic resource because they dramatize the collision between two separate and incompatible social realms: one whose customs, attitudes, and material circumstances can accommodate the idea of the household pet, and one in which household animals make sense not because they are cute or companionable or endearing or delicate but because they are useful.

In The Merchant of Venice, as in Two Gentlemen of Verona, there is no direct mention of pets either human or bestial; and to this extent the present essay concerns itself, perhaps bullheadedly, with a linguistic absence. But the play unquestionably contains both human and bestial characters who deserve to be called pets. Moreover, its complex negotiations around various cultural and biological categories—the human and the subhuman, the Gentile and the Jew, the socially accepted and the socially proscribed, the economically productive and the financially prodigal—arguably deserve to be read as manifestations of a historical process through which the notion of the housepet itself becomes thinkable. In effect, the idea of the housepet constitutes a new cultural zone in which the human may mingle with the subhuman, in which economic productivity and prodigality likewise intersect, and which therefore also holds certain consequences for principles of socially acceptable behavior. Mary Janell Metzger has recently noted that the Jew/Gentile opposition in The Merchant of Venice is by no means absolute but becomes permeable under certain conditions.16 The emergent idea of the household pet, I want to argue, provides a model of how to achieve such permeability.17 Unfortunately, this model does not apply in the case of Shylock.

2. YOUR DAUGHTER FOR A MONKEY

The most memorable pets in The Merchant of Venice are exotics, products of early modern Europe's rapidly expanding commerce with Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Of the dozen-odd references to parrots in the Shakespeare canon, for instance, two occur in this play (1.1.53; 3.5.44-46), and I have discussed the sociopolitical implications of these references in a separate essay.18 To these birds must be added the altogether more prominent case of Jessica’s monkey, through which Tubal brings Shylock news of his daughter after her elopement with Lorenzo:

TUBAL

Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night fourscore ducats.

SHYLOCK
Thou stick'st a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting, fourscore ducats!

TUBAL

There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break. … One of them show'd me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

SHYLOCK

Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turkis, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor.

(3.1.108-23)

Here, as elsewhere, Shylock's mortification takes the double form of agony over his ducats and grief for his daughter. But the two issues coincide in the case of Jessica's monkey; coming to mind, as it does, amid accounts of Jessica's extravagance, the monkey serves as a reminder that Shylock's loss of his ducats and the loss of his daughter are, in a sense, one and the same thing. Her betrayal of her father is very largely an economic one, an engagement with patterns of fiscal behavior to which Shylock is invertebretally opposed and which align Jessica at once with the play's "prodigal" Christians (1.1.129; 2.5.15). The monkey serves as a living emblem of such prodigality: it is rare and expensive, exotic and difficult to obtain, and valuable not for its ability to perform useful household labor but rather for its participation in a logic of pet-ownership that presupposes and even esteems nonproductivity.

To this extent Jessica and Shylock seem to display different attitudes toward the accumulation of what Pierre Bourdieu has called "symbolic capital." Bourdieu employs this term to distinguish between "profitable and unprofitable work"—that is, between traditional vehicles of economic advantage (cash, credit, real property, etc.) and those nonproductive and costly elements of social ornament (clothing, food and drink, luxury goods of various sorts) whose function is to secure the consumer's membership within a particular social elite. Jessica's decision to invest in the symbolic capital of a pet monkey—to exchange buying-power for image—distinguishes her from her father, who rejects the particular symbolic exchanges in which Jessica participates.

This is not to say, however, that Shylock himself is opposed to symbolic capital tout court. The bond for Antonio's flesh, for example, constitutes a sacrifice of economic capital in service of ends that are largely, albeit not wholly, symbolic. (As Salerio exclaims to Shylock, "I am sure if [Antonio] forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?" [3.1.51-52]) Likewise, Jessica's purchase of a pet monkey does not simply represent a preference for symbolic over economic capital. It also repudiates a particular symbolic investment that Shylock holds dear, for it transforms the Jew's turquoise ring, the enduring emblem of his dead wife's love, into a purely economic commodity, significant only with respect to its exchange value. The turquoise ring is made the exchange vehicle for the construction of a relationship entirely different from that which it symbolizes: the affective relationship between owner and beast that is the household pet's fundamental reason for being. In other words, the rift between Jessica and her father is articulated not simply in terms of a preference for luxury goods over cash or even in terms of a preference for one symbolic economy over another: it involves a "figurative … undoing of the parents' marriage," a realignment of personal affections such that Jessica's relationship with her monkey comes to stand in for the various affective ties—between father and mother, father and daughter, mother and daughter—represented by the ring that is its purchase price.

In a sense, then, the relationship between Jessica and her monkey serves as a parodic diminution of the family connections that Jessica herself has abandoned in eloping with Lorenzo. On another level, moreover, the monkey also serves as a substitute for the family members whose relations it burlesques; deprived of the parent-daughter bond and not yet furnished with a child of her own, Jessica may redirect what Ruth Nevo has called her "affection-starved, companionship-starved impulse[s]" onto the creature she has purchased with her
father's ring. Finally, too, the monkey comes in a way to mirror Jessica's own position as a Christian wife, for, as Launcelot Gobbo jocularly complains, that status is of questionable economic utility:

> we were Christians enow before, e'en as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs. If we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.

(3.5.21-26)

One need not take Launcelot's nervousness about the price of pork bellies seriously in order to view his jest as revealing. In effect, it instinctively conceives of Jessica as nonproductive, as economic dead weight, and it does so despite the existence of a long-standing cultural tradition that insists on the housewife's importance as a producer of commodities for domestic consumption. To this extent Jessica winds up in much the same position as her monkey; she is a creature valued in spite—and, indeed, perhaps even because—of her manifest uselessness.

If Jessica and her monkey end up in a kind of specular relation to one another, that is arguably because both housewife and housepet experience dramatic redefinitions of their sociocultural significance in sixteenth-century England. Launcelot Gobbo not only fails to think of Jessica as an economic producer; he thinks of her instead specifically as a consumer, one more mouth to feed, a woman whose new-found status as an eater of pork simply creates additional demand for already-limited resources. It can hardly be coincidence that this notion of housewife-as-consumer parallels shifts in the early modern English discourse of housewifery itself, a discourse that remains residually invested in traditional images of the housewife as cottage producer but that comes increasingly to associate gentle housewifery with economic consumption. As Susan Cahn summarizes matters: “where sixteenth-century women had made necessary objects, seventeenth-century women were more likely to purchase them.” The Merchant of Venice recapitulates this transition in Jessica, who flees a household heavily invested in thrift and economic self-sufficiency, enters a household dedicated instead to consumption, and assumes within that household a status defined by her own readiness to spend money on such exotic trifles as a pet monkey. The final irony of this development is that Jessica becomes something of an exotic trifle herself: a “stranger” (3.2.237) whose devotion to an “unthrift love” (5.1.16) is the principal index of her importance as a dramatic character.

That Jessica herself does not register her change of status in exactly these terms is certainly no surprise. Since one obvious consequence of her reconstitution as housepet must be an inevitable loss of articulacy, it makes sense that after her elopement Jessica should fade into the wallpaper of Shakespeare's play, her role reduced to a little idle banter and the occasional dutiful expression of gratitude. But interestingly enough, during her brief moment of glory in Act 2, as she is being conveyed away from her father's house by Lorenzo and his accompanying masquers, Jessica does acknowledge that she has undergone a transformation. She is clearly uncomfortable with this transformation; even more interestingly, as a result of the change in question, Jessica does literally acquire the status of a pet, at least in that term's sense of “a darling, favourite,” or “an indulged … child.” As she hands Shylock's money to the masquers assembled to meet her in the street, Jessica comments with embarrassment on her masculine disguise:

> I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me, For I am much ashamed of my exchange. But love is blind, and lovers cannot see The pretty follies that themselves commit, For if they could, Cupid himself would blush To see me thus transformed to a boy.

(2.6.34-39)
Jessica’s pronounced discomfort here is voiced again in her next speech (ll. 41-44). Yet elsewhere her character seems unmarked by moral squeamishness. Observing that Lorenzo refers to the disguise in question as a “lovely garnish” (l. 45), Grace Tiffany notes that for him, at least, Jessica's transformation carries “a romantic or sexual charge.” So Jessica's unease wants an explanation, which her own dialogue does not provide. The most compelling one has been supplied by Marjorie Garber, who observes, to begin with, that Jessica's disguise mimics the transvestism fashionable among sixteenth-century prostitutes, who would titillate potential customers by displaying their legs in tight-fitting hose. Garber also notes the inverse parallelism of transvestism among female courtesans and boy-actors; then, finally, she adds that Jessica's embarrassment may derive from an additional source as well: her “restaging of the pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad” through the act of impersonating a boy. To this powerful analysis I would add only that the spatial coordinates of the Elizabethan stage implicitly reinforce the social subordination implied by Jessica's disguise. For when she first appears as a boy, it is on the upper acting-level (2.6.25 s.d.); and when, after registering embarrassment over her changed appearance, she agrees to join Lorenzo and the other masquers, it is through an inevitable descent onto the main stage (2.6.57 s.d.). Her assumption of her new role as Lorenzo’s boy-favorite is literally a step down in the world for her, a fact we may read as emblematic of her new relationship to Lorenzo. This is a relationship defined by her personal deference, the surrender of her patrimony, her reduction in this scene to the role of a boy-favorite, and her figurative placement within Lorenzo’s “constant soul” (l. 57) as the passive recipient of nurturance and attention. The master-pet relationship exemplified onstage by Lorenzo and Jessica was not always applauded outside the theater. Thus it may serve as one final irony when the sixteenth-century Flemish jurist Joost de Damhoudere argues that

In consideration of our faith it is held by law to be true sodomy … when one engages in sexual intercourse with Turks, Saracens, or Jews. For law and the Christian religion openly attack, disregard, loathe, and hate all of this sort as nothing more than beasts.

3. HATH A DOG MONEY?

As Jessica translates herself into the role of Lorenzo's wife, she begins to assume something like the status accorded to the other female characters in Shakespeare's comedy as well. Portia, in particular, is repeatedly figured as an inert and distant object of great value and scarcity: her “sunny locks / Hang on her temples like a golden fleece, / … And many Jasons come in quest of her” (1.1.169-72; also 3.2.241); she is a “shrine,” a “mortal breathing saint,” sought by pilgrims “From the four corners of the earth” (2.7.40, 39). She toils not, neither does she spin; instead, her value—concomitant with the patrimony that she, like Jessica, embodies to her suitors—seems to derive from the mere fact of her existence. In this respect, at least, the women of Shakespeare's comedy occupy a position analogous to its Jewish protagonist; although reserving for the women a vocabulary of gentility and compliment while exposing the Jew to a broad range of scurrilous abuse, the language of Merchant seeks nonetheless to remove all these characters from the sphere of economic productivity. For Jessica (and, far less successfully, for Portia) this removal is effected through the conventions of gender and marital status. For Shylock, on the other hand, it is achieved by demonizing the usury that is his livelihood. The status of usury in The Merchant of Venice is of course an inevitable topic in critical analyses of the play and one to which the present essay seeks to make no direct contribution. Instead, the following discussion simply takes it as axiomatic that Shakespeare's comedy presents two different attitudes toward the activity of money-lending: one that regards it as legitimate, productive economic activity and one that does not.

If Jessica’s valorized uselessness finds its appropriate animal emblem in the figure of a pet monkey, Shylock's more antagonistic relation to the world of Christian business is figured through an incessant identification with dogs and curs. This strain of metaphor is brutally overdetermined; during Shylock's first appearance onstage, he is associated with the words dog and cur five times within seventeen lines of blank verse (1.3.111-28). Later, this same pattern of reference recurs in the intermittent insults of Solanio and others (“It is the most impenetrable cur / That ever kept with men” [3.3.18-19; see also 2.8.14 and 4.1.128-35]). Shylock
himself adopts this vocabulary in his vengeful asseveration, “Thou call'd'st me dog before thou hadst a cause, / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs” (3.3.6-7). The vast majority of these utterances, while nasty and short, are nonetheless worthy of examination. Analysis of this strain of imagery should, however, begin by focusing on a cooler and more prolonged remark.

The passage in question comes from Shylock, who defends his bond for Antonio's flesh by arguing that his bargain is no worse than the Christian practice of slavery. That practice, in turn, is comparable to the ownership and maintenance of work animals:

You have among you many a purchas'd slave,  
Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,  
You use in abject and in slavish parts,  
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,  
"Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!  
Why sweat they under burthens? Let their beds  
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates  
Be season'd with such viands”? You will answer,  
"The slaves are ours." So do I answer you:  
The pound of flesh which I demand of him  
Is dearly bought as mine, and I will have it.  
(4.1.90-100)

For Samuel Johnson this speech represents a conclusive indictment of the Christian morality in Shakespeare's play: “I see not how Venetians or Englishmen, while they practice the purchase and sale of slaves, can much enforce or demand the law of ‘doing to others as we would that they should do to us.’” Yet it is anachronistic to read eighteenth-century attitudes toward slavery into a sixteenth-century comedy, and, more importantly, slavery is not a recurring issue in *The Merchant of Venice*. As Richard Levin observes, “the audience has heard nothing so far about Venetian slavery”; what it has heard, again and again, is the appropriation of animal images to figure various kinds of social relation, and this passage is one more case in point.

To this extent Shylock's reference to dogs accomplishes an interesting reversal of the play's overall patterns of metaphorical association. Here Shylock alludes to the Christian Antonio through an animal identification that has been promulgated at his own expense; in the process, he furthers what W. Thomas MacCary has called “the exchange of places between Antonio and Shylock” that structures Shakespeare's play. In other words, as Shylock's identification with dogs includes him in an underclass composed of slaves and other nonpersons, so the bond of flesh inverts the standard relation between slavish Jew and free Christian by asserting Shylock's title to the prerogatives of the latter. Thus as the relations between Jews and Christians are reversed, each term acquires the qualities and associations of its opposite.

This is not to say, however, that Shylock's dogs-and-mules simile constitutes a direct or deliberate identification of Antonio with such animals; on the contrary, the simile gains resonance precisely because of its inadvertence. As Shylock maneuvers himself into the position of his slave-owning Christian antagonists, he inevitably adopts the Christians' habits of speech; and these habits hold certain implicit consequences for Shylock's ownership of Antonio, which, among other things, becomes automatically comparable to the ownership of work animals. But even so, Shylock's identification of Antonio with slaves and of slaves with dogs modifies the Christian language it echoes. More than simply elaborating a dynamic of social inversion and envy, it calls into question the very univocality of the dog metaphor itself as it operates to define social status in *The Merchant of Venice*. Given the ubiquity of dogs in Western culture and their age-old connection to human communities, it is inevitable that they should have acquired a particularly broad and ambiguous range of emblematic associations. Hence in *The Merchant of Venice*, one cannot simply say that a dog is a dog is a dog; on the contrary, the play's canine references are inflected by a variety of cultural traditions. Shylock,
when he compares his ownership of Antonio's flesh to the ownership of work dogs, certainly appropriates a vocabulary of abuse that has been directed at him throughout the play. This is not to say, however, that he appropriates the particular meanings that other characters have attached to that vocabulary. In fact he seems to do just the opposite.

John Caius divides “All Englishe Dogges” into three categories: “A gentle kinde, seruing the game”; “A homely kind, apt for sundry necessary vses”; and “A currishe kinde, meete for many toyes.” Of the three functions performed by the dog as social metaphor, one—the notion of the dog as intimate friend or companion—is a relative novelty, concomitant with the increasing popularity of pet-ownership in early modern England. The other two are far more ancient and deeply ingrained: the identification of dogs with slaves and other abjected individuals, and the association of dogs with predatory outsiders. We have already seen Shylock produce an unequivocal example of the former, but it is the latter frame of reference that the play's Christians most frequently employ to make sense of Shylock himself. Thus, for instance, Gratiano casually describes Shylock as “currish,” but then his language takes a sudden and more feral turn:

O, be thou damn'd, inexercrable dog!
And for thy life let justice be accus'd.
Thou almost mak'zt me waver in my faith
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Govern'd a wolf, who hang'zt for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus'zt itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starv'zt, and ravenous.

(4.1.128-38)

Such invective refigures Shylock not as domestic slave but rather as interloping carnivore; hence the smooth transformation of “dog” into “cur” into “wolf” as the passage progresses. Using the same logic, Antonio observes: “I pray you think you question with the Jew: / … You may as well use question with the wolf / Why he hath made the ewe bleak for the lamb” (ll. 70-74); nor is it extraneous to this pattern of imagery that Antonio then describes himself, in a famous metaphor, as “a tainted wether of the flock. / Meetest for death” (ll. 114-15). Shylock, too, seems to understand that canine descriptions of him seek to characterize him as an untamed and unwelcome outsider: “[You] foot me as you spurn a stranger cur / Over your threshold” (1.3.118-19, emphasis added). As Marjorie Garber has remarked, “words like ‘stranger’ and ‘cur,’ here used to typify the dog as a homeless mongrel stray, resonate with the equally typical period accounts of Jews as homeless and stateless, of ‘mongrel’ race and ‘cut-throat’ tendency.”

Furthermore, in figuring the Jew/dog as a murderer outcast, Gratiano touches on a set of particularly haunting and painful cultural associations. Shylock, he says, possesses the spirit of a wolf, and not just any wolf but one “hang'd for human slaughter.” The practice here alluded to carries with it an inevitable exoticism for English audiences, since England had by Shakespeare's day been free of wolves for centuries. A nameless Italian visitor to England in the time of Henry VII noted that the English “have no wolves, because they would, immediately, be hunted down by the people; it is said, however, that they still exist … at the extremity of this island, towards the north.” John Caius tells the official story of England's wolves as follows:

\textit{Ludwall} Prince of Wales paide yeerely to King \textit{Edgar} three hundred wolfes in the name of an exaction … by the meanes hereof, within the compasse and tearme of foure yeares, none of those noysome, and pestilent Beastes were left in the coastes of England and Wales. This \textit{Edgar} wore the Crowne royall … about the yeere of our Lorde, nyne hundred fifty, nyne.

Synce which time we reede that no Wolfe hath bene seene in England, bred within the bounds
The expulsion of wolves from England thus parallels and prefigures the expulsion of England's Jews, accomplished in 1290 by Edward I. Apart from a very small community of covert Jews concentrated in the London area and a similarly limited population of wolves in the northern counties, Shakespeare's England was apparently free of both. But the hanged animal of Gratiano's speech need not have been a wolf; in terms of Shakespeare's own range of experience, it could far more easily have been the dog to which Gratiano initially compares Shylock. The custom of hanging dogs was still alive both in England and on the Continent: hence the adjective hangdog. Both classical and Mosaic law authorized the prosecution and punishment of animals (usually, though not always, by death) for various legal offenses (primarily manslaughter and bestiality), and roughly two hundred documented cases of such proceedings survive, ranging in date from the ninth to the early twentieth centuries. The vast majority of these cases—fully three quarters of them—occur between 1400 and 1700, a fact that places The Merchant of Venice precisely within their heyday. Moreover, impromptu executions of dogs, some with and some without legal adjudication, remained a common means of punishing game poachers in England well into the eighteenth century; whether or not there is any scrap of validity in the colorful tradition that Shakespeare poached deer in his youth, this latter punishment can hardly have been unfamiliar to him. In any case, by replacing the hanged dog of England's countryside with the figure of a wolf, Shakespeare revises common English experience, transforming it into a spectacle of strangeness which emphasizes Shylock as both foreign and bloodthirsty.

There is, however, a further point to be made about Gratiano's reference to wolf-hanging. Such punishment echoes a practice in certain criminal proceedings in Central Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries: the hanging of condemned Jews between or alongside dogs. This “particularly degrading mode of execution,” represents a “reversed Crucifixion.” Hanged upside-down from the gallows, two dogs stand in for the thieves executed with Jesus, while the condemned man, in conformity to a long-standing identification of Jews as “Antichristi typus,” occupies the central spot of dishonor, his baseness and bestiality apparently transcending even his comrades'.

Perhaps the sole surviving visual record of this practice … was designed to accompany an anti-Semitic poem entitled Die Entehrung Maria[e] durch die Juden, which was published in Strasbourg circa 1510 and which has since been attributed to Thomas Murner. The first, narrative half of this work describes the desecration of an image of Mary by a group of Jews who stab the picture, causing it to bleed miraculously. Some years after the vandalism a paralyzed blacksmith, responding to a holy vision, challenges the principal vandal to trial by single combat and bests him with heavenly assistance, prompting the local prince to hang and burn the vandal in the manner illustrated by the accompanying woodcut. This story told, the second half of the poem then denounces Judaism in more general and wide-ranging terms, calling of course for its extermination. As for the specific events recounted in Murner's verse, they apparently took place in Alsace-Lorraine during a wave of anti-Semitic persecution in the early fourteenth century. I have found no record of parallel events in Shakespeare's England. The woodcut illustrating Murner's poem does not seem to have been reused in other contexts, even on the Continent; nor is there evidence that any of the few copies printed ever made their way to England. Thus any connection between Die Entehrung Maria[e] and The Merchant of Venice must be posited on the basis of broad cultural associations rather than of specific, traceable influences. Yet the same associations are nonetheless clearly at work in both texts.

In the end, the truly remarkable thing about the practice of dog-hanging as it is alluded to both in Die Entehrung Maria[e] and The Merchant of Venice is that it leads to the demarcation of a physical and social space where people and animals commingle: the gallows. The gallows, in turn, becomes available for symbolic contrast with a second such space, generated around the hearth or dining-table by the emergent practice of pet-ownership. I would argue that where The Merchant of Venice introduces Jessica to the latter of
these spaces, it reserves the former for Shylock: hence Gratiano's offer to the Jew of “a halter gratis” (4.1.379). Nor is this argument impaired by the fact that Gratiano's “mercy” (l. 378) is ultimately averted by the play's conclusion. Hangings perform work even when simply converted to images on paper; they need not always eventuate in the loss of life in order to be an important feature of social organization. In this respect the real point of the contrast between hearthside and gallows is that they operate respectively as zones of cultural inclusion and exclusion, where marginal individuals may be either assimilated into the social body under particular conditions or expelled from it altogether. It is through their association with these opposing social dynamics and the spaces used to implement them that Jessica and Shylock embody the semiotic capacities of Judaism in *The Merchant of Venice*. Where the dog goes, there too goes the Jew, and on the same terms.

For Shylock, as for Jessica, the most immediate corollary of this principle is the loss of any notion of productive subjectivity. As stranger dog or marauding wolf, he is cast in a parasitic or predatory relation to Christian Venice. This denial of productivity parallels Shylock's legal status as “an alien” (l. 349) within the Venetian state, and to this extent it supports James Shapiro's recent claim that *“The Merchant of Venice … translates anti-alien into anti-Jewish sentiment.”* Moreover, this translation is reinforced by Shylock's refusal to participate in social interaction except as a consumer of others' goods. When invited to supper, he “go[es] in hate, to feed upon” his Christian host (2.5.14-15), the appetitive image here, as Lawrence Danson has noted, underlining Shylock's “cannibalistic menace.” When Launcelot Gobbo leaves his service for Bassanio, Shylock rejoices that this “Drone” will “help [Bassanio] to waste / His borrowed purse” (ll. 48-51); the Jew closes his “sober house” to “the sound of shallow fopp'ry” (ll. 36, 35).

Through such language, Christian constructions of Shylock-as-pariah emphasize the Jew's lack of legitimate productivity; existing outside the Christian community, he derives his sustenance from it while contributing nothing to it in turn. It is his very productivity, however, on which Shylock, in various responses to the Christians around him, insists. Reacting to his treatment as a “stranger cur,” he poses Antonio the obvious rhetorical question: “What should I say to you? Should I not say, / ‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’” (1.3.120-22). This passage stresses his status within the community that ostracizes him but to which he is integral by virtue of his ability to contribute money to its other members. Similarly, in his later speech on slave-holding, he claims his status within the community by his ability to mimic the Christian practice of owning slaves. In both cases Jew and Christian are united by their equal participation in a system of economic production and ownership coextensive with the Venetian state. In effect, Shylock adopts the diction of his Christian oppressors but reorients its meaning so as to minimize the distance between him and them, and the ultimate consequence of this reorientation is Shylock's impassioned claim to a common humanity:

> 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, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?

(3.1.59-64)

Such language generates a context in which—as Terry Eagleton has put it—“to refuse Shylock his bond means denying him his flesh and blood, and so denying his flesh and blood, his right to human recognition.”

In light of the foregoing, I would like to modify the traditional view of how canine imagery operates in *The Merchant of Venice*. According to this view, the aspersions showered on Shylock by his Christian antagonists exemplify processes of racial hegemony whereby a dominant majority imposes notions of inferiority on others. To this extent “Shylock gradually becomes the incarnation of his own riddle of the flesh: in 1.3 he was but allegedly a cur, [whereas later in the play] he seems quite willing to accept his alleged identity”; in a similar formulation, Shylock “becomes what his Christian antagonists think him to be.” This view of matters...
holds much truth, and I do not wish to discard it entirely; certainly when Shylock warns Antonio “since I am a
dog, beware my fangs,” we see him accepting as fact an ethnic slur that he has previously disputed and that
originates with the Christians around him. To accept the terms of the slur is one thing; to accept its precise
signification is something else entirely, and it is something Shylock never really seems to do. Instead, even
when submitting to the metaphorical constructions projected on him by his Christian compatriots, Shylock
seeks to contest and to modify the force of those constructions. After all, Shylock-as-slave-dog can lay claim
to something that Shylock-as-stranger-cur cannot: an abiding sense of personal productivity and of productive
relation to the surrounding world, irrespective of whether such productivity is honored or rewarded by others.
In this regard Shylock's character may serve to remind us of the complexity and polyvocality with which
myths of ethnic inferiority may be fashioned.

4. MARRY THEM TO YOUR HEIRS

Finally, I want to return one last time to Shylock's speech on slavery in 4.1, which I have quoted at some
length above. Beyond the foregoing analysis, this speech strikes me as especially interesting in that it defines,
for Shylock, the limits of the possible. In equating Antonio with a slave, or a dog, or an ass, or a mule,
Shylock has based his claim to the merchant's flesh on what he considers to be a self-evident and
non-negotiable verity: that the separate strata of society must be kept separate—that to breach the boundaries
of class and race is as inconceivable as to breach the boundaries of species. Hence the rhetorical questions
with which Shylock concludes his argument, questions that bear repeating once more:

... Shall I say to you,
"Let [your slaves] be free! Marry them to your heirs!
Why sweat they under burthens? Let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be season'd with such viands"?

I would like to end this essay with two observations about the preceding lines. First, they describe a condition
that Shylock regards as unimaginable but that his play actually realizes through the marriage of his daughter
to Lorenzo. In arguing for his right to Antonio's flesh, Shylock has activated a series of homologies—between
owner and property, free man and slave, Christian and Jew, human being and animal—in which the
traditionally dominant terms gradually trade places with their inferior counterparts, so that the currish Jew
Shylock, by virtue of his status as owner of another man, can come to occupy the place of the free Christian.
Within the framework of this shift of signification, however, the antagonistic relation of Jew to Christian,
slave to free man, animal to human being, remains absolute. There is no room in Shylock's imagination for
these terms to mark anything other than an irreconcilable opposition whose only scope for change lies in the
question of what group is privileged and what group is not. To this extent the similarities between Shylock
and his Christian antagonists seem more important than their differences.

Yet Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo calls into question the very forms by which Shylock conceives social
opposition itself. Superficially, at least, Jessica is enfranchised through her matrimony to Lorenzo; the couple
share bed and board; and as Lorenzo's wife, Jessica assumes a social role seemingly defined by the certainty
that she will never “sweat … under burthens.” In this respect the wedding of Lorenzo to Jessica seems to mark
something that we might almost call social progress. At the very least, it introduces us to a specific form of
social relation that Jessica's father never acknowledges as existing within the realm of practical possibility.

But critics have been resolutely—and rightly—suspicious of the happiness that Christian matrimony holds in
store for Jessica, and this fact leads me to a final point. Put simply, the point is this: Shylock's inability to
conceive of cross-race, cross-class cohabitation is paralleled by his inability to imagine a world with
household pets in it. (Recall that for Shylock even the household cat is a “harmless necessary” creature
[4.1.55, emphasis added].) I have already noted that when Shylock and his antagonists use canine imagery as
a vehicle for abuse and recrimination, they tend to conceive of the dog not as a pet but either as a work animal
or as an outcast scavenger; it is understandable, as scholars regularly observe, that “Shakespeare's own opinion of dogs seems to be contemptuous.” By Tudor times, however, it was increasingly popular to think of dogs not only as lowly drudges or feral interlopers but as embodiments of loyalty, courage, and other virtues. Thus in 1594, some two to three years before Shakespeare composed *The Merchant of Venice*, Sir John Davies could write,

In that, for which all men despise a dogge,  
I will compare thee better to a dogge.  
Thou art as faire and comely as a dogge,  
Thou art as true and honest as a dogge,  
Thou art as kinde and liberall as a dogge,  
Thou art as wise and valiant as a dogge.(55)

One obvious source for such positive reappraisals was the high favor in which gentlemen's hunting-dogs were generally held; a developing fad for ladies' lapdogs also helped to improve the cultural status that dogs enjoyed in England. As for these latter animals, they embody the conditions that define the household pet as we know it today. Valued for companionship rather than for their ability to perform work, they are given personal names, are never eaten, and are admitted into all areas of the household. As John Caius observed, such dogs make

instrumentes of folly … for misings mistrisses to beare in their bosoms, to keepe company withal in their chambers, to succour with sleepe in bed, and nourishe with meate at bourde.56

Here, in this apotheosis of the Elizabethan lapdog, one again encounters the terms of a social amalgamation that Shylock, in his speech on slavery, clearly regards as unthinkable, and that has been actualized in the wedding of Shylock's daughter to Lorenzo. Common company, common bed, common board, and a common absence of labor: these terms equally define the circumstances of Shakespeare's Jessica and of Caius's toy spaniel. Indeed, we may see in Jessica's marriage the realization of a relation defined by the loss of what Shylock holds most dear: a relation in which one earns comfort and privilege by relinquishing the obligation—and right—to perform meaningful work, and in which one achieves security by becoming a sort of professional plaything. To Shylock such an exchange is inconceivable for dogs and daughters alike.

**Notes**

2. Ball, 23.
7. Thomas, 110.
10. [Steele,] 4:516.

12. *OED* “pet” sb.1, 2.a.


14. Edward Berry has demonstrated one dimension of the parallelism here by pointing out that Launce's relationship to Crab involves a “curious blend of love and loathing, self-sacrifice and self-interest” also intrinsic to Julia's pursuit of Proteus (*Shakespeare’s Comic Rites* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984], 124).


17. By the same token, it is worth noting Peter Berek's recent remark that “in the sixteenth century … the legal bar to Jewish residence in England began to be permeable” (“The Jew as Renaissance Man,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51.1 [1998]: 128-62, esp. 128). In this respect the historical and dramatic records seem to converge nicely.


19. For a discussion of the prodigal-son motif as it operates within *The Merchant of Venice*, see Susan McLean (“Prodigal Sons and Daughters: Transgression and Forgiveness in *The Merchant of Venice,*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 32.1 [1996]: 45-62), who argues that “Shakespeare uses the Prodigal Son motif to reinforce the sympathies of the audience with his Christian characters and to condemn the self-righteousness of Shylock” (60).

20. For a discussion of the interrelation between symbolic and economic capital, an interrelation that Bourdieu claims to have been occluded by traditional economism of both the capitalist and marxist stripes, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 171-83. I am indebted to Natasha Korda's essay “Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*” (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 47 [1996]: 109-31) for suggesting the relevance of Bourdieu's analysis to the study of Shakespeare's comedies.


24. Susan Cahn thus discusses the traditional “importance of the housewife's skilled contribution to her family, and her national economy” in early modern England, while likewise noting that this importance was “eroding” in the Tudor and Stuart periods (*Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500-1660* [New York: Columbia UP, 1987], 34-50, esp. 39). Michael Roberts argues that “much of women's work” was consigned “to a residual sphere of activity” in seventeenth-century England as a result of changes in how “‘trades’ … were defined” in the period (“‘Words they are Women, and Deeds they are Men’: Images of Work and Gender in Early Modern England” in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin, eds. [Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1985], 122-80, esp. 140). Korda notes that “prior to Shakespeare …, shrews were typically portrayed as reluctant producers within the household economy” (110). Alice Clark, writing earlier than Cahn et al., broadly states that “in the seventeenth century the idea is seldom encountered that a man supports his wife” (*Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* [1919; rpt. New York: August M. Kelley, 1968], 12).

25. Cahn, 63.

26. *OED*, “pet” sb.1, 2.b, 2.a.

29. Garber, 87-88.
30. Garber, 89.
31. “[C]onsideratione nostrae fidei, pro vera Sodomitica iure habetur … cum quis naturali venere vitur cum Turcis, Saracenis, aut Iudeis. Nam huiusmodi omnes, Iura & religio Christiana non secùs, quam bestias … aperì oppugnant, negligunt, fastidiunt, oderunt” (Joost de Damhoudere, *Enchiridion Rerum Criminalium* [Louvain, 1554], sig. Aa⁴°). Abbreviations in the original Latin text have been silently expanded in this transcription.
32. For one example of the rich and detailed critical commentary on this subject, see Lawrence Danson. *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1978), who points out the irony that “the Elizabethan moneylender was highly visible, well known to all, and unimpeachably a non-Jew” (141-57, esp. 147). For more recent commentary, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 98-100.
36. John Caius, *Of Englishe Dogges, the diversities, the names, the natures, and the properties …*, trans. Abraham Fleming (London, 1576), sig. B1⁴°. The social basis of this distinction is clear in such phrases as “gentle kinde,” although for Caius the dog as housepet and the dog as aristocratic hunting animal occupy the same space. Additionally, dogs possessed a broad range of traditional spiritual and moral significations that, although not immediately relevant to the present study, may also inform *The Merchant of Venice*. Beryl Rowland, for example, has noted a conventional medieval association of dogs with “the Devil, the hound of hell” (*Animals With Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism* [Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1973], 60); likewise, E. E. Stoll has noted that Judaism is identified with the Devil nine times in *The Merchant of Venice* (*Shakespeare Studies, Historical and Comparative in Method* [New York: Macmillan, 1927], 270-71).
37. Harry Berger Jr. has recently discerned a “canine connection” between the servant Launce in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the character of Falstaff in his capacity as companion to Prince Hal; see “The Prince’s Dog: Falstaff and the Perils of Speech-Prefixity,” *SQ* 49 (1998): 40-73, esp. 64-66. Caius reverses the terms of the metaphor when he describes the setter as “a creature domesticall or housholde seruaunt brought vp at home with offalls of the trencher & fragments of victualls” (sig. C4⁴°).
41. As scholars such as David Katz have shown, Jews continued to inhabit Tudor England (*The Jews in the History of England, 1485-1850* [Oxford: Clarendon Press], 1-14), albeit surreptitiously and in small numbers; likewise, during the reign of Henry VI, one Sir Robert Plumpton could still receive land in Nottinghamshire “called Wolfhunt Land, held by the service of winding a Horn, and Chasing or Frighting the Wolves in the Forest of Shirewood” (Thomas Blount, *Fragmenta Antiquitatis: Antient Tenures of Land* [London, 1679], 94). However, these are exceptional reports.


48. Shapiro, 189.

49. Danson, 159.


52. MacCary, 162.


56. Caius, sigs. D2v-D3r.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Gary Rosenshield (essay date 2002)**


*[In the following essay, Rosenshield examines Antonio's role as an economic ideal—a Christian merchant—in The Merchant of Venice.]*

For several millennia conservative writers have seen their times as corrupted by a lust for material gain and thus inherently destructive of the moral, spiritual, and religious values of an idealized older order. This attitude frequently manifests itself in quixotic nostalgia, but just as often it elicits a rancorous response. One need only recall Dostoevsky's diatribe against the Jewish idea in *The Diary of a Writer* (March 1877), which
he associates with the modern world dominated by finance and the stock market, in short, by a materialistic idea that signals the death knell of the old world of Christian love and fellowship.

Thus, it is not for nothing that over there Jews are reigning everywhere over stock exchanges; it is not for nothing that they control capital, that they are the masters of credit, and it is not for nothing—I repeat—that they are the masters of international politics, and what is going to happen in the future is only known to the Jews themselves: their reign, their complete reign is approaching! We are approaching the complete triumph of ideas before which the sentiments of humanity, thirst for truth, Christian and national feelings, and even those of national dignity, must bow. On the contrary, we are approaching materialism, a blind, carnivorous craving for personal material welfare, a craving for personal accumulation of money by any means—this is all that has been proclaimed as the supreme aim, as the reasonable thing, as liberty, in lieu of the Christian idea of salvation only through the closest moral and brotherly fellowship of men.1

Shakespeare, on the other hand, hardly sees a solution to the threat of materialism in a resurrection of the past; nor does he despair over modernity. In The Merchant of Venice, he may be suggesting a compromise between the old and new age. In fact, the play may be seen as an experiment, metaphorically testing the viability in the contemporary world of a marriage of capital and Christian ideals.2 The question that the play implicitly asks is not whether Shylock can become a Christian but whether Antonio can be both a Christian and a merchant: that is, a merchant and not in some way also a Jew. Is it possible for a Christian to escape “Judaization” in a world rapidly being transformed by a mercantile and pre-capitalist economy? And if Antonio cannot escape the corruption of finance, can anyone?

Much of the historical criticism of the play has dealt with the way in which Shylock's and Antonio's roles reflect the economic realities of Shakespeare's age. Different conceptualizations of the economic and social realities of late sixteenth-century England, however, lead to different interpretations of these roles. Shylock may appear as a precursor of modern capitalism and his usury as an early form of banking or money capital, a position traced and elucidated by Richard Halpern.3 Or he may represent, as Walter Cohen has remarked, a “quasifeudal fiscalism,” which would make him more a “figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval,” “an old man with obsolete values trying to arrest the course of history.” Antonio, by contrast, emerges “as a special instance of bourgeois mercantilism, a harbinger of modern capitalism.”4 In any case, in The Merchant of Venice, Shylock, Jew, and usurer emerge as synonymous opprobrious terms.5 Antonio is neither Jew nor usurer, but a Christian merchant. How Christian a merchant he is, and can be, in the new age is one of the most important issues explored by the play.

Although The Merchant of Venice must insist on the distinction between usurer and merchant in order to argue the possibility of a Christian merchant, we know that the difference between the two was not always clear in late sixteenth-century England. Before they were expelled from some European countries and restricted in their professions in others, Jews figured prominently as merchants in international trade, taking advantage of their contacts with their coreligionists throughout the Mediterranean. During this time, the term Jew was as associated with trade as with usury.6 Though usury had traditionally been associated with an unproductive, sterile form of profit, a purely monetary exchange, (“barren metal” 1.3.131)—profit from trade being more favorably associated with the exchange of goods or productive labor7—European mercantile society was seriously challenging the moral distinction between lending at interest and other forms of profit. In the sixteenth century, the English Parliament spent a good deal of time debating and amending laws regulating lending at interest (a common English practice),9 which became legal after 1571. Thereafter, the term usury, at least in a legal sense, seems to have been reserved for excessive interest (extortion), interest greater than ten percent.10 Before 1571, since lending money incurred significant risk, interest rates were considerably higher.
Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* gives a rather rosy view of the merchant class of London, but we know that many merchants were regularly involved in usury, especially after 1571. William Ingram notes that after 1571, “many more people engaged themselves in the business, borrowing became respectable, and the covert procedures of the underground moneylenders quickly surfaced as the standard practice of the newly legalized brokers.” John Langley, the uncle of Francis Langley (a short-time owner of The Swan playhouse), was a merchant-goldsmith who held the position of Lord Mayor of London for one year. Though he did not lend money, after 1571 goldsmiths and scriveners were almost euphemisms for moneylenders. Francis Langley, himself a draper, was continually involved in moneylending, often borrowing and lending at the same time. There were few loans that he entered into that did not include a bond (a forfeiture penalty) as an essential aspect of the contract. Since he forfeited on many of his loans, as did many who borrowed from him, he spent a good deal of his life in court, suing and being sued.

Shakespeare does not ignore the English reality, he circumvents it by setting the action in Venice, where, for want of more accurate information, the distinction between usurer and merchant and the possibility of a self-sacrificing merchant-Christian may be more credibly entertained. According to Walter Cohen, English history could only evoke Shakespeare's fears about capitalism. Italian history, or rather Shakespeare's re-creation of it, could allay those fears. Venice also gives the merchant the possibility of circulating primarily in non-merchant circles, with courtiers and the representatives of aristocratic landed wealth, lest he be tainted by intercourse with other less upright merchants. But the Italian strategy is made a little more difficult because of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, a work which takes place close enough to Italy, and to which *The Merchant of Venice* is obviously reacting.

The *Jew of Malta* presents a rather grim picture of the new world emerging at the end of the sixteenth century. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all motivated by the same desire for power and material gain. The spirit of the new age is explicitly presented in the prologue by Machiavel, who cautions the audience that those who do not heed his words will pay the consequences in lost wealth and power. He counts “Religion but a childish Toy” and holds that “there is no sinne but ignorance.” Barabas is his model, whose “mony was not got without my meanes.”

At the beginning of the play, Barabas and the Jews of Malta seem unjustly treated by their Christian rulers, who strip the Jews of their wealth to pay tribute to the Turkish Sultan. At first, the reader might harbor sympathy for Barabas's anger and desire for revenge. But after the second act, Barabas turns into a monster, poisoning his own daughter, along with all the nuns in the nunnery where she has taken refuge. Moreover, as his words make clear, he has not so much changed his ways as concentrated his stratagems. He brags that even in his youth, long before the action of the play begins, he preyed upon the Christian population of Europe.

As for myselfe, I walke abroad a nights,  
And kill sicke people groaning under walls:  
Sometimes I goe about and poyson wells ...

Being young I studied Physicke, and began  
To practise first upon the Italian;  
There I enrich'd the Priests with burials,  
And always kept the Sexton's arms in ure  
With digging graves and ringing dead mens knells;

(2.3.178-189)

Cartelli and Humphreys have argued that the Christians in the play are no better than Barabas: they have the same desires, commit the same villainies, but are just more skillful in concealing their thoughts and actions, mostly beneath a veneer of religious piety and civic duty. The Duke's main motivation is power and
revenge. And even the monks sing a different tune when gold is at issue. But *The Jew of Malta* paints a somewhat inconsistent, if not ambivalent, picture of the new world. On one hand, the monster Barabas of the last three acts epitomizes the economic egoism of the new age. On the other, the play exhibits a certain embarrassed admiration for its hero-villain, who appears less interested in revenge, gold, and power than in excitement, risk, and adventure. At times Barabas seems to “rise” above Christian, Jews, and Muslims by realizing their unconscious—or perhaps subconscious—criminal fantasies.

*The Merchant of Venice* appeared several years after *The Jew of Malta*. The writing may have received impetus from the successful revival of Marlowe's play in 1596, during the trial of the Queen's doctor, Rodrigo Lopez, a Portuguese-born Marrano who was found guilty of conspiring to poison the queen and subsequently executed. Many have noted the important differences between Barabas and Shylock, not to speak of other significant differences in the plays. Continually humiliated in the market place by his Christian rival Antonio, Shylock is a much lesser figure than Barabas. His scope is smaller, and even when he manages to find Antonio in his power, he is thwarted by no more than a young lady posing as a judge. But what is most different about the plays is not so much the characterization or even the image of the Jew, but their authors' different attitudes toward the new world, in which the lust for gold and self-aggrandizement militates against the preservation of older Christian values. In Marlowe, the modern world has arrived. Christian values appear only sporadically, and even then mostly in the hypocritical posturing of unscrupulous statesmen and clergymen. Shakespeare still entertains the hope, not that the Golden Age of Christian fellowship can return, but that Christian values can hold their own, if not thrive, midst the social and economic realities of the new age.

*The Merchant of Venice* makes several different transformations of *The Jew of Malta*. First, it carries over the Jewish and Christian enmity from Marlowe's play, but alters it considerably. The Shylock/Barabas plot structure is similar. Barabas seeks revenge against his Christian tormentor the Duke (he is responsible for the death of the Duke's son and the Turkish capture of Malta), but in the end the Duke turns the tables on Barabas and engineers Barabas's death in a boiling cauldron. Shylock's pursuit of vengeance against Antonio concludes with Antonio's complete victory. But Shylock is not only a scaled-down version of the romantic villain, even in his vengefulness he is presented as far more human. Furthermore, whereas Marlowe presents Barabas and the Duke, the Jew and Christian, as equally corrupt, two forms of the same modern phenomenon, Shakespeare sharply separates his Jew and Christian to emphasize the moral and spiritual chasm between Jewish and Christian worlds, the split between the pursuit of revenge and usurious capital on one hand and Christian charity and merchant “venture” on the other.

Shakespeare must highlight the essential differences between Shylock and Antonio to test the viability of an alternative to the Barabases, the Shylocks, and even the Dukes of the new world. Assuming that the modern world will be ruled by merchants, the play needs to show if its masters can also be Christian and noble. The Christian antithesis is already at hand in Shylock. However humanized, he conforms, for the most part, to a medieval Jewish stereotype. But a Christian merchant must be created who can be sharply differentiated from the Jewish usurer. Gross has seen the difference between Shylock and Antonio precisely in this dichotomy.

Between them, Antonio and Shylock represent two extreme versions of Economic Man, one benevolent, the other malign. Jekyll-Antonio embodies the *fantasy* that you can enjoy the benefits of economic enterprise, and confer them on your society, without being competitive and self-assertive. Hyde-Shylock is the capitalist as total predator, conferring good upon no one except himself. They are twin aspects of the same phenomenon; and a tremendous amount of the play's energy is spent keeping them apart. … [Antonio] represents an attempt to resolve—or deny—the tension between Christian ideals of renunciation and the pursuit of worldly wealth.

[italics mine]
Antonio consciously asserts and defines himself as a Christian merchant: that is, the antithesis of Shylock. He not only refuses to take interest (perhaps even in contrast to his fellow Christian merchants), but engages in a crusade to humiliate Shylock at every opportunity and to assist Christians who have suffered from Shylock’s usury. Shakespeare not only dissociates Antonio’s profession from Shylock’s usury, he elevates Antonio’s mercantile activities, presenting them as regal, noble, knightly, courteous, and gentle. Salerio describes Antonio’s ships as great seigneurs who fly by their competitors as on woven wings. Grantanio refers to him as “that royal merchant, good Antonio” (3.2.239), as does the duke at the beginning of the trial (4.1.29). Bassanio calls him that “one in whom / The ancient Roman honor more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy” (3.2.294-96). The whole enterprise, fraught with danger, seems adventurous, bold, daring, and risky, perhaps the newest knightly profession, surely not for the faint of heart. Antonio is a new breed of merchant prince. But given the usurious activities of English merchants of the time, Shakespeare not only had to change the locus of the action to Venice, he had to play his Christian merchant against type. As Holmer writes, “Shakespeare is almost avant garde in abandoning the old, despicable usurer-merchant figure in drama for the new, heroic merchant-prince figure that begins to gain dominance in popular literature in the 1590s.”

Frank Whigham, who has emphasized the importance of style and appearance in creating reality in *The Merchant of Venice*, notes how “stylized assertion” in Salerio's speech becomes one of the “tools” in Antonio’s defense as merchant. Style dresses mercantile enterprise in heroic clothes. On the other hand, “the intermixture of heroic and mercantile language emphasizes their relation to each other; the tonal disjunction suggests an ironic reading, since in romantic heroics financial foundations are usually suppressed as tawdry.” Bassanio wins Portia, the landed aristocrat and arbiter of style in the play, primarily through wit, not bravado or money. Although Shakespeare problematizes the issue of appearance and reality, he often plays both ends against the middle, using appearances as “a laudable decoration or revelation of consonance of inner and outer value,” as he does in the representation of Antonio and Bassanio, while exposing the disjuncture between appearance and reality in the words of Shylock, who like

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.  
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!  

(1.3.95-99)

Poetry is used to raise the merchant socially and ethically. Antonio, appears, like Bassanio, in search of “the golden fleece” (1.1.170), not “money-bags” (2.5.18). Shylock is aesthetically, thus morally, deficient, and as Antonio finds out too late, not to be trusted.

Antonio remains a model of friendship, love, and care in his relationships with all his Christian acquaintances—and no small virtue in Venice. Although some critics argue that Antonio exploits his virtue to manipulate Bassanio, to most commentators Antonio is an exemplary friend. He is loved and revered by all the Christians who know him. Even Portia, who sees Antonio as a rival for her husband's affections, revere his character and appreciates—with reservations, of course—his willingness to die for Bassanio. Ready to do everything in his power to help his friend, Antonio goes against his own principles (breaking “a custom” 1.3.61) by borrowing money from Shylock. One might argue that Antonio also enters into the bond because he does not suspect that he is undergoing a significant risk. Perhaps he does not take Shylock’s penalty—the pound of flesh—seriously: that is, he regards it as an interest-free loan. “Hie thee, gentle Jew. The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind” (1.3.174-75). But Antonio is not naive; he is a rich merchant who knows the ways of the world, the international rules and pitfalls of big business. He knows Shylock hates him above all other Christians and knows that Shylock must be relishing the opportunity of avenging himself on his worst enemy. Given the wide-spread currency of the blood accusation, Antonio understands, on some level, the implications of the bond and Shylock’s seriousness. He is thus willing, if need be, to sacrifice himself for
his friend in imitation of Christ. One may even view Antonio's actions against Shylock as motivated less by hatred than by a desire to protect fellow Christians. The situation demands aggressive behavior; when engaging the devil, one needs to fight fire with fire. Few in Shakespeare's audience would have found much fault with any of Antonio's actions against a Jew in defense of his fellow Christians.

If Antonio were an exemplary Christian merchant, the play would, as many have argued, constitute a standard comedy in which, according to generic expectations, the world is set right at the end. But he is not. And that is why we must not only read the play otherwise but also see it as containing a contravening vision about the modern age both in Christian Venice and, by extension, Christian London. But to read the play otherwise, we must read Antonio otherwise, arguing not only for a less exemplary Antonio, but a more complicated and conflicted one as well, an Antonio who is closer to Shylock, in some ways, than he would care to imagine. It is not perverse of modern readers to see Portia's comment about which is the merchant here and which the Jew as a textual invitation to explore similarities, especially since the differences are made explicit. Antonio's hatred of and obsession with Shylock is something more than just a justifiable Christian reaction to the person and idea of Jew and usurer. It is an overreaction betraying Antonio's subconscious, or more probably unconscious, fears about himself and his profession, about who he is and what he is.

Interpretation has understandably focused on Shylock's hatred of Antonio and the revenge that it activates when Antonio forfeits his bond. But Shylock's hatred of Antonio is presented as less a generic hatred of Christians than a direct response to Antonio's greater hatred of Shylock. Shylock has personal reasons for his animus toward Antonio. Antonio has sought him out on the Rialto. According to Shylock (1.3.103-126), Antonio has habitually berated him, baited him, humiliated him, spat on his clothes and in his face, and kicked him. Antonio confirms it. "I am as like to call thee so again / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" (1.3.127-28). He will behave exactly in the same way after the loan is repaid. For the moment, however, he will suspend hostilities for his friend's sake. He will say "there is much kindness in the Jew" (1.3.150) and "Hie thee, gentle Jew. The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (1.3.174-75). The play does not mention anyone else who has been so taken up with Shylock nor takes it as his personal mission to provide relief to the Christian population suffering from Shylock's usury. Antonio seems to have specifically chosen Shylock; there is no mention of his having humiliated any other usurers, Jewish or Christian, nor is there any mention of other Christian merchants' singling Shylock out, or any other Jew for that matter. Shylock does not squeeze his Christian borrowers to wage war against Antonio. To others, Antonio is the model of exemplary Christian love; to Shylock, Antonio is a symbol of Christian hatred. "He hath disgraced me, and hind'red me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew" (3.1.51-55).

Such personal hatred seems quite out of keeping for a Christian merchant in a play in which the Christian merchant is being advanced as an ideal. It is all the more surprising that this hatred is lodged in a character who is viewed by all his friends as even-tempered and reasonable. We can understand Antonio's hatred after Shylock demands his pound of flesh. But Antonio's hatred of and obsession with Shylock predate the action proper of the play. He has been on a personal mission against Shylock long before then. Antonio needs Shylock and continually seeks him out, for Shylock is important for Antonio's continual self-fashioning as a Christian merchant. He engages Shylock so intensely because he needs to define himself as the antithesis of the Jew, to see himself as a merchant and not a usurer, for a usurer obviously cannot be a true Christian. But it is not enough for Antonio to define himself as the enemy of the Jew, he must be Shylock's greatest enemy, a Christian merchant whose main mission is thwarting the activities of the most prominent Jewish usurer of Venice. There must be no doubt in Antonio's mind about "which is the merchant here and which the Jew."
his friends?—Antonio fears any association and thus identification with Shylock. Rather than wanting to be Shylock, Antonio dreads that he may be like Shylock already. Robert Alter hints at this self-doubt more generally when he writes about Shylock's relationship to Shakespeare's Christian audience, which “may harbor the fearsome attributes it habitually projects on the other,” and “in the savage give-and-take of the commercial world of Venice, the barriers between the insider and the outsider are not always impermeable, and there are fleeting hints that the savagery exists on both sides.” This is what Richard Halpern, after Girard, has called the mirror-image interpretation of the Christian characters of the play: “Shylock is merely the double, or mirror image, of the play’s Christian characters, who persecute him because they have projected onto him what they hate in themselves.” Shylock is not “better than he appears to be, but … the Christians are as bad as he appears to be.” Shylock is not like the Christians, the Christians are like Jews.

The irony of Antonio's battle with Shylock is that the means he employs in the struggle are bound to lead to the most untoward, unchristian results. The more he becomes involved with Shylock, the more doubts he must have about himself both as a Christian and a merchant. When Antonio is among his kith and kin, it is considerably easier to be the noble Roman and faithful friend; when he sees Shylock in the market place, he can no longer control his hatred. He acts toward Shylock no differently than Shylock acts or would act towards him, had he the power. The anxiety and hatred that Antonio feels in Shylock's presence stems in part from an unconscious recognition, not that he is the mirror image of Shylock but that there is something that nevertheless links him with his enemy. Antonio seeks to destroy Shylock precisely because Shylock is a constant reminder of the fine line dividing the Christian merchant and the Jewish usurer. A sort of modern-day paladin Templar, Antonio engages in both an economic and religious crusade to rid Venice (a sort of financial Holy Land) of Jewish usurers and replace them by Christian merchants. In the end, Shylock indeed becomes a merchant of Venice. But it is a pyrrhic victory. The ferocity of Antonio's crusade so corrupts him that in the end he is as much defined by his hatred of his enemies (the antithesis of the Christian ideal) as by his love of his friends. He hates with the same passion as his enemy and becomes part of the hatred against which he fights. Even worse, his love is corrupted by his hatred, which, as we shall see, becomes a subtle instrument of revenge.

Antonio intuitively understands that his life as a merchant cannot be the life of a true Christian. Refusing to lend money at interest and rescuing Shylock's debtors cannot obscure the truth about his profession: that many Christian merchants lend money at interest and that the profits derived from buying low and selling high may involve risk, but do not constitute a significantly different transaction from usury. The play emphasizes the distinction between merchant and usurer, even creating a Venice where only Christians are merchants and Jews usurers; but the need to create such a distinction implicitly acknowledges that in the real world many Christian merchants are usurers—the terms and professions, as Shakespeare well knew, were hardly mutually exclusive—and that many Jews are still merchants. The play's postulation of a Christian merchant is based on the existence of its antithesis: the increasing convergence of the activities of merchant and usurer in the real world.

Scholars have had a difficult time explaining Antonio's melancholy, but it may derive from his concerns about his profession. Less would have been written about his melancholy, if it could be explained by Antonio's knowledge of Bassanio's courtship of Portia. For any unironic interpretation of Antonio, the most defensible explanation of his melancholy is that he is simply of a melancholy disposition. Many characters in Shakespeare do not “develop,” they just manifest their intrinsic natures. Antonio is melancholy from the very first line of the play (“In sooth I know not why I am so sad” [1.1.1]). He is disturbed that he does not know the reason for his depression, and thinks that perhaps only more self-knowledge will alleviate his condition. Salerio suggests a cause: Antonio is anxious about his ships on the ocean. Solanio and then Salerio expand on this explanation. Had they ventured so much at such risk, they would have been far more melancholy than Antonio; in fact, they would have been preoccupied by the fate of their merchandise every moment of the day, whether at table or in church. But, curiously, Antonio dismisses this explanation outright: his fortune is not in danger for he has sent out many ships; besides he still has considerable unventured capital at home:
“Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad” (1.1.45). Antonio is both right and wrong about his melancholy. He must deny outright the implication of Salerio's statement that merchandise interferes with spiritual concerns. “Should I go to church / And see the holy edifice of stone, / And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks” (1.1.28-31). Only an exemplary merchant can place the spirit over the material, if the average merchant can think only of his merchandise while in “a holy edifice of stone.” Antonio may be less concerned about his ships (merchant risk) than about his gains (questionable profit). In fact, he has had, it seems, few losses; his ships have regularly come home. Yet he still suffers from melancholy. The melancholy lasts from beginning to end, and it is unaffected by his changes of fortune. It is something eating away at Antonio's soul. Can we imagine Antonio enjoying the sweet music of Belmont any more than Shylock could? Are Antonio's “spirits,” like Jessica's, “attentive” (5.1.70)?

If we assume that Antonio's main mission regarding Shylock is to prove himself a gentle Christian merchant—that is, completely to dissociate himself from the Jew—then the trial scene provides Antonio with an ideal opportunity to fashion himself according to his own self-conception. Before the trial, he had played the role of Crusader knight rescuing poor Christians from Shylock's usurious practices. At the trial, Antonio takes on more self-sacrificing, though no less self-serving and self-aggrandizing, roles. He attempts to accomplish his two most cherished goals simultaneously: to demonstrate the depth of his love for Bassanio in his contest with Portia, and to prove himself an exemplary Christian merchant, using his archenemy, Shylock, as his primary instrument. Antonio is the fulcrum of the play's two main rivalry plots, and here Shakespeare ingeniously brings them together in one dramatic scene with Antonio at its center.

Antonio becomes the Christ who offers himself up to the Jews for crucifixion for the sake of others. He, thus, incorporates Bassanio into his contest with Shylock and Shylock into his contest with Portia. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Shylock's desire for a pound of flesh, a recognizable transformation of the blood accusation, makes it even easier for Antonio to assume his Christlike role and fashion himself into the antithesis of Shylock, the exploiting Jewish usurer. The duke pleads with Shylock to behave like a Christian, to show mercy, pity, commiseration, compassion, “remorse,” gentleness, love, and tender courtesy. By rejecting the duke's plea, Shylock not only reinforces himself in the role as quintessential Jew and usurer, he plays into Antonio's higher sacrificial purpose. Antonio can now prepare himself for a death in imitation of Christ. “Therefore, I do beseech you make no moe offers, use no farther means / But with all brief and plain conveniency / Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will” (4.1.80-83). Antonio is leery of using the language of scripture in accepting his fate, since, after all, “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (I.iii.95). He leaves it for the duke and Portia to frame Shylock's choice in terms of Jewish flint-heartedness and Christian mercy. They set the scene for Antonio to play the martyr. Since this role is worked out for him, all he must do is passively and silently accept his suffering.

Let us take an additional imaginative step. It is one thing for Antonio morally and personally to exploit the situation in which he unfortunately finds himself; it is another purposely to put himself in such a position: that is, not only to accept death in imitation of Christ but actually seek it. Once we adopt an ironic stance toward Antonio, we need not confine ourselves to his motivation at the trial scene. We need to ask why Antonio borrows money from Shylock in the first place. I do not intend to reconstruct a psychological history for Antonio but merely pursue what the text suggests. Everyone reasonably assumes that Antonio attempts to procure a loan from Shylock because he cannot get it elsewhere: Shylock must be the only moneylender who has the ready money that Antonio needs. Therefore it is somewhat surprising that Shylock himself does not have the money that Antonio requires and must himself resort to a more wealthy Jew, Tubal.

I am debating of my present store,
And, by the near guess of my memory,
I cannot instantly raise up the gross
Of full three thousand ducats. What of that?
Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe,
Will furnish me.
Perhaps Shylock could have thwarted, in revenge, Antonio's attempt to borrow from other Jewish usurers. At least for Antonio, all borrowing inevitably goes through Shylock. It is also curious that Antonio cannot borrow the money from his Christian friends—of course at no interest—who all seem to revere and love him. Will they not do for him what he intends to do for Bassanio? After all, Antonio has rescued many Christians, and probably many Christian merchants, from Shylock's clutches: “I oft deliver'd from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me” (3.3.22-23). Are they now not in the position to reciprocate? One has to assume that they do not have sufficient funds, implying that Antonio is not only a merchant of Venice, but the richest merchant of Venice, or that the Christian merchants of Venice resemble usurers more than Antonio would like to admit. Antonio asks Bassanio to find out how much he can borrow in Venice, but he also repeats his pledge to go to extremes if necessary to help his friend.

Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;  
Neither have I money nor commodity  
To raise a present sum; therefore go forth,  
Try what my credit can in Venice do;  
That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost,  
To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.  
Go presently inquire, and so will I,  
Where money is; and I no question make  
To have it of my trust or for my sake.

(1.1.177-85)

But there is more than pure expedience to Antonio's borrowing from Shylock. The play shows at every turn that Antonio's relationship with Shylock is motivated by his assumption of the role of Christian merchant. None of his dealings with Shylock are disinterested. As we have seen, by showing his willingness to borrow from Shylock, his worst enemy, Antonio proves to Bassanio how prepared he is to put himself at risk for his friend. To those who focus on Antonio's jealousy over Portia, Antonio's contract with Shylock is an attempt to test his love against Portia's. But in terms of the other plot, the Antonio-Shylock rivalry, Antonio transforms himself into a Christian victim, similar to the Christians whom he was wont to rescue from Shylock's clutches. The more he can see himself as the victim, the more he can see himself as a Christian merchant, the less he need fear resembling Shylock himself. If he is seeking to atone for unconscious guilt over his profession, there could be no greater avenging agent than his archenemy. He has played the role of savior for other Christians; now he places himself in a position where he risks being the most helpless of all Shylock's victims because there is no one in Venice, it would seem, who can redeem him. It was not uncommon in England of the time to forfeit one's bond and have to pay a large penalty. Hundreds of lawsuits were brought to force debtors to honor such penalties. But since in *The Merchant of Venice* the bond penalty is nonmonetary, even those who could pay the bond price ten times over cannot rescue Antonio. Portia succeeds only because she bends the law to her own purposes. Moreover, Antonio enters into the bond with Shylock not with fear and trepidation, nor with reluctance and disgust, but willingly, almost flippantly, as though he had nothing to fear. His ships will come home as they have in the past. But if they do not, his purpose will be served even better.

BASSANIO

You shall not seal to such a bond for me;
I'll rather dwell in my necessity.

ANTONIO

Why, fear not, man; I will not forfeit it;
But the true measure of Antonio as Christian merchant emerges at the end of the trial, in the unexpected victory rather than in the expected but self-fashioned defeat. The dichotomy between the flint-hearted Jew and merciful Christian has been fully set up by Portia and the Duke. Antonio has the opportunity to fulfill his role as merciful Christian as exemplarily as he fulfilled his role as loyal friend and Christian merchant. But he does not. After the tables have been turned against Shylock, the Duke tells him: “That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, / I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it” (4.1.367-68). Portia then turns to Antonio expecting him to respond likewise, showing “the difference” of his spirit. “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (4.1.377) Antonio requests that the court let Shylock retain one-half of his goods. But under the guise of even greater mercy, he requests two things that accomplish his revenge. He places Shylock in a position to which anyone might prefer death: all that Shylock accumulates must be willed to the daughter who betrayed him and to the son-in-law who conspired against him. Further, Shylock must accept conversion himself. As a Christian, Shylock will no longer be allowed to lend money at interest. But more important, Antonio will no longer be confronted by a usurious alter-ego on the Rialto. In this relatively idealized Venice, Antonio's victory is assured. The success of Jewish revenge would be Christian tragedy, a reenactment of the crucifixion. Christian revenge must be comic; it must be seen not as revenge but mercy. “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (4.1.277) The pound of flesh has been trumped by conversion and revenge by ressentiment, “an act of the most spiritual revenge.”

As antagonistic doubles, both Shylock and Antonio are attempting to rid themselves of their hated rival-others, by transforming their rivals into versions of themselves. Shylock wishes, literally, to cut the heart out of Antonio. Theodore Reik maintains that the excision of the flesh functions symbolically as Shylock's attempt not only to emasculate Antonio, but to circumcise him, and thus turn him, at least physically, into a Jew: the worst possible punishment. Shapiro argues that Shylock's choice of the heart is appropriate since St. Paul (Rom. 2:28-30) implies that for Christians the New Covenant, which has taken the place of circumcision, now resides in the heart, a view that Paul may have found justification for in Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6, and a view that had become part of the English exegetical tradition. We might conclude, then, that Antonio vanquishes Shylock not by a physical but by a spiritual act: that is, by conversion—though no reader could interpret Shylock's forced conversion a circumcision of the heart.

But Antonio achieves an even more subtle revenge through conversion. He not only turns Shylock into a Christian, outwardly like himself, but he also turns him into a merchant, in fact, another merchant of Venice. Shylock retains half of his money, but since he now is a Christian he must abandon usury and become a merchant to earn his living. Antonio says to Bassanio at the end of Act I, “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind.” Shylock does not grow kind, but he still can be turned into a Christian and be forced to leave off usury in favor of merchantry. The issue here is certainly one of supersession, but not so much religious as economic. It is Antonio's mission to stamp out usury, the old economic dispensation, with a new dispensation represented by a class of merchants like himself, who can amass great wealth without resorting to the base and barren practice of making money from money. As long as Jewish usurers ply their trade, there will always be the suspicion of usury, especially given the English situation, in the merchant enterprise. Antonio is trying to rid the world of the old in preparation for the new, in which, ideally, Jews will become Christians, usurers—though no reader could interpret Shylock's forced conversion a circumcision of the heart. In the new age, Portia's question, “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” will have no meaning. At the end of the play, we know that Antonio is victorious because
of the creation of another merchant of Venice—Shylock.

But what is the viability of an economic system built on hatred and ressentiment, especially one in which Shylock, erstwhile usurer and nouveau merchant, will be a direct competitor of Antonio? Before Shylock's conversion, the competition between Antonio and Shylock was primarily ideological and moral. Will Antonio's hatred of Shylock abate when Shylock becomes his direct competitor? An economic comedy that is based on the transformation of a Jewish usurer into a Christian merchant not only lacks credibility, it contains the seeds of its own deconstruction. It is as unconvincing economically as well as characterologically, and not only because of Shylock.55

Nor is everything patched over in the fifth act. Walter Cohen argues that “the aristocratic fantasy of Act V, unusually sustained and unironic even for Shakespearean romantic comedy, may accordingly be seen as a formal effort to obliterate the memory of what has preceded.”56 But if that is true, the Shylock-Antonio plot works against Shakespeare's putative intentions. Antonio's victories (his defeat of his archenemy, his demonstration of his friendship for Bassanio, and his assumption of the role of sacrificial victim in imitation of Christ) are spiritually, socially, and economically diminished in Act V with the transfer of locus from Venice to Belmont. But the damage starts even earlier, with Portia's arrival in Venice in Act IV. She scores a significant victory over Antonio for Bassanio's affections on Antonio's own turf. Antonio had hoped with his sacrificial death to have bonded Bassanio to him for life. By saving his life, Portia simultaneously deprives him of his most strategic weapon and makes him indebted to her.57 Further, Bassanio, now a rich landowning aristocrat, will hardly be in need of his friend's services again.

Antonio's cause is further undermined by another bond, a ring. In Venice, he has persuaded Bassanio to give away the ring that Portia had Bassanio swear “never to part with” (5.1.171).

Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself,
Are yours—my lord's. I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(3.2.166-74)

Bassanio responds:

But when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence;
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!

(3.2.183-85)

Antonio thus becomes, unwittingly of course, complicit in Bassanio's breaking of his most sacred promise (a most Christian bond)58 to the one who saved Antonio's life.59

Act V thus finds Antonio attempting to make amends to the person who saved his life. He is compelled to plead for his friend, Bassanio, much as Bassanio had once pleaded for him.

ANTONIO
I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,
Had quite miscarried; I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

PORTIA
Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.

ANTONIO
Here, Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring.

(5.1.249-56)

Portia's victory over Antonio is complete: she not only saves the life of her husband's best friend, she compels him to be the one who returns her ring, the bond of affection, to her husband. Forcing Antonio to acknowledge her preeminent rights to Bassanio's affections, she seals her victory over Antonio forever. So complete is her victory that she gives the impression that she is less a character in a play than a playwright who has ingeniously staged all the events to her singular purpose. In the end, the caskets, the trial, the ring givings (and return), and the final nuptial ceremonies all seem of a piece.

But in Act V Antonio has not sufficiently learned his lessons about bonds. No sooner has he been saved than he pledges himself again, this time offering not his body as a bond but his soul. For those who see Antonio as an exemplary friend and Christian, Antonio's offer for Bassanio's faithfulness may seem an ever greater testimony to his ardent friendship, however metaphorically he means it. But Portia turns this offer on its head as well. She accepts a pledge that means that Antonio will sacrifice his soul if Bassanio in effect ever places Antonio's interest above hers, and then she bids Antonio to make Bassanio to swear to the conditions, as it were, placing Bassanio in the same situation from which she just saved him.

Portia is of the Belmont landed aristocracy. Her wealth is inherited, not earned. For all her respect for Antonio, she still sees him as a merchant of Venice, and perhaps not so different, after all, in profession, from the Jew—thus, her “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” Whereas Antonio's merchant activities are built up as noble ventures at the beginning of the play, they seem less so from the perspective of aristocratic Belmont where Antonio, lacking both polish and music, seems out of his element. The play gives significant support for Antonio as the new economic ideal, the Christian merchant, but it also undercuts the ideal from opposite directions, by Antonio's association with Shylock whom he comes to resemble in his ferocious hatred, and also by his reduction in Belmont, where he is put in his place by Portia and where his merchant activities seem far less noble than Salerio presented them in Act I. And Portia has one more card to pull from her deck of tricks. She has known for a while that most of Antonio's ships have arrived safely and made significant profits (“richly come home to harbor” 5.1.278). Antonio ultimately has made no monetary sacrifice; in fact, he is even richer than ever before. Now that he has performed his function, Portia is ready to send him back home to ply his profit-making trade. He has no more business in Belmont, where there is no business. His place is with his newly arrived ships in Venice. He has more in common with Shylock, the new merchant of Venice, than he has with Portia or her spendthrift husband, Bassanio. When Antonio first hears the news about his safe ships, he responds like a true merchant. “Sweet lady, you have given me life and
living!” (5.1.286). Antonio's words echo Shylock's after Antonio had destroyed Shylock's argosies, his livelihood:

Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!
You take my house, when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house. You take my life
When you take the means whereby I live.

(4.1.373-76). [italics mine]

When the merchant's (Antonio's) means are restored, he responds with the words of the Jew: “you have given me life and living!” No more the tainted wether, no more the weakest kind of fruit. The only way Antonio can become a true Christian is for his ships not to come in—in fact, never to come. “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matthew 20:23-24).

But Act V has the potential of diminishing not only Antonio's victory over Shylock but the whole capitalistic order that Antonio embodies. If Antonio's victory represents a supersession of the pre-capitalist economy over feudalism, then, at least aesthetically, Belmont represents a utopic supersession of the economic orders represented by both Shylock and Antonio, a supersession of Belmont over Venice and all that it represents. It is not Antonio who defeats Shylock, but the dea ex machina Portia. She not only defeats Shylock, she appropriates him as an instrument to vanquish Antonio. Exhausted from their battle with each other, Antonio and Shylock lie prostrate before her. Bassanio has exchanged Belmont for Venice. So have Jessica and Lorenzo. And so has Shylock's former servant, Lancelot. Only Antonio is sent back to Venice to the world in which he—and Shylock—belong. Antonio's victory is once again a pyrrhic one. In the utopic world of Act V, art triumphs over reality; the spiritual, social, and economic victory is Portia's, not Antonio's.

Portia's victory in utopic Belmont does not deny Antonio's victory in the real world of Venice. But it vitiates it no less than his ferocious hatred of Shylock. Both the Portia and Shylock plots reveal the inherent contradiction and limitations of Antonio as a Christian merchant; they also give pause to those who envision a world in which these contradictions and limitations can be overcome. The dichotomy between an evil Jewish usurer and good Christian merchant turns out to be a literary construct, an ideology that, unlike Belmont, cannot be sustained through artifice and the aesthetic. As Antonio is confronted with the dark side of his profession in Shylock, he begins to react obsessively and with hatred: that is, unchristianly and ungently. Christian merchantry seems to work in the milieu of Antonio's fellow Christians, but it also contains its own Christian deconstruction in its hatred of the other. If the best of merchants, the Antonios of the world, succumb to hatred and ressentiment when faced with the new economic realities, how will they act when they meet on the Rialto not Shylock the usurer but Shylock the merchant of Venice? Which will be the merchant there and which the Jew? Which the superseded feudal remnant, and which the king of the modern world?

Notes

2. Walter Cohen sees the play in the context of a wider, international development, in which rationalizations were being created for the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Walter Cohen, “The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” *Journal of English Literary History* 49 [1982], p. 783).
3. “His role as economic scapegoat is thus connected with his vulnerable and visible position within the realm of economic circulation; it is not capital as such but rather money capital that he is forced to represent” (Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
Halpern builds his argument on the difference between Marx's formulation of the difference between the more concrete use-value and the more abstract and relational exchange-value (Shylock).


5. For a discussion of the synonymy of ethic, religious, and economic categories in the figure of the Jew in general and Shylock in particular, see Halpern, Shakespeare among the Moderns, pp. 184-85.


8. Halpern writes that Shylock “is neither more nor less exploitive than other Venetians, but he does suffer the misfortune of working an unusually conspicuous mode of exploitation, one lacking any social cover or indirection. Even the Duke's slaves are tucked quietly away on his estate; we learn of them only because Shylock alludes to them polemically in court” (Halpern, Shakespeare among the Moderns, p. 185).

9. The small number of Jews who lived in London during Shakespeare's time did not practice usury; the usurers of London were Christians, who often charged higher interests than Jews did in the countries where the Jews were permitted to lend money. See Margaret Hotine, “The Politics of Anti-Semitism: The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice,” Notes and Queries (March 1991), p. 37.


11. According to Walter Cohen, “Writers of the period register both the medieval ambivalence about merchants and the indisputable contemporary fact that merchants were the leading usurers” (Cohen, “The Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” pp. 768-69).


13. According to Ingram, Langley was probably the first to demand of the players at his theater that they sign a bond, a penalty that would be exacted if they did not fulfill their contractual agreement of playing only at the Swan (Ingram, A London Life, p. 155).

14. Walter Cohen shows how “Venetian reality during Shakespeare's lifetime contradicted almost point for point its portrayal in the play. Not only did the government bar Jewish usurers from the city, it also forced the Jewish community to staff and finance low-interest, nonprofit lending institutions that served the Christian poor” (Cohen, “The Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” p. 770).

15. According to John W. Draper, Antonio “constitutes a panegyric of a princely Italian merchant in private life and in world-wide affairs, and is far from Elizabethan or Venetian actuality” (John W. Draper, “Shakespeare's Antonio and the Queen's Finance,” Neophilologus 51 [1967], p. 184).


19. Indeed, at times Barabas seems to treat the unjustice done to him as a welcome excuse to plan, to scheme, to strategize: that is, to live his idea of life at its fullest. “A kingly kinde of trade to purchase Townes / By treachery, and sell 'em by deceit? / Now tell me, worldlings, underneath the sunne, / If greater falsehood has ever bin done” (5.5.47-50).

20. Though it is often maintained that Lopez was falsely accused, David S. Katz argues that according to any reasonable interpretation of contemporary English law, Lopez had acted treasonously. He may not have actively plotted to poison the queen, but his “secret contacts with Spanish Crown and his numerous discussions about the possibility of poisoning the queen were more than enough to hang him many times over” (David S. Katz, The Jews in the History of England: 1485-1850 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], p. 106).

21. Few critics now contest the proposition that the play presents Jewishness and the Jewish idea as anything other than the antithesis of the Christian ideal. According to Derek Cohen, “though it is simplistic to say that the play equates Jewishness with evil and Christianity with goodness, it is surely reasonable to see a moral relationship between the insistent equation of the idea of Jewishness with acquisitive and material values while the idea of Christianity is linked to the values of mercy and love” (Derek Cohen, “Shylock and the Idea of the Jew,” Shakespearean Motives [New York: St. Martin's, 1988], p. 105).

22. The play often refers to Antonio's business at sea as “ventures.” Antonio assures his friends: “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted” (1.1.42). Shylock uses the same word, though demystifyingly and dismissively (“and other ventures he hath, squand'red abroad” 1.3.20-21).


26. Frank Whigham maintains that Shylock also uses style, but to demystify: specifically, to diminish the aura of Antonio's merchant enterprises. Shylock “strives to demystify their power and prestige, to strip to essences what is romantically obscured. He takes the incantatory terms with which Solanio and Salerio sang Antonio’s reputation and stands them on their feet.” In Act III, Shylock remarks that “ships are but boards, sailors but men, there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, (I mean pirates), and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks” (1.3.15-23) (Frank Whigham, “Ideology and Class Conduct in The Merchant of Venice,” Renaissance Drama 10 [1979], p. 104).

27. Whigham, Ideology and Class Conduct, p. 96.


29. The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

(5.1.83-88)


31. In this century, criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* has taken three basic paths. The first interprets the play as a romantic comedy and sees the Venetians as embodiments (though not perfect embodiments, to be sure) of the virtues of love, friendship, joy, and sacrifice. The second is ironist; it interprets the values that the characters ostensibly embody as superficial, more often than not the means to disguise more selfish motives. Since irony is much less obvious than romantic assertion, ironist interpretations are invariably more ingenious; on the other hand, they often seem less textually grounded. The third understands *The Merchant of Venice* as a hybrid, combining significant romantic and ironist elements, which lend the play its wonderful power but also create its many problems for interpretation. “The magnetism of the work,” writes Robert Alter, “is generated by the interplay between the two perspectives” (Robert Alter, “Who Is Shylock,” *Commentary* 96.1 [1993], p. 34). As will be evident, my interpretation is based on the dynamic and unresolved tension between the antagonistic romantic and ironic elements inherent in the text. For a similar description of the approaches to the play in terms of harmonious, utopian and aestheticizing interpretations vs. rational, ironic, demystifying, and ironic ones, see Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, pp. 210-26. In “Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew? Subversion and Recuperation in The Merchant of Venice,” in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Conner, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 202, Thomas Moisan argues that in *The Merchant of Venice* art trumps ideological contradictions: “The play manages to transcend the issues its text problematizes to render a dramatically, theatrically satisfying experience.”


33. It has been argued that Antonio's virtues have less to do with his actions and more with his pious self-fashioning. “That Antonio appears less devoted to these [acquisitive] aims than do Bassanio and Shylock is as much the consequence of his chosen mode of self-fashioning as it is a demonstration of actual disinterestedness” (Cartelli, “Shakespeare's Merchant, Marlowe's Jew”, p. 257).

34. Shylock calls Antonio a publican: “how like a fawning publican he looks” (1.3.38). The word publican, which has been the object of much critical scrutiny, was occasionally associated with usury. See, for example, Holmer, *Choice, Hazard, and Consequence*, pp. 151-53.


37. Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 161. The mirror image involves projection and distortion. But fear can come from the belief that one has much in common with what the play presents as an objectionable and objective reality: Shylock. A rather extravagant example of precisely this type of fear is argued by Seymour Kleinberg, who maintains that Antonio hates Shylock because he unconsciously equates usury with homosexuality and alienness, and therefore sees himself in the tainted Jewish moneylender. “He hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has come to identify symbolically as a Jew. It is the earliest portrait of the homophobic homosexual” (Seymour Kleinberg, “The Merchant of Venice: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism,” in Stuart Kellogg, ed., *Literary Visions of Homosexuality* [New York: The Haworth Press, 1983], p. 120). Cynthia Lewis maintains that in the end Antonio's hatred so alienates him that he comes to resemble Shylock in his isolation (Cynthia Lewis, “Antonio and Alienation in The Merchant of Venice,” *South Atlantic Review* 48.4 [1983], p. 29).
39. Halpern sees this kind of denigration of Christians as a subtle form of antisemitism, in which Jewishness remains a “standard of degeneration. … The vices of the dominant groups are figured as further developments or elaborations of an originally tainted Jewish essence. If the Jews’ enemies are even worse than they, this is because they are super-Jews, Jews to the second power, the ‘real’ Jews in relation to which the originals are now only pale reflections” (Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 162).

40. The Knight Templars were a military, religious community devoted to the protection of Christians in the Holy Land. They had their quarters in the area of the former Jewish Temple. The Templars took vows of chastity and poverty; however, as they gained in strength, they came to possess tremendous financial power, owning extensive properties, engaging in banking, and transporting gold to and from the Holy Land. They were, in effect, the first Christian merchant knights.

41. The play adopts the medieval position on usury—Antonio’s position against Shylock’s. But Mark R. Benbow points out that large profits were viewed almost as a form of usury in England of the time (Mark R. Benbow, “The Merchant Antonio, Elizabethan Hero,” *Colby Literary Quarterly* 12 [1976], pp. 158-59). Much has been written about the difference—and similarities—between usury and venture capital (risk capital) in *The Merchant of Venice*. See for example, Graham Holderness, “Purse and Person: For Love or Money,” in Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey, eds., *The Merchant of Venice: Longman Critical Essays* (Essex: Longman, 1992), pp. 29-40; Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 139-50; Cohen, “Historical Criticism,” pp. 142-82. It should be emphasized that before the usury law of 1571, lending money was often considered the riskiest of all exchange enterprises.

42. See Katz, *The Jews in the History of England*, p. 77. We have seen that Jewish Venetian merchants not only existed but were required “to finance low-interest, nonprofit lending institutions that served the Christian poor” (Cohen, “Historical Criticism,” p. 770).

43. It is probably impossible to know for certain whether Antonio’s melancholy precedes his knowledge of Bassanio’s wooing: “Well; tell me now what lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage, / That you to-day promis’d to tell me of?” (1.1.119-21).


45. Hassel sees Antonio’s desire for self-sacrifice as “a perplexingly selfish desire to exhibit the perfection of his love” (Hassel, “Antonio and the Ironic Festivity,” p. 71).


47. In *The Jew of Malta*, it is Jewish Barabas who uses the word flinty to describe Christian hearts (1.2.144). He also accuses Christians of using scripture for their own ends.

48. He more actively plays the role of the stoic and noble Roman friend, arguing that it is better to die now than to risk the misfortunes that await a merchant in old age, and requesting that Bassanio tell Portia the story of his noble end and the value of his friendship: “And he repents not that he pays your debt” (4.1.278).

49. To Shakespeare’s audience, this may have been no terrible coercion, but true “favor”—the granting of Shylock the possibility of salvation. One need only recall the Mortara affair of 1858, when the Church was able to take a Jewish child from his parents because he had been christened by his Christian nurse.

retribution. The Christians manage to hide that truth even from themselves. They do not live by the
law of charity, but this law is enough of a presence in their language to drive the law of revenge
underground, to make this revenge almost invisible. As a result, this revenge become more subtle,
skillful, and feline than the revenge of Shylock” (René Girard, “‘To Entrap the Wisest’: A Reading of
The Merchant of Venice,”” in Edward W. Said, ed., Literature and Society [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins,
1980], pp. 106-7).
52. Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, p. 127.
53. The conversion plays into the received theology of supersession, in which the Jews represent the
“old” repudiated world of law, obedience, and matter and Christians the “new” world of grace, love,
and spirit.
54. From the point of view of ideology, Shylock is not a direct competitor of Antonio. The Shylocks must
go not because they engage in direct or indirect competition with merchants but because they
represent an outdated, barren economic system that is retarding progress of a new pre-capitalist
system destined to take its place.
55. According to Walter Cohen, “the very contrast between the two occupations may be seen as a false
dichotomy, faithful to the Renaissance Italians' understanding of himself but not to the reality that
self-conception was designed to justify” (Cohen, “The Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” p. 771).
57. Against Antonio's failure to get himself crucified, we can place Portia's divine power of “mercifixion”
(Harry Berger, “Mercy and Mercifixion in The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Quarterly 32
that Antonio is defeated in the end because his victory over Shylock deprives him of his main goal:
sacrificing himself for his friend (Graham Midgley, “The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration,”
Essays in Criticism, 10.2 [1960], pp. 130-33).
58. Portia's formulation is: “And so riveted with faith unto your flesh” (5.1.169).
59. My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
Let his deservings, and my love withal,
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

(4.2.448-50)
60. Harry Berger writes that “Portia's advantage is like that of the conquering hero in Act V” (Berger,
61. Lawrence Stone writes that “[m]oney was the means of acquiring and retaining status, but it was not
the essence of it; the acid test was the mode of life, a concept that involved many factors. Living on a
private income was one, but more important was spending liberally, dressing elegantly, and
entertaining lavishly. Another was having sufficient education to display a reasonable knowledge of
public affairs, and to be able to perform gracefully on the dance-floor, and on horseback, in the tennis
62. Claudine Defaye argues that Portia serves Antonio his worst defeat by depriving him of his noble
sacrifice and sending him back to Venice to reassume his life as a merchant (“réendosser son habit de
marchand.”) (Claudine Defaye, “Antonio ou le marchand malgré lui,” in Michèle Willems, ed., Le
Marchand de Venise et Le Juif de Malte: Texte et représentations [Rouen: Publications de l'université
de Rouen, 1985], pp. 25-35).

Criticism: Production Reviews: Peter Marks (review date 13 January 1999)

Let Shylock be Shylock! is the unspoken motto of Andrei Serban's daringly unapologetic production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shed no tears for the Jewish moneylender of Mr. Serban's design. Shylock may be cruelly maligned by the Christian hypocrites in Shakespeare's difficult play, with its anti-Semitic overtones, but in this version he has hardly been conceived as a figure to touch the heart. Though it has become customary to render Shylock with compassion, as in Peter Hall's 1989 Broadway production, in which Dustin Hoffman's dignified pillar of a Shylock endured the taunts and a shower of spittle from his enemies, Mr. Serban breaks with modern practice and gives us something more like the sinister Shylock of yore.

Thanks to the capable conjuring of the actor Will LeBow, Shylock is imagined in this visually striking modern-dress staging at the American Repertory Theater as a Venetian go-to guy who holds the beautiful people of the canals in as much contempt as they hold him. (The performance might appeal to the literary critic Harold Bloom, who in his new book on Shakespeare argues for just such a “comic villain” of a Shylock).

Just how spiteful a piece of work is this villain is revealed in Mr. LeBow's rendition of the famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech. Routinely treated as a plea for understanding, it is instead delivered here as a caustic act of self-mockery, intended to patronize his bigoted audience, the Venetian dilettantes Solanio (Stephen Rowe) and Salerio (Jeremy Geidt).

Only when the embittered loan shark has them laughing along with him does his voice rise in sudden anguish and fury: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” That this is a man who savors his singleminded pursuit of his pound of flesh is never in doubt; in the climactic courtroom scene, where he is called upon to claim the flesh owed him by the merchant Antonio (a shrewdly lugubrious Jonathan Epstein), he even draws a circle in red on the torso of his victim and theatrically traces it with a knife.

The sleek affability of Mr. LeBow's seductive portrayal imbues this Shylock with a visceral authority, a power to make things happen, which also makes him the most compelling feature of Mr. Serban's often absorbing production. *The Merchant of Venice* is much more than the tale of a moneylender's humiliation; its more central concern is the romantic comedy of the wooing of Portia (Kristin Flanders) by Bassanio (Andrew Garman) and other sillier suitors. It's these lighter moments that trip up Mr. Serban, who seems much more in his element elucidating the cosmic complexities of “Merchant” than in realizing the gently comic ironies in the love story.

It may be that the hideous resolution of the Shylock subplot—can an enlightened audience identify with a heroine who utters lines like “Tarry, Jew” or feel anything but squeamishness at Shylock's forced conversion?—insinuates itself like an odor that can't be washed out. Still, Mr. Serban, who did such a fine job in Central Park last summer framing the humane qualities in Shakespeare's troublesome *Cymbeline*, has his actors take wide swings at the comic interludes, like overeager croquet players. The result is a tactlessness that undoes some of the production's finer points.

*Merchant* is in part about the unraveling of riddles in language and law and the unmasking of people who are not what they seem. In this vein, the scenes encompassing the elaborate riddle that Portia poses for her suitors are bizarrely broad and consequently sophomoric; the young actors portraying princes from Morocco and Spain, for instance, are encouraged to play cartoon characters who throw off the play's rhythms, and Ms. Flanders and Portia's lady-in-waiting Nerissa (Nurit Monicelli), engage in an affected style of banter at an unnecessary remove from sincerity. While the play has Portia outwitting Shylock in court, Ms. Flanders never
manages to challenge Mr. LeBow for primacy onstage.

Mr. Serban is a restless experimenter, so his Shakespearean ventures tend to be jampacked with ideas good and less good. One of his best notions here is the decadent and sexually ambiguous world of Antonio, the merchant of the title, who takes the disastrous loan from Shylock, with its peculiar terms, to finance the effort of his friend Bassanio to romance Portia.

The beauty of Venice and Belmont, as suggested by the Adriatic pastels in the lovely folding screens by Marielle Bancou and William Bonnell and lighting by Michael Chybowski, turns out to be a mirage. The scenic charm is as superficial as the slick, two-faced Venetian businessmen themselves, who make deals with the Jewish moneylender, only to revile him behind his back. (At a costume ball, they even resort to garish masks with exaggerated Semitic noses.) Dressing them all in natty European suits, it seems, is a reminder by Mr. Serban and his inventive costume designer, Catherine Zuber, that empty-headed bigotry has many contemporary disguises.

In this false paradise, Mr. Serban finds little to romanticize. Portia sermonizes grandly to Shylock about the quality of mercy, but she and the rest of Venice are complicit in a merciless dismemberment of Shylock's fortune, his faith, his very identity. It is the director's eloquent thesis, in fact, that Shylock and his Venetian tormentors are more alike than different; the vengeance envisioned by Shylock is symbolically carried out by his Christian adversaries. To drive home the point, perhaps unnecessarily, Mr. Serban creates a final dumb show in which Antonio—who by Portia's verdict appropriates Shylock's wealth—is locked in a dance with the masked Shylock. The borrower and the lender are now as one.

Mr. Serban's uneven cast is an impediment. Several of the younger actors simply do not add their own pound of flesh to these mysterious characters, which gives the play an only partly lived-in quality. As he did with Liev Schreiber's vital Iachimo in Cymbeline, though, the director finds in Mr. LeBow a lead actor who helps us greatly in our navigation of the dark side.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Hal Jensen (review date 2 July 1999)**


[In the following review of Trevor Nunn's production of The Merchant of Venice for the National Theatre, Jensen describes the way Nunn's direction emphasized the isolation of the main characters and notes that Henry Goodman's praiseworthy Shylock dominated the production.]

It is difficult, from our historical vantage point, to regard The Merchant of Venice as a comedy. Hatred and cruelty, born of racial difference, are obviously not funny; but that should not exclude them from serious comic treatment. What disagrees with our present-day knowledge is the blink-of-an-eye transition from discord, malice, violence and unqualified enmity at the end of the Trial scene, to the harmonious, all-unifying, non-drama of Act Five. How can little rituals with rings, and paeans to the music of the spheres and pledges of loyalty in the fantasy world of moonlit Belmont, erase, counterbalance or transmute what has gone before? Trevor Nunn's new production confronts this difficulty by refusing to allow the last act to palliate the first four: for instance, so “attentive” are Jessica's spirits to the tranquil music of Belmont that she has to let out something between a howl and a scream, so untranquil is her soul; and when Graziano has apparently ended the play in lewd high-spirits, Portia announces—against thunder—that it is morning, and Jessica throws herself on her knees and breaks tearfully into a Jewish lament. Usually it is only Antonio who looks left out at the end of the play, but in this production everyone looks isolated, in bleak white light on a bare stage. It is a desolate interpretation.
And yet if there is no solace to be had in Act Five, why have the act at all? Harley Granville-Barker highlighted the fairy-tale nature of this play, and if we must admit that half the tale is told as if by the brothers Grimm, and the other half by Hans Christian Anderson, it is surely a mistake to confound the one with the other. If Belmont is not magical, if music and unity cannot salvage happiness for these characters, then the play's lyrical element is devalued. In this production, Lorenzo's lines on harmony are so unimaginatively delivered that they conjure very few images, and we do not feel their restorative power. In Belmont, the casket scenes are gently derided; solemn music announces a deliberately slow procession, followed by the drawing of an enormous gold curtain by two maids who are clearly “putting on” formality. It is initially amusing: we smile at the actors' acknowledgement of conventional pageantry, which so contrasts with the grit and action of Venice. We are all but winked at by Portia and her attendants when Morocco and Arragon take the stage. Ultimately, this reduces Belmont to annoying frippery. The exchanges between Portia and Bassanio after the correct casket has been chosen are disconcertingly dull, until we realize, when they start whooping to show their real feelings, that the preceding speeches have been recited as rhetorical formalities. At this point, the concessions to realism begin to feel costly.

The Venetian scenes, however, benefit greatly from Nunn's approach. The period is 1920s or early 30s, but there is no attempt to politicize the play, to bury its human antagonisms in largescale issues; rather, the intention seems to be to modernize things enough so that we do not feel alienated by the look of them, but to avoid specific modern dates because of their overpowering implications. Of course, Shylock's Jewishness is central, but one of the successes of this production is the way it makes clear that it is Shylock's Jewishness that we witness. The focus is on the psychology of individual men, not the generalized mentality of races or faiths.

More telling than the contrast between Belmont and Venice is that between the boisterous young “Christian” gentlemen in their nightclubs and cafés and Shylock's plain dwelling in the Jewish district, where he speaks in Hebrew to Jessica. From drunken singing and outrageous floorshows (even Launcelot Gobbo's speech on conscience is turned into a stand-up routine) we are plunged into quietude, sobriety and ritual observance. Excess is juxtaposed with thrift, looseness with care, floridity with precision. All the Venetians, for once, are finely individualized; there is a particularly strong, serious Jessica (Gabrielle Jourdan), and an appallingly introverted, febrile Antonio (David Bamber).

But the evening is dominated by Henry Goodman's astonishing, complex Shylock. Alert to the details in every line, Goodman presents a shrewd, suspicious, bitter, but dignified man, full to bursting with conflicting emotions. Above all, he is sensitive. From his first scene with Antonio, it is clear that it is not hatred but personal offence that motivates his vindictiveness. When he hears there will be masques in the evening, he involuntarily slaps Jessica in the face: an act not of brutality, but of protective fear; informed by Tubal of Jessica's spending sprees, he cries “I would my daughter were dead at my foot”, but it is an explosion of pained impotence, not a curse, and Tubal tut-tuts at the wild words to show he knows they are not meant; when, of Antonio's imminent bankruptcy, he says “I am very glad of it”, it is no sneer but a release of fury; yet when he tells Tubal “Thou torturest me”, it is almost a pitiful aside, a whimper. In the Trial scene, he is driven to uncertainty, very nearly giving in to Portia's pleas to be merciful. Tubal leaves when it looks as though Shylock is going to carry through his threat, nicely isolating the issue, and the only doubt is whether such a passionate, sensitive, reasonable man could ever kill cold-bloodedly. Indeed, Goodman's Shylock aborts his first attempt, and gives us the impression that, if not stopped by Portia, he might well have collapsed in the act. His downfall is wholly tragic; cruel, not humiliating.

Nunn's production sacrifices one half of Merchant to the other: like Shylock, it is both compellingly and crippingly literal. Where it brings to life the passions of the characters in thrilling detail, it untunes the play's ethereal music. Are things so hopeless? If not, we need a production of equal conviction that celebrates Belmont. And that, today, is hard to imagine.
In the following excerpted review, Smallwood observes that Gregory Doran's Stratford production of The Merchant of Venice offered no new insights into the play.

Gregory Doran's The Merchant of Venice started as it meant to go on, with a determination to fill the space, its opening dumb-show of merchants, Jewish and Gentile, congregating on the Venetian dockside in the half light of a February day, lasting several minutes before the play's first line. With a dark mist rising and black stone walls oozing damp, cargo was examined and valued while prostitutes stood around hopefully waiting for customers: everything was for sale here, including sexual companionship; and from this we moved to the scene in which Bassanio seeks another loan from Antonio.

Doran's production had nothing particularly startling to tell us about the play, no new directorial reading to offer. In some ways it was rather safe; but what it did well was to provide actors with the chance to explore their roles in organic interaction. One saw this at once in the first scene, with Julian Curry's pale, austere, emaciated Antonio, terribly unbending but with a kind of wasted elegance, confronting Scott Handy's noisy, boisterous Bassanio. In Bassanio slid, flat on his stomach, from some bit of off-stage larking about with others of the laddish crew with whom he drinks too much and makes lots of noise in the streets. He had arrived late, and half-drunk, for an important meeting with a man who—and this we learned as soon as their eyes met—loved him deeply. Bassanio tried to touch him on the cheek; Antonio flinched, not wanting to be patronized, or teased, in this way. There was impatience from Antonio at Bassanio's slowness in coming to the point, a touch of tetchiness at his indirectness in asking for money, and a foreboding appropriateness in his giving Bassanio his ring to help in the attempt to raise it. The understatedness of Curry's performance was absolutely right in establishing the tensions of the relationship.

Philip Voss had not chosen to understate his Shylock, and the result was equally appropriate to the overall balance of the production. His first scene established his loathing for Antonio, smarming round and pawing Antonio's young friend, insisting on lots of handshakes, using the story of Laban's sheep to mime the homosexual act, swiping at Antonio's genitals as he spoke of the pound of flesh. His farewell to Jessica was very precisely observed: he was obsessed with the handing over of the keys, while she, anxious not to seem anxious to get hold of them, wrapped his scarf a little more neatly round his neck, then dodged back to him for a last little kiss—of guilt and of tenderness too. The invention of Shylock's vision of Jessica being carried away on someone's shoulders in the swirl of music and torches and hideously pig-masked revellers was, perhaps, to hammer home the point a little strenuously, but it led to a rather nice little Irvingesque moment as Shylock returned to his empty house to find his world, and his entrance hall, spinning out of control. ‘Let him look to his bond’, he was saying when we next met him, and the second time he said it we saw, with startling clarity, the idea suddenly strike him—a brilliantly focused moment. The fierce anger (no self-pity at all) of ‘Hath not a Jew eyes’, the tenderness with which he wiped off the spit that Salerio and Solanio had deposited on Tubal's beard, the anguished immediacy of his recall of Leah's turquoise, led to the howl of pain that ended the first half of the production and that seemed to come from a very ‘ancient grudge’ indeed.

The production would have been offering us ‘The Tragedy of Shylock’ if Helen Schlesinger's Portia had not been so striking and intelligent a performance. Her restless energy when we first met her, pacing around the room taking the labels off her suitors' ostentatious gifts, her wry humour, her clear resentment of the restrictions of her father's will and loyal determination to obey them, her obvious fear that Morocco or Aragon might choose right (and the hamming up of those performances made that fear understandable), all this put...
enormous pressure on Bassanio's choosing scene. This was played with total commitment and seriousness, as though the feckless young man we had watched in Venice had suddenly, through the influence of Belmont, seen things clearly for the first time in his life. The wonderful sense of pent-up joy released when he chose right, then dashed again by the arrival of the messengers from Venice, was impressive. ‘O love … dispatch’, she said when Antonio's letter was read, and ‘love’ was not a vocative but the abstract noun, signalling her realization of the emotional complexities she would face in Venice.

In the trial scene Portia was, believably enough, uncomprehending at first that Shylock would not be bought off. She clearly expected the graciousness of her argument about mercy, the persuasive eagerness with which it was uttered, the self-evident need for a surgeon, to be convincing to her adversary. Only slowly did she begin to perceive the full depth of loathing with which she had to deal and the extent of her husband's commitment to Antonio as she was forced to watch the long, slow hug between them that provoked Shylock's sardonic ‘These be the Christian husbands’. This Portia didn't have her clever little solution all sewn up before she came into court; the acting was on the moment, with the contest between the play's two impulses, to comedy or to tragedy, on the knife-edge. Moments later, as Shylock's own knife-edge lingered for a long time on Antonio's chest, trying different angles for slicing, there was a slight danger that a third genre, melodrama, might come into the equation. At the end of the scene there was another flirtation with the melodramatic as Shylock, who had collapsed in the heap of gold coins that Bassanio had thrown down in evidence that he had the repayment money ‘here, in the court’, struggled to rise to his feet. He skidded and slithered about, his forlorn gestures for help ignored, providing an image that was undoubtedly impressive, iconic even, but perhaps just too self-consciously contrived. The coins remained there for the final scene's return to Belmont, so that Lorenzo sat with Jessica on a bank thick inlaid with ducats of bright gold, an image that insisted on the play's constant shuttling between love and money: ‘Since you are dear bought I will love you dear’. Its final image was of four men clinging to the prizes that the story has given them, three of them to women who have brought them wealth, the fourth to a letter, a sort of ‘bond’, that promises him wealth too. A fifth man, who signed a bond to ‘buy your love’ and ended with neither love nor money, was not there.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: John Simon (review date 14 February 2000)**


*In the following excerpted review, Simon contends that certain elements of Trevor Nunn's production of *The Merchant of Venice* for the National Theatre were bit contrived, but finds the play as a whole "mostly absorbing."*

Trevor Nunn has been going from strength to strength at London's Royal National Theatre, where *The Merchant of Venice* is his latest success. Transposed to the thirties, its early scenes take place in a café or nightspot where “What news on the Rialto?” is aptly asked of a newspaper reader. Here, two bar girls entertain with a droll pop song, and Lancelot Gobbo delivers his monologue as a cabaret act with music to surprisingly good effect.

Nunn has cleverly turned Shylock into a father not above slapping his grown daughter, which helps justify Jessica's defection. Yet, affectingly, Nunn later allows her a twinge of remorse. Small, subtle touches abound, as when Jessica's evidently first taste of champagne makes the girl choke. Less felicitous is the swimsuit scene by Portia's pool, or the absence of all things Venetian until, quite late, we hear a concert of seagulls.

Some things are too contrived. Thus the court allows Shylock to approach Antonio's bared chest, knife in hand, without demur; in another second, blood could be shed. But, to milk the suspense, Shylock himself draws back; only on his second try does Portia stop him at the last moment. Nunn also inserts some Yiddish
for father and daughter; at the trial, Shylock's friend Tubal leaves conspicuously as things get hairy, to show that there are “good” Jews as well.

But all updatings are basically problematic, the more so when the material contains fairy-tale elements like the three caskets and the pound of flesh, which can squeak by best through distancing; closer to our time, they become more preposterous. Yet Nunn gets pleasing comical effects from a would-be Europeanized Prince of Morocco and a flamenco-dancing Prince of Aragon. The slightly oversimplified sets by Hildegard Bechtler are no-nonsense efficient, and there is amiable music by Steven Edis played live.

The acting is mostly fine. Henry Goodman's complex Shylock is first rate, as is Gabrielle Jourdan's earnest Jessica. Derbhla Crotty's Portia grows in stature as the action progresses, and Alexander Hanson's Bassanio is dapper and winning. Two weak links are David Bamber's unaccountably nondescript Antonio and Daniel Evans's unprepossessing Lorenzo, who also speaks verse like a sedulous schoolboy, though the others may go too far in prosifying poetry. Still, a mostly absorbing production.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Alvin Klein (review date 5 November 2000)**


[In the following review, Klein assesses Richard Corley's production of The Merchant of Venice for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, contending that although it attempted to develop the play's romantic and comic features, it failed to offer an original take on Shakespeare's ambivalent treatment of Shylock.]

No kidding, The Merchant of Venice is a comedy.

Categorically speaking, that's not news to Shakespearean mavens, but it's invariably a surprise. The play is not a comic read, and it is rarely played for laughs. Richard Corley, the director of the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival's production here, seems hell-bent on proving that Merchant is merry and very romantic. We don't have to believe it, but it's a fair try.

In one of those audience-friendly surveys that theaters are obliged to conduct randomly to show they care about what audiences want to see, the festival has come up with a finding that astounds. A news release says that, in recent years, the one most requested play in the canon is not Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet. It is not even Titus Andronicus. No kidding, it is The Merchant of Venice. That Shakespeare's distressing, in many ways unfathomable, and, after more than 400 years, still hotly debated play, is at the top in what amounts to a popularity poll, must mean that thoughtful people are still trying to figure it out. Or to see it performed coherently.

Mr. Corley may not have figured it out, but he knows it is supposed to be a comedy. No tragedy tonight, not when the title character, who's no hero, would fall from a very low place if he were killed. His name is Antonio and he is saved by a hair, from a knife held high—a moment that is definitely played for laughs, and gets them.

And so what if Antonio's would-be murderer is humiliated beyond hope? One villain was going to cut hazardously close to another villain's heart. In a time-honored reversal of theatrical fate, the man who is forced to play the victim triumphs, viciousness renewed, and the vengeful knife-wielder is stripped of his figurative heart and soul, his religious identity, his reason to live. And he has no choice but to say: “I am content.” Death of the spirit does not define tragedy.
Besides, his name is Shylock, but that's another story. You feel sorry for him or you don't. Either way, otherwise wise people will be giving you their views for another 400 years.

In Mr. Corley's staging, Nicholas Kepros plays Shylock for pathos, which is very wrong, obvious and sadly stereotypical, but that's a small mistake in a production as dismissive of Shylock as the play is.

If the actor's accent of studied rising inflections and his ill-advised gesticulations have something to do with the director's ostensible accent on comedy, that's a big mistake. It only keeps Shylock at a stock level, without daring to depict him as the mad clown Shakespeare likely intended him to be.

From offstage revelries at the start, to the riddle of the caskets, with Portia's suitors, and the deception involving the wedding rings, both played out in the manner of opera buffa, Mr. Corley's notions about frivolous people work to good comic effect.

And it is audience-winning, especially in the giddy, humorous interplay between Portia (Kate Forbes as a sexy, manipulative, power-driven modern woman, as much shrew as shrewd) and Nerissa (Veronica Watt, an affectionate and assertive maid and friend).

And Phillip Christian, funny with attitude, comes to woo Portia wealthily and more opportunistically as the Prince of Morocco, lending an air of lightness to a production determined to be diverting.

Ah, but underneath. Mr. Corley appears to have a grip on a newly disturbing dimension of a play that will never cease to disturb. The shallow players are all about themselves in a world that is all about money in the contemporary society that Mr. Corley's moderndress production substitutes for 16th-century cities, both real (Venice) and imaginary (Belmont).

To perceive the play as more about business, power and ego than about religion is an attempt to deflect the stigma of anti-Semitism that taints it. Yet that stigma is inescapable. Although Portia is the major player and Antonio is the title character, the specter of Shylock—remember the play is not titled “The Jew of Venice”—haunts the mind, throws the play out of whack and obsesses scholars, actors and compassionate human beings who seek his redemption, as Shakespeare did not.

Mr. Corley goes halfway with showiness and resonance. What the director cannot unravel or perhaps interweave are the disparate plays-within-plays Shakespeare wrote. And Shylock, perhaps the starriest supporting role of all time, is an unforgiving as well as an unforgivable monster, a mere cartoon, a treacherous hero, a heartbreaking villain, an unmerciful forlorn outcast or all of the above. Still, he exists outside the play, the error in the comedy and a real downer as ever.

This production does not attempt to draw him in, or to provide a brave, original, authoritative spin on a playwright's ambivalence that has turned into a lamentable universal symbol.

What is the world that would accommodate Shylock, anyway? Portia, the faux arbiter of justice, preaching mercy, practicing the politics of guile, and her compatriots are despicable, with less dimension, but more charm. It's facile and too fashionable to resolve it all by simply calling *The Merchant of Venice* a dark comedy. It is a disconnected, troubling, irreconcilable play that proves festival audiences want to think and argue.

Go figure is a commonplace command. How often does it go so deep?
Criticism: Production Reviews: Robert Smallwood (review date 2000)


[In the following excerpted review, Smallwood describes Trevor Nunn's production of The Merchant of Venice for the National Theatre as brilliant, and praises the principal actors, particularly Henry Goodman's Shylock.]

There was no such sense of a one-man show about the National Theatre ensemble's second Shakespeare of the year, a production, again directed by Trevor Nunn, of The Merchant of Venice at the Cottesloe Theatre, played in traverse mode. Hildegard Bechtler's design placed the Venetian scenes of the play in the middle of the traverse in a Cabaret world of thirties dance music, elegant café tables on a black and white chequered floor, much drinking of champagne, the noisy young men of the Christian community in an impressive range of well-cut suits and blacks such as Lancelot Gobbo doing the menial jobs (again the rejection of the 'blind casting' principle). At one end of the traverse, Belmont was a place of chic opulence, fashionable (and slightly sexy) murals, stiff cocktails, and Portia's first batch of suitors (the 'Neapolitan Prince' and his fellows) presented, wearing a fine selection of elegant hats, on a home cine-projector; at the opposite end was the humble, well-locked door to Shylock's house, with its photograph of Leah between candles on a little cupboard, and Jessica shouted at in Yiddish for not cleaning the pans as well as her mother used to.

We opened with David Bamber's middle-aged, pasty-faced, be-spectacled Antonio, a self-made provincial always a little nervous among the toffs and a permanent embarrassment to Bassanio, playing a melancholy tune on the café piano before Bassanio's boisterous set of pals arrived to drink champagne and flirt with the café's singing girls. Antonio's flat northern vowels (very Alan Bennett—Salerio and Solanio would later mimic his accent in describing his farewell to Bassanio), his dull, centre-parted hair, his behind-the-fashion suit, contrasted splendidly with the dashing playboy elegance of Alexander Hanson's beautifully coiffured Bassanio, more than a touch of the young Jonathan Aitken about him—and perhaps about as trustworthy. Their conversation about Portia (a photograph of her eagerly shown and wearily looked at) made clear that Antonio's forlorn sexual yearnings for Bassanio had long since been repressed (though not suppressed) and gave the impression that this was by no means Bassanio's first attempt to woo an heiress. At the end of it, Antonio was left to pay the scene's accumulated café bill, a little touch of Nunn social realism that would recur, Shylock most carefully paying, and tipping, for his glass of tea in his first scene, Salerio and Solanio, and Gratiano and company, never having a coin among them when large bills for champagne arrived.

Derbhle Crotty's Portia, an elegant and slightly world-weary society heiress, apparently capable of dealing with any of her suitors with ice-cool grace and wit, found herself surprisingly wrong-footed by the exotic poetic earnestness of Chu Omambala's splendid Morocco. In he came with his white-robed attendant in a wonderful pale grey pin-striped suit (complete with plus-fours and spats) and a demonstration of scimitar-twirling that she was not alone in finding mesmerizingly sexy. She had to hide her tears from her household at the depth of his grief when he chose wrongly. Aragon was easier, a genuinely funny caricature of moustachioed heel-clicking from Raymond Coulthard, and then the overwhelming handsomeness of Bassanio, irresistible of course, but with a most interesting hint of resentment that it should be so. There was a faint sense of tension and hesitation as they knelt (little church hassocks specially brought in) side by side to exchange vows and rings with a degree of solemnity that had a touch of foreboding about it, a mood deepened rather than dissipated by Gratiano's coarse, noisy laughter as the champagne flowed, and the jokes too, about getting sons and 'stakes down'. She and Bassanio were (contrary to the text) alone as she read out Antonio's letter at the end of the scene; when her betrothed sobbed on the word 'love', she understood the situation immediately. Her suitcase was packed the next time we saw her and when she appeared in court, her face
seeming pinched and pale as if from long hours of legal study, she knew there was more than one battle to be fought.

Her ostensible adversary in the court scene was Henry Goodman's remarkable Shylock. He had first appeared in the play taking his glass of tea at a café side table, a confident if wary figure in his rather straggly beard, a large black hat over his yarmulke, a dark, slightly baggy suit, a briefcase, and a silver-topped cane. His eyes twinkled as he told the story of Jacob's sheep; there was warmth and humour here, shrewdness, and a sharp and witty intelligence, and he laughed a lot to himself before he could manage to tell them about the absurd idea of the bond. Beneath the attempts at friendliness, however, one always saw the depth of grievance. 'This is kind I offer' he said to Bamber's deeply hesitant, racist Antonio and for a moment, as they shook hands, a little ray of hope seemed to touch the agreement between these two lonely men. Shylock's loneliness was manifest in the little scene with Jessica, shouting at her for housekeeping failures, embracing her possessively, slapping her face when she showed too much interest in Gobbo's message, then embracing her again and forcing her to join him in a wistful Hebrew song as they gazed at the photograph of her mother. 'Fast bind', he said - and she joined in obediently on 'fast find'. The lonely widower, desperate and demanding, over-protectively clinging to his treasured child's love, was vulnerably on view here. When next we saw him he was seated (unscripted), at a café table with Antonio and Bassanio. He looked painfully ill at ease as he listened to Andrew French's Lancelot Gobbo at the cabaret microphone presenting his (transposed) story of the conflict between conscience and the fiend as a stand-up comedy turn between the singing girls. Shylock's return home through the revellers to his unanswered front door, his fumbling with his keys, his discovery of Jessica's departure (she had kissed her mother's photograph goodbye after his earlier exit), were the inevitable prelude to his cracking up at his next appearance. It was the urbane indifference to his grief of Salerio and Solanio that did it. He had greeted them eagerly, as though pleased to have their company. Their mocking callousness produced a version of 'Hath not a Jew eyes' that was eager, urgent, intended to be persuasive, and then turned very fierce, though with the tremor of grief beneath, on 'shall we not revenge?', his body tense with fury at the years of ill-treatment. It was at this point that Peter de Jersey's Salerio began to part company with Mark Umbers's implacably racist Solanio, a move that would show Solanio, by the end of the trial scene, appalled at the behaviour of his fellow Christians and physically restraining the threatened violence of Richard Henders's loathsome Gratiano. The first half ended with John Nolan's gentle, gracious Tubal raising a deprecating hand at his friend's increasing loss of control, and Shylock vowing (from somewhat earlier in the text) 'Cursed be my tribe / If I forgive him'.

The court scene was played across the full length of the traverse stage, the Duke's desk at one end, the plaintiff and defendant half way down on upright chairs, Tubal behind Shylock, and Antonio's supporters, a Jew-baiting gang of young men in posh suits, behind him, rowdy and aggressive as a bunch of football hooligans (though in this case clearly Rugby football). The sense of physical threat to Shylock was constant through the scene. It was from it that he seemed to find the strength to resist Portia's plea for mercy. She had taken a chair to sit directly in front of him a few lines into the speech, delivering the rest of it straight to him with an earnest intensity that rivetted his attention. Never before, one felt, had a member of the Christian community spoken to him with this degree of immediacy and it was curiously welcome. At the end he agonized for several tense, painful seconds of almost unbearable suspense before a returning awareness of the Gratiano mob rekindled his resolve and he just managed to find the strength to say 'My deeds upon my head'. He was further strengthened a few moments later by the contemptible offer of thrice the money: mercy he might have been moved by, money never. The judgement given and Antonio's chest bared, Tubal rose and walked with quiet dignity from the court, absolutely dissociating himself from what seemed imminent. Shylock prayed in Hebrew; the Christians muttered 'Our Father'; Bassanio embraced Antonio who fondled his friend's face and kissed him on 'Whether Bassanio had not once a love'. And then Shylock stood, fixated and hesitant, in front of Antonio, the knife raised, his hand trembling, his eyes filling with tears, patently incapable of doing it. He stepped back to collect himself, covering his trousers with a protective white cloth, and Portia, whose frantic searches through her lawbooks had produced no shred of inspiration until this moment, suddenly had the idea and rushed down the room: 'Tarry awhile', and Antonio was rescued, and
Shylock too. Now the law against aliens that she had found could at last be useful, and she began to read it out, Shylock joining in with weary, contemptuous familiarity. What happened afterwards disgusted her, and Salerio, as the forces of Christian fanaticism were unleashed. Flaunting the scales, Antonio demanded that Shylock give up his religion. His accession to the appalling requirement was resigned, bitter, ironic, as, with a mock flourish, he put his yarmulke and prayer belt onto the scales in a gesture that suggested that they might as well have taken his life, and walked from the room to the jeers of Gratiano and his fellow yobs.

And so back to Belmont. Portia had been absolutely shattered when Bassanio's ring had been sent after her, and she took immense care over publicly humiliating Antonio in making him return it in symbolic withdrawal from her husband's life. Bamber made Antonio almost convincing (even a little peck on the cheek) in his gratitude to her for getting him some of his ships back, and then withdrew to the piano to play the same wistful little tune with which the performance had started. ‘What elegant symmetry’, one thought, as three pairs of lovers stood there, somewhat uncertainly in the growing light, the first whistles from a blackbird coming in to replace the song of the nightingale. ‘It is almost morning’, said Portia (from a moment or two earlier in the scene), and Gabrielle Jourdan's Jessica took a step or two away from her husband. She had seemed profoundly ill at ease ever since arriving at Belmont, looking like a refugee child, hating the cocktail she was given, much disturbed at Lancelot Gobbo's teasing, seeming to find her space invaded by the unctuous Welsh earnestness of Daniel Evans's Lorenzo, weeping bitterly as she listened to the music on the moonlit bank, and shattered by the gift of her father's property at his death. Now, as the play closed and she stood alone, stared at by the rest, she began to sing the Hebrew song she had sung with her father; and as its melancholy music took over the mood, thunder rumbled ominously in the distance and everyone froze as the lights went down. It was a stunningly effective ending to a brilliant production, a very obvious candidate for the best piece of Shakespearian theatre of the year—which perhaps, after all, it was. …

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Caryn James (review date 8 October 2001)**


*In the following review, James praises Trevor Nunn's adaptation of The Merchant of Venice for PBS, including Henry Goodman's “mesmerizing” Shylock and Derbhle Crotty's “commanding” Portia.*

Revenge, justice, mercy. Words that seem socially and politically charged today were already resonating through *The Merchant of Venice,* a play so deeply rooted in an enduring question—how should justice, mercy and vengeance be balanced?—that it speaks to any number of historical crises, including our own. Trevor Nunn's inspired idea was to transplant the play to the 1930's, when World War II was looming and anti-Semitism was bluntly expressed.

Stylishly set in cafe society, this astute *Merchant* gets the new season of “Masterpiece Theater” off to a smashing, unexpectedly relevant start. (The series has moved to Monday nights on PBS.)

Mr. Nunn's *Merchant* was first presented at the Royal National Theater in 1999, and despite a few cinematic flourishes it remains unapologetically stage-bound. The actors have modulated their performances for the camera, which frequently closes in on their faces, but the set design is spare. This theatrical version is so vibrant and rich, however, that it makes you wish you had seen it onstage.

The tone is set with the opening credits, in which sepia film reveals the social chasm separating the characters. There are people dancing in posh nightclubs and drinking champagne, as if they were in an RKO musical; there are scenes of a Jewish ghetto, a generic version of the Lower East Side at the time. When the actors
appear onstage, the film turns to color but retains the stylized feel of the past with a neutral palette of grays and beiges. Chairs and tables suggest a nightclub, where men wear tuxedos, the women are for sale, and the aura of decadence comes to include a song with a deliberate nod to Cabaret.

Antonio, the merchant who mortgages his fleet of ships so his friend Bassanio can try to win the hand of Portia, is given a reason for his extravagance here: we see him gently, quickly stroke Bassanio's hair. Without overplaying the erotic attraction to the point where it distorts Shakespeare, the gesture makes it more understandable to a modern audience when Antonio agrees to give his fortune and a pound of his flesh to Shylock as collateral.

Henry Goodman's mesmerizing performance as Shylock reveals why he is so haunting a character. Beneath the surface details of the yarmulke and accent, this Shylock is vengeful, imperfect, unlikable, but also persecuted, emotionally wounded and deserving of sympathy.

His anger is vehement and direct when he delivers a speech about Antonio to the camera, beginning, “I hate him for he is a Christian.” And his injured soul is also evident when he offers Antonio a friendship of convenience and is rejected. “For your love I pray you, wrong me not,” he says, with no realistic hope that will happen. By the time he gets to his most famous speech—“Hath not a Jew eyes? If you prick us do we not bleed?”—Mr. Goodman's Shylock is furious, motivated equally by social mistreatment and by his profound heartbreak because his daughter has eloped with a Christian.

His humanizing performance is helped by transporting the play to the 30's. The period neutralizes the persistent debate about the characters' anti-Semitic remarks, not by attributing them to Shakespeare's own biased era, but by framing them as the product of a vicious historical moment in our own. Launcelot, one of Shakespeare's clowns, becomes a stand-up comedian here, his descriptions of Shylock turned into the kind of jokes about Jews that were common at the time.

Most of the other performances are serviceable, with the great exception of Derbhle Crotty's commanding Portia. She is convincing as a mature woman who accepts suitors in her Art Deco home as they try to choose correctly among the gold, silver or lead caskets. There are comic touches in these scenes, notably when the Prince of Arragon arrives; he is a flamenco dancer who fractures English with a Spanish accent.

But Ms. Crotty's power truly emerges when Portia poses as a male lawyer. Her “quality of mercy” speech is not recited as airy poetry, but as a desperate conversation with Shylock, as she tries to persuade him not to claim his pound of flesh because “earthly power” is closest to God's “when mercy seasons justice.” Shylock of course insists on and is finally undone by an unmerciful adherence to the letter of the law, as this Merchant makes Shakespeare's questions seem eye-openingly fresh.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Toby Young (review date 10 November 2001)**


**[In the following excerpted review of Loveday Ingram's feminist production of The Merchant of Venice, Young states that the male characters were too emasculated to be credibly seen as romantic figures.]**

Jews are treated a good deal less sympathetically in the Royal Shakespeare Company's latest production of The Merchant of Venice. As directed by Loveday Ingram, Shylock is a villain of the first water and it takes all the ingenuity of Portia, played as a heroic mother-figure by Hermione Gulliford, to save Antonio and Bassanio from his clutches. This is an unashamedly feminist reading of the play, and, while it serves to
enliven the courtroom confrontation between Shylock and Portia, the male principals are left so emasculated it's difficult to take them seriously as romantic figures. Bassanio (Paul Hickey), in particular, is so wet I was left scratching my head as to why this fire-breathing Portia shows any interest in him.

There are some superb performances, though. Ian Fielder invests Antonio with such authority I couldn't take my eyes off him and Ian Bartholomew's Shylock seethes with embittered hatred. However, the performer who really stands out is Chris Jarman, who has a brief cameo as the Prince of Morocco, one of Portia's unsuccessful suitors. His all too brief appearance, in which he leaps about the stage like one of the Arabian Knights, gives the play a much-needed boost of comic energy, and, after he's gone, it's almost as if someone's turned out the lights. A few more touches like that and this merely competent production of The Merchant of Venice might have turned into something much more memorable.

**Criticism: Themes: Thomas Luxon (essay date January 1999)**


[In the following essay, Luxon investigates the play's treatment of Jews within the context of late Elizabethan society's attitudes toward Jewishness as both race and religion.]

Two recent studies of Shakespeare and early modern attitudes towards Jews come to remarkably different conclusions on the question of whether or not The Merchant of Venice is an anti-Jewish play.¹ James Shapiro's richly historical Shakespeare and the Jews offers fascinating evidence about the scope and complexity of anti-Jewish attitudes embedded in the “cultural moment” of Shakespeare's play (Shapiro 10), but he shies away from directly accusing either playwright or play of promoting or trading on anti-semitism, claiming that such terms are “anachronistic … inventions of nineteenth-century racial theory” and thus, “fundamentally ill-suited for gauging what transpired three hundred years earlier” (11). The objection is important; modern discourses about race are significantly different from their early modern religious forbears. However, this does not render questions like “Is the play intentionally anti-Jewish?” irrelevant. Does the play invite us to share Antonio's attitudes toward Jews? Does it mean us to regard Shylock (and so revile Shylock) as a “typical” Jew? Shapiro shows us a “cultural moment” of late Elizabethan anxiety about national and religious identities, anxieties that very often surfaced as reactionary xenophobia and both anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic paranoia. We might reasonably and profitably ask whether or not the play exploits these anxieties and phobias, and if so how? Does the play endorse the anti-Jewish attitudes that according to Shapiro helped shape a nation's anxious search for Englishness?

Martin Yaffe's Shylock and the Jewish Question throws itself headfirst into the counter-intuitive claim that the play is intentionally and even obviously pro-Jewish, that the play invites us to revile Shylock, not as a typical Jew, but as a “bad Jew.” Yaffe's argument assumes, without offering any historical evidence, that both playwright and audience would have regarded Shylock as a Jew who has abandoned traditional Jewish moral teaching and assimilated himself to the mercenary ways of Venetian capitalism.² He is bloodthirsty and merciless because he is a materialist usurer, even a precursor of the modern secular liberal, not because he is a Jew. Of course I agree with Yaffe that stereotypes of Jews as merciless, bloodthirsty, and carnal-minded are all rooted in flagrant misconceptions of traditional Hebrew and Jewish teachings, but I simply cannot bring myself to imagine that either Shakespeare or his audience was free of such misconceptions. Shapiro's book offers more than enough evidence to the contrary.

**SHYLOCK AS A “BAD JEW”**
Though I think Yaffe's overall thesis unsound, even obtuse, its perspective sometimes prompts more interesting, even more accurate, readings of key passages in the play than traditional perspectives have. Yaffe's reading of Shylock's "I am a Jew" speech, for example, is in at least one important respect more historically correct than the one Shapiro's concluding remarks imply (Shapiro 228). Shapiro echoes the time-honoured reading of this speech as a moving appeal to universalist humanism; but we too easily forget how it might have sounded to a Renaissance Christian humanist:

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 humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (Merchant 3.1.49-61)

Shylock claims that Christians and Jews are not much different from each other, that they share an underlying carnal humanity. In Yaffe's words, "Shylock argues that Jews and Christians are alike in a low but undeniable respect: having eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, and so forth, their behaviour is equally subject to the overriding needs and susceptibilities of the human body. Conditioned alike, they may therefore be expected to act alike" (Yaffe 63-64). Shylock preaches a kind of humanism, but it is a far cry from the neoplatonic Christian humanism of, say Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who taught that humanity is not so much a matter of shared physiology, but of shared godlikeness—the intimate of the gods, the king of the lower beings, … the marriage song of the world, on David's testimony but a little lower than the angels" (Pico 223). Shylock's humanism is more like the modern secular humanism implicit in the excuse, "after all I'm only human." On this score, Yaffe is precisely right; an audience that warms to Portia's mercy speech would regard Shylock's carnal humanism—revenge for revenge—as something very low indeed.

What Yaffe does not notice, for it hardly supports his argument, is that Shakespeare's audience would also have recognized in this speech the "carnal" mind they believed typical of all Jews. The carnal attitude Yaffe would attribute to Shylock's (and Venice's) "newly prominent" commercialism (Yaffe 82), a contemporary audience would have regarded as a Jewish attitude. Indeed, one of the play's chief themes is that commercialism, especially the emergent practice of favouring merchant law over common law and equity, and the general cultural slide towards the idolatries of the marketplace, all threaten traditional values much in the way Jews had long been regarded as a threat to Christianity. The play uses the Jew and the Merchant as complementary figures of each other; exaggerated mercantilism is made to look Jewish and the mythic bloodthirsty Jew is refigured as a business machiavel.

Yaffe also makes a very good point about Shylock's being bad at Bible interpretation. Yaffe regards Shylock as a "bad Jew," which in his book means an assimilated Jew. Shylock has "departed from the ways of his forbears" (Yaffe 62) and become a moneygrubbing Venetian financier. Although he still calls himself a Jew, he long ago stopped following the ancient laws of the Torah; indeed he cannot even read Torah profitably because he tends to read the scriptures "rather as a sourcebook for the creative businessman" (Yaffe 63). An allegedly telling example of Shylock's perverse assimilationist hermeneutics is his attempt, in Act 1, scene 3 to read the story of Jacob and Laban from Genesis 30-31 as a biblical endorsement of usury. Yaffe correctly observes that traditional rabbinic commentary explicitly agrees with Antonio's (supposedly the Christian) reading of the Jacob and Laban episode—that Jacob used no guile or sharp practices in his dealings with Laban, but simply followed the Lord's commandments and allowed circumstances to be "sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven" (1.3.89). Shylock's reading is not, then, a traditional Jewish interpretation of Jacob's
thriving, but a money-grubbing Venice-assimilated apostate's self-interested perversion of the story.

I agree, of course, that Shylock's reading of Genesis is not a typically rabbinic or even Jewish reading, but I think Yaffe is wrong about Elizabethan Protestant audiences. They probably would have regarded Shylock's self-serving hermeneutics as typically Jewish, and the play clearly invites us to think so. The typical Elizabethan Protestant would have offered quite a different account of Shylock's, or any Jew's, hermeneutic myopia—the widely held conviction that Jews simply cannot read the scriptures properly. In particular, it was believed they stubbornly read the Bible's promises in carnal senses rather than the spiritual senses which the Holy Spirit intended. Shakespeare's audience would probably have seen Shylock's carnal and self-serving reading of Genesis as typical of all Jews, since they generally believed that all Jews since Christ's advent had willfully given up their place in God's Church, God's Israel, and had become stubborn misbelievers, unable to read their own scriptures profitably. In short, all Jews were believed to have “departed from the ways of [their] forbears”. To Elizabethan Christians, that was virtually the definition of a Jew.

EARLY MODERN PROTESTANT VERSIONS OF THE JEW

I find Yaffe's misreadings of the “I am a Jew” speech and Shylock's hermeneutic myopia especially interesting because they pay attention to features of the play other critics ignore. Yaffe misreads these features because he has little sense of the powerfully ambivalent role played by the figure of the Jew in the Elizabethan Protestant imagination. When English Protestants read their Bibles, they read the patriarchs and prophets not just as figures of themselves; they thought of Moses, David, Ezekiel, and Daniel as co-religionists, members of God's Church. The ancient Israelites, taught Luther, Calvin, and the Geneva Bible annotations, were God's pre-advent Church. The “Old Testament” Israelites, especially the patriarchs and heroes, were widely regarded as proto-Christian members of the true Church, elect from the beginning. But the post-advent Jews represented the worst form of stubborn and graceless apostasy. Except for the Pauline assurance that many of them would turn Christian at the last moment of history, these Jews stood for everything a Christian was not—selfish, impious, carnal-minded, stubborn, vindictive, merciless, envious, bloodthirsty, narrow-minded, and devoted to this world rather than to the world to come.

Examples of these attitudes towards Israelite and Jew can be found almost everywhere in early modern religious discourse, but they are especially prevalent in reformation commentaries on the Book of Daniel. The book of Daniel and contemporary commentaries upon it are important here because Shakespeare's play so loudly and complexly invokes the stories and teachings of the ancient Hebrew prophet. In the trial scene, Shylock expresses his delight at young Doctor Balthasar's (Portia's) summary judgment in his favour by dubbing him “a Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel” (Merchant 4.1.218). As Shapiro (and Lewalski before him) observes, “editors of the play uniformly note that the characters are alluding to the apocryphal story of Susannah and the elders” and that “the explanations go no further” than this (Shapiro 133). Lewalski also observed, in 1962 (Lewalski 327-43), that the name Portia borrows for her disguise as a young law clerk, Balthasar (or as the Geneva Bible spells it, “Belteshazàr”), was the name assigned to Daniel by Ashpenaz, King Nebuchadnezzar's “chief of the Eunuches” when Daniel and three other children of Israel's royal household were taken from Israel to live in captivity in Babylon (Daniel 1:7). Thus, though Shylock probably alludes to the story of Susanna when he praises Portia as “a Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel,” his allusion is already undercut and displaced by Portia's assumption of Daniel's Babylonian name as part of her disguise as judge. Her gesture alludes, not to the apocryphal Book of Susanna, but to what Christians considered the canonical book of Daniel. Only there is the prophet referred to by his Babylonian name. Portia, then, stands for one sort of Daniel, and Shylock invokes quite another; Graziano, probably unwittingly, calls attention to the differences between the two.

In what remains of this paper I will try to show in detail how Portia's Daniel represents the Daniel who was crucial to the Reformation notion of the converted, or Christian Jew as opposed to the blind and stubborn Jew, that Shylock betrays himself as precisely such a blind and stubborn Jew who effectively misrecognizes Daniel
even as he invokes him, and that the play invites its audience therefore to revile Shylock as a typical Jew—myopic hermeneut, stubborn misbeliever, graceless and merciless dog—for whom forced conversion is too good a treatment. The play implies that Portia, disguised as Balthasar/Daniel, plays the role of a true Jew, that is, the Jew who recognizes Jesus as Messiah. It also implies that stubborn, misbelieving Jews like Shylock are not, properly speaking, Jews at all, but more truly like Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, the pagan idolaters who are the bad guys in the book of Daniel. Shakespeare does invite us to revile Shylock as a “bad Jew,” but not in the way Yaffe maintains; to an Elizabethan audience all Jews except those who, like Daniel, acknowledge Christ as Messiah, are “bad Jews.”

**DANIEL AS CHRISTIAN JEW, THE “TRUE JEW”**

Calvin wrote commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible, but his commentary on Daniel, one of the Bible's shorter books, requires two large volumes in the Calvin Translation Society series. Andrew Willet's *Hexapla in Danielem* also runs to two large volumes, much longer than his more well-known *Hexapla in Genesin*, even though the book of Daniel is about one quarter the length of Genesis. The English version of the Geneva Bible prints copious annotations around each of Daniel's twelve chapters. Protestants in Europe and in England were obsessively fascinated with the prophetic book of Daniel. The “Argument” that introduces the Geneva version of the book of Daniel indicates why: “The great providence of God, and his singular mercie toward his Church are most lively here set forth.” Of all the prophets God has sent for the comfort of “his Church,” Ezekiel and Daniel were particularly “adorned with such graces of his holy spirite, that Daniél aboue all other had most special reuelations of suche things as shulde come to the Church, even from the time that they were in captiuitie, to the last ende of the worlde, and to the general resurrection.” By “the Church” here is meant God's chosen people from the time of Abraham to the apocalypse, treated as a single predestined people throughout history from the old covenant to the new. To early modern Protestants, Daniel is a crux, textual and historical, in the saga of God's true Church. This is because they believed that Daniel foretold, not darkly or allegorically, but plainly and self-consciously, the exact number of years that would pass before the advent of “the sonne of man,” or Jesus Christ. Daniel foresaw the cessation of the ceremonies in the temple, implying that Christ's sacrifice on the cross rendered temple sacrifice redundant.

“The Argvment” preceding Daniel in Geneva Bible [1560])

Daniel tells the world of his vision of God's providential plan for the salvation of his Church, from the Babylonian captivity to the apocalypse. In other words, the prophet Daniel comprehended the Gospel centuries before the birth of Christ, and even met the pre-incarnate Christ as “the sonne of man” in a vision, and preached this gospel to a largely unresponsive Israel. He is thus a pivotal figure in the history of God's true Church, the first Jew to become a Christian. Those who reject or misread Daniel's prophecy, then, are apostate Jews, complacent in captivity, the forerunners of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Early Protestant commentaries on Daniel always point out that stubborn Jews refuse to regard Daniel as a prophet or his book as canonical. Andrew Willet, like most Protestant commentators, notes that “The Iewes doe derogate much from the authoritie of this booke, not counting it among the Propheticall writings” (Willet 7). He opines that Jews have denied Daniel the authority of a prophet because they stubbornly resent Christ and the gospel in general. This denial, Willet implies, has grown firmer throughout history. “Elder Iewes” respected the book much as they did the other non-Mosaic books and wrote commentaries on it, but “the later
Rabbines doe denye the booke of Daniel to be authenticall, and therefore do seldom reade it,” and the reason for this is “because Daniel doth so evidently point out the time of the Messiah his comming” (7). Jews in general, implies Willet, have abandoned their heritage in God's true Church, ignored his special prophets, and denied his Messiah. Calvin's comments on this Jewish perversity are typical; according to his reading of Daniel 9:11, Israel's apostasy is not so much a matter of disobeying the law as refusing to hear the gospel from God's prophet:

In revolting, he says, so as not to hear. By these words Daniel expresses the determined obstinacy of the people, implying this was not occasioned by either error or ignorance; nay even sloth was not the cause of Israel's willful blindness and inattention to God's precepts, but was only the beginning of this act of rebellion. In revolting, therefore, so as not to hear thy voice.

(Commentaries on Daniel 2.162)

Giovanni Diodati, the uncle of John Milton's best friend, Charles, wrote in his Pious Annotations upon the Holy Bible that Daniel predicts Christ's redemptive death as “more cleerly shewn to him, then to any other Prophet” and adds that another point of the prophecy is “foretelling also that Christ's Kindome should be exercised, in justly punishing the Jewish Nation for their incredulitie and rebellion.” Protestant commentaries uniformly read Daniel as foretelling Christ's redemption of “the elect” Jews and the damnation of the stubborn Jews. On Daniel 12:1, Diodati comments, “God shall deliver his elect out of the general reprobation, and extermination of the Jewish nation.” Daniel was read as a wholesale indictment, by one of their own prophets, of Jews who deny Christ, even to the point of justifying their “general reprobation and extermination.”

The enormous and hugely popular Annotations upon all the books of the Old and New Testament summarizes “the Propheticall part” of Daniel this way:

Daniel's wisedome doth clearly shine forth, in shewing when the mystery of Mans Redemption should be wrought; and Ceremonies, and legal Sacrifices should cease, and be abolished, to give way to the service of God in Spirit and Truth; namely when the Messiah was slain. … [It] also tells the time precisely when the Messiah, by his death, should purchase for his Church spiritual deliverance, and set up his Spiritual, and everlasting Kindome, by causing and meriting Salvation and Eternal felicity to all both Jewes and gentiles which were of the Election of Grace. Foretelling likewise the finall and fatal judgment of God to be executed by the Romans upon the Jewish Nation, for denying the Holy One of Israel, and betraying the Lord of life to be killed by the Romane power.6

Many Protestants believed that Christ's second coming would be immediately preceded by a mass conversion of Jews, but we are mistaken if we think they meant all Jews. Calvin, for example, taught that only those Jews “elect” from the beginning of the world would be saved. Commenting on Daniel 9:27, he says quite bluntly, “I have no hesitation in stating God's wish to cut off all hope of restoration from the Jews, whom we know to have been blinded by a foolish confidence, and to have supposed God's presence confined to a visible temple. As they were thus firmly persuaded of the impossibility of God's ever departing from them, they ought to be deprived of their false confidence, and no longer deceive themselves by such flattering hopes” (Commentaries on Daniel 2. 228-29). And on Daniel 9:26: “Two points, then, are to be noticed here; first, all hope is to be taken from the Jews, as they must be taught the necessity for their perishing; and secondly, a reason is ascribed for this, namely, the determination of the Almighty and his inviolable decree” (Commentaries on Daniel 2. 224).

According to Calvin, any Jew who had heard the gospel according to Daniel and persisted in denying both Christ and his prophet must perish; God decrees it. Shakespeare's play shows us a Jew who hears the gospel
according to Portia, speaking as Balthasar, a Daniel in disguise. He misrecognizes Daniel as a clever young judge rather than God's prophet; he refuses to hear the teaching of mercy and redemption and grace. He therefore deserves to perish. This is the anti-Jewish logic of the play.

Luther's English disciple, George Joye, compiled in 1544 *The Exposicio[n] of Daniell the Prophete*. There he repeats Melancthon's caution about how properly to read biblical prophecies like Daniel's: readers “muste loke whyche parte containeth the lawes, whyche preache the promises and the gospel” (A8v). Though we normally expect to find “lawes” in the so-called “Old Testament” and gospel promises in the New, the point here is that Daniel preaches literal gospel promises in his prophetic book and the pertinacious “Jewes” simply refuse to “get it.”

As what can be sayde clerelier and evidentlyer agaynste the Jewes, then that Daniel affirmeth Chryste to muste have ben borne duryng yet the common weal of Moses? Wherefore that horrible desstucucion of Jerusalem and ruyne of the whole lande of Juda now paste.M.CCCC.lxxiiii. yeres do testifie Chryst to be borne, & it refuteth their mad & cursed pertinaci. Here must we note the lessons of the true invocacion and worship of God. As when Daniel praieth he acknowlegeth to God onely his owne and their synnes for whom he prayeth, and asketh of God onelye delyveraunce in the fayth and confidence of his mercy, adding by expresse name. For the Lorde Christe hys sake, that is for Messias sake promised.

(A8v - B1)

According to this reading Daniel preaches Christ and “his mercy,” the end of sacrificial ritual, and the destruction of the temple centuries before “the one like the sonne of man” condescends to become incarnate as Jesus Christ (Daniel 7:13). Much like Paul who bragged that his authority as apostle derived from the “risen” Christ rather than the earthly Jesus, Daniel is here understood as an apostle to Israel authorized by the pre-incarnate Christ, appearing to him in visions as “the sonne of man,” or “the similitude of a man” or as “Michael” (Daniel 8:15, 10:13, 21; 12:1). Early modern Protestant commentaries regarded Daniel as literally, not figuratively, preaching the gospel (Daniel 10:1 note b); Calvin, for example, claims that Daniel received interpretations of his visions directly “from Christ's lips” (*Commentaries on Daniel* 2. 111) Of Daniel 7:27, Calvin says, “almost all, except the Jews, have treated this prophecy as relating to the final day of Christ's advent.”

All Christian interpreters agree in this. … As to the Jews, theirs is no explanation at all, for they are not only foolish and stupid, but even crazy. And since their object is the adulteration of sound doctrine, God also blinds them till they become utterly in the dark, and both trifling and childish; and if I were to stop to refute their crudities, I should never come to an end.

(*Commentaries on Daniel* 2. 72)

Fourteen hundred and seventy-four years (“MCCCC.Ixiii.”) of salvation history, says Melancthon, testify to the truth of Daniel’s visionary gospel; it is a gospel that came straight from the heavenly Son of God. What's more, in Daniel 9:1-19, commentators understood Daniel's famous prayer for forgiveness on behalf of Israel as addressed to Christ in Christ's own “expresse name” (Joye B1). The Geneva notes to Daniel 1:7 also insist that Daniel's prayer on behalf of an apostate Israel is consciously addressed to Christ, glossing “Lords sake” as “That is, for thy Chrissts sake in whom [thou] wilt accept all our praiers.” If Daniel prayed in Christ's name for forgiveness of Israel's sins, then Jews who do not recognize Daniel as a prophet-apostle and his teachings as gospel promises are perverse, stupid, crazy, mad, and cursedly pertinacious; as such they deserve “extermination.” This is what the book of Daniel signified to many early modern Protestants.
When, therefore, Portia assumes the name Balthasar for her disguise as Bellario's law clerk, and assumes the post as special judge in “this strict court of Venice”—that is, a special court where merchants may expect summary judgment on contract enforcement regardless of their “nation”10—Shakespeare invokes the popular Daniel lore of the age. This Daniel lore is precisely the discourse through which Bible-reading Englishmen and women thought about Jews. Portia thus not only preempts Shylock's allusion to Daniel, she preemptively corrects it. He (and ages of Shakespeare editors) alludes to the clever young judge of the story in Susanna who turns the Elders' perjuries against themselves, but Portia as Balthasar already stands for the prophet Daniel as Protestants understood him from the canonical scriptures: one who preaches Christ crucified, risen and come again, a sufficient sacrifice for all sins; the end of temple worship in types and shadows; the vanity of legal righteousness, and the necessity of praying for forgiveness and mercy “for thy Christs sake,” and in his name. In effect, the English Protestant's Daniel implies an “Old Testament” indictment of stubborn Jews; if he could believe in Christ even before Jesus's advent, based simply on prophetic visions, then the post-advent Jews who do not believe have no excuse. Shylock misrecognizes the Daniel he invokes; he therefore misses the point of Daniel's prophecy. That, in the minds of Shakespeare's contemporaries, is what makes him a “bad Jew,” that is, a non-Christian Jew.

MISRECOGNIZING PORTIA

Portia stands at the hub of a web of misrecognitions that generate this play's ironic humour and much of its anti-Jewish energy. But Shylock is not the only one who misrecognizes Portia. So also do Antonio and the Duke. The Duke mistakes her disguised sex for beardless youth. Thinking she is young, the Duke expects a certain kind of legal bias he had hoped to avoid in sending for “learned Bellario.” At first his fears look justified, but this apparently young Doctor turns out to be the only one capable of turning the case before this “strict court of Venice” from a civil merchant affair to a very traditional criminal matter based on laws that underwrite very old and bigoted notions of nation and citizenship. We are thus invited to read the Venetians' misrecognition as an index of their blindness, though it is blindness of another sort than Shylock's, for it is neither pertinacious nor willful; they are deceived, but Shylock refuses to see or listen to Portia's teaching about mercy.

Understanding how the Duke and the Venetians misrecognize Portia requires that we know something about how cases in merchant law were handled in sixteenth-century Venice, or at least the way Englishmen, anxious about legal innovations designed to enable emergent capitalist practices, feared they were handled. Walter Cohen reminds us that “To the English, and particularly to Londoners, Venice represented a more advanced stage of the commercial development they themselves were experiencing” (Cohen 75). B. J. Sokol, writing about allusions to and anxieties about “the Law Merchant” in the play, concludes “it is likely that in the Elizabethan imagination mercantile law would seem Italian. The legendary image of Venetian commerce clearly impressed Shakespeare and his audiences, and this is joined with a contemporary belief that the Venetian state firmly applied laws equally to all” (Sokol 63). Various characters in the play—Salerio (Merchant 3.2.277-78), Antonio (3.3.26-31), Shylock (4.1.37-38, 100-101)—formulate and re-formulate the legal stone that presumably blocks any possible comic resolution: Venice's strength as an international commercial center depends upon its reputation for upholding merchant and financial contracts regardless of the contracting parties' nation. Antonio puts it this way:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law,  
For the commodity that strangers have  
With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
Will much impeach the justice of his state;  
Since that the trade and profit of the city  
Consisteth of all nations.

(3.3.26-31)
In their legal philosophy, then, Antonio and the Duke are in the uncomfortable position of basic agreement with Shylock. This is why the Duke spends so much private effort trying to get Shylock to settle out of court, and why his first public statements in the trial scene once again press for settlement without trial (4.1.16-33).

Gasparo Contarini’s *Commonwealth and Government of Venice* is full of pride for Venetian internationalism, an internationalism that evoked admiration, envy, and trepidation from English readers. When Lewes Lewkenor’s translation was published in England in 1599, several English poets, including Edmund Spenser, contributed prefatory sonnets. Spenser regards “Fayre Venice, flower of the last worlds delight” as the third and last “Babel,” after Babylon and Rome. Venice is “next to them in beauty … / But farre exceedes [them] in policie of right.” Like the other two Babels, the poem suggests, Venice, too, will self-destruct, and its innovative internationalist policies will be partly to blame.11 Another poem, by I. Ashley, compares Venice to Narcissus, and predicts its ruin in its pride. All these prefatory poems say something about Venice’s innovative politics, law, and mercantile power. They all profess admiration for Venice’s progressive policies, but also suggest there is something too worldly, too proud, carnal, and vaguely idolatrous about this third Babel of a city.

Contarini’s text offers detailed accounts of Venetian innovations in merchant law. He opens by boasting that visitors to Venice are amazed at the city’s “wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people, yea of the farthest and remotest nations, as though the City of Venice onely were a common and general market to the whole world” (Contarini 1). To support the development of international commerce, Venice instituted a whole set of new civil magistrates called the “New Auditors” with specialized responsibilities, “divided according to the qualitie of the causes and of the persons” (106). Cases about property were assigned to one auditor/judge while cases about “other contracts, or bargaines” to another. Likewise, cases between citizens were assigned separately from cases between strangers, “or one with another strangers and citizens together” (106). Yet another new division of magistrates was called “Judges or Consuls of the marchauntes”: “These doe in their Judgements use a speedier dispatch then any other of the civil magistrates: which was so ordayned, to the ende that marchauntes, whose affaires might otherwise receyve great detriment and hinderance, with lingering and delayes might not be deluded or entertayned with long expectation of their right” (107).

I do not want to suggest that Shakespeare precisely modelled his trial scene on actual Venetian civil procedure. The end of the scene, where the civil court prosecutes and decides a criminal charge, argues otherwise. The point is that Venice, as Spenser’s poem suggests, had a reputation for a civil court system peculiarly solicitous of merchants’ “right” to a speedy judgment on principles that favoured liberty of contract. When the Duke warns the court that “Upon my power I may dismiss this court / Unless Bellario, a learned doctor / Whom I have sent for to determine this, / Come here today” (*Merchant* 4.1.103-106), we are witnessing the sort of specialized civil procedure Contarini outlines. The Duke does not sit as judge in this court because it was customary to invite a “forraine” judge from one of the mainland Italian cities to sit in judgment over cases involving foreigners (Contarini 18). The Duke would invite a specialist in such contracts from among the lists of “New Auditors” for merchant cases; the trial is expected to take place without delay and issue in a summary judgment.

Because this is such standard procedure, Shakespeare’s Duke is already quite certain what the result will be, and though as Duke he can intervene whenever he pleases, he is loath to do what Bassanio asks—“Wrest once the law to your authority. / To do a great right, do a little wrong”—even to save Antonio (4.1.210; 3.2.277). Whether we see Bassanio directing this plea to Balthasar as the appointed judge in this case, or to the Duke in his special authority, Portia’s response is allowed to stand:

*It must not be. There is no power in Venice Can alter a decree establishèd. 'Twill be recorded for a precedent, And many an error by the same example Will rush into the state. It cannot be.*
The Duke can delay the case if he wishes under colour of legal procedure, but he is a strong proponent of the new procedures for merchant justice, procedures designed to benefit merchants like Antonio, and to promote commercial interests in general. He is sorry for Antonio (4.1.3) precisely because he doesn't see how he can help him without impeaching a civil court system that has enabled Venice's success, without tarnishing the reputation that is the ground of its commercial preeminence. The third Babel's glory is at risk here.

There is, as it turns out, another more traditional brand of law lurking in the wings, but if the Duke knows of it, he doesn't know how to apply it in this case. No one, not the Duke, not even Antonio, can think of a way to inject equity into “this strict court of Venice” without putting Venice's reputation at risk. The play suggests that blindly promoting merchant law over equity and common law may make a city rich and beautiful, but it may also unintentionally give rein to the merciless and idolatrous lusts of unchristian beasts like Shylock. Merchant law and unbridled commercialism may build another Babel, another capitol of paganism and apostasy, another Rome.

Perhaps this is why Shakespeare's Duke, when he sends for a foreign judge to serve as auditor in this case, applies to the “learned Bellario” of Padua. Paduans were not Venetians, so Bellario is technically a foreigner, but according to legend, Venice was originally settled and founded by Paduans fleeing barbarian invasion. Padua, then, was Venice's father city and its link to a more traditional mainland past. Bellario qualifies as one of the “new Auditors,” but he also represents the old country and its more traditional systems of law. The Duke, having spent so much energy trying to get Shylock to settle out of court, selects Bellario hoping that he may know how to inject an older sense of equity into “this strict court of Venice.”

If this is so, Dr. Balthasar's first appearance in court must disappoint the Duke. Neither old, nor Paduan, Balthasar is astonishingly young and Roman. In his letter Bellario anticipates the Duke's disappointment by reassuring him that Balthasar is a puer senex: “I never knew so young a body with so old a head” (4.1.159-60). This could be code for “don't be disappointed; he's not the progressive young lawyer he appears.” So the Duke accepts Balthasar and formally installs him as judge: “Take your place” (165). But no sooner is he in place than Balthasar fulfills all the Duke's worst fears about an innovative young judge in this case. Before he has heard a word of testimony, young Balthasar has his judgment ready:

Of a strange nature is the suit you follow,
Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.

(4.1.172-174)

This is summary enforcement of contract of the speediest sort! According to merchant law, apparently, this case is open-and-shut.

No doubt Portia's grand speech on the “quality of mercy” sounds very much like the sort of thing the Duke might have welcomed from the “old head” of Bellario. It seems the young Balthasar is familiar with the old notion that mercy should be above justice, but he doesn't let traditional notions interfere with his summary judgment in the merchant's favour:

I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea;
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

(4.1.197-200)
There is a special irony in the ways the courtroom scene plays with the terms old, new, and young that is far more interesting and playful than the familiar critical allegoresis of “Old Testament law” and “New Testament grace” allows for. To Shakespeare's Venetians “old” law is law the way it was practised before the recent innovations that established merchant law as distinctively Venetian and republican. Old lawyers from Padua might remember how to practise “old” law. “New” law means support for international commerce, summary judgments for merchants, a presumption in favor of enforcing contracts regardless of the parties' “nations.” Venice's old law is not blind to nationalities, social rank, and citizenship; it would force Shylock to “show mercy” or die. The new law that enables Venice's commercial success, however, favours strict literalist interpretation of contracts and does not allow arguments about equity and mercy to affect its judgments. To the English Protestant imagination, then, Venice's new merchant law looks suspiciously like the “old law” they associated with Jews. The Duke and Antonio are new law advocates, even though this time new law puts Antonio at Shylock's (nonexistent) mercy.

Shylock also likes this new law, nobody more than he. The new law offers some hope of ridding himself of the persecutor Antonio. Antonio has been running a one-man crusade against Jewish usury (a.k.a. Shylock) for years, but under the new merchant law, if Shylock can once find a way to haul Antonio before a court, that court promises him a status Antonio and his friends have so far denied him. On the Rialto, Antonio calls him a dog and uses him like “a stranger cur” (1.3.107-124). He calls Shylock beast and devil with impunity. He does all he can to hinder Shylock's business, by fair means and foul (3.1.45-49). But in the “strict court of Venice,” Shylock knows (or thinks he knows) that all that anti-Jewish blather will not count. Graziano can call him a dog, claim that his soul once belonged to a wolf hanged for murder, but “Till [he] can rail the seal from off my bond,” says Shylock, he only hurts his lungs to shout so loud (4.1.132-137). Shylock believes that the Venetian court, famous for its practice of innovative merchant law, will allow him the status of a man, a homo economicus—a juridical emancipation. So, “new law” in this “strict court of Venice” does not stand, as so many critics have thought, just for Christian grace and mercy. In the first instance it stands, like Shylock, for summary justice according to a literal reading of the contract.

Unlike the Duke, Shylock was probably glad to see a young judge in Bellario's place. The legal innovations that favour contracts over equity and strive for judicial blindness to nation and citizenship hold out the promise to Shylock of judicial liberation. Shylock hopes the new Venetian law will allow him to stand as Antonio's equal before the law. But what Shylock cannot see is how the play has already associated Venice with Babel, legal innovation with merciless machiavellian business practices, and how the play is on the verge of making Shylock, the stubborn Jew (and therefore the false Jew), into the mascot for this new Babel. In the remainder of the scene, Portia—Daniel disguised as Balthasar—will unmask Shylock as truly the Nebuchadnezzar of the piece.

**DANIEL IN BABYLON; SHYLOCK IN VENICE; THE JEW AS NEBUCHADNEZZAR**

At first we might think that the play's allusion to Balthasar, Daniel in Babylon, draws attention to Shylock's position as a Jew in Venice. As we have seen, the English frequently thought of Venice as a latter-day Babel. Shylock makes his way, even prospers, in Venice much as Daniel did in Babylon (or Jacob in Laban's house, or Joseph in Egypt). Nebuchadnezzar’s court rewarded sages and oneiromancers; Venice rewards merchants and financiers. Like Daniel, Shylock sets limits to his assimilation; he reminds the Venetians he is a Jew: “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” (1.3.29-32). This is a tempting interpretation, especially when Shylock invokes the story of Jacob and Laban, another instance of God's chosen man patiently prospering under oppression. But the play refuses to endorse this line of interpretation, preferring instead to play Shylock as the typically blinkered, self-serving hermeneut that Elizabethan Protestants believed all stubborn Jews were. This is especially evident when Shylock unwittingly casts himself as a self-righteous Pharisee when he calls Antonio a “fawning publican” (1.3.36). And we have seen how the play mocks his reading of the Jacob story as endorsing usury and miserliness. When Shylock reads the Bible all he hears is “thrift is blessing.”
play explicitly rejects such a reading of scripture as blindly and stubbornly “Jewish.” It endorses Antonio's Protestant reading that God's blessing is “a thing” not in one's own “power to bring to pass / But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven” (1.3.88-89). The play rewards the prodigal Bassanio with Portia's blessings of wealth; the casket lesson recommends giving and hazarding rather than careful thrift; Antonio first loses everything, and then gets most of it back as if by heavenly intervention (5.1.275-76). As Lewalski has argued, the play leans far more to the “take no thought for the morrow” end of the ethical spectrum and tends to indict Shylock's “fast bind, fast find” attitude as unchristian (Lewalski 328-330), and therefore, immoral.

I have already argued that the play undercuts and corrects Shylock's invocation of Daniel by presenting Portia disguised as Balthasar. Shylock tries to call to mind the clever young judge of Susanna, but the play insists that we pay attention instead to the prophet Daniel who preached Christ to stubborn Jews and mercy to oppressive Babylonians. When we do pay such attention, when we watch the play with the familiar stories of Daniel in Babylon fresh in our minds, some curious and fascinating readings emerge. I will conclude by sketching out just a few.

In the trial scene Dr. Balthasar is a kind of silenus figure. On the outside, he looks like a progressive young judge zealous for merchant law and summary judgments favouring contracts; inside he is Portia, heiress of Belmont, daughter of old money and imbued with ancient (even bigoted) notions of citizenship, nationalism and privilege. This resembles Daniel in Babylon. Outside, he is Balthasar, sage and trusted councilor at Nebuchadnezzar's court, but inside he remains a Jew who worships the one true God. Every so often, Nebuchadnezzar must be reminded that Daniel is a Jew and that his God is truly “God of gods and Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:47). This is the Daniel the play endorses, but with a Christian twist—we must read Jew here as “real” Jew, or Christian. The play's Daniel is a Christian; Shylock's Daniel is just a false Jew's stubborn misreading of the Bible.

Shylock appears completely ignorant of the biblical Daniel's various encounters with Babylonian law. In Daniel chapter 6, certain officials, jealous of Daniel's success at court, conspire to catch him up with a new law. They urge King Darius to declare a new law forbidding worship of any god besides Darius knowing that Daniel will transgress. Darius realizes too late what he has done; he loved Daniel and “was much distressed” and “set his mind to deliver Daniel” from this strict new law, labouring “till the sun went down to rescue him,” but the jealous satraps have the law on their side: “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and the Persians that no interdict or ordinance which the king establishes can be changed” (Daniel 6). Daniel is thrown to the lions. This story resembles Antonio's situation before the Duke. The Duke has been zealous for merchant law in Venice because it grows the economy and makes Venice famous and wealthy, but now Antonio has been caught on the wrong side of this new law, and the Duke, like Darius, wracks his brain for a way to save his merchant friend. But the law is the law; it cannot be changed even by the Duke's own voice. Just as Daniel must be saved from the lions by a miracle, so Antonio must be saved from the beastly Shylock's claws by a miracle—Portia.

This story, like the one in Daniel 3, is a cautionary tale about how strict application of novel laws can produce injustice. The Merchant of Venice is another such cautionary tale. When Shylock invokes the law, he unwittingly invokes the other side's champion, and ironically casts himself in the role of Daniel's Babylonian persecutors who would try to use the new laws to catch Daniel “on the hip.” Dr. Balthasar looks at first like a young devotee of merchant law, but turns out to be an old-style prosecutor of the alien statutes. Shylock is called “the Jew” in this case, but winds up looking like the envious Babylonian satraps. And the real Daniel turns the law back on the satraps who go to the lions (6:24) without God's protection, much as Portia turns the old alien statutes on Shylock.

According to this reading, Shylock is cast as a kind of false Jew, the Jew who stubbornly misreads both Torah (the Genesis story of Jacob) and the prophets (Daniel), who is blind to the salvation story they everywhere imply. According to Paul, Jews who stubbornly crave the law and ceremonies, especially circumcision and
It was not without cause that God distinguished between us and his ancient people, by training them like children by means of signs and figures, and training us more simply, without so much external show. … This was the state of the Jews under the law. But we are like adults who, being freed from tutory and curatory, have no need of puerile rudiments.

*(Institutes* 4.10.14)*

Christians, then, are Jews grown up, the full grown children of father Abraham (Galatians 4:1-7). Jews who stubbornly remain Jews are, in a sense, not really Jews at all any more, no longer the sons of Abraham, but sons of the “bondwoman” who was “cast out” (Galatians 4:30). Grownup Jews are Christians like Daniel; Jews like Shylock are willfully stunted, pertinaciously puerile, literal-minded, and selfish.16

The play embraces this familiar anti-Jewish trope, especially by way of Portia in disguise. Beneath the Babylonian disguise and name is the true Jew, a Daniel who preaches a Christian mercy that the law and its zealots cannot comprehend. Shylock is exposed as stubbornly deaf—he cannot hear the gospel even when it is preached by a prophet. His Daniel is a rulemonger, but the biblical Daniel is a champion of mercy over the law. He mistakes the Babylonian for the Jew, the disguise for the real thing. The “real” Daniel turns out to be the Christians’ champion.

Another episode from the book of Daniel reinforces this trope. In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar calls upon young Balthasar (Daniel) to interpret a dream that baffles his other sages. The interpretation Daniel offers is a prophecy: as punishment for his overweening pride and his failure to show mercy to the oppressed (particularly the Jews in exile) Nebuchadnezzar “shall be driven from among men” and shall dwell with “the beasts of the field,” eating grass and becoming “wet with the dew of heaven.” He will continue this bestial existence, says Daniel to the King, until “[you] break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed” (Daniel 4:27). According to the story, all this comes to pass; a “voice from heaven” condemns the great king to be “driven out from among men” and live like a beast until his “reason” returns, until he acknowledges the God of Israel and shows mercy on the oppressed (Daniel 4:32-37). This Daniel story directly challenges Shylock’s caricature of Judaism as a legalistic religion—“I stand here for law.” In this story, Daniel is the champion of mercy over law, and the villain is the self-righteous Nebuchadnezzar who has forgotten God, and has forgotten to be merciful to the oppressed. He is condemned to live like a beast until his reason returns.

If we apply this Daniel story to the play, once again we find Shylock in the role of the pagan anti-Jewish oppressor steeped in his own self-righteous pride. Portia is cast as the prophetic Daniel disguised as Balthasar. The Duke and everyone else think the self-righteous Shylock is truly a beast—a dog, and an “inhuman wretch,” a “currish Jew”—but the merchant law under which he brings his strange suit allows him the status of a human plaintiff. No one but Portia (like Daniel) knows how to interpret the situation, how to strip Shylock (like Nebuchadnezzar) of his ersatz humanness and return him to his underlying bestial status. She manages this by encouraging him at every turn to overplay his role as a stereotypically stubborn Jew—literal-minded, self-righteous, legalistic, envious, and even bloodthirsty. Of course, he plays it perfectly, thus exposing himself as the opposite of the “true” Jew represented by the Christian Daniel. He is instead the false Jew, a beast. Once he is exposed as such a beast, he can simply be prosecuted as such.

The play, then, is anti-Jewish in ways more sophisticated than we have recognized. Shakespeare may very well eschew, even scorn, more pedestrian forms of anti-Jewish humour, but he lends his astonishing imaginative powers to support some very sophisticated and elaborate versions of Protestant anti-Jewish polemic. It exploits and even endorses anti-Jewish discourses woven ever so tightly into the fabric of
Protestant Christianity and reformation readings of the Bible. The play also mocks the Venetians and betrays what appear to be typically English ambivalences about the growth of internationalism in commerce and law, anxieties that live on, perhaps, in the europhobias we read about today. Antonio, Bassanio, and the Duke, however, learn their lessons; they will not so blindly endorse the innovations of merchant law again. The play makes Shylock the mascot of stubborn misbelief, hermeneutic myopia, and a mercilessly machiavellian approach to business. He is cast as more Venetian than the Venetians, more Babylonian than even Nebuchadnezzar (who repented), and therefore not truly a Jew at all, for the true Jews, the verus Israel, says the play, are the Christians.

Notes

1. I prefer the term anti-Jewish to anti-semitic as a description of the attitudes that are the focus of this essay because the latter implies attitudes based on late modern notions of race. The anti-Jewish attitudes depicted and endorsed by this play are more about theology, religion, and nation than about race as we conceive of it, but see Shapiro, 170. I am aware that scholars of early Christianity use these terms differently and more precisely than I think appropriate here; see John G. Gager, The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 8-9.

2. Yaffe even scorns historical evidence of the kind Shapiro assembles, claiming that “evidence from outside Shakespeare's play” can bring nothing useful to the issue (19). Yaffe also incorrectly claims that Shapiro “has no hesitation about calling the play ‘anti-Jewish’ (218)” (18). In the place Yaffe refers to, Shapiro attributes the characterization “anti-Jewish play” to someone else. Indeed, for reasons I respect but cannot share, Shapiro is very hesitant to call the play anti-Jewish.

3. Yaffe's claim that “Shakespeare measures his Shylock by the standards of Jewish orthodoxy” is based on his unproved assumption that Shakespeare recognized a “common reverence for biblical morality” among Christians and Jews (125) and shared a common sense of biblical ethics, the so-called Judaeo-Christian ethics featured in modern right-wing rhetoric. In light of Shapiro's historical evidence, this is simply incredible.

4. The Geneva annotations to the book of Daniel refer repeatedly to the non-apostate Jews of Daniel's time as “the Church.” In Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin frequently refers to the pre-advent “Church” of the prophets and patriarchs (4.1.18, 24). Throughout his Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel, Calvin refers to Daniel as the leader of God's Church in captivity. On Luther's sense of promissio and the pre-advent Church, see J. S. Preus, From Shadow to Promise, 268-269. See also Luxon, Literal Figures, 65-67.

5. Jerome's Latin Vulgate spells the name as “Baltassar.”

6. The implied judgment against Roman Catholic “Ceremonies, and legal Sacrifices” along with condemnation of the Jews is familiar to anyone who reads these commentaries.

7. The Geneva annotations identify “the sonne of man” (7:13) as “Christ, who had not yet taken vpon him mans nature, neither was the sonne of David according to the flesh, as he was afterward: but appeared then in a figure, and that in the cloudes, that is, being separate from the common sort of men by manifest signes of his divinitie.”

8. The Geneva annotations identify all these visions and voices, including the appearance and voice of Michael, as Christ.

9. Lewalski highlights this (340-41).

10. A more detailed explanation of merchant law, the Venetian courts, and Shakespeare's sense of both follows below.

11. Spenser's sonnet appears on an unnumbered page immediately following the title page, as do the others mentioned below. Spenser's name appears as “Edw. Spencer.” The poem also appears in Ernest de Sélincourt, ed., Spenser's Minor Poems 482.

12. Contarini writes, “So great is the princes authoritie, that he may in whatsoever court adioine himselfe to the Magistrate therein, being president as his colleague or companion, and have equal power with
the other Presidents, that he might so by this means be able to looke into all things” (41), but he also
says, “Yet nevertheless so is this authoritie of his by lawes retracted, that alone hee may not doe any
thing, neyther being ioyned to the other magistrates hath he any farther power then every other
president in his office” (42).
13. Stephen Greenblatt advanced the interesting suggestion that Antonio's persecution of Shylock
resembles the activities of the Monte di Carita in “Marlowe, Marx, and Anti-Semitism” 294.
15. See her bigoted remarks about Morocco earlier in the play (2.8.79).
16. For especially good discussions of Paul and the anti-Jewish attitudes of the early Christian church, see
Gager 113-269.

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**Criticism: Themes: Steve Patterson (essay date spring 1999)**


*In the following essay, Patterson maintains that The Merchant of Venice analyzes the early modern tradition of male homoerotic friendship through Antonio's frustrated passion for Bassanio.*

Rather famously, *The Merchant of Venice* opens with a pitiful Antonio bemoaning his outcast state but unable to articulate just what has caused his disenchantment. His very identity seems to be at stake as he complains, “I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.7). Indeed, his worries over how much and in what terms he matters in Venice may be much ado about nothing—about the possibility of his being nothing. Antonio speaks as a man at odds with the changing values of his culture, someone whose role as virtuous friend has no serious register with his fellow men but whose identity as merchant has premium value. He has entered the stage in dialogue with himself as much as with his two companions, and as the scene progresses, Antonio is repeatedly unable to connect with those he encounters. His melancholy is diagnosed immediately as an effect of money...
woes by Salerio and Solanio, who swoon over their histrionic visions of how the course of a rich merchant's humors is surely tied to the swell of his argosies' sails. In keeping with this stress on Venice as a world in which even feelings are valued mainly in commercial terms, Gratiano intimates that Antonio uses his public displays of moodiness to “fish … with this melancholy bait / For this fool gudgeon, this opinion” (ll. 101-2). In short, his strange affect must be a calculated bid to gain attention—as if melancholy is best understood as an entrepreneurial gambit. Small wonder that Antonio protests the theory that his sighing must indicate some variety of love, since even love is a cheap commodity in Venice, something one puts on like a “sober habit” or the “boldest suit of mirth” (2.2.181, 193). The passionate Antonio can hardly fathom, let alone endorse, such a devaluation of his desires.

Despite Antonio's protestations, literary critics have debated the object and nature of his love. For some time it was held that Antonio has no particular referent in mind at all, that the subject is raised mainly as a dramatic device to cue the theme of romance or that it stands as “a relic of an earlier version of the play.” But this analysis has been superseded by the modern cliché (and, some insist, the anachronism) of Antonio as a lovelorn homosexual vainly in pursuit of the obviously heterosexual Bassanio. Certainly there is enough textual ambiguity to lend validity to almost any diagnosis of Antonio's melancholy, and the present understandings of the ways that same- and cross-sex passions mattered in early modern England are still confused enough to allow for a convincing reading of Antonio as a prototype of the lovesick homosexual. Alan Sinfield's “How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist” addresses this interpretation as it considers the play's resonance—and its correctives—for a postmodern gay audience.

It may be that the current confusion about eroticism and sexual practices in Renaissance England does not mean that there were no early modern systems or structures that incorporated and even valued homosexual acts. This essay will argue that Antonio's love is a frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio and, further, that his passionate love falls into an early modern tradition of homoerotic friendship, or amity. Amity represented friendship as an identity premised upon the value of same-sex love which codified passionate behaviors between men. Its tropes, while now perhaps somewhat strange or ambiguous, were at the time of the play's production topical enough for both depiction and revision in several popular formats. Central to The Merchant of Venice is a dramatization of the failure of male friendship in a radically shifting mercantile economy—an economy that seems better regulated by a social structure based on marital alliance and heterosexual reproduction. The play's uncanny resonance comes from the way it anticipates modern romantic ideals by realigning the value and nature of amity's stock literary figures: the male lover and his beloved, the female marriage partner, and the social outcast.

Friendship themes were so often the subject of poetry and prose during the last decade of the sixteenth century that it would not have taken an audience long to recognize Antonio as the prototype of the passionate friend. The tradition he represents is exemplified by Sir Thomas Elyot's story of Titus and Gysippus in his Boke Named the Governour (1531), a redaction of the friendship narrative which is remarkable for its foregrounding of the homoeroticism implicit between inseparable male companions. Elyot revised the tale, familiar from a number of sources, especially Boccaccio's Decameron, in a way that emphasized men's intimate proximity. His Titus and Gysippus enjoy a “perfect amity” or “incomparable friendship,” as the tradition would have it, but they are further represented as physically passionate and amorously drawn to one another. In what might be considered an erotics of amity, the men are described as “embrac[ing] … and sweetly kiss[ing]” one another, and crying as if their bodies “should be dissolved and relented into salt drops”; they risk their lives for one another, swoon when parted, publicly proclaim their love, and make hyperbolic vows of eternal devotion. Although Gysippus is betrothed in order to “increase his lineage and progeny,” Elyot emphasizes that he had “his heart already wedded to his friend” and that the two men enjoyed a “fervent and entire love.” The icon of embracing lovers depicted such bonding as ethically sound (these model lovers were hardly shameful reprobates) and as a boon to the commonwealth. The depth of the lovers' passions served the economic and social well-being of their kingdoms.
Amity acknowledged eroticism’s power to ensure loyal service in men whose economic and social bonds would otherwise be open to question. In a Tudor court where “new men” lacked the blood and property ties to one another characteristic of feudalism, and in a social world where men were as available to same- as to cross-sex attractions, a representation of male lovers compatible with heroic masculinity and good citizenship grasped the imagination with rhetorical force. Amity did not avoid the implication that deep friendships might have an erotic component but constructed same-sex desire in ways that made it commensurate with civic conduct and aristocratic ideals. Together, loving friends embodied a new kind of man, as evident in the master trope “one soul in bodies twain.” And indeed, over the ensuing decades the credibility of such an ideal figure was taken up by a range of writers and playwrights interested in the ramifications of the theory and practices of devoted gentlemen lovers.

Until recently, the only thorough study of the friendship genre was Laurens J. Mills's *One Soul in Bodies Twain*, but there the literature of amity is treated as variations on a plot device traced to its classical origins. Mills eschews the notion of the friends as sexually passionate and thereby bolsters the modern truism that Renaissance male friendship was a rather baroque form of platonic male bonding. Mills concludes, moreover, that amity dies out as a genre in the early seventeenth century simply because its literary possibilities were exhausted. This neutered view of male friendship is sustained in many feminist treatments of amity as part of an ongoing debate between marriage and friendship. Amity is posited as a bonding stage both prior and inferior to a mature marriage of equals. To resist marriage or maintain bachelorhood becomes symptomatic of a psychological problem peculiar to unevolved males: the narrative progress, supposedly mirroring a psychic and historical telos, is toward the comic trope of the companionate marriage. Even when a sexual component in friendship is allowed, it is typically the case that homosexuality is seen as an immature or neurotic rejection of women or as an inherently narcissistic desire. But the friend in the tradition of amity is neither sick nor lonesome. His virtue and integrity come from an enduring love for his companion, and it is only gradually that this love is seen as a peculiar elitism or at odds with marriage. For Elyot—or, to quickly cite several who shared his vision, for Richard Edwards in his tragicomedy *Damon and Pithias* (1564) and even, perhaps, for Shakespeare in his early friendship play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594)—a social system based on amorous male friendships has an integrity that can accommodate marriage and even settle disputes over fortune, progeny, and property. The closing line of *Two Gentlemen*, as the two friends and their wives appear to settle under one roof, succinctly captures the idealism of amity: “One feast, one house, one mutual happiness.”

When Shakespeare writes *Two Gentlemen*, however, this happy house already seems remote, perhaps impossible, as such accommodations belong in the realm of fantasy. Janet Adelman has noted how false the play's “magical” ending seems: the problems the play sets up between marriage and friendship are simply “wished away.” Similarly, in her introduction to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Jean E. Howard observes “the strain under which Shakespeare labored in trying to join a tale of heroic male friendship to a tale of romantic love between men and women.” Traditionally, of course, tales of amity were comedies; sudden, happy denouements were prime characteristics of the genre. Elyot's Titus fears, for example, that his desire for Gisippus's betrothed will corrupt their friendship, but Gisippus tells him that amity incorporates the “power of Venus.” Indeed, it is Gisippus's kin, un forgiving patriarchs of contract marriage, who represent the blocking agents to this loving friendship, though finally “the noise of rejoicing hearts fill[s] all the court.” Even the duped Sophronia, conveniently silent and acquiescent, settles into marriage and produces children with Titus under the aegis of amity. In *Two Gentlemen*, however, the path to betrothal and marriage has entailed such base treatment of the female that comic closure seems compromised. The familiar bed-trick in Elyot's tale becomes rather more serious: an audience must overlook Proteus's threat to rape Silvia. Tensions that Elyot downplayed or elided begin to resonate in a way that makes the passionate conduct between two gentlemen seem, perhaps for the first time, costly.

These tensions do not represent the emergence of a natural incompatibility between the two kinds of love. Rather, the play's problems of closure may indicate that amity as a utopian narrative can no longer contain its
inherent contradictions. The theater, its market conditions financially and artistically dependent on women and other consumers varying in social status, could not bank on selling stories that represented the uncontested interests of a select few. To make Silvia quiet and compliant despite her poor treatment may be true to form, but her narrow escape from abuse also challenges amity's ameliorating power. Howard concludes her analysis by speculating that the primacy of male friendship with which the play closes has seemed strange since the eighteenth century, mainly because heterosexual romance has since enjoyed an ascendancy over all other forms of bonding. But never before were early modern consumers of amity tales asked to witness the female's cooperation as a condition of brute force or muted protests. In short, the strains and pressures apparent in Two Gentlemen mark a faultline in the gentle practices of amity.

The Merchant of Venice comes across as a comedy even more deeply skeptical than Two Gentlemen of the promises and prices of amity. Marriage and amity are squarely at odds because the play questions the possibility of a homoerotic bonding that produces exemplary conduct. As Coppélia Kahn observes, “Merchant … is perhaps the first play in which Shakespeare avoids [a] kind of magical solution” and turns his “attention to the conflict between the two kinds of bonds”—amity and marriage. It also tests the tenets of loving friendship between men of different social status—a merchant and a gentleman. Merchant raises provocative questions about virtue, rank, wealth, gender, and desire which earlier friendship literature downplayed or idealized. The play wonders whose interests are served in a vision of a world governed by the bonds of amity and how practical a solution to complex social and economic questions such a system would be. More precisely, Merchant takes to task the ideals of homoerotic male friendships, even as it raises doubts about the ability of romance and marriage to offer any radical improvements to society or to be any more inclusive.

What are the limits of amity's homoerotic love, the play asks? Might a wealthy merchant become a gentleman's dear friend? What if the betrothed female were given a voice? What advantages, if any, might a marriage-based economy have over one grounded on amorous male friendships?

Such questions are raised as the play dramatizes the travails of the ideal friend in a society that is re-evaluating its definitions of love and its virtues—a shift so disruptive that Antonio as amorous lover seems sadly outmoded, himself a kind of anachronism. Elyot's Gysippus had been outcast, too, when he defied the will of his father and a patriarchal system of contract love, and that familiar plot device makes Shakespeare's Antonio seem at first somewhat conventionally at odds with the values of Venetian society, in this case a world that commodifies every human transaction. The merchant's struggle to lionize friendship, however, is decidedly different from the one patterned by Elyot. In “Titus and Gysippus” contract marriage seems antiquated, in dire need of reform, and amity's power to match like with like in both homo- and heterosexual relations reinvigorates an ailing body politic. In Merchant the part Antonio must play in the marketplace of Venice is, as he himself seems to suspect, “a sad one” (1.1.79), and his faith in the tenets of amity seems no match for his community's cynical views on the value and purpose of relationships. Lawrence Normand has observed that “Antonio brushes aside his friends' attempts to put him into words, and offers no discursive version of himself,” but perhaps the merchant's difficulty in articulating his dismay is the fault of a discourse that has lost its clarity as a medium for expressing and securing his bond with a gentleman.

Shakespeare makes his audience aware of Antonio's marginal position not simply by dramatizing the merchant's opening complaint but also by rearranging the conventions of friendship tales. Antonio and Bassanio, his “most noble kinsman” (1.1.57), are strikingly different in both temperament and demeanor; the customary emphasis in friendship literature on exact similitude is noticeably absent. Their longtime association has been characterized by Bassanio's indebtedness to Antonio, not by mutual pledges of munificence which friends typically made in the most public and histrionic ways. Likewise, Antonio's refusal to charge interest on loans, a long-standing, economically awkward Christian value, may also refer to amity's now-impractical ethic of a generosity that assumes equality and reciprocity between men. The merchant who lends gratis in the spirit of friendship does not automatically signal a noble character, as does the gentle exemplar of gift-giving in a tale of amity, but seems, instead, foolhardy and impetuous.
Even the way Shakespeare brings the pair onstage emphasizes their differences. Elyot had observed of his protagonists that “nature wrought in their hearts such a mutual affection, that their wills and appetites daily more and more so confederated themselves.” But in Merchant the friends each appear separately and in obviously incompatible moods. Their conversation lasts only so long as Bassanio's financial needs are expressed and met. Although he says he owes Antonio “the most in money and in love” (1.1.131), Bassanio appears mainly interested in expediting a solution to his financial bind. In short, there is no unequivocal assertion of a deeply rooted physical and spiritual kinship that would immediately identify them as emotional twins and signal a familiar comic-plot trajectory. In Edward's Damon and Pithias, to illustrate the contrast, the servant Stephano marvels at the convergence of the friends, who

In mutual friendship at no time have fainted.  
But loved so kindly and friendly each other, 
As though they were brothers by father and mother. 
Pythagoras' learning these two have embraced,  
Which both are in virtue so narrowly laced, 
That all their whole doings do fall to this issue, 
To have no respect but only to virtue:  
All one in effect, all one in their going, 
All one in their study, all one in their doing.(20)

Stephano goes on to muse that “they have but one heart between them,” thereby invoking the familiar metaphor of a shared identity between lovers. Antonio and Bassanio lack the fusion—troped both physically and metaphysically, as a shared heart—that marks a bona fide friendship.

Despite this lack, Antonio plays the standard part of devoted friend. The pathos he evokes comes not from an ostentatious behavior that would alienate any man but from the lack of reciprocation between twinned companions. Indeed, according to the dictates of amity, Antonio exhibits an exemplary generosity in his willingness to help fund Bassanio's venture and especially in his desire to make Bassanio happy by enabling his courtship of Portia. He is that paragon who “more rejoiceth at his friend's good fortune than at his own.”

That he sees no threat in his friend's profession of interest in Portia also marks Antonio's faith in the power of amity. In somewhat nervous terms, Harry Berger Jr. has complained of Antonio's ardor in gift-giving as shamelessly manipulative, as if he will “sink hooks of gratitude and obligation deep into the beneficiary's bowels.” Robert Hapgood also sees Antonio as “at once too generous and too possessive.” If today there remains something strange about a man in passionate pursuit of another male, such pursuits may have been more ambiguously coded then. In Elyot's text, Gysippus gladly sacrifices his betrothed to Titus in recognition of the “similitude in all the parts of our body.” His gift not only clarifies the depth of their intimacy but, eventually, contributes to social harmony.

It could be argued that there is a classical element of generosity in Antonio's willingness to bargain with Shylock. To an early modern English audience—and, indeed, to the citizens of Venice—such a venture might be recognized as beholden to the ethics of friendship, which would dictate a carefully choreographed excess of charity and sacrifice. Still, at this point in history these signs of friendship were already being tallied as strangely extreme (and perhaps the responses of Berger and Hapgood bear out this turn in values). Risk-taking is admired only insofar as it promises to deliver substantial gains—money, especially, but position or security, too—and Antonio's venture, pledging money and his own flesh for a gentleman who has given nothing in return, does not seem likely to earn a profit or produce domestic tranquillity. Indeed, Antonio's complaint that he is a “tainted wether of the flock” (4.1.114) may refer to his inability to deliver on the promise that amity's love will yoke men of equal character and virtue. The merchant's pursuit of Bassanio is wearisome and circular in a way reminiscent of Sir Thomas Wyatt's exhausted hunter in “Whoso List to Hunt”: like that frustrated lover, Antonio makes bids for a love quarry he cannot touch. It is as if noli me tangere demarcates Antonio's object of desire as it had the hunter's hind.
That an expectation of love in return for lending would hardly be an unorthodox interpretation of amity's purchasing power is, however, evinced in this quotation from Sir Thomas Wilson's *Discourse upon Usury*:

“God ordeyned lending for maintenaunce of amitye, and declaration of love, betwixt man and man.”

Likewise Miles Mosse, in his sermon *The Arraignment and Conviction of Usury*, advises that a “lender may lawfully expect the loue and good will of the borrower. For that hath he iustly deserved by his kindnesse.” If Antonio presumes that his generosity will yoke his heart to Bassanio’s, it is because humanist images of amity have taught him to do so. This promise of an intimate equity, delivered from the court and the pulpit, may account for the popularity of Elyot’s tale of Titus and Gysippus in particular as well as the preoccupation with friendship themes in Renaissance prose and poetry; at any rate, it helps to make sense of Antonio's deep yearning. As Mosse preaches, “hee that expecteth loue cannot bee sayd to expect gaine from lending.” And so Antonio, who seems to believe his lending practices will generate love, professes to lend gratis even as he complains about a bewildering sense of loss.

On the other hand, the leveling force of amity also accounts for the apparent reluctance of the financially-strapped Bassanio to act in kind: friendship may make both borrower and lender indistinguishable, but in the case of a gentleman indebted to a merchant, it also risks betraying the men as mere partners in trade—not fundamentally different from merchant usurers such as Tubal and Shylock in being bound by the marketplace realities of what Wilson called “private benefit and oppression;” To be sure, when Bassanio visits the marketplace to beg for Shylock's backing, he risks ignoble submission; rather comically, amity diminishes Bassanio's greatness. In 1.3, as he urgently bargains with the Jew, Bassanio's manner of speaking is notably less ornate than the euphuistics he had used in private dealings with Antonio (nor does it approach the self-aggrandizing speeches he will deliver in his suit at Belmont). His awkward traffic with a usurer is an unaccounted price of amity’s laws, or, put differently, the gentleman finds himself compromised by the merchant’s amiable command to “Go presently inquire (and so will I) / Where money is” (1.1.183-84). In a bond that should give rise to an “incomparable friendship” or, as Wilson puts it, would pronounce the lovers “man and man,” Bassanio’s status seems tenuous, if not degraded. Once in Belmont, Bassanio solves Portia's father's riddle by rejecting gold and silver, a turn that might also describe his attitude toward the mercantile bonds that financed his venture:

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Therefore thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee,
Nor none of thee thou pale and common drudge
'Tween man and man. …
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(3.2.101-4)

In bargains with men below gentleman status, “perfect amity” produces a rather disorderly love: the intimacies of friendship compromise and skew hierarchical alliances and are, perhaps, intimacies best forsaken. In pointed contrast, should Bassanio marry the “lady richly left” (1.1.161), he can at least appear to maintain his rank as lord and governor, even as he is beholding to her inheritance. Conjugal amity, not companionate friendship, allows the illusion of twinship to flourish.

Thus Bassanio's risk-taking to win Portia is announced as a heroic adventure. Cast as a sort of fairy-tale, this venture in romantic love promises that the prince (not the friend) will inevitably win his love, that shows of heterosexual passion will deliver the coveted goods and preserve the gentleman's integrity. Indeed, Bassanio's access to cash in Belmont seems so enchanted that by contrast his Venetian bartering with a merchant and a usurer seems petty and haphazard. After agreeing to sign a risky contract to finance his friend's voyage, Antonio reassured an anxious Bassanio, “I do expect return / Of thrice three times the value of this bond” (1.3.154-55). But when Portia invests in Bassanio's return to Venice, her confidence dazzles: “Pay [the Jew] six thousand, and deface the bond: / Double six thousand, and then treble that. … / You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over” (3.2.298-99, 305-6). Her generosity also compasses sexual desire and
domestic comfort in a way that Antonio's act of kindness could not quite effect: “For never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul” (ll. 304-5). Indeed, the impossible world of Belmont excites fantasies about the regenerative powers of money in the right hands, while Antonio's marketplace, fraught with the well-known risks of “shallows and of flats, / … dangerous rocks, / … [and] roaring waters” (1.1.26, 31, 34), comes across as a strange uncharted world. The vexing problem of Bassanio's apparent disregard for his patron once in Belmont may be explained by Antonio's reassurance to the eager suitor—“Let it not enter in your mind of love: / Be merry” (2.8.42-43). But the memory lapse might better be explained by the way the privileges of Belmont afford him the luxury of believing his newly won riches are a sign of virtue, not bargains.

This turn to courtship and marriage at the expense of friendship fits precisely into the behaviors of a burgeoning system of alliance in which, as Lorna Hutson puts it, “the contracting of matrimony will ensure productive social relations.” Marriage to an endlessly wealthy lady will allow the gentleman to avoid the awkward scene of plying a merchant for loans in a discourse that turns on an assertion of exact similitude. Thus, Bassanio expresses his interest in a language that lends Portia's wealth and her house at Belmont the mythic allure of destiny. Portia is described as having “sunny locks,” with “wondrous virtues,” “nothing undervalu'd / To Cato's daughter” (1.1.169, 163, 165-66). In pursuit of the “golden fleece” at “Colchis' strond,” Bassanio, her questing Jason, becomes “fortunate” (ll. 170, 171, 176). From the spectacular reception Portia provides for her “Hercules” (3.2.60) to Bassanio's Petrarchan complaints of the “happy torment” in romantic love (l. 37), the fiction that this bond is a marriage of true minds becomes irresistible in the way amity's myth of twinship enjoys. It is not that Antonio's conduct is melodramatic and wanton, while Bassanio's is sensible and shrewd: these are identical investments, the same excess of risk and passion. Rather, it is the social and economic implications of each man's desires that determine the credibility of his conduct.

Though Bassanio may seem sincere in playing the part of the virtuous suitor to Portia, Merchant does not allow for a complete mystification of his turn to romance. Bassanio is that enterprising gentleman whose courtesies and favors bond him to others only insofar as they promise to secure his wealth and station. Even Bassanio's way of begging Antonio for another loan reveals his faith in courtly artifice over amorous virtue, at least in terms of the élan necessary to ply a merchant for more money. Couching his new request in a simile extended to credibility's breaking point, he likens Antonio's lending habits to the sport of archery and then claims that his conceited request for Antonio's steady marksmanship is made out of “pure innocence” (1.1.145). The needy gentleman is pledged, or “gag'd” (l. 130), to the merchant because of prodigal spending habits, and his references to a “swelling port” (l. 124) and a “noble rate” (l. 127) reveal his concerns with maintaining a lavish lifestyle. Indeed, at the heart of his impassioned plea that Antonio “shoot another arrow” is not love but Bassanio's blunt self-interest—“to get clear of all the debts I owe” (l. 134). In Elyot, Titus's desire for Sophronia comes with passionate worry that because of his romantic love, “friendship is excluded,” a desecration he cannot forebear; and it is only when Gyppus reassures Titus that there could be no motive of “lust or sudden appetite” in matters of amity that Titus agrees to accept amity's gift of marriage. Notably, Shakespeare's gentleman suffers no such consideration for Antonio.

When Bassanio turns to romance in Belmont, his motivations are mercenary enough to mitigate his protestations of transcendent love. Observing the reputation for “magnificent improvidence” that defamed Elizabethan aristocrats, Katharine E. Maus argues that Bassanio apparently “feels socially obliged to display himself properly … [and so] spends huge sums of borrowed money equipping himself for his trip to Belmont.” Similarly, Bassanio worries that his traveling companion, Gratiano, may be unable to “allay with some cold drops of modesty / [His] skipping spirit” (2.2.177-78), though his friend assures him that when the time comes, he will “put on a sober habit, … / Like one well studied in a sad ostent / To please his grandam” (ll. 187-88). This facility with rhetorical flourishes and with suiting behavior to the needs of the moment undermines an audience's ability to completely invest in the romantic fantasy orchestrated at Belmont. And perhaps, too, such self-fashioning allows Portia to opine “There's something tells me (but it is not love) / I would not lose you” (3.2.4-5).
As noteworthy for its cool remove as for its enthusiasm, Bassanio's manner of speaking may belie its sincerity. Antonio, on the other hand, is repeatedly associated with language that creates an illusion of deep regard and heartfelt devotion—a common device in persuading an audience of the authenticity of a love. As the play opens, he is marked as a man of complex feeling, not only sad but worried over “What stuff [his sadness is] made of” and how it affects his ability to “know” himself. In a world “deceiv'd with ornament” (l. 74), where fashion, disguise, deception, prejudice, mistaken identity, and falsehood prevail, Antonio resists equivocation and pretense. His struggle to express his affection may be evident from the moment the merchant has Bassanio alone: Antonio momentarily loses his command of speech, a tell-tale sign of disruptive feelings, as he stutters the nonce sentence “It is that anything now” (1.1.113). In a show of pride that alludes to friendship's values, Antonio is properly insulted by the gentleman's circumlocutions that “wind about [his] love with circumstance” (l. 154). Then, as if to verify the bounty of his love, Antonio speaks in a direct, unadorned manner, not in the circumlocutions favored by courtiers: “but say to me what I should do / That in your knowledge may by me be done, / And I am prest unto it: therefore speak” (ll. 158-60).

This impassioned resolve is how friends speak on one another's behalf. It gives an impression that what matters most is the welfare of the other, certainly not the cost of the transaction or some private interest. With just such self-denial, Edwards's Pithias reacts to the news of his lover's condemned status: “Then how near is my death also!” When later Pithias offers to die for his Damon, he wants the king to witness the depth of the friendship bond “that [he] may not say but Damon hath a friend / That loves him better than his own life, and will do to his end.” Antonio's sacrifices and declarations are conventional signs of a friend who welcomes opportunities to make public his deep regard. Certainly the devotion becomes evident to Salerio, who observes that Antonio “only loves the world” for Bassanio (2.8.50). Unlike Bassanio's passions, however, which seem to shift as the context demands, the merchant's feelings vary only in the sense of growing more intense. He moves from risking his fortune for Bassanio to offering up his own flesh.

Antonio's grand gestures are further identified as signs of physical desire, not simply platonic love, and they help to account for the sense of competition between amorous friends and romantic lovers which this play excites. Salerio remarks on Antonio's “affection wondrous sensible” for Bassanio (2.8.48), and Antonio himself avows, “My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlock'd” to Bassanio's needs (1.1.138-39). As Seymour Kleinberg notes, the echoing pun on purse and person suggests a “sexual longing,” a love expressed in somatic terms. To give all, including one's body, was a commonplace in tales of amity (as it also is in tales of romance); to be “one in having and suffering,” a sign of supreme love. Like his ships, Antonio's love is cast upon the “very dangerous flat” of the “Goodwins” (3.1.4-5). According to the Norton editor, “‘Goodwin’ means ‘friend.’” And at least at first, such wrecked passion seems routine: in tales of amity, friends are separated from one another so that the integrity of their love may be tested. Lorenzo alludes to such a trial as he compares Portia's fortitude (and her sexual sacrifice) when faced with her new husband's departure to “god-like amity, which appears most strongly / In bearing thus the absence of your lord” (3.4.3-4). Such fortitude cannot be measured by “customary bounty” (l. 9). Moreover, the separation of lovers traditionally promises a consummation. In tales of amity, friends inevitably reunite with embraces, kisses, and simultaneous protests of their passion. Richard Brathwait's image of two men rushing into one another's arms, univocally declaring their love, “Certus amor morum est,” was his emblem for “Acquaintance” in his 1633 conduct book The English Gentleman, and it is precisely this familiar moment of ecstatic reunion which tales of amity celebrated. Antonio seems to believe that there must be blocking agents to this love's consummation—Bassanio's desire for a wife, for example, or, more seriously, a hostile usurer—and that they must be confronted to test the ameliorating power of amity's love.

Friendships such as those between Titus and Gysippus or Damon and Pithias allow the lovers to luxuriate in the ecstasy of painful separations and passionate reunions. Just as undying devotion is proclaimed, as kisses and embraces express what words fail to capture, as emotions burst forth publicly and unapologetically, the love of friends seems to take on a form outside the medieval (or modern) categories of transcendent brotherhood or platonic alliance. As it is put on trial, such love only accrues in value with an intensification...
of the theme of identities merging so close as to become one and the same. Indeed, this consolidation of identities creates the illusion of a new kind of man, what Elyot called “the other I.” In *Damon and Pithias*, Pithias explains the effects of amity’s love—“when I am alone, / I forget I am Pithias, methinks I am Damon”—but this strange figure clearly confuses the uneducated, as when Dionysius inquires, “What callest thou friends? are they not men, is not this true?” Friends are so exceptional in their love that they become “[a]s it were transformed into another, which [is] against kind”—the Ovidian metamorphosis of a new being evolved from erotic love. (Idealizations of heterosexual passion use this same device in the icon of the hermaphrodite.) The risks and pleasures in this friendship “against kind”—distinguished from the view of sodomites as monsters against kind—are drawn out through the pattern of separation and return. Eventually, inevitably, the two become one, erotically linked by a conjoined heart.

Shakespeare borrows this device for producing the illusion of erotic metamorphosis in friendship by emphasizing Antonio’s declarations of allegiance as he faces separation from Bassanio. Antonio behaves as if the gentleman will be his loving friend and, later, as if their bond is but temporarily interrupted by a usurious tyrant ignorant of the ideals of friendship. When first offered the loan he seeks, Antonio scoffs at Shylock for mocking the hallmark generosity of amity’s philosophy of exchange: “If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not / As to thy friends, for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?” (1.3.127-29). Indeed, Shylock makes Antonio agree to his “merry sport” (l. 141) by defining his offer in the vocabulary of amity, a use of language that would communicate love and virtue:

> I would be friends with you, and have your love,  
> Forget the shames that you have stain’d me with,  
> Supply your present wants, and take no doit  
> Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me,—  
> This is kind I offer.

(ll. 134-38)

“I extend this friendship,—” Shylock challenges, “If [Antonio] will take it” (ll. 164-65). In turn, as if he has taken literally Elyot’s emphasis on amity as a code of ethics available for education and reform, Antonio marvels that the reprobate has become a new man. When Shylock demands his pound of flesh after all, Antonio speaks as if a Jew’s heart is beyond the scope of friendship: “You may as well do any thing most hard / As seek to soften that—than which what’s harder?—/ His Jewish heart!” (4.1.78-80). The anticipation of a confrontation with this enemy of friendship allows Antonio to prepare for his love to take a turn—for him an essential, even natural turn—toward public recognition and union.

Thus, in his summons to his friend, Antonio implores, “*Sweet Bassanio, ... all debts are clear’d between you and I, if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure,—if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter*” (3.2.314-20). What may seem desperate or effeminate devices to ensnare a man are heroic actions in the friendship tradition. Antonio wants Bassanio to be present at his trial as a sign of their love, perhaps in hopes of having his friendship, like the amity between Elyot’s twins, “throughout the city published, extolled, and magnified.” To believe that his own society, the mercantile world of Venice, devalues the erotic possibilities of male friendship nearly to their vanishing point would not only nullify Antonio’s love but turn the merchant himself into a kind of hapless, friendless “other”—possibly a sodomite but certainly a suspect character, since outside the bonds of amity and romance, his excessive behavior would seem useless or reckless. Poised at amity’s limits, he does not consider that its claims on equality and reciprocity are only about nobility and love when they are also about good manners. Perhaps Portia recognizes in Antonio’s letter a call for a scene of friendship since she not only urges Bassanio to go to his friend but encourages him to repay the bond twenty times over. Her reference to “an egall yoke of love” (3.4.13) may be a tribute to the “greater love” of biblical heroes, as Lawrence W. Hyman observes, but as a description of amity, its contingencies are apparent:
That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an egall yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit. ...

(ll. 11-15)

The limiting condition of amity's stress on loving bonds is its clause about the congruence of well-bred bodies.

Perhaps Shylock also understands that amity excludes even as it invites, since neither the alien Jew nor the female possesses that combination of features, breeding, and soul that would allow either to participate fully in amity's myth of twinship. When bargaining with Bassanio in 1.3, Shylock limits the term *good* to mean commercially sound, an equivocation that seems less a symptom of stereotypical greed when read in the context of Elyot's advice “to remember that friendship may not be but between good men” who are “engendered by the similitude of age and personage, augmented by the conformity of manners and studies, and confirmed by the long continuance of company.”52 In his pound-of-flesh bargain, then, there is a delicious irony that mocks Antonio's belief in the promises of friendship even as the terms of the agreement corroboration his desire as physical. Shylock wants a pound of “fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of [Antonio's] body pleaseth” him (1.3.146-47). This demand is erotic, as Alan Sinfield argues, because it can be read metaphorically as an attack on the genitals, as castration.53 But it is erotic also because Shylock chooses to cut the flesh from Antonio's *breast*, his very heart-in amity, as in romance, the somatic sign of love. This violation will allow the Jew to expose the exclusionary rhetoric of amity: the love between the two Venetians runs no deeper than their “varnish'd faces” (2.5.33).

Even Bassanio's disregard for the merchant reveals that Antonio's expectations of requited love are both too passionate and too expensive. In Shakespeare and Ovid, Jonathan Bate argues that the details which Shakespeare chooses in order to liken Bassanio to the classic Jason figure bring to mind Jason's worst human qualities, that is, Jason as “an archetype of male deceit and infidelity.”54 This allusion, Bate notes, foreshadows Bassanio's attempt to win and, later, to trick his female lover, Portia. But as a sign of deceit, it also refers back in time to his betrayal of Antonio's faith in friendship practices. The merchant's failure to capitalize on the tropes of amity makes his yearning less like the momentary suffering of a friendship on trial and more like some love-sickness, a bona fide Renaissance illness with its own tell-tale symptoms—a tremulous body, a distracted mind, an obsessive and futile desire for another.55 The emphasis on Antonio's love as physical is not Shakespeare's way of innovating a homoerotic yearning peculiar to a lonesome and confused Antonio; indeed, homoerotic desire, as this essay has argued, had long distinguished the protagonists of the friendship genre. What *is* striking is how the amorous pursuit of a gentleman seems both strange and unproductive when risked by a merchant.

In Act 4 the trial scene becomes a showcase for exposing and manipulating the limits of amity's erotic power. To sever the love of friends is to cut deeply into the body; as Antonio puts it, if the “cut [is] deep enough, / I'll pay ... instantly with all my heart” (4.1.276-77). Antonio will have a pound of his own flesh cut away and thus allow all who witness such spectacular violence to evaluate the transformative powers of male friendship, to judge “Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (l. 273). In the competitive, mercenary world of Venice, amity is in danger of being misunderstood as a rather ill-advised way to profit or, perhaps more worrisome to Antonio, to be devalued altogether as usurious appetite for self-promotion and status. The integrity of male friendship—its virtues of generosity, self-sacrifice, and intimacy—is so atrophied that only a radical staging of amity's power to secure bonds between men can reinvigorate its appeal. Antonio's willing self-sacrifice can be seen as a daring performance on behalf of an exemplary devotion. In the moment of the merchant's epic display of generosity (traditionally both grand and grotesque), amity will be memorialized as love “wondrous sensible” (2.8.48). It is Antonio's own nostalgic citation: when his “tale is told” (4.1.272), the true love
between friends will be as inspirational in Venice as it was when Pithias proclaimed that no one “may … say
but Damon hath a friend.” Antonio implores Bassanio to “live still and write mine epitaph” (l. 118), as if there
could be no more everlasting proof that “Bassanio had … once a love” than this familiar gesture of sacrificing
the body in the name of amity.

As if to travesty Antonio's belief in amity's power to yoke the heart of a merchant to a gentleman's love,
Shylock demands the right “To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there!” (l. 122). This attack on amity
from an outsider threatens to show how the social realities of Venice betray amity's ideals. However
questionable Bassanio's investment in his role as friend may be, he takes his cue when an alien endangers
male bonds. The gentleman arrives in time to properly reciprocate the merchant's sacrifice: “The Jew shall
have my flesh, blood, bones and all” (l. 112). The sudden turn in Bassanio, from mercenary borrower to
benevolent friend, would seem virtually inexplicable were it not for Portia's encouragement that he protect his
own kind in the face of a foreigner's threat. Certainly, in the preceding acts, Bassanio has demonstrated that he
can play any part necessary to his welfare. What is evident, too, is that Portia's quibbling with the law during
the trial is not simply a means of nullifying Shylock's financial threat to Venetian mercantile practices. Portia
seems aware of the trial's double bind: should Shylock expose the limits of amity, the universal values it
claims will be disqualified by a foreigner; but if Antonio manages to redeem amity's appeal, her role as wife will
be diminished. As Keith Geary has argued, in rescuing Antonio from public execution, she saves the merchant
and subverts a classic display of ideal male friendship: “Portia has fastened the homoerotic tendency of
Bassanio's sexuality and the obligations of masculine friendship on to herself.”56 There will be no mockery of
the Venetian practices of borrowing and partnership, but there will also be no public spectacle of amity as the
supreme form of love.

It is as if the typically acquiescent or even absent female character from tales of amity refuses at this point in
history to remain silent or vanish. Portia, like each of the characters in the competitive world of Venice, opts
to recast herself on a stage where everyone plays a part. For her the “will of a living daughter [is] curb'd by
the will of a dead father” (1.2.24-25), curbed by a discursive bind such that a marriageable daughter “cannot
choose … nor refuse” (ll. 25-26). In short, Portia resists an enforced silence—as if she only pretends to honor
a cooperative spirit in earlier scenes. Portia's bid for power depends on both Antonio and Bassanio playing
their parts, but it depends, too, on the failure of amity's climactic scene of transcendence. Her clever
orchestration of the trial scene—and, later, her neat turn on the stock bed-trick57—speaks to her shrewdness
and her determination. Disguised as Balthazar, she uses equivocation and illusion not only to save the
merchant from the usurer but also as a way of liberating herself from a part that keeps her “little body …
aweary” (l. 1), her voice faint. If the very heart of friendship is plucked from Antonio's breast for the world to
witness as a sign of his deep love, Portia seems aware that then the “greater glory [will] dim the less” (5.1.93).
Within the generous system of amity, marriage will not be devalued as cheap or worthless (the early tales had
no complaint against marriage per se), but it will also not shine nearly so brightly as it could if elevated above
amity. “A substitute shines brightly as a king,” Portia cannily observes, “Until a king be by” (ll. 94-95). What
better way to effect a re-evaluation of marriage and friendship than to have an ardent devotee of amity pledge
himself to ensuring the husband will “never more break faith” with the wife (l. 253).58 The friend will enter
into the service of marriage, a minor player in a reconfigured narrative.

Shakespeare takes up two key moments from tales of amity—an inspirational trial of friendship; the
dissemination of amity's ideals—and presents them in altered, fairly cynical versions. Even though Antonio
has behaved according to form by making a spectacle of his devotion to Bassanio, there is no sense that the
power of friendship (or of any kind of love for that matter) can be trusted to reform a hardened heart. A
murderer in Elyot's Titus and Gysippus fable, for example, witnesses “the marvellous contention of these two,
… [and is] vehemently provoked to discover the truth.”59 There friendship has the power to improve and to
educate. The proclamation of devotion between Shakespeare's two men, however, is set against the comic
presence of the disguised wives, so that the amorous vows ring more of betrayal than loyalty. These friends
seem histrionic and loose-tongued. Portia has encouraged her husband to play his part in the trial of
friendship, but her disguised presence and confidential asides have also allowed a new reading of that once untroubled scene. The females standing by seem cheated, not invited into some endlessly generous circle of amity; and as if to underscore this exclusion, another outsider scoffs, “These be the Christian husbands!” (4.1.291). Constructed in a way that exposes the pitfalls in the landscape of amity, the ecstatic devotion of the lovers loses the universal appeal it enjoyed in Elyot's hands. The depth and endurance of Bassanio's commitment are suspect, and they become even less credible when the gentleman abandons friendship in the last act as readily as he had turned to its rhetoric in the trial scene.60 The presence of Shylock and Portia-in-disguise during the proceedings draws out with some force the exclusionary subtext of friendship: should amity work its magic after all, both the Jew and the Lady would be muted, if not ostracized. Understandably, neither witness is impressed by the performance of masculine love in action.

The supposedly contagious display of devotion between friends does not register at all with the citizens of Venice, whose ethic of an eye-for-an-eye strains the quality of amity's kindness. Here friendship on trial fails to elicit virtue from spectators; it seems, quite perversely, to have encouraged a cry for blood revenge, a decidedly different effect than Elyot's magical scene of conversion. Quite regularly Merchant makes it clear that few of the characters in Venice are genuinely impressed by anything that does not produce wealth or allow for a profit margin, though their rhetoric speaks to higher interests. Shylock's real crime may not be his claim on a pound of flesh but his habit of turning the platitudes of Venice against their selfish speakers. He accuses the Christians of taking interest while calling it thrift, of keeping “many a purchas'd slave” (l. 90), and of professing humility while practicing revenge. The two characters who believe deeply in values outside the marketplace, Shylock and Antonio, for all their faults and transgressions, have no place in Venice and are neither of them understood by its citizens. Thus there is something sickening in Merchant's turn on the traditional scene of conversion. If the Jewish heart cannot be inspired by amity's practices, it can at least be subjected to force—ironically by the very merchant who believes in the power of friendship to improve by example. Even though Shylock's money must be willed to his Christian son-in-law and daughter, his penalty will be represented as “a special deed of gift” (5.1.292). Forced to speak as a new man, the Christian Jew exits broken and ailing: “I am not well” (4.1.392).

This enforced transformation casts a pall over Act 5 as the married couples struggle to collect on the promise of an ecstatic reunion in such a night that seems to be “the daylight sick” (5.1.124).61 In a final twist of the conversion plot, transposing it from a staple of amity to an element of romance, Antonio himself is subjected to reform. Perhaps awestruck by the mystifying display of the law's power, the merchant is moved to alter the nature of his own love. The merchant redefines the role of the friend from lover to grateful guest, an outsider invited within the circle of marriage. When he vows to play his part in keeping safe the ring, Antonio agrees to limit the range of its symbolic value to a sign of the amity in marriage. Indeed, by the end of the play, there is an emphasis (the context of bawdy jokes and frivolity notwithstanding) on the need for overseeing certain social practices connected to friendship bonds. The early modern custom of same-sex bed companions—and a literary sign, too, of male friendship—is alluded to twice in the play's final moments (ll. 284, 305), but its homoerotic valence is drawn out as a luxury in need of surveillance.

As Jeff Masten has observed, male companions sharing a home, a bed, and even the same clothes changed from being perceived as a convention in early modern England to being an oddity, a “‘strange Production’.”62 In Merchant, the domestic scene is represented as conjugal in a way that highlights the turn away from the customs of companionate amity. Life at Belmont, it appears, will not include erotic male friendships, most certainly not an open intimacy between men of different status; nor will it include wives who would quietly comply with such arrangements. Essential—and essentializing—choices have been made. Bassanio is granted his bed companion not in Antonio but in Balthazar, the youth whose eloquence saved the merchant's life, and the gentleman has learned, further, that the friend is his wife: “Sweet doctor,” professes the contrite gentleman to Portia, “you shall be my bedfellow” (5.1.284). The bawdy ring jokes suggesting cuckoldry and sodomy make same-sex desires resemble infidelity, if not concupiscence. As the butt of these jokes, Gratiano heads off to his marriage bed confessing “But were the day come, I should wish it dark / Till I were couching with the...
These lines, as Coppélia Kahn has observed, “voice [a] homoerotic wish”; perhaps, too, they voice a fantasy of social mobility, namely, a clerk and a gentleman as lover and beloved. Such relationships were briefly encouraged as a possibility when, at the end of 4.1, Antonio succeeded in using the ring to signal the deep bond, enabled by a doctor of law, between a merchant and a gentleman. An ending that exalted amity would be familiar, not radical or dissident, to an early modern audience, as when Elyot closes his comedy as an “example in the affects of friendship.” But Shakespeare's version anticipates the modern convergence of homoerotic desire with secrecy—wishes made in the dark—and with betrayal. Friendship's claim on the ring seems somewhat underhanded and disruptive. If the fifth act's formal turn toward romantic closure is compromised by Shylock's sentence, it also bears the burden of having foreclosed on a conventional moment of consummation: the coupling of two friends, whose amity will “Be valued 'gainst [a] wife's commandement” (4.1.447). The play ends, furthermore, as Gratiano admits (his desires notwithstanding) that he will “fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring” (ll. 306-7). In these final, comic moments, even fantasies of male friendship trigger anxiety.

This skewed arrangement—two friends pledging service to a lady—offers a corrective to applications of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the homosocial. Although Sedgwick did not propose her model as a lens for detecting the homophobia inherent in erotic triangles, the idea of homosociality is typically applied to every instance in literature where desire for a female affects male bonds, as if the woman serves mainly as a handy alibi for a potentially embarrassing homosexual desire. But the early representatives of English Renaissance friendship do not traffic in shame; nor do they invariably deflect same-sex desire onto a female decoy. The protestation of love between friends was public and straightforward—and perhaps this difference helps to explain why modern critics, accustomed to the homosexual tropes of the clinic and the closet, have debated whether amity could in fact be homoerotic. Indeed, shame as the necessary condition of the homosocial lends credibility to the cliché that the erotic language of male friendship was, at best, strategically ambiguous. Homophobia—in this instance an anxiety between men in intimate proximity with one another—appears to become a shaping force in erotic triangles as the sixteenth century comes to a close. There is no sense in Merchant's first three acts, and certainly none in the early tales of amity, that an expression of love between friends must yield before some heterosexual imperative. Only at the end of Merchant do the men experience, much to their bewilderment, a pressure to confess their “true” feelings as a desire for, or an allegiance to, marital fidelity.

As for the trope of well-matched or twinned lovers, Antonio finally mirrors Shylock, not Bassanio. This irony, a bonding of the merchant with the Jew, is made apparent in the way friendship's twin motif, significantly absent between Antonio and Bassanio, yokes the supposedly contrary figures of the usurer and the friend. The play's title might refer to either of the two moneylenders, both of whom justify their lending practices by citing a common biblical ancestor, yet each a stranger in the marketplace. Shylock's relationship to money is, like Antonio's, not reducible to self-interest, as becomes evident when the Jew bemoans the loss of Leah's priceless ring or when he cries to his judges, “you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live” (4.1.372-73). His “strange, outrageous” equations—“‘Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!’” (2.8.13, 17)—mirror Antonio's commingled valuation of love, money, and flesh. If Bassanio and Antonio have been remarkably different in respect to their manners, Antonio's melancholy and Shylock's discontent make the two merchants seem like kinsmen in humors. Neither seems quite able to participate in the festive masquerades that dominate the Venetian streets. As if to foreground this similitude, there is a pointed instance of confusion when Portia as Balthazar sets eyes on the two men for the first time: “Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?” (4.1.170). A strange question, perhaps, but its rhetorical power is striking, particularly as an ironic citation of amity's signature trope. In amity tales it was a mark of distinction that no one could tell the friends apart.
*Merchant* repeatedly draws the antagonists as one. Each seems from his entrance not only socially alienated but an obstacle to the progress of courtship and romance, though it is not until the final scene that the effect of such a kinship between ostensible enemies becomes clear. As Portia warns in a truism that might describe the disposition of either moneylender,

> The man that hath no music in himself,  
> Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,  
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
> And his affections dark as Erebus:  
> Let no such man be trusted.

(5.1.83-88)

The suspect nature of the alien Jew is ferreted out and disabled in the trial scene, and Antonio's bids for amity seem at Act 5's close to have been strategies treasonous to marital amity. In the end his spoils may be his status as bachelor. Having neither wife nor loving friend, he is accepted on terms that seem conditional. The rescripting of the friendship narrative in Venice threatens to make the presence of the needy friend as troubling as that of the greedy Jew, whose history of representation in Christian mythography has included perversion, unnatural uses of money, and an antagonism to divinely ordained bonds.67

Indeed, as Simon Shepherd has argued, there was in Elizabethan England a growing pressure on men to exhibit masculinity by demonstrating decorum in such matters as money-handling, dress, and heterosexual desire68—a codification of right conduct that even rhetorics of male friendship would admire, though of course to different effects. But masculinity was also demanding that men perform as if the object of their desire was naturally and exclusively the female. The excess of emotion allowed by the friendship tradition, albeit at select moments and supposedly for noble reasons, became more and more suspect in relations between men; and certainly acting as if erotic male friendships were a socially viable form became anathema. Shepherd argues that friendship behaviors were increasingly associated with womanish men and came to signal a perversion as well. As erotic preference for females became more and more an indication of productive behavior, attacks on aimless sexual conduct and approval of gender fidelity were used to regulate the varieties of male desire. Economic and social traffic between men were supposed to be uncomplicated by an active or open eroticism. Indeed, without a public show of desire for the female, there could be no masculinity, no noble friendship—and, in extreme cases, no citizenship.69 In *The Merchant of Venice*, however, Shakespeare makes us aware of a tactic besides the innuendo of effeminacy or the humiliations of sodomy used against men who, like Antonio, professed excessive feelings for a dear male companion: a cultural politics of speech and silence.70

Borrowed, perhaps, from antifeminist traditions or, equally likely, from the representation of strangers such as Shylock, silence signaled a sort of parole status for otherwise transgressive figures. The type of the demure lady traditionally signified a good woman, but this ostensibly positive image was contingent on her utter voicelessness. The woman who speaks, especially the woman who speaks out of turn, degenerates from wife or maid to shrew, whore, or virago. Similarly, when foreigners speak, they appear to plot, connive, or corrupt. In Edwards's play, Damon and Pithias are considered suspicious strangers until they can persuade the king otherwise. It is precisely this patriarchal demand for silence that confronts Portia as she worries if she can finesse the letter of her father's law in getting a husband and, also, as she voices her indecorous opinions in private quarters with her waiting woman. Her power as a female figure stems from her refusal to remain silent, whether that means she must give hints to obtain the man she desires or disguise herself to speak freely in court. At the close of Act 5, part of the pleasure of watching Portia comes from her play with language as she teases and cajoles the men.
Yet Portia remains her husband's wife. Her superiority within marriage hinges on her willingness to use tricks to prevent men from acting on desires that have been suppressed, not erased; and it is her own weary body—offering and withholding herself as bedmate—that insures fidelity. In the third act she elaborates on the vows she must make to her future husband, and even if her professed desire to be “trebled twenty times myself, / … to stand high in [Bassanio's] account” has the ring of irony, she must nevertheless move from being “Queen o'er [her]self” to accepting Bassanio as “her lord, her governor, her king” (3.2.153-54, 169, 165). After her exhilarating performance as Balthazar at the trial, where the “device” of burlesquing the “thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks” (3.4.81, 77) has been instead a virtuosa turn on patriarchal ethics and laws, she returns to Belmont to perform a second time. Portia's spirited wit is expressed in the final moments of the play through costume travesty and “raw tricks,” and considering her performance at the trial, such behavior (now more like the parodic device she concocted with Nerissa in 3.4) seems anticlimactic. Portia has gained the pleasure denied to Sophronia and Silvia, the pleasure of hyperbole typically enjoyed by heroes of amity and romance; certainly she is having a good time making fun of masculine vanity. But this luxury is not enjoyed “without a fee” (5.1.290): the consummate moment of the play has its costs. There is little sense that in its inversion, or reversal, of the amity model the companionate marriage will necessarily subvert its tactics and limitations.

Of course, if this play is mainly concerned with the effects of social changes on friendship, it is noteworthy that Antonio stands among the couples. He is not dismissed from the final scene, and arguably, he is even invited in, not left alone as so many modern productions insist. Yet it is telling that his penultimate words announce his own entry into silence: “I am dumb!” he cries (l. 279). It is as if the friend has traded places with the female character in Elyot's tale. Ostensibly, Antonio's bond with his friend Bassanio will still run deep, but there is no pledge of passionate devotion, only a vow to stand as “his surety” in the marriage bargain (l. 254). The one image he uses that recalls the friendship valuation of depth—the soul—is defined at the play's end merely as collateral, a wondrous but no-longer-sensible piece of the merchant submitted to ensure that the husband “will never more break faith” with his new-found friend, his wife. That the relationship will now be without physical intimacy becomes clear when Antonio speaks shamefully of the risk he took for Bassanio: “I am th' unhappy subject of these quarrels / … [who] once did lend my body for his wealth” (ll. 238, 249).

The play closes with a procession of married couples, as the munificence of marital bonds overshadows amity's claims to generosity. By some “strange accident” (but it is not love) Antonio's ships have been brought safely to port; indeed, a sense of divinely ordained economic privilege seems to proliferate like “manna in the way / Of starved people” (ll. 278, 294-95). Nevertheless, some, such as Antonio or the usurer's daughter, who might still complain “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (l. 69), are counted as present only on a contingency of silence. Perhaps the lingering melancholy that so famously marks this play as a problem comedy arises from the way an audience becomes uncomfortably aware that the price paid for the pleasure of a happy ending has been the forfeiture of the right to speak unashamedly of fantasies and desires. To identify with Antonio, with Shylock, or with Jessica—all reduced to silence—to speak up on behalf of the identities they have lost, is to forfeit the appealing and fanciful notion that comedy's comforts are gratis. To give these characters their voices is to risk being tainted, as if somehow of their ilk.

The contrite words of the twinned merchants—“I am dumb,” “I am not well”—resound with a modern familiarity, perhaps especially to those spectators who feel themselves disregarded or silenced by culture and by literature. As Michel Foucault has observed, the sort of panoptic, reified identities that have come to define marginal figures gained credibility as “truth” largely because of an interplay between discourses of silence (including that formal promise to return to silence, the confession) and avowals of illness. The early modern period was developing powerful uses for both of these tactics. For many it became difficult to speak on behalf of same-sex passions without finding one's self falling into an abject position of immorality, illness, or
incoherence; or, if these choices sound perhaps too shrill, without finding one's self represented as a minor player, as comic relief, as a stock villain or a fool. Amity's ideal of a passionate friendship that also accommodates a marriage, that has more to do with virtue and heart than with blood or breeding, is increasingly represented in subsequent Renaissance literatures as an impractical solution to economic and social problems or as a promise made to a few. Nonsexual or homosocial male friendships become a rather empty pretext for executing business and career moves, while true or reproductive love enriches the province of matrimony. Like Antonio in Merchant, the type of the homoerotic friend becomes loveless and lonesome; only within the bounds of platonic bonding does he traffic with men. He finds himself with little to say that will make sense of his strange desires.

Notes

4. Sir Thomas Elyot, “The wonderful history of Titus and Gysippus, whereby is fully declared the figure of perfect amity” in The Book named The Governor, ed. S. E. Lehmburg, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1962), 136-51, esp. 136, 145, 142, 139, 137, and 138. (My own essay uses the more common spelling Gysippus.) One of the many changes Elyot makes in the tale as he knew it from Boccaccio was to soften the female character, eliminating her protests against being “gifted” to Titus by her betrothed. Nor is she even aware of the plan, as she is in Boccaccio's version. Elyot's decision to make Sophronia ignorant and docile fuels the fantasy that amity can accommodate marriage in a way that ensures social harmony. The men's close physical resemblance is also added and emphasized, and the length of their friendship is extended in number of years. Elyot revises the tale to exalt “perfect amity,” not conjugal or romantic love. See Clement Tyson Goode, “Sir Thomas Elyot's Titus and Gysippus,” Modern Language Notes 37 (1922): 1-11.
5. Ethics is used here in a sense commensurate with Elyot's views on virtuous male conduct; that is, educable behavior that promotes ideal civic and social relationships among men in traffic with one another. Elyot was not, of course, envisioning, let alone advocating, homosexual sodomy. His ethos allowed that love between noble-minded men could be generative and conservative if properly acted out, and his concept of a heroic same-sex love set it apart from the degradations of sodomy.
6. This argument for the erotic intimacies of friendship is especially indebted to the work of Michel Foucault and Alan Bray. Foucault speculates, for example, on friendship as “a social relation within which people had … a certain kind of choice (limited of course), as well as very intense emotional

7. The emphasis on a construct of masculinity that emphasized proximity and intimate touch—as opposed to distance and the remote gaze—is part of a larger project that includes this essay. For a discussion of the sense of touch as traditionally associated with ideological disruption and homosexuality, see Sander L. Gilman, Sexuality: An Illustrated History (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1989), 31 and passim. The coupling of the transcendent and the physical was not unique to Elyot. Irving Singer discusses various efforts to reconcile the erotic and the spiritual; see The Nature of Love 2: Courtyly and Romantic, 2d ed., 3 vols. (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1984), 10-15. There was also a subversive or “pornographic” tradition of highlighting the eroticism in Renaissance depictions of intimate transcendence, as well as efforts by writers such as Pietro Aretino to represent the aroused body as a window to the soul; see Lynn Hunt, ed., The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800 (New York: Zone Books, 1993).


9. Coppélia Kahn asserts that “same sex friendships, in Shakespeare (as in the typical life cycle), are chronologically and psychologically prior to marriage” (“The Cuckoo's Note: Male Friendship and Cuckoldry in The Merchant of Venice” in Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic”: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber, Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn, eds. [Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985], 104-12, esp. 105). In the same volume, see also Janet Adelman, “Male Bonding in Shakespeare's Comedies,” 73-103.

10. John Lyly’s Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit (1578) might be included also. His companions, Philautus and Euphues, part with their friendship severed, and neither man wins the female. But the tale may be read as cautionary, warning against true friends falling prey to unbridled desires and self-interest.


13. Elyot, 140 and 149.

14. Sylvia is spared the rape. Shakespeare compounds the troubling moment with an allusion to Ovid’s tale of Philomela, whose rape transforms her into a doleful nightingale who can, at least, endlessly broadcast her plight in song. As Jean Howard further observes, Sylvia is also denied this Ovidian complaint. Still, the oblique citation might prompt an audience to ask, at least momentarily, about the degree of complicity a tale of amity requires for its idealism to work. Even the context of the allusion—raised as Valentine laments that he can “sit alone … / And to the nightingale's complaining notes / Tune my distresses and record my woes” (5.4.4-6)—embarrasses amity. The bird's song, traditionally decoded as Philomela's lament, is summoned to serenade Valentine's own sadness (Greenblatt, ed., 82).

15. Kahn, 105.


17. Mills notes this emphasis on difference, but attributes it to “dramatic contrast” and argues further that the two men are nonetheless equal in noble character (268). Brown, ed., discusses Bassanio and Antonio as exemplars of amity and concludes that this alteration from the play's source, Il Pecorone,
lends the men an air of nobility and virtue (xiv-xvi). He sees no tensions in the differences in status of the two friends, nor does he consider an erotic component in amity. Frank Whigham analyzes the play’s “context of social mobility and class conflict,” but he tends to see the Christians as singular in their revisionist use of marital courtship as a vehicle for mystifying aristocratic solidarity and economic privilege (“Ideology and Class Conduct in The Merchant of Venice,” Renaissance Drama n.s. 10 [1979]: 93-115, esp. 93). This essay stresses amity's tradition of representing friends as gentlemen, the humanist rhetoric of an educable character notwithstanding. Men of lower status are often amazed, perhaps even moved to emulate amity's code of conduct, but they are never depicted as ideal lovers, let alone peers to the entitled heroes.

18. Walter Cohen discusses the politics of early modern England's awkward shift from an opposition to usurious practices to a capitalist-based economy. Equivocations are apparent in terms such as venturing, advantage, interest, and risk; see “The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” ELH 49 (1982): 765-89. Henry Abelove argues that the ascendancy of marriage and reproductive heterosexuality is homologous with changes in demographics and a rise in capitalist ethics; he contends, however, that the role of “same-sex sexual behaviors” in such developments warrant “separate treatment” (“Some Speculations on the History of ‘Sexual Intercourse’ During the ‘Long Eighteenth Century’ in England” in Nationalisms and Sexualities, Andrew Parker et al., eds. [London and New York: Routledge, 1992], 335-42, esp. 340).


20. Richard Edwards, Damon and Pithias in The Dramatic Writings of Richard Edwards, Thomas Norton, and Thomas Sackville, ed. John S. Farmer, Early English Dramatists (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 1-84, esp. 14. Edwards's depiction of homoerotic friendship seems indebted to Elyot's idealism, although its dramatic action seems to be a defense of amity as a viable solution to social problems. The heroes must justify their friendship, which at first appears suspicious to the members of the court, and distinguish themselves from the self-serving and crass forms of alliance that define male relations in Dionysius's kingdom. The tropes of Elyot's homoerotic amity—that is, an emphasis on a transcendent physical intimacy—are advanced, and, in the end, the sovereign becomes a third friend to the gentleman heroes. The question of friendship's compatibility with marriage is not an issue in Edwards's comedy.


24. Elyot, 139.

25. Sir Thomas Wilson, A Discourse vpon Vsury (London, 1572), N7r.


28. Wilson, N7r.

29. The stage practice of playing Antonio as an older man in pursuit of a young, handsome aristocrat may arise from the play's skeptical view of amity's promises of equity, not from any reference to the men's ages. The elided tradition of an emphasis on twinship creates the sense of an imbalance between the two men, as does Antonio's unrequited yearning. The modern stereotype of age enamored of innocent youth obfuscates such inequities.

30. Whigham observes that this passage reminds an audience that Bassanio's fortune has been “bred from Shylock's gold” (101).

31. DiGangi distinguishes between “orderly” and “disorderly” homoeroticism (10-19). He argues that the value and effects of homoeroticism in early modern England can be understood only in context, not according to beliefs about its inherent unruliness or theories of its propensity for containment. This argument has further support in Masten, in Smith, and in Valerie Traub, “Lesbian Desire in Early Modern England” in Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage, Susan Zimmerman, ed. (New
32. See Brown, ed., xlvi.
34. Bassanio's description of Portia has been often observed as a crass devaluation; see, for example, Jonathan Bate, Shakespeare and Ovid (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 151-53; and Whigham, 95-96.
35. Adelman observes that one source of male identity in early modern England came from the friendship trope of twinship or the mirror self (75-76), but the rhetoric of the companionate marriage was appropriating that metaphor.
36. Elyot, 139 and 140.
37. Katharine Eisaman Maus in Greenblatt, ed., 1,081-88, esp. 1,084.
38. Brown, ed., tries to make sense of the line by providing missing punctuation or speculating on possible pronoun referents (11n), but its incoherence may be deliberate. Shakespeare uses confused or disrupted speech as a way to show emotional turmoil most famously in Othello, when the Moor's characteristic eloquence collapses into disjointed phrasing and obsessive repetition once Iago has seduced the Moor into believing he is a cuckold.
40. Kleinberg, 117.
41. Elyot, 134.
42. Brown, ed., 70n; and Greenblatt, ed., 1,115n.
43. Richard Brathwait, The English Gentleman, 2d ed. (London, 1633). The embracing gentlemen in Brathwait's conduct book are replaced in the 1641 edition with the icon of a disembodied handshake; the title is also expanded to The English Gentleman and English Gentlewoman. Jeff Masten, whose essay in Goldberg, ed., includes a reproduction of this image, brought these changes to my attention. In the 1707 broadsheet The Woman-Hater's Lamentation a woodcut of two men embracing serves to defame the homosexual molly; see Alan Bray, Homosexuality in Renaissance England (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982), 83; and Jeff Masten, "My Two Dads: Collaboration and Reproduction in Beaumont and Fletcher" in Goldberg, ed., 280-309, esp. 281.
44. Normand argues that in the exalted tones of amity “the sexual is banished, leaving only the spiritual” (66), but amity, like romance, advanced the opposite logic: a sexual relationship expressed through exalted language. It is not unlike the excited verse Romeo and Juliet use to express their profound love and physical passion for one another. See also Allen J. Frantzen, Before the closet: same-sex love from Beowulf to Angels in America (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1998), where Frantzen argues for homoeroticism in Anglo-Saxon and medieval categories of male bonding.
45. Elyot, 134.
46. Edwards, 41.
47. Edwards, 18.
48. Linda Woodbridge explains that the hermaphrodite in Renaissance poetics represented “the essential oneness of the sexes,” a reference to Plato’s idea of the original unity of the self (Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620 [Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1984], 140). Although Geary sees Portia's donning of men's clothes as a homoerotic allusion to Ganymede (57), the invaginated figure might represent the heteroerotic ideal of “one sex,” especially once Portia reveals the wife's value as helpmate in reforming patriarchal law and economic order.
50. Elyot, 149.
52. Elyot, 151 and 149.
54. Bate, 153.
55. Love melancholy, also known as love-sickness or erotomania, was catalogued most famously in Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy (1655), but love troped as an illness was part of a medical heritage dating to medieval and even classical times. See D. A. Beecher, “Antiochus and Stratonice; the Heritage of a Medico-Literary Motif in the Theater of the English Renaissance,” The Seventeenth Century 5 (1990): 113-32.
57. Elyot uses the bed-trick as well. To fulfill his friend's desire for Sophronia, Gysippus allows Titus to replace him in the marriage bed, where the marriage ring is presented and the “girdle of virginity” removed (141). Elyot's female accepts the switch without complaint. Thus amity displays not only its charity but also its capacity to improve an outdated system of contract marriage which has failed to consider the role of (male) desire. Shakespeare complicates this motif by having Antonio usurp the ring from its romantic context, then by having Portia later reclaim its value (and bargain with her chastity) when Antonio re-presents the ring as a sign of conjugal amity.
58. For a discussion of Portia's use of her knowledge and wealth to alter the circumstances of her role as daughter, see Lisa Jardine, Reading Shakespeare Historically (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 58-64. Louis Adrian Montrose analyzes the sexual politics in Elizabeth's court in terms similar to those used here to describe Portia—that is, her efforts to “advance or frustrate the worldly desires of all her subjects”; to exploit “[r]elationships of power and dependency, desire and fear” (“‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture” in Representing the English Renaissance, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. [Berkeley: U of California P, 1988], 31-64, esp. 45 and 55). Jonathan Goldberg complicates this argument by widening the sweep of court politics to include same-sex erotic bonds (as opposed to limiting desire to heterosexual and “homosocial” relations); see Sodomietries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1992), 29-61.
60. Bassanio resembles the false friends in Edwards’s Damon and Pithias, one of whom, Aristippus, accuses his double, Carisophus, of betrayal: “My friendship thou souhest for thine own commodity, / As worldly men do, by profit measuring amity” (68).
61. The fifth act begins with Lorenzo and Jessica trying to “out-night” one another in a scene that may be played, certainly, as a light-hearted game between newlyweds (ll. 1-23). But Jessica’s way of emphasizing themes of infidelity in each of Lorenzo’s citations can foreshadow the upcoming exposure of unfaithful husbands and may also recall the betrayals in scenes past.
62. Masten in Goldberg, ed., 301-4. On men as bed companions, see also Bray in Goldberg, ed., 42-43; and Bray, Homosexuality, 50-51.
63. Kahn, 111.
64. Elyot, 149.
66. See Kleinberg’s argument that the homosexual Antonio pits himself against Shylock because, as reviled outsiders, they are essentially the same (120). See also Thomas Moisan, “‘Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?’: subversion and recuperation in The Merchant of Venice” in Shakespeare Reproduced: The text in history and ideology, Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor, eds. (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 188-206.
67. Usury as an unnatural use of money was often coupled with sexual perversions. The Jewish body has a history of being depicted as monstrously deformed, a grotesque amalgam of male and female, and his lusts—a confusion of greed, sex, and profanity—as sodomitical. See Gilman, 86 and 258-59; and


69. Such changes were by no means steady or consistent. There was, for example, the luxurious if short-lived position of the late-seventeenth-century rake, who displayed his masculinity by flaunting his interest in boys and women. For a study of shifts in the perception of same-sex relations, see Randolph Trumbach, “The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660-1750” in Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, Martin Baum Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 129-40.

70. For sodomy's role in defamatory politics, see Bray in Goldberg, ed.; and Goldberg, Sodometries, 40-61.

71. In Damon and Pithias the corrupt and obdurate Aristippus and Carisophus are exposed for practicing “no friendship, but a lewd liking” (68) and are, at the end, sent away.


73. That men sometimes appropriate a discourse of reproduction, including claims that the male body is generative or capable of pregnancy, may not always or only be a misogynist or patriarchal assertion, nor a sign of perversion or gender confusion. In some contexts, such language and parody defend the worth of other kinds of love or bonds. Mollies who pretended to be pregnant and mimicked the female as wife or mother to the male may have been burlesquing an ideology that limits concepts of (re)generation, nurturance, and devotion as peculiar to the body and nature of the female. On the molly figure, see Bray, Homosexuality, 81-114.

A longer version of this essay was presented in February 1998 to a session of a year-long colloquium entitled “Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Representation in Early Modern Literature,” chaired by Susan Zimmerman at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. I am grateful to the colloquium members, especially Susan Zimmerman, Jeff Masten, and Michael Neill. Gail Kern Paster and anonymous readers at Shakespeare Quarterly also offered valuable criticism and suggestions.

**Criticism: Themes: Martin Japtok and Winfried Schleiner (essay date 1999)**


[In the following essay, the critics argue that The Merchant of Venice demonstrates that “racism was already fully operational” in the late Elizabethan era, despite the fact that “race” as a concept had not been fully developed.]

Can a cultural historian of Shakespeare's period speak about genetics and eugenics in relation to Jews and Moors? Not only did words like Jews, Moors, and race mean something different then from what they have meant since the nineteenth century, but a glance at a historical dictionary will tell us that the term genetics did not yet exist. Therefore it might be the better part of valor for us as cultural historians to avoid such terms and, someone might suggest, even such topics altogether. The alternative is to sin boldly, i.e., to do what “really” shouldn't be done, but not naively, rather with the consciousness of stretching what is permissible. Some fears are productive, and taking some comfort from Claude J. Summers's essay on the early modern scholar's anxieties of anachronism, we hope to negotiate the narrow path between the Scylla of anachronism and the Charybdis of pedantry. Can we talk about notions of genetics in Shakespeare or about notions of
Jews and Africans? We suggest that if we historicize properly, a process in which, for instance, “genetics” will become something quite different from what it is at present, we can. When we examine genetics in Shakespeare, however, we find not just one idea of genetics but several. Also, when we let the terms Jew and Moor drift a little from their modern racial and religious moorings, in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice they move surprisingly close together as versions of the alien or Other. While the play, in its very obsession with otherwise, demonstrates that racism was already fully operational, ironically, it also illustrates the extent to which the concept of “race” was still under negotiation, hovering between the spheres of religion and genetics.

With all the critical attention (in relationship to Shakespeare's play) given to what Jews could or could not do in Elizabethan England and Renaissance Venice, the depth of the underlying scientific and pseudo-scientific notions about inheritance has not yet been sounded. Some of those notions are recondite and so complicated that even the most careful modern editors cannot hope to do them justice; others are so unpleasant (because they use human beings as a mere means to an end) that they seem to have been surrounded by taboos even in Shakespeare's time. Any attempt to elucidate them on today's stage would seem not only futile but strangely out of place. But students of Shakespeare will not be content to leave taboos unexplained, particularly if some passages then remain inexplicable, because “cruxes” are intellectually bothersome. We will examine two passages in Merchant of Venice that point to larger themes: the first is Shylock's use of the biblical passage about breeding of ewes (I.iii.66-69 and 71-85), which introduces the “natural” boundaries of genetics; the second is Lorenzo's charge that Launcelot has impregnated a black woman (III.v.35), which invokes notions of “race.” In the former case, this discussion adds an undercurrent that has not been seen in this play; in the latter, we offer an explanation of what is truly a crux, for John Russell Brown says that “[t]his passage has not been explained; it might be an outcrop of a lost source, or a topical allusion.” More than literary puzzles, however, these passages invoke some understanding of genetics and of “race,” and of the instability of both terms in Merchant of Venice.

In Merchant of Venice, Shylock, a Jewish money lender, is approached by Antonio, a prominent Venetian merchant in need of a loan. Shylock is willing to supply the money but puts into the contract that the borrower will forfeit a pound of his flesh upon non-payment. When (because of some unforeseen reversals of business fortune) the merchant is unable to repay the debt, the money lender, seizing upon the opportunity to get even for past abuses, demands that the contract be fulfilled literally. By the ingenuity of a young woman cross-dressed as a lawyer, who out-literalizes Shylock with her request that he cut off exactly a pound of flesh or be indicted for murder, the merchant is acquitted and Shylock condemned for endangering the life of a Venetian. Important subplots concern the marriage of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, to a gentile, and the wooing of Portia, a noblewoman, by a number of suitors.

In Act I Shylock tells the story of Genesis 30:33-43 to Antonio and Bassanio, two Venetian noblemen, beginning “when Jacob graz'd his uncle Laban's sheep,” in what seems to Antonio and Bassanio a long-winded way. When Shylock points out that Jacob was only the third generation after Abraham (apparently genetic closeness to Abraham heightens Jacob's status in Shylock's eyes), Antonio interrupts impatiently asking, “And what of him? Did he take interest?” (I.iii.70). Shylock denies that he did “directly,” but tells the rest of the story, possibly to remind himself and also Antonio that craft or ruses are legitimate:

No, not take interest, not as you would say
Directly int'rest,—mark what Jacob did,—
When Laban and himself were compromis'd
That all the eanlings which 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 pill'd me certain wands,
And in the doing of the deeds 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 blessing if men steal it not.

(I.iii.71-85)

Jacob's stratagem, if it is not evident, would have been explained by any biblical commentary in the Renaissance: Jacob's white pilings, erected close to the water, were reflected as streaks on the dark surface of the water (the biblical passage mentions watering troughs). At the moment of generation, the moment when the conceived fetus would have been eminently impressionable by what the mother saw or imagined, these streaks were seen by the ewes, who in time bore lambs that were streaked.

Antonio knows the story, but he understands it differently, for he replies somewhat perplexedly,

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.
Was this inserted to make interest good?
Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?

(I.iii.86-90)

For Antonio, Jacob's acquisition of wealth is as miraculous as a cane turning into a snake or a well bubbling out of the spot that has been struck. Shylock, however, is intrigued by Jacob's ingenuity, which seems to him to be at least two-fold: Jacob accepts a bond and eventually holds Laban to its terms; and he is a successful husbandman. Shylock's gloating over the enforcement of potential bonds is anticipatory and private—Antonio cannot possibly understand him and is not supposed to do so. He may, and possibly does, understand Shylock's sense of the heads of the herd as capital (in the etymological sense of caput—head). He does not, however, read Jacob's feat as of a piece with the specific notions of the human medicine of his time, a correspondence between human medicine and what we now call animal science. It is Shylock who will constantly bring together ewes and humans. He is not the only character in this play to engage in such reduction, though, because some Christian low-lifers (i.e., Launcelot) will reduce the problematics of conversion to the economics of pork, its relative plentifulness or scarcity. Before Antonio signs Shylock's bond for a pound of flesh, Shylock denies the equivalence of human flesh with mutton, but he is only pretending, and the spectators (in contrast to Antonio) are supposed to see through this pretense:

A pound of man's flesh taken from a man,
Is not so estimable, profitable neither
As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.

(I.iii.161-63)

How “good” are we to think Shylock's science? What kind of “genetics” does he advance here?

The strength of the medical and psychological commonplaces invoked by the Laban story cannot be overestimated. For convenience, we use for demonstration the Dutch physician Levinius Lemnius (1505-1568)—most of his works were translated from Latin into French and English—but we could also use Campanella, who in his utopian City of the Sun recommends in the interest of a certain eugenics that one control what wives see in their bedrooms at conception. However, although Lemnius partakes of a broad tradition, he is perhaps more outspoken than most Renaissance physicians on the principle at issue. Speaking of the power of imaginations, Lemnius says in The Touchstone of Complexions (1576).
which ymaginations are of so great force and efficacie, that the things by her in mynd earnestly ymagined in and at the very instant time of her conception, is derived into the infant and child then begotten. For this Sexe being wanton, toying, and stedfastly eying every thing that is offered to sight, it happeneth that the naturally facultie being then in workinge and forming of the child, directeth her cogitations and inward conceiptes that way, and bringeth unto the Infant, an other forein shape and forme, in nature and condition altogether unlike the right parents.\textsuperscript{6}

Lemnius then adds as an example from his own experience in Holland that women, after looking at the gallant soldiers of the army of Charles V, bore infants with eyebrows and hairs black and curled, and he insists that this happened “among right honest and tryed Matrones.”\textsuperscript{7} The force and effect of the mother's vision and imagination are here seen as opposed to and stronger than the force of inheritance. They overcome features including those we may today (and some people possibly did then) consider “racial.” In fact there is a poem of the first half of the seventeenth century on this very subject (titled \textit{Callipaedia}) in which the African parents, an “Aethiopian” mother and her “sooty Sire,” are shaken when they have a “Babe deform’d,” namely a white child, because the mother has been looking on the picture of a white woman.\textsuperscript{8}

In his book \textit{De miraculis occultis naturae libri quatuor} (1564), which Shakespeare might have seen in the French translation of 1567 (the English translation, \textit{The Secret Miracles of Nature}, is of 1658), Lemnius goes over similar material, but in greater detail. This time it is primarily the woman's “secret” or “tacite” imaginations “whilst the man embrace” that influence the child:

For such is the power of the Imagination, that when the woman does intentively behold any thing, she will produce some thing like that she beheld, so it falls out, that children have the forms of divers things upon them, as Warts, Spots, Moles, Dashes, which cannot easily be wiped off, or taken away. So some of our women seeing a Hare, bring forth a child with a Harelip; so some children are born with flat Noses, wry mouths, great blubber lips, and ill shaped of all the body, because the woman when she conceived the child, and in the time she was big of it, had her eyes and mind busied upon some monstrous creature.\textsuperscript{9}

In a different context, it would be worth pointing out what to today's reader is obvious, namely that responsibility for birth marks and particularly birth defects is here shifted to women alone; however, our interest at present is in the archaeology of the notion of genetic manipulation. Lemnius goes on to point out that the principle invoked can be ingeniously used: “Men use to effect the like by art in other creatures, setting before them when they are to conceive the colours of divers things.” “Art” has here the meaning of “artifice” or rather, in the modern sense, science or genetic manipulation. In fact, all his examples are from animal husbandry: “\textit{Jacob} used that stratagem, who was afterwards called \textit{Israel}, laying rods he had pilled off the rinds from, before them every where, and so he made the greatest part of the flock spotted and party-coloured. So we make painted birds, dogs and horses dappled, with divers spots.”\textsuperscript{10} The biblical story of Jacob's stratagem appears here integrated into “scientific” discourse. It is not a miracle; in other words, it appears as Shylock's version, not Antonio's.

If any proof is needed that the notion of imagination over inheritance (as encapsulated in the idea of the malleability of the young fetus) was strong even before Lemnius wrote, we may point to a Latin poem by Thomas More that wittily plays on it and with it. In this we follow Lemnius, who quoted it in its entirety, undoubtedly because he realized that More was refuting the common argument (which Shakespeare's Paulina was still to use effectively in \textit{A Winter's Tale}) that similarity proves progeny. Here is what Lemnius calls More's “witty epigram” in the English verse translation of the English Lemnius edition of 1658:

\textbf{TO SABINUS}
Those four boys, Sabine,
Which thy Wife brought forth
Thou think'st are not thine,
Unlike thee, nought-worth.
But that Boy alone
That she lately bore,
Like thee, for thine own
Thou tak'st, and no more.
Four as bastards born
Rejected are in scorn,
Yet wise men suppose
That the Mothers mind
Doth the Child dispose
For likeness in's kind.
Four were begot
When that many miles
From home, thou wert not
Feared, nor thy wiles.
This last like to thee,
Was begot in fear,
Thy Wife was not free
Thou wert then too near.
This I think was it,
That thy likenesse hit. (ll)

All of his wife's children were begotten by other men; her fifth child only looked like him because his presence in town made a detection of her adulterous act more likely. She thought of him and thus her child looked like him. The Dutch physician drew the conclusion from the medical notions he recorded and from More's poem that it would be vain to assign fatherhood from the likeness of the child: “For neither the Law of Nature, nor the publick consent of Mankind will suffer a child to be laid to any man because it is like him.”

In Christian exegetical tradition, for which we let the medieval Nicholas de Lira stand as representative, there are both camps: those who believe that Jacob was taught by an angel, and those who consider him knowledgeable in natural science (in cognitione virtutum naturalium). In explaining Jacob's knowledge of science, Nicholas de Lira points to Jerome's reference to a Spanish horse-breeding practice of putting beautiful horses within sight of those being covered. He also tells the case of a matrona accused of adultery because she had borne a black child (peperisset Aethiopem) but found innocent after the picture of a black person was found in her bedroom.

For Shylock the immediate relevance of the story of Jacob breeding ewes is that it points to his thriving by ingenuity while sticking to a bond or contract, but the biblical passage—highlighted by Antonio's lack of comprehension—also introduces the theme of passing on traits, of inheritance from parent to child. This is the primary use to which the story has been put in western civilization, and whatever extra "spin" Shakespeare could give it through the character Shylock, its center of gravity would have been exactly there.

Swearing “by the Jacob's staff” (II.v.36) and with a wife about whom we know little else than that she was also called Leah, Shylock is conceived to recapitulate in some sense the ingenious Jacob/Israel, who, more than for his sheep breeding is famous for the ruse through which he obtained the blessing from his father, who mistakes him for his first-born brother Esau. In a related scene loosely parodying the biblical episode or at least playing on it, the “sand-blind” Gobbo meets his son Launcelot and fails to recognize him. Launcelot kneels and asks for the blessing of his father, who will feel his son's skin and comment on his excess of (facial) hair. Their meeting includes this exchange:

LAUN.

Do you not know me father?
Dismissing his father's excuse, Launcelot here generalizes in the manner of the Shakespearean wise fool: the father's eyesight would not guarantee recognition of his son. Thomas More and the physician Levinius Lemnius would have agreed. In an ironic reversal, then, sight cannot guarantee recognition of genetic descent, but it may cause transmission of genetic traits.

The transmission of such traits is thus configured as an area of radical insecurity that allows “race” to be manipulated by the various characters in the play. The poles of this manipulation are established early in the play by Shylock, who insists twice that Jessica is his flesh and blood (“my daughter is my flesh and my blood” [III.i.33]), and by Salerio, who responds, “There is more difference between thy flesh and hers / than between jet and ivory, more between your / bloods, than there is between red wine and Rhenish” (III.i.34-36). While on the surface Salerio can be understood to deny modern notions of “race,” his denial may presuppose exactly such a notion in that it relies in part on “racial” imagery to make its point. Even more crudely, Launcelot the clown tries to demean Jessica with some such understanding, holding out to Jessica what he succinctly calls “a kind of bastard hope”: “Marry, you may partly hope that your father got / you not, that you are not the Jew's daughter” (III.v.9-10). Realizing fully how demeaning this “way out” is, Jessica confirms the fittingness of the phrase “bastard hope”: “That were a kind of bastard hope indeed,—so the / sins of my mother should be visited upon me” (III.v.11-12). The general opprobrium that the period associated with illegitimate birth was anchored in canon and civil law, which excluded the illegitimate from certain honorable professions. We cannot tell whether another irony is unintentional, namely that in Jewish understanding the proof of Jewish descent is through the mother rather than the father. The very crudeness of these jokes underlines the insecurity surrounding the question of transmission of traits, an insecurity reflected, as we shall see, in the construction of “race.”

Shylock's story of Laban's sheep and the genetic paradigms into which it was integrated in Renaissance medicine relates also to a somewhat complicated and often discussed passage in Act IV: Gratiano's slur berating Shylock when the latter keeps insisting on the pound of flesh as his due:

GRA.

thy currish spirit

Govern'd a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter—

Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,

And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,

Infus'd itself in thee.

(IV.i.133-37)

In the interest of dating the composition of the play, scholars have—correctly, it would seem—seen a reference in the “wolf … hanged” to the execution on 7 June 1594, of the Portuguese Jewish physician Lopez
Religious otherness indeed preceded “racial” otherness as main category of difference in Renaissance Europe. Muslims and Jews were usually seen in terms of religion and culture (though the use of those terms often verged on what could be termed “racial” difference). But the Renaissance witnessed large scale encounters of Europeans with peoples of colors and cultures different from those of Europe. Shylock alludes to these encounters in his speech on Antonio's business interests, when he lists Antonio's ships en route to Tripoli, the Indies, and Mexico. One result of these large-scale encounters was a gradual shift from religion as the main marker of otherness. David Brion Davis's comment concerning European terminology for sub-Saharan Africans indicates such a shift: “It was only in the fifteenth century that Europeans, possibly following Arabic precedents, began to identify sub-Saharan Africans not simply as ‘black Saracens’ but as ‘blacks.’”

The events of 1492 in Spain, the reconquista against the Moors and the expulsion of the Spanish Jews—Spain ridding itself of the African and Jewish “other” at the same time—point to a historical conflation of the two categories as well. Fifty years later, however, Cabeza de Vaca, in his Relation of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, sees religion as the main differentiating factor between Europeans and Native Americans, referring to Spaniards as “Christians,” not as Spaniards or as people differing in color, suggesting that both terminology and related attitudes were still under construction. Shakespeare's play, as we shall see, might be said to bear witness to the shift from religious to racial otherness. Though Daryl W. Palmer reminds us that “early modern notions of ‘race’ must never be reduced to color,” we may also conclude with him that “this injunction must not stop us from appreciating the ways in which a supremely influential dramatist like Shakespeare has contributed to the obsession with color.”

In this play, Shylock is primarily the cultural and religious other, though the boundaries between “race” and religion are indeed porous, as Mary Janell Metzger notes when pointing out that Jessica gives as her father's ancestors—or as his genetic descent—two individuals: Tubal and Chus (III.ii.285); “the first is a Jew and the second the mythical originary black African.” That religious and “racial” otherness are differentiated in the play is exemplified most clearly by Jessica's marriage. Although her otherness may be removed by conversion, thus facilitating her marriage with a Gentile, Morocco's otherness appears to be an insurmountable obstacle and is expressed in terms of “racial” difference. Although for the modern spectator some of the innuendo used by the Christians (for instance, the “bastard hope” held out to Jessica) as well as some of the language used by Shylock (his wish that someone “of the stock of Barrabas” [IV.i.292] might have been Jessica's husband) will have racial overtones, religion is primary. Shylock is forced to convert at the end of the play, in the process losing most of his money (in his account of the Jews of Venice, Coryat regretted that the costliness of conversions acted as a deterrent to becoming a Christian).

When we study how Africans are presented in this play, however, we see again the play's challenge to some of the most basic and seemingly commonsensical genetic assumptions, for instance the one that child is like father. When the Prince of Morocco first appears as one of the three suitors to Portia's hand, he is described as “a tawny Moor” (II.i, stage direction). The meaning of tawny is a bit of a puzzle: it could mean “dark,” but possibly a shade of skin color contrasting with a “black” Moor. Be that as it may, Morocco is very much conscious that his skin color is different from Portia's and from that of her European suitors, for his first words are:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,
Of course, *complexion*, as a term in humoral physiology, had a fuller meaning than it has now: it meant not only skin color, but the entire principle imagined to effect it. Morocco fears that his looks might cause dislike. Fear of rejection because of his different looks makes him say that “this aspect” of his “hath fear'd the valiant” and attracted the most prized young women of his clime: “I would not change this hue, / Except to steal your thoughts my gentle queen” (II.i.11-12). Again we may disagree about what shade of skin is intended, but it seems to be clear that *complexion, aspect, and hue* in some way refer to the otherness of the African and that otherness is conceptualized in terms of “race.” Indeed, “racial” otherness comes across as a liability in this passage.

Portia denies that she is “solely led / By nice direction of a maiden's eyes” (II.i.13), where *nice* might indicate an over-fastidious attention to mere looks. All her remarks are potentially reversible, however, for even the denial just mentioned may imply that Morocco lacks conventional good looks. Portia on the whole remains courteous and polite, even when punning on the two meanings of *fair*: under certain conditions Morocco might have “stood as fair / As any comer I have look'd on yet / For my affection” (II.i.20-23). However, ideas of beauty and “whiteness” are firmly linked elsewhere in this play, as in Lorenzo's exclamation, upon seeing Jessica's letter, “I know the hand, in faith, 'tis a fair hand, / And whiter than the paper it writ on / Is the fair hand that writ” (II.iv.12-14). Portia's courtesy and politeness during both this scene and the casket scene (II.vii) contrast with the unambiguous rejection of him and “all of his complexion” the moment he has left at the end of that scene, after choosing the wrong casket: “A gentle riddance—draw the curtains, go,—/ Let all of his complexion choose me so” (II.vii.78-79). In the context of this play, “all of his complexion” means “all Africans.” This dismissal, then, appears to be based to a high degree on Morocco's otherness. Not only is he unacceptable as an individual suitor, but so is his whole “race.” It seems that that “race” is understood to be reason enough for his rejection so that no further explanations are needed—an implicit commentary on what one may assume to be Globe audience's attitudes. Indeed, the social meaning of this otherness is highlighted by the fact that Morocco is the suitor of the highest societal standing, so that matters of “race” appear to overrule all other considerations here.

Not surprisingly, Portia is not the only one with narrow and parochial standards of beauty. As Bassanio mulls over the virtues of gold, silver, and lead in his casket scene and particularly over the deceit of appearance, he says, “Thus ornament is but the guiled shore / To a most dangerous sea: the beauteous scarf / Veiling an Indian beauty” (III.ii.97-99). Although (as John Russell Brown reports) some editors have tried to emend *Indian beauty* because of the jingle and fuzzy contrast, the meaning—with an emphasis on Indian, whether East Indian or American—is consistent with the Elizabethan aversion to dark skins that speaks through this play. The long cultural and religious roots of this aversion need not be argued here, except to point out that in addition to such elements as the hostile “Saracen” of medieval romance, there is also a societal tradition of valuing white skin, shaded from the sun, as aristocratic, while tanned skin marked shepherds, farmers, and artisans as members of the lower classes. The latter were, to use a modern Americanism with similar associations, “rednecks.” Even in Prince Morocco's understanding of his dark skin, its color was the effect of the sun, for in a passage already cited he called his “complexion” the “shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun” (II.i.2).

The play's insecurity as to the exact meaning of “race” is not only reflected in the implicit controversy over whether it is a matter of nature or nurture but also in its implicit equation of Jewishness and Blackness in terms of presumed religious values. We might point to three passages in this respect: one concerns Portia's anticipation of rejecting Morocco as a suitor because “if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should / shrive me than / wive me” (I.ii.123-25). The second passage deals with Launcelot's assessment of Shylock as a “kind of devil” (II.ii.23). The third passage illustrates Solanio's view
of Shylock and, by extension, all Jews, when Shylock is approaching him: “Let me say ‘amen’ betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew” (III.i.19-20). Jewishness as religion and Blackness as a marker of “race” function equivalently here. Not only are they signs of otherness, but this otherness also has a moral value: it is regarded as evil. Though we have seen that Jewishness may change into Christianess, thus making “evil” appear to be a matter of “nurture,” Blackness cannot be erased in the same manner. Here the transitional stage of the concept of “race” exposes itself. While “race” and “religion” may operate as functional equivalents, both translating into generic otherness associated with evil, they are also parting ways, one assigned to nurture, the other to nature.

One passage that has befuddled the editors becomes intelligible when read through the lens of “race” and genetics. It is the passage following Launcelot's ridiculing and belittling of Jessica, in which he holds out to her a “bastard hope,” namely that she might not be Shylock's daughter. As the exchange continues, Jessica puts her hopes on her husband, Lorenzo, who, she says, has made her a Christian. Launcelot the Clown, in a kind of Brechtian reduction to the most materialist aspect of the situation, responds to this that her husband is the more to blame, for “this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs” (III.v.21-22). At this point, the new husband enters and is told by Jessica, apparently in full earnest, Launcelot's allegations. Lorenzo responds in a way that is not immediately understandable:

LOR.

I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the negro's belly:

LAUN.

It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she

(III.v.34-39)

John Russell Brown says that Lorenzo's remark has not been explained, and he surmises, “It might be an outcrop of a lost source, or a topical allusion. Perhaps it was introduced simply for the sake of the elaborate pun on Moor/more.”

The notion that the entire passage is motivated by punning recalls Samuel Johnson's low view of word-play in the period but too easily dismisses Launcelot's words. Clearly Lorenzo's reply, that Launcelot has impregnated a black woman, is meant to repay Launcelot's unpleasantness. Popular belief at that time held that a syphilitic could cure himself of his disease if he slept with a black woman. In his *Luis venereae perfectissimus tractatus* (1597), the well regarded Italian physician Hercole Sassonia (or Saxonio) writes,

But one needs to inquire into what I have heard was experienced by some people in Venice: they claim [dicunt] to have been cured instantly of gonorrhea by having intercourse with a black woman [mulier Aethiopis]. The *experimentum* [experience; experiment; demonstration or proof] is true and it seems can be confirmed by [Julius Caesar] Scaliger's *exercitatio* 180, c. 18, according to whom Africans are cured from lues venerea by sleeping with a Numidian or Ethiopian woman. That I know, too, even though I would consider as invented the reports that indeed more men were freed from *gonorrhæa antiqua* by sleeping with a virgin spouse; but then the woman gets infected.

At least three matters are important here: that in the 1590s such a view is thus documented of all places in Venice; that not only some experiential but also some literary evidence for what we may call a *canard* is given; and, although not evident from this passage, that the remedy was surrounded by strong taboos.
If we recognize the importance of taboo in this matter, namely that Sassonia was severely criticized for even recording this belief without assenting to it (since this kind of knowledge might induce the diseased to a desperate and unethical act), we will not be surprised that the view is not more often documented in medical texts. For literary documentation, however, Sassonia refers to Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1553), who in his Exoticarum exercitationum liber reports that in Africa the disease was first imported from Spain and that “those suffering from it recover when they go to Numidia or Black Ethiopia by a gift of the Heavens without any other medications.” Scaliger says nothing about intercourse, nor does Leo Africanus, who in turn seems to have been Scaliger's source, for Leo reports that if anyone in Libya, where the disease is yet rare, gets infected, he (Leo uses the masculine form) travels to Numidia or the region of the Black Ethiopians (in Numidiam aut Nigritarum regionem), where he is healed by the temperateness of the air. Leo, who as an African was the period's main informant on that continent, claims that he saw such cures, effected without drug or physician, many times with his own eyes.

However, the notion reported by Sassonia to be current in Venice, that intercourse with a black virgin would cure the syphilitic, might supply the logic or deep structure to Lorenzo's counter-charge, after he learns that Launcelot has insulted Jessica and him: “The Moor is with child by you Launcelot!” Launcelot's response, “It is much that the Moor should be more than reason,” would not be a mere and empty play on the words much, moor, and more, but an acknowledgement of the charge with explanation or excuse, for “more than reason” would refer to the special powers attributed to the mulier Aithiops. Even Launcelot's next statement, “but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for,” which continues the play on moor and more, makes considerable sense in the context of the beliefs reported by Sassonia, for Launcelot's surface sense may be that, rather than womanizing, he was only interested in having intercourse with a virgin, as Sassonia puts it, cum uxore Virgine. The sense hovers precariously between two possibilities. One possibility is that Launcelot wanted an “honest” woman for medical reasons—this would be some sort of an acceptance of the charge and an excuse. The other possibility is that more in the sentence quoted last is read as Moor and than as that: “But if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more / Moor than / that I took her for.” The latter would acknowledge his attempt at womanizing, his awareness of her being “less than an honest woman,” and his intent to have sex with an African woman, but as a response to Lorenzo's charge such an acknowledgment would make little sense. However, the view Sassonia reports from Venice supplies a continuous sense to the passage. That it is not widely reported (although documented in Theodor Zwinger's voluminous commonplace book) need not be surprising or bothersome considering that the subject matter is highly tabooed and Sassonia was taken to task for only mentioning it.

At the beginning of this essay, we acknowledged our uneasiness in projecting modern meanings of words like eugenics, Jew, and race into the past. Ultimately, though, this seemingly linguistic problem is a version of the hesitancy that Emily C. Bartels has well noted in a recent book on Marlowe: “Critics have been hesitant to ascribe racism and homophobia to early modern culture, in large part because the idea of race and homosexuality seemed poorly formed at best.” After acknowledging these anxieties, the scholar overcomes them: “Racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and the like, though they did not have a local habitation or name, had their beginnings here, with cross-cultural and domestic discourses whose uncertainties amplified difference, allowing the self to impose its terms of supremacy on the world, over the alien abroad and the alien at home.”

In The Merchant of Venice some of the most time-honored and accepted Elizabethan commonplaces about inheritance of traits and about non-European skin color are held up to inspection: the likeness of child to parent and a quasi-instinctive negative reaction to the otherness of dark skin. The expectation that the child should be like the father is rehearsed several times and set against the view that Jessica is very different from Shylock and the view that Launcelot is not recognizable to Gobbo, his father. Shylock, most likely unaware of the implications, cites in detail one of the proof-texts of contemporary scientific discourse, namely the view, by Thomas More attributed to the graves Sophi or wisemen, that the fetus is influenced by the imaginations of the mother. In terms of attitudes about race, Portia's negative reaction to Morocco and to “all of his
complexion” would find its counterpoint in Launcelot's veiled defense when he was charged with impregnating a black woman or “Moor.”

More significant than any claim to have solved a “crux” is the realization that the play sexualizes Otherness—this holds for the female “Moor” as well as for Morocco as potential sexual partner for Portia. We also recall that some of the most striking examples illustrating concepts of Renaissance “genetics” are those in which the Other is so powerful that merely looking at or imagining the Other will turn one's offspring into it. The synchronic presence of religious and racial otherness in this play, and the significantly different modes of plot intrigue for dealing with them, may mark a point on the diachronic scale (or history of European consciousness) at which religious otherness is shifting to the predominance of “racial” otherness. The “tanning” theory professed by Morocco as cause of his blackness, as well as Shylock's ewegenics and similar notions about acquiring traits at conception (notions that go deep into the fabric of this play), warn us to place race in quotation marks. The difference from later notions of race, for instance nineteenth-century ones, is salient.

Our explications call into question readings of the play that favor insurmountable dividing lines among people, like those James Shapiro recently demonstrated from Shakespeare's contemporary Andrew Willet, who believed that if an Englishman settled in Spain, his heirs would be Spaniards, but that “‘Jews have never been grafted unto the stock of other people.’”29 Our attempt has been not to replace such readings with modern cultural constructions with which we feel more comfortable, but to demonstrate that certain medical commonplaces underlying various passages, some of them obscure, put imagination over inheritance, and question fatherhood and the transmission of traits from father to son. These passages reveal a medical pseudo-science that was much stronger than Shakespeare scholars generally acknowledge. Of course such commonplaces did not die with the early modern period, but they gradually sank from the works of recognized physicians and serious literary authors to the realms of popular belief, whence they have occasionally reared their arcane heads among impostors and charlatans. Thus in the eighteenth century, as Dennis Todd has recently shown, one Mary Toft held England in suspense in 1726 with her claim of rabbit births (she said that, just a couple of weeks pregnant, she had been startled by a rabbit in her garden). She was initially believed by some medical practitioners because this claim, as Todd puts it, “was more or less in accordance with respectable medical opinion about the power of prenatal influence.”30 The Merchant of Venice may be seen as recording a moment when notions of otherness, while they had apparently not hardened yet into the concept of “race” as later times would know it, were in the process of formation. However, the play also illustrates that, while the concept of “race” was not yet fully formed, racism surely was.

Notes

5. Tommaso Campanella, *La Citta del Sole* (1623): *The City of the Sun*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Donno (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 106-7: “Restano pitture solo o statue di grand' huomini, e quelle mirano le donne formose, che s'applicano all'uso della razza.” (Only the pictures and statues of great men survive, and these the shapely women devoted to the perpetuation of the race gaze upon to
There is a similar passage about the women's preparation for coition by looking at statues (pp. 54-55).


7. Ibid., 40v.


10. Ibid.


14. We owe this suggestion to Louise Schleiner.

15. See John Russell Brown, introduction to The Merchant of Venice, xxiii.


19. Mary Janell Metzger, “‘Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’: Jessica, The Merchant of Venice, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity,” PMLA 113, no. 1 (1998): 52-63, quotation p. 55. Metzger's excellent essay explores through Jessica “how Shakespeare may have struggled with competing notions of Jewishness circulating in early modern England” (p. 53). These competing notions were whether Jewishness was a matter of religion or “race,” indicating the same gradual shift we argue can be detected in the juxtaposition of the depictions of Jewishness and Africanness in the play.

20. See Brown's note to that stage direction.


22. Brown's note to III.v.35-36.


25. See the discussion of Giovanni Battista Sitoni and Paolo Zacchia in Schleiner, 190-93.


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 77): Further Reading

**CRITICISM**


**Contends that Shakespeare's depiction and understanding of forgiveness in The Merchant of Venice is modeled on Shylock's faith.**


**Examines the ways in which The Merchant of Venice explores sexual, racial, and religious otherness, arguing that Shakespeare's Venice is in some ways reflective of Elizabethan England.**


**Maintains that The Merchant of Venice may be interpreted as a hermeneutic play which represents the conflict between Christianity and Judaism for ownership of Hebrew scriptures.**


**Explores the influence of Marlowe's The Jew of Malta on The Merchant of Venice, and suggests that an antecedent tradition, such as Il Pecorone, influenced both dramatists.**


**Studies the play's resistance to generic classification and underscores its comic aspects.**


**Examines The Merchant of Venice from the perspective of legal history, and asserts that the play depicts ironic portrayals of social prejudice—images which were offensive in terms of Elizabethan notions of decency and fairness.**

The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 87): Introduction

*The Merchant of Venice*
Considered a “problem play” by many critics, *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596-97) technically meets the criteria for generic classification as a romantic comedy. The romance centers on Portia, a young heiress of Belmont, and Bassanio, a suitor from Venice. Bassanio finances his pursuit of Portia through a loan from his friend Antonio, a Venetian merchant, who in turn secures a loan from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. The terms of the contract between Antonio and Shylock specify that the moneylender shall be entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan is not repaid on time. Attempting to enforce the contract, Shylock appears in court opposite Portia, who disguises herself as a male lawyer acting on Antonio's behalf. The trial concludes with Antonio's acquittal and Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity. The play, however, ends on a more positive note, with a happy ending for the lovers. Nonetheless, critics and audiences have been disturbed for centuries by the anti-Semitic nature of the play and the tragedy of Shylock's defeat in the courtroom—where he loses everything, including his faith.

Perhaps no character in the Shakespearean canon has generated so much controversy as Shylock. Long considered an anti-Semitic stereotype, the negative characterization of the Jewish moneylender has resulted in the play's almost complete exclusion from secondary school reading lists. Some critics have suggested that Shylock is vilified as a usurer rather than as a Jew. However, M. M. Mahood (1987) argues that “the Elizabethans would have brought a whole heap of prejudices to a play about a ‘stubborn’ Jew who is also a moneylender,” since just as Jews served as scapegoats of Christianity, the usurer served as the scapegoat of an emerging capitalist system. Michael J. C. Echeruo (1971) compares Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* with Marlowe's rendering of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, examining the relationship of both to stereotypes of Jews. Echeruo notes that critics are divided on the interpretation of that comparison, with some considering Marlowe's play more anti-Semitic and others suggesting that Shakespeare's sympathetic representation of Christianity puts Shylock in an even worse light than Marlowe's Jewish character. In conclusion, Echeruo warns against a sentimental reading of *The Merchant of Venice* that considers Shylock's ill-treatment to be directed at his profession rather than his religion, noting that “Shylock was before everything else a non-Christian, a Jew.”

Critical attention has also centered on Venice as the play's setting and on Elizabethan England's perception of the culture associated with that city. In his Marxist reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, Burton Hatlen (1980) views Venice as “a quintessentially capitalist society,” as opposed to Belmont, which he believes “exemplifies the qualities of an aristocratic way of life.” Elizabeth S. Sklar (1976) considers Bassanio the perfect representative of Venice and contends that “an understanding of Bassanio may thus provide some insight into the moral climate of *The Merchant of Venice.*” Sklar suggests that the character traits exhibited by Bassanio, the romantic hero of the play, are similar to those of Shylock, the play's purported villain. Sklar notes that both characters are devoted to material goods and the acquisition of wealth, and both confuse monetary worth with higher moral or spiritual values. Russell Astley (1979) also compares Shylock with another character as a means of exploring the moral world of the play. Astley views the moneylender and Antonio as opposites: Antonio finances the courtship of Bassanio and Portia, while Shylock refuses his daughter a dowry, forcing her to steal it; Antonio's loan is motivated by love for Bassanio as opposed to the greed and hatred that motivates Shylock's loan; and lastly, Antonio offers mercy freely, whereas Shylock is compelled to be merciful by law.

Despite the controversial nature of the play, *The Merchant of Venice* has remained one the most popular Shakespearean plays on the stage, ranking with *Hamlet* as one of the most frequently performed plays in Shakespearean stage history. Over the last four hundred years, Shylock has been played as both a villain and a victim. According to Charles Edelman (2002), the most successful productions have been those in which Shylock has not been treated as a vindictive monster. One such sympathetic representation of Shylock, reviewed by Chris Jefferey (see Further Reading), was Helen Flax's 2001 production in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. According to Jefferey, “it was a strength of this production that it set in opposition to Shylock a gang of swaggering leather-jacketed bullies who made it easy to see why he, or any reasonable person, should detest Christians.” The reviewer notes, however, that the production as a whole was a surface-level
interpretation that neglected the play's more complex levels of meaning. In his review of director Shepard Sobel's 2003 Pearl Theater Company production of *The Merchant of Venice*, D. J. R. Bruckner (2003) also suggests a similar sympathy for Shylock. Bruckner notes that Shylock's "defeat at the end of the play is pitiable," particularly when Gratiano yanks the yarmulke from the moneylender's head as he leaves the courtroom a broken man.

Shakespeare's intentions regarding Shylock, in particular, and Jews, in general, can never be known with certainty. Critical speculation on the subject has been ongoing, particularly since the nineteenth century. Lester C. Crocker (see Further Reading), who has surveyed the history of scholarly commentary on the subject, maintains that the intensity of the debate is increasing as audiences, unable to enjoy the play because of the unsettling representation of Shylock, look to critics for answers. Scholars, meanwhile, are anxious to rehabilitate Shakespeare's reputation, but are reluctant to alter the characterization of the moneylender in a way that would constitute a transformation of the playwright's original text. Crocker concludes that Shakespeare's true intention—whether endorsing or refuting prejudice against Jews—is unknowable. He contends, however, that "the semiology of anti-Semitism, 'the Christian disease,' is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, embedded into its texture." Jay L. Halio (1993) also addresses Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews and the controversy surrounding his representation of Shylock. The critic notes that "[i]f Shylock is another version of the villainous Jewish money-lender, and like Barabas a comic villain, he is also something more—the first stage Jew in English drama who is multi-dimensional and thus made to appear human."

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: M. M. Mahood (essay date 1987)**


*[In the following excerpt, Mahood examines the date and sources of *The Merchant of Venice* and the critical assumptions governing the play's reception.]*

**DATE AND SOURCE**

The magnificent sailing ships of the sixteenth century are an unseen presence throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. 'Argosies with portly sail' dominate the opening dialogue, and in the last scene our sense of an ending is satisfied by the news that three of Antonio's ships 'are richly come to harbour'. So it is highly fitting that the clearest indication within the play of the date at which it was written should be an allusion to a real ship of the period.

In June 1596 an English expedition under the Earl of Essex made a surprise attack on Cadiz harbour. The first objective was four richly appointed and provisioned Spanish galleons; worsted in the fight, these cut adrift and ran aground. Two of them, the San Matias and the San Andrés, were captured before they could be fired, and were triumphantly taken into the English fleet as prize vessels.¹ It is generally agreed that the San Andrés, renamed the Andrew, is the ship alluded to as a byword for maritime wealth at line 27 of the play's first scene:

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I should not see the sandy hourglass run
But I should think of shallows and of flats,
And see my wealthy Andrew docked in sand,
Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
To kiss her burial.
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1 (1.1.25-9)
The phrase ‘my wealthy Andrew’ is small but significant evidence that *The Merchant of Venice* was written not earlier than the late summer of 1596.²

The latest possible date for the play is only two years after this. As the first step towards publication, its title was entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 July 1598. Some six weeks later, on 7 September, Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* was entered in the same Register; a compact account of the state of English literature, it lists six comedies by Shakespeare, of which *The Merchant of Venice* is the last. Between them, these entries make clear both that the play was in the repertory of Shakespeare's company, and that a manuscript of it had been sold for publication, by the late summer of 1598.

So the play could have been a new one in either the 1596-7 or the 1597-8 acting season. The ‘wealthy Andrew’ allusion does not clearly favour one date rather than the other, since, as John Russell Brown has shown, the Andrew was several times in the news and several times in danger of ‘shallows and of flats’ between July 1596 and October 1597.³ The fact that she was ‘docked in sand’ at Cadiz and that she nearly ran aground subsequently in the Thames estuary would make an allusion apposite enough in 1596. She was, however, rather more likely to have become a household name in the next year, when, after weathering the terrible storms of August which disabled her sister galleon, she served as a troop carrier in the Islands voyage. On her return in the storm-ridden month of October, Essex was unwilling to let her sail past the Goodwin Sands where, Shakespeare's play reminds us, ‘the carcases of many a tall ship lie buried’ (3.1.4-5; compare 2.8.28-31). Essex had good cause to be apprehensive; the weather was such that it scattered and damaged a whole Spanish armada. Men's minds were a good deal occupied with ‘peril of waters, winds, and rocks’ in the autumn of 1597. And as the shareholders in the Islands voyage began to realise what a fiasco it had been, a play about failed maritime ventures would have taken on a sombre contemporaneity.

The strongest indication that the play originated in the theatrical season of 1597-8 comes, however, not from any internal allusion but from a proviso in the Stationers' Register that it should not be printed without the consent of the Lord Chamberlain—by which we may understand the agreement of Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The most reasonable explanation of this safeguard is that the actors did not want the play to appear in print while it was still enjoying the success of a theatrical novelty.⁴ Even if we had no objective evidence such as this of the play's date, 1597 would strike most readers of *The Merchant of Venice* as about right. The play's skilful blending of several plots, its enterprising and emancipated heroine and its supple, pellucid style all serve to link it to the group of mature comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (1601-2). It has a strong affinity also, despite the difference in genre, with the *King Henry IV* plays (1597 and 1598): we recognise in the first words of Shylock and Falstaff the same new-found and boldly grasped power to individualise a character dramatically through the sounds, rhythms, idioms and images of prose speech.

The same confidence shows itself in Shakespeare's handling of his main source. Like several other of his romantic comedies, the mood and atmosphere of which it presages, *The Merchant of Venice* is based on an Italian novella or short story; in this case the tale of Giannetto of Venice and the Lady of Belmont, which forms part of the collection called *Il Pecorone* (‘the big sheep’, or simpleton—the English equivalent would be ‘the dumb ox’) written in the late fourteenth century by Ser Giovanni of Florence and published at Milan in 1558. No Elizabethan translation is known, but as several modern ones are available only a brief synopsis is attempted here.⁵

A rich merchant of Venice called Ansaldo adopts his orphaned godson Giannetto. When the young man wants to join in a trading expedition, Ansaldo provides him with a splendid ship and rich cargo. On the voyage out, Giannetto is diverted to the port of Belmont, whose Lady has let it be known that she will marry none but the man who is able to spend a successful night with her; those who fail this test must be prepared to lose all they possess. She for her part makes sure of her suitors' failure by giving them drugged wine. Giannetto falls for the trick and duly loses his ship to the Lady. He returns to Venice where he hides in shame; but Ansaldo seeks
him out and, on being told the ship has been lost at sea, equips his godson for a second voyage. Everything,
not surprisingly, happens exactly as it did the first time. To finance a third voyage, Ansaldo now has to
borrow beyond his means, so he pledges a pound of his flesh to a Jew in return for a loan of ten thousand
ducats. This time, a ‘damsel’ warns Giannetto not to drink the proffered wine, and he is able to win the Lady.
He lives happily as the Lord of Belmont, and does not think about the bond until the day of reckoning comes
round. Then he tells the Lady of Ansaldo's plight and she sends him off to Venice with a hundred thousand
ducats. The Jew, however, is not to be deflected from his murderous intentions. The Lady herself now arrives
in Venice, disguised as a lawyer, and having failed to persuade the Jew to accept ten times the sum lent, takes
the case to the open court. There she tells the Jew that he is entitled to his forfeiture, but that if he takes more
or less than the exact pound, or sheds a single drop of blood, his head will be struck off. Unable to recoup
even the original loan, the Jew in rage tears up the bond. The grateful Giannetto offers payment to the lawyer,
who asks instead for his ring, which he yields after much protestation of his love and loyalty for the Lady who
gave it him. In company with Ansaldo, Giannetto now returns to Belmont, where he gets a very cool
reception. Only when the Lady has reduced him to tears by her reproaches does she tell him who the lawyer
was. Finally Giannetto bestows the obliging ‘damsel’ on Ansaldo in marriage.

This synopsis highlights the differences as well as the similarities between Ser Giovanni's story and
Shakespeare's play. Clearly the flesh-bond plot is virtually the same in both. So is the affair of the ring, though
Shakespeare handles this with a lighter touch, omitting the sentimental reflections with which Giannetto
relinquishes the keepsake, and doubling the entertainment of the ending by involving Gratiano and Nerissa in
its contretemps. That Shakespeare read Ser Giovanni's story, either in the original or in a very faithful
translation, is put beyond doubt in any close comparison of the two works. Shakespeare seizes upon all the
vivid details of the Lady's intervention to save Ansaldo—her taking the bond and reading it, her conceding its
validity so firmly that the Jew approaches the merchant with his razor bared, her dramatic last-minute halt to
the proceedings. Generations of actors who have never read Il Pecorone have instinctively felt it right for the
thwarted Shylock to tear up his bond. One puzzling feature of the play, the discrepancy between Bassanio's
long sea voyage to Belmont and Portia's headlong coach ride to the Venetian ferry, is cleared up in the Italian
source: ‘Take a horse at once, and go by land, for it is quicker than by sea.’

Even more important than these details is the emotional cast of the tale. Much is made of Ansaldo's generosity
and long-suffering, and of his readiness to risk his life for his godson, whose shiftiness forebodes the
difficulties that faced Shakespeare when he sought to make Bassanio an attractive hero. Ansaldo's behaviour
after Giannetto's first two mishaps is described in language which recalls the Prodigal Son's father, and these
resonances may have given rise to Gratiano's image of the ‘scarfed bark’ (all Giannetto's ships are gay with
banners) setting forth ‘like a younger or a prodigal’ but returning ‘lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet
wind’ (2.6.15-20). The Jew in the Italian tale is a less realised character than the merchant, but as in the play
his obduracy has a clear religious and commercial motivation: ‘he wished to commit this homicide in order to
be able to say that he had put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants’. Finally, there are enough close
verbal parallels to prove conclusively that Shakespeare knew and made use of Ser Giovanni's story.

Not everything in the tale of Giannetto was to Shakespeare's purpose. He forestalled the absurd match of the
merchant and the damsel by having Nerissa marry Gratiano in Act 3. More importantly, the ribald story of the
bed test, which makes nonsense of all the talk of the Lady's generosity, is replaced by the highly moral tale of
the three caskets, which has survived in a number of versions from the ninth century onwards. The medieval
collection known as the Gesta Romanorum includes the story of a choice between vessels of gold, silver and
lead which is made a test of marriage-worthiness—though of a woman, not a man. In translation, this forms
part of a selection from the Gesta Romanorum published in London in 1577 and, with revisions, in 1595. We
can be reasonably sure this last was the edition used by Shakespeare, because in its translation of the casket
story there occurs the unusual word ‘insculpt’ which is also used by Morocco when he is making his choice of
casket (2.7.57). Shakespeare handles the tale very freely, making the caskets the test for a whole series of
suitors; this was a common romance pattern, which needed no specific model.
So far we have been assuming that Shakespeare was the first to substitute the story of the caskets for Ser Giovanni's tale of the drugged wine. This assumption grows into a near certainty when, on subjecting the play to close scrutiny, we discover residual traces of the story that Shakespeare cut out. Among the loose ends is Bassanio's impecunious state at the beginning of the play, which leads the audience to suspect him of wooing Portia in an attempt to mend his fortunes; in the novella it is the Lady herself who is responsible for Giannetto being penniless, as she has already seized the ships and cargoes from his first two ventures. Indeed Bassanio's argument that the best way to find a lost arrow is to send another after it, which is almost too much for Antonio's patience, would be nearly valid in the context of Giannetto's triple attempt. In Antonio's expression 'secret pilgrimage' (1.1.119) there is a vestige of the secrecy with which Giannetto hid his quest from his trading companions; and Bassanio's costly gifts are likewise a reminder of the high price Giannetto paid for his first two voyages. Perhaps too it was the recollection of the risk run by the Lady's suitors that caused Shakespeare to invent such hard conditions for those who woo Portia, and, in his adaptation of the Gesta Romanorum tale, to change the inscription on the leaden casket from 'Whoso chooseth me shall find that God hath disposed' to 'Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath' (2.7.16).11

These traces of the story in its original form imply that Shakespeare made his own adaptation of the story direct from the novella and did not, as was long supposed, rework a play in which the flesh-bond plot and the casket plot had already been welded together. Lost source plays are, however, persistent ghosts in Shakespearean scholarship, and the one that haunts discussions of The Merchant of Venice has proved particularly hard to lay. It even has a name. The sometime actor Stephen Gosson, in his attack on the immorality of the stage which was published in 1579, exempted from his censure two plays which had been acted at the Red Bull. One of these, The Jew, he describes as representing 'the greediness of worldly choosers, and bloody minds of usurers'.12 This has been taken as proof that a play combining the casket story with that of the pound of flesh already existed in the 1570s, so that Shakespeare had only to re-write it for a new generation of playgoers twenty years later. But it is difficult to see how a play containing the casket story could be said never, in Gosson's phrase, to wound the eye with amorous gesture. Moreover the art of interweaving two or more stories in the manner of Italian intrigue comedy was still unknown to the English stage of the 1570s. Nor is there any need for Gosson's words to refer to a double plot: they can simply mean 'the greediness of those who choose the worldly way of life, such as bloody-minded usurers'; Morocco and Arragon, whatever their short-comings as suitors, hardly deserve to be called 'worldly'.13 In short, while a play about a Jewish moneylender existed some twenty years before Shakespeare wrote The Merchant of Venice, we have no proof whatever of the two plays being connected, whereas the text of Shakespeare's comedy offers ample evidence that he himself inserted the casket tale into the story of Giannetto.

The flesh-bond story has a long ancestry as a folk tale,14 and Shakespeare is likely to have known other versions beside Ser Giovanni's. The ballad of Gernutus, a very basic version which involves only the Jew, his merchant victim from whom he obtains the bond as 'a merry jest', and a judge who, at the moment the Jew is ready 'with whetted blade in hand' to claim his due, intervenes to tell him the pound of flesh must be exact and bloodless, is undated; the phrases quoted are just as likely to have derived from Shakespeare's play as to have contributed to it.15 Another version could have been read by Shakespeare shortly before he wrote The Merchant of Venice: this is the English translation of Alexandre Silvayn's The Orator (1596), in which a brief narrative 'Of a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian' is followed by the Jew's appeal against the 'just pound' judgement, and the Christian's speech in reply. One of the Jew's arguments is that there are worse cruelties than exacting a pound of flesh—for example, keeping one's victim in 'an intolerable slavery'. Shakespeare perhaps picked up the idea and put it to better use in Shylock's 'You have among you many a purchased slave …' (4.1.90-8). Certainly the tone of Shylock's retorts at the trial is sometimes very close to that of Silvayn's Jew. 'A man may ask why I would not rather take silver of this man, than his flesh …' could well have prompted 'You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats …' (4.1.40-2).16
The ballad of Gernutus and Silvayn’s orations are more in the nature of passing influences than sources. A work which could have been of wider use to Shakespeare, in that it may have given him a lead-in to his elaboration of the flesh-bond plot by means of the duplication of lovers and the added story of Jessica’s elopement, is a tale inset into the third book of Antony Munday’s romance Zelauto, or the Fountain of Fame (1580). The dramatic liveliness of this tale has led to the suggestion that a play by Munday himself, based on an Italian original, lies behind it; not necessarily a complete play, since the reason Munday was described by Meres as ‘our best plotter’ could be that he wrote play outlines, or scenari, which would have been sold to acting companies and worked up into full-dress dramas by their regular playwrights. The basic situation in the story is that Strabino loves Cornelia, the sister of his friend Rudolfo, who for his part falls in love with Brisana, the daughter of the rich old usurer whom Cornelia is in danger of being forced to marry. The two friends pledge their right eyes as a means of getting a large loan from the usurer, and buy a rich jewel by which they win the consent of Cornelia’s father to her marrying Strabino. When the usurer, who has meanwhile agreed to Brisana marrying Rudolfo, discovers that he has been outbid as a suitor by his own money, he summons the young men before a judge and claims the forfeiture. Using the same religious argument as Portia, the judge urges him to show mercy. But he is deaf to entreaty: ‘I crave justice to be uprightly used, and I crave no more, wherefore I will have it.’ The friends call on their attorneys to speak for them, and Brisana and Cornelia, dressed in scholars’ gowns, step forward. Brisana’s arguments, which have to do with the failure to repay by a certain date, might be heard in any court; it is Cornelia who clinches the matter by stipulating that the usurer, in taking his due, must spill no blood. Realising that he is not going to get his money back, the usurer capitulates, accepts Rudolfo as a son-in-law, and declares him his heir.

Any influence Munday's tale may have had is secondary to Shakespeare's use of Ser Giovanni's story; Portia's plea is here, but no merchant and no Jew. What is interesting in Munday's story, apart from its tone (to which we shall return), is its reduplication of lovers, by which the usurer is given a son-in-law to inherit his wealth and the heroine a companion to help bring the trial to a happy end. If Shakespeare did, as is probable, encounter Munday's romance, these two characters underwent a second binary fission in his imagination, Rudolfo differentiating into Lorenzo and Gratiano, and Brisana into Jessica and Nerissa. In this way, the love interest was trebled. Furthermore, the addition to Shakespeare's play of the moneylender's daughter increased a strong theatrical influence to which we must now turn, that of Marlowe's Jew of Malta.

Until the allusion to the Andrew was identified, The Merchant of Venice was usually dated 1594. It was known that anti-Jewish feeling was rife in that year because of the trial and execution of Ruy Lopez, a Portuguese Jew by birth and physician to Queen Elizabeth, who was convicted of attempting to poison both the Queen and an eminent Spanish refugee called Antonio Pérez. Marlowe's Jew of Malta enjoyed a revival during Lopez's trial, and it has been suggested that Shakespeare wrote his play about a Jew to emulate the success of Marlowe's piece. The fact that The Merchant of Venice is now generally dated two or three years later does not of itself dissociate the play from the Lopez affair. But Shylock, unlike Marlowe's Jew, bears very little resemblance to Lopez. He is neither a poisoner nor, before his final exit, a convert, and though the choice of the name Antonio could be a faint reverberation of the trial, it was a common Italian name which Shakespeare used for several more characters.

But if Ruy Lopez did not linger in Shakespeare's memory, Marlowe's Barabas certainly did. Shylock has learnt from Barabas how to respond to Christian contempt: Barabas finds it politic to ‘Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog’ (Jew of Malta 2.3.24) and Shylock submits with a ‘patient shrug’ to being called ‘misbeliever, cut-throat dog’ (1.3.101, 103). In both, this obsequiousness masks a fierce racial pride: Shylock recalls (1.3.81) the prosperity of Jacob with as much satisfaction as Barabas does the ‘blessings promised to the Jews’ (Jew of Malta 1.1.103). Like Barabas, he believes that without the divine seal of material prosperity, life is not worth living. To those who take away his wealth Barabas cries:

Why, I esteem the injury far less,  
To take the lives of miserable men,
Than be the causers of their misery;
You have my wealth, the labor of my life,
The comfort of mine age, my children's hope;
And therefore ne'er distinguish of the wrong

(Jew of Malta 1.2.146-51)

—a passion heard again from Shylock:

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

(4.1.370-3)

Despite such echoes of The Jew of Malta, The Merchant of Venice is a different kind of play and the product of a different kind of imagination. Marlowe's powerful and grotesque tragedy was so vivid in the memories of Shakespeare's audience that it must have presented itself to him as a challenge rather than a source. When he seems most dependent on it, closer examination often reveals that he is holding it at bay: that is, in the manner of painters—Francis Bacon, for example, ‘quoting’ Velázquez—he recalls the older work in order to show how far from it his own concerns lie. Marlowe's opening scene exuberantly celebrates the Jew's wealth of gold and silks and spices, in preparation for the portrayal of a world of materialist relationships. In Shakespeare's first scene, argosies with their cargoes of silk and spices are powerfully evoked, but they are made to appear an irrelevance to the world of feeling revealed in Antonio's sadness and his affection for Bassanio; they are the means by which Antonio may serve Bassanio's ends, whereas Barabas's wealth is an end in itself. This fruitful and creative resistance to Marlowe's play is most evident in the contrast between Jessica and Barabas's daughter Abigail. The scene in which the runaway Jessica throws down a casket of her father's jewels to her waiting lover deliberately recalls the night scene in The Jew of Malta in which the loyal Abigail extracts the sequestered treasure from her father's house and throws it down to him. Profound differences of character, tone, and circumstance in the two episodes are to make Shylock's ‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!’ (2.8.15) as ironic an echo of Barabas's triumphant ‘O girl, O gold, O beauty, O my bliss!’ (Jew of Malta 2.1.54) as is Marlowe's own use of the happy Ovidian lover's Lente, lente, currite noctis equi at the dire climax of Doctor Faustus. The Jew of Malta is not, in the conventional sense, a source of The Merchant of Venice. It is a persistent presence, which Shakespeare manipulates with confident skill.

SOME ATTITUDES AND ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND THE PLAY

The Kenyan writer Karen Blixen once told the story of The Merchant of Venice to her Somali butler, Farah Aden, who was deeply disappointed by Shylock's defeat. He was sure the Jew could have succeeded, if only he had used a red-hot knife. As an African listener, he had expected a tale about a clever trickster in the Brer Rabbit tradition; Shylock let him down. We can be as far off-course as Farah in our reading of the play if we do not pay some heed to the attitudes of its first audience: their range of expectations about comedy as a genre, and the assumptions they brought to a play set in Venice, to its portrayal of the law, of Jews, and of usury, and to its handling of the theme of love and friendship. Yet in our attempts to understand these background matters we need also to hold fast to the fact that Shakespeare's eminence makes him stand out from his background. The play is not made up of average Elizabethan preconceptions. It is made out of the life experience of a highly individual artist, and our sense of that individuality as we gather it from Shakespeare's work as a whole is an important part of our response.

KINDS OF COMEDY
First and foremost *The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic play. The triumph of love and friendship over malice and cruelty is the theme of most medieval romances, of countless short stories of the Italian Renaissance, and, from the 1570s onward, of many English plays. In comedies such as those of Robert Greene, love is an ennobling experience, far removed from the absurdities of courtship displayed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Unlike these earlier Shakespearean works which have the flavour of Lyly's court comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* has the feel of a popularly romantic play intended primarily for the public stage. Only occasionally witty, it abounds in proverbial wisdom—‘good sentences, and well pronounced’ (1.2.9). And whereas court entertainments were made up of ‘happenings’ that the dramatist could invent at will, plays in the popular romance tradition had a well-defined story line, and existed rather as narrations than presentations. Disguise, a very important element in such stories, is used to bring home to the audience the heroine's devotion and worth. Far-fetched as such devices may seem, popular stage romance was not experienced as fantasy, and to call *The Merchant of Venice* a fairy tale is to induce a dangerous condescension in the reader and a dangerous whimsy in the director. Romantic comedies could be set in real places, even (like Greene's *James IV*) portray historical figures. Although the Belmont of Ser Giovanni is the conventional court of medieval romance, complete with jousting and damsels, his Jew lives on the mainland at Mestre as most Venetian Jews did in the fourteenth century. Two hundred years later, a public theatre audience took Antonio's perils seriously as befitted members of a rival trading nation. Argosies did not only belong in story books: they sailed into Southampton Water.

Another kind of reality, that provided by the miracle play and the morality, gave further substance to much Elizabethan romantic comedy. Portia intervenes to save Antonio as providentially as the Virgin Mary, in continental miracle plays of the sixteenth century, came to the help of hero or heroine. The notion, traceable to the *Golden Legend*, that souls could be saved even when they were being weighed in the balance and found wanting persisted in several forms: didactically, in the fourteenth-century *Processus Belial*, in which the devil claims that in justice man is forfeit to him and confidently produces scales in which to weigh human sins, but is routed when the Virgin appears as an advocate calling on God to exercise his other great attribute of mercy; visually, in many wall paintings, like the one in illustration 1, of the Weighing of Souls; dramatically, as when Mercy and Peace, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, plead successfully for man's soul before the judgement seat. This strain of underlying seriousness which *The Merchant of Venice* may owe to the miracle tradition was deepened when Shakespeare substituted the caskets for the bed test. Despite talk of Jason and Hercules, Bassanio's venture has more in common with the Grail story than with the pursuit of the Golden Fleece: it is a test of moral worth, not of prowess or cunning. Moreover we are given a secure feeling, characteristic of romance, that the outcome is under the direction of benign powers; Portia's dead father acts much as the divinely directed Fortune of romance, exercising a protective role over his daughter such as she in her turn is to exercise over Antonio.

Elsewhere, the play relies on a very different set of theatrical expectations, those brought to Italian comedy as it had been naturalised by Gascoigne, Munday, Shakespeare himself in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and possibly several of the writers of comedy named by Meres. Munday's *Zelauto* has the spirit of this Italian comedy; even if it does not have a theatrical source, it represents another aspect of Renaissance fiction which is close in temper to the imbroglios of comedy, the ‘merry tale’. Like such stories, Italian Renaissance comedies and their derivatives in France and England tend to be brisk and unsentimental. The setting is urban, often a city at Carnival time. Its heroines are resourceful and adventurous. Double and treble plots give the young ample opportunity to triumph over the old by means of trickery and disguise. And the trickster is fully in control of his fate and not presented to us as the protégé of Fortune. The inset episode of Jessica's elopement in Shakespeare's second act could well form part of such a comedy of intrigue, though in point of fact no dramatic source for it has been identified. To match its mood we have to turn to the fourteenth story in the *Novellino* of Masuccio of Salerno, which is about a miser's daughter who runs away with her lover after extracting from her father's store ‘a much greater sum than anyone could have reckoned sufficient for her dowry’. No sympathy is shown for the miser, who weeps at home day after day and is ready to hang himself in grief for the double loss of his money and his daughter.
The Merchant of Venice thus rouses and satisfies two very different kinds of expectation in its audience, who appear to have had no difficulty, here or elsewhere in Shakespeare's comedies, in shifting their perspective from scene to scene. Those critics who stress the affinity between festivity and comedy point to a comparable coexistence, in the festive season of the year, of affection and charity on the one hand and a zest for brutal practical jokes on the other. Ser Giovanni's story had provided this mixture in some degree by making a trickster of the Lady. When Shakespeare instead made her the prize in a moral contest, he had to turn elsewhere—to his recollection of Munday's tale or some similar work—for a cheerfully amoral love intrigue such as Jessica's flight affords. He also introduced a little levity into the more serious parts of his plot by drawing at moments on his own prior mastery of the comedy of wit. Like Angelina in Greene's Orlando Furioso, Portia is courted by the princes of the earth. But whereas Greene starts his play with high-flown declarations of love from all the princes, Shakespeare first gives us Portia's mocking review of her suitors, saving the pomp and rhetoric till 2.1 when they can be undercut by our knowledge of her private thoughts. Later on, when the tension of the trial scene is most strained, Portia is no less sharp-tongued in her reaction to Bassanio's romantic declaration that he would give his wife to save Antonio; here, by exploiting for a moment the use of disguise for a skirmish in the sex war, Shakespeare awakens responses proper to the courtly comedy of love and wit to keep in check other responses that have more to do with melodrama.

This flexibility of response on the part of the audience is one means by which Shakespeare can give his characters substance. A personality is defined in life by an intricate net of relationships, but in a play the audience's extraneous, single-angled relationship to a character makes this multifaceted nature of personality one of the most elusive of dramatic goals. A possible path to its attainment is the use of the audience's prior experience of varied dramatic and literary traditions. Portia may at times in the courtroom be the advocatus dei of medieval drama, but elsewhere she is the heroine of a quest romance, as good as she is rich as she is beautiful, and elsewhere again a clever schemer from intrigue comedy, with a scathing wit. Shylock too meets several different expectations. At one moment he is the ogre of medieval romance, at another the devil of the morality play, at another the usurer of citizen comedy; from time to time also the proud, even awesome, remnant of the House of Jacob from the Book of Genesis. He may even appear to us fleetingly as the Pantaloon of the commedia dell'arte, who was an avaricious Venetian householder with a large knife at his side, plagued by a greedy servant and an errant daughter. But this last image would arise from a closer and more immediate knowledge of Italian culture with its distinctive dramatic modes than we can safely attribute to Shakespeare and his audience.

THE MYTH OF VENICE

The Merchant of Venice was a title that ensured its audience came to the theatre with well-defined expectations about the setting of the play. Shakespeare met these expectations with a fair amount of what would now be called local colour. The Verona, Messina, or Florence of his other plays might be anywhere, but his Venice is particularised by gondolas and traghetti and double ducats, the Rialto and the synagogues, magnifici and figures from the famous civil law school at nearby Padua. Speculations have arisen that Shakespeare visited Venice when plague closed the London theatres in 1592-4. But if he did make the journey, it is scarcely conceivable that the ghetto, the first in Europe, could have escaped his notice. Shylock however appears to live in a Christian quarter and employs a non-Jewish servant, much as a Christianised Jew would have done in Elizabethan London.

Shakespeare did not have to travel to Venice to learn about its more picturesque aspects. He could have gathered all he needed from travellers and the guidebooks and histories they brought home with them; and the Italian community in London, though small, included people he was likely to meet. The Queen's Musick included no fewer than eight members of a Venetian family called Bassani: the name as it appears in court records, ‘Bassanye’, could have given rise to the form ‘Bassanio’ in the play. Although the community of Venetian merchants in London had dwindled, their factor was sufficiently involved in London life to be one of Essex's spies; his contact in Venice was his merchant brother Antonio. The name ‘Gobbo’, heard rather than
Shakespeare appears at first uncertain how to spell it, could have been picked up from talk with those who knew Venice well. It means ‘hunchback’, but there is nothing to suggest Lancelot or his father is deformed. Shakespeare could have been told about il gobbo di Rialto, the crouching stone figure …

Supporting the platform from which laws were promulgated, which was credited with innumerable jokes and satires much as was the statue of Pasquino at Rome. Though we cannot be sure that this is the origin of the name, Shakespeare could have hit on no better one for his Venetian clown. Another memorable detail, and one Shakespeare could have found pictured in books about Venice, was the drawing of lots, in the process of election to state offices, by taking gold and silver balls out of three large receptacles. The custom may well have set Shakespeare's thoughts moving in the direction of a ‘lottery’ involving metals and so brought him to the Gesta Romanorum story of the caskets.

Of much greater importance to the play as a whole than any touch of local colour is the underlying set of ideas which Shakespeare and his audience shared about ‘the most serene city’. The myth of Venice, as historians now call it, can be watched in steady growth through half a century of publications, from the grudging admiration of William Thomas, an Englishman on the run (1549), to Sir Lewis Lewkenor's ecstatic praise prefixed to his translation of Contarini's La repubblica e i magistrati di Venezia in 1599. The sonnets by Spenser and others published with Lewkenor's essay show how strongly established the myth was by the 1590s. At the time The Merchant of Venice was written, the Republic was a legend for her independence, wealth, art, and political stability, her respect for law, and her toleration of foreigners.

After the battle of Lepanto (1571), Venice suffered a marked decline in her fortunes as a trading nation. But the traveller could still be dazzled by Venetian opulence, because this maritime decline was masked by the switch of capital to mainland agriculture and industry. Shakespeare, when he lists Antonio's ventures, pays no heed to the loss of the spice trade (1.1.33) nor to the exclusion of Venetian shipping from the new oceanic trade. Antonio's argosies not only ply between Levantine Tripoli, the ports of ‘Barbary’, Lisbon, and England, but they venture also to India and to Mexico—from both of which they would in real life have been debarred by Iberian interests. Antonio's social standing, too, reflects the heyday of mercantile power, when the city's nobility were also its trading magnates; by the 1590s, there were few who could still be called 'royal merchants'.

For Spenser, Venice's highest claim to fame was her 'policy of right'. Two particular aspects of Venetian law were highly praised by authors of the time. One was its inviolability, stressed when Portia is urged to wrest the law to her authority and replies that 'no power in Venice / Can alter a decree establishèd' (4.1.214-15). The tyrannical acts of the Council of Ten and its habit of judicial murder were still unknown in England. The other was the law's availability to all; 'equality' is the term repeatedly used. Othello shows that Shakespeare believed that in Venice 'a private suit would obtain a fair hearing in the middle of an emergency council of war', and the plot of The Merchant of Venice rests on the two facts, widely reported at the period, that Venice recognised bonds to foreigners entered into by its own citizens, and that it gave foreigners full access to its courts. This 'freedom of the state', as it is called at 3.2.277, an intellectual as well as commercial traffic between the men of many countries who comprised the communities known as 'nations', was a source of pride to the Venetians and of admiration to all strangers.

A further feature of the myth of Venice was the belief that the Republic's colony of Jews was a privileged community. Not only had they the same rights of redress in the courts as had other foreigners, but they were allowed openly to practise their religion, and were entitled to lend money at interest—'by means whereof', says William Thomas, 'the Jews are out of measure wealthy in those parts'. This belief, gained from glimpses of picturesque Levantine figures on the Rialto and reinforced by claims such as that of Sansovino that the Jews enjoyed life in Venice as much as if it had been their Promised Land, was one of the more unreliable aspects of the Venetian myth. Jews were tolerated in Venice, not out of humanitarian feelings, but because their moneylending was an essential service to the poor and saved the authorities the trouble of setting up the state loan banks which, by the end of the century, had largely taken over the function of the...
Jewish moneylenders on the mainland.\textsuperscript{47} In William Thomas's day they had had some chance to grow rich through usury, despite harsh discriminatory taxation, but by the end of the century they were allowed interest of only five per cent.\textsuperscript{48} Even this much toleration had its price in an enforced \textit{apartheid} which walled Jews up in the ghetto and set them apart by a yellow badge or by distinctively coloured headgear. The right of choice that Shylock exercises when he first refuses to dine with Bassanio but later goes to his feast could not have been enjoyed by a real Jew of the period.

In these and other respects the myth of Venice can be shown to have been sometimes a long way from the reality. But this disparity would be important to our understanding of \textit{The Merchant of Venice} only if Shakespeare, with or without some portion of his audience, could be seen to be questioning the myth. In fact he and his audience appear to be in perfect accord in admiration for Venice's mercantile power and what Lewkenor called its pure and uncorrupted justice. Only when he encountered the complacency of such Venetians as Sansovino on the subject of the Jews did Shakespeare, perhaps with Marlowe's attacks on Christian hypocrisy fresh in his mind, react with an irony to which we shall return.

\textbf{THE LAW}

Audience expectations of 1597 or so, based on the prevailing romantic mode of comedy and on the myth of Venice, were well served by the trial scene. The Duke's curiously ineffectual role is in accord with Venetian custom: the Doge could not act as sole judge in any court, though he could add his voice to those of the appointed judges.\textsuperscript{49} Appeals were also addressed to him and this enabled Shakespeare to combine supposedly Venetian procedures with the traditional design of romantic comedy in which a king or governor, exercising clemency, brought everything to a satisfactory conclusion. The fact that Venice was known to have many unique laws may have helped the more informed spectators to swallow the improbability of Shylock being entitled only to an exact and bloodless pound of flesh. But most of the audience would simply have revelled in what is a version of the Wise Judge story: a tale in which the tables are turned on the accuser, just as happens to the Elders in the biblical tale of Susanna so unsuspectingly recalled by Shylock in ‘A Daniel come to judgement!’

A pleasure in things as they might have happened long ago and might still happen far away can, however, by no means explain the effect of the trial scene. Primarily, Shakespeare was satisfying his audience's fervent interest in the law as it was practised in sixteenth-century London. His ‘gentle’ hearers had for the most part studied, or were still studying, at the Inns of Court, and many of the citizens in the theatre would, like Shakespeare's own family, have had frequent recourse to the courts. All were connoisseurs of trial scenes which in one form or another occur in one third of all Elizabethan plays.\textsuperscript{50} So however romantic and exotic the events leading to the trial, it had to be conducted in a way that would guarantee the spectators' imaginative involvement. That Shakespeare succeeded in doing this and knew himself to have succeeded is suggested by some lines towards the end of the scene. Judgement has been given and both plaintiff and defendant have declared themselves content. Gratiano throws a last contemptuous remark at Shylock:

\begin{verbatim}
In christening shalt thou have two godfathers: 
Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, 
To bring thee to the gallows, not the font.
\end{verbatim}

(4.1.394-6)

The English-sounding joke about trial by jury deliberately snaps the theatrical illusion as Gratiano, who likes to ‘play the Fool’ (1.1.79), makes use of a Fool's liberty to step out of a play and ally himself with its audience. For a dramatist thus to switch off one of his most brilliant illusions is an act of bravado, a way of celebrating the success with which he has compelled the audience to suspend all disbelief in what it has witnessed. Gratiano's remark indicates that the trial is both totally impossible—and totally plausible. Nothing
of the kind could have taken place in the Court of the Queen's Bench—and yet legal minds of the present have readily engaged with the play's handling of fundamental questions of law, much as Shakespeare's legally well-informed audience must have done.

In recent years, legal historians have tended to see the trial as a reflection of the sixteenth-century concern with equity and its relation to common law. They stress that in Shakespeare's day there were in effect two legal systems: a civil case could be settled either in one of the common law courts by a judgement based on statute or precedent, or in Chancery by a decree based upon equity and conscience—in effect, that is, upon the Lord Chancellor's sense of natural justice. Among the pleaders who sought the redress of grievances in Chancery were Shakespeare's parents, who tried in 1597 to recover an estate they had lost in the Queen's Bench ten years previously.\(^1\) In the play, some aspects of the trial, notably Antonio's proposal that he put Shylock's property to 'use', or as we would now say, that he hold it in trust, recall Chancery proceedings; and it has even been claimed that from the moment Portia says 'Tarry a little' (4.1.301), the principles, procedures, and maxims of a court of Chancery are exclusively used.\(^2\) This historical reading of the trial scene has been made much use of by critics who view the play in thematic terms as a confrontation of the principles of mercy and justice. But the equation of common law with strict legalism and Chancery with mercy is an oversimplification of Elizabethan legal thinking.

The concept of equity, so powerfully developed by sixteenth-century writers such as Bodin and Hooker,\(^5\) does indeed lie at the heart of the scene, but it is improbable that Shakespeare's audience, in the midst of so much dramatic excitement, thought of the trial as a vindication of Chancery—the decrees of which were in any case not notably humane. Equity, like its criminal law equivalent, mercy, could be displayed in other legal contexts. It could even be viewed as the basis of justice in Venice; pondering the Venetian custom of arriving at a verdict by means of a judges' ballot, William Thomas concluded (without enthusiasm: he had been imprisoned in Venice) that 'all matters are decided by the judges' consciences and not by the civil nor yet by their own laws'.\(^5\) Nearer home, the Staple Court, set up early in Tudor times to 'give courage' (that is, encouragement) 'to merchant strangers', had as its object the equitable settlement of trade disputes. It was also empowered to turn itself into a criminal court to try anyone accused of committing a felony in its precincts—which is what Portia does when she finds Shylock guilty of an attack on Antonio's life.\(^5\) Above all, a judge had ample scope to uphold the principle of equity within the framework of common law, and equity in this context constitutes the legal interest of *The Merchant of Venice*.

If Shakespeare had been concerned with the supposed incompatibility between equity and statutory law, he could very reasonably have had Portia rule that, in equity, a bond whose forfeiture resulted in mutilation was inadmissible. But what he was pursuing was not legal theory but dramatic effect. A judgement that combined a meticulous attention to the letter of the law with a no less meticulous concern for the principle of equity would unite all parts of the house in a common satisfaction. Those spectators who read chapbooks rather than works of jurisprudence would rejoice at Portia's conditions: the magical inviolability of legal words was being upheld, as was right and proper,\(^5\) but for once this mysterious literalism was being handled in a way which ensured the wicked did not prosper. And the 'judicious' spectators, who had been taught at the Inns of Court to apply the principle of equity to the interpretation of statutes, would have been no less delighted. Portia's restriction of the forfeiture to a just pound without blood, while in no way undermining the statutory protection of aliens in Venetian law, is 'an equitable diminishment of the letter of the law according to the reason and intent of true justice'.\(^5\)

The flesh-bond story ends here in many of its versions. But this will not do in the theatre, where we have just witnessed the 'manifest proceeding' of Shylock preparing to kill Antonio in cold blood. Whatever our relief and satisfaction at the legal expertise that has saved Antonio, we are still painfully aware that Shylock has attempted murder, and it would be a deep affront to our sense of justice if he now said, 'I'll stay no longer question' (4.1.342), gave a characteristic shrug and walked out of the courtroom. So Portia declares that the law has another hold on him:
There is a law in Venice, she urges, in virtue of which anyone attempting the life of a citizen forfeits both life and property. There was also a similar law in England, as the audience very well knew. Shylock had attempted ‘grievous bodily harm’ on Antonio.\(^{58}\)

Our normal human reaction here is again satisfaction. Shylock has got what was coming to him. Yet there swiftly follows a no less spontaneous misgiving. Like Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Shylock has willed more evil than he has performed. Because our sense of right decrees that he ought not to die, the equivalent of equity, the mercy of the Duke, in the end overrules statutory law.

But there are conditions to the Duke's pardon, and here a modern audience's responses are likely to differ widely from those of an Elizabethan one. Shylock must cease to be a Jew and a usurer. Those in the original audience, if they reflected on the matter, may have felt that these conditions completed the Duke's god-like act of mercy because they made it possible that Shylock ‘should see salvation’. But for us the conditions imply that Shylock is being judged not so much on what he has done as on what he is: his very being as a Jew, and his social role as usurer of which we have seen nothing in the play. The assumptions of the Elizabethans about law and equity are ones that we basically share; their preconceptions about Jews and usury are a good deal more likely to elude us.

**JEWS AND USURERS**

Though practising Jews had been excluded from England for three centuries, Elizabethan London had its colony of nominally Christianised Jews from Spain and Portugal. There are indications that attitudes to these Marranos varied between different sections of society. The London populace was xenophobic, and the English apprentices of Marranos seem to have been prepared to spy on their employers and report on the rituals of Jewish family life which they kept up within doors.\(^{59}\) At Court, however, the Queen not only had a Marrano doctor but even, for a time, a Jewish lady-in-waiting.\(^{60}\) But these divergences of attitude between classes are likely to have been superficial; as much virulence against the ‘vile Jew’ Lopez was displayed by the prosecutor at his trial as by the mob at his execution. And it is a hanger-on of the Court, Thomas Coryate, who defines for us the colloquial use of ‘Jew’: ‘sometimes a weather beaten warp-faced fellow, sometimes a frenetic and lunatic person, sometimes one discontented’.\(^{61}\)

Coryate, who had first-hand acquaintance with Venetian Jews, goes on to declare these preconceptions untrue. The sight in a synagogue of many ‘goodly and proper men’ and beautiful women moved him to reflect that ‘it is a most lamentable case for a Christian to consider the damnable estate of these miserable Jews’.\(^{62}\) Though Coryate's subsequent attempt to convert a Rabbi now strikes us as appallingly arrogant, his attitude is one we must take into account in our reading of *The Merchant of Venice*. A twentieth-century audience sometimes catches its breath at Shylock's shotgun conversion. It is as if the Jew was to be allowed to win back life and sustenance only at the price of his soul. Sixteenth-century spectators, however, would have regarded his soul as already forfeit in so far as he, like his forebears, refused to acknowledge the Christian Messiah. Baptism alone, it was believed, could put a Jew in the way of salvation.

The genuine concern of many that the ‘lost sheep of the house of Israel’ should be brought into the fold had its ugly obverse. Jews who resisted proselytisation were thought of as under God's curse for their part in killing his Son. The older members of Shakespeare's audience could in their childhood have watched plays about the Crucifixion in which the mocking Jews were played with horrifying realism. Shakespeare even exploits the association: Shylock's ‘My deeds upon my head!’ (4.1.202) is clearly an echo of the cry with which the Jerusalem crowd elected to free Barabbas rather than Jesus: ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’ (Matt. 27.25). Friars in Venice and clergymen in London fulminated from their pulpits against the Jews as deicides; outrageous as this idea now seems, it was until very recently the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic and some reformed Churches. A deicide was by definition capable of every iniquity, so the Jews became established as the arch-villains of medieval literature. It is significant that the villain of the flesh-bond story,
not a Jew in the earliest versions, became one only when the story was linked to the medieval legend about the
finding of the Cross. The old stories about sacrilege, well-poisoning, and ritual murder were familiar in
Shakespeare's day in the form of ballads for the illiterate and, for those who could read, romances such as
Chaucer's Prioress's Tale. Such horror stories were also given striking dramatic currency in The Jew of Malta.

Charges of heresy and deicide may also be seen as the rationalisation of a simple and primitive emotion, envy
of the skill and speed with which Jews were able to amass wealth. From early medieval times, Jews had been
usurers; not, as was generally believed, because their Law allowed them to take interest from strangers—in
fact both the Talmud and the Midrash condemn usury—but because moneylending was one of the few ways
they were permitted to earn a living. Temporal rulers, for their part, were content for it to be a good living,
since from time to time they mulcted the Jews of their capital under the pretext that their gains were ill-gotten.
Nothing reveals more sharply the economic basis for the ill-tempered toleration of orthodox Jews in Venice
than the fact that any Jew who became a Christian had to hand all his possessions over to the Church. The
result, Coryate noted, was that 'there are fewer Jews converted to Christianity in Italy, than in any country of
Christendom'. Unconverted Jews were of much greater use than converts in the Venetian economy.

Though there were in theory no unconverted Jews in England, economic resentment such as was widely
expressed against settlers from the Low Countries may have been behind the cry raised against the prosperous
Marrano, Lopez: 'Hang him for he is a Jew!' A folk memory of Jews as moneylenders could have lingered
through centuries, to be reinforced by medieval ballads and romances and, later, by Italian stories and plays.
Moreover, by Shakespeare's day, English usurers were in their own right a familiar element in the London
social scene.

Usury, the Elizabethans were repeatedly told, was contrary to the law of nations, the law of nature, and the
law of God. The guidance of the Gospels was clear: the command 'Lend, looking for nothing again' (Luke
6.35) was glossed 'not only not hoping for profit, but to lose the stock and principle'. In addition, popular
assent was still given to Aristotle's idea that to make money breed was against the course of nature; while the
medieval distinction between making a well-secured loan and courageously casting one's bread upon the
waters had been heard as recently as 1594 from a preacher who insisted that usurers do not, unlike 'the
merchants that cross the sea, adventure'. With all this obloquy as well as The Merchant of Venice behind
him, Shakespeare presumably did not ask for interest when a fellow townsman sought to borrow thirty pounds
from him in 1598. We do not know if he lent the money, though the association progressed in the manner of
comedy, Shakespeare's daughter in due course marrying the son of the would-be borrower.

There is something Canute-like about the many sermons preached against usury in the 1590s. The tide had
turned towards capitalism with the 1571 Act which, though it did not openly countenance usury, relaxed the
prohibition against it. The Elizabethans could no more live without usury than could the Venetians; their
multitudinous enterprises had to be floated on borrowed capital, and the more the usurer was needed the more
he was hated for his profits. His services were most in demand among the aristocracy, and since the players
were under lordly patronage the drama was a ready medium for making the usurer a scapegoat for the
economic ills of the age. By the time the theatres closed in 1642, some sixty usurers had been hissed from
their stages.

The Jew then was the scapegoat of Christendom and the usurer the scapegoat of a nascent capitalism. But
while there is no doubt that the Elizabethans would have brought a whole heap of prejudices to a play about a
'stubborn' Jew who is also a moneylender, the scapegoating of Shylock is (to make use of René Girard's
distinction) both structure and theme in The Merchant of Venice. Because the realisation that Shakespeare is
less concerned with creating a scapegoat than in suggesting how scapegoats are created comes, as Girard says,
in intermittent flashes of complicity with the playwright, discussion of it must be left till we take a closer
look at the play in action. … Two general points about Shakespeare's manipulation of the wicked Jewish
moneylender stereotype can be made here. The first is that the playwright seems to have gone to the Book of
Genesis for what we would now call background information about Judaism, and like every other reader he found his imagination stirred by the way the patriarchs are there presented as a chosen people. Shylock is rare among villains in that he claims a holy ancestry. It does not make him any better in our eyes—Lucifer too can recall a God-directed past—but it enables his mean and cringing figure to cast a nobler shadow. The second point is that Shakespeare’s play can be seen as the culmination of a series of extant plays about grasping Jews which are all in one way or another critical towards the assumed moral superiority of Christians.

Three such plays preceded *The Merchant of Venice*. *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* is a miracle drama dealing with the misdeeds of two wicked merchants, one Jewish and the other Christian. Both in the end repent, confess, and are forgiven; but on the Christian, who should have known better, is imposed the penance of never trading again. A sharper contrast is drawn in a morality play of the 1580s, Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London*. When Mercadore, the merchant suitor to Lady Lucre, is brought before a Turkish court at the suit of his Jewish creditor Gerontus, he seeks to extricate himself by turning up in Turkish dress and announcing he has reneged his faith. He knows, and this is an oblique comment on the treatment of Jewish converts to Christianity, that converts to Islam are freed from their debts. But Gerontus is horrified at the thought that he has caused a man to repudiate the faith to which he was born. He withdraws his claim, causing the judge to remark ‘Jews seek to excel in Christianity and Christians in Jewishness.’ In passing it should be noted that Gerontus has no truck with Lady Lucre's servant, Usury—who hails from Venice. The third play, and the one closest to Shakespeare's in time and in the villainy of its Jew, is Marlowe's tragedy. When Shakespeare made use of his audience's memories of the monstrous Barabas and his convertite daughter he was also inviting them to recall the way Barabas likens his guile and hypocrisy to the same traits in the Maltese Christians:

> This is the life we Jews are used to lead,  
> And reason too, for Christians do the like.  

(*Jew of Malta* 5.2.115-16)

It is easy to fit *The Merchant of Venice* into this sequence: ‘The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction’ (3.1.56-7). Shakespeare had good precedent for his modification of the simple equation, ‘Jewishness plus usury equals villainy.’ His chosen genre of romantic comedy demanded, however, that the modification should be more oblique than Wilson's moralisings or Marlowe's satire. And in one respect, his portrayal of the merchant, Shakespeare would seem to have some difficulty in sustaining his objectivity about the Christians of Venice.

**‘GOD-LIKE AMITY’**

*The Merchant of Venice*, according to the Stationers' Register, was ‘otherwise called The Jew of Venice’. The alternative suggests where the play's interest lay for the majority; for every spectator who could identify with the merchant's exalted love of his friend, there would have been many whose chief pleasure was in seeing the tables turned upon the usurer. Idealised friendship was a favourite theme of Renaissance literature, but it was a cult only of the educated minority: those who, even if they had not read Plato's *Phaedrus*, would have been familiar with the celebration of Platonic love in a more recent dialogue, in the fourth book of Castiglione’s *The Courtier*. These readers were accustomed to the impassioned language of friendship which took for its model the love of David and Jonathan—‘passing the love of women’. They did not assume either a sexual origin or an actively sexual outcome for such emotion, and they believed it could coexist harmoniously with love between the sexes. The conquest of the ‘lower’ love by the ‘higher’ friendship, a cerebral and unconvincing theme in the early *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is replaced here by an unbroken concord. Portia accepts Bassanio's absence because she has ‘a noble and a true conceit / Of god-like amity’ (3.4.2-3), while Antonio is no less self-effacing in his concern that his own risks should not enter Bassanio's ‘mind of love’ (2.8.43).
This reconciliation of love and friendship is matched in the first seventeen of Shakespeare's Sonnets, in which he urges his friend to marry. But though marriage is there no impediment to the friends' 'marriage of true minds', other inimical forces are at work. One divisive force is social difference: Shakespeare's friend, a younger man than the poet, is apparently of much higher rank. An even greater danger lies in the friend's character. His past unkindnesses are ungrudgingly forgiven, but there always remains in the poet's mind the dread that one day his friend will repudiate him. These thoughts, and the characteristic group of images which express them, have parallels in the plays of Shakespeare's middle period which, taken together with external evidence, have led some scholars to date the Sonnets as late as 1597 or 1598. If they are right, the experiences that underlie the Sonnets could have been painfully fresh in Shakespeare's memory when he came to write The Merchant of Venice. There would have been an immediate relevance in Ser Giovanni's tale about an older man prepared to give and forgive with unstinted affection and a younger man prone to forget his friend's generosity. The story also provided satisfactions lacking in real life. Ansaldo and Giannetto were social equals, and Ansaldo was the material benefactor of Giannetto, whereas in the Sonnets the poet can bestow only devotion and praise on his friend. Best of all, the Il Pecorone story offered a happy ending, in which the older man, after the marriage which he had successfully furthered, was taken into his friend's brilliant social circle.

Despite this happy ending, the anxiety which appears to have hampered the real-life relationship is present as an undertone in the play. It is heard in Bassanio's reflections on appearance and reality before his choice of the right casket; these have very close verbal parallels in Sonnet 68, one of a group of particularly ambiguous sonnets which praise the friend for an integrity the poet wants him to have but knows he lacks. It is heard too in Antonio's melancholy, which was to E. K. Chambers 'an echo of those disturbed relations in Shakespeare's private life of which the fuller but enigmatic record is to be found in the Sonnets'. As in the Sonnets, this melancholy takes the form of a deep self-deprecation. When Antonio sees himself as 'a tainted wether of the flock' (4.1.114), he is close to the poet who writes in Sonnet 88:

With mine own weakness being best acquainted,  
Upon thy part I can set down a story  
Of faults concealed, wherein I am attainted,  
That thou in losing me shall win much glory.

This rationalisation of the fear of rejection persists in the play even though Bassanio is presented in a favourable light. Indeed, the very strength and authenticity of Antonio's feelings may be at the root of the uneasiness that many critics express about Bassanio.

The story of Giannetto, then, could have appealed to Shakespeare first and foremost as the portrayal of a friendship and only secondarily as the story of Ansaldo's escape from the Jew. Here perhaps lies the source of our dissatisfaction with the relationship between Shylock and Antonio. When Antonio, accused by Shylock of having abused him, spat at him, and kicked him, replies that he is likely to do all these things again, we feel that even when allowances have been made for Elizabethan prejudices, something has gone badly wrong. Shakespeare's emotional involvement with one relationship of the character has left him insensitive to the character's other relationships—a point which could arguably be made about Hamlet also.

There is a structural difficulty here as well. In the bond scene, Shakespeare needed to give Shylock strong motives for his hatred if he was to get the story moving. The difficulty was already there in the old tale. One of its first tellers even makes the moneylender, a former serf, hate the knight to whom he lends money because the knight once, 'in a fit of wrath', cut off the moneylender's foot. Though Shakespeare's inventions are less unhappy, they have the effect of transforming Antonio, to whom most people take a liking in the play's first scene, into a self-righteous figure storming defiance at his business rival. The actor of Antonio has his work cut out to give coherence to a role that Shakespeare has left in some confusion. If Shakespeare can be accused of anti-semitism this can be found not so much in his depiction of Shylock as in an involvement
with Antonio that results in his letting the merchant's contempt for the Jew go unchallenged, whereas other Christian failings in the play do not go unchallenged. In Shakespeare's imaginative prospect, Antonio perhaps stands too close to his creator to be in perfect focus. …

Notes

2. The allusion was identified by Ernest Kuhl in a letter to the TLS [Times Literary Supplement] 27 December 1928, p. 1025.
4. See Textual Analysis, p. 168. …
7. Ibid., p. 472.
8. Bernard Grebanier, The Truth about Shylock, 1962, pp. 136-45, gives a full list. Some particularly interesting ones are noted in the Commentary.
16. The relevant extract is in Brown, pp. 168-72, and Bullough, pp. 482-6. Winifred Nowottny has found traces of The Orator in other plays by Shakespeare, especially in trial scenes; see ‘Shakespeare and The Orator’, Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg 43 (1965), 813-33.
23. In ‘Marlowe and Shakespeare’, SQ (1964), 41-53, Irving Ribner argues strongly against The Jew of Malta being treated as a source. His characterisation, though, of the two plays as ‘a tragedy of defeat and negation’ and ‘a comedy of affirmation’ oversimplifies both plays.
29. Bullough, p. 503. I do not include *Il Novellino* among the sources of the play, as the resemblances are very slight.
30. *Twelfth Night*, for example, in which the romantic main story and the heartless plot against Malvolio both originate in a single collection of stories.
33. The ghetto, founded in 1516, is described by Fynes Morison, who saw it in 1594, and Thomas Coryate who travelled to Venice in 1608. Jews were allowed at that time to employ Christian servants, provided they did not eat, drink, or sleep in the ghetto.
37. See collation and Commentary for 2.2.3, 4, 6.
38. Giulio Lorenzetti, *Venice and its Lagoon*, trans. Guthrie, 1975, p. 471. The association was first made by Carl Elze (Essays, 1874, p. 281). Lancelot’s part, translated literally into Italian, has struck a recent translator, according to Giorgio Melchiori, as ‘genuinely Venetian in sentence structure and in the very spirit of the jokes in it’.
39. Described by Contarini (see next note) and also by Thomas Coryate, *Crudities* (1611), p. 282.
40. Donato Giannotti, *Libro della repubblica dei veneziani* (1540); Gasparo Contarini, *La repubblica e i magistrati di Venezia* (1543); William Thomas, *History of Italy* (1549); Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia, città nobilissima* (1581); Girolamo Bardi, *Delle cose notabili della città di Venetia* (1592). Shakespeare could have read Giannotti and Contarini together in one edition of 1591. Christopher Whitfield thinks he also had a preview of Lewkenor's translation (‘Sir Lewis Lewkenor and *The Merchant of Venice*: a suggested connection’, *NQ* [Notes and Queries] ns 11 (1964), 123-33).
42. 3.2.267-8. A casual Venetian presence before 1530 in Brazil is indicated by Pierre Chaunu, *Conquête et exploitations des nouveaux mondes*, 1969, p. 221.
48. Coryate, in 1608, noted the apparent wealth of many Jews, but not all of it would have been acquired by usury. The only authorised moneylenders among them, the transalpine Jews, were also permitted to trade in second-hand goods, which included costly furniture and hangings.
49. Comments on the Doge's position range from Thomas's 'an honourable slave' (p. 77), quoted from the Venetians, to Lewkenor's 'strange and unusual form of a most excellent monarchy' (A2v).
50. This estimate from an unpublished thesis by D. Smith is quoted by O. Hood Phillips, *Shakespeare and the Lawyers*, 1972, p. 84.
51. The fullest account of this is in W. Nicholas Knight, 'Equity, *The Merchant of Venice* and William Lambarde', *S.Sur.* 27 (1974), 93-104. The Shakespeares were to get no more joy out of Chancery than did the characters in *Bleak House*.
53. Philip Brockbank discusses equity as a theme in the work of Hooker and Bodin in ‘Shakespeare and the fashion of these times’, *S.Sur.* 16 (1963), 30-41.
61. *Crudities*, p. 232. As Coryate was writing early in the new century, a memory of Shylock could have contributed to his definition. But the popular notion that Jews easily became impassioned could have contributed to the occasional ‘frenetic’ behaviour of Barabas and Shylock.
63. In the *Cursor Mundi*, about 1290, a Jew who has tried to take a pound of his debtor's flesh and has consequently been condemned to death is reprieved when he offers to reveal the place where the Cross is buried.
64. *Crudities*, p. 234.
65. The gloss is in the Geneva Bible, the version most used by Elizabethans for their private reading.
66. Quoted by Walter Cohen, ‘*The Merchant of Venice* and the possibilities of historical criticism’, *ELH* 49 (1982), 765-89.
67. See the full discussion by R. H. Tawney in the introduction to his edition of Thomas Wilson's *Discourse upon Usury* (1572), 1925.
72. See Appendix, ‘Shakespeare’s use of the Bible in *The Merchant of Venice*’, p. 184. …
74. Ed. J. S. Farmer, 1911 (Tudor Facsimile Reprints).
76. See the summary and discussion, pp. 2-4 above.
77. See Commentary on 3.2.95.
Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Jay L. Halio (essay date 1993)


[In the following excerpt, Halio addresses Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews, a source of considerable controversy surrounding the representation of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice.]

Any approach to understanding Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice inevitably includes a discussion of the vexed question of its alleged anti-Semitism. This Introduction to the play therefore confronts the question directly, focusing on the background against which the play must be considered and a comparison with another play famous, or infamous, for its portrayal of a Jew, Marlowe's The Jew of Malta. From thence a discussion of the Merchant's [The Merchant of Venice] more immediate sources and its date continues, followed by a detailed analysis of the play itself, which emphasizes its ambiguities, inconsistencies, and internal contradictions. This discussion naturally leads into a survey of the play's performance history, particularly its representation of the dominant character, Shylock, and the major ways he has been portrayed. The Introduction concludes with a discussion of the text and the editorial procedures followed in this edition.

SHAKESPEARE AND SEMITISM

Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews, specifically in The Merchant of Venice, has been the cause of unending controversy. Recognizing the problem, in the Stratford-upon-Avon season of 1987 the Royal Shakespeare Company performed The Merchant of Venice back-to-back with a production of Marlowe's The Jew of Malta. From thence a discussion of the Merchant's [The Merchant of Venice] more immediate sources and its date continues, followed by a detailed analysis of the play itself, which emphasizes its ambiguities, inconsistencies, and internal contradictions. This discussion naturally leads into a survey of the play's performance history, particularly its representation of the dominant character, Shylock, and the major ways he has been portrayed. The Introduction concludes with a discussion of the text and the editorial procedures followed in this edition.

In these post-Holocaust days, it may be difficult for us to conceive how Jews were regarded and treated in Europe, including England, during the Middle Ages. They had few rights and could not claim inalienable
citizenship in any country. Typically, they depended upon rulers of the realm for protection and such rights as they might enjoy. In the thirteenth century in England, for example, under Henry III and Edward I, they were tantamount to the king's chattel. The king could—and did—dispose of them and their possessions entirely as he chose. Heavy tallagges, or taxes, were imposed upon Jews—individually and collectively—to support the sovereign's financial needs, and when the moneys were not forthcoming, imprisonment and/or confiscation usually followed. At the same time, the Church vigorously opposed the existence of Jews in the country, but as they were under the king's protection the Church was powerless to do more than excite popular feeling against them.

Contrary to common belief, not all Jews were money-lenders, although usury was one of the few means to accumulate such wealth as they had. Many Jews were poor and served in humble, even menial capacities. But as non-believers in Christ, they were a despised people, however useful, financially and otherwise (as doctors, for instance). Near the end of the thirteenth century, when Edward had practically bankrupted his Jews, who found it impossible to meet his increasingly exorbitant demands for payments, the king decided to play his last card—expulsion. This act was not only satisfying to the Church, but it provided the king with the last bit of income from that once profitable source. Since everything the Jews owned belonged to the king, including the debts owed them as money-lenders or pawnbrokers, the king became the beneficiary of those debts as well as everything else of value. Although Edward relieved the debtors of the interest on their loans and made some other concessions, he hoped to realize a sizeable amount of money eventually, however much he might later regret the termination—forever?—of this once lucrative source of income.

Doubtless, some Jews preferred conversion to expulsion in England, as later in Spain under the Inquisition, and they took shelter in the Domus conversorum, the House of Converts. This institution dates from the early thirteenth century and was an effort by the Dominicans, assisted by the king, to convert Jews to Christianity. The Domus conversorum in what is now Chancery Lane in London lasted well into the eighteenth century. Although at times few if any converts of Jewish birth lived there, in the centuries following 1290 it sheltered several from Exeter, Oxford, Woodstock, Northampton, Bury St Edmunds, Norwich, Bristol, as well as London and elsewhere where Jews had lived before being expelled. After the Expulsion, some Jews entered the realm for one reason or another, either as travellers and merchants, as refugees from Spain and Portugal, or as invited professionals, such as the physicians who treated Henry IV in his illness and the engineer, Joachim Gansse, who helped found the mining industry in Wales in the sixteenth century. Small settlements of Marranos, or crypto-Jews, can be traced in London and Bristol during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

But if Jews were scarce and those few who remained were forbidden to practise their religion openly, they were not forgotten, either in history or legend, and certainly not in the popular imagination, as ballads and other literature indicate. As mystery plays grew and flourished, Old and New Testament stories were dramatized, with Jews occupying a prominent place in both. One recent scholar has suggested that the contrast between the biblical Jews of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament, particularly in plays dealing with the Crucifixion and events leading up to it, resulted in a ‘dual image’ of the Jew. On the one hand, ‘he excites horror, fear, hatred; but he also excites wonder, awe, and love’. The examples of Judas and the Pharisees in the Corpus Christi plays must have supported common belief in the Jew as an incarnation of the devil; on the other hand, the patriarchs, Moses, Daniel, the prophets, and other figures appear as heroes, symbols or presentiments of patience, constancy, and other Christian virtues. Moreover, Christian theology, as represented in the epistles of St Paul, as in Romans 11 for example, argues for the redemption of Israel through conversion to Christianity. The Jews of post-biblical history, therefore, must be present not only ‘as witness to the final consummation of the Christian promise of salvation’, but as a participant in it. If Jews were shunned as a pariah race, they also had to be preserved for the ultimate Christian fulfilment; hence, the ‘dual image’, and the dialectic of Christian thought and feeling regarding them.
The significance of this twofold attitude, and of historical actions against Jews in England and elsewhere, is apparent in *The Merchant of Venice*. Earlier, it appears in such works as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, written in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Its principal character is Aristorius, a Sicilian merchant with connections all over the known world, from Antioch to Holland, and from the Brabant to Turkey. Jonathas, a wealthy Jew, approaches him intent on testing the efficacy of the Holy Sacrament, in which he utterly disbelieves. Only the riches he has acquired—gold and precious gems—mean anything to him. Jonathas bribes Aristorius with a hundred pounds to steal the holy wafer from the church and give it to him, whereupon miraculous events occur. When he and his four compatriots strike the Host with their daggers (a re-enactment of the Crucifixion), it begins to bleed. Jonathas picks it up and tries to put it in a cauldron of boiling oil, but it sticks to his hand and he is unable to get free of it. In the succeeding comic turmoil, Jonathas loses his hand; the water in the cauldron turns to blood after the Host and his hand are thrown into it; and when the Host is finally removed and thrown into a hot oven, the oven bursts, bleeding from its cracks, and an image of the crucified Christ emerges. A dialogue, in English and Latin, ensues between the image, Jonathas, and the others, in which Jesus sorrowfully asks why they torment him still and refuse to believe in what he has taught:

Why blaspheme yow me? Why do ye thus?  
Why put yow me to a newe tormentry?  
And I dyed for yow on the crosse!(16)

The Jews are contrite and repent, converting to Christianity; whereupon Jonathas's hand is restored and Aristorius, abjectly penitent, is absolved from his sin.

The representation of the Jew in this fifteenth-century miracle play combines the attributes of physical mutilation (blood sacrifice) and commercial malpractice, as Edgar Rosenberg remarks. But beneath its obviously broad comedy, it also shows a strong impulse on the part of the unknown playwright to encourage regeneration through conversion. Later, in Robert Wilson's play, *The Three Ladies of London* (1584), the Jew Gerontus appears as the hero and Mercadore, an Italian merchant, is the comic villain who speaks in broken English and is willing to embrace Islam rather than pay Gerontus the debt he owes him. In the event, Gerontus prefers to surrender the debt obligation so that Mercadore will not be driven to apostasy, but even so Mercadore is unpunished, and both are finally brought before an upright judge, who passes appropriate sentence.

Generous Gerontus, however, is hardly typical of the Jewish stereotype in Elizabethan literature. The scoundrels Zadoch and Zachary in Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) are much more like what we might expect, or the Jewish apothecary who poisons Bajazeth and Aga in *The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1594). These and other comic villains may owe something to the notoriety caused by the trial and execution in 1594 of Roderigo Lopez, the Portuguese convert, who had been Queen Elizabeth's physician. They may also owe a good deal to Marlowe's Barabas, the protagonist of *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589), a direct descendant of the vice figure in the morality plays as well as the villainous Jews of the mystery and miracle plays. By a stroke of genius, Marlowe combined these elements with the popular conception of the Italian machiavel to produce the comic and heroic villainy of Barabas, a major dramatic figure and an extraordinarily powerful one.

While all three aspects of his character are important, Barabas as a comic machiavel emerges as the dominant one, suggested from the start when Barabas's opening soliloquy immediately follows Machiavel's prologue. Usury, so often associated with Jews, is not nearly as significant as Barabas's evident delight in his multifarious scheming. Owing loyalty to no one—not even, finally, his daughter Abigail—he proceeds despite setbacks to confound his enemies, until he ultimately and comically overreaches himself; or rather, until his enemies, Ferneze, the governor of Malta, and his knights surpass his treachery. For neither the Christians nor the Jews nor the Turks who threaten Malta emerge as the moral centre of this play, which instead substitutes wit and the ability to implement ‘policy’ as the controlling force. ‘Marlowe is not finally interested, as
Shakespeare is’, Rosenberg says, ‘in questions which touch deeply on the nature of justice, is even less interested in legalistic quibbles; he enjoys the spectacle of these depraved noblemen of passion trying to cut each other's throats’ (pp. 20-1).

But what of Barabas's Jewishness and its role in the drama? As an alien figure, an outsider, the Jew might be associated with the amoral machiavel, except that Jews, as representative of the Old Testament, had a strict moral code of their own. In his references to the patriarchs and biblical story, Barabas confirms his Jewish heritage, but in the process he comically perverts it. For example, he equates the riches he has acquired with the blessings promised to the Jews (1.1.101-4). When threatened with a tax needed to pay the Turkish tribute—a tax reminiscent of Edward I's ‘talladges’—Barabas does not seek refuge in conversion to Christianity; but his hesitation results in confiscation of his wealth. Only his craftiness in hiding the better part of his fortune prevents complete destitution. His revenge later is to have the governor's son killed in a duel with his daughter's rival suitor, Mathias—the start of a series of murders and atrocities accomplished through duplicity and deception that characterize the hero-villain.

Duplicity and deception provide the link between Barabas's Jewishness and Machiavellism, at least in the popular imagination to which Marlowe appealed. Barabas implies the connection in his soliloquy brooding upon Ferneze's unjust confiscation of his property:

I am not of the tribe of Levi, I,
That can so soon forget an injury.
We Jews can fawn like spaniels when we please,
And when we grin, we bite; yet are our looks
As innocent and harmless as a lamb's.
I learned in Florence how to kiss my hand,
Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog,
And duck as low as any barefoot friar,
Hoping to see them starve upon a stall. …

(2.3.18-26)

Florence, of course, was Machiavelli's city. Unlike Venice, it was not known for harbouring many Jews. The soliloquy occurs shortly before Barabas purchases the slave Ithamore, a Turk who rivals him in treachery, especially directed against Christians (see 2.3.171-212). Since Marlowe includes Christian treachery as well in his play, most prominently at the end, it is clear that he enjoys attacking hypocritical professors of all three major religions, not solely the Jewish machiavel.

Shakespeare also attacks Christian hypocrisy, as modern commentators have frequently noted, specifically in Shylock's speech on Christian slave-holding (4.1.89-99). But the conception of Shylock is altogether different from Marlowe's Barabas, notwithstanding the fact that both authors drew upon the same historical and literary backgrounds. Whereas Marlowe seems intent on a virtuoso display of comic villainy, with little regard for serious or deep character motives after Acts 1 and 2, Shakespeare concentrates upon Shylock's complex nature and the relationships of justice and mercy that lie at the heart of his play. If Shylock is another version of the villainous Jewish money-lender, and like Barabas a comic villain, he is also something more—the first stage Jew in English drama who is multi-dimensional and thus made to appear human.

Scholars, including myself, have looked elsewhere in Shakespeare's work for references to Jews and from them to discover more about his attitude. The references, such as those in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, 1 Henry IV, and Macbeth, are hardly complimentary, though usually offhandedly remarked and consistent with the dramatic character. The references in Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Much Ado About Nothing, on the other hand, are clearly humorous ones, depending in part on word-play to gain effect. No allusions at all appear in the poems or sonnets. Anti-Semitic slurs thus do not appear to be important in
Shakespeare's vocabulary or his thinking, with the outstanding exception of *The Merchant of Venice*. There, in the view of some critics, Shakespeare unleashed a venomous attack upon Jews—not only money-lenders and usurers, but all Jews. To cite only one piece of evidence, Shylock is rarely referred to by name; instead, he is typically referred to or addressed as 'Jew', a term then as now (in some quarters) of considerable contempt.

Despite this fact, or rather in addition to it, complicating Shakespeare's attitude and our understanding of it, are other aspects of Shylock's character. These have enabled some actors, notably Henry Irving and Laurence Olivier, to portray Shylock as sympathetic, someone more sinned against than sinning, in short a tragic figure. A certain amount of textual adaptation, such as cutting Shylock's long aside, 'How like a fawning publican he looks. / I hate him for he is a Christian', etc. (1.3.38-49), is of course essential for this interpretation, although the dramatist otherwise endowed his comic villain with sufficient depth to permit the tragic emphasis. But it needs to be stressed that despite Shylock's depths, his very human traits, Shakespeare's initial conception of him was essentially as a comic villain, most likely adorned with a red wig and beard and a bottle nose, but not a middle-European accent.

The evidence for Shylock as a comic villain is partly in the literary and dramatic traditions, which Shakespeare followed, that lie behind the character, and partly in certain generic and other considerations. Romantic comedy, as Shakespeare developed the genre, is not without its darker elements, as Hero's denunciation and assumed death in *Much Ado About Nothing* clearly demonstrate and as, in a play closer to the *Merchant*, some aspects of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also reveal. Into this side of romantic comedy falls Shylock's design against Antonio's life. But the comic element also includes Antonio's hairbreadth escape. Legalistic quibbling over the validity of the bond, or Portia's arguments opposing, is not of paramount concern: Shylock's defeat is another in a long series going back beyond Barabas's descent into the cauldron—an example of 'the biter bit', a joke Elizabethans loved almost as much as jokes about cuckoldry. As for Shylock's conversion, we need only note that it was accepted as the alternative to something that, sinfully, Shylock thought would be worse. It could have been regarded by Elizabethan audiences (unlike those since then) as evidence of Antonio's Christian charity to Shylock—a mercy, combined with his request that Shylock be spared from destitution, entirely consonant with Portia's exhortations to Shylock earlier in the trial scene. In this way, the shallowness of Shylock's Judaism contrasts strikingly with the depth of Antonio's magnanimity and, before his, the Duke's spontaneous charity.

But is Shylock worth saving? Apart from the consideration that every human soul is precious, does Shylock earn any serious sympathy that may lead us to rejoice in his salvation—such as it is? In spurning Shylock, Antonio and others, particularly Graziano, simultaneously spurn both his business and his religion; for in their minds—as in most Elizabethans'—usury and Jewishness were interlocked. They thus provide Shylock with his deep resentment and the motivation for his revenge. Heaping injury upon insult, Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, accompanied by bags of ducats and jewels, further exacerbates Shylock's bitter resentment. When news that Antonio's ships have miscarried reaches him at the moment of his agony over Jessica's actions, Shylock is more than ever prepared for a vicious counter-attack. His intention to hold Antonio to his bond and its penalty comes precisely when Salerio and Solanio taunt him unmercifully (3.1.21-49). True, Jessica later claims that Shylock always meant to undo Antonio if he could (3.2.282-8), but in the dramatic structure of the play, the impulse to revenge comes just here, where it is most powerfully motivated. And it is through this motivation and the circumstances immediately surrounding it as much as anything else that Shylock's essential human quality emerges, just as Hamlet's action in the prayer scene—his lust for vengeance against Claudius—makes him not nobler but more human.

Our response to Shylock, then, must be measured accordingly. Norman Rabkin is among the few critics who remind us that the scene with Salerio and Solanio involves the audience in a congeries of emotions so complex and contradictory that it is impossible to maintain a simple, single response to Shylock's behaviour. At once humorous, pathetic, antagonizing, Shylock's reaction to the news of his daughter's elopement, her theft, Antonio's misfortune, Jessica's squandering of his prized possessions parallels the similar situation in the
Boar's Head scene in *1 Henry IV* where Falstaff makes his *apologia pro vita sua* (2.5.421-86).\(^{33}\) If we are true to our experience of character and events, then no simplistic, reductivist description can appear accurate. Moreover, in subsequent scenes, our response to Shylock will be affected, or it ought to be, by an understanding not only of his position, but of his frame of mind, including the kinds of emotion his experience generates. That Shylock is hell-bent, literally, upon his revenge against Antonio should then hardly surprise us. Everything considered, his attitude and actions appear those of a man seriously deranged by what he, rightly or wrongly, regards as an enormous injustice against him personally and, through him, the people he represents.\(^{34}\) Is it any wonder, then, that Shylock remains intransigent, impervious to Portia's appeals to mercy in the trial scene?

In this and other ways ..., Shakespeare reveals his attitude toward Shylock. It is ambivalent, far more than Marlowe's attitude toward Barabas. But in neither author can we confidently proclaim an anti-Semitic bias that is more than abstract and traditional. For Marlowe, the machiavel was more significant than Barabas's Judaism, which merged with it. By contrast, in developing Shylock's character in depth, and endowing it with vivid attitudes and emotions, Shakespeare succeeded in creating a dramatic figure who arouses far deeper feelings than Barabas can. Whereas the one remains, first and last, a comic stage villain, however brilliant and quick-witted, the other transcends the type, shatters the conventional image with his appeal to our common humanity, and leaves us unsettled in our prejudices, disturbed in our emotions, and by no means sure of our convictions. …

Notes

1. *The Merchant* was performed on the main stage, with *The Jew* at the Swan Theatre.
2. Sher was not the first Jewish actor recently to essay the role on the British stage. David Suchet, for example, had played Shylock at the RSC in 1981.
4. See Danson, 60. A Jewish merchant from Venice, Alonzo Nuñez de Herrera (Abraham Cohen de Herrera), was captured in Essex's raid on Cadiz and brought to London as one of forty hostages in 1596, where he remained until 1600. It is unlikely, however, that he bears any resemblance to Shakespeare's Shylock or (though born in Florence) to Marlowe's Barabas. See Richard H. Popkin, ‘A Jewish Merchant of Venice’, *SQ* [Shakespeare Quarterly] 40 (1989), 329-31.
13. Cf. *Merchant* 2.2.25, where Lancelot Gobbo says, ‘Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation’.

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18. See Hyamson, History of the Jews in England, 136-40, for an account of this episode, and compare Sinsheimer, Shylock, 62-8, who notes the crowd's derision as Lopez was executed.
25. On the famous speech that begins ‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’ (3.1.55) see ‘The Play’. …
26. Since medieval mystery and miracle plays portrayed Judas with red beard and hair and a large nose, later stage-Jews followed suit: see Landa, The Jew in Drama, 11; Calisch, The Jew in English Literature, 73; and Edgar Rosenberg, From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction (Stanford, Calif., 1960), 22. A ballad published in 1664 by an old actor, Thomas Jordan, indicates that Shakespeare's Shylock continued this tradition: see E. E. Stoll, ‘Shylock’, in Shakespeare Studies (New York, 1927), 255, 271, and Toby Lelyveld, Shylock on the Stage (Cleveland, 1960), 11. The large nose was also characteristic of Pantaloon's make-up in the commedia dell'arte, a secondary source for Shylock: see ‘Sources’ … and John R. Moore, ‘Pantaloon as Shylock’, Boston Public Library Quarterly, 1 (1949), 33-42 (cited by Spencer, Genesis, 97). Had he intended to give Shylock an identifiable accent, Shakespeare could have done so, as he does, for example, Doctor Caius in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Nevertheless, many actors persist in using a comic—usually middle-European—accent when portraying Shylock, even though Spanish—the language of Sephardic Jews—was the lingua franca of European Jews in Shakespeare's time.
30. Stage-usurers were not necessarily Jews, but stage-Jews were invariably associated with usury. See Rosenberg, From Shylock to Svengali, 27. Kirschbaum, ‘Shylock and the City of God’, 25, and Warren D. Smith, ‘Shakespeare's Shylock’, SQ 15 (1964), 193-9, try (I think unsuccessfully) to distinguish between ethnic and ethic in Antonio's attitude toward Shylock.
34. Cf. Shylock's complaint to Tubal, ‘The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now’ (3.1.80-2).

Abbreviations and References

The following abbreviations are used in the introduction, collations, and commentary. The place of publication is, unless otherwise specified, London.

Editions of Shakespeare

Q: The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice. Written by William Shakespeare. 1600
Q2: The Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice. Written by W. Shakespeare. 1600 [for 1619]
F: The First Folio, 1623
F2: The Second Folio, 1632
F3: The Third Folio, 1663
F4: The Fourth Folio, 1685

Bevington: David Bevington, The Merchant of Venice, Bantam Shakespeare (New York, 1988)


Capell: Edward Capell, Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, 10 vols. (1767-8), vol. iii

Collier: John Payne Collier, Works, 8 vols. (1842-4), vol. ii

Delius: N. Delius, Complete Works of William Shakespeare, 3rd edn. (1872)


Eccles: The Comedy of The Merchant of Venice (1805)


Halliwell: James O. Halliwell, Works, 16 vols. (1856), vol. v


Johnson: Samuel Johnson, Plays, 8 vols. (1765), vol. i

Keightley: Thomas Keightley, Plays, 6 vols. (1864)
Kittredge: George Lyman Kittredge, *Works*, revised by Irving Ribner (Boston, 1972)


NS: Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson, *The Merchant of Venice*, The New Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1953)


Pooler: *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. C. K. Pooler (1905)


Riverside: G. B. Evans (textual editor), *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1974)


Rowe 1714: Nicholas Rowe, *Works*, 8 vols. (1714), vol. ii

Staunton: Howard Staunton, *Plays*, 3 vols. (1858-60), vol. i

Steevens: Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, *Plays*, 10 vols. (1773), vol. iii


Thirlby: (unpublished conjectures in marginal notes of his copies of Shakespeare)


Var. 1785: Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, revised by Isaac Reed, *Plays*, 3rd edn., 10 vols. (1785)

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*Other Works*


Bullough: Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (1957-75)


Danson: Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of ‘The Merchant of Venice’* (1978)


Fischer: Sandra K. Fischer, *Econolingu* (Newark, Del., 1985)


*SAB*: *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*

*SB*: *Studies in Bibliography*
In the sixteenth century Venice became one of the most prosperous hubs of East-West trade. Trading and commercial activities in the city filled the city's coffers and stimulated a growth in moneylending. Consequently, a Shylock could find eager clients who needed to finance the cost of supplying and manning merchant ships. At that time, traders could reap huge fortunes or lose everything, and merchant ships commonly sailed from Venice to England, Lisbon, Mexico, the Barbary Coast, and India. Only a few ships sailed to Japan, perhaps because of the distance.

William Adams, a contemporary of Shakespeare's and a pilot of Dutch merchant ship, *de Liefde*, landed in Japan in 1600. Born in 1564, Adams was the first Englishman of note to arrive in Japan. He became a close adviser of Ieyasu Tokugawa, the lord who succeeded in pacifying the warring lords and establishing a close-knit, highly regulated feudal society. Adams provided Tokugawa with useful information about shipbuilding, European foreign and trade policies, and Western culture and civilization. In return, Tokugawa rewarded Adams by bestowing upon him the rank of a minor feudal lord.

Had trade continued between Japan and England, Shakespeare and his plays might have been introduced to the Japanese during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). Iemitsu Tokugawa, however, had closed Japan to other countries, except Holland and China, and forbidden Japanese from trading with the “hairy barbarians.”
During the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan shook off the feudal system of the Tokugawa period and adopted vital aspects of Western culture and civilization. Significantly, Shakespeare and his plays gained currency among the literati of Japan during this period.

Mention of Shakespeare came as early as 1841 in a translation into Japanese of Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*. In 1871, a short biography of Shakespeare and the famous quotation from *Hamlet*, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” (1.3.75), were introduced in the translation of Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*. And in 1874, Charles Wirgman, an English correspondent who established the *Japan Punch* magazine in Yokohama, translated the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy into broken Japanese. This is regarded as the first translation of Shakespeare into the Japanese language.

As early as 1864, English language newspapers made their appearance in Yokohama. Soon after, Japanese language newspapers appeared and became part of the ongoing modernization process. Newspapers and periodicals helped spread the stories of Shakespeare to a reading public hungry for Western culture. In 1875, *Hamlet* was published in a newspaper. The first Japanese production of *Hamlet* took place in 1886 under the title of *Hamlet Yamato Nishikie* (*The Japanese Color Print of “Hamlet”*). In 1877, *Kyoniku no Kisho* (*A Strange Litigation about Flesh of the Chest*), an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, was published in two installments in the *Minken Zasshi* (*Popular Rights Magazine*), by Keio Gijuku, a school founded by Yukichi Fukuzawa. The anonymous writer explained that the story was an adaptation of a novel written by Shakespeare of England. In those days, most translations were either loose adaptations of Shakespearean plots, or constructed from *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb.

*Kyoniku no Kisho*, the first of Shakespeare's plays printed in book form, takes place in Sakai, a seaport near Osaka. The translator renamed the characters, giving them Japanese names for easier comprehension by Japanese readers. Portia, for example, became Kiyoka, meaning the Odor of Purity, and Shylock became Yokubari Ganpachi, or Stubborn Close-Fisted. Below is a summary of the plot.

Once upon a time there lived near the seaport of Sakai a rich man named Setsunosuke Matsugae. He possessed a chivalrous spirit and was always willing to provide assistance to those less fortunate. His friend Umejiro Murano, whose father died while Umejiro was still a young boy, became the pupil of Gaunsai Shirane, an expert in military science. Umejiro studied hard and Gaunsai was pleased. He placed his future hopes on young Umejiro. Then misfortune struck. Umejiro's mother became seriously ill and in need of medicine. Umejiro, penniless, went to Setsunosuke to borrow money.

Setsunosuke was sympathetic to Umejiro's request and decided to lend him the money. However, until his ship returned after having finished a trading expedition in the northern provinces, Setsunosuke himself had to borrow money. He went to Yokubari Ganpachi, a man of great wealth, to seek a loan. Ganpachi agreed upon the condition that Setsunosuke repay with one *kin* of flesh cut from his heart should Setsunosuke fail to repay the debt on the date agreed.

The date for repaying came, but Setsunosuke learned that his ship would be delayed one day. He asked Ganpachi for a day's grace; Ganpachi refused. “The court will decide which of us has right on our side,” Ganpachi said.

In the meantime Gaunsai heard about the situation. Known also for his civic wisdom, the Governor of Sakai often consulted him. The governor sent for him in order to discuss Setsunosuke's predicament. Now among Gaunsai's students was an intelligent woman named Kiyoka, the daughter of wealthy parents. She had recently become betrothed to Umejiro and was surprised at the painful situation Umejiro and Setsunosuke were in.
Gaunsai, feigning illness, sent Kiyoka to the governor instead. Kiyoka, disguised as a lawyer, pleaded the case for Setsunosuke, citing appropriate Buddhist teachings. Ganpachi argued that he cared for nothing but the law of the state. Then she offered to repay Ganpachi three times the amount borrowed. Ganpachi refused. Then Kiyoka said she was ready for a judgment. She asked Ganpachi if he brought with him scales to weigh the kin of flesh and a surgeon. Ganpachi had brought the scales but did not bring a surgeon, since it was not required by the contract. Kiyoka then told him that the kin of flesh was his by law, but that no drop of blood must be spilled. “If a drop of blood is spilled, you shall be put to death without mercy,” Kiyoka said. Ganpachi became nervous and backed away from the contract. The governor then said: “I spare your life in mercy, but your wealth is forfeit by law.”

Because the story shows both the swift turning of the heavenly wheel of retribution and the upholding of poetical justice, it appealed to large numbers of the reading public who were familiar with similar themes in Kabuki plays.

In 1883 Tsutomu Inoue translated *The Merchant of Venice* into Japanese and gave it a Japanese title, *Seiyo Chinsetsu Jinniku Shichiire Saiban* (A Western Strange Story of the Trial of Pawned Flesh). This adaptation condensed and Japanized Lamb and was popular enough to warrant several reprintings after it was first published by Kinkodo. A brief outline of Inoue's translation follows. He used a Japanese name only for Shylock.

There was a moneylender named Sairoku (Shylock) in Venice. People hated him because he was a cruel and unmerciful Jew, a person likened to the hated eta-hinin, the humble people of the lowest class in Japan who lived in a limited area. Antonio was a rich merchant who had many steamships. He was kind enough to help Bassanio marry Portia, he borrowed 300 dollars from Sairoku, and he gave it to Bassanio. Sairoku wanted to take a kin of Antonio's flesh as security for the loan.

Portia was a rich and beautiful lady who had black hair and red lips. She lived in Belmont together with her maid Nerissa. Bassanio took a train to Belmont together with Gratiano to propose to Portia. When Portia met Bassanio, she gave him a diamond ring, and they married. Gratiano and Nerissa also got married.

They received Antonio's letter saying that he was imprisoned because he could not pay back the borrowed money to Sairoku. Portia advised Bassanio to hurry to Venice, and she disguised herself as a lawyer and went to the court. Portia tried to persuade Sairoku, telling him the importance of mercy, but he refused to listen to her. Therefore, Portia ordered Sairoku not to shed blood while cutting Antonio's flesh. Thus Sairoku, a plaintiff, lost the suit and signed the bond in which his possessions should be given to his daughter after his death. Antonio's life was saved. Bassanio was very pleased and thanked Portia. She coaxed him to give her his diamond ring which she had given to him before. Unwillingly, he agreed to her request. Then Portia went back to Belmont by train. Antonio and Bassanio came to Belmont later, and the truth was revealed. After the quarrel between the couple, the ring was returned.

The translator, Inoue, concludes, “This is a moving story of Europe where virtue and goodness are admired.”

In this translation, Inoue stressed the court scene and used three of his six chapters to describe the details of the trial. The translator omitted the casket scene, the story of Shylock's conversion to Christianity, and the plot of Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, her Christian boyfriend. In other words, he made no mention of the religious opposition between Jews and Italian Christians.
Possibly Inoue omitted the story of Jessica's elopement because Japanese women were forbidden from marrying anyone their families did not approve. Cecil Roth writes that the Renaissance period in Italy was, from certain points of view, an age of feminine emancipation in life, if not in law. If so, Jessica's elopement may be evaluated from the viewpoint of feminism. Therefore, the translator may have deleted this sub-plot because elopement was regarded as immoral in Japan due to the strong influence of Confucianism. Moreover, the translator describes Portia as an obedient and uneducated Japanese woman.

It is also interesting that Inoue's characters took a train—an invention which Shakespeare had never even imagined—from Venice Station to the fictitious town of Belmont. In Inoue's translation, the characters travel this way because it was in keeping with the process of modernization then occurring. In 1872 Japan's first train line between Shinbashi and Yokohama opened. Two more lines were built: between Osaka and Kobe in 1874, and between Kyoto and Osaka in 1877. The opening of these train lines excited the Japanese imagination.

The translator's use of *eta-hinin*, or outcasts, to make comparisons with the Jews of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reflects in part Inoue's cultural and social milieu. During the Tokugawa period, the Japanese social order was divided into four classes: the *samurai* class, the peasants, the artisans, and the merchants. At the very bottom were the outcasts.

Forced to live in restricted areas, they engaged in the leather industry and were hired to perform tasks looked down upon by the other classes, such as executing criminals. In 1871, the Meiji government passed a law emancipating these people. However, they remained *de facto* outcasts.

Perhaps another reason Inoue makes the comparison between the Jews in Venice and the outcasts in Japan comes from his interpretation of Shylock's words: “He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason?—I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? …” (3.1.50-4)

As minorities both the Jews and the outcasts in Japan suffered the sting of discrimination. We know that the Jews were ordered to live in Ghetto Nuovo in Venice in 1516. As Roth writes: “In the Venice of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which became one of the luxury cities of Europe, Jews intermingled freely with non-Jews.” In addition, the Jews engaged in business activities and professions that the outcasts of Japan were forbidden from entering. Thus the comparison breaks down. Outcasts were considered unclean and unworthy of living in general society and were restricted to performing jobs and tasks considered unclean in a predominantly Buddhist society. Jews, though forced to live in ghettos, could work among gentiles as moneylenders, doctors, and scholars. Undoubtedly, Inoue did not know these details of Jewish life.

In 1885 Bunkai Udagawa, a journalist, adapted *The Merchant of Venice* for a newspaper entitled *Osaka Asahi Shinbun*, and Genzo Katsu dramatized it for the Nakamura Sojuro Kabuki Company. The title of this adaptation, performed at the Ebisu-za Theater in Osaka on May 16, 1885, was *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka (The Season of Cherry Blossoms: The World of Money)*. It was also performed under the same title at two other theaters in Osaka in June 1885 and November 1893.

This adaptation, set in the Osaka of the Tokugawa period, was the first performance of Shakespeare in Japan. In fact, until the end of World War II it was the most frequently performed play of all of Shakespeare's plays; and sometimes the trial scene alone was performed as an independent production. (Since 1945, *Hamlet* has become the most frequently performed play of Shakespearean plays.)

Why was *The Merchant of Venice* chosen as the first staging of Shakespearean plays in Japan? Why was its adaptation so successful in Osaka? The summary below indicates the reasons.
In Osaka there was a woman whose name was Ume. Her father, a rich peasant, asked Denjiro Kinokuniya, a wealthy ship merchant, to take care of her when he died. After her father's sudden death, Ume came into a rich inheritance. Her uncle, Gohei, was a usurer like Shylock. He intended to rob her of her property. After the funeral he went to the crematorium to steal money and goods from her father's coffin. Then an old traveler came, and Gohei, robbing him of his money, put the old traveler into the fire.

Shotaro Aoki, a middle-class samurai and scholar, happened to come to the crematorium. He thought that the dead traveler must be his teacher, Dr. Kansai Nakagawa, a famous scholar of Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch studies, who was going to Nagasaki, the mecca of Dutch studies.

One year later, Gohei forced Ume into an apprenticeship at a geisha house. But Tamaei, Dr. Nakagawa's only daughter, saved Ume, and Ume became Tamaei's maid. Tamaei had been proposed to by two students of her father, Aoki and Ichinojo Kawashima. Aoki did not have money to buy the right to be adopted into the Nakagawa family and to succeed Tamaei's father as head of the family. Therefore, Aoki prepared himself for death, but his friend Kinokuniya offered his help, using his own flesh as collateral, and gave it to Aoki.

Going on a trip to Nagasaki, Dr. Nakagawa willed his property to his daughter and ordered her to marry the man who would find his will in one of three caskets—the first made of gold, the second of silver and the third of iron. Tamaei and Aoki had loved each other. Aoki who had already gotten the money to defeat his rival chose the iron casket. Luckily, it was the right casket and he was able to marry Tamaei, while his rival Kawashima chose the gold one and was expelled. At night, just before the couple consummated their marriage, they received the news that Kinokuniya's ships had been wrecked. Aoki said to Tamaei, “Please pay back the money to Kinokuniya later,” and left her immediately. Tamaei asked Ume to carry money to Kinokuniya, but on the way Ume was robbed of the money and was cast into the river.

In the trial scene, Kawashima, a judge, became angry when he learned that the money in question was the key money for the marriage of Aoki and Tamaei, and ordered Gohei to cut the flesh of Kinokuniya's chest according to the bond. Just as Gohei was going to cut it, a public servant named Heijiro Mizuki told him not to shed the defendant's blood. Gohei resigned himself to receiving the money, and he was subsequently arrested. He repented his misconduct. Aoki and Tamaei had a happy life because Dr. Nakagawa returned home safely from Nagasaki, and Kinokuniya married Ume.

As noted earlier, Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka was originally a novel published in serial form in an Osaka newspaper from April 10 to May 20, 1885. The novel was dramatized and performed on May 16, 1885, even before it was completed. In both the novel and the stagesscript, Kinokuniya is equivalent to Antonio, Aoki to Bassanio, Tamaei to Portia, and Gohei to Shylock. Ume plays the role of Nerissa, though she is a typical old-fashioned woman in feudal Japan.

The full text of Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka, published by Bunpodo in 1886, consists of 190 pages and contains a series of illustrations. The title page says, “The idea is from Shakespeare's ‘Flesh of the Chest’ and the style is that of Kabuki script written by Tanehiko Ryutei, a dramatist of the Edo period. …”

In the Preface, the young literary scholars meet by chance in the center of Osaka where the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. One has a Kabuki script by Ryutei while the other has the translation of The Merchant of Venice by Inoue. The latter young man says,
“I hear that recently the pupils of the primary schools learn the English language. English studies have become more and more popular, and there is a tendency for people to read English books. This is a shortcut to our Westernization, I think. By the way, the book you have now is, as you know, written by Shakespeare, a famous English dramatist. Its original title is ‘Flesh of the Chest’ and it is a novel written to let the people know the relationship between morality and law. It is a very good book for the public, but its idea is a little strange.”

The first young man says, “The spirit of European novel is noble, but the idea of Japanese and Chinese novels is much better.” The second replies, “European novels appear to be simpler than Japanese novels because the Westerners, who are more scientific and intelligent, do not want to speak about strange or complicated things.” Thus the two young men are remarkably influenced by European literature.

“I have overheard your conversation. At a bookstore near here, I bought an old manuscript, a collection of the trial records of the Edo period, one of which is very interesting. I will be very grateful to you if you lend me your books tonight. I want to write a story and mix the spirit of European novels with the idea of Japanese novels, by referring to this trial record. I will follow the Kabuki style. I wish to ask you to criticize my story when it is completed.”

This is, in effect, how this adaptation was written. At the same time Japan was at the peak of Europeanization. We find in this adaptation the reflection of Japanese cultural and social development of that time. For instance, the adapter changed the gold, silver, and lead caskets of Shakespeare’s original to gold, silver, and iron. Why? The reason may be explained by the following words in the adaptation:

Iron is very important because it is used for guns, swords, spears, spades, hoes, scythes, axes, hammers, saws, pots and pans which the people of the four social ranks of Japanese feudal society (warriors, farmers, craftsmen and merchants) use everyday. Without iron, we Japanese can neither defend our country nor make our living. Iron is the most valuable treasure for us. We hear that the railroad has been built of iron recently in Europe and that they have made iron ships for wars.

In this passage, the adapter stated the practical importance of iron for Japan's industrial development and showed the people's concern for technology. Thinking that iron was more important than lead in Japan's policy for enhancing wealth and military strength, he changed the casket from lead to iron. However, if the choice of the lead casket symbolizes wisdom and also allegorically represents the choice of Christ as Wisdom, as Joan Ozark Holmer suggests, the Japanese adapter who changed the lead casket into an iron casket ignored the Christian background of the scene.

This adaptation gained in general popularity mainly because of the trial scene. The people of those days were very interested in law; they studied European law as a model for modernizing the legal system. In Japan, the criminal codes were promulgated in 1880, the constitution was established in 1889, and the civil codes were completed in 1896. The amazing frequency of the performances of the trial scene in this comedy indicated the Japanese people's growing interest in and awareness of their legal system.

The shocking episode depicting Gohei's attempt to cut Kinokuniya's flesh must have both horrified and thrilled audiences. When Gohei demands Kinokuniya's flesh, Tamaei—in the disguise of a boy, Yoneda—says to him, “Gohei, you were born in Japan, a country of gods. I'm sure that you believe in gods. The gods always tell us to have mercy. You know that a human being should show mercy to the poor and the weak.” The gods mentioned here refer to the gods of Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism and Buddhism were mixed in those days, and people prayed to both at home. In addition, the cruel episode must have reminded audiences of the Kabuki play, Shakanyorai Tanjoe (The Picture of the Birth of Buddha) written by
Monzaemon Chikamatsu in 1695. In act 3, a foolish man named Handoku kills a dove, and the servant of Davedatta, a disciple of Buddha, is going to cut the flesh of Handoku. This episode found in Buddhist scripture seems to have been based on an historical event. Audiences were probably accustomed to this kind of story and were surprised to find a similar episode in a different cultural context.

The second reason this adaptation gained in popularity may be found in the title, Zeni no Yononaka (The World of Money). People of the Meiji era believed that Western civilization had a close relationship with economics and that finance was most important for Japanese modernization. Therefore, this Japanese title must have appealed to audiences who were gradually becoming aware of capitalism.

Shylock performs the function of a banker in a capitalist society: he lends money and charges interest. That explains in part why Shylock dislikes Antonio: Antonio “lends out money gratis” (1.3.42). Many Christians considered usuary to be sinful. They cited Deuteronomy, where it is written: “Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother. … Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury” (23:19-20). For Christians, lending freely is a way to show wise love, but lending at interest violates the love of friendship. But Shylock, a Jew, is an alien in Venice. Therefore, he lends money at high interest to Christians without feeling any guilt. Note that the adapter changed the setting from Venice to Osaka, an old commercial city. Many wealthy merchants lived there, and the citizens had a strong sense of financial matters. Moreover, Osaka's topography resembles that of Venice. Because of the many canals, people often refer to it as “the city built on water.”

In the year following the performance of this adaptation, the Society for Dramatic Improvement was organized. Prominent people who took part in the society included Kenji Yasui, a member of the municipal assembly; Bunkai Udagawa, a journalist and writer of this adaptation for the newspaper; Sojuro Nakamura, a Kabuki actor who played the leading role in the stage production of the adaptation; and Genzo Katsu, who adapted the newspaper story for the stage. We do not know whether their efforts to make improvements to Japanese drama by introducing Western elements were completely successful. However, I think it was not entirely accidental that these people, who wanted to improve Japanese drama by introducing the influence of Westernization, chose The Merchant of Venice for their first performance in Osaka. Perhaps they thought that it was the easiest to understand of Shakespeare's plays; perhaps they also thought it held the most appeal for audiences in Osaka where the people were deeply interested in earning money and improving Japanese drama.

The third reason this adaptation gained in popularity can be attributed to the women in the play. Portia, a woman of intellect, feelings, and will power, was introduced into Japan as an ideal of European women in the days of Westernization. The differences in the images of Eastern and Western women are significant. I think that to discover in Tamaei the reflection of Portia or to compare Tamaei with Portia is useful for clarifying the status of Japanese women of the Meiji era.

In The Merchant of Venice, there are three kinds of social groups: the Jewish community, the Christian male society, and the female group in Belmont. Portia is the queen of Belmont. Anna Brownell Jameson, a pioneer of feminism in the nineteenth century, described the character of Portia as follows:

She treads as though her footsteps had been among marble palaces, beneath roofs of fretted gold, o'er cedar floors and pavements of jasper and porphyry; amid gardens full of statues, and flowers, and fountains, and haunting music. She is full of penetrative wisdom, and genuine tenderness, and lively wit; but as she has never known want, or grief, or fear, or disappointment, her wisdom is without a touch of the sombre or the sad; her affections are all mixed up with faith, hope, and joy; and her wit has not a particle of malevolence or causticity.
This is a romantic interpretation of Portia; Jameson described Portia as though she were a goddess living in a mythic world. She also stressed Portia's intellect, and mentioned Portia as the first of Shakespeare's intellectual women. She wrote, “The wit of Portia is like attar of roses, rich and concentrated.” According to Jameson, “Intellect is of no sex … [but] in men, the intellectual faculties exist more self-poised and self-directed … than we ever find them in women, with whom talent … is in a much greater degree modified by the sympathies and moral qualities.” In short, she appraises Portia's intellect and morality as well as her beautiful and graceful figure.

Bassanio says that Portia “is a lady richly left, / And she is fair, and, fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtues” (1.1.161-63). Indeed, Portia is a fair lady such as those painted by Titian and Giorgione of the Venetian School. Her golden hair attracts the suitors' attention just like “a golden fleece,” the most valuable and expensive commodity for the Argonauts.

In contrast, Bassanio is a scholar, soldier, and poor gentleman. Gentleman is the key term in the stratification of classes. To be a gentleman placed one within the 4 to 5 percent of the population that exercised power in Shakespeare's time. A gentleman did not work with his hands; he could live off his income. However, Bassanio went bankrupt and wanted to borrow money from Antonio, a merchant, in order to marry the fair, rich Portia. In a word, Portia symbolizes wealth. J. R. Brown says, “Shakespeare wrote of love as a kind of wealth in which men and women traffic. Of all the comedies, The Merchant of Venice is the most completely informed by Shakespeare's ideal of love's wealth.” We find the dynamics of erotic and economic desires at play in this romantic comedy.

Bassanio must choose the casket which contains Portia's portrait, if he is to win her hand in marriage. Portia is a wise woman and an obedient daughter when she says, “I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will” (1.2.103-5). According to Freud, “Caskets are also women, symbols of the essential thing in woman, and therefore of a woman herself, like boxes, large or small, baskets, and so on.” If so, in the casket scene, a man selects not only a casket but also a woman. Here a woman is regarded as the object of man's desire, and the casket has a sexual meaning just like Nerissa's ring.

In the patriarchal society of the English Renaissance, Portia is both an obedient wife and an obedient daughter when she says to Bassanio:

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,
That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. But the full sum of me
Is sum of something which, to term in gross,
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised,
.....This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's.

(3.2.149-71)

In this speech, where Portia confesses her love through the imagery of wealth, we also see the relationship between marriage and property. As Lawrence Stone pointed out, one of the objectives of family planning in pre-Reformation England was the acquisition through marriage of further property. Moreover, we see that a woman's body is regarded as a man's possession or a commodity in this male-dominated society, though Portia herself is an intellectual. I think that one of the themes of this comedy, the exchange of goods at both
the erotic level and the economic level, is illustrated in this passage.

In *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka*, Aoki comments, “Tamaei is different from ordinary women because she is educated at home. ... Although she is not twenty years old yet, she manages her father's property, uses servants and maids, and leads her life admirably.” Tamaei is as beautiful as Portia, but she seems to be more independent and more highly educated than Portia. She says to her first suitor Kawashima, “I do not know who will succeed to the head position in my family, but I will never rely on my future husband. I will make my way skilfully in life by means of the lessons that my father has taught me. I think a wife should have the spirit of independence.”

Kawashima asks, “Why?” and she answers,

“My father always says that men and women are physically different but that they have the same mind given by the creator, and that the European people advance the equal rights for men and women. In our country, however, men regard women as slaves, and women believe that they should obey their father, husband, and son. In addition, women are satisfied with learning only the three R's, sewing and dancing. They live meaninglessly, relying on their husbands and sons. This is not good. I am Dr. Nakagawa's daughter. I am quite different from the common women. I have studied Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch, and I will live independently.”

From her speech, we discover the progressive thinking of Tamaei's father. As a pioneer of Westernization, he educated his daughter according to equality of the sexes. However, Tamaei is a special woman educated in a family of intellectuals. Her family background and upbringing must have been unfamiliar to audiences living under male hegemony and patriarchal power. In short, she is a model of the “new woman” in the Meiji era. Perhaps the adapter wanted to show what women's education should be in the period of modernization. As a result, Tamaei was described as a fresh but rather radical woman.

Ume, her maid, is a contrast to Tamaei. Representing one type of traditional Japanese woman, Ume reveals how some women living in a feudal society often had to sell themselves for money. When Gohei was going to sell her to the geisha house, he regarded her body as a commodity. There were really such women in the Meiji era, so the audiences must have been sympathetic with Ume. In this adaptation, she plays the role of Nerissa, but she is quite different in personality. Nerissa is shrewd enough to test how deeply her husband loves her by using her ring just as Portia does. Ume is also different from Jessica, who is “wise, fair, and true” (2.6.56) and strong enough to deprive her father of his money and jewels and elope with Lorenzo.

The contrasting personalities of Ume and Tamaei show us the two different types of women, old and new. The traditional image of a Japanese woman evolved in response to the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and the samurai ethic. Ekiken Kaibara (1630-1714), the Neo-Confucian scholar, was the most influential in defining the role of women. He wrote *Onna Daigaku* (*Great Learning for Women*), which became the primary text for women because it reinforced the feudal aim of perfecting the family system. In this book published in 1790, he wrote that a woman must look to her husband as her lord and that the great lifelong duty of a woman was obedience.

A woman's legal status during the Tokugawa period was completely dependent first on her father, then on her husband and eventually on her son, as Tamaei points out in the adaptation. If a couple gave birth only to daughters, a son was frequently adopted and married to the oldest daughter. Therefore, Aoki would take the family name of Nakagawa. However, when feudalism finally collapsed in the Meiji era, there were some champions of women's rights. Tsutomu Inoue, the above-mentioned translator of *The Merchant of Venice*, wrote *Joken Shinron (A True View of Women's Rights)* in 1881. While the Confucian concept of the feminine role continued to keep women out of school for a long time, Arinori Mori, the Minister for Education in 1885,
supported education for women. Yukichi Fukuzawa, also an educator, championed equality of opportunity for women. He believed that a change of attitude toward women should accompany their education, and he published two critiques of *Onna Daigaku* in 1899. Thus Meiji leaders, realizing that education was essential to modernization, gave it a high priority.

It seems to me that the contrasting images of Ume and Tamaei reflect these confusing social conditions in which people wanted to introduce culture from abroad into Japan without abandoning traditional Japanese culture.

An informative book, *Things Japanese*, written by the Englishman, Basil Hall Chamberlain, introduced Japan to the West. Chamberlain, who arrived in 1873 as a professor of Japanese and philology at Tokyo University, had this to say about the status of Japanese women:

> Japanese women are most womanly,—kind, gentle, faithful, pretty. But the way in which they are treated by the men has hitherto been such as might cause a pang to any generous European heart. No wonder that some of them are at last endeavouring to emancipate themselves. … Two grotesquely different influences are now at work to undermine this state of slavery—one, European theories concerning the relation of the sexes, the other, European clothes! … But many resident foreigners—male foreigners, of course—think differently, and the question forms a favourite subject of debate. The only point on which both parties agree is in their praise of Japanese woman. Says one side, “She is so charming that she deserves better treatment,”—to which the other side retorts that it is just because she is “kept in her place” that she is charming. The following quotation is from a letter to the present writer by a well-known author, who, like others, has fallen under the spell. “How sweet,” says he, “Japanese woman is! All the possibilities of the race for goodness seem to be concentrated in her. It shakes one's faith in some Occidental doctrines. If this be the result of suppression and oppression, then these are not altogether bad. On the other hand, how diamond-hard the character of the American woman becomes under the idolatry of which she is the object. …”

The “well-known author” of the above-mentioned letter is Lafcadio Hearn who came to Japan in 1890 and married a Japanese woman.

When *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* was performed, the ring episode and Tamaei's disguise were omitted. In the newspaper, the adapter made Tamaei say to Aoki, “I hear there is a custom of exchanging rings for marriage in European countries. You and I studied Dutch culture, so we had better keep this habit.” However, there was no scene where Tamaei gave her ring to Aoki on the stage. I suspect this omission occurred because the Japanese of those days were not familiar with this custom, and because Tamaei did not disguise herself as a lawyer. Consequently, there was no chance for the ring to be used in a love test.

Next, I wish to consider the omission of the dramatic ploy of making use of disguises. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica, a Jewish girl, disguises herself as a boy when she escapes from oppressive patriarchy and elopes with Lorenzo, an Italian Christian. She says, “I am much ashamed of my exchange” (2.6.35), but Lorenzo says, “So are you, sweet, / Even in the lovely garnish of a boy” (2.6.44-5). Her festive cross-dressing helps her break down racial prejudice and cross the boundary between the Jewish community and Christian society.

When Portia and Nerissa go to Venice, they disguise themselves as a young lawyer and his clerk. Portia says:

> ... they shall think we are accomplishèd
> With that we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered like young men
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man and boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a manly stride, and speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth, ...

(3.4.61-9)

Belmont is a static space where people are given love and wealth; Venice is a dynamic world where people must fight for money and love. Venice is a city full of competition between races, as well as in economy and religion. Venice is a *topos* of a homosocial bond, “a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails,”26 while Belmont is a place of marriage. Venice is, so to speak, a masculine society while Belmont is a feminine society. Therefore, women, who wish to compete in Venice, have to wear male clothes. Portia knows well that cross-dressing potentially involves both inversion and displacement of gender binaries.27

Portia is never ashamed of her transformation, indeed she uses her exchange effectively. In Belmont she conforms to the Renaissance ideal of womanhood: chaste, obedient, and silent. In the trial scene, however, Portia as the upright judge is strong, decisive, and wise. The Portia who speaks about mercy and monarchy in the Venetian court bears some resemblance to Queen Elizabeth who called herself “a prince” in the English Court.28 In the trial scene, Portia is not only an androgynous justice-figure but also a person of “the supernumerary gender” or “the superior sex.”

Portia is also a predecessor of the female pages of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Rosalind in *As You Like It* wears a skirt for a few minutes. In the Forest of Arden, however, she enjoys the opportunity to play a man. But she has, in truth, no doublet and hose in her disposition. Viola's cross-dressing in *Twelfth Night* makes her feel uncomfortable because she cannot confess her love to Orsino. Portia's disguise, however, is unlike those of Rosalind and Viola. Portia does not choose a disguise for protection. Instead she disguises herself in order to play at being a man. Keith Geary says, “What is most striking about Portia's disguise as Balthazar is the absence of the psychological and sexual ambiguity that informs the disguises of the other heroines.”29 In *The Merchant of Venice*, the complex feelings of female pages are found more clearly in Jessica's speech than in Portia's speech, both of which are quoted above.

The female pages are sometimes discussed from the viewpoint of feminism.30 Moll Cutpurse, in *The Roaring Girl* by Middleton and Dekker, is a case in point. However, in English Renaissance theaters the female pages were played by boy actors. They were the “little eyases” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.339) who were “not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy.” (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.151-52). Consequently, the eroticism of the Elizabethan stage was probably different from that of the present-day stage where an actress plays the role of a female page. For example, in Rome, at a performance of Goldoni's *La Locandiera*, Goethe was surprised to see men acting women's parts, and he experienced the unique aesthetic pleasure which Elizabethan playgoers must have felt.31 Transvestism has such a dramatic effect. In addition, the transvestite stage gives men and women an opportunity to reconsider both the sex-gender system in their society and the ideological meaning of the semiotics of dress.

In Japan, boys played the female roles in the seventeenth century. People called this troupe “Wakashu Kabuki” (Lad Kabuki). They danced, mimicked, and performed a skit or acrobatics. They were effeminate enough to be the partners in homosexual relationships. As a result, the government prohibited their performances in 1652. Now Kabuki actors called *onnagata* play female roles on the stage. The word *onnagata* means “a woman's form” or “the woman side.” An *onnagata* is not a boy but a male actor who plays the role of a young woman very skillfully and gracefully in a Kabuki play. Even an older actor would play these roles.
Japanese audiences, who are accustomed to this dramatic convention, suspend their belief and forget that the onnagata is actually a male actor.

Of the trial scene where Tamaei disguises herself as a lawyer, Bunkai Udagawa writes, “Tamaei Nakagawa makes up like a woman and has her hair dressed like a young man. But nobody knows whether she is a male or a female.” Tamaei herself says, “I am disguised as a young man, taking the name of Kosaburo Yoneda. As an official spy, I will go to the court. I encourage myself in order to imitate a man just like a Kabuki actor imitates a woman.”

It is noteworthy that Tamaei is conscious of the onnagata when she disguises herself as a young lawyer. In the stagemscript, however, there is no cross-dressing. Instead of Tamaei, a young lawyer named Mizuki appears on the stage. This name reminds Japanese audiences of a famous onnagata named Tatsunosuke Mizuki (1673-1745). Why did the dramatizer, Genzo Katsu, omit Tamaei's disguise? I think the main reason was that he thought of the audiences' response: the audiences of those days were more familiar with a man in woman's disguise than a woman in man's disguise.

Clearly there are many major differences between Shakespeare's play and the Japanese adaptation. The following are minor differences between them. First, Bassanio borrows money to marry Portia and get her property, while Aoki borrows money not only to marry Tamaei but also to succeed to the family name and scholarship of Dr. Nakagawa. This change may have occurred because the adapter was profoundly conscious of Japanese feudalism. Second, Shylock holds strong principles as a Jew who places more importance on justice than on mercy or on Old Law than New Law, while Gohei has neither prejudice nor religious theory. Third, while Gohei is a villain, he does not have the same overwhelming desire for revenge that Shylock has. Consequently there is little serious opposition between Kinokuniya and Gohei, while there is much between Antonio and Shylock. Shakespeare's Antonio says that Shylock is “a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch / Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy” (4.1.3-5). But Heinrich Heine recalls, “A British beauty wept passionately to see the end of act 4 behind me in the box of Drury Lane.” It is unlikely that anyone wept upon seeing Gohei in the Japanese theater. This adaptation resembles a morality play in the style of Kabuki, while Shakespeare's original dramatizes the religious opposition between Judaism and Christianity.

I think these differences between Shakespeare's original play and its adaptation reflect Japan's hasty introduction of European culture during the Meiji era. The Japanese people of those days did not understand Renaissance ideas, English dramaturgy and the Western mode of living as well as Japanese do today. They had no time to value substance above form. They wanted to adapt European culture to the Japanese lifestyle as soon as possible.

We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that The Merchant of Venice was introduced into Japan to enlighten the public and improve the standard of culture. In other words, Shakespeare was used as one means of improving Japanese culture. While Udagawa and Katsu did not know European dramaturgy and conventions, they were strongly aware of Kabuki plays when they adapted Shakespeare's comedy to the Japanese stage. Later, Shoyo Tsubouchi, the first translator of Shakespearean works, compared Shakespeare with Monzaemon Chikamatsu, a great Kabuki playwright, and enumerated eighteen similarities between the two great dramatists. Tsubouchi was the first to give serious consideration to what the Japanese people should learn from Shakespeare and how Japanese drama should be improved by a study of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

A sketch of the stage history of The Merchant of Venice in Japan shows a great variety and innovations. Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka performed by the Kabuki actors acquired great popularity. In this adaptation, Sojuro Nakamura played the part of Kinokuniya, while Jusaburo Bando, an onnagata, played the role of Tamaei. Thus the first performance of The Merchant of Venice in Japan was an all-male production. However, when Otojiro Kawakami, a star of shinpa (New School of Theater), produced the trial scene of this comedy in
1903, Sadayakko, his wife, performed the part of Portia. Kawakami and his wife, who had seen *The Merchant of Venice* in Boston, tried to produce this comedy in the European style for Japanese audiences. Kawakami imitated Henry Irving's Shylock, and Sadayakko copied Ellen Terry's Portia. This production was criticized by Tsubouchi, but it is noteworthy that Kawakami took the lead in staging the translated drama of Shakespeare in Japan for the first time.

The Bungei Kyokai (The Association of Literature and Arts), established by Tsubouchi in 1906, performed only the trial scene at the Kabuki Theater. This was an all-male production, and Shunsho Doi, who had seen Shakespearean plays in America with Kawakami, played the role of Portia. His performance was well received. In 1913 Kabuki actors also performed the trial scene. Sadanji Ichikawa played the role of Shylock, and Shocho Ichikawa, an *onnagata*, played the role of Portia. In an essay about this performance, Tsubouchi wrote that Portia disguised as a lawyer was not so manly and that Shylock did not look so cruel.36

In 1903, the actress Sadayakko was the first woman to play Portia; in 1915, Ritsuko Mori was the second. In those days actresses were not recognized as professionals by the public. However, Mori was the first student to enter a drama school for women and to become an actress. Since then, the female characters of *The Merchant of Venice* have been acted by women.

In 1926 *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Yoshi Hijikata was performed by the actors and the actresses of the Shingeki (New Drama) troupe. This dramatic group was founded in 1924 and performed mainly modern and realistic dramas such as those by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorki at the Tsukiji Small Playhouse in Tokyo.

Modern dramatic interpretations of Shylock have varied between sympathetic portrayals and critical portrayals. In 1968 Keita Asari directed *The Merchant of Venice*, using Tsuneari Fukuda's translation. Osamu Takizawa, a leading actor of the Mingei troupe, played the role of Shylock and expressed his deep sympathy with Shylock. When Asari directed the comedy for the Shiki troupe in 1977, however, Takeshi Kusaka, who played the part of Shylock, was critical of the racial discrimination in the play.

During the 1970's and 1980's, the Shakespeare Theater group displayed considerable activity. They played all of the Shakespearean plays translated by Yushi Odashima at a small underground playhouse called “Jan Jan.” Norio Deguchi directed *The Merchant of Venice* in 1976, 1977, and 1978. These performances—given by the players dressed in T-shirts and jeans on a simple stage—were very popular among younger Japanese.

In 1973 Fukuda directed *The Merchant of Venice* for the Keyaki troupe, using his own translation. In 1982 Toshikiyo Masumi directed the same comedy for the Haiyu-za dramatic company, and players in Victorian costumes performed on the modern stage. This performance was moderate; Shylock did not appear at all villainous.

In 1983 the Subaru troupe performed *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Toshifumi Sueki and Asao Koike, who played Shylock. Koike thought that the story of this comedy was the nightmarish experience of Antonio, and he expressed this idea on stage. Five years later, in 1988, the Globe Tokyo, a new arena playhouse, opened. Here Tetsuo Anzai directed the En troupe in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* in 1990. He wanted the Japanese audience to compare Shakespeare's Shylock with Marlowe's Barabas.

In 1993 Gerard Murphy, an associate artist of the Royal Shakespeare Company, was invited by the Globe Tokyo to direct a group of Japanese actors in *The Merchant of Venice*. He thought that this comedy had a strong modern aspect because its themes were racial and sexual discrimination and the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, he was very interested in both the Japanese way of thinking and the Japanese style of acting, and he wished to express both British and Japanese cultures on stage.37
Over the years, *The Merchant of Venice* has maintained the attention of Japanese audiences. Since the Meiji era, there have been various productions of this play, and *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* became a model for adapting Shakespeare's plays to the Japanese stage. In this sense, it is of historical importance. I think that *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* is the fountainhead of Japanized Shakespeare, such as *Kumonosuyo (Throne of Blood)*, *NINAGAWA Macbeth*, and *Ran*. In *Ran*, a film adaptation of *King Lear*, Akira Kurosawa successfully reproduced the atmosphere of feudal society in Japan. He described the life of a feudal *samurai* lord by combining Shakespeare's plot with the style of the Noh play. *NINAGAWA Macbeth*, which received favorable reviews in Edinburgh and Amsterdam in 1985, revealed Yukio Ninagawa's consciousness of the dramatic technique of Kabuki plays. Moreover, his production of *The Tempest*, which also earned high praise in Edinburgh in 1988, represented his boldest experiment in combining Shakespeare's plot with elements of traditional Japanese culture.

Thus the fusion of Shakespeare with Noh or Kabuki plays represents a current trend in today's Japanese Shakespearean theater. I think that adaptation means that many people of different languages and cultures can enjoy the limitless “performability” of Shakespeare's play-texts while searching for their own images of Shakespeare on the stage or in the film. These film or stage adaptations have allowed audiences all over the world to consider a new interpretation of Shakespeare.

While there are obvious gaps in time and space between Renaissance England and modern Japan, Shakespeare is “not of an age, but for all time,” as Ben Jonson remarked, and Shakespeare's language is cross-cultural and universal. We should recognize that Shakespeare is accepted in different cultural and social contexts and that Shakespeare is a criterion by which to determine the cultural standards of the world. From this standpoint, how to produce Shakespeare and what to receive from Shakespeare are important and ongoing problems.

Notes

3. There is a railway station named “Montebello” near Venice. This is a reversal of “Belmont,” which means “a beautiful mountain.” As the name suggests, “Montebello” is located in a hilly country.
5. Bunkai Udagawa, *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* (Osaka: Bunpodo, 1886), title page. (Hereafter cited as *Sakuradoki*.)
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 3-4.
8. Ibid., 104-5.
Venice,” Shakespeare Studies, 21, eds. Leeds Barroll and Barry Gaines (London: Associated University Presses, 1993), 11-54. Holmer regards The Arraignment and Conviction of Vsurie (1595) as the most likely source for Shakespeare's decision to stage a debate between Shylock and Antonio in order to present the case for and against usury. A contrasting view may be seen in Ralph Berry, Shakespeare and Social Class (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 44. Berry asserts that Antonio and Shylock dramatize the tension between collecting interest and collecting excessive interest.

15. Ibid., 33.
16. Ibid., 31.
17. Berry, Shakespeare and Social Class, xii.
21. Sakuradoki, 54.
22. Ibid., 61-63.
23. Ibid., 63-64.
32. Sakuradoki, 183-86.
33. Ibid., 188.


Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Charles Edelman (essay date 2002)
In the following excerpt, Edelman documents the performance history of The Merchant of Venice, paying particular attention to the actors who have played Shylock.

Mark Twain is thought to have said that Shakespeare was not really the author of the plays, ‘they were written by someone else of the same name’. Although the comment appears nowhere in Mark Twain's works, and has been attributed to others in relation to Homer, not Shakespeare, it still serves as the most sensible solution to the perennial authorship question. Similarly, this introduction, especially when looking at the play as it was first performed, is not about Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, but about another play, also by Shakespeare, of the same name.

In fact, it is very possible that our play was not originally known as The Merchant of Venice: on 22 July 1598, perhaps a year or two after the first performance, ‘a booke of the Merchaut of Venyce otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce’ was entered for printing at the London Stationers' Register. This is both revealing and reassuring, since The Jew of Venice is a more appropriate title—when printed in 1600, The Merchant of Venice may have been preferred only to avoid confusion with Marlowe's The Jew of Malta.

Critics are fond of pointing out that Shylock is not the ‘Merchant of Venice’, and that his is not an especially long role, appearing in only five scenes. But amongst the male characters, Shylock has the largest part, with nearly twice as many lines as Antonio—no less than Hamlet, this is a play with a central star role, one so famous that like Cervantes's Quixote and Dickens's Scrooge, he has become a common word, a distinction not even Hamlet can claim; today, in our age of ‘director's theatre’, Merchant performances are, like Hamlet performances, usually identified by the name of the main actor, not the director.

There is one enormous difference, however, between Shylock and Hamlet or any other great Shakespearean character: The Merchant of Venice is unique in that we are told that a performance in Shakespeare's time, and the audience’s appreciation of it, would have been entirely different from what we experience today.

**THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE 1590S**

In his review of Peter Hall's 1989 production, Jack Kroll of Newsweek (1 January 1990) makes what has been a standard observation in Merchant [The Merchant of Venice] criticism for over two hundred years, that ‘Shakespeare's first audience would have been amazed’ by a sympathetic portrayal of a Jew. Although Kroll finds Dustin Hoffman’s ‘painfully real’ Shylock impressive, he qualifies his approval by quoting Harold Bloom's opinion, “‘an honest production of the play, sensitive to its values, would now be intolerable in any Western country’”.

Indeed, in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, Bloom proves an eloquent spokesman for this most enduring of Shakespearean myths:

One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy The Merchant of Venice is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work … The unfortunate Dr Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's physician, was hanged, drawn, and quartered (possibly with Shakespeare among the mob looking on), having been more or less framed by the Earl of Essex and so perhaps falsely accused of a plot to poison the Queen. A Portuguese converso [converted Jew] whom Shakespeare may have known, poor Lopez lives on as a shadowy provocation to the highly successful revival of Marlowe's The Jew of Malta in 1593-4, and presumably Shakespeare's eventual overcoming of Marlowe in The Merchant of Venice, perhaps in 1596-7.1
However, like the famous non-barking dog in the Sherlock Holmes story, the curious thing about the evidence connecting Lopez to Marlowe and Shakespeare is its non-existence. Marlowe's play was always a money-spinner; Henslowe records that it took in thirty-five shillings when acted in February of 1593, and the following year it played to good houses before Lopez's execution. There is no good reason to think that things would have been different had Lopez never existed, for Lopez's being, or having been, a Jew was hardly mentioned at his trial. So far as can be found from prosecutor Sir Edward Coke's notes, neither he nor anyone else said, or even implied, that being a Jew was an indicator of treacherous intention—Coke was trying to establish a Catholic, not a Jewish assassination plot. Whether or not Lopez was guilty (current scholarship indicates that he was) is beside the point—if he was railroaded, his having been Jewish had nothing to do with it. From the time of Lopez's indictment and trial to his execution on 7 June 1594, there is no record of victimisation of other Jews in London, or of any call to expel Jews or conversos residing there.

Obviously, one may still argue that even without the inspiration of Lopez, the original Shylock conformed to an anti-Semitic stereotype, but no such theatrical tradition existed. The only Jew to appear in extant Elizabethan drama before Marlowe's Barabas is the moneylender Gerontus in Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1584)—he is the most honourable character in the play, the most contemptible being Mercadore, an Italian merchant. Still, John Gross writes, ‘to an Elizabethan audience, the fiery red wig that [Shylock] almost certainly wore spelled out his ancestry even more insistently than anything that was actually said. It was the same kind of wig that had been worn by Marlowe's Barabas, and before that by both Judas and Satan in the old mystery plays.’

This ‘fiery red wig’, which will reappear in our story, has a rather strange history. There is no mention of Barabas's hair colour in Marlowe's play, neither is there any real connection between Barabas and Judas; even if there were, while ‘it is an old and familiar tradition that Judas Iscariot had red hair, the actual evidence is rather scattered and not very abundant’. In 1846, the noted scholar John Payne Collier discovered and published a poem written on the occasion of Richard Burbage's funeral, which reads, in part,

Heart-broken Philaster, and Amintas too  
Are lost forever, with the red-hair'd Jew.

Like most of Collier's ‘discoveries’, this was a forgery—he claimed to have seen and copied it from an original in the library of the antiquarian Richard Heber (conveniently Heber had died in 1833, and his entire collection was auctioned off). Why Collier decided to give Shylock red hair is hard to say; perhaps he was influenced by Thomas Jordan's crude ballad, ‘The Forfeiture’, published in 1664. Sung to the tune of ‘Dear, let me now this evening dye’, it starts

You that do look with Christian hue  
Attend unto my Sonnet  
I'le tell you of as vild a Jew  
As ever wore a Bonnet

and goes on to tell a twisted version of the *Merchant* in which Jessica, not Portia, dresses up as a lawyer and tricks her father, who

... by usury and trade  
Did much exceed in riches:  
His beard was red, his face was made  
Not much unlike a Witches.

To think this doggerel could have anything to do with *The Merchant of Venice* as it was performed more than sixty years previously is positively ludicrous, yet E. E. Stoll, in his often-cited argument for the ‘traditional’ Shylock, accepts the work of the ‘old actor’ (Jordan had worked as an actor at the end of the Caroline era) as proof of Shylock's appearance.
If we assume that all Elizabethans hated Jews, then we can easily assume that it was fine for Antonio to call Shylock a dog, to spit at him and then demand that he become a Christian. But we might also assume that Shakespeare and many others at a London playhouse knew a good deal about Venice, and would therefore know that a ‘real’ Antonio would have earned little approval. Although Venice segregated Jews into the world's first Ghetto, established in 1516, it guaranteed them the right to go about their business, and to practise their religion, free from interference or molestation, and while Jews were always regarded as candidates for conversion, any attempt to force them to convert was forbidden by law. It is often argued that Shakespeare's audience would have approved of Antonio's version of ‘mercy’, because baptism would save Shylock's soul, with or without his permission, but Shylock has been placed in a position similar to that of the Jews of Spain one hundred years earlier: convert, or make their living elsewhere. To many, Shylock's forced baptism would have been associated with the Spaniards, who had just tried to murder the Queen, and with the Papacy, which had excommunicated her in 1570.

Even if Shylock's religion, in itself, is not enough to make him a villain to the original audience, there is still the matter of Shylock as usurer to be considered. People making their way to the playhouse to see The Merchant of Venice in 1597 could stop at a bookstall and buy Miles Mosse's moral tract condemning the charging of any interest, The Arraignment and Conviction of Usurie, but they could also buy a book containing tables of interest rates. No economy can exist without the availability of credit, and except for an extremely conservative faction, it was accepted that usury was the charging of excessive interest. In the absence of loan banks, ordinary citizens borrowed money from an acquaintance, or found an acquaintance to act as broker to negotiate the loan with someone else. One prosperous Englishman who loaned large sums at interest, sued when he was not repaid and also acted as a broker, was William Shakespeare of Stratford.

The latter parts of this Introduction will show that it in recent times, few productions of the Merchant can take place without public discussion over whether it should be performed at all, or at the very least, without school packs or other material justifying its presentation, explaining that the original audience held different attitudes than we do today. Ironically, this can have an effect opposite to what is intended: the natural response to The Merchant of Venice, from those rare persons with no ‘knowledge’ of it before entering the theatre, is likely to be similar to that of the spectator once observed by Heinrich Heine: ‘When I saw this play at Drury Lane, there stood behind me in the box a pale, fair Briton, who at the end of the Fourth Act, fell to weeping passionately, several times exclaiming, “The poor man is wronged.”’ ‘Passionate weeping’ is not required, nor are we expected to think of Shylock as a person free of serious faults (obviously, he is not), yet the entire history of our play, everywhere in the world, shows that it has been most successful when Shylock was not acted as a villain, or thought to be one. For us to fully understand the history of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice in production, we must replace it with that ‘other’ Shakespeare play of the same title.

That play was a success: the title page of the 1600 Quarto notes that it was acted ‘divers times’; the first recorded performance was at court on 10 February 1605, followed by a second performance two days later. Since Shylock is the largest and best male part, it is likely that Burbage was the first to play him, but no genuine contemporary document confirms this, and any speculation about casting is only that. Whoever the actors may have been, the Merchant's place in the King's Men's repertoire nine or ten years after it was written argues for its popularity, but there is no further record of the play being shown, in any form, until George Granville's adaptation, The Jew of Venice, opened in 1701.

**GRANVILLE'S JEW OF VENICE**

Jewish presence in England increased markedly during the 1600s: as W. D. Rubinstein notes, the Commonwealth had an underlying culture of philo-Semitism, the Puritans seeing themselves in many respects as the re-embodiment of Old Testament Judaism. In 1656, Cromwell gave the Jews permission to remain in England and to open their first synagogue in Creechurch Lane.
During the Restoration, Jewish economic power and status rose further. It was still a tiny community, and nearly all Portuguese or Spanish Sephardim: in 1677 a London directory had forty-eight Portuguese, and two German (in Hebrew, Ashkenazi) names. As the Glorious Revolution approached, Anglo-Jews were officially residents—politically, they were essentially the English branch of Holland's Jewish community, something much to their advantage, for the Revolution could not have succeeded without the financial support of the Dutch-Jewish company of Machado and Pereira. Although this point is disputed by historians, Rubinstein and David S. Katz argue persuasively that from the Glorious Revolution until late Victorian times, the status of England's Jews was little different from that of the Quakers or other dissenters, and in many respects was better than that of English Catholics. On 23 June 1700, William III knighted Solomon de Medina, a rich London Jew who was in partnership with Machado and Pereira; six months later The Jew of Venice opened at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Granville retains much of Shakespeare's text, but many passages are shortened, altered or transposed, and Morocco, Arragon, the Gobbos, Solanio, Salarino and Salerió (the 'Salads') are omitted. Taking the place of the missing scenes is a banquet at the end of Act II, when Shylock, Bassanio and Antonio celebrate the 'merry bond' by offering toasts to wealth, and then witness an elaborate masque, ‘Peleus and Thetis’.

The prologue, spoken by the ghosts of Shakespeare and Dryden, is perhaps of greater interest than anything in the play proper. 'Shakespeare' announces,

To day we punish a Stock-jobbing Jew.
A piece of Justice, terrible and strange;
Which, if persu'd, would make a thin Exchange.

The late 1690s and early 1700s saw a major shift in economic power ‘from countryside to town, and from landowner to businessman, profoundly unsettling the traditional order’. Particularly notorious were the ‘stock-jobbers’, busily amassing wealth through speculative dealings in joint-stock ventures: their excesses led to an Act of 1697, restricting their number in London to one hundred, with twelve places reserved for Jews and twelve for other ‘aliens’. So Shylock, once a Venetian moneylender, has become a London dealer in investment schemes, despised by arch-Tories such as Granville.

Thomas Betterton was a sixty-six-year-old Bassanio, and Anne Bracegirdle played Portia. Thomas Doggett, who played Shylock, was one of the most popular comic actors of his day: according to Colley Cibber, who admired Doggett greatly, Congreve wrote the characters of Ben in Love for Love and Fondlewife in The Old Bachelor expressly for him. Records of London's 1700-1 theatre season are scanty, and we do not know how often The Jew of Venice was performed, but in any event it is difficult to agree with Gross's view that The Jew of Venice 'held the stage for forty years', for it was hardly ever seen after 1701. There is record of one performance in May 1703, three in the 1721-2 season and two in 1722-3, but none at all for the ensuing three years, and less than one a year after that—with just one recorded performance between 1736 and 1741. Given these circumstances, it is fair to say that Granville's adaptation, while interesting in and of itself, plays little part in the performance history of The Merchant of Venice. No tradition existed in the interpretation of Shylock, or of any other role, when Charles Macklin took the stage on 12 February 1741, and no expectation on the part of the Drury Lane audience had to be confirmed or denied. The Merchant of Venice was a new play.

‘THE JEW THAT SHAKESPEARE DREW’

Born in Ireland in 1699, Charles Macklin was a popular favourite in a variety of roles amongst provincial audiences of the early 1730s. John Fleetwood, the patent holder of Drury Lane, engaged him to play small parts for the 1733-4 season, but that season fell into disarray when a dispute between Fleetwood and the actors, led by Theophilus Cibber, led to the defection of Cibber's group to the Haymarket. Macklin remained
loyal to Fleetwood, though, and his importance at Drury Lane grew.

Several factors contributed to Drury Lane's decision to mount *The Merchant of Venice* in 1741: the renewal and strengthening of the Stage Licensing Act in 1737 placed the Lord Chamberlain in charge of theatrical censorship, establishing ‘a much more rigorous system of state surveillance, which would endure until 1968’, over the theatre.\(^22\) The inherent difficulties in getting a play approved encouraged managements to rely on Shakespeare and others whose plays were already part of the repertoire, and not subject to new scrutiny. Furthermore, there was no need to set the takings of the third performance aside, as was customary, for an ‘author's benefit’.\(^23\) Since the *Merchant*, in its original text, had not been performed within living memory, it would have brought with it the excitement of a famous play being seen for the first time by everyone present, the perfect vehicle for a popular actor in his first starring role.

Descriptions of Macklin's Shylock are consistent in giving us a fierce and malevolent figure, driven by his hatred of Antonio. Francis Gentleman was only thirteen in 1741, and his *Dramatic Censor* was published in 1770, so he presumably saw Macklin in the 1760s:

> in the level scenes his voice is most happily suited to that sententious gloominess of expression the author intended; which, with a sullen solemnity of deportment, marks the character strongly; in his malevolence, there is forcible and terrifying ferocity; in the third act scene, where alternate passions reign, he breaks the tones of utterance, and varies his countenance admirably; in the dumb action of the trial scene, he is amazingly descriptive; and through the whole displays such unequalled merit, as justly entitles him to that very comprehensive, though concise compliment paid him many years ago, ‘This is the Jew that Shakespeare drew.’\(^24\)

The famous ‘concise compliment’ is attributed to Alexander Pope, supposedly paid when he and Macklin met after a performance.

Portia was played by Kitty Clive, a delightful comedienne who received more unfavourable criticism for this performance than for any in her long career.\(^25\) Gentleman calls it ‘a ludicrous burlesque on the character … in the spirited scene she was clumsy … in the grave part—sure never was such a female put into breeches before!—she was awkwardly dissonant’. In the trial, ‘as if conscious she could not get through without the aid of trick, [she] flew to the pitiful resource of taking off the peculiarity of some judge, or noted lawyer; from which wise stroke, she created laughter in a scene where the deepest attention should be preserved’.\(^26\)

Macklin's text for the 1740-1 season, although probably abbreviated, would have been very close to the Quarto text of 1600. There is no record of any interpolation, and all characters, including Morocco and Arragon, were present—Arragon fell out of the play during the first season, and was not seen again until Charles Kean's revival of 1858, but ‘Morochius’ appeared in some, although not all, London performances of the *Merchant* until 1757: the 1773 Bell edition, without either of Portia's unsuccessful suitors, is probably close to the play that Macklin performed later in his career.\(^27\)

On 7 May 1789, Macklin, at the age of ninety, began a performance, but found himself unable to continue past the first scene, and retired from the stage. For nearly fifty years, he had defined the role of Shylock.

**GERMANY: SCHRÖDER, IFFLAND, FLECK**

As the Macklin era was drawing to a close, the history of *The Merchant of Venice* in modern Germany began. Friedrich Ludwig Schröder was chiefly responsible for introducing Shakespeare to the German theatre; in 1771 he took over the management of the Hamburg National Theatre from his stepfather Konrad Ackermann, and brought *Hamlet* to the stage in 1776, followed by *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* in 1777.
Using the translation of Christoph Martin Wieland, Schröder cut nearly all of the fifth act. Not much has been written about his Shylock—he is thought to have played him much as Macklin did, harsh and vindictive, while retaining some of the audience's sympathy. More important, perhaps, than Schröder's own performances is the influence he had as guest director in Vienna, Mannheim and elsewhere—one of his associates in Mannheim was the playwright-actor August Wilhelm Iffland.

Schiller admired Iffland as an actor but did not think much of his plays, perhaps because at the time they were more popular than Schiller's. During the 1780s the Mannheim National Theatre developed strongly under Iffland's leadership, and upon transferring to the National Theatre of Berlin, Iffland mounted several visually spectacular productions of Shakespeare. As the Jew, he presented a comical figure—indeed he may have been the first actor to play Shylock this way—speaking with a foreign accent, and regarded as 'irksome' and 'impish' rather than seriously threatening. He wore a 'blue coat with fur trimming, a caftan and red stockings. His performance was an aggregation of small mannerisms, commonly accepted as typical of the Jews. He pattered across the stage with mincing footsteps, he walked in circles when worried, he crumpled his cap in distress during the trial scene.'

Ferdinand Fleck had his first success as Gloucester, opposite Schröder's Lear; he played Shylock in 1797, only four years before his death at the age of forty-one. His was a different Jew than Iffland presented: the poet, critic and Shakespeare translator Ludwig Tieck thought Fleck 'horrible and ghostlike, but … always noble'.

**ENTER KEMBLE**

The 1788-9 season that saw Macklin's final exit from the English stage was also John Philip Kemble's first as manager of Drury Lane—the *Merchant* was performed once, on 17 January 1789, with Kemble as Shylock and his sister, Sarah Siddons, as Portia. The handsome and dignified Kemble never considered himself suited to the role, however, and when he later staged the *Merchant*, it was usually with Tom King, the original Sir Peter Teazle and a much-loved actor, but no Shylock: the best that Gentleman could say about him was that his performance 'is by no means so deficient as many principal parts' then being acted in London.

Kemble published his own edition of the *Merchant* 'as first acted at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden', in 1810. Taken together with Elizabeth Inchbald's 1808 edition, also 'as Performed at the Theatre Royal', these versions give us a reliable record of the play as it was presented at this time. As in the Bell edition, both Morocco and Arragon are missing, but the Kemble and Inchbald texts make some sense of the casket theme by rewriting Bassanio's choosing speech in 3.2. Songs for Lorenzo and Jessica are interpolated, and except for the Shylock scenes, huge chunks of the play are deleted. Overall, though, Kemble retained more of the Quarto text than did Macklin, and the order of the scenes is not altered—that 'improvement' was yet to come.

While Kemble's work in preparing a relatively coherent text is to be admired, we should remember that his production was rarely seen—in the 1790s, aside from a few summer performances at the Haymarket, Londoners had the opportunity to see the *Merchant* only once every two years. But this changed when Thomas Harris and W. T. 'Gentleman' Lewis engaged George Frederick Cooke for the 1800-1 season at Covent Garden, and London audiences learned what those in the provinces had known for years: the new Macklin had arrived. However, he did not stay long.

**GEORGE FREDERICK COOKE, EDMUND KEAN**

Cooke was forty-four years old when he made his debut at Covent Garden. An actor of immense power, he would have had a long and distinguished career, but frequent non-appearances due to drunkenness made employing him a risky proposition: at the time, Covent Garden had no one to compare with Drury Lane's Kemble, so the risk was worth taking.
Like David Garrick, Cooke chose Richard III for his debut. His Shylock, first seen 10 November 1800, earned qualified praise from the Porcupine: ‘His acting was uncommonly striking, his knowledge of the author complete, but his declamation jars upon the ear, as he is accustomed to give a whole line on one unvaried harsh note … In every scene there was much, very much, to commend; in the great scene with Tubal, everything. The audience seemed electrified by his excellence in it.’

The 1800-1 season was the high point of Cooke's career; over the rest of the decade, non-appearances due to ‘indisposition’, and appearances that should have been non-appearances, grew too frequent for managements and audiences to tolerate. In 1810 he embarked on an American tour, and for the first time Americans could experience the full power of The Merchant of Venice. ‘Thespis’ of the New York Columbian writes that Cooke's performance was

more than acting, it was nature improved and refined by the most consummate art. Mr Cooke, beyond all other players that have appeared on the American boards, adheres with more critical accuracy and studied uniformity to the text and spirit of his author. He is less solicitous to attract admiration by polished gestures and striking attitudes … The great points of playing are, consequently, at times in some measure lost. No actor appears less inclined to gain applause, at the sacrifice of nature and propriety.

Less than two years later Cooke died, virtually destitute, in New York. He was buried in the Strangers' Vault of St Paul's Church, and in 1820, another famous Shylock, Edmund Kean, had the remains moved to the churchyard and commissioned a monument to his great predecessor.

It may seem odd to place Edmund Kean near the end of a section, rather than the beginning, but contrary to what is generally believed, Kean did not bring any radically new conception to Shylock. The legend of his first appearance at Drury Lane has been recounted many times, and to say that it has been ‘embellished’ is to put it charitably.

An article in New Monthly Magazine of May 1834 relates that when Kean turned up at the theatre, an unnamed actor said, ‘I say! he's got a black wig and beard! Did you ever see Shylock in a black wig?’ This fanciful account, written after Kean's death, was accepted by Frederick William Hawkins, whose 1883 biography of Kean reveals that he took ‘a little black wig from his little bundle … heedless of or inattentive to the astonishment on the faces of his companions’.

But there is no compelling reason to believe that any Shylock wore a red wig before William Poel in 1898: Johann Zoffany's portrait of Macklin as Shylock shows him with dark brown hair, and a coloured engraving of Kemble's Shylock, issued in 1809, reveals him to be black-haired and bearded. The notion that Kean would harbour a ‘secret’ Shylock, and play him differently than he had done so successfully in the provinces, is not only absurd, but is inconsistent with the one opening-night story that does have an air of truth about it: Kean's friend, Joseph Drury, former headmaster of Harrow, was in the house and is said to have murmured ‘he is safe!’ when the audience applauded Shylock's first line. Drury was living in retirement near Exeter, and had seen Kean perform there; should the actor have presented some new and different interpretation, Drury surely would have commented on it.

Playing before the same type of stock scenery Kemble would have had twenty years earlier, and using the same text, Kean's performance was well within the boundaries defined by his two most important predecessors. When ‘Mr Kean from Exeter’ stunned Drury Lane on 26 January 1814, it was as a new and brilliant actor, not a new and brilliant Shylock—had Kean emulated Garrick and Cooke, and chosen Richard III for his debut, the result would have been the same.
Coleridge’s famous remark about Kean, ‘To see him act, is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning’, is not merely general praise, he is describing the most important element in Kean's approach to the art of acting. As Charles Shattuck notes, ‘Kean's forte was naturalism—the vivid realisation of exactly what emotional state, vocal tone, and bit of behavior was to be called up at every instant in the stage life of a character.’ Coleridge was not the only great poet to notice this: to Keats, ‘other actors are constantly thinking about their sum-total effect throughout a play. Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about anything else.’ These perceptions serve as reminder that whatever the ‘sum-total effect’ of Kean's Shylock, it did not derive from a considered interpretation of the role as an organic whole.

Kean impressed William Hazlitt, though Hazlitt correctly predicted in the Morning Chronicle of 27 January 1814 that the young actor would be ‘a greater favourite in other parts’. To Hazlitt, Kean did not sufficiently show the ‘the morose, sullen, inward, inveterate, inflexible malignancy of Shylock’, but

in giving effect to the conflict of passions arising out of the contrasts of situation, in varied vehemence of declamation, in keenness of sarcasm, in the rapidity of his transitions from one tone and feeling to another, in propriety and novelty of action, presenting a succession of striking pictures, and giving perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise, it would be difficult to single out a competitor.

Two years later, Hazlitt gave an even more favourable opinion, noting ‘Mr Kean's manner is much nearer the mark’, and returned to the subject again in 1817, with a well-known, and most misleading, comment:

When we first went to see Mr Kean as Shylock, we expected to see, what we had been used to see, a decrepid old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy, inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge … so rooted was our habitual impression of the part from seeing it caricatured in the representation, that it was only from a careful perusal of the play itself that we saw our error …

Hazlitt’s description of these other Shylocks has been accepted as ‘a composite portrait as actors since Macklin had presented him’, but who were these ‘decrepid old’ Shylocks, and when did Hazlitt see them? Hazlitt joined the Morning Chronicle as parliamentary and theatrical correspondent in 1812, and he is unlikely to have been a regular theatregoer before that. After his wedding in 1808, he resided at Winterslow in a cottage belonging to his wife—he may have seen Kemble or Cooke in the provinces, or in London, but what we know of these Shylocks hardly puts them into the ‘bent with age’ category. After Cooke, the Merchant was seldom seen in London: a more likely explanation is that Hazlitt's other Shylocks existed only in his imagination, and that he had rarely, if ever, seen The Merchant of Venice before January of 1814; Hazlitt would not have been the first newcomer to theatre criticism to claim more playgoing experience than he actually had.

This is not to say that Kean's Shylock was not in some respects more sympathetic than Macklin's or Cooke's. Shylock is an ‘outsider’, and as Jonathan Bate notes, Kean, with his illegitimate birth and poverty-stricken youth, was an outsider himself, who specialised in outsider parts. Such an actor would have special appeal to the radical Hazlitt, and to the Whig-dominated audience at Drury Lane, a theatre that served as a home ‘for Opposition politics, and a reading of Shakespeare as a friend of the people against the autocracy of government’. There is also the intriguing matter of Kean's own Jewish ancestry—his father had brothers named Aaron and Moses. That this could have been a factor, even a major factor, in Kean's portrayal of Shylock is undeniable, but it is also undeniable that another of Kean's triumphs was Barabas in The Jew of Malta.
LUDWIG DEVRIENT, KARL SEYDELMANN

Just as Edmund Kean was the greatest of English Romantic actors, Ludwig Devrient held that status in Germany, and his Shylock commanded the German stage over the same period that Kean's did the English and American—they were nearly exact contemporaries. As Simon Williams notes, Devrient's Shylock seemed to have spent his life 'building up resentment against the hated Christians; in fact, this hatred was the dominant concern of his life, making his demand for Antonio's flesh an act of desperate rebellion, a necessary consummation, yet a triumphant culmination of years of bitterness, suffering and martyrdom'.

Complicating any discussion of Devrient's characterisation is the fact that he often changed it, this inconsistency exacerbated by a serious drinking problem. He played Shylock either with a distinctly dark skin or speaking in a recognisably Jewish accent, dressed as a Venetian Jew, or as a Polish or Hungarian Jew. But he always took care that the character's nobility—a quality which audiences constantly associated with European culture—was persistently to the fore … perhaps no German actor so completely embodied the tragic dimensions of the role.

Only a few years younger than Kean and Devrient, and also going to an early grave, was Karl Seydelmann. Born in Silesia, he made his way to the German stage via Prague, and came to be regarded as Devrient's successor in Berlin in the 1830s; Mephistopheles, Iago and Shylock were some of his best roles. As the Jew, he ‘was the incorporation of a persecuted nation's accumulated wrath. Even in his outbursts of fiendish rejoicing over Antonio's ruin, in his sanguinary yearnings to take the life of his arch-enemy, in his tremulous exaltation whilst anticipating his revenge, he compelled his audience to feel that there was some justification for all those manifestations of extravagant excitement'.

WILLIAM CHARLES MACREADY

Yet another contemporary of Edmund Kean was William Charles Macready; he lived so much longer that he is easily mistaken for someone of a later era, but he was only five years younger, and after his London debut in 1816, he became Kean's rival for the unofficial title of England's leading actor. Macready first played Shylock at Covent Garden in 1823, when he was thirty, but only sporadically after that—he never considered it a good part for him, and given his triumphs as Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth and Claude Melnotte in The Lady of Lyons, there was little reason to persist. He did perform the Merchant somewhat more frequently in the late 1830s and early 1840s; he appears to have anticipated Irving in lending Shylock an unusual air of refinement. The Spectator (12 October 1839) said,

Mr Macready has endeavoured to give personal dignity to the Jew, and to soften down the ugly features of the character by assuming an erect port and a frank and cordial manner, that are quite inconsistent with the persecution and insults to which the whole tribe are subject; he makes us wonder that a man of his appearance should belong to a despised race, much more that he should be accustomed to such indignities as Shylock reminds Antonio of putting on him.

Macready's Portia at this time was Helen Faucit. She ‘became the gravity of the learned doctor better than the gayety of Portia; her sprightly sallies at the expense of her suitors were forced, and her modest sweetness was not wholly free from the approach of affectation’. The Spectator closes by remarking, ‘we ought not to pass by the two scenes of Venice without praise, but they made others look shabby by comparison’.

The comparative quality of Macready's Venice and Belmont sets is not important; that the scenery should be mentioned at all is. The 1820s saw the introduction of gas and calcium lighting, i.e. ‘limelight’, to London's
theatres, innovations that demanded greater attention to the quality of what was being illuminated, and Macready's tenure at Drury Lane marks the gradual transition from the 'stock' Merchant to one with scenery expressly designed for the play. In contrast to 1839, when only the Venice scenes were worthy of a brief comment, the December 1841 production drew this reaction from The Times:

The scenery is in the best possible taste, very beautiful, and yet nicely discriminated, so as not to overbalance the drama. The effect of the tribunal, with the forty, was most imposing, reminding us of that produced by the Roman Senate in Mr Macready's revival of Coriolanus. The moonlit garden in the fifth act is particularly beautiful, sparkling with soft light, and melting away into a poetic indistinctness at the back.59

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

From the time of Macklin through to the late nineteenth century, reviews of English productions make little mention of Shylock as a representative character of the Jewish race. One can only speculate why this was so: while not disregarding such phenomena as the debate over the Jew Bill of 1753, or the barriers that kept Nathan Rothschild, elected four times, from taking his seat in Parliament, it appears that the rights of England's Jewish population, always comparatively small, were not a major factor in English political life.60

A progression of other Jewish characters made its way to the London stage. Ironically, the first was created by Charles Macklin in 1769, the Italian Jew Beau Mordecai, a minor figure in his enormously successful farce, Love à la Mode, where not only Mordecai, but the Scottish Sir Archibald Macsarcasm (the role Macklin wrote for himself), and the Irish Sir Callaghan O'Brallaghan are satirised. In 1772 Richard Cumberland wrote Naphthali, a Jewish stockbroker and moneylender (a small part and one of the less likeable characters) into his comedy The Fashionable Lover; in the same year the broker Moses had a four-line role in Samuel Foote's The Nabob, followed two years later by the friendly Moses Manasses in Foote's The Cozeners. Sheridan gave the English theatre the 'honest Israelite' Moses in The School for Scandal (1776), and other kindly Jews followed: Sheva in Cumberland's The Jew (1794), Nadab in his comic opera The Jew of Mogadore (1808) and the warm-hearted central roles in two plays by Thomas Dibdin, Abednego in The Jew and the Doctor (1798), and Ephraim in The School for Prejudice (1801). Some of these plays were popular for a long time, and one, The School for Scandal, is a major work: except for Nadab, the Jewish characters are taken from contemporary English life, and that they are mostly sympathetic means that we have travelled some distance from Granville's 'stock-jobbing Jew'.

Of infinitely greater importance was a brilliantly drawn character, taken not from the Exchange, but from London's underworld: with the publication of Oliver Twist in 1838, and its subsequent stage adaptations, Fagin, virtually overnight, replaced Shylock as the most important fictive Jew in English culture. Although Jews were never a large proportion of London's poor East End neighbourhoods, their increasing numbers during the nineteenth century inevitably meant that some would turn to crime: ‘Fagin was probably untypical of the run of London criminals of the time, but the portrait of him offered by Dickens was not an inaccurate depiction of the common view of the Anglo-Jewish malefactor.’61 As is well known, Dickens encountered protests about his depiction of Fagin, and later tried to make amends with the kindly Riah in Our Mutual Friend.

CHARLES KEAN

Macready's production, with its attention to details of staging, began a new phase in the Merchant's history, and it marked the close of another. The exclusive right of London's two patent theatres to perform spoken plays ended in 1843, and so the names Drury Lane and Covent Garden disappear from our story—they were devoted more and more to opera, while the newly licensed smaller houses such as the Haymarket (now allowed to operate throughout the year), the Princess's and the Lyceum became the focus of Shakespearean
production in London.

The link between Macready and Charles Kean is direct, for the younger Kean used Macready's promptbooks, copied for him by the stage manager and prompter George Ellis, in preparing his own productions. His skills as an actor never approached those of his father, but as a director and theatrical manager his influence on Shakespeare in the English theatre was greater and more lasting. When he assumed control of the Princess's in 1851, Kean embarked on a series of Shakespearean productions, of which The Merchant of Venice, opening on 12 June 1858, was the most spectacular ever seen until that time. John William Cole provides this description of the opening scene:

The curtain draws up and we discover ourselves in Venice, the famed Queen of the Adriatic, 'throned on her hundred Isles’ … we see the actual square of St Mark with the campanile and clocktower, the cathedral, and the three standards, painted from drawings taken on the spot; restored, as in 1600, when Shakespeare wrote the play, and the incidents he has so skilfully interwoven are supposed to take place. Throngs of picturesquely-contrasted occupants gradually fill the area, passing and re-passing in their ordinary avocations. Nobles, citizens, inquisitors, foreigners, traders, water-carriers, and flower-girls are there; a flourish of trumpets announces the approach of the Doge, who issues in state procession, on his way to some public ceremony.62

Kean's text was also very different from anything seen before. Although their parts were much reduced, Morocco and Arragon were restored, The Times (14 June 1858) noting, whereas the story of Portia and her caskets has hitherto seemed only subordinate to that part of the action in which Shylock and Antonio are chief figures, full justice is now done to the whole of the plot as designed by the author, and thus a play that has hitherto been attractive solely on account of certain isolated scenes is now interesting from beginning to end.

While the spectacle at the Princess's warranted the attention it received from the critics, the performances were unexciting: The Times did note that ‘Mr Charles Kean is seldom seen to more advantage than as Shylock’, but clearly the fire of his father, or even of Macready, was not lit. For developments in the acting of the Merchant, we must look to Germany and America.

DAWISON, BOOTH, MITTERWURZER

Bohumil Dawison made his acting debut at the age of nineteen in his native Warsaw; after establishing himself in Hamburg, he went on to important roles in Vienna and Dresden.63 Known for his Hamlet, Othello, Lear and Richard III, he was the first Jewish actor to play Shylock in Europe, and he also toured to the United States. William Winter of the New York Tribune, as bigoted and vindictive a critic as the American theatre has ever known,64 was usually suspicious of foreign actors, but he had some good things to say about Dawison's performance at New York's Stadt Theatre in September of 1866:

The chief merits of it were authority and executive skill. The chief defect of it was an indefinable yet clearly perceptible pettiness in the quality, fibre, or essence of the character. Whatever else Shylock may not be, he is terrible. Dawison's embodiment evinced duplicity, greed, and implacable malignity, but, notwithstanding his uncommon advantages of physical stature and intellectual force, it was not terrific … the dress was skilfully fashioned to accentuate the height and leanness of the figure; the elocution was exact, fluent, and consistent, marked by a slight accent, intended to denote that Shylock is a foreigner in Venice, and that accent was intensified in moments of vehement utterance.65
In the spring of 1853, during the days of the California gold rush, the actress Catherine Sinclair, who had achieved some notoriety due to her recent divorce from Edwin Forrest, engaged a nineteen-year-old actor for a season at the San Francisco Theatre. The *Placer Times and Transcript* (9 September 1853) duly noted:

Last evening Mr Edwin Booth had a full house at this theatre on the occasion of his benefit. He performed for the second time the part of Shylock, in Shakespeare's play the *Merchant of Venice*. He was highly successful in this difficult delineation of character, giving promise of great future excellence in it. As Portia, Mrs Sinclair acquitted herself with much credit, her performances in the court scene being in our opinion, the most judicious and excellent piece of acting she has rendered on the San Francisco boards.

Booth went on to achieve an unchallenged pre-eminence amongst American actors; as with Edmund Kean, Shylock did not rank with Hamlet, Othello or Iago as one of his great roles, but he played the part often, especially as he grew older. His Jew was very much in the tradition established by Macklin—hard, cruel and single-minded in his pursuit of revenge—John Ranken Towe, one of the major critics of the day, writes ‘his portrayal was a most harmonious blend of racial prejudice and hate, insatiate avarice, dignity, craft, revengeful passion, and abject defeat. He made no pretence of elevating it with any touch of patriarchal or romantic nobility.’

For all of his fame, Booth cannot be seen as part of a move towards a greater naturalism that was later to distinguish Shakespearean acting in America, but in Germany this movement had begun. The actor Joseph Schildkraut says of Friedrich Mitterwurzer, ‘in a period when the German stage was dominated by the romantic and declamatory school of acting, [he] was one of the few exponents of the nascent era of realism’. Known for his interpretation of Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck* and other Ibsen characters, Mitterwurzer showed Shylock to be driven by malice, ‘the common moneypeddling Jew, rich beyond all measure, greedy and mendacious’, a strange mix of the traditional German clown Hanswurst, and the intense realism he brought to Ibsen.

**FROM THE BANCROFTS TO IRVING**

Squire and Marie Bancroft were having great success with the genteel comedies of Tom Robertson at their small Prince of Wales Theatre on Tottenham Street, so their decision to offer *The Merchant of Venice* in 1875 represented a new direction.

Charles Kean cut the *Merchant* drastically, but he did not alter the order of the scenes. The Bancrofts, hampered by a tiny stage, were forced to take a radical approach to the text: as Squire Bancroft recalls: ‘I took upon myself the great responsibility of rearranging the text of the Play, so as to avoid change of scene in sight of the audience, and to adapt the work, so far as possible, to its miniature frame.’ He delayed 1.2 until after the first interval, and combined 1.1 and 1.3 into one scene, setting it ‘under the arches of the Doge's Palace … [with] a lovely view of Santa Salute’. The necessary passage of time between 1.1 and 1.3 was established ‘by carefully arranged processions and appropriate pantomimic action from the crowd of merchants, sailors, beggars, Jews, who were throughout passing and repassing’. Clement Scott mentions one important detail missing from Bancroft's list—gondolas—one seemed ‘to hear the ripple of water as [they] glide on’.

Bancroft's invention, born of the necessity to economise on set changes, became standard practice—while different actor-managers adopted different sequences, they always grouped the Venice and Belmont scenes, the journey from one to the other taking place during an interval. Beerbohm Tree, recalling the Bancroft *Merchant* years later, remarks that it was ‘the first production in which the modern spirit of stage management asserted itself, transporting us as it did into the atmosphere of Venice, into the rarefied realms of Shakespearian comedy’.
The production was not a success, due mostly to Charles Coghlan's decision to underplay Shylock in a style more suited to the modern comedies in which he had excelled, “a moody, sulky, and uninteresting person”. Obviously, one cannot have a good Merchant without a good Shylock, but the Bancrofts came close, for as Tree remembers, “it was here that Ellen Terry first shed the sunlight of her buoyant and radiant personality on the character of Portia”.

ENTER PORTIA

Portia is by far the largest part in the play, but some aspects of the character place her out of the first rank of Shakespeare's comic heroines. Although a transvestite role, it is not one of the ‘breeches’ parts so loved in the Restoration theatre: instead of dressing up like Rosalind, ‘in all points like a man / A gallant curtle-ax upon [her] thigh’, she wears a legal gown, possibly reverting to civilian dress for the very brief 4.2. Unlike Rosalind, Viola, Julia or Imogen, she does not don male attire to escape danger or find her true love, but only to participate in a legal proceeding—unlike the other heroines, she gets her man in the middle of the play, and no resourcefulness or bravery is required until she decides to help her new husband's friend out of trouble; until then, her role is entirely passive. Hence we can understand why Sarah Siddons thought her ‘a character in which it was not likely that I should excite any great sensation’, while Fanny Kemble noted that Portia ‘is not a part that is generally much liked by actresses, or that excited much enthusiasm in the public’.

Apart from being comparatively unexciting, there is also the fact that Portia is, in some respects, less than admirable. She is the chief agent of Shylock's downfall—after invalidating the bond through the ‘no jot of blood’ quibble, she unnecessarily (or so it seems) engages in a prosecution that quickly becomes a persecution: indeed, Ellen Terry notes, ‘whatever view one takes of it, it is impossible to admire it, although it may be defended on the ground that the end justifies the means’.

Before Terry, no actress advanced her career, or even made a lasting impression, as Portia. The great Shylocks who preceded Irving—Macklin, Cooke, Kean—played opposite any number of Portias, depending on when and where they happened to be doing the play, while Terry had the advantage of long-term employment in the Lyceum company. Also, the extent to which the text was cut in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned Portia into a relatively minor role: without Morocco and Arragon three scenes are gone, and gone along with them is any coherent treatment of the riddle of gold, silver and lead. Bassanio's casket scene was always much abbreviated, as was Act V, if Act V was played at all.

Helen Faucit's performance has probably received more attention than it deserves because of the notoriously negative review of the Irving production that appeared in Blackwood's (December 1879)—that the author was Blackwood's publisher Sir Theodore Martin, Faucit's husband, was an open secret. Martin deplored all the qualities Terry brought to the role in an implied, and at one point explicit, comparison with his now retired wife: reading this review, one might think that Portia was an important part for Faucit, but Faucit spent only a few seasons with Macready, and Macready did not do the Merchant that often; most of her later career was in minor provincial companies. In 1867 she appeared in Manchester, and the North British Daily Mail was unimpressed, saying that the casket scene was ‘painful … bordering on the ridiculous’, adding that ‘Portia was never one of Miss Faucit's best characters, and she is now more than ever past looking the part’.

Terry came to Portia with the advantage of being relatively young, twenty-eight, with a slim figure and great physical beauty. James Spedding (known primarily as an authority on Sir Francis Bacon) writes of her performance for the Bancrofts, ‘everything that she had to do seemed to come equally easy to her, and was done equally well; and the critic who would undertake to define the limits within which her power lies must be either very sagacious or very blind and deaf’.

Some of the cuts and rearrangements the Bancrofts made to the text would have been a help, not a hindrance, to Terry—indeed, Spedding observes that ‘the part of Portia is not a long one’. In this version, instead of first
being ‘aweary of this great world’, Portia was thrust into the tension of Morocco's choice of caskets. Spedding admired ‘the reserved and stately courtesy with which she received the Prince of Morocco, and explained to him the conditions of his venture; her momentary flutter of alarm as he went to make his choice; her sudden relief, mixed with amusement, when he began by dismissing the leaden casket with contempt’.

Terry's brilliance was wasted opposite the quiet Shylock of Coghlan, but Henry Irving was looking for an Ophelia in 1878, and acting on the advice of his friends Sir Frederick and Lady Pollock, he engaged Terry. After her success in that part, and as Pauline in Lytton's ever-popular Lady of Lyons, Irving cast her as Portia, and the result was, in terms of longevity and audience approval, the most successful production ever of The Merchant of Venice.

So much has been written about the Lyceum Merchant, which opened on 1 November 1879, that only a few main points can be dealt with here—Irving's stage business is well recorded in reviews, biographies and other historical literature, and key moments, such as his famous ‘return’ to an empty house after Jessica's elopement, are described in the textual commentary.

Lyceum productions were highly regarded for the quality of their scenery, but the Merchant of 1879 was not particularly lavish, its total cost being only £1,200. As Irving's biographer August Brereton notes, the production was ‘a revelation, but it was made so by the intelligence and admirable acting, not, as some people seem to think … by the scenery’. The story of how Irving decided to play Shylock after observing Levantine merchants while on a Mediterranean cruise is well known; it is also said that he went for a more dignified Jew because he knew how limited an actor he was, without the physical or vocal power of a Macklin or a Kemble. In a remarkably well-written review, the Spectator (8 November 1879) describes the qualities Irving brought to Shylock, and the social attitudes that articulate spectators brought to, and derived from, the performance:

Probably, to every mind, except that of Shakespeare himself—in which all potential interpretations of his Shylock, as all potential interpretations of his Hamlet, must have had a place—the complex image which Mr Irving, presented to a crowd more or less impressed with notions of their own concerning the Jew whom Shakespeare drew, was entirely novel and unexpected; for here is a man whom none can despise, who can raise emotions both of pity and of fear, and make us Christians thrill with a retrospective sense of shame. Here is an usurer indeed, but no more like the customary modern rendering of that extortionate lender of whom Bassanio borrowed ‘monies’, than the merchants dei Medici were like pawnbrokers down Whitechapel way; an usurer, indeed, and full of ‘thrift’, which is rather the protest of his disdain and disgust for the sensuality and frivolity of the ribald crew out of whom he makes his ‘Christian ducats’, than of his own sordidness … a Jew, in intellectual faculties, in spiritual discipline, far in advance of the time and the country in which he lives, shaken with strong passion sometimes, but for the most part fixed in a deep and weary disdain.

This Shylock is not from the world of Whitechapel pawnbrokers—in mentioning contemporary Jewish life, the critic instantly dismisses it as being of no relevance to the play. Irving is opposed to another Shylock, the presumed Shylock of two centuries ago, and it is in comparison with this Shylock that Irving can ‘make us Christians thrill with a retrospective sense of shame’.

While Irving played a fuller text than was customary at that time (he included Morocco but not Arragon), Portia's part was still heavily cut. What most endeared Terry to the audience, and offended the more conservative critics, was her beauty, her gaiety and the frankness with which she portrayed her sexual desire for Bassanio. Blackwood's was especially disapproving of how Terry held Bassanio caressingly by the hand, nay, almost in an embrace, with all the unrestrained fondness which is conceivable only after he had actually won her … There is, altogether, a great deal too
much of what Rosalind calls ‘a coming-on disposition’ in Miss Terry's bearing towards her lover. It is a general fault with her, but in Portia it is painfully out of place.

Terry's forwardness was also more than Henry James could cope with. To this ‘miserable little snob’, as Theodore Roosevelt once called him, Terry giggles too much, plays too much with her fingers, is too free and familiar, too osculatory, in her relations with Bassanio. The mistress of Belmont was a great lady, as well as a tender and clever woman; but this side of the part quite eludes the actress, whose deportment is not such as we should expect in the splendid spinster who has princes for wooers. When Bassanio has chosen the casket which contains the key of her heart, she approaches him, and begins to pat and stroke him. This seems to us an appallingly false note, ‘Good heavens, she's touching him!’ a person sitting next to us exclaimed—a person whose judgment in such matters is always unerring.

James’s ‘unerring’ judge was the former Portia, Fanny Kemble.

**AFTER IRVING**

The Lyceum production marks a major turning point in the history of the *Merchant*: Irving joined Macklin, Cooke and Kean as a Shylock against whom future performers would be measured, and for the first time Portia attracted considerable notice. This was as true in the United States as it was in England, since Irving's company made no less than six American tours between 1883 and 1903.

One nearly immediate effect of Irving's success was that the play would no longer be acceptable without Act V. When Lawrence Barrett staged the *Merchant* in 1886, using his friend Edwin Booth's text, *Shakespeariana's* critic complained, ‘The charming fifth act, which so ideally and joyously rounds out the comedy, is altogether cut, and only a ragged here and there, and a consciousness of inconsequence, in scenes not wholly dedicated to the Jew, remain vaguely to remind us of the perfect whole we miss.’

Booth and Barrett jointly mounted a new *Merchant* in the following season, and 5.1 was restored, the newly executed set revealing, as described in the Philadelphia *Item*, Jessica and Lorenzo in a ‘dreamy Italian garden by moonlight, with rose-colored lamps and twinkling stars’. They went to great lengths to ensure that the other sets, too, would outdo anything yet seen in America: Act I showed ‘the Piazzetta of St Mark along the south side of the Palace of the Doges, whose columned facade filled the side of the stage to the audience's right’, and for Act II Shylock’s house stood beside a bridge spanning a canal, high enough so that a gondola could pass underneath with its gondolier standing. The beautiful Polish actress Helena Modjeska, who had great success as Ophelia, was their Portia. Her performance was distinguished by the quiet earnestness with which she delivered the ‘mercy’ speech.

As noted, Booth's Shylock was a much darker character than Irving’s, and some of the stage business in his promptbooks is reminiscent of Victorian melodrama. He was not unaware that his performance might be seen as a libel against the Jewish people, but like many an actor after him, he believed that to play Shylock essentially as a villain was to remain faithful to Shakespeare's intention, however problematic that might be to modern sentiments. He once wrote to Richard Mansfield, another notable Shylock, ‘it is not easy to estimate how much the antipathies to the Jewish race have been sharpened by those portrayals of the wolf-like ferocity of the one great figure that typifies the spirit of usury’.

Mansfield, an accomplished musician as well as a versatile actor, played only a few Shakespearean leads in a career cut short by an early death; his great successes were as Jekyll/Hyde in a stage adaptation of Stevenson's tale, and as Cyrano de Bergerac. The story of Mansfield's *Merchant* is a strange one: while on his third
American tour of 1887-8, Henry Irving saw Mansfield perform, and was so impressed that he invited him to appear for a season at the Lyceum, a season that unfortunately did not prove to be a success. Mansfield ended up owing Irving a large amount of money, and subsequently developed an irrational and obsessive hatred of his erstwhile friend—when he came to play Shylock in 1893, opposite his wife Beatrice Cameron as Portia, Mansfield most wanted to better Irving, about to embark on another American tour, by returning to the ‘true’ Shylock of Shakespeare. He wrote to William Winter, ‘I shall make Shylock what Shakespeare evidently intended: a hotblooded, revengeful & rapacious Oriental Jew.’ Winter then praised Mansfield’s interpretation for having ‘brought into the strongest relief the craft and wickedness of his motives, the malignity of his hatred, and the deadly determination of his passion for revenge’, but the production played to poor houses in Chicago, where Irving had been a short time previously. Mansfield blamed Winter: ‘Damn your criticisms! … I had a deuce of a time getting our only patrons, the Jews, to come and see The Merchant, because you made me out a fiend and a vulture.’

More successful in post-Irving America was Augustin Daly, one of the most powerful managers of the century, known especially for bringing elaborate spectacle to his productions of Shakespeare. Daly's first encounter with the Merchant was in 1875, and he followed the (by then) traditional pattern of a rearranged text to allow for scenic tableaux. Towse thought that the ‘the rich dressing and picturesque setting’ made ‘small amends for the irreverent and often incapable treatment of the text’, but he admired the Shylock of E. L. Davenport:

He surpassed Edwin Booth in range, though inferior to him in subtlety and electrical tragic inspiration. His Jew was a forceful and consistent study, masterful, keen, with a note of menace in its sarcastic self-control. He was intense rather than tempestuous, and tore no passion to tatters … the concentrated, cool, and deadly purpose of his acting in the court scene was appalling, and his final collapse a tragic picture of blank and irremediable despair.

Twenty-three years later Daly chose The Merchant of Venice for what was to be his last and most sumptuous Shakespearean production. Unlike his previous effort, this was after Irving’s American tours and the Booth/Barrett revival, and Daly was determined to surpass them. Venice was prettified—Shylock's house, ‘mouldy and crumbling’ in Booth and Barrett’s production, was gaily painted and covered with roses, and there were more extras providing atmosphere than had ever been seen in the Merchant. Apart from the scenery, Daly’s leading lady, Ada Rehan, was the only real attraction—Sidney Herbert was too limited and inexperienced an actor to succeed Davenport, and Daly’s last production was not one of his triumphs.

The Shylock of Scottish-born Robert Mantell, an audience favourite in a variety of heroic roles, would have been more important had he been able to play New York in his prime, but he had to remain outside the state because of a pending arrest warrant for failing to meet alimony payments. His Hamlet and Othello were a hit with the public, but received only guarded approval from the critics, due to his tendency to over-act in the more passionate scenes. One would expect that these excesses would be even worse as Shylock, but to Mantell’s credit, he gave a controlled performance, moving William Edgett to write in the Boston Evening Transcript, ‘so perfect is his command of himself that he is able to give a quiet and downright restrained earnestness to the single phrase, “I am a Jew”, in the midst of a long speech that is aflame with uninterrupted passion and pathos’.

Even when allowing for the varying perceptions of individual critics, around the turn of the century we see a definite pattern emerging in American attitudes to the way Shylock should be played. Irving still cast a long shadow over his successors, who found themselves hard-pressed to place their own stamp on the role: Mansfield and Sothern, in presenting a physically unpleasant and undignified Shylock, received little approval for their efforts, while Mantell earned respect for his restraint. …
Notes

5. Gross, *Shylock*, pp. 16-17. For a more detailed argument denying that Shylock conformed to a stereotype, see Edelman, ‘Which is the Jew’.
9. Chambers and Pullan, *Venice*, pp. 338-49. In a 1977 article, Brian Pullan finds little trace of popular resentment against Jews in Renaissance Venice, and where it did exist, it seems to have been amongst Greeks or other minorities, not Italians (Pullan, ‘A Ship with Two Rudders’, p. 54).
17. In the 1680s Ashkenazi immigration to England increased, and by 1690 enough German Jews lived in London for them to form their own independent community. The first Ashkenazi synagogue, later known as the Great Synagogue, was founded in Duke's Place in 1690. In 1695 the London census showed 853 Jewish names, 255 (30 per cent) of them Ashkenazi (Rubinstein, *History of the Jews*, p. 61).
28. Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, p. 133. I am very much indebted to Williams's magisterial study.
29. Bruford, *Theatre Drama*, p. 34.
33. Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, p. 135.
35. This was not Kemble's first attempt at the part—he did it at Smock Alley, Dublin, and for his London debut in January, 1784.
37. See Appendix 1.
38. Hare, *George Frederick Cooke*, p. 113.
39. He had appeared in London before, at the Little Theatre, Haymarket, in 1778.
40. Hare, *George Frederick Cooke*, p. 119.
44. Lelyveld, *Shylock on the Stage*, p. 42.
47. *qtd* Bate, *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 201.
54. Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, p. 137.
58. Faucit’s Portia is discussed further, p. 22.
60. In *Shakespeare and the Jews*, Shapiro questions the conclusions of Katz and other historians (see above, p. 6), who regard this time as one of improvement for England's Jews, as ‘wishful thinking’ (p. 193). But Shapiro's own use of incidents such as the Jew Bill of 1753 as proof of pervasive anti-Semitism is equally questionable.
68. *qtd* Williams, *German Actors*, p. 132.
73. Scott, *Drama of Yesterday and Today*, p. 583.
74. Tree, *Thoughts*, p. 44.
75. Scott, *Drama of Yesterday and Today*, p. 188.
76. Tree, *Thoughts*, p. 44.
79. Terry, *Four Lectures*, p. 121.
80. See pp. 25, 192, 234.
83. *Ibid*.
85. *As You Like It*, 4.1.112-13.
88. ‘The Drama’, pp. 523, 524.
90. Ibid., p. 48.
91. See p. 223.
93. For a fuller account see *ibid.*, pp. 211-25.
95. Towse, *Sixty Years*, p. 130.
98. Photographs of Augustin Daly's sets for his last great Shakespearean revival of 1898 are in *ibid*.
99. 7 March 1907. qtd *ibid.*, p. 239.

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In the following essay, Hapgood discusses Portia's devotion and loyalty to the letter of the law.]

In a passage which sums up the main point of his provocative article, "The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond," Sigurd Burckhardt writes:

the plot is circular: bound in such a way that the instrument of destruction, the bond, turns out to be the source of deliverance. Portia, won through the bond, wins Antonio's release from it; what is more, she wins it, not by breaking the bond, but by submitting to its rigor more rigorously than even the Jew had thought to do. So seen, one of Shakespeare's apparently most fanciful plots proves to be one of the most exactingly structured; it is what it should be: the play's controlling metaphor. As the subsidiary metaphors of the bond and the ring indicate, The Merchant [The Merchant of Venice] is a play about circularity and circulation; it asks how the vicious circle of the bond's law can be transformed into the ring of love. And it answers: through a literal and unreserved submission to the bond as absolutely binding.1

Thus boldly would Burckhardt put a new twist on the prevailing view of Portia, which sees in her a direct exponent of liberality in love as in law. To Burckhardt, hers is "the way to freedom," but, paradoxically, that entails "a radical and literal acceptance of bondage." To me, neither of these views of Portia seems quite right: the prevailing view mistakes the exceptions for the rule; Burckhardt discerns the general rule, but misses the exceptions that fundamentally qualify it. As I understand Portia in each of the three main sequences in which she figures—the casket-choice, the pound-of-flesh trial, and the ring-trick—her ultimate loyalties are to the law, including its most legalistic forms. Yet in each she also reveals her most appealing trait, a gift for making enlightened exceptions. These exceptions are in the service of a large-minded sense of law, one that includes its spirit as well as its letter; and it is through them, not through out-Shylocking Shylock, that she makes the bond gentle.

I

In each of the three sequences, Portia must cope with "rigorously positive laws," as Burckhardt well puts it, "which threaten to frustrate the very purposes they are meant to serve, but which must nevertheless be obeyed" (pp. 246-47). Portia's approach is basically the same in all, but it is perhaps most clearly seen in the trial, where her enlightened exceptions derive explicitly from contemporary ideas about equity.

The loan-bond between Shylock and Antonio, though legal, is obviously not serving its intended purpose. Shylock is perverting its letter to commit legalized murder. Bassanio's remedy would be to break the law: he begs Portia to "Wrest once the law to your authority,—/ To do a great right, do a little wrong" (IV.i.211-12).2 Portia, however, is firm:

It must not be, there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established:
'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state,—it cannot be.
Her remedy is equity—not simply justice or simply mercy, but justice tempered by mercy. That is what in her “quality of mercy” speech she advocates to Shylock instead of the rigor of the law. And that is what she advocates for Shylock when the tables are turned: the Venetian law she finally invokes leaves the decision of life or death for the offender “in the mercy / Of the Duke only,” and she urges Shylock to “beg mercy of the duke” (351-52, 359). Since this much equity was built into the law, Burckhardt might well maintain that Portia was thus doing no more than fulfilling its letter. But Portia goes further, to urge: “What mercy can you render him Antonio?” (374).

Yet does Portia herself practice the equity she preaches? Is it equitable for Portia to encourage Shylock to think that his case is legally unassailable? She repeatedly assures him that “the Venetian law / Cannot impugn you as you do proceed” (IV.i.174-75). Furthermore, once Shylock has officially invoked the bond and thus decisively broken the law forbidding aliens to contrive against the lives of citizens, should not Portia have applied that law immediately? Instead, she repeatedly seems to offer Shylock the option of insisting, fatally, on the bond and suffering the consequences.

Undoubtedly, Portia's methods in the trial scene (as elsewhere) are highhanded. Yet they seem to me defensible, not as those of a judge administering the law but as those of a teacher presenting a series of lessons in it. For Portia is a born and incorrigible teacher. When we first meet her, for instance, she is trying to mock Nerissa out of her sententiousness: “Good sentences, and well pronouncd,” she laughs, and goes on to pronounce a string of good sentences which proclaim the insufficiency of good sentences: “I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching” (I.ii.15-17). Nerissa of course remains as sententious as ever, the grand comic irony of Portia's pedagogy being that this master teacher finds herself surrounded by twenty who are virtually unteachable.

For the sake of her teaching, Portia is as ready to take enlightened liberties with strict equity as with strict legality. She at first represents the legality of Shylock's claim as secure in order to make graphic to him the distinction between mere justice and equity. Thus, too, she can allow him a purely equitable option when she brings her teaching to the test:

> Why this bond is forfeit,

> And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
> A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
> Nearest the merchant’s heart: be merciful,
> Take thrice thy money, bid me tear the bond.

(IV.i.227-31)

At this point, Shylock fails to respond at all to her instruction, ignoring her equitable alternative and formally charging her by the law to “Proceed to judgment” (236).

It is then that Portia comes closest to the “literal and unreserved submission to the bond as absolutely binding” that Burckhardt finds to be her liberating principle. Certainly, she here invokes the letter of the bond “more rigorously than even the Jew had thought to do”:

> The words expressly are “a pound of flesh”:
> Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
> But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
> One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
> Are (by the law of Venice) confiscate. …

(IV.i.303-307)
But she does not “submit” to it. Although we do not yet know about the law against aliens that she finally applies, Portia of course does, and she can employ it whenever necessary. Her repeated offer that Shylock take his bond is not, then, a real risk; nor does it seem like one. The effect is rather that Portia has successfully foiled Shylock's threat by presenting him with an unacceptable alternative, as Gratiano underlines by jubilantly mocking: “O upright judge!—/ Mark Jew,—O learned judge!” (308-309). There is perhaps more of a threat that Shylock will take Portia's dare after she has refused him thrice the bond and promised “nothing but the penalty” (318). But if Shylock's “pause” seems menacing, Portia seems easily equal to it, adding now the further deterrent that, if he takes more or less than a just pound, “Thou diest” (328). The effect—while Gratiano crows in triumph—is that Shylock has again been faced down by an unacceptable alternative.

To Burckhardt, it is “the apostate rather than the bond that is brought into contempt” (p. 260) by Shylock's refusal to become “a blood witness” to the letter of the law. To me, just the opposite seems true: Shylock's refusal appears to be one of Portia's more successful pieces of instruction, partial as her success may be. It is true that Shylock is extremely reluctant to face the whole truth of what it means to insist upon his bond and nothing but the bond and that he keeps seeking ways out of the confrontation, ways which Portia (all the while silencing Bassanio, who has totally missed her point) must block one by one. But she does repeatedly bring him face to face with the self-destructiveness of “all justice” in a manner that causes him to back away from this ultimate extreme of his self-deadening legalism. If this is largely expediency on his part, still his “Is that the law?” (IV.i.309) seems to register disenchantment as well as disbelief.

It remains for Portia to bring home to Shylock the enormity of the legalized murder he thought to perform, and at last she applies the Venetian law that supersedes the bond. In tempering its punishments, moreover, Portia sees the chance to let the other Christians demonstrate to Shylock the equity that she had earlier advocated. If the final results seem less than equitable, that is because—once again—her instruction is only partially successful.

The Duke comes nearest to rising to Portia's level. Even before she came to the trial, he had recommended, albeit threateningly, an equitable settlement to Shylock; and here he pardons Shylock his life before he asks it (“That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit” [IV.i. 364]) and promises that humbleness may reduce the state's half of his estate to a fine. One can only guess at Portia's reactions, but I see her beam approvingly. She is not at all pleased by Gratiano's vindictiveness, however, and not altogether happy with Antonio's doubly provisional kind of mercy. She is not happy either with the Duke's threat to “recant / The pardon that I late pronounced here” (387-88). My Portia, however, shrugs ruefully, gives Shylock a chance to appeal, and, when he says, “I am content,” backs up the more generous part of Antonio's response, settling for such equity as she has been able to get.

Not that Portia emerges as a paragon. As indulgent as Shakespeare is toward her didacticism, he does not conceal its high price. Part of our sympathy for Shylock comes from our sense that he alone has to pay for Portia's failure to lift him and the others to her own level of enlightenment.

II

In the casket sequence, Portia adheres in general to the letter of her father's will. It is true that in her first scene she repines to Nerissa at this limit on her choice: “I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father …” (1.ii.22-25). And she is not so bound by her father's rules that she cannot play with the idea of misleading the drunken German suitor by setting “a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket …” (91-92). Still, she affirms at the end of the scene that “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will …” (102-104). Accordingly, she runs the risk of being chosen by Morocco or Arragon.
Outlandish as it seems, there is something to be said for her father's device. Its risks frighten off the overly “reasonable”; and those who are so foolhardy (Morocco) or foolish (Arragon) as to try it, fail it. Like most of Shakespeare's fathers, however, Portia's father made the great error of leaving his daughter's wishes out of account. If he had been as wise as she, he would have known, as she puts it, that “the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree” (17-19), and have provided for the claims of her blood. Since he did not, when Bassanio arrives, she does it for him.

Her choice is precisely the kind of man her father most wanted to eliminate. As is borne out by the verses in each of the caskets, what he wanted above all for his daughter was a husband who was not taken in by appearances. And, from the first scene, Bassanio reveals himself to be preoccupied with false show, reminding Antonio of

How much I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance. ...

(I.i.123-25)

A little later we see him, with his borrowed money, ordering the “rare new liveries” that attract to his service the fool Launcelot, who appropriately receives “a livery / More guarded than his fellows' …” (II.ii.147-48). And in the same scene, Bassanio instructs Gratiano to restrain his wild behavior lest it “show / Something too liberal” in Belmont (175-76). His arrival there is preceded by an “ambassador,” of whom Portia's servant reports:

A day in April never came so sweet
To show how costly summer was at hand,
As this fore-spurrer comes before his lord.

(II.ix.93-95)

Such false shows would hardly seem to promise true love. Yet Portia sees in Bassanio the potential for such love and hence makes exceptions to her father's will. She does not go so far as to tell Bassanio the answer to the puzzle; nor (unlike the lady's maid in Il Pecorone) does Nerissa do so. The precise temptation that Portia fears will make her forsworn is more subtle: as she tells Bassanio, “I could teach you / How to choose right …” (III.ii.10-11). And to that temptation, I believe—although she denies it—she succumbs.

Bassanio's privileges stand out by contrast with the pattern established by Morocco and Arragon, who were inspired neither by a confession of the lady's love beforehand nor by music while they made their choice. I find, too, in Portia's lines to Bassanio (before he chooses) a host of subliminal suggestions, of the sort by which a skillful teacher leads a responsive student to make his own “discoveries.” Bassanio is thus made aware that the correct answer is not obvious but needs to be taught; he is brought by Portia's example to think in paradoxes (“O happy torment” [III.ii.37]); and he is prompted to think of success as involving difficulty and hazard (like an exploit of Hercules).

His chief privilege is the song, “Tell me where is Fancy bred.” I do not mean its rhymes with “lead”; they belong at most to the realm of subliminal suggestion. What the singer must convey is the song's warning against trusting the eyes—precisely the trait Portia's father designed the casket-puzzle to test. For in the lines immediately after the song, Bassanio responds directly to this warning (“So may the outward shows be least themselves,—/ The world is still deceiv'd with ornament” [73-74]) and follows it through a series of “so” and “thus” clauses to the decisive “Therefore” that precedes his rejection of the gold and silver caskets.
Thus Portia makes gentle her father's bond. He had intended to provide for a marriage founded on right love, an intention she remains true to, while adjusting his method. For the man she rightly loves, she in effect alters the casket-choice from an “achievement” to an “aptitude” test, one designed to select a husband who can be taught to love rightly. Bassanio of course passes this test brilliantly. That he is truly learning her lesson is shown immediately: although—in his old way—he spends a dozen lines admiring “Fair Portia's counterfeit” (115-26), he then catches himself up to declare how “far this shadow / Doth limp behind the substance” (128-29). Apt pupil that he is, however, he is still in need of further instruction in right love—as Portia shortly learns.

III

Bassanio still must learn to put the laws of their love before those of his friendship with Antonio. That is the upshot of Portia's final lesson, as presented in the ring-sequence. Yet she knows how to make an enlightened exception to her own laws, as well as to those of her father and the state. And it is through her willingness to forgive Bassanio's breach of their love-bond that the “ring of love” at the end is achieved.

The terms of their love-bond are very clear. When Portia first gives Bassanio her ring, she declares:

This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours,—my lord's!—I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(III.ii.170-74)

Bassanio responds with a vow:

Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence,—
O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!

(183-85)

Bassanio's breach of this bond is just as clear. When he gives the ring to the “lawyer” who has saved his friend, it signifies the precedence Bassanio gives his friendship for Antonio over his love for Portia, a precedence which has by then been indicated in many ways. Although Antonio is resigned to the proposed marriage of his friend, he clings to first place in his affection. That is surely part of the reason for his mysterious melancholy and his being moved to tears by Bassanio's departure. If, according to Renaissance orthodoxy, friendship should ideally thus take priority over love, still the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio is plainly much too one-sided to be ideal. Antonio is at once too generous and too possessive. His claim on the love of his “dearest friend” interrupts the consummation of Bassanio's marriage, not because Bassanio might help to save his life but because he wants Bassanio to see him die for his sake, a last request that Antonio makes a test of love: “if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter” (III.ii.319-20). At the trial, Antonio bids his friend a last farewell:

Commend me to your honourable wife ...
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death:
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love. ...

(IV.i.269-73)
Ever impressionable, Bassanio responds to the implied (and invidious) comparison with the declaration that

\[
\text{life itself, my wife, and all the world,}
\]

Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(280-83)

In \textit{Il Pecorone} it is the hero himself who decides to let the lawyer have the ring; in \textit{The Merchant} Bassanio at first refuses to do so and complies only at Antonio's urging:

\[
\text{let him have the ring,}
\]

Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement.

(445-47)

The issue, and Bassanio's choice, could not be more sharply drawn.

Portia is never unduly concerned about Antonio's claims for precedence. At the very first, in fact, she seems ready to make a threesome. After sending Bassanio hence on their wedding day, she tells Lorenzo:

\[
\text{Being the bosom lover of my lord,}
\]

Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul,
From out the state of hellish cruelty!—
This comes too near the praising of myself,
Therefore no more of it. ...

(III.iv.16-23)

Yet even then she is concerned not only that Bassanio prove a good friend, but also that he prove a good husband: “For never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul” (III.ii.304-305). J. A. Bryant puts it too strongly when he remarks that Portia's “whole objective in coming to the trial, as her trick about the ring at the close of that scene shows, is to snare Bassanio. …”3 But there is a sense of husband-hunting as well as friend-saving about Portia's quest to Venice. She is true kin to the much less fortunate Helena, who in \textit{All's Well That Ends Well} must resort to a bed-trick, as well as a ring-trick, in order to consummate her marriage.

Of course, Portia never approaches such extremes. Her rivalry with Antonio never becomes an open, direct issue at all—even through Bassanio; for when poor Bassanio is with Portia, he submits to her will, and when he is with Antonio, he submits to his. So lighthearted and tactful is Portia in dealing with Antonio's claims on her husband that one may well question whether she is concerned about them at all. The reaction of Portia-the-judge to Bassanio's grandiose exaltation of his friend over “life, wife, and all the world” is jocular: “Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer” (IV.i.284-85). Yet she does not merely let it pass either. And her jocularity need not indicate a total lack of concern with the issue. It seems to me, rather, to come from a supreme (and thoroughly warranted) confidence in her ability to deal with the male world, as in her prediction to Nerissa:

\[
\text{That they did give the rings away to men;}
\]

But we'll outface them, and outswear them too. ...
In the last act, she fulfills her prediction and firmly reclaims her precedence with Bassanio. As playful as her ring-trickery is, Portia does not let up until her husband has fully acknowledged his fault and guaranteed, with his friend's backing, that it will not happen again. Not until his third plea is he pardoned. His first plea had been full of self-defense (as well as dramatic irony):

For by these blessed candles of the night,
Had you been there, I think you would have begg'd
The ring of me to give the worthy doctor.

His second plea was more abject yet still self-justifying: “Portia, forgive me this enforced wrong …” (240). His final plea makes no qualification upon his offense, simply: “Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee” (247-48). Antonio chimes in:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

Only then does Portia relent.

Thus Antonio enters into another “merry bond.” Friendship's martyr, he here finally gives all, renouncing out of friendship first place in his friend's affections. Once he has done so, Portia is quick to assure him of second place, making him the intermediary of their reconciliation—“Then you shall be his surety: give him this, / And bid him keep it better than the other” (254-55)—and a little later rewarding him with news of his three recovered argosies.

Bassanio's acceptance of the ring constitutes a new marriage, one more firmly safeguarded than the first. Before she is through, Portia has made her ring represent the marriage-bond in all its aspects, teaching Bassanio the rewards (including material ones, and sexual) of fidelity to it, the punishments for violating it. Although Portia is prepared to give much, she will not—unlike Antonio—give all. Just this once, however, she is prepared to make an exception and forgive Bassanio's breach of their marriage-bond, as long as it does not happen again.

IV

In the summary passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, Burckhardt goes on to draw an analogy between Portia's supposed sense of bondage and Shakespeare's own:

It is as though Shakespeare, finding himself bound to a story already drawn up for him in his source, had taken it as the test of his creative freedom and had discovered that this freedom lay … in a Portia-like acceptance and penetration of these exigencies to the point where they must yield their liberating truth.

(p. 243)
Burckhardt accordingly sets out to show that Shakespeare followed “his source religiously.” I do not feel his urgency to draw a biographical parallel since I do not see Shakespeare’s use of his source materials in *The Merchant of Venice* as a “discovery”: his practice seems very much like what it was before and was to be after. If there is a parallel to be drawn between Portia and Shakespeare, however, it is that both know how to take poetic license.

Since Burckhardt, following prevailing opinion, regards *The Jew* as Shakespeare’s source, and since *The Jew* is no longer extant, it is extremely difficult to dispute whether Shakespeare followed it religiously or not. Burckhardt does grant, however, that Shakespeare made two departures from his presumed source: he changed the inscription on the lead casket from “Whoso chooseth me shall find that God hath disposed for him” (as it appears in *Gesta Romanorum*) to “Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath”; and he added the Jessica-story. Burckhardt denies, however, that these liberties contradict his view of Shakespeare’s Portia-like sense of bondage to his source; instead, paradoxically, they confirm it. I maintain that these two instances are more consonant with my understanding of Portia than with his.

He makes my case for me in his discussion of the inscriptions, arguing eloquently that, in making the change, Shakespeare

\[
\text{did not alter the story but restored it to itself by freeing it from a pious falsification. For its meaning was that it sprang from a series of ventures, of hazards; it was propelled by the risks Antonio, Bassanio, Portia and, up to a point, Shylock were willing to take.}
\]

(p. 258)

I need only point out that such “restoration” is scarcely following the letter of the story’s law; it illustrates instead exactly the same ability to make an exception to its letter for the sake of its spirit that I have been claiming for Portia.

Burckhardt sees the Jessica-Lorenzo affair as an inversion of true bonded love: in contrast to that of Portia and Bassanio, “Their love is lawless, financed by theft and engineered through a gross breach of trust” (p. 253). As I understand the contrast between the pairs of lovers, its function is more precise: it serves to distinguish Portia’s poetic license from Jessica’s simple license. Jessica defies her father’s will and, as Burckhardt finely observes (p. 253), literally throws her father’s casket to Lorenzo. Their love is subjected to no test. Portia tests Bassanio, makes him choose, but—as already discussed—redefines the test in a more enlightened way. She transcends her father’s will.

Yet even the license of Jessica and Lorenzo is more sympathetically treated by Shakespeare than is Shylock’s legalism. They are shown to be like the

\[
\text{Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,}\n\text{Which is the hot condition of their blood,—}\n\text{If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,}\n\text{Or any air of music touch their ears,}\n\text{You shall perceive them make a mutual stand. …}
\]

(V.i.72-77)

If Shakespeare were really as devoted to the bond as Burckhardt takes him to be, he would seem to be unaccountably indulgent toward these two. The same is true of Launcelot, who feels it is devilishly against his conscience to break his bond to his master and run away; yet this alteration of the bond, comically, receives the blessing of all concerned—his former master, his new one, and his father.
Thus the two alterations that Burckhardt grants need not be taken as confirming Shakespeare's general bondage to the letter of The Jew. And it is not at all certain that Shakespeare used The Jew at all. As John Russell Brown writes in the introduction to the Arden edition:

Clearly there is insufficient evidence to claim that a lost Jew play was the direct source of The Merchant of Venice, and it remains at least a strong probability that Shakespeare himself adapted the story as found in Il Pecorone. Shakespeare often used more than one source for a single play, and there is no reason why he should not have done so for The Merchant [The Merchant of Venice].

(p. xxx)

If Brown's “strong probability” is right, then Shakespeare's self-allowed latitude would be even larger. In any case, it seems to me clear that Shakespeare makes the bondage of his source gentle neither through total freedom (like Jessica and Lorenzo) nor “through a literal and unreserved submission to the bond as absolutely binding” (like Shylock) but by allowing himself the liberty to make the enlightened exceptions that will bring out its own best possibilities (like Portia).

Notes

1. ELH, XXIX (1962), 242-43.
2. The Merchant of Venice, ed. John Russell Brown, Arden Shakespeare (London, 1955); all quotations are from this edition.

Criticism: Character Studies: Michael J. C. Echeruo (essay date winter 1971)


[In the following essay, Echeruo compares Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice with Marlowe's rendering of Barabas in The Jew of Malta, examining the relationship of both to stereotypes of Jews.]

Irving Ribner's recent comparison of Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Shylock suggests that the finer conclusions to be drawn from any such comparison need to be restated and made quite explicit. It is true, as Prof. Ribner says, that when comparisons are made between The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta—“and it is perhaps inevitable that they should be—it is usually with the assumption that Shakespeare imitated Marlowe. … To some we have Shakespeare palliating the antisemitism of Marlowe with a more sympathetic portrait of a Jew; to others we have Shakespeare striving to outdo Marlowe in antisemitism by presenting a more sympathetic view of the Christian world than Marlowe's.” Ribner's view is that the “proposition” that The Jew of Malta “exerted much influence” upon The Merchant of Venice is “questionable” and “can be positively neither denied nor affirmed”. He feels, also, that the propositions that Shylock “owes much to Barabas”, and that “Shakespeare is indebted to Marlowe for ‘much of the atmosphere of his Jewish theme’” are “dubious propositions at best.” If these two plays are to be compared, he concludes, “it must not be for what we learn about the influence of one dramatist upon the other, but for the insight such comparison may afford into the vast gulf which divides the two major Elizabethan dramatists” (p. 45).
But surely the gulf is not that vast, and the aim of such comparisons should not merely be to defeat the argument for Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare but to appreciate the (perhaps independent) effect of an antecedent tradition on two contemporary dramatists, to lead us to an awareness of the scope of that tradition and, finally, to enable us to understand whatever else each of them may have wanted to do with or to that tradition. In which case the specific influence of Marlowe (or of Il Pecorone) on Shakespeare is not really that crucial to the understanding of any parallel situations in Shakespeare and Marlowe. More specifically, even if they do not establish an influence, the parallels in plot and emphasis between their two plays would at least suggest that certain plot-situations and emphases were quite susceptible in Elizabethan times to the specific treatment accorded them by the two major dramatists.

Even then, another issue needs to be resolved. It is the problem of the Jew as stereotype and the place it has in the criticism of Elizabethan drama. The problem arises whenever we try to understand a comment such as Duthie's—that “in the Il Pecorone story the Jew is a conventional figure. Shakespeare vitalizes the character.” The point is that Ser Giovanni's story is not about a Jew as such, but about the many trials of Giannetto. The story devotes very little time, anyway, to the Jew and could therefore not be expected to give the same ample illustration of the Jew's personality as Shakespeare does. Moreover, Ser Giovanni manages to give us the background of Venetian law against which to see the Jew's otherwise incredible obstinacy. “The question [of the Jew's demands] was much debated, and every one said that the Jew was in the wrong, but since Venice had a reputation as a place of strict justice, and the Jew's case was legal and formally made out, nobody dared to deny him, but only to plead with him.” Hence, in keeping with this tradition of strict justice, the Jew, on his defeat, is not even allowed the ten thousand ducats he was now willing to accept: “‘If you want your pound of flesh, take it. If not, I shall declare your bond null and void.’ … Everyone present was delighted and they all mocked at the Jew, saying, ‘He who lays snares for others is caught himself.’ The Jew, seeing that he could not do what he had wished, took his bond and tore it in pieces in a rage” (p. 474). This is the Jew of Il Pecorone. What we are at a loss to know is how this Jew is “conventional” whereas Shakespeare's is not.

Perhaps this question is related to another. Prof. Ribner has drawn our attention to two opposed statements by C. J. Sisson and H. B. Charlton. “The Jews in London”, Sisson declared, “had the immense comfort of communal life, undisturbed, with full freedom to carry on their trades and professions, and even the further solace of the regular practice of religious rites in the home, even if in secret. The Jewish problem was, in truth, no problem in the reign of Elizabeth.” That is to say, The Merchant of Venice has nothing to do with the Jewish question. Charlton, for his part, claims that “about 1594, public sentiment in England was roused to an outbreak of traditional Jew-baiting; and for good and evil, Shakespeare the man was like his fellows. He planned a Merchant of Venice to let the Jew dog have it, and thereby to gratify his own patriotic pride of race.” In other words, the play is Shakespeare's contribution to the contemporary anti-Semitism movement. Both declarations are quite relevant to the problem in hand—namely the attempt to reconstruct the forces acting on the audience and the dramatist in their appreciation of the play. But the thing to seek is not the local or topical momentum that gave immediacy to the plays but, possibly, the latent folk memory which could be induced by a dramatist to a suspension of its own belief or disbelief in Jewish cruelty and blasphemy.

When we fail to take this folk or archetypal conditioning into account, we become liable to possibly sentimental readings of The Merchant of Venice. We are likely then to resort to the kind of over-statement we find in Prof. Grebanier's study of the play and (now) in Ribner's essay. Shylock, Grebanier says, “is not only a Jew; he is also a prototype of the banker, and what Shakespeare has to say on that head applies equally to Christian, Jew or Moslem.” Ribner says of Shylock and Jessica that they are “saved by the reality of love”. The “highest reflection in terms of human love of God's divine love for man is the kind of love reflected in … Jessica's readiness to leave her father and his gold for Christian salvation”! These interpretations are misleading. In The Jew of Malta, Marlowe was un-Christian enough (as Ribner points out in another context) to expose the money-minded logic behind the Christian gesture of love through conversion. Prof. Ribner makes very much of this gesture. “The punishment which Shylock at the end receives is his reception into the
Christian community. … Shakespeare's Jew comes at last to generate love in spite of himself and in this is some victory” (p. 48). But even a brief consideration of the Proclamation in The Jew of Malta will reveal the base motivation behind some such offers of salvation.

First, the tribute-money of the Turks shall be levied against the Jews, and each of them to pay one-half of his estate.

Secondly, he that denies to pay, shall straight become a Christian.

The third clause of the Proclamation suggests the calculating and cynical wickedness of the entire procedure: “he that denies this, shall absolutely lose all.” When in The Merchant of Venice IV. i the defeated Shylock “accepts” the conditions imposed upon him by the court—“Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it”—he is recognizing the weight of Christian authority and submitting to it. The process is not a “reception into the Christian community.”

The reference to a “reception into the Christian community” does, in fact, draw our attention to what may be considered the central pattern in Shakespeare's handling of his subject, namely, the Christian-Jew dichotomy. Or more specifically the conflict between Christian Europe and a Jew who was thought to be not only an usurer but also (by definition) a hater of Christ and of Christians.9

To understand this conflict, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that from the start European “prejudice” against Jews was Christian and theological rather than racial in origin. The Church did have its early struggles with Judaism, but it was not till the ascendency of Christianity as a state religion under the Emperor Constantine that the Christians had an opportunity to legislate effectively against Jews and Judaism. The destruction of Jerusalem had scattered the Jews all over the Roman Empire, where they were initially granted some protection. This toleration—of which the Constitution of Caracalla (198-217 a.d.) was an example—was repudiated through Christian pressure in the Theodosian Code. Among other things, this Code designated Jews as “inferiores” and “perversi”, and regarded Judaism as a godless and dangerous sect (“secta nefaria”, “feralis”). It also declared the meetings of Jews “sacrilegi coetus”.10

Under Canon XV of the Council of Illiberis (305 a.d.), marriages of Christians to Jews, pagans, or heretics were regarded as akin to adultery.11 By a further Edict of 423 a.d., marriages between Jews and Christians were made punishable by death.12

It is important that we insist on the religious foundation for this prejudice. Thus, though the Bishop of Caesarea objected to the Jewish rite of circumcision because he considered it a disgrace, he condemned it principally because he thought that it was a heresy.13 Naturally there was difficulty in distinguishing between the social characteristics which differentiated Jews from Europeans and the doctrinal or ritual ones which separated Jews from Christians. Ephraem Syrus, for example, called the Jews “circumcised vagabonds”, and Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (340-397 a.d.), called the Synagogue in Mesopotamia “a house of depravity in which Christ is daily blasphemed”. Pope Gregory the Great declared the Jewish religion “a superstition, depravity and faithlessness”. And Thomas Aquinas was able to assert that the Jews were “doomed to perpetual servitude and the lords of the earth may use their goods as their own.”14 The enthusiasm of these Bishops in their hostility to Jews did not come from personal prejudice, but from strong religious attitudes deriving from theological convictions. St. Isidore, for example, believed that the Jews were responsible for their suffering. In his De Fidei Catholica ex veteri et novo Testamento contra Judaeis, he declared that the Jews who killed Christ brought damnation on their posterity: “Judaei posteritatem suam damnaverunt”.15 St. Isidore depended for his justifying text on Matt. xxvi: 25: “His blood be upon us and upon our children”. He quotes this passage several times through his writings, even linking it with the curse of Noah on Cham. Just as Cham, through his derision of his father's nakedness, had brought about the curse on his children, “sicut et plebs Judaei, quae Dominum crucifixit etiam in filiis poenam damnationis suae transmisit” (LXXXVII, 237). In his Allegoriae Quaedam Sacre Scripturae, he elaborates further on this comparison. Cham, he claims, stands for the Jews, “quo Christum incarnatum atque mortuum derident.” He continues:
In all his attacks on the Jews, it would thus appear, St. Isidore was motivated by the blasphemy of the Jews on Christ, from which the analogies with the Cham-episode gain considerable force.

It is essentially this tradition of the hatred and irreverence of the Jews towards Christ which was carried over through the early Church into the Renaissance. The Jew was thus identified as a reject, as an inveterate hater of Christ and Christians. In medieval drama, the Jew is shown consistently in this role. Though the New Testament made it clear that Christ was scourged and tormented by Roman soldiers, the Play of Corpus Christi (1415) has four Jews accusing Christ, four persecuting him, and others compelling him to bear the cross.

Along with this tradition of the Jew as a hater of Christ was another of him as the usurer. This tradition can be traced back to the Biblical stories of the publican and of Christ's cleansing of the Temple. Especially, it was associated with Judas' betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver. The cycle of mystery plays acted at York on Corpus Christi Day during the 14th and 15th centuries gives numerous examples of this. "Judas, like the bargaining usurer, asks for thirty pence saying that he would like to 'make a merchandise'; he grumbles when the Romans fail to hand the money over at once. He is also described as Christ's Treasurer in which office he had shown his 'Jewish' instincts by converting ten percent of the money to his own use, a fact which receives special emphasis in the play." Money-lending for interest was of course considered immoral and unnatural in the Old Testament and even in classical antiquity, though, for obvious reasons, many people engaged in it.

The early Church condemned lending at a profit and claimed that the ruling of the Mosaic Law against what was called “usury among brothers” amounted to a universal interdiction against the taking of any interest under any circumstances. St. Ambrose made an allowance for Christians dealing with Jews and Mohammedans, arguing that it was no crime to take interest from a religious enemy: “From him exact usury whom it would be no crime to kill.” By the end of the 12th century, however, Christian money-lenders were so numerous that the Church had to reaffirm its stand. The Second Lateran Council (1139 a.d.) declared the unrepentant usurer condemned by the Old and New Law alike and therefore “unworthy” of “Christian burial”. The Quod Super nonnullis bull of 1258 by Pope Alexander IV went so far as to make the taking of interest an act of heresy.

These restrictions on banking, which many Christians found onerous, made the Jews (who were not subject to these laws but were resident within the Christian community) the one group of people who could engage in the necessary and lucrative trade without the force of the Inquisition being brought to bear on them. The Christians who did engage in the business were regarded as lost souls, as Dante specifically states in the Inferno (Cantos XI and XVII). The result was naturally a despised minority made rich and powerful by the religious decisions of a Christian Europe. Hence, for example, Barabas' boast in The Jew of Malta:

Rather had I, a Jew, to be hated thus,  
Than pitied in a Christian poverty.

This boast was, of course, Marlowe's way of projecting into his drama the sentiment which a disgruntled Christian audience would imagine to be most natural to a Jew. As Marlowe makes Barabas assert, the riches of the Jewish merchant “are the blessings promised to the Jews, And herein was old Abraham's happiness.”

This ambivalent response to Jewish prosperity is also to be found in Shakespeare's play, particularly in Shylock's retelling of the story of Jacob and Laban's sheep in which Shylock claims to be emulating Jacob's
practice. Laban's story became well-known especially after the Reformation, when the emphasis on Old Testament stories became general. In the dramatizations of the story, Esau is the villain, Jacob the hero. Shylock appears to be defending his usury by ironically recalling the fact that in medieval plays Jacob's otherwise dishonest scheming was justified and praised.\(^{30}\)

Also connected with the tradition of Jewish usury is the Lorenzo-Jessica subplot in the play. The abduction of the Jewish maiden (her father's heir) and the robbery of her father (with or without her connivance) were stock Renaissance exempla.\(^{31}\) Shakespeare creates his characters within that tradition.\(^{32}\) In V. i. 14-17 Lorenzo repeats the seduction motif, leaving Antonio to supply the robbery motif by forcing Shylock to endow the couple with half his fortune.\(^{33}\)

When we speak of “stereotypes” in a play such as *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Jew of Malta*, we should really be thinking of that complex product of an imagination conditioned by the expectations of its audience, that product of an imagination which may modify or even reject the implications of its characterizations but cannot escape addressing itself to those implications. To such a “conditioned imagination”, the fact that Shylock and Barabas are Jews becomes more important than the fact that they are men. In the sense that they are men, their actions are, of course, capable of being explained by the same reasons as the actions of other people with whom (we might say) the writer is “in resonance”. To the extent, however, that they are “Jews”, they are supposed to have a psychology which allows them the right to modes of behavior for which there would otherwise have been no explanation. These characters, in other words, have a mode of being determined principally by the imaginative expectations and assumptions of the members of the culture in which they are being presented. In the usual representation of motive in literature, the detailed exploration of a character is at the same time an exploration of the psychology of the audience watching the operation. In the case of a stereotype such as the Jew, a difference arises between the experience of the character and that of the audience. Hence, such a character can only function within a frame of attitudes created by a tradition outside his own person. In one kind of literature, the author thus seeks to understand the man, the individual. In the other kind, he tries *at the same time* to understand the race, the group.\(^{34}\) It is in this sense that we speak of Shylock as the product of a “conditioned imagination”.

Shylock is introduced in the play specifically as a Jew stereotype. His conversation with Bassanio (I. iii. 1-34) is dominated by the overriding interest in money (“Three thousand ducats, well”) and his intense hatred for Christians: “Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into: I will buy with you, sell with you, walk 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”. The blasphemous reference to Christ could not have gone unnoticed and unappreciated in Christian Elizabethan England. The effect of this blasphemy and this usuriousness is further heightened by Shylock's self-confessed reasons for hating Antonio. They are reasons, in fact, which place Shylock irrevocably in the tradition of the anti-Christ and the inveterate usurer.

I hate him for he is a Christian:
But more (35) for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

(I. iii. 37-40)

The fact that this hatred and this usuriousness are “self-confessed” suddenly gives a certain plausibility to what was, all along, a conventional assumption. Shylock does not become an “individual” because he gives expression to this confession, but because of our disposition to believe the dramatic convention of a confession as affirming our experience of that kind of character. If, for example, Shylock had denied these characteristics, he would have then seemed to us an idealized and “unrealistic” characterization.\(^{36}\)
In III. i, Shakespeare allows Shylock his spirited and persuasive speech complaining of the inhuman treatment he has received at the hands of the Christians, and, in effect, asserting that he, too, is as mortal a man as the Christian. The speech has been used frequently to justify a reading of the play as representing Shakespeare's plea for a humane treatment of Jews. It is a speech, according to Dover Wilson, which makes Shylock "entirely more human than the conventional Jew of Il Pecorone or than the magniloquent monster created by Marlowe." On the other hand, Allan Bloom, who describes Shylock's speech as "an appeal to the universality of humanity," finds that Shylock "includes only things which belong to the body" in his list of characteristics on which he bases his claim to equality with his Christian tormentors. "What he finds in common between Christian and Jew is essentially what all animals have in common. The only spiritual element in the list is revenge."

To be properly understood, the speech has to be seen first as the culmination of the Jew-Christian contrast begun by Salerio a few lines earlier. Shylock had called Jessica his "own flesh and blood. … I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood." Salerio's retort is definite: "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory" (III. i. 31, 33, 34-35). This contrast between Shylock and Jessica, the true Jew and the convertite, is pressed further in Shylock's speech. Shylock is thus not really pleading for compassion; he is justifying his determination to revenge. Antonio, he argues, had no other reason for scorning and mocking him than that he is a Jew. From this premise, Shylock derives the major thrust of his argument:

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 humility? revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example?—why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

(III. i. 52-66)

Thus Shylock works himself into commitment to revenge by establishing both the irrational and the hypocritical nature of Christian humility and suffering. It is this argument that Shylock has devised to answer Salerio's anti-Jewish jibe.

SAL.

Why I am sure if [Antonio] forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh,—what's that good for?(40)

SHY.

To bait fish withal,—if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge; he hath disgrac'd me.

(III. i. 45-49)

Having thus understood Shylock's argument, we have to recognize a second point, namely that the meaning of "Jew" in Shylock's speech is unspecified. Shylock takes "Jew" here in its most non-pejorative or neutral sense. Elsewhere in the play, however, the name is consistently used in a disparaging sense. In most cases, it is actually used to represent usuriousness, blasphemousness, and unkindness. In such circumstances "to hate a Jew" would, by definition, mean to hate a covetous and uncharitable anti-Christ. Sigurd Burckhardt was quite right in claiming that the rhetorical thrust of Shylock's quarrel with Antonio forces our sympathies to go
to the Jew at that point: “Shylock gets more than his share of good lines. … Shylock is powerful in his vindictiveness. … Antonio is grandiloquent.”

But this is not the complete story. The speech is in no way a denial of the grounds on which hatred of the Jew was established in the first place—his self-confessed hatred of Christ (and Christians) and his unbridled usury. For as long, therefore, as “Jew” meant “anti-Christ and usurer”, Shylock's speech (like that of Edmund in King Lear or Caliban in The Tempest) will not carry any justification in itself.

European persecution of the Jews was not based on the belief that Jews were not capable of feeling pain. The pathos of Shylock's statement would in all certainty, then, be absorbed as a genuine but irrelevant protest, an evasion of the major issues in dispute. For the major conflict arises from the very fact of Shylock's Jewishness which made it all too certain that he would be the “stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, Uncapable of pity, void, and empty From any dram of mercy”, as the Duke himself describes Shylock (IV. i. 4-6).

The Trial Scene (IV. i) is an incomparable dramatization of these stock attitudes. The setting is “Venice. A Court of Justice.” But the Duke is apparently there to plead for mercy rather than give judgment in Justice. “I have heard”, Antonio tells the Duke, “Your grace hath ta'en great pains to qualify His rigorous course” (IV. i. 6-8). In his principal address to Shylock, the Duke reinforces the case for mercy in a peculiarly “Christian” manner. The world, he says, expects mercy from “this fashion of thy malice”, and “thy strange apparent cruelty”. Such a gesture of mercy would be expected even from the “brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint” of “stubborn Turks and Tartars never trained To offices of tender courtesy.” In a deliberately malicious pun, the Duke in effect, asks from Shylock an un-Jewish virtue: mercy. “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” (IV. i. 31-34).

That Shakespeare and his audience could not have expected mercy from Shylock we can surmise not only from the Duke's pun on a “gentle” (meaning a “gentile”) answer, but from the consistency of Shylock's own reply. Not only has he sworn by “our Holy Sabbath” against mercy, he would rather “let the danger light Upon your charter and your city's freedom”, than yield. Shylock then reverts to the argument of his speech in III. i, and follows what he had judged to be the irrational nature of traditional Jew-Christian hostility. This time, however, he is willing to attribute his harshness to a whim. “But say it is my humour,—is it answered?” (IV. i. 36, 38-39, 43.)

Or more specifically, a Jewish anti-Christian whim, as Shylock himself relates (“a lodg'd hate, and a certain loathing I bear Antonio”) and as Antonio confirms: “than which what's harder?—His Jewish heart!”

The harshness of these remarks should not, however, lead us to forget that The Merchant of Venice is a comedy and that, therefore, the trial scene is also, in essence, comic. It is a kind of comedy (Ben Jonson's Volpone is another example) where the high seriousness of the legal charge is reduced by the relative inconsequence of the punishment imposed. In The Merchant of Venice, moreover, the comedy of Portia's strategy in the Court Scene is of the same kind as the comedy of the Casket Scenes. In both cases, Portia has a rigged court which oddly enough is also a “just” court. The essence of the comedy in both instances is in the double surprise—first, in the fear that the deserving party will lose his cause through the meticulous justice of Portia's judgment, and, secondly, in the happy defeat of the worldly or un-Christian antagonist. In the Trial Scene, Portia is the defender of her love and her faith. The disguise hides this fact from both Shylock and Antonio and thereby enhances the suspense. She grants Shylock's legal right to exact his bond; she demands and gets a confession from Antonio of his liability. But she uses all this to impose on Shylock an obligation of Mercy: “Then must the Jew be merciful.”

Portia's speech on the quality of mercy is a set speech designed to win Antonio back from the clutches of a “heartless” Jew. Shakespeare prepares for this speech by establishing the pathos of Antonio's Christian resignation to his “un-Christian” enemy: “I do oppose my patience to his fury, and am arm'd To suffer with a quietness of spirit, The very tyranny and rage of his” (IV.i.10-13). By introducing Portia and her speech on Mercy, and by insuring that Shylock rejects her appeal, Shakespeare, as it were, makes a conventional dramatization of a European stock-attitude seem very human indeed. The conflict between Shylock and
Antonio accordingly becomes one between a Christian merchant—forgiving and godly—and a Jewish merchant—unforgiving and brutish. A Christian merchant was expected to yield to Portia’s appeal. Shylock was not—as is borne out by the pattern of such Jew-Christian confrontations since the Middle Ages.

Portia adds another dimension to this stock dramatization. She links the plea for Mercy with the threat of damnation. Shylock’s willingness to forgive would, in other words, also secure salvation for the Jew.

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. …

(IV. i. 193-196)

Thus Shylock’s “Daniel come to judgement” is also (perhaps, primarily) a partisan on the side of authority, the “protector of the King”, as her assumed name of Balthazar implies. The consequent outwitting of Shylock at his own game (“I crave the law”) accordingly becomes a double victory for Portia: it enables her to achieve her personal objective of freeing her husband’s friend and allows her to establish a clear superiority of Christian over Jew, love and mercy over hatred and justice. The entire suspense depends on the audience being disturbed at the possibility of Christian Antonio being made over to the ruthless Jew. The comedy is in the disappointment of this possibility, in the victory of Christian over Jew.

It is interesting, from this point of view, to note the emphasis placed on Shylock’s Jewishness after his rejection of Portia’s plea. In the rest of the trial, scene, Shylock is addressed by his name on only three occasions, but fifteen times as “the Jew”. The five references to “Christian” in this part of the scene are intended as contrasts to “Jew”.

This particular contrasting of Shylock and Antonio is itself part of a larger statement concerning the false and the true religion. For Antonio represents the true Christian blend of Justice and Mercy. As the “just” man, he asks Shylock to bestow the income of half his fortune on Jessica and Lorenzo. As the “merciful” man, he demands that Shylock become a Christian. This demand, in fact, is both punishment and (to the Christian conscience) kindness. For conversion—the acceptance of Christ—had implications which were closely associated with the very basis of anti-Jewishness. Conversion, then, was the only kind of assurance of future goodwill which a Jew could give or which would have been completely acceptable to the Christian imagination. In other words, conversion was not required of Shylock because he was a “wicked” man but because he was a Jew. For a “good” Jew also needed conversion, as one of Boccaccio’s stories shows. Jehannot, the Christian,

had particular friendship for a very rich Jew called Abraham, who was also a merchant and a very honest man and trusty man, and seeing the latter’s worth and loyalty, it began to irk him some that the soul of so worthy and discreet and good a man should go to perdition for default of faith; wherefore he fell to beseeching him on friendly wise leave errors of the Jewish faith and turn to the Christian verity. …

… [He] raised him from the sacred fount and named him Giovanni … and thenceforth was a good man and a worthy and one of a devout life.
The offer of conversion to Shylock was partly based on this tradition and on the other tradition of hypocrisy which we saw manifested in the Proclamation in *The Jew of Malta*. Shylock does not accept the offer, he merely succumbs to the pressure:

I am not well,—send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.

(IV. i. 392-393)

The distinction comes out quite clearly in Jessica, who combines the examples of Boccaccio's Giovanni and Marlowe's Abigail and ceases to be a Jew. “I shall be sav'd by my husband,—he hath made me a Christian” (III. v. 17-18). It is the holy nature of her rejection of father and faith, symbolized in the marriage with Lorenzo, that makes her so endearing to the Christian imagination and so endowed with all the tenderness of a lady of Romance.51

The revival of the Shylock-debate in the Quatercentenary issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* is a reminder to us that the theoretical resolution of the interpretation of a kind of character like Shylock has not yet been attempted. Some critics who want to be anti-Jewish will read the play as if the fact of Shylock's usury and mercilessness is proof of Jewish unkindness. Others, who think Shakespeare was above prejudice, see the play as a kind of defence of the man. Both groups of critics tend to a conclusion for which there is no justification: that powerful literature is not possible to an author who shares the strong positive prejudices of his civilization. The problem of Shylock's characterization is one peculiar to a character-type which develops such great permanence in alien culture that it is no longer possible to differentiate the individual from the stereotype in him. Today, Shylock is not seen in the light of the Christian European imagination which originally celebrated him, but rather in terms of recent concepts of race-prejudice and of the problems of a minority. Shakespeare's Shylock was addressed to a specific English audience. The creation of a Jew who did not have the characteristics of either Marlowe's Barabas or Shakespeare's Shylock, a Jew who did not serve as a comment on the accumulated religious pre-judgments of the Christian conscience, would have required the reconditioning of the total experience of the contemporary culture. Thus, however human Shylock may seem—in the sense that he is subject to pain, humiliation and revenge—he remains a “Jew”, usurious and bitterly anti-Christian.

It is certainly not an accident that there are not unconverted good Jews in Elizabethan drama. Jew-baiting in such a community was not a mark of prejudice, if by the word we mean a response which is private, whimsical, malicious in intent, and resented by the community. Indeed, such baiting was often thought honorable and high-minded. Quoting Cyrillus and agreeing with him, Sir Walter Raleigh maintained that “Cain and Abel were figures of Christ, and of the Jewes; … as Cain after that he had slaine Abel unjustly, he had thence-forth not certaine abiding in the World: so the Jewes, after they had crucified the Sonne of God, became Runnegates: and it is true, that the Jewes had neuer since any certaine Estate, Commonweale, or Prince of their owne vpon the Earth.”52 So also in the Epistle Dedicatory to the English translation of Mornay's *The Trewnesse of the Christian Religion* (1587), Golding contends that

if any atheist Infidel or Jew having read this his work with aduisement, shall yet denye the Christian Religion to be the true and only pathway to eternal felicitie, and all other Religions to bee mere vanitie, and wickedness; must needes show himselfe vtterly voyd of humaine sense, or els obstinatly and wilfully bent to impugne the manifest truth against the continuall testimonie of his own conscience.53

Such was the sense of conviction and the temper of the Christian mind for which Shakespeare wrote. To understand the Jew in Elizabethan drama, we have to seek to recreate that attitude to what must have seemed "a very terrible and powerful alien, endowed with all the resources of wealth and unencumbered by any
Christian scruples”.

Shylock was before everything else a non-Christian, a Jew. The Merchant of Venice is a comedy written for an Elizabethan audience about a Jew. All the terms count.

Notes

1. Irving Ribner, “Marlowe and Shakespeare”, SQ [Shakespeare Quarterly], XV (Spring, 1964), 44-49.
4. Quoted in Ribner, pp. 44-45, n. 7.
7. He points this out (p. 47) in connection with Abigail's “conversion” where the Friar “laments above all else the death of a seducible virgin.”
9. See the interesting observation in Il Pecorone (Bullough, p. 472) on the Jew's reason for insisting on a pound of flesh: “many merchants joined together in offering to pay the money, but the Jew would not have it, for he wished to commit this homicide in order to be able to say that he put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants.”
16. Ibid., p. 103. Cf. Shylock's reply in IV.i, to Portia's speech, on Mercy: “My deeds upon my head.”
17. See also Patrologia Cursus Completus, LXXXVII, 235: “Quam Noah nudatatem, id est, passionem Christi, videns Cham, derisit, et Judaei Christi mortem videntes subsanaverunt.”
19. A. W. Pollard, English Miracle Plays (Oxford, 1909), p. xxxiii. The Catholic Liturgy still has traces of this interpretation of Good Friday. “Oremus et pro perfidis Judaeis: ut Deus et Dominus noster auferat velamen de cordibus eorum; ut et ipsi agnoscant Jesum Christum Dominum nostrum.” At other points in this sequence, the priest says “Flectamus genua” after the “Oremus”. The Missal specifically states that after the prayer for the Jews, the “Flectamus is omitted, and the clergy and people do not kneel down.” After a few more prayers, there follows the Reproaches in which the Priest (representing God) speaks of his rejection by the Jews. “Quia eduxi te de terra Aegypti: parasti crucem Salvatori tuo.” “Popule meus, quid feci tibi? aut in quo contristasti te? responde mihi”, etc.
21. Deut. xxiii: 19-20 “You shall not lend upon interest to your brother, interest on money, interest on victuals, interest on anything that is lent for interest. To a foreigner you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest.” See also Grebanier, p. 78.
23. Quoted in Grebanier, p. 79.
25. Grebanier (p. 80) notes that this position was not changed till 1830 when “moderate interest” was made permissible.
26. William of Auxerre is said to have found the prohibition “even more rigorous than the commandment against murder: there is no exception to the law of usury, whereas it is on occasion even meritorious to kill.” See B. N. Nelson, *The Ideas of Usury* (Princeton, 1949), p. 13.


28. See John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) III. ii. 45-46: “… If there were Jews enough, so many Christian would not turn usurers.”

29. *The Jew of Malta* I. i. 112-113; 103-104.


32. Ribner misses this point completely. Jessica, he says (p. 48), “is an agent of her father's redemption”, forgetting apparently that Jessica and his gold were together all his life. E.g. III. i. 33. On the marriage of Jewish daughters and the laws of inheritance, see the Old Testament ruling in Numbers xxxvi: 6-12.

33. Compare *The Jew of Malta* I. ii. 68ff. and *Merch.* IV. i. 376-386. Marlowe is rebel enough to make Barabas call this Christian offer a sheer sin of theft against the 7th Commandment and worse than his sin against the 8th Commandment, “covetousness”.

34. See my M.A. Thesis (Cornell, 1963), “Some Negro Stereotypes in English Literature”, especially chapter I.

35. There is no reason to place much emphasis on this phrase since, technically, Antonio—being a Christian—was expected not to lend money at interest. If anything the phrase shows how interrelated the two aspects of Shylock's case against Antonio were. See J. Russell Brown's edition, pp. xlii-xliv.

36. Cf. Hazlitt's comment on Kean's rendering of Shylock. Kean had substituted a sardonic intellect and fiery spirit for the malevolence of earlier actors; in the process, Hazlitt observed, Shylock became “more than half a Christian. Certainly, our sympathies are much oftener with him than with his enemies. He is honest in his vices; they are hypocrites in their virtues.” Quoted by John Russell Brown, “The Realization of Shylock: A Theatrical Criticism”, *Early Shakespeare* (Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, no. 3). London, 1961, pp. 193-194.


38. *Shakespeare's Politics*, p. 23. It is not really correct to say that “revenge” is the only spiritual element in the list. Shylock does mention “affections, passions”. In any case, as I point out later, the subject of his speech is Revenge.

39. See also *Merchant* I. iii. 156-158.

40. Shylock could not eat Antonio's flesh for it is neither the “fish” nor the “flesh” approved of in the Kashruth. Shylock appreciates the implied insult in his reply: “To bait fish withal.” Launcelot jokes in a similarly coarse vein in his conversation with Jessica in III. v: “this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs,—if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.”

41. E.g. *Merchant* I. iii. 173-175; II. ii. 106-108; II. iv. 34; II. vii. 51.


43. See the description of this rhetorical tradition in E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (New York, 1953), p. 34.

44. A racial, not merely a personal, whim, as it is taken to be in the case of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. See Eldred D. Jones, “Aaron and Melancholy in *Titus Andronicus*”, *SQ*, XIV (Spring 1963), 178-179. It is interesting, in any case, considering the argument of this paper, that Dr. Johnson felt the answer was given gratuitously “to aggravate the pain” of Shylock's adversaries.
45. Allan Bloom (p. 27) puts this bluntly: “Portia goes off to Venice to save Antonio, not out of any principle of universal humanity, but because he is her husband's friend, and Bassanio is involved in the responsibility for his plight.”


47. E.g. “If thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood” (ll. 305-306); or “pay the bond thrice And let the Christian go” (ll. 314-315). It should be noticed that *Il Pecorone* merely states: “If you shed one drop of blood”, etc. (Bullough, p. 473); and that Shylock himself (in the second example) sees Antonio as “the Christian” rather than as “rival” or “debtor”.

48. In several medieval Miracle Plays, the conversion of Jewish merchants was effected by some divine intervention, and for good reason. “Le Juif converti sais faire un noble usage de sa fortune mal accumulée. ‘Qui'il out pris e muscie uilment. Il partage ses biens et pratique pieusement la charité que la religion chrétienne prescrit, car il aime Marie.’” In another example of a blaspheming Jewish merchant, the Saviour appears and says to him: “Ne m'insulte pas ainsi, o juif! Je ne peux avoir d'obligation ni abandonner non serviteur dans la souffrance; prends ce qui t'appartient”. Following this “le juif se fit baptiser avec sa femme et tous les siens.” Lifshitz-Golden, pp. 129-130; 131.

49. But see Grebanier, p. 29: the demand was “simply an act of extraordinary kindness to bring the nonbeliever into the true faith”.


**Criticism: Character Studies: Elizabeth S. Sklar (essay date fall 1976)**


[In the following essay, Sklar highlights similarities between Bassanio and Shylock despite their apparent differences.]

Bassanio is probably the least prepossessing of the principal figures in *The Merchant of Venice*. Dwarfed by Shylock's monumental passions, Bassanio seems thin-blooded and ultimately rather trivial, and his stature is further diminished by the brilliance and panache of Portia. Yet in some respects Bassanio is as complex and ambiguous a figure as Shylock, if not as fully realized, for although he would seem superficially to be the complete antithesis of Shylock, Bassanio's values and ethic are often uncomfortably similar to those of the usurer. Bassanio shares Shylock's preoccupation with material goods, and is not always able to distinguish between worldly wealth and value of a higher order. He is affectionate, but is also something of an opportunist who uses the affection he inspires in others for material gain. Bassanio's first protestation of love to Antonio is revealing: “To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and in love” (I.i.130-31). He is capable of generosity, yet his largesse depends on the fortunes of his friends. Although Bassanio can be properly contemptuous of material wealth when the occasion warrants, he manifests a purely Shylockian ethic when he employs Antonio's loan to marry “a lady richly left.” Surely he is using money to breed money. And if Shylock's monomaniacal obsession with his bond nearly results in Antonio's death, we cannot forget that it is Bassanio's unabashed prodigality that has led Antonio to the courtroom in the first place. Thus Bassanio's virtues are diluted by a distorted sense of values and a puerile disregard for the consequences of his actions.
The ambiguity of Bassanio lies in the fact that he is not a villain but the romantic hero of *The Merchant of Venice*, charming, well liked by his peers, and capable of inspiring love in the shrewd Antonio and the witty Portia. The problem is, then, can one explain the disjunction between Bassanio's rather serious moral flaws and his overtly romantic role? In general, commentators have either viewed Bassanio as incompletely conceived and thus given him short shrift, or they have attempted to plead his cause, to make him out to be a proper romantic hero, worthy of Antonio's loyalty and Portia's devotion.\(^2\) But to overlook Bassanio's flaws is to ignore his real contribution to the play. For in his love of money, in his desire for wealth and a rich marriage, Bassanio is a paradigmatic inhabitant of Venice, typical of that society in a way that Portia, a woman, and Shylock, a Jew, cannot be. An understanding of Bassanio may thus provide some insight into the moral climate of *The Merchant of Venice*; and I should like to suggest here that an important clue as to Bassanio's function in the play—and one that accounts for both his typicality as a Venetian and the apparent clash between his romantic role and the less appealing side of his character—is the metaphorical association of Bassanio with Jason and his quest for the golden fleece.

When Bassanio first introduces the name of Portia into the play (I.i.161-67), it is her “value,” in the material sense, that really captivates him; his diction betrays his motives. He describes Portia as “a lady richly left … nothing undervalued / To Cato's daughter,” and he claims that the whole world is cognizant of her “worth.” He likens her home to Colchos and her person to the golden fleece, implying that he is the Jason who will win her:

... her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.

(I.i.169-72)

This image, significantly, is picked up again after Bassanio's success with the caskets when Gratiano fairly crows: “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (III.ii.244).

That those allusions hold some special interest is suggested by the fact that no other Shakespearean play alludes to Jason or his quest.\(^3\) In a play that is largely concerned with the right uses of and attitudes towards wealth, it cannot be fortuitous that Portia is compared to the golden fleece, always a symbol of desirable and sometimes ill-gained wealth, and Bassanio's quest likened to Jason's. Moreover, these references to Jason are supported by several secondary allusions to the legend of the quest for the golden fleece. Four times, in the course of the play, Antonio's ships are referred to as “argosies” (I.i.9, I.iii.18, III.i.105, V.i.276), and in the love duet that introduces Act V, Jessica is compared with Medea.

On the broadest level of interpretation, Jason is a singularly apt prototype for Bassanio in both achievement and moral character. Although he was traditionally admired for his valor, Jason was also criticized for his opportunism. Thus Jason, who, as Dante has it, gained his reputation “by courage and by guile,”\(^4\) is characterized by the same moral ambiguity as we find in Bassanio. Both are tainted heroes. More important, Jason, like Bassanio, exercised his talents for the winning of wealth, and it is tempting to regard Bassanio's quest as a parody of Jason's. For as Jason crosses the sea to Colchos in search of the golden fleece, Bassanio sails to Belmont in quest of wealth, the “golden fleece” of Portia and her dowry. Both heroes must undergo a testing process before achieving their respective quests, and as Medea helps Jason by providing enchanted herbs and magical advice, so Portia—according to some readings, at least— aids Bassanio by giving him clues before he selects the lead casket.\(^5\) Both heroes marry the women who provide them with wealth, swearing oaths of eternal fidelity, oaths that are subsequently broken: Jason deserts Medea for another woman, and Bassanio soon parts with the ring he had sworn to keep until death.
The difference between Bassanio and Jason is essentially the difference between comedy and tragedy: Jason plays for higher stakes. His sea journey is long and arduous, where Bassanio is whisked off almost magically to Belmont. Jason's testing takes the form of dangerous physical combat, while Bassanio's test is merely a guessing game in which he stands to lose no more than high hopes should he fail, and neither his own life nor his reputation is at stake. Jason's marriage is miserable, and his broken oath gives rise to murderous violence, while Bassanio has won a better wife than he deserves, and his broken oath results in another elaborate game of which he is the ultimate winner. The parodic contrast between Bassanio and his mythological prototype, which is the contrast between courage and charm, heroism and gamesmanship, provides on one level a commentary on the fate of heroism in a modern, commercially oriented society. Bassanio's heroism, if we can call it that, is vicarious; he is passive and highly dependent on others. Typically he risks someone else's life for his own profit, and it is Portia whose wit and courage finally defeat the “wolfish” Shylock. Bassanio is not entirely to blame, of course, since he is the product of a society which, dedicated to the very concrete goal of making money, apparently has no place for abstract heroic concepts.

I believe, however, that the analogy between Bassanio and Jason goes beyond the merely parodic, and in order to understand fully Bassanio's significance as a Jason, it may be useful to examine briefly the interpretations given to the legend of Jason and his quest in the medieval mythographic tradition inherited by the Renaissance. In the course of this discussion, I shall suggest that Bassanio, although not a “figure” in the allegorical sense, is modeled in part on the Jason of Book V of Gower's *Confessio Amantis.*

While it is perhaps simplistic to suggest that there existed any one interpretation of Jason's history, since both mythographers and poets were apt to use ancient legend as it best suited their immediate purposes, there is a clearly unified body of interpretation in the moralist mythographic tradition in which Jason becomes a figure of “untrouthe.” Dante had already assigned Jason, with his “fair pledges and words of gold,” to the eighth circle of Hell, when the *Ovide Moralisé,* in its rather farfetched exegesis, glossed Jason as a figure of the man who has forgotten Christ and thus betrayed Him, and it is as a betrayer that Jason appears in subsequent moral interpretations of the legend. In the Middle English translation of Christine de Pisan's *Epistle of Othea to Hector,* for example, Jason is a villain “whoose untrouthe and doublenes al knyghtes dispyse,” and in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* he is described as a “devourer and dragoun” of love who, after swearing to Medea that “he for lef or loth / Ne sholde nevere hire false” (ll. 1639-40), abandons her for another woman, “evere in love a chef traytour.” Likewise, Lydgate remarks in his *Troy Book* that “[Jason] was false and eke unkynde” to Medea (l. 3603) whom he “hath for-sake ful unkyndely” (l. 3694).

Gower's treatment of the Jason legend in Book V of *Confessio Amantis* is worth examining in some detail, since the themes of Book V bear a striking similarity to thematic material in *The Merchant of Venice.* We know that Shakespeare was familiar with Gower's work, having drawn upon it for material in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles.* Book V, moreover, contains two versions of the casket motif which, while they differ in detail from Shakespeare's treatment, evince striking thematic and verbal parallels with *MV* [The Merchant of Venice], notably in the use of the casket motif as an illustration of the precept that “every man mot take his chance” (l. 2260). We may recall Portia's laconic “You must take your chance” (II.i.44) to Morocco as he dithers before the caskets. As a corollary, Gower's Confessor shows, through the casket stories, that the determining factor in an individual's success is often not effort or desire but a lucky toss of the dice: “So mai it schew in sondri wise / Betwen fortune and covoitise / The chance is cast upon a Dee” (ll. 2434-36). Morocco echoes this theme himself: “If Hercules and Lichas play at dice / Which is the better man, the greater throw / May turn by fortune from the weaker hand” (II.i.32-34), although he lacks the wisdom to follow his own teaching. Finally, Gower uses the casket motif to demonstrate that the concept of “just deserts” is unsound: “For ofte a man mai se this yit, / That who best doth, lest thank schal have” (ll. 2264-65). This applies equally well to Antonio, who for his generosity is almost rewarded with destitution and death, and to Bassanio, whose mere existence seems to bring him good fortune.
Because of its treatment of the casket motif, *Confessio Amantis* has sometimes been cited as an analogue for *The Merchant of Venice*. Of more significance, I think, is Gower's treatment of the Jason legend and the larger themes of Book V. The principal theme of this book is covetousness in love, which is characterized by a confusion in the mind of the lover between true emotion and love of money. A man is guilty of covetousness in love if he desires a woman because of her wealth:

Riht only for the covoitise  
Of that thei sen a womman riche  
Ther wol thei al hire love affiche;  
Noght for the beaute of hire face.

(ll. 2518-21)

Gower's Confessor uses the legend of Jason and his quest to illustrate one aspect of covetousness in love, namely the untruth that inevitably follows from a vow of love that is only half sincere. Jason, in the hands of moral Gower, becomes specifically a figure of Perjury, which “spareth nought to swere an oth / Thogh it be fals” (ll. 2867-68):

Anon he wole his hand doun lien  
Upon a bok, and swere and sein  
That he wole feith and trouthe bere,  
To serven evere til he die.

(ll. 2889-92)

Thus we find Jason swearing to Medea that “Thei scholde nevere parte atwinne, / Bot evere whil him lasteth lif / He wolde hire holde for his wif” (ll. 3490-92). The Confessor's recounting of the remainder of the legend is a lesson in the potentially disastrous effects of Perjury in love.

*The Merchant of Venice* is hardly a morality play, and no character, however minor, is merely a “figure,” but the relationship between Gower's interpretation of the legend of Jason and Bassanio's role and character in *MV* is highly suggestive. In the first place, *The Merchant of Venice* is largely a play about covetousness in its various manifestations, and if Shylock represents greed in its purest form, Bassanio is clearly guilty of the lesser sin of covetousness in love as it is defined by Gower's Confessor. We need only recall Bassanio's first words about Portia: he immediately observes that she is a lady “richly left” whom he describes in terms of her “worth,” identifying her “sunny locks” with the golden fleece. In deference to Bassanio's nicer side, one must acknowledge that he loves Portia for the “beaute of hire face” as well, but one doubts if he would have wooed her with such enthusiasm had she not been wealthy since, by his own admission, he is in desperate need of money. There is—initially, at least—a confusion of wealth with love in Bassanio's mind.

As Gower's exemplum of Jason illustrates “what sorwe it doth / To swere an oth which is noght soth, / In loves cause namely” (ll. 4223-25), so does Bassanio's story, in the form of the ring plot. Like Gower's Perjury and his Jason, Bassanio swears “to serven evere til he die” when he receives the ring from Portia:

But when this ring  
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence:  
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!

(III.ii.185-87)

Bassanio is inevitably perjured. It is worth observing here that although Bassanio, unlike his mythical prototype, is not sexually unfaithful to Portia, adulterous overtones are present throughout the latter portions of Act V: “I'll die for't,” says Portia, “but some woman had the ring” (V.i.208). Bassanio is certainly
“untrewe” for he relinquishes the ring to the “young doctor” within a matter of hours after his vow is made. Shakespeare eschews Gower’s harsh moralism, of course, and converts a potentially tragic situation into comic confusion; but the perjury Bassanio commits concerning the ring is significant enough to require an entire act to mend the wrong that he has done. And while it must be noted that Bassanio, the victim of a cunningly laid trap, cannot be held morally responsible for his perjury, his “untrouthe,” like his covetousness, reflects a theme of central importance in the play.

It is through his JASONIAN character that Bassanio’s relationship to the world of The Merchant of Venice and to the other characters may best be explained. For Bassanio’s JASONIAN traits are reflected by other figures in the play, and his moral weaknesses—covetousness and perjury—are the principal flaws bred by the Venetian world of commerce and merchandise.

The confusion of money and love (Gower’s covetousness in love) is expressed by a number of characters. Gratiano, for example, always Bassanio’s rather unsavory double, includes himself in Bassanio’s quest when he exclaims “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (III.ii.244; emphasis mine). Although Antonio is the exemplar of loyal friendship, he, like Bassanio, sometimes speaks of friendship in monetary terms, as if on some level he were willing to purchase the love that Bassanio would sell: “Your worth is very dear in my regard” (I.i.60) he assures Salerio, and to Bassanio he vows “my purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (I.i.138-39). Shylock’s “My daughter! My ducats!” is perhaps only an exaggerated form of the confusion of values expressed in a more subtle manner by Bassanio and Antonio. Antonio is further implicated in the JASONIAN analogy in that he sails the seas in his “argosies” in perpetual quest of wealth, and the disastrous failure of his mercantile ventures is specifically equated with the loss of the golden fleece: Salerio retorts to Gratiano’s boasting, “I would you had won the fleece that [Antonio] hath lost” (III.ii.245).

At a further remove from the central plot, the relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo reflects the legend of Jason and Medea in small. Lorenzo, like Bassanio and Gratiano, is marrying wealth. He is fully aware before his elopement with Jessica “what gold and jewels she is furnished with” (II.iv.32), and once again the lover succeeds in a tricky venture through the cleverness of his mistress: the escape and elopement are orchestrated entirely by Jessica, and all Lorenzo has to do is to follow instructions. It can hardly be coincidental that Jessica compares herself with Medea, although she misses the fine irony in the comparison: “In such a night / Medea gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew old Æson” (V.i.13-15). Lorenzo’s cynical riposte is more to the point: “In such a night / Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew / And with an unthrift love did run from Venice” (V.i.16-18). For like Medea, Jessica abandoned her father and her race, absconding with Shylock’s carefully hoarded wealth and leaving emotional devastation in her wake.

The Merchant of Venice is as much a play about oaths as it is about love and the right uses of wealth, and Bassanio’s “untrouthe,” his inability to fulfill his oath to Portia, is as thematically central as is his confusion of love and money. The play abounds in oaths: we have Shylock’s “oath in heaven,” Portia’s oath not to reveal the right coffer even to the man she loves, Bassanio’s oath to Portia, and Antonio’s double bond to Shylock. And every oath, with the possible exception of Portia’s, is broken, usually against the desires of the oath-taker: Shylock cannot fulfill his unholy oath because he is outwitted by Portia; because his ships are lost at sea, Antonio cannot repay Shylock’s loan, and even his willingness to pay the grim collateral is thwarted by Portia’s legal sophism; and Bassanio, forced to choose between Portia’s apparent whim and a compelling debt of gratitude, hands over the precious ring. The consequences of perjury, as it is defined in MV, range from Bassanio’s discomfit to the near-death of Antonio and the emotional and financial destitution of Shylock. While Shakespeare is less stern than Gower—he does not overtly condemn his characters for breaking their oaths—he does suggest, through the action of the play, that “untrouthe” is inherent in the very act of taking an oath, and that unpleasant consequences attend on the inevitable perjury that follows oath-taking.
The analogy between Bassanio and Jason is admittedly limited, in that it is metaphorical rather than figural. Nonetheless, Bassanio's association with Jason and his quest for the golden fleece helps to explain his double nature, to reconcile his role with his character, and the reflection of Bassanio's Jasonian traits by other figures in *The Merchant of Venice* suggests his thematic function and tells us something about the values of Venice and about societies in general which “have too much respect upon the world.” Most obviously, a society dedicated to monetary profit is possessed of a perverted value system, so that affection is often measured by, or even confused with, money and property, a confusion exhibited in varying degrees by Bassanio, Antonio, Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Shylock. Nor can vows be kept, regardless of the determination or sincerity with which they are made. In the world of Venice, such ideals as unselfish love and fidelity to truth cannot exist in unadulterated form because they are incompatible with the human weaknesses fostered by such a society.

Bassanio is the product of that world and a mirror of its values, the “perfect” representative of an imperfect society. And perhaps in their Jasonian guise, Bassanio and the other Venetians comment indirectly upon Shakespeare's world as well. The Argo of classical legend has been said to represent “a single embodiment of all the pioneers who went out to seek a distant treasure, who followed a road that led past Colchis to the riches of a vast continent; and the Golden Fleece becomes a type of all these riches.”

Elizabethan England, too, had her Argonauts.

**Notes**

3. The Argo of classical legend has been said to represent “a single embodiment of all the pioneers who went out to seek a distant treasure, who followed a road that led past Colchis to the riches of a vast continent; and the Golden Fleece becomes a type of all these riches.”
5. Although Portia happily lacks Medea's penchant for hysteria and violence, she is, like Medea, an enchantress of sorts, who is willing to take courageous and unconventional action to ensure the success of the man she wishes to marry. As Medea magically protects Jason from the dragon, Portia secretly manages to extricate Bassanio from the moral dangers posed by Shylock's threat to Antonio's life. I am grateful to Professor John Velz, who suggested that there are further similarities between Portia and Medea, noting that "witchlike, [Portia] brings magical good news at the end, 'you shall not know' by what means she found it; and it might even be said that like Medea she brings success out of disaster, 'renewing' Antonio as Medea did 'old Æson.'”
6. This assertion requires some qualification, perhaps, since apparently Portia's suitors are required to swear, should they select the wrong casket, “Never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage” (II.i.41-42). It is worth noting, however, that the interchange between Portia and Bassanio before he makes his selection contains no reference to the oath to which Morocco is sworn.
7. Shakespeare was undoubtedly familiar with contemporary readings of the Jason legend, such as those found in the dictionaries of Cooper and Stephanus, and, of course, with Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Interestingly, however, Renaissance mythographers apparently found Medea more compelling than Jason; Cooper's *Thesaurus*, for example, contains no entry under “Jason,” although a
sizable paragraph is devoted to Medea, and Book Seven of the Metamorphoses relates the legend primarily from Medea's point of view.

8. The Portable Dante, p. 98.
9. Middle English translation attributed to Anthony Babyngton, ed. James D. Gordon (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1942); quoted from Legend LIV.
13. All quotations from Confessio Amantis are taken from the edition of G. C. Macaulay, EETS es LXXXII (1901). An additional thematic parallel between MV and Gower may be the latter's discourse on usury in Book V, shortly following his tale of Jason and Medea.
14. There is some debate as to whether “argosie” in sixteenth-century usage bore any reference to Jason's ship. The editors of the NED argue that there is no connection. However, the commonest form of the word in the passages they cite is some variant of rugue, and taken in conjunction with the other allusions to the Jason legend in MV, I would argue that the use of “argosie” in this play retains its classical connotations.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Kenneth S. Rothwell (review date fall 2001)


[In the following excerpt, Rothwell praises the outdoor settings of the Film d'Arte Italiana silent film version of The Merchant of Venice, but regrets that the film's ending has been lost.]

To modernists, Shakespeare in silent movies may seem a laughable oxymoron, but this was not how the European and American filmmakers at the beginning of the twentieth century saw it. Quite the opposite. Putting the plays of William Shakespeare on screen fit their larger design of making a disreputable industry reputable by attracting “the better classes of persons,” who scorned the scruffy nickelodeons and penny gaffs. Seeking excellence, they drew for inspiration on the resources of contemporary theater, even as they strove for some kind of filmic identity. What may look today in an old movie like egregiously ostensive acting simply represents the transferral of theatrical practices to the screen, which involved actors' developing an “attitude” before going on stage, striking statuesque poses, or arranging scenes in static tableaux. If anything, the early filmmakers erred on the side of reverence for the Bard, just as today's postmodernists play ironic games with the canon.

This new Milestone Films videocassette happily makes six of these once-inaccessible silent Shakespeare movies now accessible. Researchers will no longer need to undertake epic journeys to remote archives when, for a mere 95, they can screen on their own VCRs King John (UK, 1899), the Percy Stow Tempest (UK, 1908), the Vitagraph Midsummer Night's Dream (USA, 1909), the Film d'Arte Italiana King Lear (Italy, 1910), the Vitagraph Twelfth Night (USA, 1910), the Film d'Arte Italiana Merchant of Venice (Italy, 1910), and the F. R. Benson Richard III (UK, 1911). Doubtless this new propinquity will encourage a deluge of commentary about these ghosts from the past that have often been sneered at, scorned, mocked, and reviled. The challenge will be to reimagine the genuine excitement felt by the pioneers at the dawn of the Shakespeare movie.

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The colorful and exciting Lo Savio Merchant of Venice abandons stuffy indoor sets for the streets and waterways of Venice and follows the Italian practice of cutting the plot down to manageable size, this time by deleting the casket and ring subplots. This print, perhaps only because of lost footage, begins in medias res with Jessica, played by a svelte Francesca Bertini, eloping with Lorenzo. Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock remain central to the film, the Jewish moneylender wearing a gaudy costume of gold, blue, and dark red, perhaps in sign of an outward frivolity that, like Portia's gold casket, conceals an inner darkness. Shylock's obsession with the inhuman bond is underscored by showing in closeup a holograph copy of the contract; while counterbalancing it, Portia's discovery of the law that forbids the shedding of Christian blood gets equal billing during the trial scene. Even as a plump Portia (Olga Novelli) enters the courtroom and Shylock is shown sharpening the knife, the print suddenly ends, so that we may never find out what was on the missing three hundred feet. …

These old silents should be judged not by today's cinematic standards but in the context of the cinema art of their own day. In approaching them, we should perhaps recollect Duke Theseus's advice to the condescending Philostrate: “never any thing can be amiss, / When simpleness and duty tender it.” Otherwise we may be in peril of behaving like grownups feeling superior to a stumbling toddler.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Susan L. Fischer (review date winter 2002)**


[In the following review, Fischer calls Hansgünther Heyme's 2002 staging of The Merchant of Venice a “postmodern, transcultural production,” incorporating elements of Erwin Piscator's “Epic Theatre” as well as Noh theatre.]

Hansgünther Heyme's *The Merchant of Venice*, with its ideological stress on theatre as a form of “provocation” and its deployment of anti-illusionary techniques of “objective acting” and non-verbal gestures of “showing,” evinced an affinity with the “Epic Theatre” of his mentor, Erwin Piscator. It also alluded to Noh theatre. “Where does good end, and where does evil begin?” That was the question implicating all of the characters in this postmodern, transcultural production. According to the director, the only surety in the marshy terrain of Venice, as well as in the ideal world of Belmont, was money. Everything could be bought, and everything was for sale, including affection and love.

Cuts in Heyme's *Merchant* [The Merchant of Venice] were severe although they did not alter the core of the text, which was based on a faithful translation from *The Oxford Shakespeare* (1988). They were, however, sufficient to allow the text to be played without an interval and with only two blackouts (the first, at the end of 3.1, just after Shylock decides upon his revenge and Tubal runs off in utter horror; and the second following the jail scene in 3.3).

Design and interpretation were indistinguishable. A water system composed of silver piping three units deep ran the length of the curtain line and framed the set for both Venice and Belmont. The play opened in a bathhouse where the men were effeteely dressed in long silky skirt-like garments or “sarongs” of varying tonalities. Salerio and Solanio wore black and white or brown and gold. Bassanio sported a pink top and a lavender wrap-around, a burnt-orange coat with a touch of red, and a fluffed white scarf that would emerge when he metamorphosed visibly into Morocco onstage. Antonio appeared with his head covered with a red cloth, a *leitmotif* that would come to connect him, however perversely, with Portia in the final scene. There was a clear homoerotic association between the merchant and his Bassanio from the start. The reflection of the sun's rays on the canals was suggested by lighting effects on a plastic curtain hanging in front of the upstage...
water system, which consisted of a green tiled tub adorned with ten or so golden taps attached to transverse piping, in addition to dual shower fixtures.

The production's depersonalized and crippled Portia, with her red wig and red silk garb, evoked for the director timeless Old World figures such as Elizabeth, Maria Teresa, Katherine of Russia, Marlene Dietrich. She used a cane and propped herself up on Nerissa; her handicap, which had erotic undertones, was intended to resonate with the dubious moral authority she exercised over men. Nerissa moved as though she were walking a tight rope in a balancing act; her black and white silky jumpsuit opened into a fan-shaped skirt. The automaton-like Balthasar resembled an androgynous Japanese “doll” clad in a jean-suit; she wore a bandage over the eyes to hide red under-coloring, which became visible when the eyepiece was removed for the metamorphosis into Launcelot Gobbo. A Christ-image emblazoned on the back of the jean-jacket signified the servant's shift from one master to the other, and there were similar sorts of emblematic costume changes for the other parts she played (i.e., Stefano, Jailer, Officer, Messenger). In this postmodern production, then, personality was a matter of temporary identities and multiple selves, revealed as the combination of fantasies, stylizations, and adopted stances.

Shylock, fastidiously clothed in a silky, white double-breasted suit, wore a rubbery yellow nasal prosthesis attached by black straps. If it resembled a feline-like mask, it evoked the yellow emblem worn by holocaust Jews, for Jessica displayed the same nasal contraption. Once she stole from her father's house, however, only the black straps remained to provide a marked reminder of her ethnic past. Shylock's speech was slow and ponderous, like that of an automaton; he would lose control only once in the company of Tubal. His proffering of the bond “in a merry sport” (1.3.138) was first missed by Antonio, but, after Shylock extended his hand as a sign of Christian “kindness,” the lovesick merchant discerned the calculated joke.

Just as Shylock had expressed revulsion at the smell of pork, so Antonio felt compelled to cleanse and disinfect the hand that had touched the Jew. He washed it under one of those multifarious tub taps that would be doubly associated with the font and the gas chambers in the trial scene. This was a symbolic action that heightened Shylock's tragic dimension as a victim of social ostracism, discriminatory law, and racial prejudice. The relatively sympathetic portrayal was enhanced by the omission of the lines—“I hate him for he is a Christian … / If I can catch him once upon the hip” (2.3.37-41). Spanish critics read this production in philo-semitic terms as a protest against the racism latent in multicultural societies, which is quick to erupt into intolerance and hatred. They connected it to recent events of Spanish history, like a new law of immigration that was being transacted with respect to aliens.

Certain details regarding the casket scenes deserve attention. The fact that the same actor trebled in the roles of Bassanio, Morocco, and Aragon left the impression that it was Bassanio's illicit game to try and sniff out beforehand which casket to elect. Morocco wrapped everyone in the ribbons hanging from the scrims embellished with Bosch drawings that represented the caskets. Portia's sexual attraction was apparent as she went for this Prince's groin; when he threw her off, she was at once visibly upset, so that when he departed she wished him “a gentle riddance” (2.7.78). Aragon actually chose the correct casket, but Nerissa quickly switched the ribbons, indicating that the lottery was in fact a setup in Bassanio's favor. The Spanish Prince was so tottering that he struggled to find the best light in which to read the schedule, whose content Nerissa mouthed, since she had clearly been there before. When Bassanio appeared as himself, he wore a red shirt, pink “sarong,” and fleecy maroon robe. A telltale ribbon was left as a marker near the lead casket. Unable to hide her physical attraction once the lottery had been won, Portia let go of her phallic cane. She fell strategically on top of Bassanio, and the two of them sucked erotically on each other's fingers. There was no doubt that Belmont was tainted by what money and sex could buy.

The trial scene was presided over by a poof of a Duke propped up on stilts in front of the prophetic shower piping. He was clad in a fan-shaped white garment that enveloped his upper body, and he wore long ornamental earrings. Shylock was so composed, and so intent on “justice” in the form of the bond, that he

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failed to see the perverse potential in his seemingly logical assertion that there would be no force in Venetian law if he were denied his judgment. His initial aplomb in the courtroom stood out in sharp contrast to the whimpering of Bassanio, who, in alternately burying his head in Antonio's groin, affecting a Buddhistic pose, and adopting a foetal position, seemed more the “tainted wether of the flock” (4.1.113) than Antonio. Portia, already physically unsteady in the courtroom sans walking stick, was patently undone by her husband's pathetic antics. Antonio, sporting a leopard fur jacket and that suggestive red cloth on his head, knelt in a sacrificial posture of prayer, resigned to the worst. Shylock's white suit gave him an air of surgical precision as he prepared, in depersonalized and automatous fashion, to cut into the merchant's flesh with a small paring knife.

If Shylock was the epitome of self-restraint even when the scales tipped in the opposite direction, Portia's displaced anger at Bassanio's histrionics made her lose control. Her husband, in fact, was so blinded by his love for Antonio that he did not even apprehend the turning point. The courtroom changed metaphorically into a baptismal font, a slaughterhouse, and a gas chamber. As Gratiano stood upstage behind the tub taps and Antonio opened them, Shylock lifted himself mechanically into the polysemous receptacle, emerged dripping in water, turned the shower on himself, and, in an expressionless tone, spoke the words “I pray you give me leave to go from hence. / I am not well” (4.1.391-92). Stripped of his soul, he removed both his nasal mask and yarmulke; his drenched white suit made him look at once naked and lifeless in the lighting. He dangled the yellow nose—the only vestige of his former identity—from the piping above the tub, then exited, emitting an extended OOOOOOH. There was presumably little difference for the Jew between the font and the gas chamber.

Antonio, for his part, sauntered away ostensibly more distressed over the loss of Bassanio than contented at his own reprieve. His freedom seemed a fate almost worse than death. Portia appeared no less disturbed at the virtual mariage à trois, especially when she was given her husband's ring. In Belmont, Jessica was hardly at ease, as she stood beside the generic green tub with all its connotations, puffing on a cigarette as though it were her last before being baptized into Christian society. Lorenzo, in a gesture of pious hypocrisy, threw water on her face as he recited the words “In such a night / Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew, / Slander her love, and he forgave her” (5.1.20-22). Shylock's daughter symbolically grabbed hold of her father's detached nose, still suspended from the faucet piping. Although her own nasal sign was gone, its strap marks were a poignant reminder of her former, or rather other, self.

The final Belmont scene revealed not so much connection as division. The last moments were performed to the offstage sound of shattered glass, and Launcelot entered holding a cracked hand mirror (presumably Jessica's). In quasi-Piscatorian and postmodern fashion, then, the spectators were presented with a fragmented mirror in which they could see themselves.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: D. J. R. Bruckner (review date 21 November 2003)**


[In the following review of the 2003 Pearl Theater Company production of The Merchant of Venice, Bruckner underscores the effects of director Shepard Sobel's emphasis on the relationship between Shylock and Antonio.]

In the Pearl Theater Company's *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock certainly makes the most of his day in court, and all the days before, and that makes this production a sometimes troubling experience. Shepard Sobel, the company's founder and the director here, accomplishes this transformation by focusing our attention more
intently than usual on the confrontations between Shylock and Antonio, the merchant of the title.

Dominic Cuskern's Shylock is angry, bristly, too offended for too long to hide his resentment. This Shylock affects a slight Middle European accent, and he knows how to make the other characters, and the audience, feel the snap of his wit. (No other character can stand up to him in this respect.) He makes no big speeches. Those few that we expect to be appeals to the audience are spoken directly to other characters, naturally, and you can feel Shylock struggling to hold onto his temper. His defeat at the end of the play is pitiable.

As for Antonio, Dan Daily turns him into an easily recognizable commercial tycoon, a bit standoffish, bragging about his diversified investments in shipping, easily commanding his younger colleagues, silencing them with declarations that his status gives him higher obligations. When Shylock first accuses Antonio of spitting on him, you can almost see this Antonio craning over the lip of his skybox to get a better aim.

There is a dramatic spark between these two characters that puts everyone else in the background, and that makes the final court scene viscerally upsetting but, in an odd way, hopeful. There is a feeling that Shylock will somehow escape the legal manacles placed on him by the duke and the law, and then all these people will learn what an irresistibly smart opponent he can be.

In the background the play remains a comedy, as Shakespeare meant it to be, and there is plenty of laughter at the complicated maneuvers and misunderstandings of the three pairs of lovers and the clown. The discovery by Portia and Nerissa that their new husbands have given away their wedding rings is as funny as any version I can recall.

But there are a number of distracting lapses of attention.

Portia seems to like putting her hands on everyone she fancies. This woman is sought after in marriage by kings and gladly spurns them. So why is she acting like Fergie? Launcelot Gobbo, plotting Jessica's jewel heist and escape, fondles her knee. Bassanio, denouncing Shylock for demanding his pound of flesh, grabs his neck and appears to choke him. When Shylock leaves the court grieving and broken, Gratiano snatches his yarmulke off his head.

Nowadays we tolerate coarser behavior in our betters than people did in the past. But in the context of this elegantly contrived and written play, little vulgarities of this kind can easily seem to yank an actor out of character—a risk no director should be willing to tolerate.

**Criticism: Themes: Russell Astley (essay date April 1979)**


*In the following essay, Astley explores issues of morality and ethical risk-taking in *The Merchant of Venice.**

*The Merchant of Venice* bases its dramatic logic on the New Testament premise that you get what you give, and the play's consistent enactment of this looking-glass logic creates a world in which mirroring is a major internal principle of order. This makes for a rather peculiar play-world: a providential world where reversal (the last made first) and reflexiveness (the judge self-judged) rule; a world which offers at any moment to confound subject with object and appearance with reality; a world, that is to say, oddly akin to Alice's Looking-glass Garden, where you approach your goal by advancing in the opposite direction. The three main lines of action—the casket-, bond-, and ring-plots—form portions of this reflexive unity, each an analogue of the others, helping to clarify them and the meaning of the whole.
The play as moral mirror of a human nature external to it; the necessity of moral risk-taking: these two ideas are familiar enough to students of The Merchant of Venice. In this essay however I want to propose a more intimate and somewhat different connection between them and to show with what persistence both are implicated in the internal mirroring just mentioned. I will suggest also that Shakespeare in this play confronts not only his dramatis personae but perhaps his audience as well with the moral risk of self-judgment through judging the other and, further, that this dramatic (or supradramatic) situation could be achieved only by a playwright self-consciously willing to put his own craft at hazard. Portia's arts too, mirroring her creator's, will be seen to exploit the shifts of self-reflexiveness for moral ends. And the end of my argument should be to rediscover under a new light the familiar truth that in such a world of fearful Christian symmetries—a world which I think meant to embrace playwright and audience as well as the play's internal characters—the choice between real and apparent goods is always consequential and inescapably hazardous.

I

Shylock's tale of Jacob and Laban and Antonio's response to it turn on thoughts of hazard and consequence. The standard argument against usury had it that legitimate wealth could be generated only by risk of wealth or by physical labor. Since the usurer avoided both (his loans were guaranteed), his profits were plainly illegitimate. Yet according to Shylock Jacob's profit is just such a riskless consequence not of labor but of magical know-how, and he nevertheless "was blest". So Shylock the usurer—to put this in a way that should seem more relevant as the present essay unfolds—sees in this patriarchal exemplar only his own reflection. Antonio on the other hand reads there only the pattern of a Christian merchant. His Jacob is no more a laborer than Shylock's but he is no sorcerer either and deserves no personal credit for his good fortune, which is rather the result of a risk, a "venture" much like Antonio's own: Jacob's luck is to Antonio's mind a thing "swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven" (I. iii. 88-90). For Antonio, following Christian tradition, recognizes in Fortune, who seems to shuffle the world's goods blindly and randomly, a mere persona of omniscient providence, an agent of the divine will. I think the play supports only Antonio's interpretation.

The casket choice willed by Portia's father also is spoken of as an affair of "fortune," a "venture," but often in a sense opposed to Antonio's. Morocco, for example, frets about being led by "blind fortune" and complains that even Hercules might be beaten at a game of chance. Yet the happy outcome of the contest makes it dramatically clear that old Belmont's quaint device was very providently designed. "Who chooses his meaning chooses" Portia, and she is in fact won by the only suitor whose love transcends narcissism. For Belmont's law, like the Christian God's, is fulfilled only by such love. Risk is indeed part of what must be chosen. But risk in this context is not reliance on accident, on pagan and arbitrary Chance (Sors), but again the gamble of faith understood by Antonio. The leaden demand to "give and hazard all" expresses a kind of wisdom, the reversal of worldly values, which is folly to pagans (and to Roman Catholics in the Reformers' view) and a stone of stumbling to the Jews.

Belmont's caskets are the mirrors which first expose the reflexive hazards of judging. Each chooser chooses his own self-image; what he gets (win or lose) is a glimpse of a truer self, of character as personal destiny. Aragon wishes to see himself unironically as a worldly wiseman but, like his name and nation, his zeal to get what he deserves reflects only obtrusive arrogance. "There be fools alive iwis, / Silvered o'er, and so was this" jibes his scroll (II. ix. 67-8) and the point is sharpened if Aragon himself displays the silver thatch of age without its wisdom. Morocco is described in the original stage direction as a "tawny"—gold rather than black—Moor, and he proclaims part of his self-image in rejecting base lead: "A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross" (II. vii. 20). Lanuncelot's later punning on the noun "Moor" and the comparative adjective "more" (III. v. 41-3) may further help interpret this emulous chooser of desire: because "enough / May not extend so far as to the lady," the Moor wants more (II. vii. 27-8). He is sensual, ambitious, aggressive; but from Belmont's Christian perspective physical potency wins only physical death.
Whereas the choosers of externals mirror both physically and spiritually the images they approve, the richly-attired Bassanio, who chooses “not by the view,” is physically no “lead casket.” Yet he unmistakeably does choose a reflection of his own values when he chooses to “give and hazard all.” This is his motto from the first to the last scene of the play. To Antonio he is frank about the element of hazard in his plan to win Portia, and he gives to the Gobbo and right after to Gratiano as readily as Antonio and later Portia give to him (II. ii. 142, 173). If he never needs squarely to face the ultimate generosity, forgiving an enemy (as Shylock and Antonio must), he nevertheless lives by the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount that enjoins Christians to “Give to him that asketh.” But this strength, unconscious of its limits, turns to weakness, as Portia in Act Five leads him to understand. Bassanio's glimpse of his essential self, his soul's destiny, is the lead casket's picture of Portia.

The casket contest is at least as consequential and hazardous for Portia as for any of her suitors. Her predicament at first glance may seem just the converse of theirs. They must choose, she must not; bad luck for them means they must not marry no matter how much they want to, for her that she must no matter how much she wants not to. But Shakespeare uses most of her introductory scene to establish that Portia too makes a choice. From her witty scourging of the first parcel of wooers and her embarrassed delight when Nerissa trips her into blurtting Bassanio's name we gather that Portia is far from indifferent to the contest's outcome. She is no fairy-tale automaton: submission to her father's will means curbing a strong will of her own (I. ii. 23-4). She is after all herself “lord” of Belmont now (III. ii. 167-9) and could, as Nerissa incidentally reminds her, “refuse to perform [her] father's will” (I. ii. 90-92). And Jessica's example reminds us of the same possibility. When instead Portia chooses obedience she too chooses a version of the lead casket. She accepts self-renunciation and the risk of faith: faith in her father's love and wisdom and, as inevitable consequence of this, faith that if the man she loves loves her, he too will make the right choice (III. ii. 41).

The hazardous necessity of consequential choice is the play's recurring moral predicament. It reflects an irony of the human condition mediated for Shakespeare's culture by the myth of Adam's choice and its consequences. The inevitability of hamartia was one of these consequences, from which it followed that all human decisions, no matter how resolute or thoroughly calculated, ought to preserve some margin of faith in a providential grace. Or otherwise put: all our choices are risks.

II

When the Prince of Aragon chooses desert he discovers himself a fool; for in the words of a wiser prince, “treat every man after his desert and who shall scape whipping?” Desert is mere justice, as Portia warns Shylock at the trial.

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation.

(IV. i. 196-9)

The issue raised by the silver casket, in other words, is assimilated here as elsewhere in Shakespeare to the Reformation antithesis of justification by human merit and justification by divine grace.

Shylock, we have seen, judges Jacob's profit in lambs riskless and deserved, rejecting Antonio's interpretation of it as a gift of providence. Likewise in court, sensing no risk and feeling no need of grace, Shylock stands secure on his own righteousness under law: “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” St. Paul identifies this attitude as an aspect of what he sees as a kind of fundamental “Jewish heresy,” the confidence that one has no need of Christ's purchase of grace if one is already performing to the letter the law of Moses. But Shylock's bond condemns Shylock himself to death, and if he had been merciful the life saved would also
have been his own. Obviously, like Belmont's caskets, the law too is something of a mirror in this play.

If we disregard motivation, Shylock's behavior appears not very different from Antonio's. Among other things both are law-abiding money-lenders and rather sober and solitary wifeless men. Antonio seems really close only to Bassanio, who leaves him (financed by Antonio's money) to go off and win himself a bride; Shylock is close only to Jessica, who leaves him (financed by his money) also to marry. If Antonio lends Bassanio money without interest, Shylock first lends it (the identical ducats in fact) to Antonio also without interest and in the end even forgoes the principal. When Antonio is awarded half Shylock's estate he arranges to pass it at Shylock's death to Lorenzo and Jessica; and our last intelligence of Shylock is that he is about to turn Christian, having already willed his remaining worldly goods to his Christian son-in-law and convert daughter. Obviously the contrast between Shylock and Antonio leans less on deeds than on motives: the play distinguishes them for us rather by what they would like to do than by what they end up being responsible for. Antonio voluntarily finances Bassanio's marriage venture; Jessica must steal her dowry. Antonio lends without interest out of love, Shylock out of hate. Shylock forgives Antonio's principal, turns Christian, and bequeaths his goods to his only child solely because the law compels him to act in these ways; Antonio's mercy at the trial is free and unimpelled.

What we see in action here is the New Testament dialectic of love and the law, which are presented there not only as antagonistic opposites but as also in a certain sense two forms of one reality. If law is external motivation to do good, love as caritas is internal motivation toward the same end. Thus in a sense the law is simply Christian love objectified. If you act out of love you are no longer “under the law” because your acts though lawful are autonomous: the law is merely “what you will.” But if your actions express motives contrary to love you find yourself facing a law which appears as a menacing external enemy. Thus conceived, the law has power only over criminals who, though they break it, are not therefore free of it: instead violation wakes forces of coercion otherwise dormant. Jesus and Paul usually distinguish God's law from Caesar's, but Paul in his homily on the duty of obedience to civil authorities extends the dialectic of law and love to the secular order (Rom. 13), and the Reformers took this more general interpretation as also the fundamental one. *In The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare too assimilates his civil and criminal law to this theological model.

At the opening of the trial scene Shylock equates the law with his own lust for revenge, and the more responsible Venetians reluctantly agree with him. To disarm and unmask this perversion of law, Portia must at last turn the Mosaic tables on Shylock and produce her anti-Judaic “quibble”. The bitter point of this serious joke is that Antonio is not kosher: his flesh is bloody and blood is forbidden Shylock by the letter of his own “law”, his bond, metonymic here for the law of Moses. And despite his clamor that everything not expressly spelled out in it is invalid, Shylock evidently has not read his bond with sufficient care. But the letter of the law turns out to be even harder to fulfill than to interpret; in fact in Shylock's case fulfillment is impossible. As soon as this lesson sinks home Portia follows it with a more important one. Even if Shylock could live up to it in other respects, the law is anyway incapable of sanctioning private revenge, which contradicts its nature as objectified love. It can only reflect the offense back onto the would-be perpetrator's head: for having sought another man's life Shylock must forfeit his own. Thus the law Shylock had thought one with his own murderous will is revealed as instead an antagonist, which meets him in the magnified image of his own violence.

But although *The Merchant of Venice* intends to be anti-Judaic, it does not mean to be anti-Semitic. In fact in so far as the rationale for its attitudes is Pauline it is also fundamentally anti-racist: Jessica's “race” is no bar to her salvation. For to Paul the old covenant of the flesh (both in its racial sense of descent from common ancestors and in its insistence on material signs of holiness: physical circumcision, dietary laws, etc.) is superseded by the new covenant of the spirit, with its belief in inheritance through faith and its “circumcision of the heart.” Paul, writing to the Romans, worries that recent converts from Judaism will slide back into their old habit of confusing physical symbols, external appearances, with spiritual realities. Literalism in its whole range of meanings is thus another aspect of Paul's “Jewish heresy.”
Literalism is the presiding mechanism of Shylock's style of mind. Even his speech patterns are shackled by a trick of literal repetition very like the broken-record rhythms of old Justice Shallow, the sterile inversion of Renaissance rhetorical ideals of “copia” or generous variation. His style compulsively explains away its own figures of speech: a perfect verbal tic for a miser who, Midas-like, has a hard time distinguishing money as symbol from the real wealth it only represents. When other characters in the play speak of people as “dear” and “worthy” or even as “dear bought,” they understand these terms figuratively, after the “spiritual sense”; only Shylock tries to take such expressions according to the “letter”. And if “the Spirit giveth life” Shylock's despiritualized “letter” threatens to snatch it away. Thus in III. i. Shylock bewails to Solanio-Salerio the rebellion of his “flesh and blood” (meaning, as he immediately explains, his daughter) and complains that Tubal's gossip of Jessica's honeymoon junket “sticks a dagger” in him. Here passion constrains him to seize the figurative word; but in the subsequent trial scene that word is almost made flesh in a demonic triple parody of circumcision, crucifixion, and communion as Shylock does his utmost to stick a literal dagger into Antonio's gentle side and scatter abroad some of his literal flesh and blood. The lex talionis itself seems the fitting condemnation of this literalist caricature of reciprocity.

Shylock's sharply reductive cast of mind shows itself too in his treating people as things to be owned and used, as well as in his crafty confounding of mineral with animal breeding. It is partly to forestall the perennial objection to usura as contra naturam, which bases itself on this last confusion, that Shylock produces the witness of Jacob's practice on Laban. But here as everywhere Shylock's defense serves only to convict him out of his own mouth. He doesn't answer the objection at all; instead he reminds his audience of it. The moral of the whole Jacob-Laban story, as Shylock reads it, is that the letter, not the spirit, is all that need concern a man: “Thrift is blessing if men steal it not.” Anything goes, that is to say, short of literal theft. It is against this notion of theft, a notion that lets Shylock prosecute a bond whose burden approximates the outlaw challenge: “Your money or your life!”—it is against this interpretation of what the law allows and disallows that Jessica's theft of love is to be measured and judged.

Jessica's choice appears to be between love and the commandment of filial obedience. But we have already observed that from the Christian viewpoint her father's conception of law is perverse. He sees it as an objectification of the wrong kind of love, of cupiditas not caritas. For Jessica to continue obeying his commandments would be to acquiesce in his warped and heretical values. Eros is not caritas either, but as romantic love leads to the sacred institution of marriage it accords with law and is essential to society. In Shakespeare, as we know, to be anti-marriage is to be anti-social, and heavy fathers in both tragedies and comedies are typically petty tyrants and their eloping daughters sympathetic heroines. But Shylock's sense of Jessica is anti-human as well as anti-social. He is aware of her as of an item of inventory, to be locked away with his precious stones, an item of great sentimental value, like Leah's ring, as precious to him as his own flesh and blood but with no more right to independent life than a ducat or one of his own limbs.

That Shylock has finally to be forced by law to leave his goods to his daughter and son-in-law should remind us of the foreseeable consequences Jessica faces as she makes her choice. When she elects to throw down the casket of jewels to Lorenzo she also elects to throw down her right to inherit old Shylock's ample fortune. So that when she "steals from the wealthy Jew" she is not just a thief but equally an heiress renouncing a secure claim to wealth to risk an uncertain life with an impecunious lover. This must I think be reckoned a version of choosing the lead casket. Nevertheless Jessica does disobey her father and she is at least literally a thief. We are not to perceive her as a paragon of daughterly conduct: that is Portia's role. But she ought to draw more sympathy than censure as a well-meaning character caught up in a moral dilemma, who chooses to do a wrong to do a right, a choice which, as we shall see, is made also by Bassanio.

III

Portia, like other heroines of the early comedies, shows a strong histrionic bent. She loves to hold the mirror up to human nature just as her father did in the casket contest. She seems unable, in fact, to resist gilding even
his lily. The casket scenes designed by him are surely theatrical enough, with their parting curtain and glittering symbolic props, their built-in reversals and recognitions. Yet when Bassanio comes to choose, Portia's excited imagination cannot refrain from casting the scene and its characters against a musical backdrop, into the allegorical postures of a court masque of Hercules and Hesione (III. i. 53-62). The dressing-up is only verbal here but at the trial Portia puts on the actual appearance of the law and, as we have seen, aims its mirror at the violence of Shylock's will; in the ring scene she again shows a character the image of his vice so that in passing judgment on another he may judge and so amend himself.

We recall that in the casket and trial scenes, all more or less stage-managed by Portia, we have observed characters first self-deceived by distorted self-images, then abruptly confronted by reflections of truer selves. But to understand how an analogous double-take informs the ring scene we must first review the trial from a slightly different angle.

When Portia tells Shylock he may have his pound of flesh but no jot of “Christian blood,” he asks: “Is that the law?” “Thyself shalt see the act” is her reply—which seems to indicate that she has already “seen the act” herself, since she knows its content and location. And if we grant that Portia enters the scene knowing at least this way to block Shylock's attempt at legalized murder, there is really no reason to resist the companion assumption that Bellario has “furnished her with [his] opinion” on the other two laws as well. Why then doesn't she just tell Shylock at once the truth of his legal position? If we could ask Portia, who quotes Shylock the Lord's Prayer, she might respond by quoting us Christ's explanation that he employs parables because in this way “is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which prophecy saith, By hearing, ye shall hear, and shall not perceive.”

But the dramatic reason seems to be like father like daughter: she wants to give Shylock the chance to make his free choice and to set him up a mirror to show him the inmost parts of whatever self he chooses. If she were to explain to him at once how his bond could become his own death warrant, he would tear it up and both he and Antonio would be physically safe. But his chance to choose the lead casket, caritas rather than cupiditas, would be utterly lost. The only choice left him that would not further his self-interest would be the insane decision to execute his bond, carve out Antonio's heart, and knowingly thereby sentence himself to death. He is finally offered this choice, but not until he has been given every chance to give and thus to receive absolute forgiveness: the giving and the receiving being complementary interpretations of the same judgment.

But this free moral choice Portia insists on offering everyone is always depicted by Shakespeare as consequential and as based on partial ignorance, hence as risky. Shylock, ignorant of his own ignorance, thinks he can judge others without risk to himself: he is made to see how hazardous judgment is and that it is always reflexive: “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.” “To offend and judge are distinct offices” as Portia says; but Shakespeare habitually contrives to have them performed by the same agent so that the judge may unknowingly judge and sentence himself. Othello and Angelo and Lear are conspicuous victims of this moral boomerang; but the process is ingrained in Shakespeare's imagination and some example of it gets into almost every play. The principle is the complement of the golden rule: do not unto others as you would not have them do unto you. Shylock does not want to give up his own life (he finally prefers humiliation), yet he demands Antonio's. On the other side, Antonio does not sentence Shylock to anything he would not want for himself, including the conversion. To a twentieth-century audience Antonio may seem to be demanding that Shylock merely shed—or worse, betray—one religion for another, where both are equally valid. These are surely things Antonio would refuse to do himself. But Shakespeare would have expected his contemporaries to perceive a different situation. He would have expected them to see Antonio as requiring Shylock to adopt the unique sure means to his soul's salvation—which is something Antonio indeed would do—has done—himself.

If Shylock had chosen mercy when Portia begged him to he could have walked out of the courtroom with his life, his goods, and his religion all apparently intact. But this choice, if genuine, would actually have amounted to a de facto conversion to the play's vision of primary Christianity. Shylock of course remains true
to himself in his self-destructive fashion. And forced conversion thus becomes inevitable, the reflexive *reductio ad absurdum* of the major pattern in the play which shows Shylock never doing anyone a good turn unless he is made to. For though Shylock's conversion is part of the consequences of his originally free choice and therefore cannot itself be free in the same sense, it does hold its own kind of freedom. As Marsilio Ficino explains the principle, the evil man “converts blessings into evil for himself” whereas the good man “converts evils into good for himself.” Thus Antonio profits spiritually from facing up to imminent death; and Shylock has the option of truly embracing his new religion and its gift of eternal salvation. But we feel sure he will characteristically convert what could have been his greatest blessing, his baptism, into a means of self-damnation. Attempts to interpret this as the planned result of some kind of hypocritical Christian entrapment would seem to be misguided: a faked conversion would be seen by Shakespeare's neighbors as endangering Shylock's soul no more than his simply remaining a Jew (Acts 4:11-12). Antonio's stipulation seems rather to offer Shylock an opportunity he probably will not accept and at the same time to demand an outward conformity that will make it at least less easy for him to go on openly taking advantage of what was thought of as his Jewish license to commit usury (Deut. 23).

It was Mrs. Jameson, followed in this century by E. M. W. Tillyard and others, who first noted that Portia in her “quality of mercy” speech is actually pleading for Shylock not Antonio. Antonio is already safe when Portia starts her pleading: only Shylock can profit from the destruction of his bond. It is not Antonio's flesh that needs saving but Shylock's soul. Both Mrs. Jameson and Tillyard however assume that Shakespeare requires his audience to be aware of this actual situation. I want to suggest instead that the scene may well be arranged to provoke a more complex response than this. For Shakespeare has apparently rigged the trial so that it can be construed in two mutually exclusive ways. It seems, in fact, to have been made easy to misunderstand, hard to see truly. A word from Portia could have prevented all possibility of audience misunderstanding. But Shakespeare withholds the word. On the first acquaintance then, when we do not know what Portia knows, we are invited to accept as our own the Venetian view, seeing the danger as Antonio's, fearing Shylock's fury and the privilege of his knife, cheering the sudden rescue of Antonio by Portia and her equally sudden defeat of Shylock. We are thus drawn into a vicarious participation in the Venetians' anxiety for their neighbor's life and encouraged to share with them the melodramatic thrill of Portia's long-delayed “Tarry, Jew,” which overturns the situation, hands Antonio Shylock's opportunity for vengeance or mercy, and makes Shylock taste Antonio's bankruptcy and sentence of death. But with hindsight and after considering the total pattern of the play's evidence, we find ourselves instead looking through this surface melodrama and realizing that the danger is always actually to and from Shylock, who defeats, judges, and sentences himself. And once we penetrate to this inner meaning, our former view can remain appropriate only to Shylock and the Venetians: we cannot ourselves return to it. Thus, on this interpretation, the trial may be thought of as like one of Belmont's caskets, with a deceptive outside whose apparent significance is reversed by what is concealed within. So conceived, it offers a hazardous mirror to audiences: for whoever with Gratiano judges this complex structure a melodrama simultaneously judges the depth of his own understanding of it. It is the author of the play who now seems to be saying of the Gratianos in his audience: “in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias. …” I am suggesting then that in the trial scene Shakespeare constructed a dramatic event that would offer his audience a first-hand experience of the kind of double-take they had thought they were merely observing. And like the “good” characters in his play Shakespeare as artist would also be committing himself to the same gamble of faith. The hazard of *his* enterprise (to use the mercantile metaphor) would be that his audience, even the most perceptive, might fail to catch on, in which case his ingenious dramatic structure along with its moral point would be lost. But this is the ordinary risk of the parabolist, and Renaissance poets, with Portia, were disposed to accept it as proper to serious mimesis.

But what is concealed in the trial scene (however we interpret it) is revealed in the ring scene. Here we share with Portia and Nerissa the information—that they were the lawyer and clerk—necessary to see all points of view and spot the limits of each. The trial scene repeats the lesson of the caskets that judgment is a mirror and shows too that the only escape from the destructive circuit of retributive justice is through forgiveness: not a forgiveness that negates the law's necessary consequences but a forgiveness that fulfills the law's spirit, which
is essentially educational: the law being, according to Paul, our school-master to Christ. This is the kind of mercy Antonio extends to Shylock in act four and it is the kind Portia extends to Bassanio in act five.

The ring test catches Bassanio in a double-bind. He ought to give and hazard everything he has for love (give the ring—his claim to Belmont and Portia—for love of Antonio) yet he ought also to keep faith with his bride whom he also loves. Bassanio meets here for the first time the sort of ordeal that Portia and Jessica have already undergone: the psychic tug-of-war between equal and apparently mutually exclusive loves, with their divergent obligations. His conflict is closer to Portia's than to Jessica's in its balanced intensity: there is no Shylock on either hand to obscure the delicacy of his predicament. But his solution is more like Jessica's. Portia alone is able to resolve the dilemma through obedience to a father whose will is in perfect unison with her own. Jessica and Bassanio do wrong to do right. Jessica breaks faith with her father and steals a ring given him by his wife which she prodigally spends for a love trifle. Bassanio spends his wife's ring for a far worthier purpose, to repay his debt of love to Antonio; but he nevertheless thus gives away his claim to his new fortunes at Belmont and takes a very great risk on his bride's reaction when she learns he has been false to his word.

Bassanio has failed to realize that even giving has a limit, that holding on—constancy—is also among love's values. And he has also failed to understand the dialectic of justice and mercy, as we learn during the trial when he asks Portia-Balthasar to "wrest the law" and do wrong to do a right. The answer he receives then is that this "must not be." Yet this is the principle that governs his decision after the trial to forswear himself and surrender his wedding ring. In act five he must learn by personal experience what Shylock's example might more comfortably have taught him: a wrong, even a small one, is always a wrong and calls forth its own punishment automatically. For, as we have seen, the law sleeps only until offended, when it reacts by reflecting the offense in kind. The law has no power to make anyone choose to do right; it can only punish those who do wrong. As with Adam so with Everyman: the original choice or judgment is free, its consequences are not. The consequences are what the law-breaker deserves, mere justice (dike). And though one's freely-chosen attitude toward unavoidable consequences can transform them, making virtue of necessity, the only transcendence of the mechanical rigor of desert itself is by way of giving, forgiving, mercy.

Portia responds to Bassanio's decision in what we may recognize as typical Belmont family style: she offers him a little dramatic lesson, using highly-polished equivocation as her mirror. First she uses her art to tell him the plain truth: "I'll die for't, but some woman had the ring" (V. i. 208), that hearing he may hear and not understand. Next she produces the ring, flashing him an image of his own indiscretion in her verbal portrait of herself as adulteress, thus apparently trading places with him, hoisting him suddenly to the seat of judgment and casting herself into the role of guilty suppliant: "Pardon me Bassanio, / For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (ll. 258-9). Bassanio's understandable "amazement" achieves no verbal expression, but Portia's expectation in showing him a magnified double of his fault is quite conventional: his conscience, fundamentally sound, will be soundly wrung and will return his judgment onto himself so that he may amend his own smaller infidelity.17

But just at this brink of moral gravity Portia redeems the comic mood and rends her veil of illusion. Her adequate response to the violation of her bond avoids Shylock's empty literalism, distinguishing nicely between the symbol (the ring) and what it represents (herself and her wealth). Bassanio's offense in yielding the ring remained symbolic, so must its chastisement. Moreover the very offense was simultaneously a gesture of generosity and renunciation of self in recognition of which his punishment is now revealed to be also his reward. With the sudden flourish of the stage magician Portia flips the leaden casket of adultery inside out and shows that it has all along concealed a forgiving and faithful wife, this time the thing itself and not a painter's iconic symbol. The case of Shylock's bond is played back in reverse. The same words that a moment ago had guaranteed Portia's infidelity now, echoed by Bassanio, guarantee her constancy:

Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow.
When I am absent, then lie with my wife.

(V. i. 284-85)

This whole elaborate joke is possible only because the law, the “doctor” who “saved” Antonio, was in reality only an outward disguise of love. And like her other feats of Christian magic Portia's last illusion is created and dispelled by the mainly verbal looking-glass of her entertaining and instructive art.

Notes

2. Bassanio's name seems not to be the same kind of vernacular pun as the names of the other suitors. Nevertheless, as Northrop Frye pointed out in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 166, it is fitting that the name of the only suitor to judge truly among the symbolic metals should resemble a Greek word for touchstones (*basanoi*). And it may even be intentional that the first syllable of Bassanio's name should in Shakespeare's pronunciation have the sound of English *base*—as in the key phrase “base lead”—with its appropriately conflicting meanings of “worthless,” “foundation,” and “humble.”
3. Matt. 5:42. Bible citations are from the Geneva version, spelling modernized. For an account of Antonio's progress from a self-righteous piety that cannot love its enemy to a closer approximation of true Christian charity, see Barbara K. Lewalski's “Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *SQ. [Shakespeare Quarterly]* 13 (1962), 330-1.
4. Portia explains to Lorenzo the Neoplatonic principle of the like souls of true lovers at III. iv. 11-21.
5. I mean *hamartia* here to include both Aristotelian “error” and Pauline “sin.”
6. *Ham.* II. ii. 536-7. Hamlet of course was educated at Wittenberg; Aragon is a Spanish Catholic.
7. See also Isabella to Angelo in *MM* [Measure for Measure] II. ii. 74-8.
10. Perhaps it always ought to be mentioned that the “Judaism” portrayed in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses an inaccurate idea of historical Judaism, especially as contrasted with historical Christianity. Shakespeare’s conception of “Judaism” is derived mainly from Paul's propagandist distortions. There is no room here to rehearse the inaccuracies of that view, but its limits may perhaps be sufficiently indicated by recalling that the New Testament's “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord” is a quotation from the Torah and that the golden rule was taught in its complementary form … by Rabbi Hillel Hanasi, elder contemporary of Philo, before the birth of Christ (see *The Talmud of Jerusalem* [New York: Wisdom Library, 1956], pp. 26-7).
11. “For charity itself fulfils the law, / And who can sever love from charity?” (*LLL* [Love's Labor's Lost] IV. iii. 361-2): in its Renaissance context Berowne's *coup de grace* to the court's oath of abstinence is not altogether fool.
Criticism: Themes: Burton Hatlen (essay date 1980)


[In the following essay, Hatlen offers a Marxist reading of The Merchant of Venice, maintaining that the playwright questioned both feudal and bourgeois concepts of value.]

Twentieth-century historians such as R. H. Tawney and Christopher Hill have demonstrated that a profound economic, social, and cultural revolution was taking place in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. How did this revolution affect Shakespeare's art? Was he a “conservative” defender of the dying feudal order? Or was he perhaps a “progressive” spokesman of an emerging bourgeois civilization?

In the 1930s and 1940s scholars devoted a good deal of energy to debating such questions as these, and by the early 1950s a consensus on this matter had apparently emerged: Shakespeare was, such critics as Theodore Spencer and E. M. W. Tillyard persuasively argued, a “Christian humanist,” a defender of a traditional, hierarchical world view. This Conception of Shakespeare has been, in the last two decades, subjected to attack from many quarters; most contemporary Shakespeareans would, I suspect, agree that the Spencer-Tillyard description of Shakespeare's world view is at the very least simplistic. Yet rather that seek a more accurate view of Shakespearean scholarship has in the last two decades largely busied itself with smaller, more easily resolvable questions of language, form, and theme. The one significant exception to this general tendency is Marxist literary scholarship, and the insistence of such critics as Robert Weimann, Paul N. Siegel, and Arnol Kettle that we must see Shakespeare within the context of his moment in history has made Marxist criticism, in my judgment, the most vigorous and fruitful of the various current tendencies in Shakespearean studies. However, it must also be recognized that Marxist scholarship has not yet achieved a consensus of its own on the question of Shakespeare's relationship to his epoch. Some Marxists, including Siegel, have continued to accept the Spencer-Tillyard conception of Shakespeare as a “Christian humanist”; others, such as Annette Rubenstein, have seen him rather as a “progressive” spokesman for all the bourgeois; and still others have regarded him as a representative of (in some phrases of Zdanek Anikst quoted by Siegel) “a cross-section of the nation's progressive elements,” and have argued that he does not “express the interests of any one particular Estate over and above any other.” My own (equally Marxist, I believe) approach to Shakespeare differs from all of these, for I see Shakespeare not as a spokesman for any one ideology but rather as an acute critic of all the ideologies current in his time. In this essay I shall seek to develop this conception of Shakespeare by focusing on his treatment of one central question, the nature of value, in one particular play, The Merchant of Venice in the attempt to show that the play, rather than inviting us to accept one or another of these ideas of value as “true,” dramatizes the consequences of the two modes of thought here at issue—and thus, by implication at least, brings into focus both the virtues and the limitations of the feudal and the bourgeois ways of life themselves.
In Shakespeare's time the official agents of church and state diligently promulgated the idea that value is a quality that is intrinsic in certain objects, acts, or persons. The legitimacy of both the aristocracy and the monarchy rested primarily upon the willingness of Englishmen in general to believe that some human beings are, by virtue of their birth into certain families, inherently “better” than others. Indeed, some members of the English aristocracy continue even today to believe that their blood contains certain attributes absent from the blood of ordinary human beings, and until recently most working-class English children were trained in childhood to show respect for their “betters.” Exactly what makes aristocrats different from ordinary human beings was always unclear, but the feudal system confidently assumed that aristocrats possessed from birth a quality variously denoted as “honor,” “grace” (significantly, both these words were traditionally employed as terms of address toward certain members of the aristocracy) or “courtesy.” No less than the medieval feudal system, the medieval church was also committed to the principle that value is an objective phenomenon. As Frederick Copleston notes, God is, for Thomas Aquinas, “the supreme value and the source and measure of all value: values depend on Him … in the sense that they are participations or finite reflections of God.” Thus, to Thomas, and to medieval Catholicism in general, value is an objective phenomenon and our duty as humans is to discover the relative degree of value inherent in an object, act, or person. From this mode of thinking issued medieval moral theology, with its conception of sin as “inordinate love”—i.e., love that ascribes either too much or too little value to some object of desire. From this absolutist habit of thought there also issued medieval economic theory, with its concept of the just price (which assumes that the market price of a commodity should be determined by its presumed intrinsic value, a value established by God himself) and with its blanket condemnation of usury (on the grounds that usury permits money to function, not merely as the medium of exchange, but as a creator of wealth and so of value—at which point money threatens to usurp God's role as the fons et origo of value). Such an economic theory, I might add, is both natural to and reasonably adequate to the needs of an agrarian society. For in such a society use-value (both the obvious physical usefulness of the foods and fibers that sustain life, and the supposed usefulness of those spiritual “goods” that claim to offer a means of access to supernatural powers) is an immediate and obvious phenomenon, whereas exchange-value seems to be an “unnatural” form of value superimposed upon the use-values “naturally” inherent in things. A conception of value as an objective phenomenon is thus the characteristic ideology of an agrarian society. Such a concept of value embodied itself in the hierarchical structure of European society during the Middle Ages and percolated through all areas of medieval thought, and both this hierarchically structured society and this absolutist habit of thought survived, although not without some modifications, into Shakespeare's time.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, the traditional conception of value as an objective quality was challenged by a new mode of thought, which tended to see value as an ascribed rather than inherent quality. The challenge took many forms. In politics, the authority of the feudal aristocracy was disputed by wave after wave of new aspirants to power (the new aristocrats created by Henry VII, the country gentry, the urban merchants), all of whom were impatient with the old aristocracy's claim to be intrinsically “better” than ordinary (“common”) human beings. (Ironically, however, these new claimants to power generally soon decided that their own blood was superior to ordinary blood, so the challenge to aristocratic pretensions was, perforce, repeated over and over.) At the same time, Protestant thinkers, as Tawney has shown, generally either ignored or even explicitly repudiated both the doctrine of the just price and the traditional ban on usury. In this way, Protestantism (followed shortly by post-Tridentine Catholicism) began to chart out an area of human conduct—specifically, those activities that we now call “business”—in which value was to be determined less by the will of God than by the operations of the market. Concurrently, philosophers such as Hobbes began to argue that the source of value lies not in the object itself but in the mind of the beholder:

But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good: and the object of his hate or aversion, evil: and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply or absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves. …
Hobbes applied this mode of thinking not only to objects but to persons as well:

The value or worth of a man, is as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another.

(Leviathan, p. 57)

Hobbes's political absolutism is, passages such as these make clear, in no sense “conservative.” Rather he is an absolutist because, having rejected all claims to authority grounded upon a supposed intrinsic merit, he can imagine no form of political order except one created by force. These passages from Hobbes also suggest the ways in which the new, subjectivist concept of value was appropriate to a capitalist society. For capitalism, as Marx argued, seeks to reduce all things to commodities, and all modes of value to exchange-value. Under capitalism, the value of anything—even, as Hobbes suggests, of a human being—is the price that people will pay. To reduce all value to exchange-value, capitalism must first destroy any lingering notions that the value of a thing might be determined either by its relative usefulness or by the amount of labor required to produce it. The reduction of all value to exchange-value is the “impossible dream” of capitalism. (This dream is “impossible” simply because even under capitalism people have real needs, which can be satisfied only by use-values.) But before capitalism could set off in pursuit of its impossible dream, it was first necessary to persuade people that value is determined not by the relative usefulness of things but by the relative intensity of people's desire for things, and in this respect the shift from objective to subjective conceptions of value that occurred in the seventeenth century is of major historical significance.

In The Merchant of Venice the concept of value as an objective quality is associated primarily with the world of Belmont. This association is appropriate enough, since Belmont represents a feudal way of life which, within the dialectical structure of the play, stands in sharp contrast to the bourgeois ethos of Venice. That Belmont represents the feudal way of life has, however, been recognized by relatively few commentators on the play, perhaps because Portia, who presides over Belmont, is never addressed by any of the honorific titles traditionally applied to members of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, Portia is regularly referred to as a “lady,” a term applied to women of a wide range of social ranks, from the gentry through the upper aristocracy, and she herself has at least one lady-in-waiting. More important, all of her suitors are members of the aristocracy. These suitors include a Prince of Naples (the King of Naples was a powerful monarch in the early seventeenth century); the County Palatine (in this period, the County Palatine ruled a large area of Germany); lords of Scotland, France, and England; the nephew of the Duke of Saxony (another powerful German ruler); and the Princes of Morocco and of Aragon. Belmont is, furthermore, clearly a “great house,” a country estate surrounded by pastoral gardens, and in this respect Belmont represents the agrarian mode of life of the landed aristocracy, which stands in contrast to the urban milieu of the Venetian bourgeoisie. Belmont is also a thoroughly absolutist society. Portia's father has decreed that only the man who chooses the right casket can marry her. Portia's father is dead and she thinks that the rule he has established is absurd. Nevertheless, she feels she must abide by his wishes: in Belmont, the dead hand of the past determines the behavior of the living. Of course, the three caskets story, as many critics have noted, seems to derive from a fairy tale and therefore my socioeconomic interpretation of Belmont may seem, at best, a little humorless. However, the fairy-tale aura that surrounds Belmont actually offers additional evidence in support of my argument. For if we read the caskets story as a fairy tale, then the requirement that the successful suitor must choose the right casket becomes analogous to those various trials (for example, killing the dragon, or climbing the glass mountain) that fairy-tale kings are wont to impose upon the suitors of their daughters. Thus Portia's dead father assumes, when we interpret the play in this way, the attributes of a king, and Portia herself becomes not merely a lady but a royal princess—a fit wife for a Neapolitan prince, or for a County Palatine, or for an impoverished but charming aristocrat like Bassanio.
The concept that value is an intrinsic quality is introduced into the Belmont plot primarily through the symbolism of the three caskets themselves. Portia's portrait, as we all learned in high school, is in the lead casket. The suitors who choose the apparently more valuable caskets, the gold or silver, are rewarded with, respectively, a death's head and a fool's cap. What is the point of this elaborate iconography? On this matter Harold C. Goddard sums up what seems to be the consensus view of Shakespearean critics: “The casket story obviously stresses the contrast between what is within and what is without.” While I would not quarrel with this interpretation of the casket story, it seems to me important that the realm of “appearance” here is also the realm of money. The two “deceiving” metals, gold and silver, were commonly employed in the Renaissance in the making of coins, whereas the idea of lead money seems grotesque. Thus the casket story appears to suggest that we must reject external monetary values if we are to perceive “true” value. And what represents, in the terms of the play, “true” value? Nothing less than the infinite treasure of Portia herself. She is, Bassanio has told us earlier, the “golden fleece,” the object of all quests: and the sign on the lead casket demands that the suitor must “give and hazard all he hath”—with the implied promise that he will receive in return the summum bonum. As John Russell Brown has argued, Portia is the supreme embodiment of “love’s wealth”—an unquantifiable, spiritual mode of value that stands in contrast to the quantifiable modes of value represented by Shylock. The casket symbolism suggests that this mode of value should be defined in Christian terms. The lowly lead casket proves more valuable than the outwardly precious gold and silver caskets, thus exemplifying a basic Christian principle: “Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.” Yet the “inner” values emphasized by Christianity are no less “intrinsic” than the more “worldly” forms of value embodied in feudal society. Furthermore, the Belmont plot implies that the “spiritual” values that Christianity affirms and the hierarchical structure of the feudal state are not incompatible but mutually complementary. Why, we may ask, is Portia (rather than the lady-in-waiting Nerissa, or the Jewess Jessica) the supreme incarnation of “love’s wealth”? Is it not because her social rank is “higher” than Nerissa's or Jessica's? This play (unlike, for example, All's Well That Ends Well, which clearly seeks to dissociate intrinsic worth from social position) offers us no specific evidence for ascribing Portia’s value to qualities of character or conduct that are independent of her social position. We must therefore conclude that her intrinsic merit, although not to be confused with her external appearance or her wealth, is a “natural” manifestation of her aristocratic birth, and when Bassanio “sees through” ignoble appearances, he merely displays his ability to perceive what might be called the “princess within.” We have a comparable state of affairs in A Winter's Tale, when Prince Florizel falls in love with a humble shepherdess, only to learn that she is in fact a princess. The implication seems clear: Florizel's noble heart intuitively detected the princess hidden within the shepherdess Perdita. As shepherdess, Perdita embodies the “natural” values of simplicity and innocence that pastoral celebrates; as princess, she embodies the aristocratic values associated with the court. She is thus “precious” in two ways—both outwardly (as shepherdess) and inwardly (as princess). Portia, too, is “precious” in both ways, even though her external circumstances are quite different from Perdita's. The casket symbolism suggests her “inner,” “spiritual” value; her lavish estate suggests her “external,” social value. But I would reiterate that both modes of value here at issue are intrinsic. Portia's value is inherent in Portia herself; it is not created by Bassanio's (or Morocco’s, or the County Palatine's) desire for her.

But if Belmont exemplifies the qualities of an aristocratic way of life, Venice is no less clearly a quintessentially capitalist society. In its detailed portrait of a society given over chiefly to getting and spending, The Merchant of Venice differs markedly from most of Shakespeare's other comedies, and the very title underscores this difference for us. First, the title reminds us that one of the major characters in this play is, not an aristocrat, but a merchant—a businessman. (In such plays as Love's Labor's Lost, Twelfth Night, As You Like It, and Much Ado About Nothing, all the principal characters except the farce characters or clowns are aristocrats.) Second, much of the play is set, neither in the idyllic world of the “great house” (compare the king's palace in Love's Labor's Lost, or Leonato’s palace in Much Ado About Nothing, or Countess Olivia's palace in Twelfth Night) nor in the overtly pastoral world of Arden Forest (As You Like It) or of the woods outside Athens (A Midsummer Night's Dream), but rather in the streets of a busy city. In its use of an urban setting, The Merchant of Venice looks back to The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew, and it looks forward to Measure for Measure. But unlike these other urban comedies, The Merchant of Venice sets
up a deliberate contrast between the city and an alternative world: Belmont, a setting which, as we have already seen, has both "great house" and pastoral overtones. Just as A Midsummer Night's Dream and As You Like It turn upon a court/country opposition, so The Merchant of Venice turns upon a city/great house opposition, and much of the unique flavor of this play results from this pattern of contrast. Moreover, if, as I have here argued, the great house represents the feudal way of life and the feudal concept of value, so the city represents the bourgeois way of life and the bourgeois concept of value. The specific city Shakespeare chose as his setting—Venice—represented what may well have been the highest development of mercantile capitalism, just as today the United States represents the highest development of monopoly capitalism. By Shakespeare's time, however, the mercantile capitalism of Venice was already being challenged by new forms of capitalism (primarily Spanish and English) that integrated production and distribution systems more effectively than sea-girt Venice was able to do. Thus Venice represented a social form that had, by the end of the sixteenth century, completed its historic function, and was lapsing into decadence.17 But in his treatment of Venice, Shakespeare displays an acute understanding of the city's historical significance. The first scene of the play sets the tone: here we learn that the primary concern of all Venetians is the making and the spending of money, that the most respected citizens of Venice are those individuals who (like Antonio) have become wealthy through trade, and that in the fiercely competitive economic atmosphere of Venice even a glamorous young aristocrat like Bassanio can find himself deeply in debt. In this scene, too, we also sense, in the languid melancholy of Antonio, the incipient decadence of Venice. Two scenes later we meet the eminence grise of this capitalist society and the concrete embodiment of its decadence: the banker, Shylock. All the gentile Venetians we meet share an intense dislike of Shylock. But the primary reason they dislike him so much is that they need him so much: merchant and banker, gentile and Jew are bound together in a symbiotic relationship. The lending of money at interest was, in the sixteenth century, still regarded as a morally dubious enterprise, yet the rapid development of capitalism had, by Shakespeare's time, made the moneylender an essential figure within society.18 Few entrepreneurs of the period could finance their ventures out of their own pockets and so even Bassanio must turn to the moneylender for the capital to finance his quest for the golden fleece. As we read or watch the play, we are likely to forget that without Shylock's money Bassanio could not have wooed and won Portia. Yet if we forget this fact, we will miss one of the essential points made by the play: in a capitalist society, as Shakespeare has acutely observed, the man who controls the flow of capital holds the reins of power. In this play, the merchants and the aristocrats finally unite to defeat the banker, but not before the latter has revealed his enormous potential power, and not before we have perceived how dependent both merchant and aristocrat have become upon the banker. In Belmont "Lord Love" may, as Nerissa suggests, rule over human affairs.19 But in Venice capital is the absolute lord, and Shylock is its priest.

Since Shylock is the kingpin of Venice's capitalist economy, it is fitting that he should be the primary—though by no means is he the only—spokesman for what I have described as the bourgeois concept of value. Shylock has difficulty conceiving of any form of value except monetary value. This point is graphically underlined for us by Solanio's description of Shylock staggering about the street shouting, "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter / … my ducats, and my daughter!" (2.8.15-16). In Shylock's mind, money and human life are interchangeable. Jessica, who should be priceless to her father, is stamped with a price: to Shylock, she is "worth" no more (but no less) than the ducats she has taken. Shakespeare's portrait of Shylock also suggests that once we begin to define human relations in monetary terms, we end by reducing all that exists merely to so much dead, meaningless matter, devoid of any form of value except the monetary value momentarily ascribed to it by the market. The symbolism of the "pound of flesh" makes this point memorably and concisely. The bond between Antonio and Shylock is purely monetary. They hate each other, but they are united by a financial "deal": a purer example of the "cash nexus" would be hard to imagine. The cash nexus reduces the worker to the status of a "hand," and it reduces human beings in general to mere "meat on the hoof"—commodities to be bought and sold. Thus Antonio, who had heretofore thought of himself as a free and responsible creature, possessed of dignity and delicate feelings, finds himself suddenly become merely so many pounds of meat; he also discovers that another human being has a legally valid claim to one pound of this meat. To add insult to injury, Shylock even suggests at one point that this particular piece of
meat is significantly overpriced: “A pound of man's flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither / As flesh of muttions, beeps, or goats” (1.3.161-63). Shylock's determination to see Antonio as nothing more than “meat on the hoof” also lends a disturbing implication to the references to dogs scattered through the play. “If you will call me a dog,” Shylock seems to say, “then I will act like a dog—but remember that the dog is a carnivorous animal.” But the dog references also remind us that the inhumanity of Shylock finds its mirror image in the inhumanity that the gentle Venetians display toward Shylock himself. Here again Shylock and the men whose flesh he would devour (and who in the end devour his wealth) are united in a symbiotic relationship. Shylock does not choose to be a dog, but having been labeled a “Jewish dog” by his society, he accepts this identity. The crimes of Shylock are monstrous, but Shakespeare seems to imply that the society that transformed him into a “dog” must share in the guilt for those crimes. Furthermore, the cruelty of the gentle Venetians, no less than Shylock's cruelty, seems to result from a tendency to confuse monetary values with human values, for everyone in the city is obsessed with money. Even the aristocratic Bassanio sounds, while in Venice, like a mercenary adventurer, as he proposes to wed Portia for her money. Jessica too seems to have difficulty distinguishing monetary values from human values: “I will … gild myself / with some more ducats.” (2.7.49-50) she says as she prepares to offer herself to her lover. The accents in which Bassanio and Jessica speak change markedly once they arrive in Belmont, and we are mistaken if we see their mercenary statements as signs of character defects. Rather they speak, while in Venice, as Venetians, and the ethos of Venice is the ethos of capitalism, which rejects all modes of value except monetary value. Within the play Shylock is the supreme exemplar of the capitalist mode of thought, but all the Venetians display, in lesser degree, an inclination to see all human life in monetary terms.

Can we, on the basis of the evidence provided by The Merchant of Venice, draw any conclusions about Shakespeare's attitudes toward the feudal and the bourgeois concepts of value, and toward the feudal and the bourgeois ways of life? At first glance, the line between “good guys” and “bad guys” would seem to be sharp: Shylock, the supreme exemplar of the capitalist mentality, is the villain, while the aristocratic Portia not only embodies the sumnum bonum but also devises a clever legal maneuver that permits good to triumph over evil. Yet the more we reflect on the play, the less adequate this neat, good-guys-versus-bad-guys interpretation seems to be. On the one hand, the villain of this piece seems at several moments a man more sinned against than sinning. The notion that Shylock is a partly sympathetic character is not simply an invention of liberal sentimentalists: the “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech was (so far as we can tell) written by Shakespeare himself, and its defiant assertion of Shylock's humanity brings sharply into focus the inhumanity of Solario and of the other Venetians. On the other hand, many of the aristocratic “good guys” in the play show, as I have already argued, some traces of that obsession with money which, when we see it in Shylock, we are asked to condemn as the quintessence of evil. But even if we cannot neatly categorize the characters in the play as wholly good or wholly evil, can we not at least conclude that Shakespeare here indicates a marked preference for the traditional feudal conception of value over the new bourgeois conception of value? Here the evidence seems a little more conclusive, for undoubtedly the play does assume a strongly negative stance toward Shylock's inclination to reduce all forms of value to monetary value. Yet I would argue that there is something to be said of Shylock's view of the world. Shylock's repeated appeals to the protection of the law, together with the Duke of Venice's insistence that the law must not be abrogated in any way, should remind us that in one respect at least the bourgeois state represented a major advance over the feudal state: for hereditary privilege and rule by fiat, the bourgeois state early sought to establish the principle of equality before the law. It is worth remembering that Jews could live in bourgeois Venice and could claim the protection of Venetian law, whereas in the sixteenth century Jews were still forbidden to live in such nations as England and Spain, which still paid at least lip service to the aristocratic ideal. In practice, I suspect that most of us would prefer life in bourgeois Venice to life in feudal Belmont, for life in the “great house” was an idyll only for the privileged few. I also suspect that Shakespeare wants us to recognize the ways in which rule by law is preferable to aristocratic privilege, for the fairy-tale atmosphere that he creates around Belmont undercuts any inclination we may have to see the “great house” way of life as a practicable alternative to the bourgeois way of life. For these reasons, I must reject the notion that Shakespeare's critique of the bourgeois concept of value necessarily implies that he believes in and wants us to adopt the feudal concept of value. My unwillingness to
see Shakespeare as a spokesman for the feudal concept of value is reinforced by the fact that in other plays, notably All's Well That Ends Well, he seems strongly skeptical of the notion that some people are intrinsically better than others, and in at least one play, Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare assumes a distinctly critical viewpoint toward the concept of intrinsic value itself. Any assertion that Shakespeare “believed in” the intrinsic concept of value must thus be made in the teeth of considerable evidence to the contrary.

Rather than seeing The Merchant of Venice as an attempt to persuade us to reject the bourgeois concept of value and to accept the feudal concept of value, I would suggest that we see the play as a dialectical exploration of the relationship between these two modes of thought. I believe that Shakespeare invokes the concept of value as an intrinsic phenomenon less to offer it to us as an object of credence than to establish for himself a point d'appui from which he can subject the bourgeois concept of value to a critique. This conception of the role ideas play in The Merchant of Venice owes a good deal to Norman Rabkin, who has suggested that generally Shakespeare is less concerned with advocating one set of ideas than with dramatizing the interplay between various ways of explaining human existence.21 For Rabkin, the distinctive quality of Shakespeare's art is “complementarity,” the capacity to hold simultaneously in mind two contrasting sets of ideas about the world. Following Rabkin on this point, I would contend that The Merchant of Venice holds in solution (without any “irritable straining after fact or reason”) two “complementary” ways of thinking about the nature of value. Rabkin is, however, essentially a formalist: he sees Shakespeare's dialectical dance as occurring in a vacuum. In contrast, I believe (and I have here sought to show) that Shakespeare was deeply engaged with the great historical issues of his time. In this respect my approach to The Merchant of Venice is Marxist rather than formalist, even though I depart from most other Marxist critics in my belief that Shakespeare here engages these issues, not dogmatically, but rather critically. Shakespeare is not, I would suggest, much interested in telling us what we should think about the world. Rather than regarding The Merchant of Venice as a piece of propaganda for the virtues of feudalism, therefore, I think we should see it as primarily a critique of capitalism; the play's appeal to feudal ideals seems to me more a dialectical ploy than a serious statement of ideological commitment, whereas the play's critical examination of capitalism seems both profound and seriously intended.

Such a conception of the play seems to me both intellectually and aesthetically satisfying. It has another virtue as well: when the play is so viewed, its message is as cogent today as it was in the sixteenth century. If Shakespeare lived in the dawn of capitalism, we live in its twilight, and we see all around us the destructive effects of the capitalist mentality. For us, an emergent socialism offers an alternative to capitalism, and an awareness of this alternative permits us to understand the limits of capitalism. Shakespeare, of course, knew nothing of socialism, but a dying feudalism offered him the model of an “organic” society that contrasted sharply with the “mechanical” society of capitalism, and a comparison of these two societies enabled him to perceive and to dramatize for us the ways in which capitalism distorts our humanity. Shakespeare's critique of capitalism seems to me at least as cogent as the critiques of capitalism developed by modern socialists—although, of course, Shakespeare's critique of capitalism is less “scientific” than Marx's. If Shakespeare is not, as Jan Kott proposed, “our contemporary,” he is at least our comrade in our struggle to discover our humanity. Humanists working in the Marxist tradition should welcome him as such.

Notes


5. See, for example, Siegel, Shakespeare in His Time and Ours, p. 23.


11. On the significance of the “great house” in Elizabethan literature, see John F. Danby, Elizabethan and Jacobean Poets (London: Faber & Faber, 1952). That The Merchant of Venice revolves around the contrast between Venice and Belmont has been recognized by a good many critics. Sigurd Burckhardt, for example, sees the “world of The Merchant” as consisting of “two separate and mostly contiguous realms: Venice and Belmont, the realm of law and the realm of love, the public sphere and the private.” See “The Gentle Bond,” in Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 211. Other interpretations of the Venice/Belmont polarity are summarized in John Russell Brown's introduction to the Arden edition of the play (London: Methuen, 1955), p. lii. However, I know of only one critic who has described this opposition in the same terms I have used, that is, as an opposition between a bourgeois and a feudal way of life. The critic is Paul N. Siegel, who has outlined such a view of the play in a recent essay, “Marx, Engels, and the Historical Criticism of Shakespeare,” Shakespeare-Jahrbuch (Weimar) 113 (1977): 130.


*The Merchant of Venice* 2.9.101. All subsequent references to the play will be from the Arden edition and will be cited in the text.

A good many recent critics have offered judgments on this point that are similar to mine. See, for example, Berry, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, pp. 111-48; Auden, “Brothers and Others,” esp. pp. 221 and 234; and R. Chris Hassel, Jr., “Antonio and the Ironic Festivity of *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 6 (1970): 67-74. One recent critic has even suggested that the commentators on this play “split into warring camps” on this issue, with one group of critics seeing the Christian characters of the play in largely “positive and approving terms,” while another group, “noticing that commerce, wealth, and financial speculation as thoroughly preoccupy the Venetians as they do Shylock, see the play ironically exposing the failure of the Christians to practice the beliefs which they profess.” See Raymond B. Waddington, “Blind Gods: Fortune, Justice, and Cupid in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Journal of English Literary History* 44 (1977): 458. On this point I am obviously in essential agreement with the spokesmen for the second of these two positions.


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**Criticism: Themes: Douglas Anderson (essay date spring 1985)**


In the following essay, Anderson references Shakespeare's religious sensibility to explain the “sordid conflict between religions” in The Merchant of Venice.

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1. *every something blent together*

2. *Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy*

3. *Expressed and not expressed.*

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4. 3.2.181-83

Norman Rabkin argues in the first chapter of his recent book, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, for a critical vision which embraces the whole of a play's “aesthetic experience.” Even the most fruitful interpretive
scholarship runs the risk of being reductive so long as it neglects the “total and complex involvement” of all
of an audience's considerable powers of appreciation, which the best literary art invariably calls into play.
Meaning in literature, Rabkin suggests, is almost never simple, almost never internally consistent, almost
always richer than any single line of argument can convey. The Merchant of Venice provides him with an
especially apt text for these observations in view of the diversity of response which the figure of Shylock has
elicted over the play's history and which that character continues to elicit at different moments in any given
performance and in the experience of any given reader. That diversity has ranged from the broadly
humanitarian view of the play espoused by John R. Cooper to the more recent, and more emphatic, judgments
of D. M. Cohen. Cooper has argued that the “fundamental opposition” in the play is not between religions but
between sets of value: an “uncalculating generosity and forgiveness” on the one hand and a remorseless
assertion of self on the other. Ethics, and not racism, is the dramatic issue. Cohen's assessment could not be
more different; The Merchant of Venice, in his view, is “crudely anti-Semitic.”
My intention here is to show
that neither of these opposed views fully appreciates the extent to which Shakespeare brought a deeply
religious perception to bear upon the sordid conflict between religions. Uncalculating forgiveness is certainly
the indispensable human capacity upon which that perception rests. But Shakespeare's understanding of
forgiveness is, in key ways, rooted in Shylock's faith.

I

Of course, playwrights make plays; they do not construct academic arguments. The indebtedness of The
Merchant of Venice to the Old Testament is not simply a matter of textual allusion and verbal echo. But
allusion and echo do play a part in summoning up a sense of the play's religious background at two crucial
points in the action, as well as at other, more frivolous moments. I am not thinking primarily of direct biblical
references—Shylock's consideration of Jacob, Laban, and the eanling lambs, for example—though those too
are important. More interesting for my purposes here are those moments when Shakespeare works the biblical
source directly into his dramatic fabric. A comic instance of this treatment occurs in the curiously layered
scene where Launcelot Gobbo tries “confusions” with his old, “high-gravel blind” father. Launcelot makes his
first appearance in the play deeply engaged in a debate between his conscience and the “fiend” over the
question of whether or not he should abandon Shylock's service. Conscience appeals to his honesty and
advises him to stay; the fiend, of course, is enthusiastically in favor of flight. Reasoning at last that though the
fiend is evil, “the Jew is the very devil incarnation,” Launcelot decides to run. Just as the long controversy
ends on this wonderfully resonant malaproprism—the idea of “incarnation,” after all, is bound to remind us of
a very different Jew from Shylock, and of a vastly different vision of Jewishness from the one Launcelot
entertains—Old Gobbo enters and Launcelot proceeds to tease the blind old man. In the course of this teasing,
Shakespeare makes it clear to any member of his audience who is even casually acquainted with Genesis that
Launcelot is unwittingly reenacting two popular stories from Jewish legend: Jacob's deception of his own
blind father, Isaac, when he steals a blessing meant for Esau, and the deception carried out by Joseph's
brothers when they, in turn, tell Jacob that Joseph is dead. It is difficult to make this pattern of allusion clear
without quoting prohibitively large portions of text, but even the brief comic exchange on Launcelot's beard
has its biblical analogue in the fleece that Jacob uses to simulate his proverbially hairy brother:

GOBBO:

Pray you, sir, stand up. I am sure you are not Launcelot my boy.

LAUNCELOT:

Pray you let's have no more fooling about it, but give me your blessing. I am Launcelot—your boy

GOBBO:

I cannot think you are my son.
LAUNCELOT:
I know not what I shall think of that; but I am Launcelot, the Jew's man, and I am sure Margery your wife is my mother.

GOBBO:
Her name is Margery indeed! I'll be sworn, if thou be Launcelot thou art mine own flesh and blood.

(2.2.72-88)

Part of the charm in this scene derives from Old Gobbo’s delighted rediscovery of his wife's name, but part surely stems from more complex sources. Launcelot's simple-minded “confusions” lead immediately to the sort of innocent burlesque of scripture characteristic of the Second Shepherd's Play, in which sheep-stealing and rough-housing blend harmoniously and beautifully with the birth of Jesus. That harmony between humble and exalted subjects works its magic in this short exchange too. Launcelot and Old Gobbo, like the Towneley shepherds, give human simplicity and warmth to the remote and momentous biblical record. The subject of celebration here, however, is Genesis and not Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

An instance of far more potent dramatic allusiveness involves the casket scenes, particularly Bassanio's moment of choice, for by then the audience has already learned which casket is the right one and what the wrong caskets contain. Morocco chose gold and received a skull, with a scroll pronouncing his dismissal stuck in its empty eye. Aragon chose silver and earned “the portrait of a blinking idiot” and a dismissal similar to Morocco's. The unprepossessing leaden casket, as we all learn when Bassanio astutely chooses it, contains a portrait of Portia so lifelike that, to the enraptured Bassanio, the eyes seem to move and the lips seem “parted with sugar breath.” Barbara Lewalski noted some years ago that Shakespeare's source for the caskets, the Gesta Romanorum, leads directly to Deuteronomy 30, in which Moses offers his people a choice between life and death, between obedience and disobedience to God's commandments. The death's head and the portrait of Portia are Shakespeare's dramatic reminders of the Mosaic choice. But what Lewalski does not notice, or neglects sufficiently to emphasize, is precisely that this is a Mosaic choice, from a critical text in the Old Testament, the beauty and pertinence of which assert themselves not only here but again and again in Shakespeare's work where the choice between life and death, good and evil, becomes a central feature of his imagination.

Indeed, Shakespeare's interest in this portion of Deuteronomy is even more dramatically evident in The Merchant of Venice as Portia makes her appeal for mercy in act 4. The speech is justly famous and it is no exaggeration to observe that it is a crucial moment in the play for those readers who see Shylock and Portia as emissaries of the Old Law and the New, of covenant and grace respectively:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scept'red sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then shew likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

(4.1.182-95)
The scene as it develops after this appeal does, in fact, sustain the view that Portia's New Testament morality supersedes Shylock's Old Testament legalism. Antonio himself suggests a parallel with Christ's sacrifice when he describes the contentment with which he will pay Bassanio's "debt" with his life (4.1.277). Shylock appears to underline these sacrificial associations by alluding to Barabbas (4.1.294). Gratiano even adds a gruesome reminder of Judas' suicide as he exults over Shylock's discomfiture: "Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!" (4.1.362). The language clearly asserts New Testament themes, but once again the imaginative core of the scene is deeply indebted to the very religion which its Christian participants appear to scorn. Not only does Portia repeatedly offer Shylock the same choice between life and death which we noted above in the casket scenes, but she offers that choice very nearly in Moses' own words, taken from the song Moses sings at the close of Deuteronomy in which he summarizes the themes of virtually the entire Pentateuch and foretells the repeated patterns of anger and forgiveness which will characterize God's relations with Israel. The entire song takes up forty-three verses, but it is the opening passages which are most interesting here:

Hearken, ye heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth heare the wordes of my mouth.

My doctrine shall drop as the raine, and my speech shal stil as doeth the dewe, as the showre upon the herbes, and as the great raine upon the grasse.

For I will publish the Name of the Lord: give ye glorie unto our God.

(Deut. 32:1-4)5

The image of falling rain does not play an extended role in the rest of Moses' song, anymore than it does in the remainder of Portia's speech. In both cases, the metaphor is a lyric precursor to more complex, detailed discourse. Indeed, this structural parallel between the two passages underscores the similarity in language. Moses' reference to the rain and dew is calculated to remind his recalcitrant followers both of the Lord's capacity to punish and of his capacity to nourish. The floods of Genesis ("great raine") and the manna that fell with the dew in Exodus are equally present in this balanced peroration and in the song that follows. Portia's speech develops the elements of mercy and nourishment more exclusively than Moses does, but the same linkage of mercy with power so startling in the biblical passage continues to make itself felt in Shakespeare. Surely all careful readers of the play have observed that Portia's advice is pointed every bit as sharply at the Duke and his Venetian "magnificoes" as it is at Shylock. The Christians represent "earthly power" and "scept'red sway" in Shakespeare's scene. The moral vision brought into play as a check on that power is Jewish.

Students of theology and history will immediately reply that Elizabethans had long been accustomed to reading the Bible typologically, interpreting Old Testament events and figures as metaphorical anticipations of events and figures in the New Testament. Moses, in such a context, becomes a "type" of Christ and not a distinctly Judaic hero and prophet; his words become, in effect, hints of the forthcoming "new" law of grace. More than one collection of English mystery plays, for example, has exploited this typological connection by staging the Israelite escape from Egypt and then moving immediately to the first of the New Testament themes, the Annunciation. Indeed, in the Towneley plays, Moses himself not only draws on the same passage from Deuteronomy that gives rise to Portia's speech, but in the process of doing so he further confuses the distinction between Judaism and Christianity by acknowledging himself to be a good trinitarian:

MOYSES:

Heven, thou attend, I say in syght,

And erthe my wordys; here what I telle,
As rayn or dew on erthe doys lyght
And waters herbys and trees full well,
Gyf lovying to Goddes mageste.
Hys dedes ar done, hys ways ar trew,
Honowred be he in trynyte,
To hym be honowre and vertu. Amen.(6)

It is probably impossible to know how familiar Shakespeare was with a typological understanding of the Bible. One of the tremendous advantages students of Shakespeare enjoy over those who study nearly any other major English or American poet is that our nearly complete ignorance in matters of biography constantly sends us back to the plays themselves as works of art rather than as objects of clinical speculation or as footnotes to late-sixteenth-century culture. Even the three short passages we have examined so far make it clear that Judaism exercises a dramatically rich and wide-ranging influence in The Merchant of Venice that is by no means wholly, or even significantly, confined to the presence of Shylock.

Shylock himself, of course, is less than exemplary as a man of faith, even if we discount the ferocity of his resentment against Antonio. He appears to honor dietary laws, but he has at the same time an odd predilection (which he shares with Marlowe's unsavory Barabas) for using the pre-covenant name for Abraham—Abram—in his conversations with Bassanio and Antonio. The difference between the two names is easily audible and an actor might well make an issue of the name with his audience by exaggerating the pronunciation. Perhaps more significantly, Shylock is clumsy in his use of scripture to defend the practice of usury. Antonio's knowing caution to Bassanio that the devil can quote the Bible in a bad cause is off the mark. Shylock's malice is not so clearly evident at this early stage in the play as is his prolixity:

SHYLOCK:
I had forgot—three months, you told me so.
Well then, your bond. And let me see—but hear you,
Methoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow
Upon advantage.
ANTONIO:
I do never use it.
SHYLOCK:
When Jacob grazed 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 int'rest. Mark what Jacob did:

When Laban and himself were compromised
That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied
Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank
In end of autumn turnèd to the rams;
And when the work of generation was
Between these woolly breeders in the act,
The skillful shepherd peeled 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-colored lambs, and those were Jacob's.
This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;
And thrift is blessing if men steal it not.

(1.3.63-86)

This speech is devious and garrulous at the same time. Shylock is coyly warning an oblivious Antonio to be wary of the bargains he makes; "the doing of the deed of kind" can refer not only to the procreation of sheep but to an act that reciprocates "in kind" the public scorn which Antonio has heaped upon Jews. At the same time, Shylock has rather politicly strayed from the subject at hand. Antonio quickly and quite rightly challenges the application of the story of Jacob and Laban to usury. Indeed, if Shylock had wanted only a biblical justification for his lending practices, he might have quoted two brief verses in Deuteronomy which countenance the lending of money at interest to strangers, though not to one's "brothers" in Israel. That Shylock does not avail himself of this direct and easy defense against at least one Christian accusation may well reflect Shakespeare's awareness of the level of biblical sophistication in his audience. The verse in Deuteronomy which permits the charging of interest is a notable exception in Old Testament commentary on the subject. Both Exodus and Leviticus explicitly prohibit all usury, without exception. And Proverbs provides a simple, beautiful verse which could well have served as an epigraph to the fourth act in Shakespeare’s play: "He that increaseth his riches by usurie and interest, gathereth them for him that will be merciful unto the poore" (Prov. 28:8). Shylock's riches do indeed become the means of a mercy that is practiced by third parties. So close is the application of the verse in Proverbs to the action of the play that it is difficult to believe that Shakespeare did not consciously invite the comparison.
In any event, it is clear that Shylock himself is something less than a pattern for his people. In this much, he is a perfect complement to Antonio, whose brand of Christianity is every bit as repellent as Shylock's blood lust. Shylock far exceeds his Christian counterpart, however, in dramatic grandeur. Antonio's passionate outbursts against Jews in general and against Shylock in particular make only a second-hand appearance in the play itself. Shylock reports them to us. Shakespeare chooses to give full and direct expression exclusively to Shylock's memorable counterattacks against Venetian racism. The only Christian character who in any sense "answers" Shylock is Gratiano, whose name is a grotesque commentary on his jackal-like gloating in act 4. Antonio himself half acknowledges this supreme dignity in his enemy, even as he gives frightening expression to the depths of his own bigotry. In the trial scene, after Bassanio and the Duke have exhausted themselves trying to shake Shylock's resolve, Antonio himself resignedly urges the court to proceed:

I pray you think you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf,
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops and to make no noise
When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
You may as well do any thing most hard
As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—
His Jewish heart.

(4.1.70-80)

Here we are quite beyond matters of a more or less scholarly sort—biblical references, typology, mystery plays and so forth. In this speech Shakespeare succeeds in an act of dramatic concentration that requires, I think, some critical description to make its power fully apparent. Elements of Antonio's speech are clearly invidious: the implied comparison of his antagonist to a wolf, the embittered racism behind his reference to the "Jewish heart." But these elements clash with others which are substantial and striking: the comparison of Shylock's force of character with the force of the tides, the suggestion that his passion has some of the grandeur and beauty of mountain pines tossed by the wind. Half of this passage, if you will, chooses life and half chooses death. Half of Antonio's intelligence is locked in bigotry and half is illuminated by a sympathy richer and more compelling, perhaps, than any other human sympathy in the play. In his joy at discovering Portia's portrait in the leaden casket—and filled with a sense of "confusion in my powers"—Bassanio burst forth with the lines which I quoted at the beginning of this piece: "every something blent together / Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy / Expressed and not expressed." A confusing blend of "powers" is indeed the signature of this play, but its distinctive quality is not necessarily the ecstatic joy of a successful suitor. Equally potent is this frightening (and saddening) blend of powers, for hatred and for sympathy, in Antonio and in the entire action of the play's fifth act. I hope it is clear that we have not at all abandoned the question of Shakespeare's indebtedness to the Old Testament. The choice between life and death, as Moses offers it, is simple. Despite the casket business, Bassanio's choice is comparatively easy too (even without Portia's clever musical hints) when we once consider that gold and silver are the true base metals where something as unworldly as love is in question. But life and death are not so readily separable when we encounter them painfully intermingled in the heart and mind, as Antonio's speech suggests they are in his. The Merchant of Venice is in many ways a lesson in the profound difficulty of Moses' choice.

II

The closing moments of The Merchant of Venice seem calculated to bring together both the narrowest and the broadest aspects of Shakespeare's biblical indebtedness. His imagination clings to the simplest details and at the same time explores the most far-reaching implications of those final chapters of Deuteronomy which I hope to add to Il Pecorone and the Gesta Romanorum in the list of the play's primary sources. In the area of
simple details, the word “deuteronomy” itself signifies “second law,” according to the indefatigable Geneva editors. Moses restores, in this last book of the Pentateuch, the binding covenant between God and Israel, which the idolatrous Israelites had previously forfeited. He gives the commandments a second time. One of the functions of Portia's tricksiness with the rings is that it gives Shakespeare a chance to include his own second “covenant” of sorts:

BASSANIO:

Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
I never more will break an oath with thee.

ANTONIO:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

PORTIA:

Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.

(5.1.247-55)

A broader, and more suggestive, biblical influence involves the treatment of human generations in the play—“the work of generation,” Shylock might call it. Many readers have noted in one connection or another the number of variations upon the father-child relationship which *The Merchant of Venice* explores: Jessica and Shylock, Portia and her father's will, Launcelot and Old Gobbo. Antonio and Bassanio are, for all dramatic purposes, father and son. The prototypes for these two characters in *Il Pecorone* are godfather and godson. Moreover, the cast as a whole appears to divide rather neatly into an older and a younger generation. Antonio, Shylock, Morocco, Aragon, the Duke, Old Gobbo, and Tubal all fit into the generation of the fathers; Portia, Bassanio, Gratiano, Lorenzo, Jessica, Nerissa, Salerio, Solanio, Launcelot, the generation of children.

The very first scene in the play gracefully and enjoyably insists on this division. Salerio and Solanio make an animated and, I think, affectionate attempt to lift Antonio's spirits. In the process, to be sure, they reveal themselves as ingenuous. All the worries in the world to them must certainly be attributable to merchandise. A man like Antonio, they fancy, can't even eat his soup without worrying about storms at sea, profit and loss. Or if not merchandise, then the crux of life must certainly be love. “Fie, fie!” Antonio swiftly replies to their nonsense, and the audience would no doubt see immediately from this man's gravity of manner how silly their suggestions are. After Solario and Solanio depart, Gratiano elaborates upon the theme by continuing to tease Antonio:

Let me play the fool!
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
Why should a man whose blood is warm within
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
Sleep when he wakes? and creep into the jaundice
By being peevish?

(1.1.79-86)

The scene immediately establishes a lasting contrast between the exuberance of youth—a kind of verbal prodigality in Gratiano's case—and the quietly mournful demeanor of age and experience.

The contrast between generations is equally critical to Numbers and Deuteronomy. The “numberings” that give Numbers its name involve a complete census of Israel in order to be certain that none of the tainted, older generation who had known slavery (and Egyptian religious abominations) would enter the Promised Land. Moses himself is excluded. Very nearly this same sharp division in age and geography marks The Merchant of Venice. For all practical purposes only the generation of the children will reside in Belmont. Antonio may even invite the biblical parallel in his bleak self-assessment as the trial scene opens: “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me” (4.1.114-17). His presence in Belmont in the final act is surely temporary, for his newly-arrived ships must soon draw him back to Venice. Already he is absorbed in the letter which brings word of his unexpected good fortune. In light of this division of fathers and children, it is important, too, that Antonio is chiefly responsible for imposing the sentence of religious conversion upon Shylock. In the audience's mind these are the two characters most thoroughly saturated with the history of racial hatred between Christian and Jew. The forced conversion is only a final and quintessentially offensive expression of that historical antagonism. All the exchanges between Antonio and Shylock are marked by the sense of a long and bitter past. Together they fittingly constitute the Venetian abominations that must not be permitted to corrupt Paradise.

Belmont, however, is not Paradise—at least, it is not an untroubled Paradise—nor are its residents free from the kind of spiritual limitations that cripple Antonio and Shylock. The wonderfully simple contrast between gold and leaden caskets, between death and life, loses all its simplicity in act 5. Shakespeare reaches far beyond his biblical analogues to attain the psychological and dramatic poignancy we associate with great art. In the opening lines of the final scene, as Jessica and Lorenzo idly make love in the moonlight, they announce this greater reach by recalling instances of tragically (or notoriously) thwarted love. These two are, presumably, on a blissful honeymoon, but their talk is of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas. Lorenzo teasingly reminds Jessica that their marriage began in theft. Jessica teasingly replies that all Lorenzo's vows of love are faithless. Their fondness for one another is unmistakable, but Shakespeare has found a way to blend that fondness with equally unmistakable reminders of the tenuousness of its foundations and of its sheer human vulnerability. Death and life are tangled in their speech, as they are a bit later when Lorenzo's admiration for the stars reminds him of “this muddy vesture of decay,” the flesh, that prevents him from hearing their celestial music, or when praise for the soothing power of music reminds him that much in the human spirit is savage, full of rage, “dark as Erebus” (5.1.51-87). “I am never merry when I hear sweet music,” Jessica wistfully observes. Sweetness and sadness season one another here, as mercy and justice do in Portia's courtroom plea. Indeed, the vision of this play insists that all of human life is a seasoning, a mingling. So Portia would suggest as she and Nerissa wend their way home to Belmont:

PORTIA:

That light we see is burning in my hall;

How far that little candle throws his beams!

So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
NERISSA:
When the moon shone we did not see the candle.

PORTIA:
So doth the greater glory dim the less.
A substitute shines brightly as a king
Until a king be by, and then his state
Empty itself, as doth an inland brook
Into the main of waters. Music! hark!

NERISSA:
It is your music, madam, of the house.

PORTIA:
Nothing is good, I see, without respect;
Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.

NERISSA:
Silence bestows that virtue on it, madam.

PORTIA:
The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended; and I think
The nightingale, if she should sing by day
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren.
How many things by season seasoned are
To their right praise and true perfection!

(5.1.89-108)

This last speech is delivered to the sound of the music which Lorenzo has just called for from Belmont's musicians. As Portia and Nerissa draw near the sleeping couple, Portia gazes down at Lorenzo and Jessica and breaks off her reflections on the relativity of all beauty with an observation which makes the preceding lines seem idle: “How the Moon sleeps with Endymion, / And would not be awaked” (5.1.109). To some degree these words are no less than “right praise” for a true, romantic perfection. That Portia delivers the line with considerable affection is evident in the light-heartedness with which she immediately greets the awakening Lorenzo a moment or two later: “He knows me as the blind man knows the cuckoo—/ By the bad voice.” But
the mythological lovers to whom Portia has briefly alluded represent a mixture of romantic promise with hopeless limitation. They are close kin to the equivocal partners that Jessica and Lorenzo mentioned earlier, for the Moon could only visit the shepherd Endymion in his sleep. Their passion has all the perfection and all the insubstantiality of dreams. Life and death—the choice facing us in so much of this play—face us once again in the guise of love and sleep, and here too the antagonistic forces are hopelessly interfused. No human possibility, and no character, in *The Merchant of Venice* is free from the kind of entanglement with death that Portia's words so beautifully express. “Fair ladies,” Lorenzo exclaims to Portia and Nerissa in one final Old Testament allusion, “you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (5.1.294). But there are no true saviors here; that fact roots the play firmly in drama and not in scripture or fable. Portia herself is tainted with the very bigotry she so memorably restrains. Human beings are blessed with the power to see the choice between life and death, to feel its urgency, and now and then to choose wisely, but not with the power wholly to embody life. Clarity of vision and incapacity of spirit are the constituent elements of Shakespeare's art in *The Merchant of Venice*, as they must be in a play that spends so much of its time on the borders of tragedy.

**Notes**

3. Cooper's article, “Shylock's Humanity,” may be found in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21 (1970): 117-24, but Rabkin provides an able summary both of Cooper's work and that of others who share Cooper's general view. D. M. Cohen's article, “The Jew and Shylock,” is also in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (Spring, 1980): 53-63.
6. *The Towneley Mysteries*, vol. 3 in *The Publications of the Surtees Society* (London: Nichols and Son, 1836), 65. S. Schoenbaum speculates that Shakespeare may have been acquainted with the tradition of mystery plays. He had an opportunity to witness one of the last performances of the Coventry cycle when he was fifteen. See S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 111.
7. E. S. LeComte traces the Endymion myth through all its classical sources in *Endymion in England: The Literary History of a Greek Myth* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1944). It is an extremely complicated piece of detective work, and the myth itself is hospitable to a wide variety of interpretations which poets and compilers in succeeding centuries have not hesitated to provide. It seems likely that the predominant version of the myth available to Shakespeare carried connotations of unfulfillment. LeComte quotes Montaigne's punning reference: “Seemes it not to be a lunatique humor in the Moone, being otherwise unable to enjoy *Endimion* hir favorite darling, to lull him in a sweete slumber for many moneths together; and feed herself with the jovissance of a boye that stirred not but in a dreame?” (LeComte, quoting Florio's translation, 9).

**Criticism: Themes: John K. Hale (essay date 2002)**

[In the following essay, Hale discusses Shakespeare's use of Il Pecorone as a source for The Merchant of Venice.]

The value of source-criticism within Shakespeare is ancillary, negative, and indicative. It will help us think about a play or scene. It will tell us how not to think about them. And in the absence of other hard evidence as to the genesis or intention of a play, source-criticism—by showing where and how a play began—can indicate directions of imaginative change. In fact, the pattern of what Shakespeare leaves out, picks up, extends, and adds from elsewhere indicates a great deal.

These truisms apply with particular force to The Merchant of Venice, for two main reasons. First, the play's storyline keeps very close to its main source, the story of Giannetto from Il Pecorone—from the initial borrowing of capital for a wooing journey by the young protégé of the Venetian merchant, through the sex-disguising and trial scene, to the concluding practical joke of the wedding rings. Secondly, source-study has something to put alongside the play's theatre and critical history, in which Shylock dominates. Just as Shylock's original, the “Jew of Mestri,” had not even a name, so Shylock appears in a bare five scenes and is absent from the finale: what sort of play did Shakespeare think he was writing, even if we know better about the one he did create?

Without expecting to change anyone's mind, and indeed without quite knowing my own mind, I offer as a reality check the following observations about how Shakespeare went to work on the chosen materials. The chief emphasis will fall on Il Pecorone, which is a skeleton for the story and characters together—the entire central transaction, of the pound-of-flesh bond and its results. The parties to the transaction will be called the “Beneficiary” of the bond (Giannetto/Bassanio), its “Donor” (Ansaldo/Antonio), the “prize” or “Lady” (the widow of Belmonte/Portia), and the “Bondholder” (the Jew of Mestri/Shylock). Other sources will be acknowledged at the appropriate points of a (mainly) scene-by-scene analysis.

The opening scene shows the young protégé raising the wind from his kinsman. This is exactly as in the source, except that Bassanio is doing it for the first and only time: Shakespeare cunningly alters Giannetto's three attempts at his widow, into Bassanio's being the third of three suitors tackling the moral riddle whose solution brings marriage with Portia. (He shows mental and moral penetration, whereas Giannetto had trouble achieving the physical sort.)

More simply, Shakespeare begins as usual in medias res. The emotions of Bassanio on this single occasion are those of Giannetto at the final one—embarrassment, some shame, dependency, and withal a loverlike determination. The emotions of the Donor, and indeed his prominence, have shifted, towards or even past equality. Though we instinctively call the source “Giannetto's story,” Shakespeare is launching “the Merchant of Venice,” Antonio's story. Antonio is onstage for the entire scene, with emphatic probing of his melancholy. In this, the feelings of a surrogate father (Ansaldo) are extended into a burdensome overplus of grief (which “wearies” Antonio himself, and all of the group [1.1.2] if “you” is plural) for imminent loss, which Antonio cannot express to Bassanio but which all the more clouds the giving.

The second scene is assigned to Portia, Belmont, and the strange conditions of courting her. Since the first two conditions have been introduced already, the new scene concentrates on the third: there is more to this courtship than a cash float and love-glances. Shakespeare of course splices in here his adaptation of the “Caskets” romance, but he dwells equally on her father's mysterious will for Portia. The play has much to say about fathers, and even more about people whose life's fulfillment depends—in the manner of a wager—upon a single choice, made by someone else. Because the scene holds no events, only exposition, jokes, and thematic wonderment, it makes us think around the design; to other fathers (Shylock and old Gobbo, maybe Antonio as father-figure); and to those who depend on choices by others (Antonio, three couples, Shylock, and Jessica). The source said much less about fathers, so Shakespeare's addition of them is intriguing. Risk, however, was embedded in the source, at all its points, in both its locations. The scene also sets going a
connection of places (whether to differentiate them, or to align them), by which Belmont will have almost as many scenes as Venice and the action will close there—Shakespeare again giving life to what lay inert in his source.

In his third scene Shakespeare introduces the remaining figure of his source's quadrilateral transaction, the Jewish moneylender. It is striking that when (improbably but necessarily) the Donor can find no lender except the hostile Jew, the latter is not found out as a last resort by Ansaldo himself but by Bassanio, who brings him along to Antonio. Of what is the change indicative? Is it made to involve Bassanio more deeply in responsibility (a character-based explanation)? To build up the Bondholder by giving him further relationships (for enhancement of another character)? To enable him to express motivation through soliloquy, such as no previous character has needed? To strengthen the fateful transaction and its scene by building to the meeting of the play's two mighty opposites? Although one purpose does not preclude another in Shakespeare, a source-approach hints at the last-named possibility. The scene is made stronger by the change, and many other source-changes serve the same end. The previous two scenes having rearranged a mass of good detail to gain strong scenes, this third one seeks a still stronger scene, a scene not of latent tension but outright conflict, and not of things unsaid but palpable rancor, ominously patched up.

This, however, leaves unexplained why Shylock alone of the main foursome needs a soliloquy to launch him. After all, later on he will talk of his motives to any bystander, and Shakespeare will give him Tubal for more intimate confidences. In general, soliloquy near the start of action puts emphasis on apartness, aloneness, secrecy, and ill will, if Richard III's or Hamlet's are parallel. But in particular, using the source as guide, the soliloquy is Shakespeare's expansion of minimal matter from his source. The Jew of Mestri's intentions are not stated at all at the equivalent point of the novella (Bullough 469), and emerge only later, when after the crash of Ansaldo's fortunes he refuses the offer of repayment from “many merchants joined together … for he wished to commit this homicide in order to be able to say that he had put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants” (472). The changes are extremely indicative here, and helpful to Shakespeare's interpreters, including all three actors of the scene. He wants to establish motivation at once, not by and by. Nor is the motivation that of the novella, a Guinness-Book-of-Records ambition for a twisted glory. The soliloquy expresses contempt and Jewish identity (36), then religious antipathy (37), “but more” it expresses commercial resentment. Then “grudge,” against Antonio as commercial and racial enemy: “he hates our sacred nation” and so in return “cursed be my tribe / If I forgive him.” All of these manifold motives, entwined like a snake dance, will be developed into actions later; and albeit extended by new motives such as his loss of Jessica and her looted dowry, they are here already made his guiding principles. It is simply untrue that Shylock means his “merry sport” merrily, or as a genuine overture, or that he plans revenge only after later losses, because Shakespeare has written such a strong weltering of motives into this explanatory, unsourced, initial soliloquy. In soliloquy, characters do not lie, except sometimes to themselves.

Shakespeare is putting further expansion, that is to say conscious effort, into the argument about Laban's sheep (lines 66-97). Using the Bible now as source, he shows us Shylock raising the subject of Jacob's triumph in that story of patriarchs' wagering. Antonio gives a haughty rebuttal whilst Shylock collects the laugh. Which was more Shakespeare's design is still being debated, but from our present standpoint in any case we can see both characters more deeply as a result—Shylock aggressively identifying with the most tricky of the patriarchs who was nonetheless to carry the blessing upon Israel, and Antonio self-righteous in orthodoxy (Bassanio silent, embarrassed and impatient). A wider significance, perhaps, is that Shakespeare has picked on this precise passage of the Scripture which their religions share, with its inscrutable sheep genetics and its awkward (surely ex post facto) vindication (Genesis 31.12), in which God in Jacob's dream had explained his success as divine retaliation against Laban's exploitations of Jacob. The murky episode, in which Shylock casts himself as Jacob, makes Antonio an exploitative Laban: this accounts for Antonio's otherwise excessive anger, for he hates losing face in front of Bassanio.
The rest of the scene is all Shakespeare's own, with its excess and hubris on Antonio's part, Bassanio's fears for his benefactor and dismay at the terms of the Bond, and Shylock's steady working of the advantage first gained in the biblical altercation.

The following ten scenes, 2.1 through 3.1, are mainly short ones. Individually they may seem minor, preparing as they certainly do for the double crisis of act 3, scene 2. Nonetheless, they are better seen together first, because thus they reveal Shakespeare's persistent interweaving. The sequence interweaves the pound-of-flesh motif with the wooing motif, the two strands of the main plot, and furthermore interweaves both with several further risk-actions (Gobbo, Gratiano, Jessica). These come from diverse sources. They are not all interwoven in the same way. They do not all have the like impact. The manysidedness of this whole is the myriad-mindedness which Coleridge admired in Shakespeare. And it provides the key to full enjoyment of this play. Seen in this context, Shylock's refusal to change provides one dark contrast to the many changes for the better which characterize comedy, though it is not the sole such contrast. Just the same, comedy normally favors change.

Briefly to substantiate all that, Morocco—another outsider as to race and religion—is the first to undertake the risk of the caskets test (2.1 and 7). Then in the longer 2.2, Gobbo tricks his father, only to rue it; together they sue for him to leave Shylock's service and join Bassanio's. Gratiano, too, “must” accompany him to Belmont. Jessica, not seen till 2.3, dominates the next four scenes—not joining Bassanio nor at this juncture going to Belmont, but decisively rejecting her father Shylock, religion and all. In 2.8 Antonio's losses commence, and with them the threat from Shylock, whose other losses (daughter and ducats) have enraged him. Antonio was angry and off-balance in 1.3: now it is Shylock's turn. Losses proliferate as Arragon (an outsider in religion though not in race) becomes the second to pick a wrong casket, and Shylock is torn between grief and glee; grief at his own losses, glee at Antonio's. I discern no privileging whatever of Shylock's strand over all the others within this expert web. Interaction and multiplicity are the guiding principles.

In 3.2, by contrast, hierarchy is pivotal. Bassanio's successful choosing modulates, absurdly, into Gratiano's noisy jubilation: Bassanio's choosing, which is not a lucky dip, occasions Gratiano's success, which is, a silly side bet. Then by a further excellent modulation, “Enter Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio, a messenger from Venice”: Salerio brings news of Antonio's mortal danger, while Jessica's sole speech confirms that danger. The spotlight moves away from the Beneficiary, and from the Lady, too, though to a lesser extent because the plot still keeps her passive, to the Donor and Bondholder. It stays with the last two for the next scene. But then with the sex-disguising of the Lady, and her getting into motion at last, attention shifts to her preparations for meeting—her sole, and incognito meeting—with the Bondholder.

What, then, is 3.5 included for? It is not enough to say it covers the lapse of time while Portia reaches Venice, since that journey can be quick or slow at Shakespeare's own wish (and any other small scene would serve the same purpose). It shows Jessica, with Gobbo again, then with Lorenzo. Jessica, to my mind, is Shakespeare's largest and most significant addition to the Bondholder's role. It is worth mentioning that she has seven scenes, her father five. She shares only one scene with him, in which she speaks to him only when spoken to (receiving several commands and one hot question—2.5.10-55). So what does this large addition contribute?

Contrasting strongly with her passive, innocent prototype Abigail, Jessica is proactive and determined. She throws down her father's money from a window like Abigail, but to her lover, not her father. She is given many of the quintessential attributes of heroines in romance comedy—male disguise, giggling about it, participation in masque, abandoning family for lover like Juliet—but like Desdemona crossing a racial gap, too. Is it her change of religion which alienates current feminist sympathies? If so, this too was taken from Marlowe's Abigail. I find it odd, then, that Jessica attracts a modern odium, for example from many of my students: Shakespeare is empowering her, at least equally with the other two cross-dressing heroines.
He is not empowering her for empowerment's sake, but to represent a strong counterweight to what her father represents. It is done subtly whenever she has a scene, or (more often) part of one. “Our house is hell,” she says to Gobbo, “and thou (a merry devil) / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness” (2.3.2-3, her first speech in the play sings a keynote). At the other end of the play she is “never merry when I hear sweet music,” which Lorenzo diagnoses as “attentiveness”—thoughtfulness or intenseness. She has had reason to be both; and yet the two laugh together about dangerous topics like untrustworthy lovers (5.1.1-22). Shakespeare seems eager to qualify her for comic luck, all the more because he writes so many passages which explain that her father is disqualified for it!

It is amongst all of this added Jessica material that Shakespeare adds two passages which have most elicited sympathy for Shylock: “Hath not a Jew eyes?” and Jessica's theft of his wife's engagement ring, both in 3.1. The first is said to Solanio and Salerio, after they have concluded their jeering at him; the second is said to Tubal, whose alternating good and bad news has reduced Shylock to a suffering automaton.

The first is therefore natural anger, strongly expressed, and meant to alarm them. They have deserved all of it. The second is actually the stronger effect, because it swings between absurdity and pathos. The element common to the two passages is reductiveness, in the one case Antonio's flesh as fish bait and the meaning of life narrowed to revenge, in the other case Shylock swung between extremes of schadenfreude and self-centered misery. As Shakespeare is inventing all of this,12 we need to ask for what purpose, or to what discernible authorial effect? So far, I discern the desire to make a strong scene, part of which is the aptness of Shylock's words to his Venetian interlocutors.

But then, next, to Tubal. What is the fellow-Jew up to? Presumably we are not to think, with friends like this who needs enemies? Perhaps Tubal is up to nothing, being an unknown quantity—there for Shylock to react to, and to his news, not himself. So we keep our eyes on Shylock, more than in the previous exchange. This helps explain why Jessica gets the blame. One could just laugh at the idea of wasting a valuable ring on a pet monkey, or relish the idea that the miser’s daughter has become one of life’s big spenders. Or one could sympathize with Shylock's hurt at his engagement ring being lost to him. Should we? We know nothing about his Leah, nor whether she was Jessica's mother. The passage as a whole is nonetheless showing us a strongly suffering Shylock, who is “tortured” and excessive and absurd, by turns or even all at once. The stronger this scene is, the stronger will be the showdown in 4.1. Source-criticism is alerting us to Shakespeare's extensions and additions, and these alert us to his dramaturgy; here, in the form of that “principle of episodic intensification” which is normal on the Elizabethan stage, but can lead to overinterpretation or misunderstanding. Shakespeare's wealth of specificity and ambivalent empathy in the scene can distort our perception if we do not recognize that they exist in Jessica's scenes too, and others—such as the Trial scene itself, greatest and last for Shylock, yet not for others. (The fact that Jessica is withheld means that counterweight is available later.)13 Hence, by the principle of episodic intensification once more, in the Trial scene Shakespeare gives his Bondholder the most rousing possible finish, trusting to his own experience and intuition to restore the balance later, by benefitting later scenes similarly. Did he succeed, is the question? And are we prepared to let him, is the question to ourselves.

The Trial scene is the one closest to the novella. The source has the same shape: pleas from “the merchants of Venice one and all” are made to the Jew, who, however, insists on getting Venetian—that is, strict—justice (Bullough 472); he is offered up to ten times the amount of the bond, without avail; the disguised heroine hears the case and urges him to quit while he is so far ahead; and when he refuses, she springs the trap; and a reverse-auction (Dutch auction) ensues. Here we begin to notice divergence in Shakespeare's treatment. In the source the bond is declared null and void, everyone “mocked at the Jew, saying, ‘He who lays snares for others is caught himself’” (Bullough 474). The Jew then “took his bond and tore it in pieces in a rage.” In the play there is less of a reverse-auction, and nothing explicit about the bond itself,14 more of mockery, a different moralitas. Responses of bystanders differ from one another (this is important and often ignored by critics). Instead of a stormy sudden exit like Malvolio's, Shylock's is prolonged. The delaying of the exit, and
its qualities when at last it does come, is the heart of the problem of this play for us all.

My view can already be guessed. It is dramaturgical more than ethical. Shakespeare has seen how to milk the situation for a bewildering variety of effects, now that the hard work is all done and before the comic sequel is reached. And he does milk it.\(^{15}\) It is episodic intensification with a vengeance, because it creates not just a variety of strong effects but a literally bewildering variety. We are left not knowing what to think; and as the debate shows, this is not a contented relinquishing of any need to make judgment, but rather a need to make judgment which is not, and cannot, be satisfied. I take those points of divergence one by one in the same order.

The bond is not declared “null and void” in Shakespeare; rather, it is upheld to the full by Portia (“all justice,” “nothing but the penalty” she says), and woe betide Shylock if he deviate by a hair's breadth. This emphasizes the peripeteia, not suddenly, but by a reverse literalism, rubbing in the defeat. What is swift in the source, with “everyone present” mocking the loser when his plot backfires, and with the Jew tearing up his bond, is being made gradual and (among other things) educative. It is by nature hard to distinguish “teaching someone a lesson” (with deterrence and reform uppermost in the punishment) from retribution; and the slower the process, the more like a vengeance.

The case is alike regarding the Bond, the paper document as stage property, whose presence is often implied, and which must end up somewhere once Shylock has lost. Many actors of Shylock have torn it up anyway, as a good dramatic admission of defeat; but Shakespeare does not specify it, and this may well be because the trial is now passing beyond what the bond says, to something else. That something else is not a contest about bonds, but about what is to happen on the other charges to which (Portia reveals) he is liable, conspiracy against the life of a Venetian (345). Shylock is not getting more than he bargained for. Seen one way, this is fitting, being inherent in any act of hubris. Seen in the light of the sequel, his forcible conversion and stripping of assets, it looks more as if he is being punished for what he is, than for what he has done—since in a sense he has done (accomplished) absolutely nothing. Whose will is done, then? The court's? The state's? Portia's? Antonio's? Let us see who says what, in the process by which Shakespeare diversifies what “everyone present” said, into the responses of Gratiano, Bassanio, the Duke, Portia, and Antonio.

Gratiano is very vocal, jeering in the loudmouth way which Bassanio had long before disrelished and which now blossoms into racist jokes. Bassanio simply wants to give the Jew back his principal (333) but is overruled by Portia: since in 1.3 and later in the present scene he is overruled by Antonio, he seems decent, dependent, and accommodating, the sort who finds it hard to say no. The Duke pardons Shylock for two lines, then imposes conditions—as befits a lawcourt, but hardly a comic one.\(^{16}\) Portia is legalistic now: her celebrated appeal for mercy is absent, or muted into asking Antonio “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” She is keeping up her role, and testing the Merchant of Venice (whose “mercy” comes last and is made the Duke's decision also). Maybe the whole play tests this merchant. It is Antonio who disposes of Shylock's possessions and insists on the enforced conversion. None of this, to repeat, was in the novella.

It is Antonio again who insists on Bassanio's surrendering his wedding ring, and neither is this in the novella. In an age which respected oaths as binding, and considering that the ring is the emblem of a marriage taken most seriously (and not even yet consummated), Antonio is asking a lot. The fact that Bassanio as Beneficiary owes him so much makes it harder to deny him, and so he ought not to have asked. Portia rightly smells a threat. Far from being misnamed after Antonio, the play is correctly seen as about his ambivalences; not simply here at the end of the trial, when he punishes Shylock not for what he does but for what he is, but at points throughout the sequel. His burdensome love of Bassanio is the last of all the obstacles which stand (like increasingly difficult obstacles in a steeplechase) between the lovers and their joy. I completely agree with Anne Barton's reading of Antonio.\(^{17}\)
The finale expands on the joking and partying of the source's ending, but has to provide a counterweight to the complexity and intensity and unresolved emotion which Shakespeare added to the trial scene. How does it attempt this, and does it succeed?

It attempts the task, which Shakespeare has just made very hard for himself and unquestionably harder than he found it in his main source, by the following discernible sequences: a night duet for Lorenzo and Jessica (1-23); messengers, from outside the household and inside (Stephano and Gobbo, eisangelos and exangelos so to speak, 25-53); rhapsody on the music of the spheres and the music of earth (54-88). There is much talk of the time, of lights and whether dawn is come; it does not come, so that at the close it will still be suitable time for the lovers’ going to bed. Enter Portia and her company (89), then Bassanio and his, which now includes Antonio (127), whereupon she is at long last introduced to him. Small talk follows till the rings’ quarrel erupts (142), and the exploitation of this and then its elucidation fill out the last half of the finale. The first half is added from other sources, while the second expands on the novella.

The litany of lovers, I have argued, mentions instances of the tribulations of lovers, not because they apply, but because they do not. Lorenzo and Jessica can warble (respectively) of the separation of Troilus and of Dido from their faithless lovers because they themselves are not separated, hence not thinking about betrayal either. When they bring themselves into the litany, they do a crossover, woman naming man and vice versa. Ovid is being appropriated for love-expression, not subpoenaed to help cast a blight.

So these lovers are being authorized, as it were, to give us the play's backward look at the strife now ended. We could say that Jessica, not Shylock, gets the last word, so long as we recognize her exact state of mind. She says nothing at all while Lorenzo interprets the stars as symbols of celestial harmony, a music of the heavenly bodies. But when he moves on to physical music, her answer is edgy, transitional, ambivalent … What is the word for it? Maybe just realistic: music, heeded, draws us into itself, and that is the bliss it gives. And denies to “the man that hath no music in himself.” Frank Kermode's comment was that the passage “tells the audience how to interpret the action” so that “only by a determined attempt to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme” (221, 224).

Broadly, I agree. To reinsert the thought of Shylock—except here, where Shakespeare does it, and does it moreover by a glancing generalization—is to superimpose one's own play on the very sufficient one the dramatist wrote. Let people do so, by all means, but let them not call it his play. His play, though multi-centered and problematical, does center where its title puts the emphasis, on Antonio.

I should have said, it does this when allowed to. If a company's best actor takes the role of Shylock, and his scenes are arranged to suit him, and if further Shylock-allusions are inserted by the director in the finale, then of course he will upstage Antonio and the other parties to the four-way transaction which the play enacts. It is self-fulfilling. But if he does upstage them we will have an unresolved, or soured, comedy—or even a tragedy. And so we will not be watching the play which Shakespeare wrote, nor the design which source-criticism establishes. And similarly with written interpretation: if attention starts or finishes with Shylock, in and beyond his five scenes, the play will emerge less perfect and more skewed than if we keep our attention wheresoever Shakespeare is directing it. This option is more difficult, but more rewarding. The play manifests a tense, shifting balance throughout, the balancing of four principal agents with several love stories, which—let us not forget—he chose to work out. That, and not Shylock alone, is the play's driving force.

Notes

1. I approximate to the view of M. M. Mahood, ed. The Merchant of Venice, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Introduction, pp. 24-25, where she speaks of our “multiple and shifting responses ….” The text used for quotation and reference is this one, hereafter termed “Mahood.”
2. “Plot,” in Aristotle's full sense of the term: the what and the who as they merge in causality, hence governing characterization also.
3. The “golden fleece” of 1.1.169 (also 3.2.240, typically vulgarized by Gratiano).
5. 1.1.57, the only time kinship is mentioned: a vestige of Giannetto's story, where Ansaldo is Giannetto's godfather?
6. From the medieval Gesta Romanorum, Englished in 1577 and revised just before the play (see Mahood 4).
7. Implicit in the source, where Ansaldo “decided to sell everything he had in the world, to equip another ship” (Bullough 469).
8. As Mr. Woodhouse in Emma recognizes. He dislikes weddings because they are inseparable from change: the play accumulates changes, of gender-dress, allegiance, status, religion, ownership, matrimony, and most especially of who has the power.
9. Mahood (8) is cautious about accepting Marlowe's Jew of Malta as a source at all, speaking instead of its “pervasive presence,” and mainly in terms of contrast. Considering the Marlovian language of Morocco, “pervasive presence” seems right. But so does significant contrast as regards Abigail/Barabas and Jessica/Shylock.
10. What with the many other comedic features assigned to Jessica, it seems misguided to dwell on the allusions to false love as signs of falsity in their speakers: spoken between lovers they are more a sign of confidence and security than of skating on thin ice. The dangerous stuff can be acknowledged, by lovers who have made a dangerous alliance, without imperilling anything.
11. I understand the off-color jokes in 3.5 similarly: Lorenzo talks of being jealous of Gobbo because he is not jealous, not because he is, though it is open to some humorless or axe-grinding director to play the scene against the grain. See also Hale, The Shakespeare of the Comedies, p. 17.
13. We never see father and daughter at ease with each other, they never say anything good about each other. She is “ashamed” to be his child, and once he notices her rebellion the feeling is strongly reciprocated. She is “dead” to him.
14. Despite stage tradition, intuitively reinstating the Jew of Mestri's impassioned gesture.
15. As he does elsewhere, to similarly problematic effect: Iago's humiliations to Othello are prolonged too, because they make good theater. Shakespeare's rigor can look like cruelty.
16. He is the harshest of Shakespeare's comedy-dukes in passing judgment.
17. In the Riverside edition. I am reminded of Jonathan Miller's solution of the ending of the Taming of the Shrew, another ending unpleasing to modern sensibilities, until it is psychologized. Just as Katharina has been exorcised of a demon by Petruchio's play-acting, so Antonio must stand aside lest he become the demon of Bassanio's married life.
18. Like, but not like, the close of A Midsummer Night's Dream: these lovers get to bed late, in the nick of time, whereas the symmetrical puppets of the previous play go at the set time, midnight. The delayed wedding night in the Merchant is part of its design, seen very clearly by the contrast with its source where consummation had to precede the wedding, the former performance qualifying Giannetto for the latter.
19. The play ended with Shylock's exit in some eighteenth-century versions (Mahood 43)—a curious opposite to the happy ending of Nahum Tate's Lear. If the latter is scorned as travesty nowadays, why not the former also? And with it, the intrusion of Shylock where Shakespeare did not put him?

Works Cited


The Merchant of Venice (Vol. 87): Further Reading

CRITICISM


Maintains that the overall comic structure of The Merchant of Venice should not be obscured by a sympathetic approach to the characterization of Shylock.


Explores elements of The Merchant of Venice that often trouble audiences, in both Shakespeare’s time and today.


Examines interpretations of Shylock’s character from various perspectives, maintaining that he should be viewed neither as a grotesque villain nor as a sympathetic victim.


Investigates why the treatment of Shylock causes uneasiness and distress in the conscience of Christians.


Analyzes the sources Shakespeare used to create Shylock.

*Maintains that director Helen Flax presented a surface-level interpretation of The Merchant of Venice in her 2001 production for the Port Elizabeth Shakespearean Festival.*


*Discusses the complicated set of events and characters that appear in the second act of The Merchant of Venice.*


*Interprets Gratiano's trial scene speech in which he compares Shylock to a wolf.*


*Evaluates practices of sixteenth-century merchants and their relationship with the contemporary discourse on “alien races.”*


*Surveys various views of the notion of equity in Elizabethan England and examines the basis in Common Law for Portia's case against Shylock.*

### The Pound of Flesh: Introduction

#### The Pound of Flesh

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What a matter were it then if I should cut of his privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?—*spoken by the Jew in the English translation of Alexander Sihayn's The Orator*, 1596

I hope I shall never be so stupid as to be circumcised. I would rather cut off the left breast of my Catherine and of all women.—*Martin Luther, c. 1540*

Perhaps the least explicable feature of the ritual murder accusations was the charge that Jews first circumcised their victims before killing them. In some ways it must have made perfectly good sense. After all, it was well known that Jews circumcised young boys, and it was not all that difficult to imagine this practice as part of a more complex and secretive Jewish ritual ending in human sacrifice. In other ways, however, it made no sense at all, for as Menasseh ben Israel justifiably wondered, "to what end he was first circumcised" if "it was intended that shortly after this child should be crucified?" The confusion is understandable, since the ritual significance of what is described in the Bible as cutting the "foreskin" of the "flesh" remains poorly understood even by Jews and other peoples who have long practiced this rite. In the twentieth century we
stand doubly removed from appreciating the effect of circumcision upon cultural identity. Even as circumcision is now routinely practiced in Western cultures for hygienic and aesthetic reasons, an awareness of its symbolic meanings (aside from psychoanalytic ones) has been virtually lost. Current debate about circumcision has focused almost exclusively on the pain it might cause the child, or on its effects upon reducing the spread of certain diseases. A very different situation prevailed in early modern Europe, where there was an intense curiosity about the often unnerving implications of a ritual bound up with theological, racial, genealogical, and sexual concerns. I am interested here not only in restoring a sense of the fascination and importance circumcision held for Elizabethans but also in arguing that an occluded threat of circumcision informs Shylock's desire to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh. Before turning to the presence of circumcision in The Merchant of Venice and its sources, it is important to consider what this ritual might have meant to Elizabethans, what their understanding of it was based on, and what light this casts on their cultural beliefs.

The Pound of Flesh: I. Elizabethan ideas about circumcision

In the twentieth century circumcision has often been described as a symbolic form of castration or emasculation. This association has undoubtedly been influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, who, in an argument that bears a striking resemblance to Maria Edgeworth's ideas about childhood trauma and the wellsprings of anti-Jewish feelings, writes in Little Hans that the "castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis—a piece of his penis, they think—and this gives them a right to despise Jews. And there is no stronger unconscious root for the sense of superiority over women."¹ For Freud, the symbolic act of circumcision proves a vital source of both misogyny and antisemitism.² The notion that circumcision could easily slide into the more definitive cut of castration did not originate with Freud and in fact had long circulated in English culture. D'Blossiers Tovey, in his account of instances in medieval England in which Jews were charged with being "emasculators," cites a case from the reign of King John in which "Bonefand a Jew of Bedford was indicted not for circumcising, but totally cutting off the privy member" of a boy named Richard.³ And Shakespeare's contemporaries used circumcision as a metaphor for castration: the poet Gabriel Harvey, for example, implores God to "circumcise the tongues and pens" of his enemies.⁴

For early modern English writers, though, the threat of circumcision did not begin and end with emasculation. In the sixteenth century circumcision was more than a cut, it was an unmistakable sign. But of what, exactly? When the Elizabethan preacher Andrew Willet tried to answer this question he found himself describing circumcision as not only a "a sign of remembrance or commemoration of the Covenant … made between God and Abraham" but also as a sign "distinguishing the Hebrews from all other people." To this genealogical, Jewish association, he added a few more that are distinctly Christian: circumcision prefigured "baptism" and demonstrated "the natural disease of man, even original sin."⁵ To these Willet might have added yet another: that through circumcision, one "is … made a Jew,"⁶ a troubling thought for a Christian who might find himself threatened with such a cut.

One such individual was Thomas Coryate, the celebrated Elizabethan traveler. Coryate describes how his efforts to convert the Jews of the Venetian ghetto soured, leading him to flee from the hostile crowd. Though this specific detail is never mentioned in the narrative itself, a picture of Coryate pursued by a knife-wielding Jew is included in a series of scenes illustrating the title page of his travel book, Coryats Crudities.⁷ For those who wrote commendatory poems to Coryate's book—including Laurence Whitaker—this Jew threatens not death but circumcision: "Thy courtesan clipped thee, 'ware Tom, I advise thee, / And fly from the Jews, lest they circumcise thee." Hugh Holland, too, draws attention to the danger to Coryate's foreskin: "Ulysses heard no Syren sing: nor Coryate / The Jew, least his prepuce might prove excoriate." Coryate's conversionary effort backfires, and instead of turning Jews into Christians he finds himself in danger of being religiously transfigured by means of a circumcising cut.⁸ Holland, comparing Coryate to Hugh Broughton, the evangelizing Elizabethan Hebraist, makes this symmetrical relationship between baptism and circumcision
He more prevailed against the excoriate Jews
Than Broughton could, or twenty more such
Hughes.
And yet but for one petty poor misprision,
He was nigh made one of the circumcision. 9

With the exception of a handful of infants circumcised by the radical Puritan group led by John Traske around 1620, and a few self-circumcisors like Thomas Tany and Thomas Ramsey thirty years later, there is no evidence that circumcisions took place in early modern England. Nonetheless, the same post-Reformation interest that led to this Judaizing impulse also inspired a broader curiosity about a ritual not only central to the Old Testament accounts of the patriarchs but also crucial to the theological position maintained by the apostle Paul in that central text of the Protestant Reformation, Epistle to the Romans. One result of this new interest was that English travelers eagerly sought out invitations to circumcisions and recorded what they witnessed for the benefit of their contemporaries. As noted earlier, the resilient Coryate, who in the course of his extensive travels had long desired to observe a circumcision, finally had his wish granted in Constantinople, at the "house of a certain English Jew called Amis" [i.e., Ames]. The fact that Ames and his two sisters spoke English no doubt made it easier for Coryate to have various details of the ritual explained to him. Coryate describes how the Jews came into the room and sung certain Hebrew songs, after which the child was brought to his father, who sat down in a chair and placed the child being now eight days old in his lap. The whole company being desirous that we Christians should observe the ceremony, called us to approach near to the child. And when we came, a certain other Jew drawing forth a little instrument made not unlike those small scissors that our ladies and gentlewomen do much use, did with the same cut off the prepuce or foreskin of the child, and after a very strange manner, unused (I believe) of the ancient Hebrews, did put his mouth to the child's yard, and sucked up the blood. 10

English observers were particularly struck by how the rite symbolically enacted the male child's passage from his mother to the community of men. 11 Coryate observes that at the conclusion of the rite, the "prepuce that was cut off was carried to the mother, who keepeth it very preciously as a thing of worth," and Fynes Moryson, describing a circumcision he had witnessed in Prague, was alert to the fact that women were "not permitted to enter" the room and that they "delivered the child to the father" at the door. Like Coryate, Moryson records his surprise at witnessing another practice for which Scripture had offered no precedent, *metzizah*, the part of the ceremony in which the circumcisor sucks the blood from the glans of the circumcized "yard" or penis of the infant. Moryson writes that "the rabbi cut off his prepuce, and (with leave be it related for clearing of the ceremony) did with his mouth suck the blood of his privy part." 12 Apparently, this innovative practice, introduced during the Talmudic period, though not universally practiced by Jews, must have seemed to these English observers to have sodomitical overtones. 13

Coryate, Moryson, and other Elizabethan observers express surprise at the discrepancy between the ceremonies that they witnessed and that which they had expected to see based on the divinely ordained precepts set forth in the Bible. 14 There was also disagreement over whether the Jews were the first people to have practiced circumcision. At stake in this debate was whether circumcision should be viewed as something peculiarly Jewish. On one side there were those like Samuel Purchas, who had read too many accounts from too many foreign lands to accept the argument that all peoples who practiced circumcision had learned this rite from the Jews. Purchas insisted that the "ceremony and custom of circumcision hath been and still is usual among many nations of whom there was never any Opposing suspicion from that they descended from the Israelites." 15 Opposing this minority view were those like Andrew Willet, who maintained that "circumcision
was a peculiar mark of distinction for the Hebrews" and further urged that "some nations among the Gentiles retained circumcision by an apish imitation of the Hebrews, but they did abuse it superstitiously and did not keep the rite of institution as the Lord had appointed it." Writers who sided with Willet's position used this as a basis for substantiating claims about the discovery of the ten lost tribes of Israel. When Thomas Thorowgood, for example, writes that "many Indian nations are of Judaical race," he offers as evidence that the "frequent and constant character of circumcision, so singularly fixed to the Jews, is to be found among them."17

While it was widely accepted that others—especially Turks—practiced circumcision, there was still considerable resistance to abandoning the idea that it was a distinctively Jewish rite. An unusual story regarding Turkish circumcision—and murder—made its way to England in February 1595 when John Barton, the English ambassador in Constantinople, forwarded to Lord Burghley a report describing the events surrounding the accession of the Turkish monarch Mohamet III. The narrative, written in Italian by a Jew named Don Solomon, describes how Mohamet consolidated his power by inviting his nineteen brothers, the eldest eleven years old, to greet him: Mohamet "told them not to fear, he meant no harm to them but only to have them circumcised according to their custom…. As soon as they kissed his hand, they were circumcised, taken aside by a mute, and dextrously strangled with handkerchiefs. This certainly seemed strange and cruel, but it was the custom of this realm."18 The story offers yet one more instance, in the year preceding the first staging of The Merchant, of the association of circumcision with ritualistic and surreptitious murder.

The Pound of Flesh: II. Romans and the theological meanings of circumcision

This unprecedented interest in the physical act of circumcision was directly related to some of the theological preoccupations of post-Reformation England. Elizabethans knew that circumcision had caused something of an identity crisis for early Christians, especially Paul. Paul, who was himself circumcised and had circumcised others,"19 directed his epistles to communities for whom to circumcise or not to circumcise was a matter of great concern. But Paul's remarks on circumcision went well beyond approving or disapproving of the act itself: they offered a revolutionary challenge to what defined a Jew, and by implication, a Christian. Luther and Calvin both devoted themselves to explicating Paul's often cryptic remarks on circumcision, and a host of English translators, commentators, theologians, and preachers enabled the widespread circulation of these interpretations to the broadest community possible. More than anything else in the late sixteenth century—including firsthand reports like the ones described above—Paul's ideas about circumcision saturated what Shakespeare's contemporaries thought, wrote, and heard about circumcision. At times confusing and even contradictory, Paul's remarks, and the extraordinary commentary produced to explain and resolve various ambiguities contained in them, had an immeasurable impact on Elizabethan conceptions of Jews. This body of commentary, much of it gathering dust in a handful of archives, richly repays close examination.

The first problem confronting a Christian explicator of Paul's Romans was a fairly simple one. Since God had first ordered Abraham to undertake circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, what justified abandoning this practice? And what were the consequences of such a break? The immediate answer was that the Jews had misunderstood that this Covenant, like the Law, was not changed or abolished by Jesus, "but more plainly expounded … and fulfilled." “Surely,” Philippe de Mornay wrote, in a text translated by Sir Philip Sidney, "in this point… we [Christians] be flat contrary to them." And sounding a bit like a modern deconstructive critic, Mornay adds, that the "thing which doth always deceive" the Jews is that "they take the sign for the thing signified," since circumcision was merely a "sign or seal of the Covenant, and not the Covenant itself."20

For John Calvin, the "disputation and controversy" over circumcision similarly masked a more consequential debate over "the ceremonies of the Law," which Paul "comprehendeth here under the particular term of circumcision." By equating circumcision with the Law and its supersession by faith, English Protestants drew
an analogy between Paul's rejection of circumcision and their own repudiation of Catholicism's emphasis on justification through good works: it is "not circumcision, but faith [that] makes us wait for the hope of righteousness; therefore not circumcision but faith justifies." Calvin's interpretation of Paul had made it clear that "circumcision" had lost its "worth," having been replaced by the sacrament of baptism. No longer even "a sign," it was "a thing without any use."

But such an outright rejection of circumcision seemingly contradicted Paul's own assertion that "circumcision verily is profitable, if thou do the Law." Confronted with such a claim, commentators had to work hard to show that Paul's words actually meant quite the opposite of what literalists might mistakenly imagine. In order to achieve this end, the gloss to the Geneva Bible takes Paul's wonderfully concise and epigrammatic phrase and turns it into a ponderous argument: "The outward circumcision, if it be separated from the inward, doeth not only not justify, but also condemn them that are circumsiced, of whom indeed it requireth that, which it signifieth, that is to say, cleanliness of heart and the whole life, according to the commandment of the Law."

The commentator's overreading is enabled by the fact that Paul in the verses that follow introduces a crucial distinction between inward and outward circumcision. It is a distinction central to his redefinition of Jewish identity in a world in which circumcision has been superseded: "He is not a Jew which is one outward, neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one within, and the circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God." Paul here attacks Jewish identity at its genealogical root. If he can deny that outward alone defines the Jew from generation to generation, he can insist on a figurative reading of the Law in all other matters as well. For Joseph Hall, Paul's message is unambiguous: "He that would be a true Israelite or Jew indeed must be such inwardly" and must be "cleansed from all corrupt affections and greed." More-over, this "circumcision must be inwardly in the heart and soul and spirit (in cutting off the unclean foreskin thereof) and not a literal and outward circumcision of the flesh."

Before turning to the symbolic circumcision of the heart touched on here by Paul and his explicators—the most striking feature of his argument and the most relevant to a reading of The Merchant of Venice—it is important first to emphasize that Paul and his followers were reluctant to abandon the outward, physical implications of trimming the foreskin, in part because this surgical act so perfectly symbolized the cutting off of sexual desire. Andrew Willet, drawing on the work of Origen, remarks that even if "there had been no other mystery in circumcision, it was fit that the people of God should carry some badge or cognizance to discern them from other people. And if the amputation or cutting off some part of the body were requisite, what part was more fit then that … which seemed to be obscene?" The gloss to the Geneva Bible reads this puritanical perspective back into Genesis 17.11, explaining there that the "privy part is circumcised to show that all that is begotten of man is corrupt and must be mortified." And the 1591 Bishops' Bible similarly stresses the connection between circumcision and the curbing of sexual desire, explaining that Deuteronomy 30.6—"And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart"—means that God will "cut away thy ungodly lusts and affections." These commentaries effectively rewrite Old Testament allusions to circumcision, infusing them with Paul's deep discomfort with human sexuality.

John Donne was particularly drawn to this line of thought. In his New Year's Day sermon preached in 1624 commemorating the Feast of the Circumcision, Donne imagines himself in Abraham's place after having been commanded by the Lord to circumcise himself and all the men in his household. Given that it was to be done "in that part of the body," Donne surmises that this command must have struck Abraham as too "obscene a thing to be brought into the fancy of so many women, so many young men, so many strangers to other nations, as might bring the promise and Covenant itself into scorn and into suspicion." Why, Abraham must have wondered, "does God command me so base and unclean a thing, so scornful and misinterpretable a thing, as circumcision, and circumcision in that part of the body?" The answer, of course, is that in "this rebellious part is the root of all sin." The privy member "need[s] this stigmatical mark of circumcision to be imprinted upon it" to prevent Abraham's descendants from "degenerat[ing] from the nobility of their race."
Willet, Donne, and like-minded commentators never quite acknowledge that insofar as the cutting off of the foreskin effectively subdues that rebellious and sinful part of men's bodies, circumcision once again veers perilously close to the idea of a (partial) sexual castration and emasculation.

It was also clear to Christian theologians that for the Jews who literally circumcised the flesh, the Covenant could only be transmitted through men.\textsuperscript{32} This helps explain why Jewish daughters like Jessica in \textit{The Merchant of Venice} and Abigail in \textit{The Jew of Malta} can so easily cross the religious boundaries that divide their stigmatized fathers from the dominant Christian community. The religious difference of Jewish women is not usually imagined as physically inscribed in their flesh, and the possibility of identifying women as Jews through some kind of incision never took hold in England, though for a brief time in the fifteenth century in northern Italy the requirement that Jewish women have their ears pierced and wear earrings served precisely this function. In her investigation of this sumptuary tradition, Diane Owen Hughes cites the Franciscan preacher Giacomo della Marca, who in an advent sermon said that earrings are jewels "that Jewish women wear in place of circumcision, so that they can be distinguished from other [i.e., Christian] women."\textsuperscript{33} One wonders whether Pauline ideas about circumcising desire also shaped this bizarre proposal. Though this method of marking Jewish women was shortlived (other women also wanted to wear earrings) and apparently not widespread, a trace of it may possibly be found in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, when Shylock, upon hearing that Jessica has not only left him but also taken his money and jewels, exclaims: "Two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!"\textsuperscript{34} Shylock fantasizes that his converted daughter returns, and through her earring is reinscribed at last as a circumcised Jewess.

The problems that circumcision raise for issues of gender and sexuality persist into our own more secular age. To cite an unfortunate instance of this, modern medicine, when confronted with the extremely rare cases of botched circumcisions, has found it advisable to alter the gender of the child by reconstructing female rather than male genitalia.\textsuperscript{35} Does this procedure confirm the kind of anxieties we have been exploring about the underlying castrating and feminizing threat of circumcision? Or does it suggest that doctors are perhaps so influenced by such deeply embedded cultural beliefs as to translate them into scientific practice? In either case it underscores how provisional the assignment of gender is, a point familiar enough to Shakespeare's audiences confronted in \textit{The Merchant} with cross-dressing women and a hero who describes himself as a "tainted wether," or castrated ram. Circumcision, then, was an extraordinarily powerful signifier, one that not only touched on issues of identity that ranged from the sexual to the theological but, often enough, on the intersection of the two. The threat of Shylock's cut was complex, resonant, and unusually terrifying.

\section*{The Pound of Flesh: II Circumcision in the sources of The Merchant}

The foregoing analysis may help explain why \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, more than any other depiction of Jews in this period, has continued to provoke such controversy and has also continued to stir long-buried prejudices against the Jews. I want to be careful here about being misunderstood. I am not proposing that Shakespeare is antisemitic (or, for that matter, philosemitic). \textit{The Merchant of Venice} is a play, a work of fiction, not a diary or a polygraph test; since no one knows what Shakespeare personally thought about Jews, readers will continue to make up their own minds about this question. \textit{The Merchant of Venice} is thus not "about" ritual murder or a veiled circumcising threat any more than it is about usury, or marriage, or homosocial bonding, or mercy, or Venetian trade, or cross-dressing, or the many other social currents that run through this and every other one of Shakespeare's plays. Plays, unlike sermons, are not reducible to one lesson or another, nor do they gain their resonance from being about a recognizable central theme. Surely, in the hands of a talented dramatist, the less easily definable the social and psychological currents a play explores, the greater its potential to haunt and disturb. We return again and again to Shakespeare's plays because they seem to operate in these depths and tap into the roots of social contradictions on a stunningly regular basis, leaving critics with
the task of trying to explain exactly what these are and how Shakespeare's plays engage them. With this in mind, I offer the following interpretation of the pound of flesh plot.

Those watching or reading *The Merchant of Venice* are often curious about what part of Antonio's body Shylock has in mind when they learn of Shylock's desire to exact "an equal pound" of Antonio's "fair flesh, to be cut off and taken" in that "part" of his body that "pleaseth" the Jew. Those all too familiar with the plot may forget that it is not until the trial scene in act 4 that this riddle is solved and we learn that Shylock intends to cut from Antonio's "Breast" near his heart. Or partially solved. Why, one wonders, is Antonio's breast the spot most pleasing to Shylock? And why, for the sake of accuracy, wouldn't Shylock cut out rather than "cut off a pound of flesh if it were to come from "nearest" Antonio's "heart"? Moreover, why don't we learn of this crucial detail until Shylock's final appearance in the play?

It is not immediately clear how for an Elizabethan audience an allusion to a Jew cutting off a man's "fair flesh" would invoke images of a threat to the victim's heart, especially when one calls to mind the identification of Jews as circumcisors and emasculators. On a philological level, too, the choice of the word flesh here carries with it the strong possibility that Shylock has a different part of Antonio's anatomy in mind. In the late sixteenth century the word *flesh* was consistently used, especially in the Bible, in place of *penis*. Readers of the Geneva Bible would know from examples like Genesis 17.11 that God had commanded Abraham to "circumcise the foreskin of your flesh," and that discussions of sexuality and disease in Leviticus always use the word *flesh* when speaking of the penis.

Not surprisingly, popular writers took advantage of the punning opportunities made available by this euphemism. Shortly before writing *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare himself had played on the sexual possibilities of *flesh* in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the opening scene of that play the servant Samson, boasting of his sexual prowess, tells Gregory: "Me [the maids] shall feel while I am able to stand, and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh." Playing on the contrast between erect flesh and flaccid fish, Gregory responds: "'Tis well thou art not fish." Mercutio returns to the same tired joke about the loss of tumescence when he says of Romeo's melancholy: "O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified."

*The Merchant of Venice* is similarly replete with bad jokes about trimmed male genitals. As noted above, Antonio in the court scene speaks of himself as "a tainted wether" best suited to suffer the exaction of Shylock's cut. In addition, Salerio's jibe about Jessica having Shylock's "stones," that is, testicles, "upon her" and Gratiano's tasteless joke about "mar[ring] the young clerk's pen" (i.e., penis) offer two other instances from the play of men's obsessive anxiety about castrating cuts. It should also be noted that in Elizabethan England such a cut was not merely the stuff of jokes. As a deterrent to crime, convicted male felons were told at their sentencing to prepare to be "hanged by the neck, and being alive cut down, and your privy members to be cut off, and your bowels to be taken out of your belly and there burned, you being alive."

Scholars have long recognized that Shakespeare drew upon a well established tradition in his retelling the story of the pound of flesh. Among the printed sources Shakespeare may have looked at were Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* and Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator*. Other scholars have uncovered a range of analogues and antecedents, including popular English ballads like "Gernatus the Jew" and medieval works like the *Cursor Mundi* that bear a strong resemblance to Shakespeare's plot. Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to what part of the body the pound of flesh is taken from in these sources and analogues. In fact, when Shakespeare came to one of the main sources that we are pretty confident he consulted, Silvayn's *The Orator*, he would have read about a Jew who wonders if he "should cut of his [Christian victim's] privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?" Before turning to this story and its curious reception, I want to consider another first, one that is even more revealing about the significance of the pound of flesh: Gregorio Leti's *The Life of Pope Sixtus the Fifth*.

Leti was a popular Italian historian, born in the early seventeenth century, who left Italy and took up residence in Northern Europe after converting to Protestantism. For a brief period in the early 1680s he lived and wrote.
in England. Although there are no recorded performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during his stay there, Leti may well have become familiar with the printed text of Shakespeare's play in the course of the extensive research he undertook on Elizabethan England. The earliest edition of his biography of Sixtus V, first published in Lausanne in 1669, omits any reference to the celebrated pound of flesh story; the anecdote was only introduced in the revised version, published in Amsterdam after Leti's visit to England, which may suggest that Leti drew on English sources for this addition.

After 1754, when Ellis Farneworth translated Leti's story, those unable to read the Italian original could learn how in the days of Queen Elizabeth I it was "reported in Rome" that the great English naval hero, Sir Francis Drake, "had taken and plundered St. Domingo, in Hispaniola, and carried off an immense booty. This account came in a private letter to Paul Secchi, a very considerable merchant in the city, who had large concerns in those parts, which he had insured." Leti then relates that Secchi then "sent for the insurer, Sampson Ceneda, a Jew, and acquainted him with it. The Jew, whose interest it was to have such a report thought false, gave many reasons why it could not possibly be true; and, at last, worked himself up into such a passion, that he said, "I'll lay you a pound of my flesh it is a lie." Secchi replied, "If you like it, I'll lay you a thousand crowns against a pound of your flesh, that it's true." The Jew accepted the wager, and articles were immediately executed betwixt them, the substance of which was "that if Secchi won, he should himself cut the flesh, with a sharp knife, from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased."

Leti then relates that "the truth of the account" of Drake's attack "was soon after confirmed by other advices from the West Indies," which threw the Jew "almost into distraction, especially when he was informed that Secchi had solemnly sworn [that] he would compel him to the exact literal performance of his contract, and was determined to cut a pound of flesh from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." We move here from a cut "from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased" to the more precisely defined "part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." The original Italian version conveys even more strongly a sense that only modesty prevents specifying that Secchi's intended cut will come from the unmentionable genitals of the Jew ("e che la modestia non vuo che io nomine"). The circumcised Jew faces a bit more surgery than he reckoned for.

The rest of the story should be familiar to anyone who has read Shakespeare's play, except, of course, that this time it is the Christian who is intent on cutting the flesh of the Jew. The Governor of Rome referred the tricky case to the authority of Pope Sixtus V, who tells Secchi that he must fulfill the contract and "cut a pound of flesh from any part you please, of the Jew's body. We would advise you, however, to be very careful; for if you cut but a scruple, or a grain, more or less than your due, you shall certainly be hanged. Go, and bring hither a knife and a pair of scales, and let it be done in our presence." This verdict led both Secchi and the Jew to agree to tear up the contract, though the affair was not fully settled until Sixtus V fined both of them harshly to serve as an example to others.

Farneworth, in a note appended to his translation, states the obvious: the "scene betwixt Shylock and Antonio in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* seems to be borrowed from this story, though the poet has inverted the persons and decently enough altered some of the circumstances." Farneworth's comment that Shakespeare "decently enough … altered some of the circumstances" presumably alludes to the threatened castration of the Jew. And while we don't know why Leti in the version of the story has "inverted the persons," there is little likelihood that he did it out of love of the Jews. In his book on Great Britain published in England shortly before his departure, Leti reveals his familiarity with London Jewry, describes the services at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London in somewhat mocking terms, and makes fun of the ridiculous gestures of the Jewish worshippers. We can only speculate about the original source of Leti's seventeenth-century story. Did it antedate Shakespeare's play, and was Shakespeare familiar with versions in which the Jew was the victim? Or did it emerge out of a tradition that was itself influenced by *The Merchant of Venice*? Did turning the tables and having the Christians threaten to castrate or symbolically recircumcise the Jew ultimately prove more satisfying to Christian readers?
Farneworth's translation of Leti's story made a strong impression on eighteenth-century English interpreters of *The Merchant of Venice*. Edmond Malone reproduced this passage in his influential edition of Shakespeare's works in 1790, and David Erskine Baker, though he does not acknowledge his source, wrote that Shakespeare's story "is built on a real fact which happened in some part of Italy, with this difference indeed, that the intended cruelty was really on the side of the Christian, the Jew being the happy delinquent who fell beneath his rigid and barbarous resentment." Tellingly, he adds that "popular prejudice, however, vindicates our author in the alteration he had made. And the delightful manner in which he has availed himself of the general character of the Jews, the very quintessence of which he has enriched his Shylock with, makes more than amends for his deviating from a matter of fact which he was by no means obliged to adhere to." Again, we are left with a set of difficult choices: is it "popular prejudice" that "vindicates" Shakespeare reassigning the "intended cruelty" to Shylock? Or is it Shakespeare's play that by the late eighteenth-century is influential enough to perpetuate and channel this "popular prejudice"?

Familiarity with this inverted version of the pound of flesh story was given even broader circulation by Maria Edgeworth in her novel *Harrington*, where she allows the Jew, Mr. Montenero, to present what he believes to be the historically accurate version of the facts in his response to Harrington, who had recently attended a performance of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Edgeworth, too, sees the issue of "popular prejudice" as a central one, and has Mr. Montenero politely acknowledge that while "as a dramatic poet, it was" Shakespeare's "business … to take advantage of the popular prejudice as a power," nonetheless "we Jews must feel it peculiarly hard, that the truth of the story should have been completely sacrificed to fiction, so that the characters were not only misrepresented, but reversed." Harrington "did not know to what Mr. Montenero meant to allude." He politely tried to "pass it off with a slight bow of general acquiescence," before Mr. Montenero went on to explain that in "the true story, from which Shakespeare took the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, it was a Christian who acted the part of the Jew, and the Jew that of the Christian. It was a Christian who insisted upon having the pound of flesh from next the Jew's heart." Seeing how struck Harrington is by this revelation, Mr. Montenero magnanimously offers that "perhaps his was only the Jewish version of the story, and he quickly went on to another subject." Edgeworth adds her own authority to Montenero's when she provides a footnote to the words "true story" directing readers to "Steevens' Life of Sixtus V and Malone's Shakespeare," where the Farne-worth translation appears. Strikingly, though, at the very moment that she insists on the original version, Edgeworth herself either misremembers or swerves away from a key features of Leti's "true story" in favor of Shakespeare's version of the events when she substitutes the words "having the pound of flesh from next the Jew's heart" for Farneworth's translation of Leti's original: "from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention."

Once nineteenth-century Shakespearean source-hunters like Francis Douce and James Orchard Halliwell-Phil-lipps pointed out that Leti's version could not have antedated Shakespeare's play, and, moreover, that this episode in Sixtus V's life was probably fictional, interest in Leti's narrative rapidly declined. H. H. Furness, in his still influential variorum edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, includes Farneworth's translation but then invokes the authority of those who dismiss it as a source. And though he quotes Farneworth's observation that Shakespeare's plot "is taken from this incident," he cuts off the quotation at the point where it leads Farneworth to point out that Shakespeare has also made the Jew the victim and left out indecent details. Interest in pure sources—rather than near contemporary versions that might cast light on various aspects of the story—has been influential enough in Shakespeare studies in this century to account for the virtual disappearance of Leti's story from editions or even from collections of Shakespeare's sources. Nowadays, Leti's version is no longer cited, mentioned, or even known to most Shakespeareans.

When we turn to Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator*, which these same source-hunters agree is one of Shakespeare's primary sources for the pound of flesh plot, we find a clear precedent for the argument that a Jew considers the possibility of castrating the Christian. The ninety-fifth declamation of *The Orator*, translated into English in 1596 shortly before the composition of *The Merchant*, describes "a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a christian." In his appeal to the judge's sentence that he "cut a just
judge's to the pound of the Christian flesh, and if he cut either more or less, then his own head should be smitten off," the Jew insists that in the original agreement the Christian was to hand over the said pound:

Neither am I to take that which he oweth me, but he is to deliver it me. And especially because no man knoweth better than he where the same may be spared to the least hurt of his person, for I might take it in such a place as he might thereby happen to lose his life. What a matter were it then if I should cut of his privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound? 

While Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors included this source in unadulterated form, a century later it would be partially suppressed, apparently proving too obscene for Furness to reprint in unexpurgated form. In a strange act of textual castration and substitution, Furness alters the line to read "what a matter were it then, if I should cut of his [head], supposing that the same would weigh a just pound." This makes little sense, no matter how light-headed the victim might be, since in the next sentence the Jew continues, "Or else his head, should I be suffered to cut it off, although it were with the danger of mine own life," and in the sentence after that wonders if his victim's "nose, lips, his ears, and… eyes … make of them altogether a pound." Furness's textual intervention immediately influenced subsequent editions of the play; a year after his edition was published, for example, Homer B. Sprague wrote "head" (without brackets) in his popular school edition of the play. The bowdlerization of this source, and the lack of interest in Leti, have effectively deflected critical attention away from aspects of the play that touch upon ritual Jewish practices.

The Pound of Flesh: III. The circumcision of the heart

Why this bond is forfeit,  
And lawfully by this the Jew may claim  
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off  
Nearest the merchant's heart.  
—The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.227-30

When Paul declares that "the circumcision is of the heart" and is "in the spirit, not in the letter," we are presented with a double displacement: of the physical by the spiritual and of the circumcision of the flesh by the circumcision of the heart. Elizabethan commentators were well aware that Paul's metaphorical treatment of circumcision builds upon a preexisting tradition in the Old Testament, expressed particularly in Deuteronomy 10.16 and 30.6: "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart," and "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart." Mornay, in Sidney's translation, also notes that when the Old Testament prophets "rebuke us, they call us not simply uncircumcised, but uncircumcised of heart or lips," and Peter Martyr simply confirms that "Paul borrowed" this "phrase touching the circumcision of the heart … out of the Old Testament." 

Hugo Grotius understood that this substitution of heart for flesh neatly defined the relationship between Christian fellowship and the genealogical Judaism it replaced, since the Covenant "should be common to all people." He even argued that the Old Testament prophets recognized this "mystical and more excellent signification contained" in "the precept of circumcision," since they in fact "command the circumcision of the heart, which all the commandments of Jesus aim at." John Donne is particularly eloquent on this symbolic displacement: "The principal dignity of this circumcision was that it … prefigured, it directed to that circumcision of the heart." For Donne, "Jewish circumcision were an absurd and unreasonable thing if it did not intimate and figure the circumcision of the heart." 

The unexplained displacement of Shylock's cut from Antonio's "flesh" upward to his heart is now considerably clearer. Viewed in light of this familiar exegetical tradition, Shylock's decision to exact his
pound of flesh from near Antonio's heart can be seen as the height of the literalism that informs all his actions in the play, a literalism that when imitated by Portia leads to his demise. Also echoing through the trial scene of *The Merchant* are the words of Galatians 6.13: "For they themselves which are circumcised keep not the Law, but desire to have you circumcised, that they might rejoice in your flesh," that is to say (as the gloss to this line in the Geneva Bible puts it), "that they have made you Jews." Shylock will cut his Christian adversary in that part of the body where the Christians believe themselves to be truly circumcised: the heart. Shylock's threat gives a wonderfully ironic twist to the commentary on Paul's Romans that "he is the Jew indeed … who cuts off all superfluities and pollutions which are spiritually though not literally meant by the law of circumcision." Psychoanalytically inclined readers will immediately recognize how closely the terms of this Pauline displacement correspond to the unconscious substitution central to Freud's secular theories. Theodore Reik, a disciple of Freud's, interpreted Shylock's bond in just these terms, arguing first that the "condition that he can cut a pound of flesh 'in what part of your body pleaseth me'" is "a substitute expression of castration." Reik adds that when it is later decided that "the cut should be made from the breast, analytic interpretation will easily understand the mechanism of distortion that operates here and displaces the performance from a part of the body below to above." In repudiating circumcision, [Paul] sought to redirect the Covenant, sever the genealogical bond of Judaism, distinguish Jew from Christian, true Jew from false Jew, and the spirit from the flesh (while retaining in a metaphorical sense the sexuality attendant on the flesh). Yet his actual remarks about circumcision are enigmatic and confusing. It is only mild consolation that they proved no less puzzling to the sixteenth-century theologians who tried to untangle the various levels of Paul's literal and symbolic displacements. Take, for example, the Geneva Bible's gloss to Romans, which reaches new depths of convolution in its attempt to iron out these difficulties by asserting that "Paul useth oftentimes to set the letter against the spirit. But in this place the circumcision which is according to the letter is the cutting off of the foreskin. But the circumcision of the spirit is the circumcision of the heart. That is to say, the spiritual end of the ceremony is true holiness and righteousness, whereby the people of God is known from profane and heathenish men." In their frustration, Paul's interpreters often turned against one another. Andrew Willet, for example, chastised Origen for misreading Paul and "thus distinguishing the circumcision of the flesh; that because there is some part of the flesh cut off and lost, some part remaineth still. The lost and cut off part (saith he) hath a resemblance of that flesh, whereof it is said, all flesh is grass. The other part which remaineth is a figure of that flesh, whereof the Scripture speaketh, all flesh shall see the salutation of God." Willet is sensitive to Origen's conflation of the two kinds of circumcision here, spiritual and fleshly—"Origen confoundeth the circumcision of the flesh and the spirit, making them all one"—but it is hard to see how to maintain hard and fast divisions when, on the one hand, commentators drive a wedge between the spiritual and the physical, while, on the other, they show how even in the Old Testament circumcision was used both literally and metaphorically. For Willet, then, the correct interpretation, and one that seems to require a bit of mental gymnastics, requires that we think not of the circumcision of the flesh and the circumcision of the heart "as though there were two kinds of circumcisions" but as "two parts of one and the same circumcision which are sometimes joined together, both the inward and the outward."" The Pound of Flesh: IV. Uncircumcision

If the distinction between inward and outward circumcision were not confusing enough, Paul further complicated matters by introducing the concept of reverse, or uncircumcision. Even if a faithful Christian were circumcised in the heart, what if one's body still carried (as Paul's did) the stigmatical mark that revealed to the world that one was born a Jew? The seventeenth-century Scottish preacher John Weemse recognized that the early Christians were embarrassed by this Judaical scar: "When they were converted from Judaism to Christianity there were some of them so ashamed of their Judaism that they could not behold it; they took it as a blot to their Christianity." Uncircumcision, then, was the undoing of the seemingly irreversible physical act that had been accomplished through the observance of Jewish law, and it was a topic that Paul would
return to obsessively (in large part because it was a pressing issue within the new Christian communities he was addressing). Paul asks in Romans "if the uncircumcision keep the ordinances of the Law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature (if it keep the Law) condemn thee, which by the letter and circumcision art a transgressor of the Law?" In Galatians he writes in a similar vein that "in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything" nor "uncircumcision, but faith, which worketh by love." His remarks in Corinthians on the irrelevance of this mark are even more forceful: "Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not gather his circumcision. Is any called uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."

Paul's shifts between literal and figurative uncircumcision in these key passages are dizzying, and the commentators had to scramble to keep up with him. Thomas Godwyn voices the question that must have been on many readers' minds: "Here it may be demanded how it is possible for a man, after once he hath been marked with the sign of circumcision, to blot out that character and become uncircumcised?" He is responding to Paul's warning that one should not "gather" or reverse one's circumcision. The gloss to this line in the Geneva Bible also takes Paul in the most literal sense imaginable, explaining that this "gathering" is accomplished with "the help of a surgeon" who undoes the effect of the cutting of the foreskin by "drawing the skin with an instrument, to make it to cover the nut" or glans of the penis. The Geneva Bible even directs readers to the medical source for this procedure, the seventh book of Celsus's *De Medicina*. Other writers explained that Paul forbids this literal uncircumcision in his letter to the Corinthians "because some that were converted to Christianity from Judaism did so renounce all their Judaical rites that they used means to attract the preputia again, which was an act of too much superstition and curiosity, and so is censured here." It also needs to be stressed here that uncircumcision, like circumcision, was understood by Paul's commentators to operate both spiritually and literally; Andrew Willet reminds his readers that "as there are two kinds of circumcision, so there is also a twofold uncircumcision, "an uncircumcision of the heart, and another of the flesh."

The belief that one could be uncircumcised, could have one's irreducible Jewish identity replaced with a Christian one, is also a fantasy that powerfully shapes the final confrontation between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio's consummate revenge upon his circumcised adversary, whose actions symbolically threaten to transform not just his physical but his religious identity, is to ask of the court a punishment that precisely reverses what Shylock had in mind for him. When Antonio demands that Shylock "presently become a Christian," a demand to which the Duke readily agrees, the "christ'ning" that Shylock is to receive will metaphorically uncircumcise him. The new covenant has superseded the old, as the sacrament of baptism, which has replaced circumcision, turns Jew into Christian. In his commentary on Romans Peter Martyr offers up a summary of Paul's treatment of the Jews that ironically foreshadows Antonio's victory over Shylock at the end of the trial scene: "In civil judgments, when any is to be condemned which is in any dignity or magistrateship, he is first deprived of his dignity or office, and then afterward condemned. So the apostle first depriveth the Jews of the true Jewishness, and of the true circumcision, and then afterward condemneth them."

Antonio and Shylock, who fiercely insist on how different they are from each other, to the last seek out ways of preserving that difference through symbolic acts that convert their adversary into their own kind. Paradoxically, though, these symbolic acts—a threatened circumcision of the heart and a baptism that figuratively uncircumcises—would have the opposite effect, erasing, rather than preserving, the literal or figurative It is boundaries that distinguish merchant from Jew. It is just this fear of unexpected and unsatisfying transformation that makes *The Merchant of Venice* so unsettling a comedy, and that renders the even more deeply submerged and shadowy charge of ritual murder such a potent one. The desire to allay such fears produces a fantasy ending in which the circumcising Jew is metamorphosed through conversion into a gentle Christian. While this resolution can only be sustained through legal force in the play (Shylock's alternative, after all, is to be executed), its power was sufficiently strong for this spectacle of conversion to be
reenacted in a number of English churches in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, as a handful of Jews were led to the baptismal font.

Notes


1 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, trans. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 10, p. 36. See, too, his *Leonardo da Vinci* (1910), where Freud notes that "here we may also trace one of the roots of the anti-semitism which appears with such elemental force and finds such irrational explanation among the nations of the West." For Freud, "circumcision is unconsciously equated with castration. If we venture to carry our conjectures back to the primaeval days of the human race we can surmise that originally circumcision must have been a milder substitute, designed to take the place of castration" (vol. 11, p. 95). He added this footnote in 1919. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* he similarly writes that there "seems to me no doubt that the circumcision practiced by so many peoples is an equivalent and substitute for castration" (vol. 15, p. 165). Sander Gilman's penetrating studies—*The Case of Sigmund Freud*, and *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)—discuss in great detail the historical and medical issues that informed Freud's ideas about circumcision; see especially the chapter on "The Construction of the Male Jew" in *Freud, Race, and Gender*, pp. 49-92.

2 In Freud's own analysis of Shakespeare's play he avoids Jewish questions, focusing not on the pound of flesh plot but on the tale of the three caskets. Marjorie Garber, turning Freud's psychoanalytic approach against him, brilliantly argues that by "turning *The Merchant of Venice* into *King Lear*, Freud occludes Portia and her own scene of choice, when, dressed like a man, she chooses between two men, two symbolic castrates, Antonio the 'tainted wether of the flock' (4.1.114) and Shylock 'the circumcised Jew.'" Garber wonders whether Freud, by focusing on this issue, is able to avoid confronting his own patriarchy and misogyny by failing to address the more disturbing "problem of the two things he does not want to think of, the two last things that remain on the periphery of the essay on 'The Three Caskets,' discreetly offstage and off-page, the two figures central to *The Merchant of Venice*: the cross-dressed woman and the Jew?" (Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* [New York: Methuen, 1987], p. 187, n. 63).

3 Tovey, *Anglia Judaica*, p. 65. Bonefand, we learn, "pleaded not guilty, and was very honourably acquitted," raising the interesting question of how, given the medical evidence, the case could ever have been successfully prosecuted.


6 As Purchas puts it in his *Pilgrimage* (1613), p. 158.

7 While this woodcut no doubt relates to his reputed escape from a crowd of hostile Venetian Jews whom he sought to convert, there is no evidence anywhere in Coryate's book that these Jews bore weapons against him. Coryate himself explains that "that some forty or fifty Jews more flocked about me, and some of them began very insolently to swagger with me, because I durst reprehend their religion. Whereupon fearing least they should have offered me some violence, I withdrew myself by little and little towards the bridge at the entrance
into the ghetto” (Coryate, *Coryats Crudities* [London, 1611], pp. 236-37).

8 Coryate is subsequently imagined as facing the danger of circumcision in his travels through Islamic nations. A poem written in 1615 to Coryate by John Brown, an English merchant residing at the time in India, warns Coryate to "have a care (at Mecca is some danger) / Lest you incur the pain of circumcision." Coryate published the poem in his *Thomas Coryate, Travailer ... Greeting ... from the Court of the Great Mogul* (London, 1616), p. 34.

9 Coryate, *Coryats Crudities*, sigs. D7v, Elr, and A2r.

10 Coryate adds: "All his privities (before he came into the room) were besprinkled with a kind of powder, which after the circumcisor had done his business was blewed away by him, and another powder cast on immediately. After he had dispatched his work ... he took a little strong wine that was held in a goblet by a fellow that stood near him, and poured it into the child's mouth to comfort him in the midst of his pains, who cried out very bitterly; the pain being for the time very bitter indeed, though it will be (as they told me) cured in the space of four and twenty hours. Those of any riper years that are circumcised (as it too often commeth to pass, that Christians that turn Turks) as at forty or fifty years of age, do suffer great pain for the space of a month" (Coryate, *Coryate's Crudities; Reprinted from the Edition of 1611. To Which Are Now Added, His Letters from India*, vol. 3, sig. U7rU8v.

11 See Daniel Boyarin's essay in which he notes that "at a traditional circumcision ceremony the newly circumcised boy is addressed: 'And I say to you [feminine pronoun!]': in your [feminine] blood, you [feminine] shall live.,” and offers as a possible interpretation that "circumcision was understood somehow as rendering the male somewhat feminine," or alternatively, "that there is here an arrogation of a female symbol that makes it male, and that circumcision is a male erasure of the female role in procreation as well" (Boyarin, "'This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel': Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel," *Critical Inquiry* 19 [1992], p. 496, and n. 64).


13 Cf. John Evelyn, who reports in his diary entry for January 15, 1645, in Rome, that when "the circumcision was done the priest sucked the child's penis with his mouth" (as cited in A. Cohen, *An Anglo-Jewish Scrapbook, 1600-1840* [London: M. L. Cailingold, 1943], p. 292). Charles Weiss notes that *metzitzah* "was probably introduced during the talmudic period," and that "its practice never became universal" ("A World-wide Survey of the Current Practice of *Milah* [Ritual Circumcision]," *Jewish Social Studies* 24 [1962], p. 31). See too Bernard Homa, *Metzitzah* (2d ed., London, n.p., 1966), where the relevant Midrashic texts that are the source of the authority for this practice are cited. Michel de Montaigne also found an opportunity to observe and describe "the most ancient religious ceremony there is among men," which he "watched ... very attentively and with great profit." He too was struck by the practice of *metzitzah*: "As soon as this glans is thus uncovered, they hastily offer some wine to the minister, who puts a little in his mouth and then goes and sucks the glans of this child, all bloody, and spits out the blood he has drawn from it, and immediately takes as much wine again, up to three times." After bandaging the child, the "minister" is given "a glass full of wine.... He takes a swallow of it, and then dipping his finger in it he three times takes a drop of it with his finger to the boy's mouth to be sucked.... He meanwhile still hath his mouth all bloody" (Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne's Travel Journal*, trans. Donald M. Frame [San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983], pp. 81-82. The event was recorded by one of Montaigne's servants, assigned to compile the journal).

14 The Bible also failed to prepare English travelers for what they would witness in Africa: female "circumcision." Samuel Purchas, anticipating the skepticism of his readers, writes of one of the voyages into Ethiopia: "Let no man marvel which heareth this, for they circumcise women as well as men, which thing was
not used in the old Law." He also notes that both in Cairo and "Abassine" they "circumcise not only males, but with a peculiar rite females also" (Purchas, Pilgrimage, pp. 1040, 841, and 1134). The Islamic practice of delaying circumcision until sexual maturity struck Elizabethan writers, versed in a scriptural tradition of circumcision occurring on the eighth day, as unusual. Richard Jobson's description of his trip to "Gambra" in 1620, provided readers in England with considerable details of the practice—locally known as the "cutting of pricks"—experienced by brave adolescent boys in Africa: "Hither we came in season for that solemnity, hearing before we came, shouts, drums and country music. The boy knew the meaning, and told us it was for cutting of pricks, a world of people being gather[ed] for that purpose, like an English fair…. We saw our black boy circumcised, not by a marybuck [that is, a priest], but an ordinary fellow hackling off with a knife at three cuts his praepuce, holding his member in his hand, the boy neither holden nor bound the while" (As cited in Purchas, p. 925). See, too, a later narrative where Richard Jobson speaks of the local African custom concerning circumcision: "It is done without religious ceremony, and hath no name but the cutting of pricks, the party stripped naked and sitting on the ground, and the butcher pulling the skin over very far, and cutting it, not without terror to the beholder" (As cited in Purchas, p. 1573).

15 Purchas, Pilgrimage, p. 121.

16 Willet, Hexapla, p. 204.

17 Thorowgood, Jews in America, pp. 13, 15. Similarly, when Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to Russia, Giles Fletcher, declared that the Tartars were the ten lost tribes of Israel, he too found confirmation in the fact that they "are circumcised, as were the Israelish and Jewish people" (Giles Fletcher, "The Tartars or, Ten Tribes," first published sixty-six years after his death in 1611, in Samuel Lee, Israel Redux: Or the Restauration of Israel [London, 1677], p. 22).


19 See Acts 16.3. Unless otherwise noted, scriptural passages are quoted from the 1589 edition of the Geneva Bible, published in London (I have modernized spelling and orthography here as well).


21 William Perkins, A Commentane or Exposition, Upon the First Five Chapters of the Epistles to the Galatians (Cambridge, 1604), p. 380.

22 Jean Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvine Upon the Epistle of Saincte Paule to the Galatians, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574), fol. 325r.

23 John Calvin, A Commentane upon S. Paules Epistles to the Corinthians, trans. Thomas Timme (London, 1577), fol. 82v. Others offered an evolutionary model that would explain the different attitudes the earliest Christians held toward circumcision. For example, the Scottish preacher John Weemse writes that in the "first period," Christians "might only circumcise; in the second period, circumcise and baptize; (for they had yet more regard to circumcision than to baptism); in the third period they baptized and circumcised (now they had more regard to baptism than circumcision); in the fourth period, they only baptized" (Weemse, The Christian Synagogue, 4 vols. [London, 1633], vol. 1, p. 129).

24 Romans 2.25.

Romans 2.28-29.

For this aspect of Paul's thought, see Daniel Boyarin, who astutely observes that Paul's problem with circumcision was that it "symbolized the genetic, the genealogical moment of Judaism as the religion of a particular tribe of people. This is so both in the very fact of the physicality of the rite, of its grounding in the practice of the tribe, and in the way it marks the male members of that tribe (in both sense), but even more so, by being a marker on the organ of generation it represents the genealogical claim for concrete historical memory as constitutive of Israel." Thus, by "substituting a spiritual interpretation for a physical ritual, Paul was saying that the genealogical Israel 'according to the Flesh,' is not the ultimate Israel; there is an 'Israel in the Spirit'" (Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," p. 502).


Willet, Hexapla, p. 142. Origen's own position may have been qualified by the possibility (according to Eusebius) that he had castrated himself in his youth in order to work unconstrained with female catechumens.

It should also be noted that there is a Jewish tradition that values circumcision because it curtails male desire. Daniel Boyarin cites the observation of Maimonides that circumcision was instituted "to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible" (in Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans, and ed. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 609, cited in Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," p. 486, note 37. Boyarin also notes the Platonic, allegorizing view of circumcision in Philo as well. Some of the complex ways in which circumcision was understood symbolically in Jewish exegetical traditions are explored by Elliot R. Wolfson in "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," History of Religions 27 (1987), pp. 189-215, and "Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine," The Jewish Quarterly Review 78 (1987), pp. 77-112.

Donne concludes, "God would have them carry this memorial about them, in their flesh," in "A Sermon Preached at Saint Dunstan's Upon New-Years-Day, 1624," Sermons, vol. 6, pp. 190-92.

The gendering of the act had long been a problem for Christian interpreters of the Bible, some condemning the Jews for leaving women out of the Covenant, others answering the objection "that circumcision was an imperfect sign, because it was appointed only for the males, the females were not circumcised," by saying that "the privilege and benefit of circumcision was extended also unto the females, which were counted with the men, the unmarried with their fathers, the married with their husbands" (Willet, Hexapla, p. 205).


Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 3.1.82-84.

This problem is usually due to excessive electrocautery used in some hospitals, which burns off too much of the infant's penis to warrant reconstructing the organ. The surgeons perform a "feminizing genitoplasty,"
that is, reconstructing female rather than male genitalia (and at the age of puberty performing a second
operation, a vaginoplasty, supplemented by estrogens). See John P. Gearhart and John A. Rock, "Total
Ablation of the Penis After Circumcision with Electrocauter: A Method of Management and Long-Term
Follow-up," Journal of Urology 142 (1989), pp. 799-801. The authors note that the "successful adaption and
normal sex life of our 2 older patients are a tribute to early gender reassignment, the involvement of a
complete team of specialists, including a medical sexology expert, and extensive familial counseling from the
time of injury" (p. 801). I am indebted to Dr. Franklin Lowe of Columbia Physicians and Surgeons for making
this scholarship available to me. I am also grateful to Patricia E. Gallagher, of Beth Israel Medical Center, for
providing me with material on circumcision procedures.

36 Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 1.3.146-48, and 4.1.249. The first hint appears in act 3, when
Shylock says to Tubal "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit" (3.1.119-20).

37 "Whosoever hath an issue from his flesh is unclean because of his issue," Leviticus 15.2. Biblical
anthropologists have traced the practice of using the euphemism basar (flesh) when referring to the penis to
the priestly redactors (rather than the Jahwist, who did not use this euphemism). See Howard
Eilberg-Schwartz, The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism

38 Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 1.1.29-30, and 2.4.37.

39 Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.113. Antonio's next lines—"the weakest kind of fruit / Drops
earliest to the ground, and so let me" (4.1.114-15)—may connect back to the recurrent biblical identification
of fruit trees with circumcision. In his chapter on "Uncircumcised Fruit Trees," Howard Eilberg-Schwartz
notes the frequent comparison in biblical literature between "fruit trees and male organs" (p. 149; see, for
example, Leviticus 19.23-25), and concludes that "the symbolic equation of an uncircumcised male and a
young fruit tree rests on two, and possibly three, associations. The fruit of a juvenile tree is proscribed like the
foreskin of the male organ. Furthermore, a male who is uncircumcised and not part of the covenantal
community is infertile like an immature fruit tree. Finally, this symbolic equation may draw part of its
152. See, too, his "People of the Body: The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," Journal of the

40 Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 2.8.22, 5.1.237.


42 Before he had to leave in 1683—having run afoul of the Duke of York and England's Catholic
community—Leti had even been elected to the Royal Society and asked by Charles II to write a history of
England from its origins to the Restoration. See the introduction to Nati Krivatsy, Bibliography of the Works
of Gregorio Leti (Newcastle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Books, 1982).

43 Gregorio Leti, Vita di Sisto V, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1693), vol. 3, pp. 134ff. Since the first English
translation of Leti's biography—The Life of Pope Sixtus the Vth (London, 1704)—was based on the 1669 text,
it does not contain the pound of flesh story.

edition of this translation was published in Dublin in 1766.

And, conveniently, to pay for a hospital that he had recently founded. See Leti, *Sixtus the Fifth*, trans. Farneworth, pp. 293-95.


For one of the few twentieth-century citations of Leti's story in relationship to Shakespeare's play, see Berta Viktoria Wenger, "Shylocks Pfund Fleish," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 65 (1929), esp. pp. 148-50.

Bullough, *Sources*, vol. 1, p. 483.

Bullough, *Sources*, vol. 1, p. 484. In other sources the cutting is to be done to the eyes (as in Anthony Munday's *Zeluto*), or is left ambiguous or unspecified, in the words of Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1558), "wheresoever he pleases."


Bullough, *Sources*, vol. 1, p. 484.


See Willet's gloss on this passage in *Hexapla*. Elizabethan editions of the Bible constantly read Pauline doctrine back into the Old Testament passages. Thus, for example, the Bishops' Bible gloss explains: "That is, let all your affections be cut off. He sheweth in these words the end of circumcision"; and "Cut off all your evil affections."


Peter Martyr [Vermigli], *Most Learned and Fruitfull Commentaries of D. Peter Martir Vermilius, Florentine ... Upon the Epistle of S. Paul to the Romanes* (London, 1568), p. 49v. Andrew Willet also cites the prophet Jeremiah, who proclaims that "all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart" (9.26).


67 For this psychoanalyst (who had first witnessed Shakespeare's play as a young boy at the turn of the century in antisemitic Vienna), only "one step is needed to reach the concept that to the Gentile of medieval times the Jew unconsciously typified the castrator because he circumcised male children." The "Jew thus appeared to Gentiles as a dangerous figure with whom the threat of castration originated." Theodore Reik, "Psychoanalytic Experiences in Life, Literature, and Music," in *The Search Within* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1956), pp. 358-59; first printed as "Jessica, My Child," *American Imago* 8 (1951), pp. 3-27.


70 Romans, 2.26-27.

71 Galatians, 5.6. He would return to this idea again shortly, when he states that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Galatians, 6.15).

72 Corinthians, 7.18-19.


74 The same information was also made available in the margin of the Geneva Bible, where Elizabethans, who had no need of this procedure themselves, were nonetheless informed that "the surgeon by art draweth out the skin to cover the part circumcised." The Geneva Bible also cross-references 1 Maccabees 1.16, which describes how the Jews followed the "fashions of the heathen" and "made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy Covenant." The table of contents to the 1589 Geneva Bible (which usefully cites all biblical passages that mention circumcision) cites this passage as one in which the "Jews did uncircumcise themselves, and became apostates," indicating that the act carried with it associations of abandoning one religion for another.

Those curious enough to follow up the medical reference would have read in the Latin text of A. Cornelius Celsus (the first English translation, from which I quote, was not published until 1756) that this procedure requires that "under the circle of the glans, the skin" is "to be separated by a knife from the inner part of the penis." Celsus explains that this "is not very painful, because the extremity being loosened, it may be drawn backwards by the hand, as far as the pubes; and no hemorrhage follows upon it." Next, the "skin being disengaged, is extended again over the glans; then it is bathed with plenty of cold water, and a plaister put round it of efficacy in repelling an inflammation." Celsus offers as postoperative advice that "the patient is to fast, till he almost be overcome with hunger, lest a full diet should perhaps cause an erection of that part."
Finally, when "the inflammation is gone, it ought to be bound up from the pubes to the circle of the glans; and a plaister being first laid on the glans, the skin ought to be brought over it" (A. Cornelius Celsus, *Of Medicine. In Eight Books*, trans. James Greive [London, 1756], pp. 438-39).

75 Hammond, *A Paraphrase*, p. 565. Hammond also describes the "practice of some Jews, who, under the Egyptian tyranny first, then under Antiochus, and lastly under the Romans, being oppressed for being Jews, of which their circumcision was an evidence, used means by some medicinal applications to get a new praeputium. And these were called by the Talmudists mishuchim" (I transliterate the Hebrew here). Following the Geneva Bible gloss, Hammond cites as a medical authority "the famous Physician" Celsus, and, unusually, also invokes Talmudic antecedents, citing Rabbi "Aleai of Achan," who "made himself a praeputium."

76 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.383, 4.1.394. Cf. Reik, who argues that if "Shylock insists upon cutting out a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast, it is as if he demanded that the Gentile be made a Jew if he cannot pay back the three thousand ducats at the fixed time. Otherwise put: Antonio should submit to the religious ritual of circumcision." In addition, at "the end of the 'comedy' Antonio demands that Shylock should 'presently become a Christian.' If this is the justified amends the Jew has to make for his earlier condition, it would be according to poetic justice that the Jew be forced to become a Christian after he had insisted that his opponent should become a Jew" (*The Search Within*, pp. 358-59).

77 Martyr, *Most Learned and Fruitful Commentaries*, p. 48r.

78 See the fascinating discussion of the philosophical implications of Shylock's circumcising cut in Stanley Cavell, *The Claims of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* ([New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], pp. 479-81). Marjorie Garber notes that both "Reik and Cavell predicate their insights upon an assumption of doubling or twinning, a moment of perceptual equipoise that enforces the disconcerting confusion of identities…. Cavell, with 'skepticism with respect to other minds' and the epistemological uncertainty of identity. Each reader appropriates Shylock's scene, persuasively, to his own theoretical project, and finds the twinning of Shylock and Antonio in the courtroom a theatrical hypostasis, an onstage crux that reifies his own perceptions" (Garber, p. 187, n. 63). See also


**Analysis: Historical Background**

There may not be a play more misnamed in Shakespeare’s entire canon than *The Merchant of Venice*. Though he is certainly an important character, Antonio—the merchant in question—merits, at best, fourth billing. The main lovers in the play, Portia and Bassanio, command a great deal more attention, and, as most commentators suggest, Shylock is ultimately the main attraction. Although the Jewish moneylender “appears in only five of the play’s twenty scenes, and not at all in the fifth act, everyone agrees that the play belongs to Shylock” (Barnet 193-4). His dominance is such that, in certain productions (particularly in the nineteenth century), the last act has been “omitted entirely” (Myrick, “Introduction” xxii). Yet, despite his somewhat lesser role, Antonio proves crucial to both main plots of *The Merchant of Venice*. His agreement to serve as collateral for Shylock’s loan to Bassanio facilitates the latter’s courtship of Portia, and the risk to his life which results from this arrangement generates much of the plot’s complications. Shakespeare’s decision to make him the title character perhaps stems from an acknowledgment of Antonio’s structural importance to all the various story lines, as well as from an effort—perhaps unsuccessful—to balance the audience’s attention equally between Shylock’s thirst for revenge and the romance of Portia and Bassanio.

Antonio’s importance as the hinge between the play’s two main plots may reflect the fact that Shakespeare had no one particular inspiration for *The Merchant*, but rather drew primarily on two different sources. Both
the story of the three caskets and the story of a usurer’s demand of a pound of human flesh apparently derive from Oriental folk-tales (Myrick, “Sources” 142-3; Barton 250), though it is likely that Shakespeare encountered them from Italian and Latin sources. A collection of Italian stories, *Il Pecorone*, is usually suggested as Shakespeare’s source for the pound of flesh, while *Gesta Romanorum*, a book of medieval Latin stories (first translated into English in 1577), was very likely his introduction to the three caskets (Myrick, “Sources” 142-3). As with most of Shakespeare’s plays, the exact date of composition is unknown, but contemporary references prove that it had been performed at least by 1598. “In 1598 and in 1600 the play was entered in the Stationers’ Register. It was first published in a quarto (Q1) in 1600” (Myrick, “Textual Note” 139).

The most prominent cultural issues in *The Merchant*, both embodied in the character of Shylock, are the Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews and usury (moneymooning). Although “[e]laborate arguments have been mounted to demonstrate that The Merchant of Venice is not anti-Semitic”—presumably stemming from critics’ desire to defend the ethics of the man many consider to be the greatest poet of the English language—“it is no good to try to discard the hate that energizes the play” (Charney 47). “Jews had been officially banished from England for three centuries” by the time Shakespeare was writing, and there was a lingering hatred of the Jewish race and religion among Christian societies (Barton 250). Such a Christian grudge against Jews allegedly stemmed from the latter group’s rejection of Christ, and this sad mixture of racial and religious prejudice is by no means absent from the play. The anti-Semitic mood of England was further fueled by the trial and execution of Roderigo Lopez—a Portuguese Jew and physician to Queen Elizabeth—who was accused of attempting to poison his employer in 1594, a few years before Shakespeare’s play was written (Barton 250). The association of Jews with usury is a stereotype unfortunately still familiar to us today; apart from such racial animosity, however, the Elizabethans despised moneylending for interest in and of itself. The practice was technically illegal in England at the time, although there were various ways—some officially-sanctioned—around the law (Myrick, “Introduction” xxvii-iii). The possibility of Antonio’s death as a result of his financial dealings with Shylock no doubt reflects the contemporary fear about the exorbitant interest rates usurers sometimes charged.

The stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* has largely been the history of the interpretation of Shylock. How Shakespeare staged the play and the part is unknown; the absence of extensive reference to it throughout the 1600s suggests it wasn’t originally one of the author’s most popular works (Barnet 194). George Granville staged a notable adaptation of it in 1701, featuring a bumbling, comic Shylock, and this interpretation appears to have been the standard one until 1741, when Charles Macklin radically transformed the character into a terrifying, almost monstrous villain (Barnet 194-6). The next major revision in the acting of the role occurred in 1814, when Edmund Kean presented a Shylock who “evoked not simply terror but pity”; Shylock was seen as justified in his rage, due to his ill-treatment at the hands of the Christians (Barnet 196-7). The evolution of a kinder, gentler Shylock culminated in 1879, when Henry Irving played the character as “a sympathetic and tragic figure,” a heroic victim of the increasingly unseemly Christians (Barnet 119). As the dominant Christian culture in England and America has gradually mollified its attitudes toward Jews, Shylock has been portrayed in an increasingly sympathetic light, and subsequent interpretations have oscillated between the various elements of horror and pity, comedy and tragedy, available to the role.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Shakespeare’s writing—one which no study guide can presume to replace—is his linguistic style. Indeed, though this may be an obvious point, it is Shakespeare’s language (rather than, say, his characters or plots) which has earned him his reputation as the pre-eminent English poet. The large number of expressions or sayings from his plays that have found their way into everyday speech, testifies to the English-speaking world’s fascination with Shakespeare as an architect of language. Ironically, however, it is the very strangeness or poetic quality of Shakespeare’s language that many beginning students find to be the chief difficulty in coming to terms with his plays, and a few remarks on this subject may serve to clarify some of the peculiarities of Shakespeare’s version of English.
It is important to note at the outset that the English of Shakespeare’s time and that of our own are relatively the same. That is, both fall under what is broadly designated “Modern English,” as opposed to “Old English” (such as one might find in the epic poem Beowulf) or “Middle English.” (as in Chaucer’s). Be that as it may, some mitigating factors tend to estrange the present-day The Canterbury Tale reader or audience member from Shakespeare’s language. The most obvious of these is age. The Merchant of Venice, for example, is roughly four hundred years old, and while its language may be substantially the same as ours, a great many words, phrases, and even whole syntaxes have altered over the course of time. This can be shown in the following example:

In Act II, scene 1, when the Prince of Morocco attempts to persuade Portia of the value of his dark skin, he remarks, “I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine/ Hath feared the valiant.” There are a number of minor differences easily dispensed with; most English speakers will know “thee” and “hath” are the equivalents of “you” and “has” respectively. The word “aspect” may seem a somewhat unusual or archaic way to refer to “complexion” or “face,” but presents no serious difficulty. What is strangest about this sentence is that, for the present-day reader, it seems to say the opposite of what it means. In current usage, to say that someone “feared the valiant” would be to indicate that the person was “afraid of” valiant people. In Shakespeare’s time, however, the verb “fear” could also be used to indicate “make afraid” or “cause to fear,” a usage which has since died out in our everyday speech. The sense of Morocco’s utterance is apparent only in the context of his whole speech, where “afraid of the valiant” wouldn’t fit into a list of his complexion’s attributes. Such moments may cause a reader confusion in certain passages, but a little detective work usually clears the matter up. A good edition of the play will most likely footnote such passages and explain the disparity.

Not all of the differences between Shakespeare’s English and our own are strictly chronological, however. The Merchant of Venice, like all of Shakespeare’s plays, is written largely in verse, and as such, is estranged from any variety of spoken English. (Although we can make very educated conjectures, we can’t, in any case, be positively sure of how English was spoken in Shakespeare’s day based on written documents alone. This is, of course, the only evidence available.) Much of what a present-day reader might find estranging in Shakespeare’s language is simply due to his poetic techniques. A reader must be prepared to grant Shakespeare a great deal of leeway in his use of language; otherwise the encounter will end in frustration. Sometimes, for example, Shakespeare will concoct a usage of a word different from, but related to, its previous senses. Shylock, in Act II, scene 6, complains of the laziness of his former servant, Launcelot Gobbo, with the remark “Drones hive not with me;/ Therefore I part with him…” A present-day reader is probably not used to seeing “hive” as a verb at all; although it has such uses in Shakespeare’s time, he seems to have invented this particular one. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest recorded usage of “hive” in the sense of “To live together as bees in a hive” is this same example from The Merchant of Venice (Compact Edition OED 1312). Shakespeare frequently bends previous senses of his words to accommodate his poetic desires, sometimes initiating new trends in the word’s employment.

Shakespeare is at his best (though for the new student most difficult) when he makes words perform tasks they ordinarily don’t do, and this is often manifested in more subtle and complicated ways than merely inventing a new-but-related sense for a word. The final example is from the same scene as the previous one and is also spoken by Shylock. In cautioning his daughter Jessica to ignore the Christian revelries taking place on the street below, Shylock says:

    Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum
    And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
    Clamber not you up to the casements then…”

The phrase in question here is “wry-necked fife,” which—strictly speaking—doesn’t make sense. A fife is one cylinder-shaped piece; nothing on it could be called its “neck.” The phrase might thus be taken to refer to the fife-player, whose neck would be so twisted in order to play the instrument. “Fife” would then be a
synecdoche for “fife-player,” much as one can refer to a king by saying “the crown.” The trouble with this reading is that it doesn’t fit with “vile squealing,” which would refer to the sound of the fife not the player, and a reader may also be inclined to take “fife” as the instrument in parallel with the reference to “drum.” The best solution to this dilemma is to say not that “fife” must refer either to the player or the instrument, but rather that Shakespeare accesses both with his grammatical violation. Both player and instrument are needed to fill out the sense of the sentence, which, though perhaps difficult for new readers, can hardly be construed as a flaw since the poet manages to say two things for the price of one, in a remarkable feat of “verbal economy.” Such moments, once the reader is familiar and comfortable enough with the language, become transformed from the poet’s greatest difficulty to his chief attraction.

A twentieth-century philosopher, attempting to grasp the significance of and his own difficulty with the most renowned of English poets, once wrote: “I do not believe that Shakespeare can be set along side any other poet. Was he perhaps a creator of language rather than a poet?” (Wittgenstein 84). This is perhaps a useful way to conceive of Shakespeare, inasmuch as his plays often create their own rules for language usage and readers must be willing to loosen their hold on their sense of “correct English” in order to partake of them. If anything justifies Shakespeare’s reputation as the greatest of English poets, it is such “creative power,” the poet’s ability to fashion linguistic objects which are not only unprecedented in our language but which subsequently become part of that language.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

**Venice**

*Venice. Major Italian port whose commercial activities are the play’s focus. William Shakespeare’s Venice is a busy mercantile center, in which businessmen are concerned about their cargoes at sea and who are often at the mercy of usurious moneylenders, such as Shylock. A wealthy Jew, Shylock has a deep-rooted animosity toward Christians, who chronically insult him and his religion. Although Venice is dominated by money, with its foundations resting on commerce, trade, and family inheritances, there is a society of exclusiveness under its busy mercantile surface—which is symbolized by the Rialto Bridge, a common meeting place for businessmen. Venice’s people include reviled Jews and anti-Semitic Christians, and Venetian law has the inveterate power to turn individuals into scapegoats.*

**Belmont**

*Belmont. Town near Venice in which the wealthy young Portia lives. In contrast with Venice, Belmont is a place of beautiful material luxury and pleasure. Portia’s beauty, wit, and grace distinguish her home, but it is actually a world of idleness, frivolity, music, and romance. Portia and her waiting-maid Nerissa seem to do little but gossip about Portia’s eager suitors and show much anxiety about Bassanio’s chances at winning her hand. A scene in which Portia’s suitors must choose among treasure caskets to win her hand in marriage is pregnant with the symbolism of wealth and moral implications.*

**Shylock’s house**

Shylock’s house. Venetian home of Shylock the moneylender. Shylock’s daughter Jessica and his servant Launcelot Gobbo complain about the hellishness of the place, where thrift is practiced, where doors and windows are shut against the masked Christian revelers whom Shylock regards as threats to his religion and his property.

Shakespeare also uses generalized street scenes or scenes in front of Shylock’s to demonstrate the anti-Semitism of Solario, Salerio, and Gratiano, and to contrast the shallowness of these men and of Launcelot
Gobbo with the wisdom of Portia and the considered judgment of Antonio, the rich and generous merchant of the play’s title.

**Court**

Court. Venetian court of justice that is the setting for the all-important trial scene, in which the problem of Shylock’s bond is resolved by Portia’s ingenious cleverness and a bargain that Shylock is forced to make with Venetian law in a crystallization of opposite forces: lofty Jewish concept of right and Christian “mercy.”

**Analysis: Modern Connections**

*The Merchant of Venice* is considered one of Shakespeare's problem comedies in part due to its anti-Semitism. A problem play introduces moral dilemmas without offering clear-cut or comforting solutions to these dilemmas. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Christian Antonio and his friends plead with the Jewish Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio, yet when the situation is reversed and Antonio and his friends are in a position to show Shylock mercy, they do not. Instead, they strip him of his worldly possessions and force him to convert to Christianity. Since there were few or no Jews in Shakespeare's England, his depiction of Shylock is probably based on stereotypes rather than the intimate knowledge acquired through contact. Shylock is depicted as a Jewish moneylender who makes his money through "usury," a practice in which exorbitant interest is charged on loans. He hates Antonio because Antonio loans money without interest and cuts into Shylock's business. It is reported by Solanio that when Shylock discovers his daughter and his money missing, he wanders the streets crying, "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!" (II.viii.15). Solanio implies that Shylock values his daughter and his money equally, another stereotypical image of Jews in the Elizabethan age.

Shakespeare's audience would have expected this kind of stereotype and probably would have applauded Shylock's harsh treatment at the hands of the Christians in the play. But for modern audiences, this treatment of Shylock is neither funny nor necessary. In fact, we tend to read a certain hypocrisy in the contrast between the Christians' speeches and actions. For all their talk of "mercy," they show Shylock none at all when the tables are turned. We can read, after all, the glimpses of Shylock's humanity Shakespeare gives us beneath the veneer of stereotype. Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (III.i.59-60). When his friend Tubal tells him that one of Shylock's stolen jewels has been given in exchange for a monkey, Shylock reveals that the jewel was one he had given his wife, Leah. He says, "I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (III.i.123). From these references, one can infer that Shylock has loved deeply and experiences pain.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare dramatizes the contrast between "law" and "mercy" in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Shylock represents law as it is stressed in the Old Testament of the Bible, and Portia and the others represent the mercy associated with Christianity and the New Testament. The message of the play seems to be that laws are necessary but must be tempered with mercy and compassion. Shakespeare emphasizes that it is important to observe the "spirit" rather than the "letter" of the law. For example, the spirit of the law or bond negotiated between Shylock and Antonio is the guarantee of restitution—Antonio will see that the ducats loaned by Shylock will be repaid. Shylock should have been satisfied with the offers by Bassanio and Portia to double or even triple the original amount of the loan; instead, he insists on cutting off a pound of Antonio's flesh. Since this surgery would most certainly have killed Antonio, conforming to the letter of the bond would have been an instance of state-licensed murder, disrupting the system of laws instituted for the protection of Venetian society. The play's insistence on conforming to the spirit rather than the letter of the law is evident not only in the main plot but in the two subplots as well.
In the subplot of the caskets, Portia is faced with the law of her deceased father's will. She must marry the suitor who passes the test devised by her father to correctly choose a certain casket. Portia perhaps violates the letter of her father's will by helping Bassanio choose correctly but not the spirit of her father's will. We can only imagine that the test was devised to procure for Portia an intelligent and financially stable husband with certain values. If the test of choosing the right casket is meant to insure Portia's happiness, we can hardly imagine that Portia's father would have been disappointed with the success achieved by Bassanio through her manipulation.

In the subplot of the rings, Bassanio and Gratiano have promised never to give away their wedding rings. Obviously, they have not really given the rings away since it is Portia who receives them after she and Nerissa have tricked them. Even so, the two men are correct to argue that they have not violated the commitment of love and devotion for which the rings are only the outward symbol. Today, we would call what Portia does to Bassanio entrapment—encouraging someone to commit a crime he did not actively seek to commit. Portia and Nerissa forgive their husbands because they realize that Bassanio and Gratiano have not betrayed a trust by giving their wedding rings to the young doctor; their intention was to reward the young doctor for a perceived kindness. This forgiveness is another example in the play of the importance of weighing intention when judging a person's actions.

The concern with the letter and the spirit of the law shown in *The Merchant of Venice* is not peculiar to Shakespeare's time. In our own age, we know that laws are necessary to prevent anarchy and to insure peace and order. But we also know that no law can anticipate every circumstance and intention. At the same time we realize that a proliferation of laws to remedy this situation would compromise our freedom. The alternative to this dilemma is to enforce each law with common sense, always remembering the spirit or intention with which that law was formulated.

**Bibliography**

**Sources for Further Study**

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Levin, Richard A. *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985. Levin devotes one chapter to *The Merchant of Venice* and focuses on one of the play’s central problems: the ambiguity of Shylock’s conflicting motives in Act I, scene iii: The bond proposed may have been “a vicious and deceptive offer” or it may have been an incentive for better treatment from Antonio and others.

Rabkin, Norman. *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. In a superb essay on *The Merchant of Venice*, Rabkin notes the many significant inconsistencies and contradictions in the play and shows the impossibility of imposing easy, reductivist interpretation on it.


**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

*If available, books are linked to Amazon.com*


—. “Textual Note.” Shakespeare 139-141.

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**Quotes**

I hate him for he is a Christian;  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis, and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.  
(I, iii)

In the first act, one aspect of Shylock's nature is clearly revealed. Here he complains that Antonio, by lending out money for free, brings down the interest rate at which he can lend money. Shylock's greed is apparent throughout the play, and statements like these help draw a caricature of what Shakespeare's audience would recognize as the stereotypical, selfish, medieval Jew.

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 suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe;
Here Shylock responds to Bassiano’s request for money, pointing out that he is not deaf to all of the criticism he has endured; rather, that he turns a blind eye to it. Shylock makes a good point in this conversation with Bassiano: despite their obvious hatred for him, they come to him for help in the form of money.

’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\(\)  
(II, vii)

The Price of Morocco finds this note written on a scroll when he opens the golden chest. He mistakenly equates Portia with material value, and thus the chest serves as another example of Christian values that run deeper than surface appearance. Indeed, the quote suggests that the pursuit of “gold” often leads men to their tombs.

Therefore, thou gaudy gold,  
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;  
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge  
’Tween man and man: but thou, thou meagre lead,  
Which rather threaten’st than dost promise aught,  
Thy plainness moves me more than eloquence,  
And here choose I: joy be the consequence!\(\)  
(III, ii)

It is Bassiano that wins Portia’s hand through his demonstration of Christian value and true worth. This is the end of a long quote, in which Bassiano meditates on truth and goodness versus the superficiality of surface appearance. Thus, gold is simply “gaudy” and plain goodness is what will bring him joy.

Commend me to your honourable wife:  
Tell her the process of Antonio’s end;  
Say how I lov’d you; speak me fair in death;  
And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge  
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.\(\)  
(IV, i)

One of things Shakespeare explores in Merchant is the dimension of friendship, brotherly love, and love between man and wife. Here, Antonio, believing that he is about to die, speaks to Bassiano and seems to imply that a rivalry between himself and Portia exists for loving Bassiano the most. Bassiano replies to Antonio by saying that, despite his love for Portia, he would sacrifice everything to save Antonio.

Your wife would give you little thanks for that,  
If she were by to hear you make the offer.\(\)  
(I, i)

Portia, in disguise as a lawyer, responds to Bassiano’s remark that he would sacrifice everything to save Antonio. She rightly points out that the relationship between man and wife has value superceding brotherly love between friends.
The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes
(IV, i)

Throughout the play, Portia is in many ways Christian values personified; here, in the play's climactic scene, she sums up the major theme of Merchant of Venice, that of Christian mercy and compassion.

Quotes in Context: "A Daniel Come To Judgment"

Context: When the debt became due, Antonio, a Venetian merchant, could not pay the 3000 ducats he had borrowed from Shylock to lend to his friend Bassanio so that he could woo and wed the rich heiress Portia. For his bond, Antonio had pledged to Shylock, who secretly hates him, a pound of flesh. The case is brought before the duke. Portia hears of it, and, disguised as a lawyer named Balthazar, she comes to court to defend Antonio. She gives her famous "Quality of mercy" speech but fails to move Shylock to mercy. He insists that the law must run its course. Bassanio, who does not recognize his wife, insists that since he can pay twice or ten times the sum of the debt, the court should "wrest once the law to [its] authority." But Portia urges, instead, that "there is no law in Venice / Can alter a decree established." Shylock, thinking he will be revenged on Antonio, congratulates Portia, likening her to Daniel, who was a judge in the Apocryphal book of Susannah.

SHYLOCKA Daniel come to judgement. Yea a Daniel.O wise young judge how I do honour thee.But Shylock's approval of Portia is quickly destroyed, because she rules that Shylock may have his pound of flesh but nothing else.PORTIA. . .This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,The words expressly are a pound of flesh... . .But in the cutting it, if thou dost shedOne drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goodsAre by the laws of Venice confiscate. . .

Quotes in Context: "A Harmless Necessary Cat"

Context: Antonio's friend, Bassanio, seems to have lost heavily in commercial investments, and Antonio goes to the rich and usurious Jew, Shylock, to borrow enough money to save his friend. Shylock, pretending a jest, persuades Antonio to pledge a pound of his flesh nearest his heart as surety for the loan. When Antonio's investments seem to miscarry, Shylock appears to demand his due, and when the case comes up in the court of justice, the Duke, as judge, instructs Shylock to show mercy to Antonio. The Jew insists that he have his due and refuses to explain his cruelty:

SHYLOCK. . .You'll ask me why I rather choose to haveA weight of carrion flesh, than to receiveThree thousand ducats. I'll not answer that,But say it is my humour; is it answered?What if my house be troubled with a rat,And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducatsTo have it baned. What, are you answered 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 i' th' nose,Cannot contain their urine; for affection,Mistress of passion, sways it to the moodOf what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer,As there is no firm reason to be renderedWhy he cannot abide a gaping pig;Why he--a harmless necessary cat;Why he--a woollen bag-pipe; but of forceMust yield to such inevitable shame,As to offend himself being offended;So can I give no reason, nor I will not,More than a lodged hate, and a certain loathingI bear Antonio, that I follow thusA losing suit against him. Are you answered?
Quotes in Context: "A Light Wife Doth Make A Heavy Husband"

Context: In the early action of the play Antonio, the merchant, borrows money from Shylock, the usurious Jew, in order to save his friend Bassanio, whose ships are long overdue and feared lost. Shylock, pretending a jest, persuades Antonio to pledge the pound of flesh nearest his heart as surety for the loan. Antonio's investments also seem to fail, and Shylock brings his claim to court in order to collect his pound of flesh. At the trial Antonio is saved by a brilliant young lawyer who is, unknown to the men, the girl both have wooed and Bassanio has won, Portia, in disguise. After the trial Portia hurries home, where she meets Lorenzo and Jessica and swears them to secrecy concerning her part in the trial. Bassanio, Antonio, and several of their friends follow close behind:

LORENZOYour husband is at hand, I hear his trumpet. We are no tell-tales madam, fear you not.
PORTIA This night methinks is but the daylight sick; It looks a little paler: 'tis a day, Such as the day is when the sun is hid. Enter BASSANIO, ANTONIO, GRATIANO, and SERVANTS.
BASSANIO We should hold day with the Antipodes, If you would walk in absence of the sun.
PORTIA Let me give light, but let me not be light; For a light wife doth make a heavy husband, And never be Bassanio so for me. But God sort all. You're welcome home my lord.
BASSANIO I thank you madam. Give welcome to my friend.

Quotes in Context: "A Stage Where Every Man Must Play A Part, And Mine A Sad One"

Context: This play seems to have been occasioned by an outbreak of anti-Semitism in London about 1594. In the play Antonio, the merchant, borrows money from the rich Jew, Shylock, in order to assist a friend, pledging, according to Shylock's diabolical demand, that pound of flesh nearest his heart as surety for the loan. When the play opens, however, no difficulties have arisen; yet Antonio is sad. His friend, Solanio, insists that if business reverses have not occasioned the sadness, then Antonio must be in love. They encounter three friends, and after some conversation Antonio; Bassanio, the friend Antonio will assist later in the play; Gratiano; and Lorenzo are left on stage. Gratiano in his turn tries to cheer up Antonio:

GRATIANO You look not well Signior Antonio, You have too much respect upon the world. They lose it that do buy it with much care; Believe me you are marvellously changed. ANTONIOI hold the world but as the world, Gratiano, A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one. GRATIANO Let me play the fool; With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come, And let my liver rather heat with wine Than my heart cool with mortifying groans. Why should a man whose blood is warm within, Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster? . . .

Quotes in Context: "A Swan-like End"

Context: The belief that the swan, which is otherwise voiceless, recognizes its coming death and sings before it occurs is at least as old as Socrates. The expression "swan song" is firmly entrenched in our language and the idea is used in Chaucer's The Parlement of Foules (1372-1386), and elsewhere in Shakespeare—Othello (1604), Act V, sc. 2, l. 245. It was also used by Byron in Don Juan (Canto III, stanza 86, l. 16). In The Merchant of Venice, Bassanio, who is in love with the rich heiress Portia, but is unable to marry her unless, according to her father's will, he choose the casket among the three—golden, silver and lead—which contains her portrait, wants to try his luck, because, he confesses, in his uncertainty he lives "upon the rack." Portia,
however, wishes him to delay making the choice because she likes his company and is afraid she will lose him because he will select the wrong casket. Portia consents, however, and cautions him:

PORTIA Away, then, I am locked in one of them. If you do love me, you will find me out... Let music sound while he doth make his choice: Then if he lose he makes a swan-like end. Fading in music... .

Quotes in Context: "An Honest Exceeding Poor Man"

Context: Gobbo, old and blind, stumbles along a street in Venice, searching for his son, Lancelot Gobbo, who is employed by the wealthy Jew, Shylock. Lancelot is also walking along the same street, debating with his conscience whether to quit the service of Shylock in favor of the service of the young gentleman Bassanio. Old Gobbo comes upon Lancelot, but, because he is blind and because Lancelot has matured, does not recognize his son, who jests with his father, suggesting that Gobbo must be seeking "Master Lancelot" rather than a menial.

GOBBO Be God's sionties, 'twill be a hard way to hit. Can you tell me whether one Lancelot that dwells with him, dwell with him or no? LANCELOT Talk you of young Master Lancelot?

[aside.] Mark me now, now will I raise the waters.—Talk you of young Master Lancelot?

GOBBO No master sir, but a poor man's son. His father though I say it is an honest exceeding poor man, and God be thanked well to live.

LANCELOT Well, let his father be what 'a will, we talk of young Master Lancelot.

Quotes in Context: "Hath Not A Jew Eyes?"

Context: Shylock, a wealthy Jew of Venice, lends Bassanio three thousand ducats to aid in his quest of the hand of the fair Portia. Antonio, "the merchant of Venice," agrees to stand bond for Bassanio and promises Shylock a pound of his flesh if, by chance, his many ships fail to produce the expected revenue. With apprehension Salanio and Salerio, friends of Bassanio, note the failure of one after another of Antonio's vessels. Hence they query Shylock.

SALERIO Why I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh, what's that good for?

SHYLOCK To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? 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? . . .

Quotes in Context: "How Far That Little Candle Throws His Beams"

Context: The heiress Portia, wife of Bassanio, returns to her home, Belmont, after disguising herself as a wise young judge and freeing Antonio, benefactor of Bassanio, from the forfeiture of Shylock's wicked bond—the payment of a pound of flesh since Antonio's ships had failed to come to port. As Portia and her handmaiden, Nerissa, near Belmont, Portia speaks.
PORTIA

That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams,
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

NERISSA

When the moon shone we did not see the candle.
PORTIA

So doth the greater glory dim the less.

A substitute shines brightly as a king
Until a king be by, and then his state
Empties itself, as doth an inland brook
Into the main of waters. . . .

Quotes in Context: "How Much More Elder Art Thou Than Thy Looks"

Context: In a Venetian court Portia, the fair bride of Bassanio, in disguise as a young judge, rescues Antonio, Bassanio's friend, from the fate of having the venomous Jew, Shylock, cut one pound of his flesh as forfeiture of a bond which the merchant Antonio has stood for Bassanio to aid in his suit of Portia. As the trial begins, Shylock interprets the words of the judge to mean that, according to the bargain, Shylock may rightfully claim the heart of Antonio. Antonio demands to hear the sentence, Portia speaks, and Shylock, joyously assuming that he has won the case, pronounces the wisdom of the youthful justice.

ANTONIO

Most heartily I do beseech the court
To give the judgment.

PORTIA

Why then thus it is,
You must prepare your bosom for his knife.

SHYLOCK

O noble judge, o excellent young man!

PORTIA

For the intent and purpose of the law
Hath full relation to the penalty,
Which here appeareth due upon the bond.

SHYLOCK

'Tis very true. O wise and upright judge,
How much more elder art thou than thy looks.

Quotes in Context: "I Am Sir Oracle"

Context: Antonio, "the merchant of Venice," confesses to his friends, Salerio and Salanio, that he is plagued with sadness, not over his trading business, since his fortune rests with many vessels, nor over his love affairs. Salerio and Salanio, having tried in vain to cheer Antonio, leave when Antonio is joined by his close friend, Bassanio, and his companions, Lorenzo and Gratiano. Gratiano, noted for his loquaciousness, also tries to convince Antonio to leave off his sadness, pointing out the folly of those who vainly feign wisdom by a dour countenance:

GRATIANO

There are a sort of men whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
And do a wilful stillness entertain,
With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,
As who should say, I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!

Quotes in Context: "I Am Never Merry When I Hear Sweet Music"

Context: Lorenzo, friend of Bassanio, and his bride Jessica, daughter of the Jew Shylock, talk tenderly on a moonlit night along the avenue to Belmont, home of the heiress Portia and her husband Bassanio. Though messengers inform the pair of the return of Portia and Bassanio, Lorenzo and Jessica delay the preparations for the home-coming of the master and mistress of the house. Lorenzo orders music, commenting that on such a night the soul can almost hear the harmony of the spheres. In a light mood, Lorenzo greets the musicians, but Jessica replies that she is not merry when she hears sweet music.

LORENZO

. . . Come ho, and wake Diana with a hymn,
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,
And draw her home with music. [Music plays.]

JESSICA

I am never merry when
I hear sweet music. LORENZO: The reason is, your spirits are attentive. . . .

**Quotes in Context: "In Such A Night Stood Dido"**

Context: Jessica, daughter of the Jew Shylock, and her husband, Lorenzo, friend of Bassanio, talk poetically on a moonlit night along the avenue to Belmont, home of the heiress Portia, recent bride of Bassanio. The lovers are reminded that on a night such as this Dido, Queen of Carthage, holding a willow branch, symbol of unrequited love, waited vainly for the return of her beloved Æneas.

LORENZO: In such a night Stood Dido with a willow in her hand Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love To come again to Carthage.

JESSICA: In such a night Medea gathered the enchanted herbs That did renew old Æson.

**Quotes in Context: "It Is A Wise Father That Knows His Own Child"**

Context: Lancelot Gobbo, the servant of Shylock, debates with himself whether he should run away from his master. He meets his father, Gobbo, who is "more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind." Gobbo inquires the way to Shylock's house because he wants to see his son Lancelot, whom he does not recognize. When Lancelot Gobbo discovers that his father does not know him, he teases the old man. Finally, half seriously, Lancelot asks his father if he does not really know him, Gobbo, his son. The old man answers that, being blind, he does not know his son. To this Lancelot replies, in the aphorism that is popular today:

LANCELOT GOBBO: . . . It is a wise father that knows his own child. . . . Truth will come to light, murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may, but in the end truth will out.

**Quotes in Context: "Let Him Pass For A Man"**

Context: Portia, a rich heiress, has been condemned to marry by chance. Her father, now dead, willed that she should be the wife of the man who, choosing among three caskets—golden, silver, and lead—should select the correct one, that is, the lead one which contains Portia's portrait. Portia, witty and charming, is talking the matter over with Nerissa, her waiting maid, and is chafing over the choice given her. One of her suitors she calls a "colt indeed," whose "mother played false with a smith." As for him and another, Portia "had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth, than to either of these." Nerissa next asks Portia about the French lord, and Portia replies:

PORTIA: God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man. In truth I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but he—why he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's, a better bad habit of frowning than the Count Palatine; he is every man in no man . . . he will fence with his own shadow. If I should marry him, I should marry twenty husbands. . . .

**Quotes in Context: "Love Is Blind"**

Context: Lorenzo, a Venetian Christian, is in love with Jessica, daughter of the Jew usurer Shylock. They plan to elope. To assist them, two friends, Gratiano and Salerio, meet before Shylock's house. Lorenzo is late in arriving, but he finally comes. Jessica appears above, in boy's clothes. She then descends, bearing a chest of her father's wealth. Then she speaks to her lover:
JESSICA Here, catch this casket, it is worth the pains. I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me. For I am much ashamed of my exchange. But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit; . . .

Quotes in Context: "Quiring To The Young-eyed Cherubins"

Context: As Lorenzo, friend of Bassanio, and his bride Jessica, daughter of the Jew Shylock, speak tenderly on a moonlit night along the avenue to Belmont, home of Portia and her husband Bassanio, they are interrupted by messengers telling of the arrival of the master and mistress of the house. Lorenzo and Jessica, who feel duty-bound to oversee the preparations for the return of Bassanio and Portia, nevertheless put off going inside. Lorenzo orders the servants to call for music, reminding Jessica that the soul, if it were not hindered by the lowly flesh, could, on such a night, hear the choirs of cherubim produced by the harmony of the universe.

LORENZO Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold. There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st But in his motion like an angel sings, Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins; Such harmony is in immortal souls, But whilst this muddy vesture of decay Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Quotes in Context: "Suffrance Is The Badge Of All Our Tribe"

Context: To further his quest for the hand of the fair Portia, Bassanio, a young gentleman of Venice, seeks a loan from his friend Antonio, a merchant in Venice. Since Antonio cannot advance the money to Bassanio until his ships come to port, Shylock, a rich Jew, is approached for a temporary loan. Though Shylock hates and is hated by the Gentiles, he agrees to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with Antonio standing bond. Pointing out the irony of the request for a loan by one who has badly mistreated him at the Rialto, the Venetian exchange, Shylock says:

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 gaberdine, And all for use of that which is mine own.

Quotes in Context: "Tell Me Where Is Fancy Bred"

Context: According to the will of her father, the lovely heiress Portia must marry whichever suitor who, selecting among three caskets, golden, silver, and lead, selects the casket of lead which contains the portrait of Portia. Of all her suitors Portia loves only Bassanio, but she cannot, even for love, break her father's dying wish by revealing to Bassanio which casket to choose. She devises the scheme, however, of having music to aid Bassanio in his choice, and to provide a fitting flourish if he should fail. This song is sung:

SONG Tell me where is fancy bred, Or in the heart, or in the head, How begot, how nourished? All. Reply, reply. It is engendered in the eyes, With gazing fed, and fancy dies In the cradle where it lies. Let us all ring fancy's knell; I'll begin it, ding, dong, bell. All. Ding, dong, bell.
Quotes in Context: "The Devil Can Cite Scripture For His Purpose"

Context: Bassanio, a poor noble Venetian, wants to marry the wealthy heiress Portia. He asks his friend Antonio, a rich merchant, for 3000 ducats. Antonio, temporarily without funds, tries to borrow the money from Shylock, a rich Jew, who accumulated his wealth by usury. Shylock hates Antonio because he lends money without interest, thus lowering Shylock's interest rate. Shylock agrees to lend the money with the understanding that if it is not repaid in three months, Antonio must forfeit a pound of flesh. Antonio and Bassanio meet Shylock and are arranging the loan, but Shylock apparently holds back. He points out how Jacob in the Bible pulled an underhand trick to profit himself. Shylock says, "...Thrift is blessing, if men steal it not." Shylock then adds that he makes his money increase as rapidly as possible. To this remark Antonio responds to Bassanio:

ANTONIO. . .The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witnessIs like a villain with a smiling cheek, A goodly apple rotten at the heart. O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath.

Quotes in Context: "The Quality Of Mercy Is Not Strained"

Context: In Venice, Bassanio, a nobleman, has borrowed from Shylock, a Jewish usurer, three thousand ducats with which to court the beautiful heiress, Portia. His friend Antonio is bound as surety for the payment of the debt. In pretended jest, Shylock requires that, if the debt is not paid on the right day, he will be allowed to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio accepts the strange condition, not knowing that Shylock hates him for lending money at no interest, thus damaging the Jew's business. When the appointed day arrives, Antonio cannot pay the money and is brought into court to forfeit his bond. The Duke pleads for mercy from Shylock, and Bassanio offers twice the sum of the debt; but Shylock is adamant in demanding the flesh. Portia, meanwhile, has disguised herself as a lawyer and now appears in the court. First, she appeals to Shylock's sense of mercy, in the famous speech that begins:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest; It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes. . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Shadowed Livery Of The Burnished Sun"

Context: Portia, wealthy Venetian heiress, is bound by her late father's will to be chosen for wife by lottery. All suitors will choose among three caskets—one golden, one silver, and one lead. The lead is the correct one, for it contains her portrait. Among her suitors, Portia has no choice. The Prince of Morocco comes to woo her. He tells her:

PRINCE OF MOROCCO: Mislike me not for my complexion, The shadowed livery of the burnished sun, To whom I am a neighbor, and near bred. . . . PORTIA. . . if my father had not scanted me, And hedged me by his will to yield myself His wife who wins me by that means I told you. Yourself, renowned Prince, then stood as fair As any comer I have looked on yet For my affection.
Quotes in Context: "There Is No Vice So Simple, But Assumes Some Mark Of Virtue"

Context: Bassanio, in love with the heiress Portia, can marry her only if, according to her father's will, he choose from among three caskets—golden, silver and lead—the one which contains her portrait. Now he stands before the three, trying to choose correctly and debating which one he should select. He argues with himself, knowing that the world "is still deceived with ornament." He then broods on the lesson taught in his statement. He debates further, and finally chooses:

BASSANIOThere is no vice so simple, but assumessome mark of virtue on his outward parts. . . . . Therefore thou gaudy gold,Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee.Nor none of thee thou pale and common drudge'Tween man and man. But thou, thou meagre leadWhich rather threatenst than dost promise aught,Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence,And here chose I, joy be the consequence. . . . What find I here? [Opens the leaden casket]Fair Portia's counterfeit. . . .

Quotes in Context: "To Do A Great Right, Do A Little Wrong"

Context: Antonio is in danger of having to forfeit a pound of flesh because he is unable to repay three thousand ducats to Shylock, the Venetian usurer, which he borrowed to lend to his friend Bassanio. Bassanio has prospered both in marrying Portia and in becoming wealthy. At the trial of Antonio, Bassanio says that he will gladly pay the sum of Antonio's debt ten times over if Shylock will allow Antonio to go free. Portia, unknown to her husband, has come to defend Antonio. Shylock remains obdurate in demanding forfeit of a pound of flesh. Bassanio, after being frustrated in getting Shylock to relent, requests that Balthazar, who is Portia in disguise, bend the law to achieve justice. His request and her refusal go thus:

BASSANIO. . . And I beseech youWrest once the law to your authority,To do a great right,do a little wrong,And curb this cruel devil of his will.PORTIAIt must not be, there is no power in VeniceCan alter a decree established.'Twill be recorded for a precedentAnd many an error by the same exampleWill rush into the state. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Troilus Mounted The Trojan Walls"

Context: Along the moonlit avenue to Belmont, home of the fair heiress Portia, bride of Bassanio, Bassanio's friend, Lorenzo, and his bride Jessica, daughter of Shylock, talk poetically. They are reminded that on such a night the legendary Troilus, hero of Troilus and Criseyde by Geoffrey Chaucer and of Troilus and Cressida by William Shakespeare, looked longingly from the height of the Trojan wall toward the Greek camp where his beloved Cressida lay:

LORENZOThe moon shines bright. In such a night as this,When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,And they did make no noise, in such a nightTroilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tentsWhere Cressid lay that night, JESSICAIn such a night Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew,And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,And ran dismayed away. . . .LORENZOIn such a night Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,And with an unthrift love did run from Venice,As far as Belmont.
Quotes in Context: "Well Paid That Is Well Satisfied"

Context: Portia, fair bride of Bassanio, disguised as a youthful judge, pronounces sentence upon the vengeful Jew Shylock, who has insisted upon the forfeiture of the bond of the ill-fated "merchant of Venice," Antonio—the forfeiture being a pound of Antonio's flesh. Portia, wisely noting that the promise includes a pound of flesh, but no blood, directs Shylock to proceed with the forfeiture at his own risk. As Shylock retracts his demand, Portia adds that since he, an alien, has threatened the life of a Venetian, the law requires that his own possessions be forfeited, half to the wronged citizen and half to the state. Bassanio and Antonio seek to express their gratitude to the judge by paying a large fee, but Portia refuses to accept payment:

PORTIA He is well paid that is well satisfied, And I, delivering you, am satisfied, And therein do account myself well paid. My mind was never yet more mercenary. I pray you know me when we meet again, I wish you well, and so I take my leave. BASSANIO Dear Sir, of force I must attempt you further. Take some remembrance of us as a tribute, Not as a fee. Grant me two things I pray you, Not to deny me, and to pardon me.

Quotes in Context: "What A Goodly Outside Falsehood Hath!"

Context: The young Venetian gentleman, Bassanio, asks the assistance of the merchant Antonio, in seeking a loan to aid in his quest for the hand of the lovely Portia. Antonio, however, cannot immediately supply the demand of Bassanio, since his wealth depends upon the return of his ships. Shylock, a Jew who has felt the hatred of Gentiles and who, in turn, has despised them, agrees, notwithstanding, to advance the loan. Antonio protests the Jewish custom of charging usery and condemns Shylock for backing his stand by quoting the scriptural story of Jacob's devious acquisition of the best of the flock of his father-in-law, Laban:

ANTONIO Mark you this Bassanio, The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witnesses like a villain with a smiling cheek, A goodly apple rotten at the heart. O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath.

Quotes in Context: "What News On The Rialto?"

Context: Bassanio, a young Venetian gentleman, in plying his quest for the hand of fair Portia, seeks an additional loan from Antonio, "the merchant of Venice." Antonio, however, whose funds are tied up with ships in many ports, must in turn seek a temporary creditor. Hence, Bassanio approaches the Jew, Shylock, who agrees to advance three thousand ducats with the stipulation that Antonio shall stand bond. Shylock, refusing Bassanio's invitation to discuss the deal while they dine, gives vent to his hatred for Gentiles and, on hearing Antonio approach, asks the latest report on the Venetian exchange, the Rialto:

SHYLOCK Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. 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. What news on the Rialto? Enter ANTONIO Who is he come here?

Quotes in Context: "You Take My Life When You Do Take The Means Whereby I Live"
Context: Portia, in defending Antonio against Shylock, argues that Shylock is indeed entitled to the pound of flesh that Antonio put as bond against the 3000 ducats he borrowed for his friend Bassanio. But she says that since there is nothing in the contract about any blood, if Shylock spills one drop of Christian blood his life will be forfeited. Shylock, realizing that his evil design has been frustrated, tries to recover his 3000 ducats, saying he will be satisfied. Portia, however, invoking a law against any alien who seeks the life of a citizen, tells Shylock that half his property is forfeited to Antonio and the other half to the state, Shylock protests against the severity of this law:

SHYLOCK
Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that. You take my house, when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house. You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live.

Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Antonio

ANTONIO:

Give me your hand, Bassanio: fare you well!

Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you;

For herein Fortune shows herself more kind

Than is her custom: it is still her use,

To let the wretched man out-live his wealth,

To view with hollow eye, and wrinkled brow,

An age of poverty; from which lingering penance

Of such misery doth she cut me off.

Commend me to your honourable wife:

Tell her the process of Antonio’s end,

Say, how I lov’d you, speak me fair in death;

And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge

Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

Repent not you that you shall lose your friend,

And he repents not that he pays your debt;

For, if the Jew do cut but deep enough,

I’ll pay it instantly with all my heart.
Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 272-288

Summary

Shylock, upon learning that Antonio’s ships have been lost at sea and all his wealth with them, has brought Antonio to trial to force him to pay the forfeit on his loan. The forfeit is a pound of Antonio’s flesh, taken from that nearest his heart. Although Bassanio, newly married and with access to his wife Portia’s wealth, has offered to pay double or triple the amount of the loan, Shylock refuses. At this point, Shylock is not out for money: he is out for revenge. In the past, Antonio has looked down upon Shylock as a Jew and condemned him for usury (lending money and profiting by charging interest). This humiliation, coupled with the humiliation he has suffered as a Jew at the hands of a Christian, makes Shylock want to see Antonio die.

On top of this hatred, Shylock is bitter because his only child and daughter, Jessica, has eloped with Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio and also a Christian. This desertion by his child to join the realm of the Christians has made him more than eager to inflict punishment on the first Christian he can legally get his hands on—in this case, Antonio.

At the trial, Portia arrives disguised as a male lawyer (doctor of the law), to speak on Antonio’s behalf. The trial is held in the court overseen by the Duke of Venice, who has no choice but to try Antonio for his breaking of the contracted agreement that he willingly made with Shylock. Yet Portia pleads for mercy. Agreeing that the Duke cannot intercede because of the implications such interference would have on the legal system of Venice, Portia appeals to Shylock’s better nature. Yet Shylock refuses and the court is forced to grant Shylock his request.

The time has come for Antonio to pay the forfeit. He bares his chest, since according to their agreement, the pound of flesh must come from the area closest to his heart. This will mean almost certain death. Portia calls for a surgeon to be standing by, but Shylock objects because this was not detailed in the contract. Shylock has made sure to word the contract in such a way that there will be no room for Antonio to wriggle out of the punishment.

Knowing he is meeting his death, Antonio prepares to say good-bye. His first farewell is to Bassanio, his dearest friend. He tells Bassanio not to grieve that Antonio is dying for Bassanio. He states that Fortune in this case is kind by letting him die at the moment he becomes poor. Many men live long past the moment when poverty overtakes them, suffering want and deprivation. Antonio is mercifully spared that. He also commends himself to Bassanio’s wife, Portia. He wants his friend to tell her of the deep friendship that her husband and Antonio had shared.

Antonio, out of his friendship, does not regret dying for Bassanio. To the last, he maintains his sense of humor, saying that will pay it “with all his heart,” a double meaning of paying willingly as well as literally with his heart.

Analysis

As he says good-bye to his friends, Antonio is grateful that he will not have to suffer the deprivations of his newly acquired poverty. In one sense, he seems to love money more than life. What is life without wealth? In this, he mirrors Shylock. Shylock is presented as a stereotype of the “money-loving Jew.” Shylock thinks more of the money missing with his daughter Jessica than his daughter herself, and Antonio would rather face death than poverty.

Antonio’s wealth has made him overconfident of his stability. He had been secure in knowing that all his finances had been invested in three separate ships. Therefore, he believes, the loss of one would not devastate
him. He could not imagine the possibility of losing all three, as now appears to be the case. This trust in the security of his money parallels Shylock’s trust in the security of money that he is owed.

Yet more than money, Antonio has staked his life on a different commodity, namely friendship. His relationship with Bassanio mirrors the ancient biblical definition of friendship. In the Bible, Jesus says, “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Also, the Stoic Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger states, “What is my object in making a friend? To have someone to be able to die for, someone I may follow into exile, someone for whose life I may put myself up as security and pay the price as well” (Letters From a Stoic, Letter IX). In a very literal sense, Antonio is the personification of Seneca’s definition of a friend.

In this way, Antonio serves as a Christ-figure. He willingly lays down his life for that of another. His self-sacrifice in the place of Bassanio presents him as a redeemer, someone who, according to the legal definition, purchases the debt of another. The pound of flesh being near his heart is symbolic of the emotional and spiritual price that is paid for another out of friendship.

However, unlike a strict Christ-figure, Antonio is “resurrected” not by the fulfillment of the law, but because of Shylock’s inability to fulfill it in the strictest interpretation, which he has insisted on. Because blood will be shed, the contract cannot be fulfilled. The legalism of the contract that binds Shylock and Antonio is his undoing. He is unable to receive the pound of flesh, but he also loses his wealth and his religion because he is forced to “officially” become a Christian.

Antonio is thus returned to life, so to speak, and like Job in the Old Testament, he has his wealth restored to him as it is revealed that his ships were not in fact lost. Through his offering himself for the redemption of his friend, Antonio receives the reward for his devout friendship.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Shylock**

**SHYLOCK:**

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 humility? 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 shall go hard but I will better
the instruction.

*Act 3, Scene 1, Lines 51-63*

**Summary**

Solanio and Salarino, two friends of Antonio, have received news that the ship Antonio owns has wrecked in the English Channel. It is a rumor that they hope will prove unfounded (which it will be eventually, but almost too late). As they are discussing the consequences of this loss for Antonio, Shylock approaches. The elopement of his daughter Jessica with Lorenzo, a Christian and a friend of Antonios, has upset him.

Solanio, always eager to provoke the Jew, brags that he knows the tailor who made the page boy disguise that Jessica used to escape from Shylock’s home and onto the boat bound for Belmont. He also taunts Shylock, claiming that he had to know that his daughter was bound to leave home eventually. In reply to Solanio’s jests, Shylock says that Jessica is damned for her desertion. Salarino’s reply is that she will be so only if it is the devil that condemns her. He notes the vast difference between Shylock and his daughter.

To change the subject, Salarino asks Shylock if he has heard of the loss of Antonio’s ship. Shylock’s response is a complaint that this is yet another bad deal he has thrust upon him, one for which he will hold Antonio accountable. As for Antonio’s financial setback, Shylock sees this as a type of divine justice on Antonio, who has lent money without interest, thus taking business away from the Jew.

Seeing that Shylock is chiefly concerned about money, Salarino protests that there is little value in a pound of flesh for Shylock. But Shylock states that he will have that pound of flesh, for Antonio has humiliated him repeatedly in the past. The cause of Antonio’s animosity is simply because Shylock is a Jew.

Shylock then defends himself as both a Jew and as a human being. He compares himself to a Christian and finds little difference between the two. Both have the same physical characteristics (“Hath not a Jew eyes?”), the same emotions, and the same needs. A Jew, like the Christian, is subject to both pain and pleasure. More ominously, the Jew has the same desire for revenge if born out of a righteous anger. Thus Shylock promises to return the revenge he has experienced at the hands of Christians, but it will be of a greater degree than what Christians have meted out.

**Analysis**

Shylock is presented in a fairly strict stereotype that was common in Europe at the time (and continued up through the World War II). Money—the gaining and keeping of money—is presented as the primary goal in the life of a Jew. This acquisition of money is usually presented as through less than honorable means, an unfair characterization that was based on the restrictions placed on Jews in the business world. One of the few areas open to Jews (and closed to Christians) was money-lending for interest, otherwise known as usury. For Christians, ursury was restricted because the practice was considered “unbiblical.” However, it was safe for Jews to practice usury because it was believed that they were going to hell anyway.

Anti-Semitism was a standard prejudice in Europe for centuries. Jews were subjected to the same discrimination that African Americans (among others) were in the United States prior to the Civil Rights era.
Persecution was legal, accepted, and desirable. Shylock naturally resents the public humiliation that he has been subjected to by the Christians of Venice, especially by Antonio.

At this point, Shylock is faced with an attack on his Jewish heritage from two sources: Antonio and his daughter, Jessica. As a Christian, Antonio has joined with Venetian society in anti-Semitism. This is more understandable to Shylock than his daughter's actions are. By marrying Lorenzo, Jessica is required to renounce her family and her heritage and become a Christian by baptism. This double betrayal of his daughter and his faith increases his resentment and anger against Christian society, personified by Antonio.

In his rage against anti-Semitism, Shylock asserts his humanity and his equality with Christians. In the most famous passage from the play, Shylock bit by bit proclaims himself just as good, and just as bad, as any Christian. Physically he is the same. He is not a “lower order” of creature. He is subject to the same emotions, having the same hopes, dreams, and values as a Christian. His needs are identical, thus requiring him to be able to earn his living by one of the few avenues left to him by the Christian legal system. And most of all, he has the same power for revenge.

The Old Testament, which Shylock as a Jew clings to, provides for revenge in the form of the adage “an eye for an eye.” Yet Shylock means to go beyond the belief system that he holds as the reason for his discrimination. Shylock wants “a life for an eye.”

Shylock is portrayed as desiring money more than life, be it the life of his daughter or that of Antonio. Yet in this passage, he holds his personal honor and dignity of higher worth. Because he has been deprived of these, Antonio must pay with his life. To Shylock, this is not the extravagant payment for a debt. It is an affair of honor. After repeated insults and humiliations, Shylock is calling Antonio out. Yet rather than resorting to the code duello, he is turning to the legal system. Antonio, proclaiming himself a Christian and thus a man of honor, has failed in that honor by not abiding by his word. Shylock feels justified, on the basis of honor, for requiring Antonio to forfeit his life.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Racial Enmity**

**SHYLOCK:**

How like a fawning publican he looks!

I hate him for he is a Christian:

But more, for that, in low simplicity,

He lends out money gratis, and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

If I can catch him once upon the hip,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.

He hates our sacred nation; and he rails,

Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!

*Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 36-47*

**Summary**

Bassanio is in need of 3,000 ducats in order to court the rich heiress Portia. Having lived beyond his means, he turns to his friend Antonio for a loan. Antonio, a rich merchant, is more than happy to help his friend, but Antonio does not have that much money available in cash at the moment. He does, however, have three ships returning to Venice with goods that should more than cover that amount. Though he does not regularly borrow or lend money at interest, he will do so out of his friendship for Bassanio.

Bassanio, with an attempt at good will, acts friendly to Shylock. However, Shylock resists his advances. Shylock has a built-up resentment against Antonio, both for business and personal reasons.

As Antonio approaches the two, Shylock lets his feelings be known in an aside. Addressing the invisible audience, he tells how he hates Antonio first and foremost because he is a Christian. He also hates him as a competitor in a business that Shylock is almost forced into and in which he has an unfair disadvantage. Shylock acknowledges that, in his turn, Antonio hates Shylock because he is a Jew. In fact, according to Shylock, Antonio hates not only him but also the whole Jewish nation. It is for this humiliation that Shylock ultimately refuses to forgive Antonio.

In calling Antonio a “publican,” Shylock is making a reference to a Jewish citizen in the Roman Empire who collected taxes for Rome from his fellow Jews. As recorded in the New Testament, such people were looked upon as traitors to their people. Shylock sees smugness rather than humility in Antonio, and he feels it is not out of kindness that Antonio has lent money interest-free. By doing so, Antonio has lowered the rate of interest that Jews may charge for a loan, thus hurting their livelihood. Antonio’s principles concerning the lending of money is not born out of goodwill but the law. Christians were not allowed to charge interest, which left the practice to the Jews. Because indebtedness was so frowned upon yet so common, Jews were looked upon as cheats and swindlers for the interest that they charged. It is for this reason, as well as for Antonio’s hatred of the Jewish people, that Shylock is open to an opportunity for revenge.

**Analysis**

The animosity between Shylock and Antonio is a small portrait of the much bigger picture of racial hatred that had been present for centuries, if not millennia. From both sides, a deep-seated distrust of the other race set the stage for cultural collision that finally resulted in World War II in the twentieth century, 350 years after the first performances of this play.

From the Jewish point of view, this enmity and separateness had predated Christianity. By Jewish law, Jews were to consider themselves separate from Gentiles (non-Jews). The identity of the Jews was a focus of protection, with laws in place to shield the people as much as possible from the influence of Gentile nations. First with the Greeks, and then with the Roman conquest of Israel, the Jews ardently protected themselves from the encroachment of Gentile culture on their distinctive way of life.

From the Christian point of view, Jews were blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus was executed by the Romans for blasphemy because Pontius Pilate, the ruler in Jerusalem,
was asked to do so by the Jews. Christians used this reasoning to persecute Jews for their religion throughout history. With the rise of the Roman Catholic Church and its widespread influence over Europe, Jews were routinely banished, imprisoned, forced to convert, or massacred. Jews were banned from England in 1290, France in 1396, Austria in 1421, and Spain in 1492 during the Spanish Inquisition. Few professions, let alone areas, were available or safe for Jewish communities.

While there were racial tensions and a history of hatred on both sides, Christian persecution and subjugation of Jewish populations was enduringly more violent because they were the dominant group in the social and political makeup of Europe.

Shakespeare’s characterization of Shylock can be read as a straightforward stereotype from his time period of the “money-grubbing,” dishonest, swindling, tight-fisted, and miserly Jew who loves money more than everything else. However, one of the major themes in this play is the difference between something’s perceived exterior and its internal reality. The Christians consistently use monetary metaphors to describe relationships and feelings to suggest they are in fact the ones who value money above relationships and religion.

Shylock and the play can be read as straightforward stereotypes and examples of racism in Shakespeare’s time. But the play can also be read as writing against and undermining that stereotype. Shakespeare reminds the audience, however ineffectually during his time period, that Jews are human beings, and that it is important to pay attention to who is in control of the narrative in order to understand how they are shaping the perception of reality.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Mercy**

*PORTIA:*

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth, as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this—
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer, doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much,
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

*Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 187-208*

**Summary**

Antonio appears in court before the Duke of Venice, brought there by Shylock in his attempt to extract the forfeit that Antonio owes for defaulting on his debt. Though Bassanio has three times the amount of the loan to repay Shylock, the moneylender desires instead his revenge by taking the prescribed pound of flesh. Because the contract stipulates that the flesh is to be extracted from “that region closest to his heart,” this will most likely mean Antonio’s death.

Disguised as a male doctor of the law, or attorney, Portia has come to the court. She has acquired not only the clothes of a lawyer but also some legal insight into the case from her acquaintance, Bellario, who is a noted attorney. Bellario has sent a note, at Portia’s instigation, stating that he is not able to attend the court, so he is sending his young but learned associate to take his place.

Portia, pretending ignorance of the participants, asks for the identification of the two principal players. Speaking to Shylock, Portia informs him that, though his case is unusual, it is not against Venetian law and thus must proceed.

Next addressing Antonio, Portia determines that Antonio willfully entered into this agreement, knowing the terms that would apply should he fail to repay the debt at the appropriate time. On these qualifications, Portia in the disguise of the lawyer pronounces that Shylock must be merciful.

Shylock objects, asking why he should be forced to be merciful. Portia replies that mercy cannot be forced. It must be given willingly and gracefully. Such mercy is a benefit to both the one who receives it and to the one who grants it.

The nature of mercy is such that it shows itself greatest in the most noble of people. While a king has power, it is ruled by mercy. Mercy is a gift from God and thus shows people in their best light when they are merciful.
Portia tells Shylock that, though he seeks justice, he should be very careful in its execution. If justice were enforced as much as Shylock himself insists upon, no one would escape its power, she says. All would fall condemned. Therefore, each person seeks mercy from God and should willingly give it to his fellow creatures.

Portia states that her purpose is to attempt to mitigate Shylock’s call for justice that, should he insist, must be enacted against Antonio. Shylock replies that he does insist that the law be carried out. Calling down the consequences of the deeds on his own head, he demands the forfeit that is prescribed by the contract he and Antonio signed.

Analysis

This passage speaks to the question of the justification of justice. Antonio accepted the terms of the contract, knew full well the consequences, and yet now would like to be released from them. The question of “fairness” arises, as Shylock seeks to get back what is rightfully his.

By rights, the law is on Shylock’s side, as Portia willingly admits. She cannot deny the legality of his case, nor can the Duke interfere except at a terrible consequence to the standing of the Venetian legal system. The notion of “equal justice under law,” despite the fact that Shylock is a “despised Jew,” plays a significant role here. The objective “blind” justice shall judge the validity of the case. It does, and it finds in Shylock’s favor.

And yet Portia pleads for mercy. In this, there is a confrontation between the two “qualities.” Which holds greater weight: justice or mercy? As Portia points out, mercy is an attribute of God himself, and thus has the scent of the divine. Yet justice too falls in the realm of God. Both are at His command, according to the Renaissance understanding of the Bible, so either could be used to justify each position.

As the case is between Jew and Christian, the interplay of justice versus mercy is also paralleled between the two religious bases of the different faiths. The Jews holds to the Old Testament, which is a rule of law. Through sacrifices, tithes, and offerings, the Jew holds himself accountable to the law as dictated by God to Moses. Through a strict adherence to the letter of the law, the individual Jew can be “righteous” before God. Thus Shylock’s position is an appropriate representation of the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.

Portia, however, holds to mercy, which is more akin to the teachings of the New Testament. The Christian position is that Christ set people free from the strictures of the law and thus they are able to receive God’s mercy. It is not through a rigid following of a set of laws that the Christian is considered “righteous,” but by the mercy and grace of God. He is saved not because he deserves it, but because God has removed the consequences of his sin. This then is Portia’s defense. It is beyond the mere trial of a legal contract. It is a battle between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Paradoxically, it is not through mercy that Antonio is freed but through the legal wrangling of Portia. By sticking to the letter of the law and to justice, she presents to Shylock the choice of whether to demand that the law be followed, at the cost of all his wealth, or that he drop his claim. Shylock chooses to drop his demands for the pound of flesh. However, rather than show mercy, Portia brings up the law again, which demands that anyone who makes an attempt on another person’s life forfeit his wealth. This Shylock is forced to do, as well as become a Christian. But the manner in which he embraces the faith is a purely legalistic manner, since it is an outward compliance when it should be a matter of the heart. Thus by appealing to the Christian doctrine of mercy, Portia descends back into the Jewish viewpoint of the justice of the law.

Teaching Guide: Introduction
So you’re going to teach *The Merchant of Venice*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its challenging spots, teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. It will give them unique insight into racial prejudice in the Early Modern period, Shakespeare’s role in spreading these racial ideas, and important themes surrounding prejudice, alienation, and revenge. This guide highlights the text’s most salient aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

**Note:** This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

### Facts at a Glance

- **Publication Date:** 1605
- **Recommended Grade Level:** 9 and up
- **Author:** William Shakespeare
- **Country of Origin:** England
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Literary Period:** Early Modern, English Renaissance
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Society
- **Setting:** Venice, Italy, 1605
- **Structure or Dominant Literary Devices:** Five-Act Play, Dramatic Irony, Double Plot, Mistaken Identities
- **Tone:** Comedic, Ironic, and Light-hearted, but with a Grave Undertone

### Texts that Go Well with *The Merchant of Venice*

*The Jew of Malta*, by Christopher Marlowe, is a 1590 play in which a Jewish man in Malta begins killing people after the Duke takes away all he has. The main character, Barabas, is a vicious, villainous, amoral character. Compare Christopher Marlowe’s Barabas and Shakespeare’s Shylock. While Barabas is irredeemably wicked, Shylock is the only truly pious character of *Merchant* and is allowed to make an argument for his humanity.

*The Stranger*, by Albert Camus, is a 1942 existentialist novel in which the main character, an Algerian-born Frenchman named Meursault, kills an Arab man after attending his mother’s funeral. This novel addresses the theme of individual alienation from culture. In this case, Meursault feels alienated from inherent meaning and human connection. Just as Meursault cannot understand what motivates people to act, Shylock cannot understand the Christians who live according to contrary laws and vilify him at every turn.

*Grendel*, by John Gardner, is a 1971 novel that tells the story of the epic poem *Beowulf* from the perspective of the monster. Grendel becomes a monster because the Geats treat him like a monster. Though Grendel commits murder and other horrible acts, readers empathize with Grendel because he is rejected and mistreated by the community. This novel can be used to examine Shylock’s character and the extent to which his actions are the result of the prejudice and rejection that he faces.

*Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, is a 1952 novel that addresses the social issues and challenges facing African Americans during the early 20th century. The unnamed protagonist struggles to find his identity within different groups. He faces racism and prejudice from the dominant culture and rejection from various subcultures. The protagonist in this story can be compared to Shylock as both characters seem to have no community to support them. This lack of community leads to isolation, anger, and resentment.
The Pianist, by Henryk Szpilman, is the 1946 memoir of a Polish-Jewish pianist and composer who lived through the occupation of Poland and the Warsaw ghetto during World War II. Szpilman quotes the “Hath not a Jew Eyes” speech to his brother in order to question Nazi propaganda that demonizes Jewish people. The novel can be used to examine the dangerous effects of the anti-Semitic rhetoric that created characters like Shylock and eventually led to the mass extermination of European Jews.

The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a 1925 novel about American excess and nostalgia during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. Told from the perspective of Nick Carraway, the novel chronicles Jay Gatsby’s attempts to reconnect with his now-married former paramour, Daisy Buchanan. Like the Christians in Merchant, the lives of the characters in Fitzgerald’s novel revolve around money, which causes many of the problems throughout the story. The novel’s plot is in many ways driven by repression. Nick’s character’s dedication to and obsession with Gatsby can be seen as a type of homosexual desire similar to Antonio’s dedication to Bassanio. Nick’s homosexual repression, Daisy’s repressed desire for Gatsby, and Gatsby’s repression of his true nature cause the events of the novel to unfold just as Antonio and Bassanio’s powerful bond sets the events of Merchant in motion.

Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points

While we encourage your class to read The Merchant of Venice in its entirety, we understand that time is a constraint. These key plot points will help guide you to the most salient parts of the play.

Antonio Takes out a Dangerous Bond for Bassanio (Act I): The play begins with Antonio, a Venetian merchant, wondering aloud why he is sad. Minor characters Salario and Solanio, also merchants, assume that his sadness comes from anxiety: Antonio’s ships are at sea and in danger of pirate attack, sinking, or stagnant winds. However, Antonio is not convinced. His friend Bassanio enters the scene talking about a new love that he has. He needs money to woo her, though, as her palace is far away. Ever accommodating, Antonio offers to loan Bassanio the money. But because Antonio’s ships are still at sea, he must find a money lender to give Bassanio the money on credit.

Antonio and Bassanio go to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock reveals that he hates Christians, especially Antonio, because Christians have been cruel to him. He agrees to give Antonio 3,000 ducats, but only under the condition that he may extract a pound of Antonio’s flesh if he cannot repay the bond in time. Foolhardy Antonio takes the bond. Readers also meet Portia, the woman of Bassanio’s desire, and her maid Nerissa. Portia’s father has died and left behind a massive estate. Through their conversation, we discover that Portia cannot marry whom she chooses. Her father established in his will that the winner of a contest of wits would win Portia’s hand.

Shylock Loses His Daughter (Act II): Portia’s suitors must pick between three chests: one silver, one gold, and one lead. Portia encounters two suitors, one a prince from Morocco and another a prince from Arragon. Morocco chooses the gold casket and finds a skull inside bearing the cryptic message “all that glitters is not gold.” Arragon chooses the silver casket and finds a mirror inside. The message mocks him as a fool.

Meanwhile in Venice, Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, elopes with Lorenzo, a Christian man. To Shylock’s rage, she takes Shylock’s money with her. The audience hears about Shylock’s reaction through Salario and Solanio, who mockingly claim that Shylock was more concerned about losing his ducats than his daughter. There is also news that a ship has wrecked, and everyone fears that it is Antonio’s.

“Hath not a Jew eyes?” (Act III): While Antonio’s friends are mocking Shylock over his losses, Shylock hears news of yet another wrecked ship. He sends authorities after Antonio so that he can collect his bond: a pound of Antonio’s flesh. When Salario asks why Shylock even wants Antonio’s flesh, he delivers the very
famous “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech. Shylock makes an argument that he is human just like the Christians, and therefore he will follow their example of vengeance and mercilessness.

Meanwhile at Portia’s castle, Bassanio chooses the lead chest and finds a picture of Portia inside. She gives him a ring to symbolize their union. Lorenzo and Jessica arrive, and Portia’s servant, Nerissa, becomes engaged to Gratiano. All of the couples experience what should be a happy ending. However, news reaches them that Antonio is about to die for the bond. Portia sends Bassanio and Gratiano with 6,000 ducats—twice the amount needed to pay back the bond. She and Nerissa claim they are going to a convent, but instead devise a plan to dress up like men and follow their husbands to Venice. Antonio longs to see Bassanio as he sits in prison.

The Trial (Act IV): Antonio and Bassanio go before the Duke, hoping that he will force Shylock to be merciful. Shylock refuses to be merciful and declines the 6,000 ducats that Portia sent with Bassanio; he wants to claim his bond. Portia enters disguised as Balthazar, Antonio’s lawyer. She argues for Shylock to be merciful, but Shylock is not swayed. Finally, Portia tells Shylock that he can have his bond. Antonio prepares for death and Shylock brandishes his knife. But before Shylock can kill Antonio, Portia tells him that the bond guarantees him to flesh but does not account for blood. If Shylock sheds one drop of Antonio’s blood while securing his pound of flesh, the bond will be forfeit. Portia then recalls an ancient Venetian rule that states anyone who tries to kill a Venetian will be put to death and made bankrupt. The trial resolves with the Duke’s pardoning Shylock yet taking his money and forcing him to convert to Christianity.

Antonio and Bassanio thank Portia—thinking her to be Balthazar—and offer to pay her. However, she does not want Bassanio’s money. Instead, she wants the ring that his wife gave him that he promised to never take off. Though Bassanio initially protests, he eventually gives Portia the ring at Antonio’s behest.

The Happy Ending (Act V): Portia and her servant Nerissa return to Portia’s palace and mock their husbands for giving up their wedding rings. They decide to play a trick on the men: they claim they will not sleep with their husbands until the men wear the rings again. When Bassanio swears his fidelity to Portia, she reveals the trick and returns his ring. She also reveals that Antonio’s ships have not wrecked and that Shylock’s money will go to Jessica and Lorenzo.

Teaching Guide: History of the Text

Humanism and the English Renaissance: Shakespeare wrote at the turn of the 17th century, when humanism was a dominant philosophical ideology in England. The humanist cultural movement turned away from medieval, religious scholasticism to revive ancient Greek and Roman literature—which focused on human thoughts, feelings, and motivations rather than divine or supernatural matters.

- *The Merchant of Venice* reflects humanist ideology. The many soliloquies throughout the play attempt to capture the human experience. The many Greek and Roman allusions throughout the text reference a period that was seen by Shakespeare and his peers as the apex of human potential.

Anti-Semitism and Usury in Early Modern England: In 1290, King Edward I of England ordered the Expulsion of the Jews from his lands. This decision primarily came from the Catholic church’s complicated history with usury, the practice of lending money for profit. Church doctrine held that no Christian could lend money for profit; however, the Jewish faith did not forbid usury between Jews and non-Jews. Because Jews were banned from many other professions in medieval Europe due to anti-Semitism, many Jewish men began lending money to Christians and collecting the interest. This business led to unrealistic depictions of Jews as heartless money lenders, greedy extortionists, and diabolical figures. Rumors began to spread that Jews murdered Christ and that they performed ritual sacrifices of children. King Edward I segregated Jews and
forced them to wear yellow badges on their clothing to signify their faith. When public outrage and hatred towards Jews reached a climax, King Edward banned Judaism from England, and many Jews fled. Venice, Italy, where this play is set, was more accepting of Jews because their money-lending kept the Venetian economy prosperous. Venetian law protected usury and Jewish business. However, while the law allowed Jews to exist in Venice and collect interest, Venice’s Christians treated the city’s Jews as second-class citizens, confining them to ghettos and openly discriminating against them.

Anti-Semitism plays a big role in *The Merchant of Venice*. It drives the Christian characters to persecute and then rob Shylock of everything he has. Ultimately, the comedic ending comes for the Christian characters when they vanquish their greedy, Jewish enemy. However, Shakespeare’s portrayal of Jews is less straightforwardly malicious than other depictions in the English Early Modern period (see Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*). Shylock is a complex character. Shakespeare gives him some of the best lines in the play, including the famous “Hath not a Jew eyes” monologue. Whereas the Christian characters seem to care more about money than about their God or Christian kindness, Shylock demonstrates a true dedication to his faith. In one scene, Shylock loses his daughter, Jessica, and is reported to care more about the money she took when she runs away than her disappearance. However, the audience does not see this scene, but rather hears about it from two Christian merchants. For these reasons, Shylock is not necessarily the villain of the play. He can be read as a marginalized character who is persecuted for his beliefs.

Both of the following points should be addressed when talking about this play: First, anti-Semitism was rampant in Europe, and plays like *The Merchant of Venice* helped to spread hatred of the Jews. Second, Shakespeare creates a sympathetic character in Shylock, giving us insight into both the identity of a persecuted minority and the cruelty of the Christian oppressors.

*The Merchant of Venice in the Context of Shakespearean Drama*: Shakespearean tragedies generally involve a hero who has a fatal flaw that leads to his eventual downfall. This fatal flaw is usually something like ambition, greed, or revenge, and the play generally ends with all of the main characters dying. Shakespearean comedies generally revolve around one or two couples kept apart by a societal constraint, such as their parents don’t want them to get married, or by a personal flaw, such as they are too proud to admit they love one another. After a series of mistaken identities and farcical pranks, these plays tend to end happily in multiple marriages.

- *The Merchant of Venice* includes both the plot of a tragedy and the plot of a comedy. The Christians’ story is a comedy. Portia and Bassanio are kept apart because of money and Bassanio’s promise to Antonio. Portia’s “clever defeat” of Shylock allows the couple to marry at the end of the play.
- Shylock’s story is a tragedy. Shylock’s desire to seek revenge against the Christians for their cruel treatment causes him to demand something monstrous. For this vengeance, he loses his daughter, his livelihood, and all of his money by the end of the play, essentially rendering his life forfeit.

*The Merchant of Venice’s Performance History*: The play was first performed for King James’s court in 1605. Since the king enjoyed the play, it continued to run in public venues. It was likely performed in the open-air Globe Theater. Plays at this time used minimum props or stage decorations. Instead, music, language, and costumes quickly moved the story across the stage. Female characters were played by young boys.

- Shylock in the 1600s: It is impossible to know exactly how Shylock was portrayed in Shakespeare’s time, and it depends on whom Shakespeare intended for the part. If Shylock was played by Will Kemp, the leading comedic actor in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men performance group, then it is likely that Shylock was exaggeratedly comedic. In medieval mystery plays and other plays at this time, evil Jewish characters would wear a red wig and a false nose. However, if Richard Burbage—the lead tragic actor famous for his portrayals of Hamlet, Lear, and Othello—played Shylock, then the character was likely played in a comparatively earnest style.
• Shylock since 1945: Modern interpretations of Shylock show the character to have dignity and quiet rage over the discrimination and cruelty that he faces. Rather than showing him as a farcical buffoon who has no control over his actions, modern Shylocks seem poised.

**Teaching Guide: Significant Allusions**

**Greek History and Mythology:** Many of the allusions in this play are to love stories from Greek and Roman mythology and to classical gods of love, chastity, and romance. The Christian characters use these allusions to show off their learning in the humanistic style. Ironically, many of the references they make are to couples whose stories have tragic endings.

• On the night that Lorenzo and Jessica run away together with Shylock’s gold, they compare their elopement to the conditions “on such a night” of famous, mythological romances, such as **Pyramus and Thisbe**, **Troilus and Cressida**, **Dido and Aeneas**, and **Medea and Jason**. Ironically, all of these mythological stories end tragically. Dido commits suicide after Aeneas leaves her; Pyramus kills himself when he believes Thisbe has been eaten by a lion; Cressida is made to become a Greek’s paramour and betray her Troilus; and Medea kills her own children when Jason betrays her. Jessica and Lorenzo compare their escape to these tragic love stories, missing the point of the myths they have alluded to.

LORENZO: In such a night,

Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,

And with an unthrift love did run from Venice,

As far as Belmont.

JESSICA:

In such a night,

Did young Lorenzo swear he lov’d her well;

Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,

And ne’er a true one. (act V, scene I)

• Allusions to Gods:
  • **Venus**, Goddess of love: “O, ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly / To seal love's bonds new-made, than they are wont / To keep obliged faith unforfeited!” (act II, scene VI)
  • **Cupid**, God of love: “Cupid himself would blush, / To see me thus transformed to a boy” (2.6); “for I long to see / Quick Cupid's post that comes so mannerly” (act II, scene IX)
  • **Diana**, Goddess of chastity: “Come, ho! and wake Diana with a hymn; / With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear” (act I, scene I); (act V, scene I)
  • **Mars**, God of war: “As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins / The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars” (act III, scene II)
  • **Portia** shares the same name as Brutus’s wife. Brutus was the man who killed Caesar. As **Julius Caesar** was written contemporaneously with **The Merchant of Venice**, it is likely this is not a coincidence.
**Biblical Allusions:** Most of the biblical references in this text come from Shylock. In this way, Shylock is defined by his religion and his piety, whereas the Christian characters are defined by their business and knowledge of Greek and Roman texts.

- **Barrabas** was in jail under the Romans at the same time as Jesus. Pontius Pilate asked his people to choose which man they wanted to live. The people chose Barrabas and so Jesus was crucified. Barrabas is also the name of the diabolical Jewish man in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta.*

  SHYLOCK:

  These be the Christian husbands: I have a daughter;

  Would any of the stock of Barrabas

  Had been her husband rather, than a Christian!

  We trifle time; I pray thee pursue sentence. (act IV, scene )

- Shylock references the **Prodigal Son** in order to warn his daughter Jessica not to fraternize with the Christians. The Prodigal Son is a parable told by Jesus in the book of Luke. In the parable, a son asks his father for his inheritance and then squanders all of his money. Eventually, the penniless son returns home. Rather than punishing his son, the father welcomes him and forgives him. In this reference, Shylock is referring to Antonio’s wastefulness and destitution.

  SHYLOCK:

  I am not bid for love; they flatter me:

  But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon

  The prodigal Christian. (act I, scene V)

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**Money Versus God as a Theme:** Money is near the heart of many of the relationships in the play. From the first scene, the characters assume that money is the main issue in everyone’s lives. Antonio is assumed to be sad because of money, Bassanio cannot pursue love without money; Jessica and Lorenzo cannot elope without money. When Jessica disappears, they claim that Shylock was crying about his money rather than his daughter. Most of the Christians’ metaphors revolve around money. While the Christians hate Shylock because he is Jewish and ultimately condemn him to conversion, the Christians are never seen caring about God in this play. The Christians’ “God” seems to be money. From one perspective, this hypocrisy turns the Christians into villains and Shylock into a victim.

  - **For discussion:** Why is it significant that Shylock makes allusions to the Bible while the Christian characters make references to antiquity?
  - **For discussion:** The Christians are identified by their faith and yet spend most of the play discussing money rather than God. What theme might be revealed by this substitution?

**Prejudice and Alienation as a Theme:** Throughout the play, the Christian characters show extreme prejudice towards Shylock because he is Jewish. In return, Shylock shows hatred for the Christians. In the trial scene,
Shylock refuses to take Portia’s money so that he can punish Antonio for his bigotry. Because Shylock is alienated from Venetian society, he cannot engage with it effectively. This alienation turns Shylock into a type of monster. In a tragic twist, Shylock becomes the monster that the Christians have assumed he is all along because he reacts strongly to the treatment he endures at the hands of the Christians.

- **For discussion:** Why won’t Shylock take Portia’s money in exchange for his bond? How does this commitment to the original agreement challenge the Christians’ view of Shylock as a greedy, money-hungry man?
- **For discussion:** Though an Early Modern audience would see Shylock as the villain of act IV, scene I, how do the Christians act monstrously?

**Interpretations of Shylock’s Character:** Shylock’s character can be read from three predominant angles.

1. **Shylock as villain:** The play’s earliest audiences may have viewed Shylock as a blood-thirsty heathen who plagues the good Christian characters. This interpretation looks past moments in which Shakespeare humanizes the character and takes as its defining image Shylock’s brandishing the knife he will use to cut Antonio’s flesh.
2. **Shylock as vengeful:** Some primarily view Shylock as a victim of circumstance. From this perspective, Shylock’s ruthlessness towards Antonio arises from the injustices he has faced at the hands of the Christians. In other words, if he is a monster, it is only because his Christian antagonists have made him so.
3. **Shylock as flawed hero:** This interpretation essentially blends the above readings of Shylock’s character. Shylock, then, is both a villain and a victim, someone who chooses the wrong solution to a complex problem. Like flawed heroes such as Macbeth or Othello, Shylock’s poor judgement—rather than an innately wicked nature—leads to his downfall.

- **For discussion:** Looking at Shylock’s dialogue, what types of words and phrases does he use? With what kind of tone does he speak to others? Based on this, what can you conclude about his character?
- **For discussion:** Consider the trial in act IV, scene I. Why does Shylock refuse to show mercy to Antonio? Does this make him a villain? Why or why not?
- **For discussion:** Compare Shylock to the main characters of Shakespeare’s tragedy Othello. Do you think Shylock is more similar to Iago, who is amoral and vengeful, or Othello, who is shortsighted and reactionary?

**Interpretations of Antonio’s Sadness:** Readers will notice Antonio’s absolute devotion to Bassanio. At the beginning of the play, Antonio says “Forsooth, I know not why I am so sad.” Many critics have argued that the source of Antonio’s sadness is his unrequited and unspoken love for Bassanio. Throughout the play, the strongest bond is the one between Antonio and Bassanio. Antonio agrees to place his life and livelihood in jeopardy for Bassanio by taking the initial bond with Shylock. He symbolically offers up his heart to Bassanio by promising “a pound of flesh taken from the area around his heart.” Bassanio in turn proves his loyalty to Antonio when he gives up Portia’s ring to repay the lawyer who saves Antonio’s life. Portia’s “prank” at the end of the play intends to break the bond between the two men by having Bassanio swear his love to her. Antonio is left with his money at the end of the play, but he is left out of the comedic happy ending. His story does not end in romantic union and his “sadness” is never solved.

- **For discussion:** Why is Antonio so sad at the beginning of the play? Do you think this sadness has subsided by the end of the play? Does Antonio receive the happy ending befitting a Shakespearean comedy?
- **For discussion:** Why does Portia need to play a prank on her husband at the end of the play? What might the ring come to symbolize in these final scenes?
• **For discussion:** What might the pound of flesh taken near the heart symbolize? Why is it important that this is the bond Antonio takes for Bassanio?

**Additional discussion questions:**

• In act II, scene VIII, we hear an account of Shylock by Salario and Solanio. How do these two characters describe Shylock? Is their account consistent with the Shylock we have witnessed on stage?
• How does the trial scene complicate our expectations of justice and mercy? Do you think justice is served? In what way do Portia and the Duke show mercy? In what way is Shylock’s punishment not merciful?
• Discuss the casket test. What does this test tell us about Portia’s character? Why is Bassanio able to pass the test?
• Would you characterize this play as a comedy, tragedy, or something else?

**Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching**

**There Are Many Offensive Moments in the Play:** Because this play portrays the anti-Semitism of the Elizabethan age, many of the things said to and about Shylock, and Jews in general, are offensive.

• **What to do:** Address the anti-Semitism directly. Briefly describe the situation of Jews in Europe during Shakespeare’s time, and point out lines in the play that describe their circumstances. Acknowledge that some of the lines will make students uncomfortable, and that they can be difficult to read.
• **What to do:** Read these passages with an empathetic eye for Shylock. In other words, if the text is depicting him doing something monstrous, try to figure out why he is doing it. In many cases, Shylock’s actions are reactions to harmful things that the other characters have done to him. It is difficult to know, without detailed records of contemporary performances, how Shakespeare intended Shylock to be portrayed or received. Point to the character’s moments of intense humanity, and his own descriptions of his situation.

**Usury Is a Complicated Concept:** One of the main reasons for the animosity between the Christians and Shylock is the complicated ideology behind usury in Shakespeare’s time. Students will also have a hard time understanding why usury was so shunned since the collecting of interest is a fundamental part of modern economies.

• **What to do:** Explain that usury is the practice of lending money and charging interest on the loan based on how long it takes the borrower to pay the money back. It is akin to having a credit card or student loan. Explain that the Catholic church banned usury because it considered the practice an absence of charity and a monetization of time, both of which were problematic according to doctrine.
• **What to do:** Explain why usury is not necessarily a crime or wrongdoing.

**Shakespearean Diction and Syntax Are Difficult:** Shakespeare’s language can be difficult for students to understand. However, it is not written in Old English or even Middle English. It is written in Modern English and therefore can be understood with some practice.

• **What to do:** Outline the whole plot of the story before beginning the play so that it is easier to follow. Consider hanging a timeline on the board or asking students to recap the plot at the beginning of each
What to do: Start with a short passage and ask students to translate Shakespeare’s archaic language into plain English so that they can become familiar with his style.

**Alternative Approaches to Teaching The Merchant of Venice**

While the main ideas, character development, and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the novel.

- **Focus on anti-Semitism and alienation.** Though Shylock delivers the play’s best lines and is the most pious character, he is still alienated from his society and severely discriminated against. Talk about how this play figures in the larger narrative of anti-Semitism. Use the “Hath not a Jew Eyes” speech as a way into talking about anti-Semitism in Europe, and how this tradition eventually led to the Holocaust in the 20th century.
- **Focus on Jessica’s conversion narrative.** Highlight the scenes in act II in which Jessica converts to Christianity in order to marry Lorenzo. Ask why Jessica decides to convert and investigate the language she uses to show her conversion. Compare her voluntary conversion to Shylock’s forced conversion at the end of the play.
- **Focus on Nerissa and Portia’s comedic trick.** Look at the trick the two women play in the final act. Though this playful ending is typical of a Shakespearean comedy, it seems out of place in this story that centers on racial prejudice. Discuss the effect of this comedic ending and how it affects the tone of the play.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I, Scenes 1-3: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What causes do Salerio and Solanio suggest for Antonio’s melancholy?
2. What humorous advice does Gratiano offer Antonio?
3. Why does Bassanio want Antonio to loan him more money?
4. Why is Portia angry with her deceased father?
5. Why does Nerissa tell Portia she “need not fear” her unwelcome suitors?
6. What do Portia and Nerissa think of Bassanio?
7. According to Shylock, why does he hate Antonio?
8. Why is Shylock indignant over Antonio’s request?
9. What is Antonio’s response to Shylock’s accusation?
10. In exchange for what does Shylock agree to lend Antonio and Bassanio the money?
Answers
1. Salerio and Solanio think Antonio is distracted because his money is tied up in his ships, which are sailing on dangerous seas. When he denies this suggestion, Solanio guesses that he’s in love, an answer Antonio also rejects.

2. Gratiano tells Antonio not to be so grave about worldly affairs, but rather “With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,/…Why should a man whose blood is warm within/Sit like his grandsire…/…And creep into the jaundice/ By being peevish?” In other words, he suggests Antonio is acting old before his time.

3. Bassanio tells Antonio that “had [he] but the means” to compete with Portia’s suitors, he would “questionless be fortunate,” i.e., win the wealthy heiress’s hand, thus solving his financial difficulties.

4. Because of the provisions of her father’s will—the challenge of the three caskets—Portia cannot choose her own husband. As she says, “I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.”

5. Nerissa tells Portia she “need not fear” marrying any of the undesirable suitors because “[t]hey have acquainted [Nerissa] with their determinations; which is indeed to return to their home, and trouble [Portia] with no more suit…”

6. Nerissa claims that Bassanio, “of all the men that ever [her] foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady.” Portia agrees and “remember[s] him worthy of [Nerissa’s] praise.”

7. Shylock claims to hate Antonio because “he is a Christian;/ But more, for in that low simplicity/ He lends out money gratis, and brings down/The rate of usance here with us in Venice.” He also remembers being personally insulted by Antonio.

8. Shylock suggests that Antonio is a hypocrite, having first spurned him for being a usurer and now asking him for a loan. As Shylock taunts him, “You come to me and you say,/ ‘Shylock, we would have moneys’—you say so,/ You that did void your rheum upon my beard…”

9. Antonio insists their mutual hatred is a proper business relationship, telling Shylock, “If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not/ As to thy friends…/ But lend it rather to thine enemy,/ Who if he break, thou mayst with better face/ Exact the penalty.”

10. Shylock asks Antonio to sign a bond stating that, if he doesn’t repay Shylock within the allotted time, he must sacrifice “an equal pound/ Of [his] fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/ In what part of [his] body pleaseth [Shylock].”

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II, Scenes 1-9: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Morocco fear Portia will reject him at the outset?

2. What is Bassanio’s reservation about Gratiano accompanying him to Belmont?

3. What is Jessica’s dilemma concerning her father, Shylock?

4. How does Lorenzo plan to disguise Jessica in order for her to escape from her father?
5. Before going to dine with Antonio and Bassanio, what advice does Shylock give his daughter?

6. Why does Jessica not want Lorenzo to see her when he arrives at Shylock’s house?

7. What is Morocco’s rationale for choosing the gold casket?

8. What news has Salerio heard, making him anxious?

9. How does Solanio interpret Antonio’s sadness at Bassanio’s departure?

10. Which casket does Aragon choose, and why?

Answers

1. Morocco fears Portia would not want to marry someone of his race. Upon entering the play, he pleads: “Mislike not for my complexion/ The shadowed livery of the burnished sun…”

2. Bassanio suspects that Gratiano will appear “too wild, too rude, and bold of voice” for the people of Belmont. “[W]here thou art not known,” Bassanio warns, such traits “show/ Something too liberal.”

3. Jessica believes it is a “heinous sin…/ To be ashamed to be [her] father’s child!” Although she is Shylock’s daughter by “blood,” she claims not to be by “manners” and hopes to become a Christian by marrying Lorenzo.

4. Jessica will be dressed as Lorenzo’s torchbearer for the street festivities.

5. Shylock tells Jessica that if she hears commotion outside, she should “Clamber not…up to the casements then,/ Nor thrust [her] head into the public street/ To gaze on Christian fools…/ But…/[she should] Let not the sound of shallow fopp’ry enter/ [his] sober house.”

6. Jessica is ashamed because she has been “transformed to a boy,” i.e. is dressed in men’s clothing in order to make her escape.

7. The gold casket is engraved “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.” As Morocco points out, “All the world desires [Portia]/ From the four corners of the earth they come/ To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint.”

8. A Frenchman informed him that a Venetian ship has been wrecked in the English Channel, and Salerio fears it may be one of Antonio’s.

9. Solanio believes that Antonio “only loves the world for [Bassanio].” In other words, his friendship with Bassanio is the one thing which keeps Antonio from being overwhelmed by melancholy.

10. Aragon selects the silver casket, engraved “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves,” because, he asks, “who shall go about/ To cozen fortune, and be honorable/ Without the stamp of merit? Let none presume/ To wear an undeserved dignity.” Aragon feels whoever wins Portia had better be deserving of her.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scenes 1-5: Questions and Answers
Study Questions
1. Why, since it won’t result in any financial gain, does Shylock insist on the terms of his bond with Antonio?

2. What news does Tubal bring Shylock?

3. Why does Portia want Bassanio to wait before facing the challenge of the three caskets?

4. Why does Bassanio select the lead casket?

5. What does the lead casket contain?

6. What does Portia claim will occur if Bassanio gives up the ring she gives him?

7. What does Gratiano reveal after Bassanio solves the riddle of the three caskets?

8. Why does Portia allow Bassanio to leave before they get married?

9. According to Antonio, why won’t the Duke be able to intercede on his behalf?

10. What does Portia decide to do at the end of Act III?

Answers

2. Tubal tells Shylock that one of Antonio’s ships has been wrecked “coming from Tripolis” and that Jessica has spent a great deal of his money.

3. Afraid that Bassanio will fail, but desirous of his company, Portia wishes to spend as much time with him as possible.

4. Bassanio distrusts attractive surfaces, for fear they contain corrupt things. As he addresses his choice, “But thou, thou meager lead/ Which rather threaten’st than dost promise ought,/ Thy paleness moves me more to eloquence;/ And here choose I.”

5. Inside the lead casket, Bassanio finds a picture of Portia—signifying his success—and a scroll instructing him to kiss her.

6. If Bassanio does “part from, lose, or give away [Portia’s ring],/ …it [will] presage the ruins of [his] love.”

7. Gratiano announces that he and Nerissa intend to marry.

8. Portia discovers, while reading Antonio’s letter, that he fears “it is impossible [he] should live” and wishes to see Bassanio before he is killed.

9. “The Duke cannot deny the course of the law;/ For the commodity that strangers have/ …in Venice, if it be denied;/ Will much impede the justice of the state.” In other words, the Duke must uphold the law for non-citizens, so that Venice may maintain its good standing in international business affairs.

10. Portia decides that she and Nerissa must go to Venice disguised as men, to help resolve the situation there.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV, Scenes 1-2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What does the Duke request of Shylock?

2. What reason does Shylock give for his wanting the pound of Antonio’s flesh?

3. Why does Antonio advise his friends to give up attempting to dissuade Shylock?

4. Why does Shylock believe the Duke must enforce the terms of the bond?

5. Why does Portia, disguised as the lawyer, initially conclude that Shylock’s bond must be adhered to?

6. Although she acknowledges Shylock’s right to a pound of Antonio’s flesh, how does Portia prevent the usurer from acting on it?

7. Why is Shylock stripped of his possessions?

8. Apart from the financial conditions, what does Antonio’s new arrangement demand of Shylock?

9. What does the disguised Portia demand from Bassanio for her services?

10. Why is Bassanio reluctant to give up the ring?

Answers
1. The Duke asks Shylock if he will “not only loose the forfeiture,/ But touched with human gentleness and love,/ Forgive a moiety of the principle,/ Glancing an eye of pity on [Antonio’s] losses.” In other words, he asks Shylock to consider Antonio’s financial predicament and not only accept money in place of the pound of flesh, but also reduce the amount of the debt.

2. Shylock claims he can “give no reason, nor will [he] not,/ More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing/[He] bear[s] Antonio…”

3. Antonio believes that Shylock cannot be reasoned with, due to a racially-determined stubbornness within him. He claims, “You may as well do any thing most hard/ As seek to soften that—than which what’s harder?—/ His Jewish heart.”

4. Shylock thinks that the Duke must uphold the terms of the bond, otherwise all Venetian law will be held up to scorn and ridicule.

5. Portia insists that there is “no power in Venice/ Can alter a device established,” i.e., Shylock’s bond can’t be changed after its terms have already been violated.

6. Portia points out that, although it allows Shylock to cut away a pound of Antonio’s flesh, “This bond doth give [Shylock] here no jot of blood…”

7. Shylock’s goods are confiscated because Venetian law decrees such a penalty to a foreigner who “by direct or indirect attempts…seek[s] the life of any citizen…”


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8. Shylock must convert from Judaism to Christianity.

9. Portia asks for Bassanio’s gloves and his ring.

10. Bassanio promised Portia that he’d take it off only when he’d stopped loving her.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scene 1: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What message does Stephano deliver to Lorenzo and Jessica?

2. What opinion does Lorenzo hold of men who don’t like music?

3. What does Portia order her household not to do?

4. To whom does Nerissa claim to believe Gratiano gave his ring?

5. What does Portia threaten when Bassanio admits he gave the ring away?

6. What does Portia claim she will do if she encounters the doctor to whom Bassanio gave the ring?

7. How does Antonio attempt to placate Portia?

8. What does Portia offer Bassanio to seal the new promise?

9. What secret does Portia reveal to the company?

10. What good news does Portia tell Antonio?

**Answers**
1. Stephano announces that Portia “will before the break of day/ Be here at Belmont. She doth stray about/ By holy crosses where she kneels and prays/ For happy wedlock hours.”

2. Lorenzo claims that “The man that hath no music in himself,/ Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,/ Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils” and is thus not to be trusted.

3. Portia insists that no one reveal that she and Nerissa have been away from home.

4. Nerissa claims whoever has the ring “will ne’er wear hair on’s face…” In other words, she says she suspects him of giving it to a woman.

5. Portia swears that she “will ne’er come in [Bassanio’s] bed/ Until [she] see[s] the ring!”

6. Portia says to Bassanio, “Since [the Doctor] hath got the jewel that I loved/ And that which you did swear to keep for me,/ I will become as liberal as you,/ I’ll not deny him anything I have,/ No, not my body nor my husband’s bed.”

7. Antonio promises Portia that “[his] soul upon the forfeit… [Bassanio]/ Will never more break faith advisedly.”
8. Portia offers the same ring she initially gave Bassanio, claiming she recovered it by sleeping with the doctor.

9. Portia reveals that she and Nerissa were in fact the doctor and his clerk.

10. Portia gives Antonio a letter in which it is revealed that “three of [his] argosies [i.e., ships]/ Are richly come to harbor suddenly.”