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***The Merchant of Venice***

**From:** *Bloom's How to Write about William Shakespeare*.

**Reading to Write**

Though *The Merchant of Venice* is dominated by the figure of Shylock, and the tragedy of the Holocaust and continuing discord in the Middle East make the play's discussion of Judaism especially resonant to modern audiences, *Merchant* also offers many other exciting prospects for the writer. The play has a deep cast of characters whose actions and motives are intriguing. It functions as a snapshot of changing economic realities in early modern Europe. Moreover, it has significant formal consequences for Shakespeare's future career, especially his comedies.

*Merchant* also has one of the dramatist's finest set pieces. You could write an essay entirely about the trial scene of act 4, scene 1, analyzing the virtuoso display of dramatic action and characterization on display, as Shylock pushes ahead with his claim on Antonio's flesh, while the entire judicial and political authority of Venice presses back against him. Although Shylock trusts in nothing more than the letter of the law, you could construct an essay by observing the ways in which the accumulated machinery of the state works consciously and deliberately against him. Particularly worth noting and incorporating into your essay are any shifts in sympathy you sense as the scene progresses: While you might begin the scene resenting Shylock for his unrelenting malice, by the end of the scene a modern audience might find it difficult to take any pleasure in the thwarting of Shylock and the punishment meted out to him. The scene concentrates the play's action, skillfully condensing so many of the work's core themes and concerns. As a result, a close reading of it will allow you to synthesize many broader elements of the play. What might such an essay consider? Here is perhaps the most memorable and often-quoted passage from the scene. Portia, disguised as a learned doctor called to adjudicate on the dispute between Shylock and Antonio, lectures Shylock on the need to be compassionate and release Antonio from the bond.

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.  
… It is an attribute to God himself,  
And earthly power doth then show likest to 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. (4.1.179–200)

You might begin by observing an obvious point about the passage as a whole: It is profoundly eloquent. Without question, the speaker, Portia, is a remarkably intelligent and assertive woman. As these are probably Portia's most recognizable lines of the play, a close reading of them could be a starting point for character analysis. Besides displaying rhetorical skill, consider what these words say about their speaker. Traditionally, Portia was viewed as one of Shakespeare's most admirable heroines, but her currency dipped in the late 20th century. Why? Compare this speech to Portia's treatment of Shylock moments later. Also, what does it say about the socially constructed limits of Portia's authority that she must speak these words disguised as a young man?

The opening lines of the speech praise the value of mercy, implicitly contrasting this value with Shylock's remorseless determination to execute Antonio. But as Portia gives her argument a religious turn, she sets up another contrast that goes straight to the heart of the play's action. Comparing Christian to Jew in Shakespeare's Venice might make for a very strong essay indeed. Here Portia proposes a Christian model of mercy, acknowledging that no person can be saved without the ultimate mercy of God, thus urging compassion among humans in their worldly affairs. If this sentiment is supposed to represent the Christian species of forgiveness, what is implied (or assumed) about the Jewish model? Commentators have traditionally viewed this as a conflict between two interpretations of law: the Christian one focusing on the spirit of the law, with the Jewish one bound to the letter of the law. You might look for evidence of this dualism throughout the play. However, it might be wise to ask if this really is the full extent of what Shakespeare has in mind. After all, such a theological statement would be little more than an eloquent voicing of stereotypes. To look for more than this in the play, you should contextualize Portia's speech, locating it within the scene and within the play as a whole. After all, the most important thing to seek out in this play might be irony. Look for ways in which the Christian characters of the play say one thing and do another; they are so often guilty of the same practices for which they hate and condemn Shylock. Portia's speech here is followed almost immediately by an extremely harsh and merciless punishment of Shylock, one that both denies him his bond and strips him of his identity and dignity. From this perspective, Portia's famous speech on mercy is a fake, a cruel trick no less disguised than its speaker.

Finally, this speech raises an important point about Shakespeare's authorial presence and intention. It is, of course, impossible for us to know what the dramatist wanted to say, what he thought and felt. Nonetheless, for centuries writers have spent ink and paper attempting to do just that. *The Merchant of Venice* provides you with a truly magnificent opportunity to participate in this time-honored tradition. To what extent are the lines quoted above—and others like them throughout the play—ironic, or to what degree do we as modern readers and writers insert that irony because we wish to find it? In other words, what balance should we strike between what we hope is the spirit and what we can see is the letter of the play?

**Topics and Strategies**

Every essay requires a focus; you cannot write about everything in the play at once. The section on how to write an essay shows you a number of ways to turn a focus into a thesis, observations into arguments. However, the starting point is nearly always finding an initial focus and making first observations. What follows is a discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* geared toward helping you make the most of the budding ideas you will have as you read the play. By no means should you feel limited to these topics, however.

**Themes**

When approaching some of the themes in this play, first look to see if Shakespeare appears to make the theme you are considering a point of contrast between Shylock and the Christians of Venice. Next, you might strongly consider asking whether any simple dichotomy (Christian mercy versus Jewish cruelty, for example) is undermined by the actions of Bassanio, Portia, and the others.

Other themes, of course, will not necessarily invite that exact approach. However, there is far more to this play than meets the eye. For example, think about the theme of love in *The Merchant of Venice.* On the surface, this play would appear to celebrate love and make use of it to shape the comic movement. But look closely at each of the couplings in this play, and you may find that the relationships in each case have question marks lingering over them. You might also extend your essay to cover different forms of love, such as the relationship between Shylock and Jessica (a potential source of sympathy for Shylock) or Antonio's love for and devotion to his friend Bassanio. Are any idealized forms of love present in this play? Or, once you have scraped at the surface with a pointed reading of the text, can you see this as a text governed by cynicism and irony rather than romance and love? Indeed, it might even be possible to turn the answer to this question into a thesis statement. An essay assessing the role of irony as a theme might provide you with a focused way of discussing *Merchant* as a whole while still allowing wide discussion of the play's characters and themes.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Money and wealth:** Does money mean different things to the Venetian Christians than it does to Shylock? How much of the play's action is motivated by money?  
     
   For many critics, money is what makes the world of Shakespeare's Venice go round. It seems to motivate many of the choices made by characters, from Bassanio's quest for Portia to Lancelot Gobo's desire for a better livery. Look for ways in which money and wealth structure other characters and their actions. Assess, too, whether there are differences in how money is valued and treated between Belmont and Venice. What does money mean to Shylock? Look for parts of the text that hint at other factors motivating him, even while money continues to play a central role in his character. What does the play seem to say about usury, the act of charging interest on a loan? Compare Shylock's zeal for money to the Christians' financial dealings. Also, you might try to connect the theme of wealth and money to another reoccurring motif, that of "hazarding," or gambling. These two closely related themes overlap in parts of the text, especially the casket scenes in which Portia tests her suitors. Love and business perhaps become connected by the notion of gambling and risking all, just as Antonio does first with his ships and then with his dangerous bond to Shylock on Bassanio's behalf.
2. **Fidelity:** This is a play that seems obsessed with bonds of different kinds, as well as the consequences of not honoring those bonds. What does the play say about faithfulness? How might this theme influence your evaluations of other thematic areas of the play?  
     
   Such an essay might establish a connection between the action surrounding Shylock's bond and the subplot of Portia's ring in act 5. While the final act can seem at first glance unnecessary, a strong case could be made for its integral place in the play. Look for interconnecting issues raised by the two trials, that of Shylock in court and Bassanio in Belmont. In this essay, you might let the unexpected connection between the two plot lines suffice as your thesis, allowing room in your essay to show and explain similarities and meaningful points of difference. For example, the marriage bond represented by Portia's ring is obviously one that should be kept, while Shylock's bond is one that the play wants to see broken. Perhaps you might expand your essay to include other signs and symbols of faithfulness, from Jessica's sale of Shylock's wedding ring to the statements of religious devotion that reappear throughout the text; you might certainly extend the discussion to the infidelity of the Venetian Christians to their much-professed and -flaunted moral creed. Finally, try to cement your discussion together by asserting what faithfulness or fidelity finally means in the play. Are there any faithful characters? What are they faithful to? Does the play value fidelity?

**Character**

All of the main characters in this play deserve and can support their own essays. While not drawn with the psychological complexity of Macbeth or Hamlet, for example, the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* are nonetheless fascinating, not least because of the gap that exists between so many of their statements and actions. Take Bassanio, for example. An essay on this character might turn on the question of his motives: Why does he pursue Portia? Is he a gold-digging playboy or a romantic hero in the traditional vein? Begin by outlining what you learn of Bassanio's past in the opening acts. Assess his relationship with Antonio and closely examine his reasons for seeking Portia (look, for example, at his ordering of Portia's qualities in 1.2.161–76). Look for irony, too, in Bassanio's victory in the casket scene. What is the relationship between the moral of the lead casket and what is known of Bassanio's history and character?

An equally rich essay could be written about Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Like Bassanio, she is a character we seem asked to admire, but we might not be able to. Such an essay would begin by establishing the relationship between father and daughter, noting Jessica's various complaints but also carefully observing Shylock's treatment of and feeling for his daughter. Then ask yourself what motivates Jessica to elope with Lorenzo, sifting through her escape scene to assess again the role of money and wealth. You might proceed by looking at how Jessica's flight influences your sympathies for Shylock as he discovers her loss (and the loss of his stolen money).

Character study, then, even of the minor characters, seems to be a productive way to approach *Merchant.* Many students, however, will choose to focus on one of the three main characters.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Shylock:** How do you view Shylock's character? What are his redeeming features, and how might you assess his function and meaning in Shakespeare's play?  
     
   There is so much to say about Shylock that you could very well write a book about him. Indeed, John Gross has done just that with his very readable and well-researched *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy.* The first challenge of dealing with Shylock, then, is to focus your essay on a specific aspect of him. One thesis might concentrate on his redeeming characteristics, showing how a man who is clearly the antagonist of the play is also a victim. Once you have established this sympathetic position, the next move might be to show how Shakespeare slots Shylock into his complex system of meaning. Both of these steps might involve pinpointing Shylock's position within the culture and society of Venice.  
     
   First, what picture of Shylock emerges in the opening scenes? Look for any evidence of how he is treated and viewed by Venetians, including Antonio. Equally, assess how Shylock views the citizens of Venice. Try to piece together Shylock's philosophy of money and wealth, looking in particular at any justifications he offers for his usury. Consider, too, his domestic life with Jessica. Look very closely here for details that might endear you to Shylock, especially in his response to Jessica's flight. Why does he pursue his revenge against Antonio? How do you feel about him once he has been defeated in the court, stripped of his money and religion?  
     
   This final question urges you to reflect on Shylock's function within the play's production of meaning. Try to think why Shakespeare creates such an ambiguous and rounded figure where other lesser artists might have settled for a stock Jew to vilify. This approach puts Shylock at the heart of the play's moral compass, again encouraging you to question the differences between Jew and Christian in Venice.
2. **Antonio:** Why is Antonio marginalized by the play, left out of the comic resolution? What is the cause of his unexplained melancholy voiced in the play's opening line?  
     
   Antonio is a somewhat obscure figure who has received considerable critical attention in recent years. Much of that interest has centered on his relationship with Bassanio, as critics have commented on the homosocial nature of his love for the young man. This affection and the despondency caused by Bassanio's quest for a profitable marriage are suggested as the roots of Antonio's famous sadness. If you wished to pursue this aspect of Antonio's character, you might marshal other works of Shakespeare's canon to your side. Shakespeare treats the importance of male friendship in his early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* but this idea is more readily available and interestingly rendered in his sonnets and the (coincidently named) figure of Antonio in *Twelfth Night.* Critics Bruce R. Smith and Valerie Traub have led the way in considering these issues in Renaissance drama, and their work would be of help if you wish to bolster your writing with reference to outside sources.  
     
   More traditional approaches to Antonio focus on his financial dealings and what some critics refer to as his martyrdom. Compare Antonio's handling of money to Shylock's. Equally, however, you might find that Antonio can be contrasted to many of the play's characters in other ways, not least by way of his faithfulness to Bassanio. If you can arrive at a distinction or difference that separates Antonio from the other characters, see if you can use this to explain why Shakespeare leaves Antonio noticeably out in the cold as the comic feast of resolution closes the play.
3. **Portia:** While Portia is an admirably strong and intelligent woman, how does she employ these virtues in controversial ways?  
     
   Such an essay should unquestionably consider points already discussed in the "Reading to Write" section of this chapter. More than this, however, you might explore the function of Belmont, Portia's home, to which she is symbolically conjoined. Shakespeare's comedies typically feature a "Green World," a setting in which characters escape the rules and logic of the court in order to find themselves and resolve problems that are rooted back in the real world of the city. While Belmont is the Green World of this play, assess whether it serves the typical function of such a setting. How similar or different is Belmont from Venice? Again, the role of money and wealth may be your starting point here.  
     
   Finally, look critically at the ring plot that occupies the fifth act. While Portia's trick with the ring and barely veiled threats of infidelity are bawdily funny, how do they further threaten the already compromised comic ending and connect back to themes of trial and fidelity set out by the play earlier?

**History and Context**

As discussed in the "Character" section, a study of Antonio might take your writing down a distinctly historical route. To understand the implications of a homosocial love between Antonio and Bassanio, you must bring to the table more than our 21st-century notions of sexuality. An essay treating this aspect of Antonio or this theme in Shakespeare generally must attempt to understand the historical context. Although historians disagree on how the Renaissance perceived intimate, even sexual relationships between men, it is certain they did understand them differently than we do today. Many argue that the category "homosexual" did not even exist in the Renaissance, and it appears that it was common for some men to speak of a male friendship as idealized, better than a relationship with a woman precisely because it lacked the complicated and potentially ruinous sexual dimension. This theme was of enormous interest to Shakespeare and appears frequently throughout his work, so it is clear that a reading of Antonio might benefit from historical research.

If a character study of Antonio could be redirected by complementary historical research, the theme of money and wealth is unquestionably another essay topic that could likewise benefit. Historians talk of the early modern period as witnessing the birth of what we call capitalism. The way wealth and status were generated changed during Shakespeare's lifetime. Medieval economic practices such as the feudal system receded and were gradually replaced by early free markets. New attitudes to private property and consumerism radically changed the meaning of wealth, and some critics have suggested that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare breathes a sigh of disappointment and disapproval with the emerging ethos of capitalism. Find ways in which Shakespeare's play seems to speak out against a culture preoccupied with mercantilism and profit, forging from these a reading of Shakespeare's play as satire or social commentary. Lisa Jardine's excellent book on consumption and business in Renaissance Europe, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance,* is an excellent place to begin research in this area.

**Sample Topic**

1. **Judaism in Renaissance Europe:** Does Shakespeare use *The Merchant of Venice* to condemn anti-Semitism, or at least to challenge some of its harsher commonplaces?  
     
   Such an essay would attempt to see Shakespeare's text as social commentary, a document in which the dramatist contemplates the figure of the Jew in his time. Obviously, the important thing here is to recognize that you are no longer treating Shylock as a self-contained character in a self-contained play but as a creation pieced together out of cultural tradition and historic moment. Asking what Shakespeare does with that mix, how he processes the ideas, beliefs, and images of his age, is the key to this essay. James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews,* a seminal work in this particular field of Shakespeare studies, would make an excellent point of departure for such research.  
     
   It will be helpful if you are aware of the literary tradition forming the backdrop to Shakespeare's play. In early modern Europe and earlier, anti-Semitism was rooted in biblical accounts of the death of Christ. It was this perceived blame for Christ's death that spawned popular resentment of Jews and a virile tradition of folk belief and literature peopled by countless variations of the murderous Jew. This culture of hatred can be found even in the works of Chaucer, whose "Prioress' Tale" tells the story of a young Christian boy killed by envious Jews. As is discussed in the "Compare and Contrast" section below, this tradition was alive and well in Shakespeare's day, most visibly in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* (a work certainly at the front of Shakespeare's mind as he wrote *Merchant*).  
     
   Though Shakespeare was surrounded by stock representations of Jews, he probably never encountered an actual flesh-and-blood Jewish person. The number of Jews in Shakespeare's England is difficult to estimate but probably numbered only in the low hundreds. Jews had been expelled from English soil in 1290, and the remaining small number was made up mostly of immigrants from southern Europe who did not openly practice their faith. It might seem, then, as though Judaism was hardly a topical matter for Shakespeare to pick up, but Marlowe's play and the arrest and execution of Roderigo Lopez gave the subject contemporary resonance. Lopez was a Jewish doctor accused of plotting to kill Queen Elizabeth, and his traitor's death—hung, drawn, and quartered—in 1594 would have stoked anti-Jewish sentiment enough to make Shakespeare's play very much of the moment.  
     
   You might wish to investigate this cultural and historic context further, assessing Shakespeare's response to it. An essay could usefully be structured by a provocatively simple question: Is this an anti-Semitic play? You should answer this as you wish, but a safe path to steer might be the predictably qualified answer "yes and no." As many commentators have noted, it would have been impossible for Shakespeare to discard the intellectual baggage of his time entirely; look for ways in which Shylock retains some of the elements of the stock Jew, and examine how Shakespeare's play employs them to bring paying customers into his theater. But equally seek ways in which Shakespeare, even if he does not reject the anti-Semitic tradition of his culture, at least reconsiders and revises it. Your task as writer here is to catalog your evidence on either side but then assess the balance that Shakespeare strikes.

**Form and Structure**

*The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy, but an essay exploring the problems of this definition might be extremely rewarding. Most critics do not label *Merchant* as one of the "problem comedies," a small group of later comedies that explicitly and innovatively challenge the meaning of comic drama. In many ways, however, *The Merchant of Venice* anticipates the challenges to comic form offered by later plays such as *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure.* When Shakespeare challenges comedy, the approach he seems to favor most is to have all the required sweet ingredients of comedy present yet still produce a bitter flavor. One of Shakespeare's problem comedies may well end in marriage, as a comedy should, and avoid death as it must, yet its resolutions appear intentionally incomplete, its air tainted by the breath of tragedy.

**Sample Topic**

1. **The Limits of comedy in *The Merchant of Venice:*** Despite the comic closure of the play, does *Merchant* function successfully as a comedy? What elements of the play question or hinder its comic movement, even after the union of lovers in marriage?  
     
   Such an essay might start by looking at the end of the play, the moment in which a comedy should offer resolution and hope. Regardless of the appearance of unity, look for sources of discord and dissent in the final acts. The most obvious character to start with might be Shylock, but note also how Antonio, despite the return of his ships, seems excluded from the festivities at the close of the play. How are these two figures marginalized? Consider the impact of the ring plot on the comic movement as well. While it is funny, its consequences are far from comic in the formal sense of that word. Think about how Portia's threats of infidelity undercut the reconciling comic power of marriage. The thing to consider as you write this essay is effect. How does this play, regardless of its comic promise, finally manage to spread a little of Antonio's enigmatic sadness to its audience?

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

As discussed above, one of the most prominent approaches to this play, the weighing of Shylock against the Venetian Christians, inherently takes the form of compare and contrast. Be alert to the way Shakespeare draws parallels where audiences would have only expected distinctions. An essay comparing Belmont to Venice might also encourage you to find unexpected similarities. Look for ways in which the magical, carefree Belmont is as focused on money and superficiality as Venice, the city that embodied luxurious excess and wealth for the early moderns. Approaching comparison and contrast from a character perspective, you might look for yet more unanticipated common ground between Shylock and Antonio. While the play hinges on Shylock's antipathy for Antonio, what do they have in common? Look for ways in which they are both cogs in the wheel of Venetian capitalism, and perhaps explain how both characters seem to lead marginal lives despite their wealth. Yet another approach might be to look elsewhere in Shakespeare's canon for related works. *The Tempest* and *Othello* are major plays that also treat "otherness," exploring the confrontation between white Europeans and people of different religions or races. Such an essay might turn on a comparison of Shylock with Othello or Caliban, arguing as you see fit for similarities or differences in Shakespeare's level of sympathy for these characters. However, perhaps the most attractive compare and contrast opportunity would be to link *The Merchant of Venice* to a text by another great playwright of the English Renaissance.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Comparing Shylock to Christopher Marlowe's Barabas *(The Jew of Malta):*** While both Shakespeare and Marlowe base plays on a Jewish antagonist, how much do Shylock and Barabas have in common? Despite their differences, how might Shakespeare and Marlowe finally use these central characters from *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* to create related effects and social commentary?  
     
   Marlowe's play came first, so a good approach might be to assess how Shakespeare builds on *The Jew of Malta* to create his play and his representation of Shylock. You might first consider the differences between Barabas and Shylock, some of which should be quite clear. Marlowe seems to rely far more on the stereotypical figure of the villainous Jew, much like the one found in Chaucer's "Prioress' Tale" and countless vulgar ballads and stories (but perhaps he is doing so ironically). Find examples of this tradition in Marlowe's portrait, looking at moments like the slave market scene, in which Barabas boasts of his astonishingly prolific evil. Contrast this to Shylock's altogether subtler villainy. However, you may find a few ways in which Barabas is less stereotypical. For example, critics have observed that while Shylock earns his money through usury, Barabas has earned his great wealth primarily through long-distance business ventures like Antonio's. Other distinctions can be found, for example, in the relationships Barabas and Shylock have with their daughters, Abigail and Jessica.  
     
   Having found similarities or differences, you might turn to a consideration of what effect each dramatist seeks through his central Jewish figure. Look especially at how both Marlowe and Shakespeare set up divisions between Jewish and Christian communities that essentially become engines for satire and comparison. Although vastly different, what might connect, say, Ferneze in Marlowe's play with Bassanio in Shakespeare's?
2. **Contrasting Shakespeare's play to Michael Radford's film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice (2004):*** What strategies does Radford use in adapting Shakespeare's play? What are the most significant interpretive moves made by the film, and what are the effects of these choices?  
     
   With its star cast and lavish production, Radford's film adaptation of the play will surely feature regularly in classroom discussions of *Merchant* for a good many years to come. While it is faithful to the play to a great extent, it does offer some interpretations beyond the text, primarily through visual additions to the original text. One of the great opportunities of cinematic adaptations are the shots that, without adding a word to the dialogue in Shakespeare's play, can radically alter the play. Pay close attention to such moves made by Radford. For a start, what is the effect of staging Antonio's spitting on Shylock, only mentioned in the play? Why does Radford show a number of early scenes, entirely absent from Shakespeare's play, of Christian victimization of Jews in Venice? Such an essay might reflect, too, on the visibly eroticized relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Most important, however, think about the effect and meaning of the final montage. Consider the effect of shots showing Shylock and Antonio alone as the play closes, but especially think about what might be Radford's most daring visual invention: a closing shot of Jessica and the ring she was rumored to have sold for a monkey. What implications does this proof she did not sell the ring have for Jessica's character? Try to characterize early in your essay, as your thesis, the governing logic or pattern of Radford's interpretive choices in *The Merchant of Venice.*

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## Deconstructing the Christian Merchant: Antonio and *The Merchant of Venice*

**Date:** 2002  
On *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare  
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**From:** *The Merchant of Venice*, Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages.

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*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 Dostoevksy'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)7—profit from trade being more favorably associated with the exchange of goods or productive labor8—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 1571.11 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."12 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.13 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.14 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.15 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.16

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."17

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 alwayes kept the Sexton's arms in ure  
With digging graves and ringing dead mens knells  
(II, iii, 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.18 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.19 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.20 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.21 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.22

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]23

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" (III, ii, 239), as does the duke at the beginning of the trial (IV, i, 29). Bassanio calls him that "one in whom / The ancient Roman honor more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy" (III, ii, 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.24 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."25

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.26 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."27 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,"28 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!  
(I, iii, 95–99)

Poetry is used to raise the merchant socially and ethically. Antonio, appears, like Bassanio, in search of "the golden fleece" (I, i, 170), not "money-bags" (II, v, 18). Shylock is aesthetically, thus morally, deficient, and as Antonio finds out too late, not to be trusted.29

Antonio remains a model of friendship, love, and care in his relationships with all his Christian acquaintances—no small virtue in Venice. Although some critics argue that Antonio exploits his virtue to manipulate Bassanio,30 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, reveres 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," I, iii, 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" (I, iii, 174–175). 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.31 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.32 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 (I, iii, 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" (I, iii, 127–128). 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" (I, iii, 150) and "Hie thee, gentle Jew. The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I, iii, 174–175). 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" (III, i, 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.33 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."34

Bernard J. Paris argues that Antonio hates Shylock because Shylock acts out Antonio's "forbidden impulses."35 He gives no indication, however, of what those forbidden desires might be. Besides, there is little evidence in the play that suggests that Antonio unconsciously desires to be a Shylock. Quite the contrary: because he becomes involved in money matters—how else does Antonio thwart Shylock's bargains and cool 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."36 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."37 Shylock is not "better than he appears to be, but . . . the Christians are as bad as he appears to be."38 Shylock is not like the Christians, the Christians are like Jews.39

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.40 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.41 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.42 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.43 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" [I, i, 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 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" (I, i, 45). Antonio is both right and wrong about his melancholy.44 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" (I, i, 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" (V, i, 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.45 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.46 "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" (IV, i, 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. 47 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.48

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 suprising 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.  
(I, iii, 50–55)

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" (III, iii, 22–23). Are they now not in the position to reciprocate? One has one 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.  
(I, i, 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;  
Within these two months—that's a month before  
This bond expires—I do expect return  
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.  
(I, iii, 151–56)

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" (IV, i, 367–368). Portia then turns to Antonio expecting him to respond likewise, showing "the difference" of his spirit. "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (IV, i, 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.49 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?" (IV, i, 277). The pound of flesh has been trumped by conversion and revenge by *ressentiment,* "an act of the most spiritual revenge."50

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.51 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.52 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.53

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 merchants, barren feudalism will give way to venture capitalism, and the Shylocks of the world will become potential Antonios: Christian merchants. In the new age, Portia's question, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" will have no meaning.54 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" (V, i, 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.  
(III, ii, 166–174)

Bassanio responds:

But when this ring  
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence;  
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!  
(III, ii, 183–185)

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.  
(V, i, 249–256)

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.60

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.61 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 safety and made significant profits ("richly come home to harbor," V, i, 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.62 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!" (V, i, 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.*  
(IV, i, 373–376). [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**

1. F. M. Dostoievsky, *The Diary of a Writer,* tr. Boris Brasol (Santa Barbara: Smith, 1979), p. 650.

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, 1997], p.186). 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).

4. Cohen, "The Possibilities of Historical Criticism," p. 771.

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.

6. See Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), pp. 309–12; H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Middle Ages," in H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 469–72.

7. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice,* in David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare,* 3rd ed. (Glenview: Scott, 1980), pp. 260–91.

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.

10. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 98–99.

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).

12. William Ingram, *A London Life in the Brazen Age: Francis Langley, 1548*–*1608* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 40.

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).

16. As is well known, by his death in 1593, Marlowe was more renowned and imitated than his rival, William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice* is called "Shakespeare's most Marlovian play" (James Shapiro, "'Which is *The Merchant* here, and which *The Jew?*': Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 [1988], p. 269). Many studies have been devoted not only to Marlowe's relation to Shakespeare, but to *The Merchant of Venice* as a reaction to *The Jew of Malta.* See for example, Maurice Charney, "Jessica's Turquoise Ring and Abigail's Poisoned Porridge: Shakespeare and Marlowe as Rivals and Imitators," *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979), pp. 33–44; Arthur Humphreys, "*The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*: Two Readings of Life," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50:3 (1987), pp. 279–93; Shapiro, "Which is *The Merchant*?"; Thomas Cartelli, "Shakespeare's *Merchant,* Marlowe's *Jew*: The Problem of Cultural Difference," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988), pp. 255–60.

17. I have used the following edition for Marlowe's play: Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta,* in Fredson Bowers, ed., *Complete Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 259–335.

18. Cartelli, "Shakespeare's *Merchant,*" p. 255; Humphreys, "*The Jew of Malta,*" p. 286.

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" (V, v, 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" I, iii, 20–21).

23. John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (New York: Simon, 1992), pp. 54, 93.

24. Most commentators see Antonio as a Shakespearian ideal. Draper describes him as "ideal man of commerce and affairs" (Draper, "Shakespeare's Antonio," p. 178), "a pious eulogy" (p. 179), "a symbol of commercial and also of personal rectitude" (p. 179). For Humphreys, he is "the soul of self-sacrificing friendship" (Humphreys, "*The Jew of Malta,*" p. 289). For August Schlegel "the melancholy and self-sacrificing magnanimity of Antonio is affectingly sublime" (August Schlegel, *Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature: The Jew of Malta* [Bohn: London, 1846], p. 389). For detailed discussions of Antonio as Shakespeare's hero and ideal, see in addition: Myron Taylor, "The Passion of Antonio: A Reply to Recent Critics," *Christian Scholar* 99 (1966), pp. 127–31; Henry Morris Partee, "Sexual Testing in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *McNeese Review* 32 (1986–89), pp. 64–79; Bernard J. Paris, "The Not So Noble Antonio: A Horneyan Analysis of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice,*" *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49.3 (1989), pp. 189–200. Paris presents Antonio as an ideal despite the title of his article. The phrase "princely merchant" seems to be an attempt to elevate both Antonio and merchants in general: that is: not only can Antonio be a prince, but so can all merchants. It should be emphasized that as a merchant Antonio belongs to a lower class than his improvident friend Bassanio—in fact, to a class more like that of his rival, Shylock. For a discussion of Antonio's class, see Lars Engle, "'Thrift Is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in the Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986), pp. 28–29.

25. Joan Ozark Holmer, The Merchant of Venice: *Choice, Hazard, and Consequence* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995), p. 156.

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" (I, iii, 15–23) (Frank Whigham, "Ideology and Class Conduct in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *Renaissance Drama* 10 [1979], p. 104).

27. Wingham, *Ideology and Class Conduct,* p. 96.

28. Whigham, *Ideology and Class Conduct,* p. 105.

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.  
(V, i, 83–88)

30. For perhaps the earliest full statement arguing for Antonio's sacrifice as a means of possessing Bassanio, see Lawrence Hymen, "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21 (1970), pp. 109–16.

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 problematicizes to render a dramatically, theatrically satisfying experience."

32. See Halpern's analysis of Shylock's primitive hatred of Antonio in terms of the desire to feed on the flesh of the Christian (Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns,* pp. 202–3).

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" (I, iii, 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.

35. Paris, "The Not So Noble Antonio," p. 197.

36. Alter, "Who Is Shylock," pp. 33, 34.

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).

38. Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns,* p. 179.

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?" (I, i, 119–21).

44. The mysterious sources or reasons for Antonio's melancholy have always engaged scholarly interest. See, for example: R. Chris Hassel, "Antonio and the Ironic Festivity of the Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Studies* 6 (1970), pp. 67–74; Carl Goldberg, "What Ails Antonio? The Nature of Evil in Psychiatric Disorders," *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* 9.2 (1985), pp. 68–85; Cartelli, "Shakespeare's *Merchant,*" pp. 255–60.

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).

46. According to Benjamin Nelson, "Antonio's heroic suretyship to Shylock for Bassanio finds its prototype in Christ's act in serving as 'ransom' to the Devil for all mankind" (Benjamin Nelson, *The Idea of Usurety: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* [Chicago, 1969], p. 144).

47. In *The Jew of Malta,* it is Jewish Barabas who uses the word flinty to describe Christian hearts (I, ii, 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" (IV, i, 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.

50. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals,* tr. Francis Golffing (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 167. Gross calls the conversion "a form of soul-murder" (*Shylock: A Legend,* p. 90). As René Girard, the ultimate ironist, has written: "The truth of the play is revenge and 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 becomes 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).

51. Theodore Reik, *The Search Within* (New York: Aronson, 1974), pp. 358–59.

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).

56. Cohen "The Possibilities of Historical Criticism," p. 777.

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 [1981], p. 161). On this point see Hymen, "The Rival Lovers," p. 112. Graham Midgley has argued 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" (V, i, 169).

59.

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.  
Let his deservings, and my love withal,  
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.  
(IV, ii, 448–50)

60. Harry Berger writes that "Portia's advantage is like that of the conquering hero in Act V" (Berger, "Mercy and Mercifixion," p. 161).

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 court and the fencing-school" (Lawrence Stone, *The Cult of the Aristocracy* [Oxford, 1965], p. 50).

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).

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## Shakespeare's Method: *The Merchant of Venice*

**Date:** 1936  
On *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare  
**Author:** J. Middleton Murry  
**From:** *The Merchant of Venice*, Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages.

*J. Middleton Murry (1889–1957) was a prolific author, editor, and scholar. Among his other works was* Keats and Shakespeare *(1926).*

*The Merchant of Venice* probably shares with *Hamlet* the distinction of being the most popular of all Shakespeare's plays. It was not always so. After the Restoration, *The Merchant of Venice* suffered eclipse. When it was at last revived (in a drastic adaptation) at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Shylock was played as a purely comic part. Not until 1741, when Macklin played Shylock at Drury Lane, did something near to Shakespeare's text come back to the stage. The return was triumphant. "Macklin made Shylock malevolent," says Mr. Harold Child, "and of a forcible and terrifying ferocity." Macklin's Shylock, which Pope accepted as Shakespeare's, dominated the stage for nearly fifty years; and it imposed the conception described by Hazlitt:

When we first went to see Mr. Kean in Shylock, we expected to see, what we had been used to see, a decrepit 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.

With this conception of Shylock *The Merchant of Venice* became truly popular. Garrick chose it for the opening performance of Drury Lane under his management in 1747, and in it Kean made his triumphant first appearance at the same theatre in 1814. It was Kean's Shylock, as Hazlitt makes plain, which caused a revolution in the attitude of criticism towards the character. "In proportion as Shylock has ceased to be a popular bugbear, 'baited with the rabble's curse,'" wrote Hazlitt, "he becomes a half-favorite with the philosophical part of the audience, who are disposed to think that Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries."

That is a singular and significant stage-history. For both these popular Shylocks are Shakespeare's: or rather both are to be found in Shakespeare. As the attitude to the Jew became more civilized, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, so it was discovered that the new attitude also was prophetically contained in Shakespeare's Jew.

But *The Merchant of Venice* is more than Shylock. It is, more even than *Hamlet*, more than any other of Shakespeare's plays, a matter-of-fact fairy tale: a true folk story, made drama; and it makes its secular appeal to that primitive substance of the human consciousness whence folk tales took their origin. Or, without reaching back to these dark and dubious beginnings, we may say that it is, as nearly as possible, a pure melodrama or tragicomedy, an almost perfect example of the art-form which being prior to art itself, most evidently and completely satisfies the primitive man in us all. If the English theatre be considered as a place of popular entertainment, strictly on a level with the football field, the prize ring and the racecourse, then *The Merchant of Venice* is the type of entertainment the theatre should supply—villain discomfited, virtue rescued, happy marriages, clowning, thrills, and a modest satisfaction of the general appetite for naughtiness.

*The Merchant of Venice* happens to be Shakespeare's; but Shakespeare has not much to do with its popularity. True, *The Merchant of Venice* almost *is* Shakespeare in the popular mind. But this popular Shakespeare, who wrote *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*, is scarcely a person. He is rather a name which gives to these satisfactions of our elementary appetites for melodrama the prestige of art. This impersonal "Shakespeare" is a great stumbling block to criticism, which is for ever engaged, consciously and unconsciously, in the effort to dissolve him out of existence. But he did most certainly exist: he is the Shakespeare who, in his own day as in ours, was veritably popular, who tickled the groundlings because his living lay that way (and surely it was a better way than being hand-fed by the aristocracy, gratification for dedication), who did what he could to season his caviar to the general appetite, and made not a virtue of his necessity—that was hardly his nature—but the best of it.

It is the more striking, therefore, that of all the plays of this period *The Merchant of Venice* is the most typical of Shakespeare—the most expressive of what Coleridge once called his "omni-humanity". It contains tragedy, comedy high and low, love lyricism; and, notably, it does not contain any "Shakespearian" character. The Berowne-Mercutio-Benedick figure, witty, debonair, natural, is diffused into a group of young Venetian noblemen, all credible and substantial, but none possessing the inimitable individuality of their progenitor. Antonio, who stands apart from them, and was (if my judgment of the various verse-styles of the play is to be trusted) the last figure in it to have been elaborated, is a singular character. He supplies a background of sadness to the whole drama. He seems to be older than the friends who surround him, and detached from their thoughtless extravagance. Actually, in his final elaboration, by reason of the quality and color given to him by Shakespeare's rewriting of Act I, Scene I, he becomes, as a character, slightly inconsistent with the contemptuous opponent of Shylock of later scenes; but it is not the function of Antonio to be primarily a dramatic "character." In that capacity, he is negative; he is a shadow beside Shylock and Portia, and unsubstantial even in comparison with his Venetian entourage. But as the vehicle of an atmosphere, he is one of the most important elements in the play. He provides, for the beginning of the play, what the lyrical antiphony of Lorenzo and Jessica supplies for the end of it—a kind of musical overtone which sets the spiritual proportions of the drama. He shades into the Duke of *Twelfth Night*.

The analogue between *The Merchant of Venice* and a musical composition is significant, I think, when taken in conjunction with the basic popularity of the play and the probability that its origin is to be sought in a play of many years before called *The Jew*, which Stephen Gosson exempted from abuse in 1579 because it displayed "the greediness of worldly chusers and the bloody mind of usurers." That is too apt a summary of the purely dramatic content of *The Merchant of Venice* to be accidental, and it fits too well with our impression of the play as the product of much rewriting to be ignored. Whether or not *The Merchant* is, as Malone suggested, the "Venetian Comedy" mentioned by Henslowe in 1594—a date which would suit very well for Shakespeare's first drafting of *his* play—may be left undecided. The important fact is that in *The Merchant* we have, almost certainly, Shakespeare's treatment of a dramatic plot which came to him, substantially, as a datum.

Out of this substance Shakespeare wrought a miracle. He transformed it, and yet he left the popular substance essentially the same. What he did not, could not, and, so far as we can see or guess, would not do, was to attempt to make it an intellectually coherent whole. That seems to have been no part of his purpose; he did not entertain the idea because he knew it was impossible. The coherence of *The Merchant of Venice* is not intellectual or psychological; and there has been much beating of brains in the vain effort to discover in it a kind of coherence which it was never meant to possess.

As an example of what I believe to be a radical misunderstanding of the nature of *The Merchant of Venice*, we may take the edition of the play in the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*. It will serve as a typical example of a mistaken approach to Shakespeare, for *The Merchant* in its origins, its methods of composition, and its final splendor, is typical of Shakespeare's achievement. The very stubbornness of his material compelled, I believe, a more or less complete abeyance of Shakespeare's personality. In his work upon this play he was pre-eminently the "artist," but not in the modern and largely romantic sense of the word.

When the news of the disaster to Antonio's ventures comes to Belmont, in the very ecstasy of happiness there, Jessica adds her witness to Salerio's report of Shylock's implacability:

When I was with him, I have heard him swear  
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,  
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh  
Than twenty times the value of the sum  
That he did owe him: and I know, my lord,  
If law, authority and power deny not,  
It will go hard with poor Antonio. (III. ii. 285–91)

On this passage, the New Cambridge editors have the following note:

We are tempted to put this speech into square brackets as one from the old play which Shakespeare inadvertently left undeleted in the manuscript. Note it jars upon a nerve which Shakespeare of all writers was generally most careful to avoid: that a daughter should thus volunteer evidence against her father is hideous . . .

This fits, precisely, with the description of Jessica given in the essay of general introduction to the play:

Jessica is bad and disloyal, unfilial, a thief; frivolous, greedy, without any more conscience than a cat, and without even a cat's redeeming love of home. Quite without heart, on worse than an animal instinct—pilfering to be carnal—she betrays her father to be a light-of-lucre carefully weighted with her father's ducats.

This is, indeed, to break a butterfly upon a wheel. But more alarming than the severity of the sentence is its irrelevance. *The Merchant of Venice* is not a realistic drama; and its characters simply cannot be judged by realistic moral standards. Jessica, taken out of the play, and exposed to the cold light of moral analysis, may be a wicked little thing; but in the play, wherein alone she has her being, she is nothing of the kind—she is charming. She runs away from her father because she is white and he is black; she is much rather a princess held captive by an ogre than the unfilial daughter of a persecuted Jew. Whether or not it is true that Shakespeare "of all writers" was most careful to avoid representing unfilial behaviour without condemning it—and the proposition becomes doubtful when we think of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*—it is almost certainly true that he did not himself conceive, or imagine that others would conceive, that Jessica's behaviour was unfilial. The relations between the wicked father and the lovely daughter are governed by laws nearly as old as the hills.

Yet even so, in rejecting Jessica's words as un-Shakespearian because morally hideous, the *New Cambridge Shakespeare* is not consistent; for the introductory essay discusses the problem how it is that Shylock is made "sympathetic" to us, and argues that it is because he is deserted by his bad and disloyal daughter: "he is intolerably wronged," and we feel for him accordingly. We cannot have it both ways; we cannot argue that Shakespeare deliberately made Jessica unfilial in order to gain our sympathy for the Jew, and at the same time reject a passage as un-Shakespearian because in it Jessica reveals herself unfilial. The dilemma is absolute, but it is of the modern critic's making, not Shakespeare's. It is the direct result of applying to *The Merchant of Venice* a kind of criticism which it was never meant to satisfy.

Criticism of this kind seeks for psychological motives where none were intended or given. Shylock's hatred of Antonio is, in origin, a fairy-tale hatred, of the bad for the good. And perhaps this fairy-tale hatred is more significant than a hatred which can (if any hatred can) be justified to the consciousness. At any rate Shakespeare was at all times content to accept this antagonism of the evil and the good as self-explanatory. Not to speak of Iago, or Goneril, or Edmund, in the very next play in the Folio, *As You Like It*, which was probably written at about the same time as *The Merchant of Venice*, Oliver, in plotting Orlando's death, similarly confesses his elemental hatred of his brother: "I hope I shall see an end of him; for my soul, yet I know not why, hates nothing more than he." Some would explain these simple assertions of a primal antagonism as compelled by the conditions of the Elizabethan theatre, which required the characters clearly to label themselves as villains or heroes; but it is quite as likely that Shakespeare accepted the sheer opposition of good and evil as an ultimate fact of the moral universe. Assuredly, if it was a necessary convention of the Elizabethan theatre, it was a convention which Shakespeare found it easy to use for his own purposes. For the hatred of his villains always lies deeper than their consciousness.

Thus Shylock at one moment declares that he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian"; at another, because he is a trade rival: "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will." If we take the psychological point of view, the contradiction should not trouble us. We may say that Shylock is trying, as later Iago will try, to rationalize his hatred of Antonio: that he contradicts himself in so doing, is in accord with everyday experience. Or, on a different level, we may say that Shakespeare himself is trying to rationalize his elemental story. Unlike Oliver, who appears only at the beginning and the end of *As You Like It*, unlike the unsubstantial Don John in *Much Ado*, Shylock is the main figure of the play. What is in reality the simple fact of his hatred has to be motivated. Oliver and Don John are not required to be credible; Shylock is.

But these two kinds of explanation are not contradictory, as some critics think they are. They are two modes, two levels, of the operation of the same necessity: the "psychologization" of a story that is a datum. In the process, Antonio's character suffers some slight damage. He spits upon Shylock's Jewish gaberdine. If we reflect in cold blood on Antonio's reported behavior to Shylock, we are in danger of thinking that Shylock's intended revenge was not excessive. But we are not meant or allowed to reflect upon it. We are not made to *see* this behavior. It is a sudden shifting of the values in order to make Shylock sympathetic to us at the moment he is proposing the bond. This is a dramatic device of which Shakespeare was always a master. But because Shakespeare was Shakespeare it is something more than a dramatic device.

Shylock undoubtedly is, to a certain degree, made sympathetic to us; and it is important to discover how it is done. For this, almost certainly, was a radical change wrought by Shakespeare in the crude substance of the old play. But the effect was certainly not achieved by Shakespeare's representing Shylock as the victim of Jessica's ingratitude. On the contrary, Shakespeare is most careful to prevent any such impression from taking lodgment in our minds. At the moment when we might feel a little uneasy about Jessica's treatment of her father, any nascent misgiving is stifled by Salerio's description of Shylock's outcry at the discovery:

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. 14–22)

It is not the loss of his daughter that moves Shylock, but only the loss of his money. Shylock, at this moment, is presented as an ignoble being whom Jessica does well to escape and despoil.

Shylock is deliberately made unsympathetic when it is required to cover Jessica. He is made sympathetic when Shakespeare feels the need, or welcomes the opportunity of making a truly dramatic contrast between Shylock and Antonio. At critical moments he is given dignity and passion of speech and argument to plead his cause to us and to himself. His hatred then is represented as deep, irrational and implacable, but not as mean and mercenary. It is then a force of nature—something greater than himself:

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,  
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing  
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus  
A losing suit against him. (IV. i. 59–62)

"A losing suit," because he, who grieves more for his ducats than his daughter, refuses many times the value of his debt to have his bond of Antonio; and his implacability is supplied with excuses enough to more than half persuade us—Antonio's expressed contempt for him, and the magnificent speech, which may have been hardly less magnificent in the verse from which Shakespeare seems to have changed it.

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! And 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. 71 *sq*)

Not content with that, Shakespeare in the trial scene gives Shylock a truly tremendous argument:

Duke. How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?  
Shy. What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?  
You have among you many a purchased 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 urthens? let their beds  
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates  
Be seasoned 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: 'tis mine and I will have it.  
If you deny me, fie upon your law!  
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.  
I stand for judgment: answer, shall I have it? (IV. i. 87–103)

Shall I not do as I will with mine own? It is the morality of a whole society, to which Antonio and his friends belong no less than Shylock, which Shylock challenges here, and by anticipation blunts the edge of Portia's great plea for mercy. As Hazlitt put it, in his tempestuous way, "the appeal to the Jew's mercy, as if there were any common principle of right and wrong between them, is the rankest hypocrisy, the blindest prejudice." The world where mercy prevails is not the world of the play. That is a world where justice is the bulwark of injustice.

This is much more than a dramatic device to gain a momentary sympathy for Shylock; yet it is less, or at least other, than a deliberate posing of a profound moral problem. *The Merchant of Venice* is not a problem play; it is a fairy story, within the framework of which Shakespeare allowed free working to the thoughts of his mind and the feelings of his heart. What an unfettered Shylock might say, this fettered Shylock does say.

In other words, Shylock is both the embodiment of an irrational hatred, and a credible human being. He is neither of these things to the exclusion of the other. And if we ask how can that be? the only answer is that it is so. This was Shakespeare's way of working. If we choose, we may say that there are in the story primitive elements which he could not wholly assimilate to his own conception; but such an explanation, in *The Merchant of Venice* as in *Hamlet*, brings us against the fact that the dramatic impression made by these plays is the impression of an artistic whole. And, indeed, it seems more probable that Shakespeare did not deal in "conceptions" of the kind that are often attributed to him. He set himself in successive attempts to infuse a general impression of credibility into an old story, and to secure from his audience no more, and no less, than "that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith."

One cannot too often emphasize the nature of Shakespeare's dramatic "method." It was not chosen by him, neither was it imposed upon his reluctant genius; it was simply the condition of the work he had chosen to do. The situation was given; necessarily, therefore, the "characters" in a certain primitive sense—much the same sense in which we can speak of "characters" in a nursery-story like Cinderella or Robin Hood or a Punch and Judy show. They are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story. Shakespeare proceeded to endow them with poetic utterance, and with character in a quite different sense. He did what he could to make them credible human beings to himself. He gave them so far as was possible, humanly plausible motives for their acts and situations, although these were often in fact prior to humane psychology. In a word, the method of Shakespeare's drama consists, essentially, in the humanization of melodrama. And each of those terms must have real validity for the Shakespeare critic who is to avoid ascending or descending into some private universe of his own and calling it Shakespeare.

This Shakespeare, who strove to humanize melodrama, and yet was perforce content with the immediate dramatic impression—an "essential Shakespeare," if ever there was one—is apparently very difficult for modern criticism to grasp. There is something monstrous about him which must be brought to order. The methods of disciplining him are various. In their extreme form they were practised by the late Mr. J. M. Robertson, and consisted in assigning to somebody else, on "stylistic" grounds, nearly all that was unpalatable in Shakespeare. In the more circumspect form, practised by the New Cambridge editors, they are a combination of discovering "old-play-fossils," which generally contain the parts of Shakespeare which are held to be morally or aesthetically reprehensible, and downright charges of bad workmanship, by standards which are irrelevant. Thus, the New Cambridge edition argues that, since "everyone of the Venetian *dramatis personae* is either a 'waster' or a 'rotter' or both, and cold-hearted at that," the true dramatic contrast between Shylock and Antonio and his friends is blurred.

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 wakes his intended victims, as a class and by habit, just as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock's passionate excuse.

The basis of this argument is surely mistaken. To supply the true dramatic contrast to Shylock's insistence upon his bond, not rare Christian charity, but ordinary human decency is enough. The contrast would not be heightened, but made intolerable, if Antonio and his friends were represented as uncanonized saints. Deliberate and conscious cruelty is an outrage upon ordinary human nature. And the careless paganism of Antonio's friends—ordinary "decent" young aristocrats—is the proper foil to it.

Antonio and his friends are unconscious. They do not realize any more than did the average decent man of Shakespeare's day, that their morality is essentially no finer than Shylock's, or rather that Shylock's is the logical consequence of their own. Because they are unconscious, they are forgiven; where Shylock, being conscious, cannot be. And that is true to life. Logic in morality is intolerable and inhuman, and Antonio's escape from Shylock's revenge by a legal quibble is poetic justice. The impediment of logic and law is broken down by logic and law, and the stream of human life—ordinary, approximate, unconscious, instinctive human life—can flow on. The decency of an age and an average prevails over the design of an isolated bitterness.

There is a morality in *The Merchant of Venice*, though it is not of the formulable kind; nor is it a morality on the level of the deepest insights expressed in the play. Shylock's incrimination of "Christian" society, Portia's appeal to Christian mercy—these are overtones, as it were caught from the celestial spheres.

Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:  
There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest  
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 us in, we cannot hear it. (V. i. 58–65)

No one distinctly hears that harmony in the play: and it would be fatal if they did. For this play was never intended to vex us with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls, but "to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in these points where the nature of things doth deny it."

That axiom of Bacon's may be applied not merely to *The Merchant of Venice* as a whole, but to Shakespeare's work upon the story. If we try to make the play as a whole consistent with the points in which Shakespeare gave satisfaction to his own mind, we retire discomfited. If we persist, we are landed in critical extravagance. Thus one of the New Cambridge editors (who is in general a very fine critic) condemns Shakespeare as a bad workman because he did not attune all the Venetian gallants to the key of Portia's appeal for mercy. He dismisses the rest of Antonio's friends as beneath contempt, and concentrates his indignation upon Bassanio.

When we first meet him, he is in debt, a condition on which—having to confess it because he wants to borrow more money—he expends some very choice diction.

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,  
[No, it certainly was not!]  
How much I have disabled mine estate,  
By something showing a more swelling port  
Than my faint means would grant continuance.

That may be a mighty fine way of saying you have chosen to live beyond your income; but Shakespeare or no Shakespeare, if Shakespeare means us to hold Bassanio for an honest fellow, it is mighty poor poetry. For poetry, like honest men, looks things in the face and does not ransack its wardrobe to clothe what is naturally unpoetical.

Moral indignation runs floodgate here: for the consequences of this statement are, first, that it is "naturally unpoetical" to live beyond your income, and second that poetry should look such a condition "in the face." What the effect of this contemplation would be we cannot surmise—perhaps a naturally unpoetical poetry. At all events it is clear that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has for the moment become unmindful of the very nature of poetic drama; he would banish the generous spendthrift from it for ever.

Even so Bassanio is not done with. He crowns his unmitigated offences by paying suit among the rivals to Portia's' hand.

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.

Now this (says his stern mentor) is bad workmanship and dishonoring to Bassanio . . . But he gets the money of course, equips himself lavishly, arrives at Belmont; and here comes in worst workmanship. For I suppose that, while character weighs in drama, if one thing more than another is certain, it is that a predatory young gentleman such as Bassanio would *not* have chosen the leaden casket.

To all which the only reply is that every ordinary reader of the play, so far from considering Bassanio predatory, hopes, expects, is certain, that so debonair a gentleman will choose the right box. The lapse is not in Shakespeare's workmanship, but in his editor's judgment. Shakespeare remembered what he was doing, his editor has forgotten. *The Merchant of Venice* is not, and was never intended to be, a realistic problem-play. It is possible not to like what it is; but the first duty of a critic is to see it as what it is, and not as something quite different. No one would hold up tragicomedy as the highest form of poetic drama; but it is a separate form, with a quality and flavor all its own. *The Merchant of Venice* is the finest example of it that we possess.

Dr. Dover Wilson's method of dealing with the baffling substance of *The Merchant of Venice* is different. He does not accuse Shakespeare of being a bad workman. He convinces himself that there are substantial elements of a pre-Shakespearian play in Shakespeare's text. He reaches this conviction, in fact, on *a priori* grounds, for his bibliographical evidence points merely to the probability of revision, which any careful reader of the play will admit; it supplies no ground for supposing that the original text, which Shakespeare revised and revised again, was not Shakespeare's own. But for some cause Dr. Dover Wilson is anxious to prove that there is non-Shakespearian matter in the play. There is—and it hardly needs proving. The bare plot is, almost certainly, not Shakespeare's own. But Dr. Dover Wilson wants to prove much more than this: namely, that substantial elements of the writing are not Shakespeare's. And the cause of this anxiety, we believe, is that he is perplexed by the substance of the play. At all events, the anxiety must needs be devouring to enable him to imagine that there is any validity in the argument he uses. "Mere surmise is not enough," he truly says. "What we need is proof, and proof of such a kind as will leave no doubt that two distinct dramatists have been at work on the structure of the play." The sentiment is admirable. But Dr. Wilson thus continues:

The divergent conceptions of the Venetian polity evident in the play, though hitherto unnoticed by critics, furnish, we think, the proof required. Consider these three passages:

He plies the duke at morning and at night,  
And doth impeach the freedom of the state,  
If they deny him justice. (iii. ii. 278–80)  
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)  
I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,  
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn  
To have the due and forfeit of my bond:  
If you deny it, let the danger light  
Upon your charter and the city's freedom. (iv, i. 35–9)

In the second we recognize the historical Venetian republic, the independent state, the great world port and world market, whose trade and confidence were only secured by the city's even-handed and rigorous enforcement of the law of contract. In the third passage the constitution has completely changed; Venice has now become a city, like London or many other English townships, enjoying privileges under a royal charter, privileges liable to suspension if the city misbehaved itself. As for the first of the three passages, it must remain uncertain what type of constitution it has in view, seeing that "freedom" may refer either to "the commodity (i.e. privileges) that strangers have" in the port of Venice, or to the freedom of the city itself from royal or baronial interference. Indeed, one may hazard the guess that it was just the ambiguity of this word "freedom" which gave rise to the contradiction in the other two passages. In any case, it can hardly be denied that the contradiction is there and that its presence makes it absolutely certain that two different dramatists have been at work upon the text. Nor, we think, should there be any doubt which of the two was Shakespeare. The historically accurate lines from III, iii give us pedestrian and unskilful verse, witness the awkwardness of "since that," the ugly repetition in "deny . . . denied," and the muddled construction of the whole sentence which no commentator has quite succeeded in unravelling. On the other hand, the lines which inaccurately credit Venice with a royal charter come not only from the trial scene, but from the mouth of one of Shakespeare's supreme creations at his most characteristic moment.

We have quoted the argument entire, because it shows very plainly the process by which non-literary theory can tamper with literary judgment. No one reading those three passages without prepossession would be inclined to deny any one of them to Shakespeare. To adduce the "muddled construction" of the second as evidence that it is not Shakespeare's is perverse. Compressed and pregnant syntax of precisely that kind (where the main drift is plain) is pre-eminently Shakespearian.1 Further, if the passages came before us simply as anonymous fragments, we should naturally conclude that the second was from the same hand as the first: the phrases, "impeach the freedom of the state," "impeach the justice of the state," would certainly be attributed by the ordinary literary critic to the same pen. Dr. Wilson, however, requires us to believe that each is the work of a different hand, simply because the conceptions of Venetian polity in two of them are inconsistent. Since when is Shakespeare required to be rigidly consistent in such matters? Shall we conclude that two distinct dramatists had a hand in *Othello* because the members of the Council are in one place called "senators" and in another "consuls," and a third where Iago says that Brabantio is twice as powerful as the Duke and has power of his own motion to divorce Desdemona from the Moor. Every reader of Shakespeare knows that he was quite careless of consistency in such matters. Dr. Wilson himself knows this far better than most of us, but he has managed to persuade himself, and would persuade us, that the negligible inconsistency "makes it absolutely certain" that in *The Merchant of Venice* two different dramatists have been at work upon the text of yet a third.

We believe that these are aberrations of criticism, and that they ultimately derive from the peculiarity of Shakespeare's methods, which are perhaps exceptionally prominent in *The Merchant of Venice*. The unity of a Shakespeare play (if we may generalize) is seldom what would be described today as a unity of conception. That was precluded, save in rare cases, by the necessities of Shakespeare's peculiar craft. The axiom, which has long been current in Shakespeare criticism, that the situation derives from the character is, in the main, a mistaken one. The reverse is nearer to the truth; for the situations are generally prior to the characters. But that does not mean, as some modern critics assert, that the reverse is the truth, and that the characters derive from the situations. They do not. They are largely epiphenomenal to the situations.

This is difficult to grasp, because it is so simple. There is an element in a Shakespeare character which derives from the situation; but that element is relatively small compared to the element which floats as it were free of the situation. On this element Shakespeare lavished himself, because here he was, within limits, a free agent. A simple example is Antonio's motiveless melancholy at the opening of *The Merchant*. It is motiveless: because it is motiveless, modern "scientific" criticism explains it away by a "cut." "We have here," says Dr. Dover Wilson, "a dramatic motive deliberately suppressed at the time of a revision, and the broken line 'I am to learn' shows us where one of the 'cuts' involved in this suppression took place." On the contrary, I am persuaded that Shakespeare intended Antonio's melancholy to be motiveless and that the half-line was deliberate. Shakespeare was taking advantage of that part of Antonio's character which was free to introduce a depth into his character, and still more a feeling-tone into the play, which he felt the play could bear, and which would enrich it. That Antonio's character, as fixed by the situation, does not fully square with this; that he has subsequently to be one who "rails upon" the Jews, and spits upon a Jewish gaberdine, did not trouble Shakespeare. He had had to learn not to be troubled by such necessities. Antonio would remain a presence in the responsive imagination, a character whose, nature was not wholly expressed in the acts required of him. It is not otherwise with Shylock. Shylock's "free" character is created of sentiments and thoughts which are, on any cool analysis, incompatible with the acts required of him. The "bloody-minded usurer" is the mouthpiece of an oppressed nation and the impassioned critic of current Christian morality; yet he is, because he has to be, "the bloody-minded usurer" as well. And Shakespeare, as we have seen, will exalt and degrade him at need, either to make uncouthness in the action more plausible, or to wring every atom of imaginative and dramatic possibility out of the central situation. As Dr. Bridges wrote, "He had, as it were, a balance to maintain, and a fine sense of its equipoise: if one scale descends, he immediately throws something into the other, and though he may appear to be careless as to what he throws in, he only throws in such things as he knows he may be careless about. But an examination of those matters would tend to prove that he did not regard the reader as well as the audience of his plays."

Coherent, in the modern sense of the word, such characters are not. Nor are they even consistent among themselves, so to speak. At their best, which is often, they create the inimitable Shakespearian impression of being imagined "in the round" and exhibiting in action only one aspect of their rich substance to us; at the worst, which is rare, they are puzzling and demand from the reader more than the normal effort towards the willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith. Such a method of character-creation could arise (I think) only out of a sort of consubstantiality of the poet with the theatre. It was imposed by the practice of rewriting time-honored and time-proven theatrical material: and it is notable that where Shakespeare had a relatively free hand this imaginative ambiguity is much less frequent. For in this order we should need to make a distinction between story-material which was familiar to Shakespeare's audience, and story-material which, though not of Shakespeare's invention, was not familiar to them. The degree of Shakespeare's liberty to adjust his dramatic action to his imaginative need must have varied greatly according to the definiteness of popular expectation.

To determine that variation is, perhaps fortunately, beyond our power. We lack the knowledge, and it is unlikely that we shall ever attain it. But it is worthy of more than passing notice that the two perennially popular plays of Shakespeare—*The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*—are the two of which we can say, most definitely, that his freedom to alter the action was most limited; and that they are also the plays in which the nature of the chief character is most disputed.

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## Law and Self-Interest in *The Merchant of Venice*

**Date:** 2006  
by William Shakespeare  
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Shakespearean comedy is notable for the blitheness with which, in some latter acts, rulers overturn laws they have previously described as inexorable. In the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Duke Theseus tells the hapless Hermia she must acquiesce in her father's choice of husband for her, enter a nunnery, or die, since the Athenian law that gives Egeus the right to dispose of his daughter is one that the duke "by no means [ … ] may extenuate" (1.1.120).1 Yet in act four Theseus discovers a means to change the law. He can simply do it. Encountering Hermia and Lysander outside the Athenian wood, the duke overrides the complaint of Egeus—who "beg[s] the law, the law, upon [the] head" of Lysander for stealing his daughter—announcing, "Egeus, I will overbear your will" (4.1.155, 179). A similar reversal occurs in *The Comedy of Errors*. There the Duke of Ephesus initially tells the captive merchant egeon that though he "may pity" he may "not pardon" him for his illegal entry into ephesus, a city at war with egeon's city, Syracuse (1.1.97). egeon must die unless someone buys his release. yet in act five, the Duke waves away the bag of ducats Egeon's son tries to hand him as "pawn" for his father, saying breezily, "It shall not need; thy father hath his life" (5.1.390). Audiences never question the late-term rule-changes in these plays, since their causes are manifest in the comedies' conclusions. As romantic (rather than satiric humors) comedies, these plays' final scenes are consecrated to celebrations of love, not law: family reunion, marital reconciliation, and above all erotic harmony. When facing the miraculous finding of lost relatives and amazing tales of spiritually restorative magical events, civic law may properly bow.

What I want to explore is the diminishment of romantic-comic fulfillment in a play in which law does not bow to love: where, in fact, the reverse occurs, and love conforms to law. *The Merchant of Venice* violates Shakespearean comic convention, by which eros nullifies or overrides rules. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the law that makes it "death for anyone in Mantua / To come to Padua" is only a hoax Tranio invents to get a Mantuan to don disguise and help in a wooing scheme (4.2.81–82). In *Love's Labor's Lost*, the Navarran king's rules against men's fraternization with ladies do not survive the play's first scene. Even the contorted and troublesome conclusion of *Measure for Measure* depends, for its various marital pairings and formal reconciliations, on Duke Vincentio's pardoning of the play's sexual criminals, Angelo, Claudio, Lucio, and Juliet. Only in *The Merchant of Venice* are conflicts resolved through adherence to law rather than by law's suspension. Thus the comedy affords no romantic release from law's domain into the realm of love, where private selves are generously sacrificed to a larger, shared identity. Instead, the play proposes a generosity and sacrifice tempered by underlying rules that limit and curb those qualities and that ensure private selves and private property are kept safe. Put another way, since rules and laws in *The Merchant of Venice* concern the contractual safeguarding of things, their sway has an anti-comic because anti-erotic effect. *The Merchant of Venice* celebrates not characters' warm embrace of mutual identity, as in marriage, but their cold preservation or augmentation of what they legally own. (Certainly Shakespeare derived some skepticism regarding love's power to nullify self-interestedness from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, a play wherein the "wind that bloweth all the world" is not eros but "[d]esire of gold" [*The Jew of Malta* 3.5.3–4].) Thus *The Merchant of Venice* dramatizes the sobering influence of a mercantile ethic, enshrined in law, on a romantic-comic economy.

Contractual laws, or rules, designed to keep property safe hold sway in *The Merchant of Venice* despite its Christians' protestations of absolute generosity. Throughout the comedy not only enemies, like Shylock and Antonio, but lovers and friends hedge their commitments to one another with rules, charges, directions, and laws safeguarding their interests. Things are not given, but loaned. Debts are incurred and are not dismissed. "To you, Antonio," Bassanio says in the play's first scene, "I owe the most in money and in love" (1.1.130–131). Bassanio's statement is not merely a poetic description of an emotional debt, but a literal account of a real financial problem in whose light the play's romantic plot will be launched. Bassanio owes Antonio money as well as love, and must repay it. His decision to woo Portia is thus seen to arise not from erotic impulse (as do, for example, Claudio's pursuit of Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Lysander's of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Syracusan Antipholus's of Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors*). Bassanio's plan is instead a scheme "to get clear of all the debts [he] owe[s]" (1.1.133–134). Portia's eroticism is similarly chilled by the care with which she provides for her own interests while ostensibly surrendering them to Bassanio. Once he has won her, she eloquently pledges her house, servants, and self to him "with this ring," but provides a caveat that entitles her to revoke all gifts if he breaks the rules that govern the ring's disposition. Such violation of the rules will give her "vantage"—a financial term meaning "profit"—to "exclaim on," or legally arraign, Bassanio for the breach (3.2.170–174).2 Presumably when that happens, all bets will be off.

Even the generous Antonio, like Portia, hedges his kindness with caveats. "My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions," he tells Bassanio in the play's first scene (1.1.138–139). But subsequent scenes disclose that that purse and person have their price. In an exercise of what Barbara Correll has called "emotional usury"3—or, to quote Timon of Athens, "usuring kindness" (4.3.509)—Antonio will promise to clear Bassanio's debt to him "if [he] might but see [him] at [his] death" (3.2.319–320), and when Bassanio comes to witness, in the Venetian courtroom, what he thinks will be Antonio's death, he is charged with nurturing and promoting Antonio's claim on his own heart. "Commend me to your honorable wife," Antonio instructs him then,

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. (4.1.273–277)

After the courtroom scene, Antonio further demands that Bassanio demonstrate that he values Antonio's love more than Bassanio's "wife's commandement" that he safeguard her ring (4.1.449–451). The language of loan, not of gift, marks Antonio's speech, as in his final description, in the play's last scene, of his prior transaction with Bassanio: "I once did lend my body for his wealth" (5.1.249). He does not say "I once did give my body for his love." Sylvan Barnet, editor of the Signet edition of this play, strives in a footnote to soften this crass reminder of the money relations among our heroes Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio, glossing "wealth" as "welfare" ("I once did lend my body for his welfare" [n249, 98]). But Shakespeare wrote "wealth." Out of that wealth, we remember, was to come repayment of Bassanio's original debt to Antonio. So Antonio's diction is apt. It reminds us that this play's plots have not been impelled by an impulse toward wild erotic self-surrender but by the regulated claims of property. *The Merchant of Venice*'s celebrated darkness has much to do with the fact that in it, rules and laws concerning private ownership are never forgotten or departed from either in Belmont or in Venice, but instead preserved obsessively, even absurdly, to the very letter, by others besides Shylock.

It is not that the Venetians do not love, but that love—an impulse and commitment that upholds a shared rather than a private identity—is not the prime motivator of their actions. Many scholars have observed that among all this play's characters, money and emotional interests are inextricably mixed.4 True to his promise—"we will resemble you" (3.1.68)—Shylock is like the Christians in his intermingling of private emotional *and* financial claims. He likes profit, but his chief charge against Antonio finally has little to do with money; he turns down twice the number of ducats Bassanio owes him because he has paid a higher emotional price for Antonio's flesh (it is "dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it," he threatens [4.1.100]). Both in soliloquy and conversation with Tubal, he has framed his desire to kill Antonio as a business decision ("were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will" [3.1.127–129]). But the scene in which his anguished reaction to Jessica's elopement is interwoven with his glee at Antonio's business losses shows a more complicated self-concern. That a Christian has invaded Shylock's family justifies his radical reach for financial security through harming a Christian, he seems to conclude.

As for Jessica, her love for Lorenzo is bound to the social advantage she imagines she will acquire by marrying him.5 "[A]shamed to be [her] father's child," she will "end this strife" by "[b]ecom[ing] a Christian and [Lorenzo's] loving wife" (2.3.17, 20–21). Lorenzo's love for Jessica is expressed in terms that suggest his similarly mixed motives of love and private acquisitiveness. "She hath directed / How I shall take her from her father's house, / What gold and jewels she is furnished with" (2.4.29–31).6 Although Jessica and Lorenzo break the law, stealing from Shylock to pad their pockets, their thievery is oddly validated by law in act four. After Shylock's claims on Antonio's person are thwarted in court, the Duke requires Shylock to "record a gift / Here in the court of all he dies possessed / Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter" (4.1.388–390). This ruling both safeguards Shylock's property, or a portion of it, during his life and preserves Jessica's portion, implicitly and retrospectively reframing the theft of money and jewels as a lawful activity. Shylock must legally will his possessions to "the gentleman / That lately *stole* his daughter" (4.1.384–385). Here again, law is not suspended but called into service to support, not love, but financial security. For the apparently broke Lorenzo and Jessica, who have squandered their cash and jewels at the gaming tables of Genoa, this contractual promise of financial support will be "manna" for "starved people" (5.1.294–295).

Superficially, Portia appears radically to contrast with those in the play who, like Shylock, want what is legally theirs. The apparent possessor of limitless wealth, she offers it all to Bassanio: "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/ Is now converted," she tells him.

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.[ … ] (3.2.166–171)

Yet, as I, and other scholars, have noted, Portia hedges her promise with stipulations regarding the safeguarding of a ring, then works against that ring's safeguarding by encouraging Bassanio to give it away, and in the play's last scene re-presents the ring to him without renewing her generous pledge of house, servants, and self. "[B]id him keep it better than the other," she says briefly, to Antonio, the second time (5.1.255). She reminds Bassanio that to secure his gain in her, he must conform to the rules with which she regulates that gain.7 Bassanio and his follower Gratiano are the "Jasons"; they have "won the Fleece" (3.2.241). Still, audiences may know that Jason lost everything in the end for not respecting the rights of his wife.

Portia's final contract with Bassanio is the last expression of a proprietary attitude she has demonstrated throughout the play. Her concern to keep what she owns is implied early by her anti-comic insistence on honoring her father's will. Portia's free choice of a husband is not hampered by an angry Egeus or even a benign Baptista, but by a piece of paper that pledges her material estate to the suitor who wins the casket game. "[S]o is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.24–25), she sighs. That Portia abides by her father's will indicates that she—a woman as unromantic as are Bassanio and Lorenzo—is not willing both to marry and be penniless. Superficially her words to Bassanio upon his arrival in Belmont express self-abandonment in pursuit of the larger self found in erotic relationship, yet they also imply the same frustrated desire for control of property—including control over herself—that she has expressed in the play's first scene. "One half of me is yours, the other half yours," she tells her suitor. "Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours, / And so all yours! O these naughty times / Puts bars between the owners and their rights" (3.2.16–19). But Portia finds a means to squeeze between those bars. No less committed than Shylock to the rules, she works within them to achieve not only the husband of her desire but the mastery of her fortune and her fortunes. While numerous scholars have suggested that Portia cheats and helps Bassanio win the wooing game,8 she does not cheat but hints, thus upholding the letter if not the spirit of her father's law. Portia ensures that while Bassanio makes his choice, he is sung a song whose first three lines rhyme with the word "lead," the metal of which the right casket is made (3.2.63–65). Doubtless Portia stands by, supplying the "fair speechless messages" her eyes are wont to give Bassanio, as he has earlier bragged to Antonio (1.1.163–166). Thus she ensures his victory without breaking the rules.

Once he has won, despite her words of absolute committal of her wealth and person, she never stops exercising proprietary rights over her stuff, which now includes Bassanio, as Corinne Abate (292) and Sandra Logan have noted. It is Portia, not Bassanio, who offers money to redeem Antonio once the message concerning his wreck is brought (3.2.299). Even after their hasty marriage, she goes where she pleases and refers to her servants as "My people" (3.4.37). Bassanio may return to Venice after he obeys her instructions, which are, "First go with me to church and call me wife" (3.2.304). "*By your leave*, / I bid my very friends and countrymen, / Sweet Portia, welcome," Bassanio says meekly when his friends arrive from Venice (3.2.222–224; my emphasis). At the play's end, it is again Portia who dispenses gifts, including—mysteriously—the news that some of Antonio's ships have come safely to port (5.1.276–277). Her dispensation of the wealth underscores her commitment to controlling it. In Portia, as in Antonio, generosity co-exists with a firm insistence on private holdings.

"Commodity" is a word for the anti-erotic interest in private rights that Portia subtly and other *Merchant* characters overtly exhibit. The most famous Shakespearean reference to "commodity" occurs in *King John*, when the Bastard calls political commodity the "bawd," "broker," and "bias of the world" (2.1.582, 574). In *Merchant*, written perhaps the same year as *King John* (i.e., 1595), Shakespeare shows a fascination with the claims of commodity in a financial context. In Venice, known to Elizabethans as a thriving commercial center, citizens' own fiscal sufficiency depends on the city's protection of the private interests of official "strangers" like Shylock. It is ironically Antonio, the generous lender who stands to suffer most from law's demands, who insists on upholding Venetian law to preserve "commodity." The "play's committed legalist," in Samuel Ajzenstat's phrase, Antonio "considers the commercial law of Venice untouchable" (272). He willingly submits to the bond by which he must yield his own life to Shylock because the law safeguarding property interests—the law by which he himself lives—demands it. "The duke cannot deny the course of law," he tells Solanio,

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)

As Janet Adelman writes, Antonio's speech "implies a political economy in which states exist to insure trade conditions among 'nations' conceived as political and economic units" (21). This politico-economic context gives meaning to his life. His subsequent words in court suggest that if he can no longer function within that context, he is better off dead. Therefore, though the enforcement of contract law in this case threatens to kill him, he welcomes the law because as a "bankrout" (4.1.122)—and the apparent loser in a contest for Bassanio's heart—he has nothing for *which* to live. In providing a legal means by which he may die, Fortune "shows herself [ … ] kind" to Antonio. Not only will she allow him to secure a posthumous claim to Bassanio's affections by dying for him, she will also not make him "outlive his wealth" (4.1.267, 269) in a city where not only Shylock but other, possibly Gentile, "creditors grow cruel" (3.2.316).

Antonio here aligns Fortune with law. Though Portia will prove more powerful than Fortune and will avert the fate that Antonio thinks dooms him, still, she will not—like the dukes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*—overturn law. In fact, she, like Antonio himself, explicitly forbids the Duke to subvert the law in a conventional comic manner. Antonio has told Solanio that the "Duke cannot deny the course of law" in Antonio's case without alienating "strangers" on whom commerce depends. But this caveat is a caveat only. The Duke *can* deny the course of law if he is willing to put what we would call human rights above property rights. And in fact, the Duke seems ready to do this. "Upon my power I may dismiss this court," he says, after failing to elicit from Shylock voluntary mercy, "Unless Bellario, a learned doctor / Whom I have sent for to determine this / Come here today" (4.1.104–107). Bellario sends Balthazar, or Portia in disguise, who thus seems summoned as Shylock's advocate rather than Antonio's. Portia is brought to "stand [ … ] for law" like Shylock (4.1.142), and stand for law—the contract which secures Shylock's property rights—is exactly what she finally does. As she questions Shylock, Bassanio appeals to the higher authority of the Duke, begging him, "Wrest the law to your authority" (4.1.215). Before the Duke can answer, Portia stops him. "It must not be" (4.1.218). She claims that "There is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established," but her next lines suggest that this claim is more an argument regarding the wisdom of overriding the law than a statement of fact. If the Duke does kick the case out of court, "'Twill be recorded for a precedent / And many an error by the same example / Will rush into the state" (4.1.218–222). A proper comic duke's response would be "Who cares? Court adjourned, forever." But this duke silently affirms Portia's anti-comic insistence that the commodity of strangers outweigh kindness.

That the legal commodity of strangers is distinct from kindness to strangers becomes plain when we examine strangers' treatment in both Venice and Belmont. Both realms are structured by adherence to laws that safeguard the commodities of residents and strangers who form complex networks of mutual social and financial obligations. Portia's world is thus in one sense a mirror of the Venice she penetrates.9 In it, strangers are allowed to compete in a wooing contest because a legal document requires their admission to the game, but their welcome is severely qualified. Her father's rules demand that Portia open her doors to a Neapolitan, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Frenchman, a Scotsman, a German, and a Moroccan, but she makes clear to Nerissa and to the audience that she does not like any of them (1.2).10 Her warm welcome is saved for the "young Venetian," Bassanio (2.9.87, 3.2). In Venice, in its turn, commercial imperatives obligate the Duke to uphold "stranger cur" (1.3.118) Shylock's contract rather than to overturn it in comic mercy, but—deferring to Portia—the Duke honors legal claims rather than the claims of human kindness for Shylock as well as for Antonio. Thus the Duke allows Portia an absurdly literalist reading of the bond that prevents its execution and violates its spirit. Shylock may take a pound of flesh, but no blood, and may not let the flesh's weight exceed one pound by "the twenti[e]th part / Of one poor scruple" (4.1.325, 329–330), a stipulation whose exactness would put an end to all commerce if generally enforced. In addition, once Shylock has forsworn the bond, the Duke sits by as she unnecessarily invokes an anti-alien law that threatens to kill Shylock.

Shylock, of course, has asked for all this by assuming a literalist as well as a legalist stance with regard to the bond. Having introduced the contract as a joke—"a merry sport" (1.3.145)—he clings in court to its cruel letter. Shylock stands generally opposed to verbal figures that break the boundaries of the literal. (As Anne Barton has said, he is "distrustful of metaphor or figurative language" [251].) "You call me [ … ] cutthroat dog," he has told Antonio. "Hath a dog money?" (1.3.111, 121). There is, then, some comic justice in Portia's demonstration to Shylock of the limits of literalism in law. Yet the play's critique of literalism is chastened by the self-serving uses to which Portia and the other Christians put metaphor. Antonio's calling Shylock "currish" and "wolvish" (4.1.133, 138) is partly justified by his rage at Shylock's cruel treatment of his creditors ("I oft delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me," Antonio says [3.3.22–23]). Though the canine metaphors are harsh, in Antonio they are at least partly aligned with a generous purpose. Not so for Bassanio, whose extravagant poetic description of himself as Jason in quest of the golden fleece is a mere pretty mask for the plain financial need that sends him to Belmont, to woo "a lady richly left," the phrase that first leaps to his lips as a description of Portia (1.1.161). Portia's elaborate verbal gift of herself to Bassanio is, as we have seen, a deceptive conceit undercut by rules limiting that gift, as well as by her subsequent behavior, which demonstrates her continued autonomy. Finally, in the courtroom, the kindness offered to strangers itself becomes a word-screen behind which private interests may be preserved.

We see this *faux* kindness in Portia's insistence that mercy towards Antonio be not mandated by the Duke but freely embraced by Shylock. When Shylock refuses, he is granted his bond under terms that guarantee his own decision not to enforce it. Likewise, Shylock's conversion is not, strictly speaking, "coerced," as it is generally called, but formally chosen as a means of safeguarding his wealth.11 His choice to convert comes on the heels of Antonio's proposed modification of the Duke's decision to spare Shylock's life, leave him half his wealth minus a fine, and give the other half of his money to Antonio. Antonio interjects,

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. (4.1.380–390)

Antonio's bizarre proposition subverts Christ's instruction that to become his follower a rich man must "sell that [he] ha[th], and give it to the poor" (Matthew 19:21, Geneva). According to Antonio's caveat, Shylock will give up all he owns only if he *doesn't* formally follow Christ. Shakespeare here imaginatively reverses the popularly believed-in Venetian civic custom of appropriating the goods of Jewish converts. ("All their goods are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity," Thomas Coryate wrote of the Jews in 1610.) Conversion to Christianity is now, to the contrary, the only means by which Shylock may *keep* some of his goods during life. Conversion on these terms is, of course, a mockery of faith, but it is one framed by the Venetians in terms that support the play's overriding concern with the preservation of private property. Formally, if bitterly, accepting the proposal in order to stay in business—"I am content," Shylock says (4.1.394)—Shylock is merely participating in the anti-comic economy of property interests that structures the play.

Nor is Antonio selfless here. While several scholars have suggested that in the lines quoted above Antonio is proposing only to administer the half of Shylock's estate granted him "on Shylock's behalf,"12 the sense of his words is surely otherwise. Superficially, the lines are confusing. Antonio says he is "content" for the Duke to remit a fine for Shylock and allow Shylock free use of half his own goods if Shylock "will let me have the other half in use." However, the first part of that statement is "precatory"—it has no legal bearing on the judgment just pronounced—and the second part is redundant. Antonio "has no power over, nor any interest in," the half of Shylock's wealth that was due the state before the Duke reduced that penalty, as Richard Weisberg says (15),13 and as for the other half, he has already been granted it (and only it). He does not need to bargain for half of Shylock's wealth "in use." So what does he mean?

Joan Ozark Holmer argues that Antonio here pledges himself only to employ the interest, or "use," on Shylock's goods, and not to "touch the principal," but if this is so we see Antonio suddenly agreeing to profit from a business practice he has heretofore hated.14 The more likely meaning is the obvious one: that Antonio, now that he is going to live in Venice after all, wants to *use* the money as though it were a lifetime loan from Shylock ("let me have / The other half in use"). To adapt Portia's phrase, one half of what's Shylock's—minus the court-mandated fine—is Shylock's, the other half, "Shylock's," though really Antonio's. At the end of Shylock's life—enough time, one would think, for Antonio to relaunch his hazardous business—the money will be converted, in the most punishing way, to the use of Shylock's hated son-in-law and daughter. Like the fake lifetime loan, the bequest will be a fake (but legal) "gift" from a fake Christian to a fake "son" and a daughter he has emotionally disowned. ("Clerk, draw a deed of gift" [4.1.394], Portia says to the fake clerk, Nerissa.) Shylock's choice to keep any of his money is thus made contingent on his official agreement to be financially kind to his bitterest enemies, Antonio, Jessica, and Lorenzo. Again, the appearance of generosity is made by law a mask for the property interests of everyone.

Samuel Ajzenstat has eloquently argued that the stress on private interests in *Merchant* makes the play not anti-comic, but a different kind of romantic comedy than most of Shakespeare's others. Perhaps, he suggests, with its "basic metaphor [of ] the contract," the play is "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" (Ajzenstat 263, 277). Perhaps, though Shakespeare may also have meant to critique the commercial self-interestedness that debased human interaction in his own London, a place where, according to the late sixteenth-century pamphleteer Miles Mosse, "lending upon usury is grown so common and usual among men, as that free lending to the needy is utterly overthrown." What seems inarguable is that in *Merchant* Shakespeare's own interest lay in exploring how private interests, guarded by law, could challenge and taint the lawless but kind forces of erotic and filial love. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus, seeking his family, is like a dissolving

drop of water,  
That in the ocean, seeks another drop,  
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth  
[ … ] confounds himself. (1.2.35–38)

In *Much Ado about Nothing* and *As You Like It*, characters embrace *the* danger of cuckoldry—the violation of masculine identity, in conventional terms—to embrace the mutuality of marriage. "The horn, the horn, the lusty horn / Is not a thing to laugh to scorn" sing the men of the Arden Forest (4.2.17–18).15 In these as in most of Shakespeare's comedies, characters radically risk their private identities to engage the larger, shared selves found in familial or marital relationships. Laws that safeguard ownership—such as the law that upholds Egeon's rights to his daughter in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—are done away with in celebration of these larger connections. Not so in *The Merchant of Venice*, which accomplishes the reverse. In this play, eros, friendship, and even mercy are managed so that each character keeps legal title at least to a portion of what he or she owns.

## Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.
2. "Vantage" and "Exclaim" are so defined in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*.
3. The term was used in a post-paper discussion at the 39th Kalamazoo Congress for Medieval Studies, 2004.
4. See, for example, Samuel Ajzenstat's "Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*" and Nancy Elizabeth Hodge's "Making Places at Belmont: 'You Are Welcome Notwithstanding.'"
5. Karoline Szatek comments on Jessica's "usury" in her marriage transaction in "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Politics of Commerce," in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John and Ellen McMahon, 338.
6. Michael Radford's film version of *The Merchant of Venice* (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2004) brilliantly expresses the mixture of romantic and mercenary motives in the elopement in its interpretation of the scene wherein Lorenzo takes Jessica and the money from Shylock's house. In a gondola below her window he rhapsodically praises her beauty and virtues, but interrupts himself twice with "No!" as he sees her about to throw the casket of money and jewels from the window, out of fear that the loot will not land in the boat but sink in the canal.
7. As Ajzenstat writes, Portia implicitly tells Bassanio at the play's end, "my sexual fidelity is contingent on yours" (270).
8. See Bruce Erlich's "Queenly Shadows in Two Comedies" (*Shakespeare Survey* 335 [1982]: 65–77), S. F. Johnson's "How Many Ways Portia Informs Bassanio's Choice" (*Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions*. Ed. John M. Mucciolo. Aldershot: Scholar's Press, 1996. 144–147), Ajzenstat, and Michael Zuckert's "The New Medea: On Portia's Comic Triumph in *The Merchant of Venice*" (*Shakespeare's Political Pageant: Essays in Literature and Politics*. Eds. Joseph Aluis and Vickie Sullivan. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), among others.
9. Adelman also makes this point (22).
10. Nancy Elizabeth Hodge points out that *déclassé* merchants are also not fully welcome at Belmont.
11. See James Shapiro's comment, " 'Coerced' conversions were virtually unheard of in the various narratives circulating about Jews in sixteenth-century England" (131).
12. Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of* The Merchant of Venice, 164. See also Joan Ozark Holmer, who says that Antonio requests his half "in use" and "cannot touch the principal" (216), and thus appears "all the more generous" (217), and John Russell Brown, who says Antonio uses his money for Shylock. Hugh Short, among others, argues that Antonio will manage the money for the benefit of Lorenzo and Jessica (199).
13. As Peter J. Alscher writes, "Antonio's [ … ] disbursement of his half of Shylock's wealth with its two painful financial conditions" is unmerciful (25).
14. As Peter J. Alscher and Richard Weisberg note, Antonio's " 'trust' arrangement practices a form of interest profiting which he [once] swore to Antonio's face he never engaged in" (204).
15. See the detailed discussion of the essentialness of the surrender of private holdings to mutuality in Grace Tiffany, *Erotic Beasts and Social Monsters: Shakespeare, Jonson, and Comic Androgyny*.

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## Law and Self-Interest in *The Merchant of Venice*

**Date:** 2006  
by William Shakespeare  
**Author:** Grace Tiffany  
**From:** *The Merchant of Venice*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations.

Shakespearean comedy is notable for the blitheness with which, in some latter acts, rulers overturn laws they have previously described as inexorable. In the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Duke Theseus tells the hapless Hermia she must acquiesce in her father's choice of husband for her, enter a nunnery, or die, since the Athenian law that gives Egeus the right to dispose of his daughter is one that the duke "by no means [ … ] may extenuate" (1.1.120).1 Yet in act four Theseus discovers a means to change the law. He can simply do it. Encountering Hermia and Lysander outside the Athenian wood, the duke overrides the complaint of Egeus—who "beg[s] the law, the law, upon [the] head" of Lysander for stealing his daughter—announcing, "Egeus, I will overbear your will" (4.1.155, 179). A similar reversal occurs in *The Comedy of Errors*. There the Duke of Ephesus initially tells the captive merchant egeon that though he "may pity" he may "not pardon" him for his illegal entry into ephesus, a city at war with egeon's city, Syracuse (1.1.97). egeon must die unless someone buys his release. yet in act five, the Duke waves away the bag of ducats Egeon's son tries to hand him as "pawn" for his father, saying breezily, "It shall not need; thy father hath his life" (5.1.390). Audiences never question the late-term rule-changes in these plays, since their causes are manifest in the comedies' conclusions. As romantic (rather than satiric humors) comedies, these plays' final scenes are consecrated to celebrations of love, not law: family reunion, marital reconciliation, and above all erotic harmony. When facing the miraculous finding of lost relatives and amazing tales of spiritually restorative magical events, civic law may properly bow.

What I want to explore is the diminishment of romantic-comic fulfillment in a play in which law does not bow to love: where, in fact, the reverse occurs, and love conforms to law. *The Merchant of Venice* violates Shakespearean comic convention, by which eros nullifies or overrides rules. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the law that makes it "death for anyone in Mantua / To come to Padua" is only a hoax Tranio invents to get a Mantuan to don disguise and help in a wooing scheme (4.2.81–82). In *Love's Labor's Lost*, the Navarran king's rules against men's fraternization with ladies do not survive the play's first scene. Even the contorted and troublesome conclusion of *Measure for Measure* depends, for its various marital pairings and formal reconciliations, on Duke Vincentio's pardoning of the play's sexual criminals, Angelo, Claudio, Lucio, and Juliet. Only in *The Merchant of Venice* are conflicts resolved through adherence to law rather than by law's suspension. Thus the comedy affords no romantic release from law's domain into the realm of love, where private selves are generously sacrificed to a larger, shared identity. Instead, the play proposes a generosity and sacrifice tempered by underlying rules that limit and curb those qualities and that ensure private selves and private property are kept safe. Put another way, since rules and laws in *The Merchant of Venice* concern the contractual safeguarding of things, their sway has an anti-comic because anti-erotic effect. *The Merchant of Venice* celebrates not characters' warm embrace of mutual identity, as in marriage, but their cold preservation or augmentation of what they legally own. (Certainly Shakespeare derived some skepticism regarding love's power to nullify self-interestedness from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, a play wherein the "wind that bloweth all the world" is not eros but "[d]esire of gold" [*The Jew of Malta* 3.5.3–4].) Thus *The Merchant of Venice* dramatizes the sobering influence of a mercantile ethic, enshrined in law, on a romantic-comic economy.

Contractual laws, or rules, designed to keep property safe hold sway in *The Merchant of Venice* despite its Christians' protestations of absolute generosity. Throughout the comedy not only enemies, like Shylock and Antonio, but lovers and friends hedge their commitments to one another with rules, charges, directions, and laws safeguarding their interests. Things are not given, but loaned. Debts are incurred and are not dismissed. "To you, Antonio," Bassanio says in the play's first scene, "I owe the most in money and in love" (1.1.130–131). Bassanio's statement is not merely a poetic description of an emotional debt, but a literal account of a real financial problem in whose light the play's romantic plot will be launched. Bassanio owes Antonio money as well as love, and must repay it. His decision to woo Portia is thus seen to arise not from erotic impulse (as do, for example, Claudio's pursuit of Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Lysander's of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Syracusan Antipholus's of Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors*). Bassanio's plan is instead a scheme "to get clear of all the debts [he] owe[s]" (1.1.133–134). Portia's eroticism is similarly chilled by the care with which she provides for her own interests while ostensibly surrendering them to Bassanio. Once he has won her, she eloquently pledges her house, servants, and self to him "with this ring," but provides a caveat that entitles her to revoke all gifts if he breaks the rules that govern the ring's disposition. Such violation of the rules will give her "vantage"—a financial term meaning "profit"—to "exclaim on," or legally arraign, Bassanio for the breach (3.2.170–174).2 Presumably when that happens, all bets will be off.

Even the generous Antonio, like Portia, hedges his kindness with caveats. "My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions," he tells Bassanio in the play's first scene (1.1.138–139). But subsequent scenes disclose that that purse and person have their price. In an exercise of what Barbara Correll has called "emotional usury"3—or, to quote Timon of Athens, "usuring kindness" (4.3.509)—Antonio will promise to clear Bassanio's debt to him "if [he] might but see [him] at [his] death" (3.2.319–320), and when Bassanio comes to witness, in the Venetian courtroom, what he thinks will be Antonio's death, he is charged with nurturing and promoting Antonio's claim on his own heart. "Commend me to your honorable wife," Antonio instructs him then,

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. (4.1.273–277)

After the courtroom scene, Antonio further demands that Bassanio demonstrate that he values Antonio's love more than Bassanio's "wife's commandement" that he safeguard her ring (4.1.449–451). The language of loan, not of gift, marks Antonio's speech, as in his final description, in the play's last scene, of his prior transaction with Bassanio: "I once did lend my body for his wealth" (5.1.249). He does not say "I once did give my body for his love." Sylvan Barnet, editor of the Signet edition of this play, strives in a footnote to soften this crass reminder of the money relations among our heroes Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio, glossing "wealth" as "welfare" ("I once did lend my body for his welfare" [n249, 98]). But Shakespeare wrote "wealth." Out of that wealth, we remember, was to come repayment of Bassanio's original debt to Antonio. So Antonio's diction is apt. It reminds us that this play's plots have not been impelled by an impulse toward wild erotic self-surrender but by the regulated claims of property. *The Merchant of Venice*'s celebrated darkness has much to do with the fact that in it, rules and laws concerning private ownership are never forgotten or departed from either in Belmont or in Venice, but instead preserved obsessively, even absurdly, to the very letter, by others besides Shylock.

It is not that the Venetians do not love, but that love—an impulse and commitment that upholds a shared rather than a private identity—is not the prime motivator of their actions. Many scholars have observed that among all this play's characters, money and emotional interests are inextricably mixed.4 True to his promise—"we will resemble you" (3.1.68)—Shylock is like the Christians in his intermingling of private emotional *and* financial claims. He likes profit, but his chief charge against Antonio finally has little to do with money; he turns down twice the number of ducats Bassanio owes him because he has paid a higher emotional price for Antonio's flesh (it is "dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it," he threatens [4.1.100]). Both in soliloquy and conversation with Tubal, he has framed his desire to kill Antonio as a business decision ("were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will" [3.1.127–129]). But the scene in which his anguished reaction to Jessica's elopement is interwoven with his glee at Antonio's business losses shows a more complicated self-concern. That a Christian has invaded Shylock's family justifies his radical reach for financial security through harming a Christian, he seems to conclude.

As for Jessica, her love for Lorenzo is bound to the social advantage she imagines she will acquire by marrying him.5 "[A]shamed to be [her] father's child," she will "end this strife" by "[b]ecom[ing] a Christian and [Lorenzo's] loving wife" (2.3.17, 20–21). Lorenzo's love for Jessica is expressed in terms that suggest his similarly mixed motives of love and private acquisitiveness. "She hath directed / How I shall take her from her father's house, / What gold and jewels she is furnished with" (2.4.29–31).6 Although Jessica and Lorenzo break the law, stealing from Shylock to pad their pockets, their thievery is oddly validated by law in act four. After Shylock's claims on Antonio's person are thwarted in court, the Duke requires Shylock to "record a gift / Here in the court of all he dies possessed / Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter" (4.1.388–390). This ruling both safeguards Shylock's property, or a portion of it, during his life and preserves Jessica's portion, implicitly and retrospectively reframing the theft of money and jewels as a lawful activity. Shylock must legally will his possessions to "the gentleman / That lately *stole* his daughter" (4.1.384–385). Here again, law is not suspended but called into service to support, not love, but financial security. For the apparently broke Lorenzo and Jessica, who have squandered their cash and jewels at the gaming tables of Genoa, this contractual promise of financial support will be "manna" for "starved people" (5.1.294–295).

Superficially, Portia appears radically to contrast with those in the play who, like Shylock, want what is legally theirs. The apparent possessor of limitless wealth, she offers it all to Bassanio: "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/ Is now converted," she tells him.

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.[ … ] (3.2.166–171)

Yet, as I, and other scholars, have noted, Portia hedges her promise with stipulations regarding the safeguarding of a ring, then works against that ring's safeguarding by encouraging Bassanio to give it away, and in the play's last scene re-presents the ring to him without renewing her generous pledge of house, servants, and self. "[B]id him keep it better than the other," she says briefly, to Antonio, the second time (5.1.255). She reminds Bassanio that to secure his gain in her, he must conform to the rules with which she regulates that gain.7 Bassanio and his follower Gratiano are the "Jasons"; they have "won the Fleece" (3.2.241). Still, audiences may know that Jason lost everything in the end for not respecting the rights of his wife.

Portia's final contract with Bassanio is the last expression of a proprietary attitude she has demonstrated throughout the play. Her concern to keep what she owns is implied early by her anti-comic insistence on honoring her father's will. Portia's free choice of a husband is not hampered by an angry Egeus or even a benign Baptista, but by a piece of paper that pledges her material estate to the suitor who wins the casket game. "[S]o is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.24–25), she sighs. That Portia abides by her father's will indicates that she—a woman as unromantic as are Bassanio and Lorenzo—is not willing both to marry and be penniless. Superficially her words to Bassanio upon his arrival in Belmont express self-abandonment in pursuit of the larger self found in erotic relationship, yet they also imply the same frustrated desire for control of property—including control over herself—that she has expressed in the play's first scene. "One half of me is yours, the other half yours," she tells her suitor. "Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours, / And so all yours! O these naughty times / Puts bars between the owners and their rights" (3.2.16–19). But Portia finds a means to squeeze between those bars. No less committed than Shylock to the rules, she works within them to achieve not only the husband of her desire but the mastery of her fortune and her fortunes. While numerous scholars have suggested that Portia cheats and helps Bassanio win the wooing game,8 she does not cheat but hints, thus upholding the letter if not the spirit of her father's law. Portia ensures that while Bassanio makes his choice, he is sung a song whose first three lines rhyme with the word "lead," the metal of which the right casket is made (3.2.63–65). Doubtless Portia stands by, supplying the "fair speechless messages" her eyes are wont to give Bassanio, as he has earlier bragged to Antonio (1.1.163–166). Thus she ensures his victory without breaking the rules.

Once he has won, despite her words of absolute committal of her wealth and person, she never stops exercising proprietary rights over her stuff, which now includes Bassanio, as Corinne Abate (292) and Sandra Logan have noted. It is Portia, not Bassanio, who offers money to redeem Antonio once the message concerning his wreck is brought (3.2.299). Even after their hasty marriage, she goes where she pleases and refers to her servants as "My people" (3.4.37). Bassanio may return to Venice after he obeys her instructions, which are, "First go with me to church and call me wife" (3.2.304). "*By your leave*, / I bid my very friends and countrymen, / Sweet Portia, welcome," Bassanio says meekly when his friends arrive from Venice (3.2.222–224; my emphasis). At the play's end, it is again Portia who dispenses gifts, including—mysteriously—the news that some of Antonio's ships have come safely to port (5.1.276–277). Her dispensation of the wealth underscores her commitment to controlling it. In Portia, as in Antonio, generosity co-exists with a firm insistence on private holdings.

"Commodity" is a word for the anti-erotic interest in private rights that Portia subtly and other *Merchant* characters overtly exhibit. The most famous Shakespearean reference to "commodity" occurs in *King John*, when the Bastard calls political commodity the "bawd," "broker," and "bias of the world" (2.1.582, 574). In *Merchant*, written perhaps the same year as *King John* (i.e., 1595), Shakespeare shows a fascination with the claims of commodity in a financial context. In Venice, known to Elizabethans as a thriving commercial center, citizens' own fiscal sufficiency depends on the city's protection of the private interests of official "strangers" like Shylock. It is ironically Antonio, the generous lender who stands to suffer most from law's demands, who insists on upholding Venetian law to preserve "commodity." The "play's committed legalist," in Samuel Ajzenstat's phrase, Antonio "considers the commercial law of Venice untouchable" (272). He willingly submits to the bond by which he must yield his own life to Shylock because the law safeguarding property interests—the law by which he himself lives—demands it. "The duke cannot deny the course of law," he tells Solanio,

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)

As Janet Adelman writes, Antonio's speech "implies a political economy in which states exist to insure trade conditions among 'nations' conceived as political and economic units" (21). This politico-economic context gives meaning to his life. His subsequent words in court suggest that if he can no longer function within that context, he is better off dead. Therefore, though the enforcement of contract law in this case threatens to kill him, he welcomes the law because as a "bankrout" (4.1.122)—and the apparent loser in a contest for Bassanio's heart—he has nothing for *which* to live. In providing a legal means by which he may die, Fortune "shows herself [ … ] kind" to Antonio. Not only will she allow him to secure a posthumous claim to Bassanio's affections by dying for him, she will also not make him "outlive his wealth" (4.1.267, 269) in a city where not only Shylock but other, possibly Gentile, "creditors grow cruel" (3.2.316).

Antonio here aligns Fortune with law. Though Portia will prove more powerful than Fortune and will avert the fate that Antonio thinks dooms him, still, she will not—like the dukes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*—overturn law. In fact, she, like Antonio himself, explicitly forbids the Duke to subvert the law in a conventional comic manner. Antonio has told Solanio that the "Duke cannot deny the course of law" in Antonio's case without alienating "strangers" on whom commerce depends. But this caveat is a caveat only. The Duke *can* deny the course of law if he is willing to put what we would call human rights above property rights. And in fact, the Duke seems ready to do this. "Upon my power I may dismiss this court," he says, after failing to elicit from Shylock voluntary mercy, "Unless Bellario, a learned doctor / Whom I have sent for to determine this / Come here today" (4.1.104–107). Bellario sends Balthazar, or Portia in disguise, who thus seems summoned as Shylock's advocate rather than Antonio's. Portia is brought to "stand [ … ] for law" like Shylock (4.1.142), and stand for law—the contract which secures Shylock's property rights—is exactly what she finally does. As she questions Shylock, Bassanio appeals to the higher authority of the Duke, begging him, "Wrest the law to your authority" (4.1.215). Before the Duke can answer, Portia stops him. "It must not be" (4.1.218). She claims that "There is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established," but her next lines suggest that this claim is more an argument regarding the wisdom of overriding the law than a statement of fact. If the Duke does kick the case out of court, "'Twill be recorded for a precedent / And many an error by the same example / Will rush into the state" (4.1.218–222). A proper comic duke's response would be "Who cares? Court adjourned, forever." But this duke silently affirms Portia's anti-comic insistence that the commodity of strangers outweigh kindness.

That the legal commodity of strangers is distinct from kindness to strangers becomes plain when we examine strangers' treatment in both Venice and Belmont. Both realms are structured by adherence to laws that safeguard the commodities of residents and strangers who form complex networks of mutual social and financial obligations. Portia's world is thus in one sense a mirror of the Venice she penetrates.9 In it, strangers are allowed to compete in a wooing contest because a legal document requires their admission to the game, but their welcome is severely qualified. Her father's rules demand that Portia open her doors to a Neapolitan, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Frenchman, a Scotsman, a German, and a Moroccan, but she makes clear to Nerissa and to the audience that she does not like any of them (1.2).10 Her warm welcome is saved for the "young Venetian," Bassanio (2.9.87, 3.2). In Venice, in its turn, commercial imperatives obligate the Duke to uphold "stranger cur" (1.3.118) Shylock's contract rather than to overturn it in comic mercy, but—deferring to Portia—the Duke honors legal claims rather than the claims of human kindness for Shylock as well as for Antonio. Thus the Duke allows Portia an absurdly literalist reading of the bond that prevents its execution and violates its spirit. Shylock may take a pound of flesh, but no blood, and may not let the flesh's weight exceed one pound by "the twenti[e]th part / Of one poor scruple" (4.1.325, 329–330), a stipulation whose exactness would put an end to all commerce if generally enforced. In addition, once Shylock has forsworn the bond, the Duke sits by as she unnecessarily invokes an anti-alien law that threatens to kill Shylock.

Shylock, of course, has asked for all this by assuming a literalist as well as a legalist stance with regard to the bond. Having introduced the contract as a joke—"a merry sport" (1.3.145)—he clings in court to its cruel letter. Shylock stands generally opposed to verbal figures that break the boundaries of the literal. (As Anne Barton has said, he is "distrustful of metaphor or figurative language" [251].) "You call me [ … ] cutthroat dog," he has told Antonio. "Hath a dog money?" (1.3.111, 121). There is, then, some comic justice in Portia's demonstration to Shylock of the limits of literalism in law. Yet the play's critique of literalism is chastened by the self-serving uses to which Portia and the other Christians put metaphor. Antonio's calling Shylock "currish" and "wolvish" (4.1.133, 138) is partly justified by his rage at Shylock's cruel treatment of his creditors ("I oft delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me," Antonio says [3.3.22–23]). Though the canine metaphors are harsh, in Antonio they are at least partly aligned with a generous purpose. Not so for Bassanio, whose extravagant poetic description of himself as Jason in quest of the golden fleece is a mere pretty mask for the plain financial need that sends him to Belmont, to woo "a lady richly left," the phrase that first leaps to his lips as a description of Portia (1.1.161). Portia's elaborate verbal gift of herself to Bassanio is, as we have seen, a deceptive conceit undercut by rules limiting that gift, as well as by her subsequent behavior, which demonstrates her continued autonomy. Finally, in the courtroom, the kindness offered to strangers itself becomes a word-screen behind which private interests may be preserved.

We see this *faux* kindness in Portia's insistence that mercy towards Antonio be not mandated by the Duke but freely embraced by Shylock. When Shylock refuses, he is granted his bond under terms that guarantee his own decision not to enforce it. Likewise, Shylock's conversion is not, strictly speaking, "coerced," as it is generally called, but formally chosen as a means of safeguarding his wealth.11 His choice to convert comes on the heels of Antonio's proposed modification of the Duke's decision to spare Shylock's life, leave him half his wealth minus a fine, and give the other half of his money to Antonio. Antonio interjects,

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. (4.1.380–390)

Antonio's bizarre proposition subverts Christ's instruction that to become his follower a rich man must "sell that [he] ha[th], and give it to the poor" (Matthew 19:21, Geneva). According to Antonio's caveat, Shylock will give up all he owns only if he *doesn't* formally follow Christ. Shakespeare here imaginatively reverses the popularly believed-in Venetian civic custom of appropriating the goods of Jewish converts. ("All their goods are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity," Thomas Coryate wrote of the Jews in 1610.) Conversion to Christianity is now, to the contrary, the only means by which Shylock may *keep* some of his goods during life. Conversion on these terms is, of course, a mockery of faith, but it is one framed by the Venetians in terms that support the play's overriding concern with the preservation of private property. Formally, if bitterly, accepting the proposal in order to stay in business—"I am content," Shylock says (4.1.394)—Shylock is merely participating in the anti-comic economy of property interests that structures the play.

Nor is Antonio selfless here. While several scholars have suggested that in the lines quoted above Antonio is proposing only to administer the half of Shylock's estate granted him "on Shylock's behalf,"12 the sense of his words is surely otherwise. Superficially, the lines are confusing. Antonio says he is "content" for the Duke to remit a fine for Shylock and allow Shylock free use of half his own goods if Shylock "will let me have the other half in use." However, the first part of that statement is "precatory"—it has no legal bearing on the judgment just pronounced—and the second part is redundant. Antonio "has no power over, nor any interest in," the half of Shylock's wealth that was due the state before the Duke reduced that penalty, as Richard Weisberg says (15),13 and as for the other half, he has already been granted it (and only it). He does not need to bargain for half of Shylock's wealth "in use." So what does he mean?

Joan Ozark Holmer argues that Antonio here pledges himself only to employ the interest, or "use," on Shylock's goods, and not to "touch the principal," but if this is so we see Antonio suddenly agreeing to profit from a business practice he has heretofore hated.14 The more likely meaning is the obvious one: that Antonio, now that he is going to live in Venice after all, wants to *use* the money as though it were a lifetime loan from Shylock ("let me have / The other half in use"). To adapt Portia's phrase, one half of what's Shylock's—minus the court-mandated fine—is Shylock's, the other half, "Shylock's," though really Antonio's. At the end of Shylock's life—enough time, one would think, for Antonio to relaunch his hazardous business—the money will be converted, in the most punishing way, to the use of Shylock's hated son-in-law and daughter. Like the fake lifetime loan, the bequest will be a fake (but legal) "gift" from a fake Christian to a fake "son" and a daughter he has emotionally disowned. ("Clerk, draw a deed of gift" [4.1.394], Portia says to the fake clerk, Nerissa.) Shylock's choice to keep any of his money is thus made contingent on his official agreement to be financially kind to his bitterest enemies, Antonio, Jessica, and Lorenzo. Again, the appearance of generosity is made by law a mask for the property interests of everyone.

Samuel Ajzenstat has eloquently argued that the stress on private interests in *Merchant* makes the play not anti-comic, but a different kind of romantic comedy than most of Shakespeare's others. Perhaps, he suggests, with its "basic metaphor [of ] the contract," the play is "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" (Ajzenstat 263, 277). Perhaps, though Shakespeare may also have meant to critique the commercial self-interestedness that debased human interaction in his own London, a place where, according to the late sixteenth-century pamphleteer Miles Mosse, "lending upon usury is grown so common and usual among men, as that free lending to the needy is utterly overthrown." What seems inarguable is that in *Merchant* Shakespeare's own interest lay in exploring how private interests, guarded by law, could challenge and taint the lawless but kind forces of erotic and filial love. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus, seeking his family, is like a dissolving

drop of water,  
That in the ocean, seeks another drop,  
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth  
[ … ] confounds himself. (1.2.35–38)

In *Much Ado about Nothing* and *As You Like It*, characters embrace *the* danger of cuckoldry—the violation of masculine identity, in conventional terms—to embrace the mutuality of marriage. "The horn, the horn, the lusty horn / Is not a thing to laugh to scorn" sing the men of the Arden Forest (4.2.17–18).15 In these as in most of Shakespeare's comedies, characters radically risk their private identities to engage the larger, shared selves found in familial or marital relationships. Laws that safeguard ownership—such as the law that upholds Egeon's rights to his daughter in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—are done away with in celebration of these larger connections. Not so in *The Merchant of Venice*, which accomplishes the reverse. In this play, eros, friendship, and even mercy are managed so that each character keeps legal title at least to a portion of what he or she owns.

## Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.
2. "Vantage" and "Exclaim" are so defined in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*.
3. The term was used in a post-paper discussion at the 39th Kalamazoo Congress for Medieval Studies, 2004.
4. See, for example, Samuel Ajzenstat's "Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*" and Nancy Elizabeth Hodge's "Making Places at Belmont: 'You Are Welcome Notwithstanding.'"
5. Karoline Szatek comments on Jessica's "usury" in her marriage transaction in "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Politics of Commerce," in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John and Ellen McMahon, 338.
6. Michael Radford's film version of *The Merchant of Venice* (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2004) brilliantly expresses the mixture of romantic and mercenary motives in the elopement in its interpretation of the scene wherein Lorenzo takes Jessica and the money from Shylock's house. In a gondola below her window he rhapsodically praises her beauty and virtues, but interrupts himself twice with "No!" as he sees her about to throw the casket of money and jewels from the window, out of fear that the loot will not land in the boat but sink in the canal.
7. As Ajzenstat writes, Portia implicitly tells Bassanio at the play's end, "my sexual fidelity is contingent on yours" (270).
8. See Bruce Erlich's "Queenly Shadows in Two Comedies" (*Shakespeare Survey* 335 [1982]: 65–77), S. F. Johnson's "How Many Ways Portia Informs Bassanio's Choice" (*Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions*. Ed. John M. Mucciolo. Aldershot: Scholar's Press, 1996. 144–147), Ajzenstat, and Michael Zuckert's "The New Medea: On Portia's Comic Triumph in *The Merchant of Venice*" (*Shakespeare's Political Pageant: Essays in Literature and Politics*. Eds. Joseph Aluis and Vickie Sullivan. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), among others.
9. Adelman also makes this point (22).
10. Nancy Elizabeth Hodge points out that *déclassé* merchants are also not fully welcome at Belmont.
11. See James Shapiro's comment, " 'Coerced' conversions were virtually unheard of in the various narratives circulating about Jews in sixteenth-century England" (131).
12. Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of* The Merchant of Venice, 164. See also Joan Ozark Holmer, who says that Antonio requests his half "in use" and "cannot touch the principal" (216), and thus appears "all the more generous" (217), and John Russell Brown, who says Antonio uses his money for Shylock. Hugh Short, among others, argues that Antonio will manage the money for the benefit of Lorenzo and Jessica (199).
13. As Peter J. Alscher writes, "Antonio's [ … ] disbursement of his half of Shylock's wealth with its two painful financial conditions" is unmerciful (25).
14. As Peter J. Alscher and Richard Weisberg note, Antonio's " 'trust' arrangement practices a form of interest profiting which he [once] swore to Antonio's face he never engaged in" (204).
15. See the detailed discussion of the essentialness of the surrender of private holdings to mutuality in Grace Tiffany, *Erotic Beasts and Social Monsters: Shakespeare, Jonson, and Comic Androgyny*.

#### Further Information

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