

**CHRISTIAN DUCATS AND JEWISH SCALES:
RELIGIOUS CURRENCY IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE***

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Abstract: A significant amount of contemporary scholarship of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* has read the text strictly in Marxist economic terms. One disadvantage to this approach is that it treats religion as merely a support to Venetian society rather than as its base, presuming a cynical, and consequently tragic, view of the text. This paper reverses that analysis, viewing the conflict between religions as foundational to understanding the play. Interpreting *Merchant* through the genre of romance, the text becomes less a problem play and more a moral exemplum in how to live rightly. Through the tripartite tests of casket, court, and ring, Shakespeare emphasizes not the inequities and oppressive structure of a market economy but how the freedom inherent in such a system promotes love and redemption at all levels of society.

Keywords: Economy, religion, law, mercy, romance

I. INTRODUCTION

The Merchant of Venice is a notoriously challenging play to interpret. It may be alternately viewed as a comedy, as it ends in a marriage; as a tragedy, for the antagonist Christians defeat the protagonist Jew; or as a problem play, since it creates a dilemma for which *aporia* is the only satisfying solution. Considering the play revolves around problems created by and to which the optimal solution appears to be money, many critics have treated this play from a materialist perspective—often from a narrowly Marxist vantage point. This error is understandable, but it is an

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error nonetheless. Scott Cutler Shershow, for instance, has remarked extensively on an opposition between generosity and selfishness, between representations of feudalism and proto-capitalism. The play perpetuates the myth of the generous capitalist, he claims, depicting prosperity as the result of generosity to one's friends, a "strategy at one level [which] merely replicates the specious providentiality of the early modern moral economy itself, a discourse which also commonly promises to reward its readers if they will give without *expectation* of reward."² Capitalism "cloaks itself," he asserts, "with an ethic of generosity" but cannot itself be generous because generosity, he assumes, is somehow opposed to capitalism.³ This assumption is fatal to criticism—both of the text and of economics—limited as it is in a one-dimensional ideological approach. Such an analysis, and similarly positioned interpretations, does not comprehensively nor charitably account for the transformative role of religion in human life.

Religious difference is just as important, if not more so, than the various feudal and capitalist impulses pervading the play. Indeed, our ambiguous portrait of Shylock comes into sharper definition when we remember the historical implications of his "Jewishness." Likewise, generosity, viewed in the text as mercy, is an ideal informed not so much by economics but by religion—though the two value systems can sometimes be indistinguishable. Rather than dividing them into separate lines of inquiry, therefore, we might do better to lightly yoke religion and economics in our understanding of the text. This is not to lay upon the text an interpretive lens of ideology, as Marxist critics have done, but to treat religion and economics as two sides of the Elizabethan coin, to see them as linked pairs to humane living. To do so, it is expedient that we view *The Merchant of Venice* not as a problem play but as a romance.

² Shershow, Scott Cutler, "Shakespeare Beyond Shakespeare" in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (London: Routledge, 2001), 259, emphasis original.

³ *Ibid.*, 260.

Admittedly, there is little critical support for this assertion—an unfortunate oversight in our earnest efforts to classify how to interpret the text.⁴ It is worth noting that the frustrations of genre are our own, certainly not Shakespeare's. While he sees the story of Richard III as a tragedy and labels it such, he does not title the sexual-political conflicts in *Troy* as *The Problem of Troilus and Cressida*. Modern readers struggle to know what to do with these kinds of texts because their moral complexity eludes our humorous expectations of comedy. But the tragi-comic nature of the story, the aristocratic characters, the unexpected and providential resolution, and the love of the virtuous heroes and heroines all point to a plausible categorization of *Merchant* as romance.

Treated at the level of romance, and not as an anachronistic discussion in contemporized Renaissance racial attitudes or class distinctions or dialectical materialism, the triple-drama of the casket scene and the deftness with which an aristocratic gentlewoman dispatches a murderous archetype before a doubly consummated marriage doesn't depict realism but fantasy. Because it is fantasy, anchored in the dilemma of court and coin, we must see the text as an interplay of human relationships. The economics of Venice only serves as the background through which the *oikonomia* of household management, of friends and lovers, are negotiated. It presents a series of conflicts, as Jan Lawson Hiney states, of "the disparate demands of father versus child, friendship versus marriage, and legal versus human 'rights.'"⁵ The play's purpose is to assay the fabric of moral relationships holding Venetian society together. Thus, while he variously presents problems of marriage, class, and gender, the primary

⁴ There is, however, some support to reject the catch-all term of "problem play." Despite *Merchant's* frequent characterization as such, Harley Granville-Barker emphatically insists that it is not, "so long as we do not bedevil it with sophistries." *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991): 4.

⁵ Lawson Hiney, Jan, "Bond Priorities in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 20, no. 2 (Spring, 1980): 238.

tender in which Shakespeare trades is religious currency, showing that, though neither economics nor religion is without its failings, capitalism offers the fullest expression of human justice and Christianity the fullest expression of human mercy.

II. A PROBLEM PLAY?

The first interpretive difficulty occurs when encountering a dispiriting ennui that pervades the atmosphere. Something is unsettling in the state of Venice. Antonio opens the play in a melancholic humor, unaware why he is so sad (1.1.1), a disposition that never leaves him even in the play's supposedly happy ending. Salarino longs to make Antonio "merry" (1.1.51), but cries helplessness to do so. Shylock, in a display of ironic good humor for so dark a deed, signs a "merry bond" (1.3.501), the terms of which infamously endanger Antonio's life. Lancelot, a "merry Devil" (2.3.2), forsakes his bond to Shylock and escapes, to which Jessica agrees, lamenting in either a horrifying pastiche of *Inferno* or in its parody, "Our house is hell" (2.3.2). And even after her elopement to Lorenzo and translation to the mansions of Belmont, Jessica claims despondently that sweet music never makes her "merry" (5.1.77). There is a demonstrable lack of mirth among these characters, enough that even its comedic conclusion leaves us with enough doubts as to note Venice's contradictions and Belmont's ambiguities. Why are people so unhappy?

Several critics have pointed to acquisitiveness as the problem, and, if so, the sickness runs deep. Solanio and Salarino's assumptions about Antonio's sadness (1.1.15-40) "suggest that whether earned from engaging in commercial risk or other capital ventures, money is the only route to Venetian self-worth, public value, and happiness."⁶ Antonio's general inactivity and free-floating anxiety about life make him a less-than-

⁶ Szatek, Karoline, "The Merchant of Venice and the Politics of Commerce" in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, eds. John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 325-352.

attractive character, and certainly not a hero in the conventional way.⁷ There may even be a mercantile near-indistinguishability between Antonio and Shylock, highlighting Portia's question in the courtroom, "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" (4.1.176). In that same scene, Antonio all but relinquishes his will to live, convinced he cannot be saved from Shylock's knife—perhaps not wanting to be saved. He adopts a spirit of martyrdom in the courtroom, seeing all relationships, and not just those of the plaintiff, in fiduciary terms.⁸ If relationships are held together only by tender, if money is the singular substance of life, what then is left for which to live?

Picking up this theme and unabashedly channeling Marx, Critchley and McCarthy proclaim, "Money is the visible God and common whore of mankind" that brings together two people not for their inherent value but for their extended value.⁹ What gives Marxists pause, and should Christians as well, is the reduction of human relationships into mere transactions, alienating men not just from their labor but from each other in the deep ties of communal affection. Because of money's comparative sterility, the love of human community rightly answers false promises bequeathed by wealth and status.¹⁰ Indeed, Samuel Ajzenstat sees the play as a conflict between human relationships and contractual obligations.¹¹ Antonio's willingness to stand for surety for Bassanio might support this reading, for he believes usury to be wrong, arguing with Shylock over the hermeneutics of the Jacob-Laban episode (1.3.69-94), but assents out of

⁷ If he is the titular hero, about which there is some doubt, he is a strange one, as Antonio has only 47 lines in the play, in comparison to Bassanio's 73, Shylock's 79 and Portia's 117.

⁸ Lawson Hiney, "Bond Priorities," 235-36.

⁹ Critchley, Simon, and Tom McCarthy, "Universal Shylockery: Money and Morality in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Diacritics*, 34, no. 1 (Spring, 2004): 16.

¹⁰ Aristotle famously commented that the begetting of money by money via interest was unnatural (*Politics* I.10, 1258b)

¹¹ Ajzenstat, Samuel, "Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Philosophy and Literature*, 21, no. 2 (October 1997): 262.

love for Bassanio.¹² So, too, Bassanio's own affection for Antonio results in his rejection of Portia's ring, choosing friendship over the bonds of his word and his marriage. Barbara K. Lewalski asserts that Antonio's version of charity is indicated throughout the play under the metaphor of "venturing." This may be why he is sad, detached from the world as he is, and why he quickly takes out a bond for Bassanio's friendship.¹³

Such an inordinate preoccupation with money is a diagnosis as spiritual and interpersonal as it is material. For credit is not merely the personal liability to borrow money. In a world absent central banking, credit was extended primarily by individuals, and rarely by organizations or corporations. To minimize their own risk and financial exposure, lenders shored up potential losses through evaluating the liability of a borrower—his assets and his personal responsibility. Trust and credit (Lat., *credere*, "to believe") depended on the "currency of reputation" in the community and determined one's creditability.¹⁴ Credit depended on, in other words, an outwardly-focused interchange of communal relations in which one built a reputation of committed labor and ethical behavior with the community to achieve access to money. As Craig Muldrew says, the establishment of trustworthiness became the most crucial factor needed to generate and maintain wealth. The result of this was the development of a sort of competitive piety in which householders sought to construct and

¹² Holmer, Joan Ozark, "The Education of the Merchant of Venice." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25, no. 2 (Spring, 1985): 313.

¹³ Lewalski, Barbara K., "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 13, no. 3 (Summer, 1962): 329-330.

¹⁴ Muldrew, Craig, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Obligations*. (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 1998), 3-4. One may also recall Max Weber's thesis, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 1930; 2002. See, in particular, chapter 2, in which Weber connects the Puritan interest in proving one's salvation through hard work, which extended into a communal affirmation through credit.

preserve their reputations for religious virtue, belief and honesty in order to bolster the credit of their households so that they could be trusted.¹⁵

But an overextension of credit might require creative solutions for borrowing outside of the interdependent network of communal relations, causing some to turn to usury, a less creditable institution, to fund their ventures.

Usury fulfilled a market need because of the expansion of and reliance on credit in the early modern period. If one could not obtain credit from licit sources (i.e. neighbors, merchants, etc.), then one could resort to acquiring it from less than socially-acceptable sources.¹⁶ Real Venetian merchants were famously cautious and exacting with their wealth, though Antonio lends out money gratis as a display of friendly virtue (1.3.44).¹⁷ Jews were barred from virtually every other occupation excepting pawnbroking, yet Jewish businessmen found a profitable position in lending money.¹⁸ But this profitability brought with it an understandable level of resentment in respectable circles. Numerous connections were made between Jewish usurers and prostitution; to use a dated reference, such Jews were considered the predatory lenders of their day, despised

¹⁵ Ibid., 148-49. See also Phillips Ingram, Jill, "'My Bloody Creditor': *The Merchant of Venice* and the Lexicon of Credit" in *Idioms of Self-Interest: Credit, Identity, and Property in English Renaissance Literature*" (New York: Routledge, 2006), 99-115.

¹⁶ Following the 1571 Usury Act in England, roughly twenty-five years before Shakespeare composed *The Merchant of Venice* and incidentally the same act that placed a ceiling on interest at ten percent, women were permitted entrance into the world of moneylending, and perhaps correlatively, more women remained single. Further, widows undertook a large percentage of the moneylending industry in England from 1500-1900. See Korda, Natashaia, "Dame Usury: Gender, Credit, and (Ac)counting in the Sonnets and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (Summer, 2009): 132-33.

¹⁷ Ferber, Michael, "The Ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*," *English Literary Renaissance* 20, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 437.

¹⁸ Kish-Goodling, Donna M., "Using *The Merchant of Venice* in Teaching Monetary Economics." *Journal of Economic Education* (Fall, 1998): 332. Jewish merchants were forbidden lending interest to one's fellow Israelite (Ex. 22:25, Lev. 25:37, Deut. 23:19), but usury was a practical option for making money when one's borrowers were Christian.

for their needed services and seducing Christian citizens into loans they could not afford.¹⁹ Anti-Semitism found a forceful outlet for expression in England when Jews were expelled in the 1290s and not allowed to return until the Restoration under Cromwell in 1656.²⁰ And even in the famed city of equality, Jews were expelled from the city limits of Venice in 1516 and were forced to live in the first ghettos.²¹ Clearly persecution did not result on account of usury alone; many Jews suffered horrific abuses as a result of baseless myths rooted in religious intolerance. Nevertheless, in the Christian-dominated world of the Renaissance, Judaism was considered illegal tender, a counterfeit medium of exchange.

Shershow, therefore, is only partially correct in asserting that the success of the protagonist and the defeat of the antagonist suggest a “pro-capitalist” reading. Shylock is certainly a capitalist, as much as the merchants of Venice around him. He, like others, uses transactional language but differs in that he views people entirely in terms of their financial viability—his reference to Antonio’s person as “sufficient” (1.3.12-17) is particularly alarming, exemplary of the contemporary interplay between people and their credit. Even more so is his insistence on exacting the terms of what was intended to be a supposedly merry bond (1.3.144). Shylock’s preoccupation with money reflects intentional language (at least on the part of the playwright) that furthers Jewish stereotypes—many of which have persisted to the present day—that they are miserly hoarders, who care about their coin second only to their coin. In demanding the ubiquitous pound of flesh, the Jew “literaliz[es] the traditional metaphoric view of usurers.”²² He is “wolvish, bloody, starved,

¹⁹ Cohen, Walter, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism” in *The Merchant of Venice: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 99-100.

²⁰ Shapiro, James, “Shakespeare and the Jews” in *New Casebooks: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Martin Coyle (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 73

²¹ McPherson, David, *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Jews* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 65.

²² Cohen, “Historical Criticism,” 49

and ravenous" (4.1.138), a stereotypical view of Jews in particular shared with capitalists in general. In fact, many have understandably viewed Shylock as "the spirit of economic self-seeking which is indifferent to the welfare of others, stultifying those whom it possesses and oppressing the rest of humanity."²³

But it is far more significant that Shylock is a Jew than that he is a capitalist. His Jewishness provides depth, a dimension of perceived evil to his character that would not exist were he somehow a European Christian usurer. Elizabethans were obsessed with fears of Jewish infiltrates in Christian communities, of circumcision and conversion, and even emasculation and murder.²⁴ Shylock is often called by the title *Jew* rather than his name by the other characters over fifty times in the text, as if to state his name would invest him with humanity.²⁵ That Shylock confuses his daughter with ducats shows desperation; but her conversion to Christianity causes despair (2.8.16). He hates Antonio precisely *because* the latter is a Christian (1.3.39). Before even striking up a conversation with him, the audience knows the Shylock holds an "ancient grudge" (1.3.46) toward Antonio and hears him utter an imprecatory oath (1.3.47-48). This animosity is, on its surface, a financial battle between fellow lenders, as Antonio's generosity reduces Shylock's competitive advantage and brings down interest rates: "He was wont to lend money for a *Christian* courtesy" (1.3.44-45; emphasis mine). The words "ancient" and "tribe" solidify this religious conflict, and he interprets Antonio's generosity as an act of savagery against himself and his people. For we later learn in his famous "I am a Jew" speech that he blames Christian severity for his own bloodlust: "The villainy you teach me, I will execute" (3.1.67-68). Thus, Shylock's "merry bond" in the context of his soliloquy of confessed hate is similarly deceitful.

²³ Siegel, Paul N., "Shylock the Puritan," *Columbia University Forum*, 5, no. 4 (Fall, 1962): 17.

²⁴ Shapiro, "Shakespeare and the Jews," 76-81.

²⁵ He is also frequently called "greedy" and "usurer," not to mention "dog." But these instances pale in comparison to the count of Jewish epithets.

“What is *revenu* in talk of mercy,” says Critchley and McClatchey, “is mercantile revenue. Christianity is the spiritualization of the originally material.”²⁶ Christianity, in other words, appears to provide a superstructural support for the economic base of Venetian capitalism. While twenty-first century critics might be tempted to separate the supposedly objectively material with the more subjectively spiritual, the text does not permit us this division. These critics are correct, but not for the reasons they assume. Where they err is in assuming the material before the spiritual. Shakespeare’s solution to the problem of religious conflict and economic difference truly is mercy, which is in keeping with both Judaism and Christianity. It is in seeing the best parts of these systems, rather than merely deconstructing them, that we find the virtues that define and transcend all of them. We cannot expect the play to “solve” race relations nor to champion the cause of social justice. It is a play, and as a play its role is to provoke thought and to entertain, to instruct and delight. Insofar as it can instruct, it does so through the work of romance, leading the characters and the audience to rediscover happiness through the exercise of moral virtue. Thus, it does not problematize religion or economics so much as it reveals the way through these conflicting and sometimes contradictory forces. By adopting a romance structure—three caskets, three couples, three outcomes for the trial, three punishments, three persons in a triangle—Shakespeare brings about a structural unity to the play, resolving all conflicts through the virtue of mercy and exercised in the three tests of casket, court, and ring.

III. THE CASKET TEST

The casket test initiates another problem inherent in a mercantile economy: How does a daughter escape her father’s will to choose her own suitor and chart her own destiny? Further, in her will to choose, does she

²⁶ Critchley and McClatchey, “Universal Shylockery,” 4.

press toward individual desire, or does she subordinate desire to responsibility? The emphasis on choice is predictable in the familiar romance structure of threes (seen in countless stories like *The Knight's Tale*, *The Fairie Queene*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, just to cite a few). The structure anticipates not only that the first two suitors will choose wrongly but also indicates what their choices represent. Morocco emphasizes his physical stature and Aragon his confidence—two ideals in a potential husband. Surely our hero Bassanio, viewers anticipate, who has neither of these qualities nor his own wealth, will choose wisely if motivated by virtue. In a democratic age, we assume that freedom to choose brings happiness. But the early modern world understood that freedom of the will was imperiled by excessive passion, and a knowledge of a secret, even transcendent, reality was necessary to live well.

As enticing as freedom are the appeals of wealth and power. Shylock is certainly not the only figure in the play to value people in terms of their goodness and sufficiency (1.3.12-17). Bassanio, in measuring Portia's matchless "worth" (1.1.174), begins by mentioning her inheritance (1.1.168) and, measuring himself against her suitors, finds himself wanting:

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* (1.1.180-83, emphasis mine).

His desire for Portia is predicated—in order, on her riches, beauty, and virtues (1.1.161-163). His choice of words reveals his values, suggesting that he desires Portia not because of her beauty or virtue but because others esteem her. He dares not "undervalue" her, rare as she is like the Golden Fleece (1.1.178-79). To view him only from his words in Act I, we see him as little different from Morocco and Aragon, one who needs money to compete fairly with the other claimants (1.1.175, 181). He sees himself and others primarily in terms of economics. As a nobleman, Bassanio cannot raise money himself, unless it were through liens on his fiefs; thus, he needs Antonio, a respectable though insolvent merchant, to

provide cash for him (1.1.140-42). Considering Bassanio's eagerness for wealth and inability to manage what he has, no wonder, then, Portia's father wrote his will to circumscribe her own freedom to choose.

The sin of commoditizing others is not limited to Jews and noblemen. Lorenzo, one of two other lovers in the play, also confuses the language of commerce with that of love. Joining his friends before the masque, he tells them, "Not I but my affairs have made you wait" (2.6.23), revealing a disconnect between one's self and one's business. Like Bassanio, he measures Jessica's worth by her wisdom, beauty, and faithfulness (2.6.55-59). Even Portia herself, no stranger to commodification, has learned to use Venetian financial language. When Portia claims she's weary, Nerissa suggests surfeit is the cause (1.2.6). Similar to Antonio's ennui discussed earlier, she is too immoderate in her passions to be satisfied. Antonio's and Portia's shared weariness indicates that Venice and Belmont are not too far removed. She acknowledges that she does not follow rules well, that she may teach better than be taught (1.2.15-17), that even in death her father has "curbed" her will (1.2.24-25). Indeed, according to one critic, Portia "is only ever allowed to speak from within the boundaries circumscribed by the will of her dead Father."²⁷

I submit that the circumstances are not so dire as that. This view victimizes Portia rather than recognizing her self-awareness and the immense power she still holds. Considering her adroitness in court, we surmise Portia's father must have himself been a lawyer—a strange occupation among the aristocracy—or paid handsomely for his daughter to have (also strange) a legal occupation. But he would have understood, of course, that a woman would not have been able to practice law or exercise much autonomy in a masculine-dominated world of commerce. Legally, his property would transfer title to his son-in-law. Considering these limitations, the casket test is not an oppressive restraint but a final

²⁷ Drakakis, John, "Jessica" in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, eds. John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon (New York: Routledge, 2002), 150.

rite of passage in which Portia learns how to navigate the waters of self-governance. That she successfully acquits Antonio is, we assume, her first formal test at the bar, and the later ring test is entirely her own creation, forever establishing that while Bassanio may possess legal, public rights, the private world is hers to command.²⁸

For here we see her clearly using the constraints of the casket test in her favor. When Morocco and Aragon both take their turns, choosing the gold and silver caskets respectively, she does nothing to help or hinder them. Yet when Bassanio arrives at Belmont, she becomes far more engaged. She explains the rules—“I could teach you / How to choose right, but then I am forsworn” (3.2.10-11)—yet warns him that truth is not found solely in appearances: “beshrew your eyes, / They have o’erlook’d me and divided me” (3.2.14-15). Perhaps she is concerned that Bassanio sees her as property to be appraised and distributed, suspecting his interest lies in what wealth she will bring his deficient title. Nevertheless, Portia makes her own passions clear by assisting him. Her “stand for sacrifice” (3.2.57) and commissioning of the song (3.2.65-74) points Bassanio toward the lead casket. Here she stands in conformity to her father’s marriage law while simultaneously exercising her limited power to influence the outcome.²⁹ And her gifting of the ring, which represents both her love and the transfer of wealth to her husband, becomes a moment where she can exercise her own agency in another, future test.

At the moment of decision, Portia has successfully taught Bassanio not to look on “outward shows,” so he must intuit her meaning. He chooses not to calculate as Morocco and Aragon do, finding Portia’s “counterfeit” in the lead casket (3.2.119). This term, associated as it is with money, might lead us to conclude that he has lost the test. But failure exists only insofar

²⁸ Readers of Chaucer may recognize the private-public divide as exercised by Dorigen in “The Franklin’s Tale” (V.745-752). Dorigen possesses sovereignty over all family matters, so long as her husband Averagus is allowed to maintain the appearance of sovereignty at court.

²⁹ Berger, Harry Jr., “Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2010), 14.

as he prefers the image to the reality. This, we know, and Portia may guess, is Bassanio's temptation. As one who spends frivolously, he cares greatly about how wealth may benefit him. But Portia's "worth" lies in far more than her account. He realizes images can deceive when he chooses the lead casket, learning that love must, like wealth, be risked if it is to have any true value. Gratiano, never accused in the play of being a wise man, also realizes this truth when he opines: "All things that are / Are with more spirit chasèd than enjoyed" (2.6.13-14). Bassanio must learn to prize reality over the image and see beyond the senses, a paradox in which is "the choice of life [and] the love of God."³⁰ Portia, interestingly, does not trust him to choose correctly, fearing that he pledges his love "enforced" (3.2.34). Perhaps more poignantly, she knows he has "o'erlooked [...] and divided" her (3.2.15), treating her as a commodity rather than as herself. It is, therefore, fitting when he makes the correct choice that she says, "You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, / Such as I am" (3.2.153-54). Despite his success in seeing accurately, she continues her language of accountancy in anticipation of transferring to him her ring and her fortune:

yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich, that only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. But the full sum of me
Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed. (3.2.156-63)

For a man who wrongly appraises the value of his future wife, her subtle urging him toward the correct casket is an act of mercy superannuated with self-interest. She teaches him the better value of a person, exceeding account in "virtues, beauties, livings, friends." Hers is not a mercenary action simply because she prefers Bassanio to Morocco and Aragon; it is a

³⁰ Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory," 337.

rational decision to choose, to bestow mercy on one with whom she can emotionally relate.

Portia's deftness at social and political maneuvering, thus, contrasts more powerfully Jessica's earnest attempts at the same kind of emancipation. Jessica's efforts, while debatably successful, are neither as adroit nor impressive. She lies to her father, whom she despises. When he tells her, "Look to my house" (2.5.17), he expects she will not only protect his home but his legacy. Instead, she, like Portia, disguises herself; unlike Portia, she steals her father's wealth in a casket and squanders his most valuable possessions. Hers is a prodigal retreat, giving her story a less satisfactory conclusion. She wins her intended, but her future with Lorenzo appears dim in Act 5 (see below). Portia upholds the structures of civilization in her trials through obedience to both father and husband and in displaying an acute understanding of the law. Jessica, on the other hand, brings the whole edifice down upon Shylock, achieving the benefits of Venetian Christianity and Belmont aristocracy—with none of the virtuous effort.

The casket test, we may conclude, is not supposed to be a true test in that it measures the mettle of the suitors; rather, it is a way for Portia, a woman born into societal constraints, to exercise volition within the confines of gendered limits. Her interaction with Nerissa points to an ability to manipulate the actions of the suitors. She is receiving an education in "wifeing," displaying discernment—skills she exercises to their fullest in leading Bassanio to the lead casket and manipulating him with the ring. The coldly calculating language of commerce witnessed in the casket test are overshadowed by

ambiguous allusions associating Bassanio with Jason, Portia with the Golden Fleece, and Belmont with Colchis [that] resolve themselves in this comic metaphor of renewal. The tragic pattern gives way to comic

restoration by a kind of mysterious rite not unlike baptism, with its waters of supernatural grace.³¹

How can the erudite legal scholar Balthazar not find a way to exempt Portia from her father's will and the altogether risky casket test? Perhaps the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Venice would take no note of a woman dressed as a man provided she only fulfill her legal and economic functions. Or perhaps Portia, unwilling to curb the will of a dead father at home out of a spirit of humility, found no compunction in playing barrister abroad.

Or it may be that the stakes are much lower and the outcome more assured than many critics surmise. While its seriousness can serve as a commentary on social issues, the casket scene is supposed to be part of a larger romance, a fantastical test of the marital navigation between men and women and of the filial navigation between fathers and daughters.³² Portia has been released from her father's will but has relinquished her body and fortune to Bassanio, a man who has had mixed success in managing his finances and proves her a second-class citizen measured against Antonio. She, not unlike Chaucer's Wife of Bath, must regain the power she lost by giving her heart and property to a man. The solution, Portia discovers, is in obedience to the letter of the law, which reveals the spirit of the law. By submitting to her father, Portia finds the hope of her desires. It is a strategy which she will repeat in the court scene.

IV. THE COURT TEST

The court scene is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which for our purposes is that it measures the role and efficacy of religion,

³¹ Cunningham, John and Stephen Slimp, "The Less into the Greater: Emblem, Analogue, and Deification in *The Merchant of Venice*" in *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, eds. John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon (New York: Routledge, 2002), 225-282.

³² Levin, Richard A., "Portia's Belmont" in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), 30.

veiled by economic interests, in a republic of supposed equality. I say supposed because the outsider Shylock has been viewed in various ways by many critics. It is now in vogue to see him as a persecuted victim of Christian hegemony. One need look not only at contemporary criticism about Shylock's Jewishness but also the 2004 Sony Pictures Entertainment production, which contextualizes racial conflict by opening with title cards about Jewish ghettos and depicting Antonio (Jeremy Irons) angrily spitting on Shylock (Al Pacino).³³ In the early twentieth century, E. E. Stoll's deconstruction of the heroic Shylock portrayed in nineteenth century productions should have reasserted a more historically-informed view.³⁴ Yet more recent scholarship, and both cinematic and theatrical productions, have ignored Stoll's criticism, transforming Shylock into the most victimized of all minorities—a Jew with one shot at justice before losing out to a Christian conspiracy disguised by the judicial system. This reductivist view, though not wholly without merit, translates the play through the lens of twenty-first century social conflict, a politics which assumes all of history is the unwritten material struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed. True, Western experience with Nazism at home and abroad has increased our sensitivities to the plights of ethnic and religious minorities, and to Jews in particular; and since this essay aims to elevate religious concerns over others, we cannot overlook this element. But one of the secondary objectives in this analysis is to show that the characterization of collective racism and exclusivity attributed to the Christian characters in modern interpretations is overemphasized, to the extent of ignoring the central theme of the play.

I do not subscribe wholly to Harold Bloom's view, which holds that Shylock is comic, and that the play is reduced to incoherence when he is

³³ Radford, Michael M. *The Merchant of Venice*. Beverly Hills, CA: MGM Pictures, 2004, DVD. No reference to Jewish ghettos exists in Shakespeare's original, and Antonio's spitting is referenced by Shylock (1.3.122) but not depicted in the play.

³⁴ Siegel, Paul N., "Shylock the Puritan," *Columbia University Forum*, 5, no. 4 (Fall, 1962): 14-19.

performed sympathetically.³⁵ But I admit that I lean somewhat more on Bloom in this instance than with what he calls “the school of resentment.”³⁶ As Shakespeare would have us do, Bloom argues, we are meant to mock Shylock, who could never seriously find himself “content” to become a Christian. Notwithstanding Shylock’s deeper love for money than his faith, Bloom’s assessment overlooks the one, if not two, aspects of the play that provide Shylock the pathos he needs for personal redemption in our eyes. The second is the forced conversion into Judaism. Such an act, as seen by early modern Christian characters and audiences, is rightly comic in the traditional term so that Shylock’s religious doctrine and practice now line up with metaphysical reality—and all’s well that ends well. Barring their charitable perspective, the conversion would be further comic in that the “devil incarnation” (2.2.26-27) has received what is coming to him. Like Malvolio in his yellow stockings, we are compelled to laugh at his ridiculousness. More on this point needs to be said. But the first aspect that Bloom evades, which seems to me ever so much more convincing than the second, is Shylock’s famous monologue to Solano and Salarino (3.1.52-72). Jews are indeed fellow humans, and they should be treated like humans—especially in the republic of Venice, renowned for its equanimity. Jews indeed have eyes and ears, hearts and blood, and Shylock forces us to see beyond the stereotypes and to confront his humanity. After such a moving speech, we see Shylock in a new dimension, as worthy of our respect if not pity, and we understand that he is not comic, at least not as a type. Shylock is self-aware and “knows the reasons for his behavior, as a comic figure generally does not.”³⁷ Thus,

³⁵ Bloom, Harold, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 172.

³⁶ Weiss, Antonio. “Harold Bloom, The Art of Criticism, No. 1.” *The Paris Review*, 119 (Spring, 1991). <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2225/the-art-of-criticism-no-1-harold-bloom>.

³⁷ Cooper, John R. “Shylock’s Humanity,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21, vol. 2 (Spring, 1970), 117-124.

if we are compelled to laugh mirthfully with the Christians at the end of Act IV, the abuse he suffers in Act III reminds us that our sympathies should not always settle among our own kind.

For Shakespeare's conception of Venice is as a Christian republic. As a Christian republic, it elevates not only religious duty but the inviolability of law in ways to which Tudor England might only aspire. A penitential reverence overtakes this courtroom drama, which has all of the romance not only of the Renaissance stageplay but also of the unreality of the postmodern screenplay.³⁸ On the one hand, we have the litigant Shylock, who would manipulate the new law courts of civilization to justify the far older *lex talionis*. His desire for revenge, an act which should be punished under the criminal code and not tort law, forces the state to forsake its role to protect life in the interest of protecting property. When given the opportunity to forgive the bond, even compensated three times over for the default (4.1.235), he calls upon heaven and claims that to relinquish his bond might perjure his soul (4.1.237-38). As the quintessential figure of justice holding knife and scales, his statement, "I stand for judgment" (4.1.103), should echo a contrast with Portia's "I stand for sacrifice" (3.2.57).³⁹ The Biblical connotations of these words further characterize these players as Law and Grace, as Shylock anticipates himself as righteous enough to withstand God's justice while Portia humbles herself on the altar of mercy.

On the other hand, we have a defendant who, though rarely speaking in his own defense, is asking the court to deny a valid contract. His legal team, first headed by Bassanio and then by Portia *qua* Balthazar, would likewise manipulate the court to exempt him from judgment. Bassanio's

³⁸ As Granville-Barker comments on the unreality of the case, "the law and its ways are normally so uncanny to a layman that the strict court of an exotic Venice might give even stranger judgments than this and only confirm us in our belief that once litigation begins almost anything may happen" (22). And almost anything does happen.

³⁹ Overton, Bill, "The Problem of Shylock" in *The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 295.

prodigality in wealth, we see, applies to his view of the law as well. He begs the court to do good in releasing Antonio from his bond, no matter how much chaos it might afflict upon the law-abiding civilization of Venice. “Wrest once the law to your authority,” he pleads, “To do a great right, do a little wrong” (4.2.212-13). Portia knows how dangerous a suggestion this is, if for no other reason than that she is a beneficiary of the Venetian law that sustains the music and liberality of Belmont, and she, anticipating such a ruling, rejects his pleas outright. Civilization cannot stand without law. The free exchange of commerce, which gives meaning to one’s labors and raises the standard of one’s living, is only made possible in a state that ensures physical and political safety to individuals to conduct that commerce—and, I would add, makes little effort to interfere. Therefore, the Duke’s reluctance to break the bond by force is shrewd, if seemingly inhumane. To do so would be, as Antonio wisely understands, to “impeach the justice of the state” (3.3.29), even if it comes at personal cost to his body. The stakes are too high to simply gamble away the law, as Portia warns: “‘Twill be recorded for a precedent / And many an error by the same example / Will rush into the state” (4.1.204-206). Antonio fears the effects would ripple far beyond Venice “Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations” (3.2.30-31). It is not just the republic that would suffer anarchy, but the entire global economy could collapse under such an arbitrary foundation.

But in terms of economic generosity, the most appropriate contrast to Shylock is not Antonio but Portia. She offers to pay Antonio’s debt to Shylock three times over (4.1.235), and she alone exercises an uncanny logic of Venetian law to free Antonio from his bond when her munificent offer is rebuffed. Her generosity has been labeled otherwise by some critics who see her as motivated by capitalist impulses. Lars Engle, for one, sees Portia’s appearance in court as an insurance policy designed to oversee her investment in Antonio and to secretly coerce Shylock into

paying Antonio's debt.⁴⁰ She goes to court to determine the legitimacy of her trust in Bassanio, which she knows she is in danger of losing to Antonio.⁴¹ By redeeming Antonio, body and soul, she ameliorates the threat to her marriage without cynically allowing him to martyr and apotheosize himself in Bassanio's memory. Korda also suggests that Portia is not a liberal giver at all, but that she becomes involved in the situation out of her own economic self-interest—two incentives, we might retort, that are not mutually exclusive.⁴²

While these arguments are not entirely inaccurate, Portia's legal and religious rhetoric suggests more than just a mercenary motivation. Her plea is the plea of mercy, "which droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven" (4.1.183). Notwithstanding the pun on Gentile and "gentle," Portia is appealing to Christian virtues to change Shylock's mind.⁴³ She typifies the exacting nature of justice to Shylock when he denies it to others, reminding him that "in the course of justice, none of us / should see salvation" (4.1.195-6). There is no doubt that the text supports this Christian preference of mercy over justice, arguing the pre-eminence of the Old Law to the New.⁴⁴ But it must also be remembered that Portia, no matter her background, represents a feudal, aristocratic pattern. While she is progressive in terms of challenging conventions of gender and social hierarchies, she is not so radical that she breaks them. As we have already seen, while lamenting her father's casket test, she still submits to it.

⁴⁰ Engle, Lars, "Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37, no.1 (Spring, 1986), 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² Korda, "Dame Usury," 131.

⁴³ Twice the word *gentle* is associated with the word *Jew*: Antonio calls him a "gentle Jew" (1.3.176), and in the trial scene the Duke says, "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew." (4.1.34). Given Shakespeare's penchant for puns, we cannot assume this is accidental. The Christian characters are demanding of Shylock something which he cannot—yet—be, subtly demanding not just a change of attitude but a complete change of faith.

⁴⁴ It may likewise easily be argued that Jessica rebels against her father because his is the law of oppression, not the law of freedom.

Though clearly superior to Bassanio, she grants him control over her wealth—yet not over her body before marriage. She employs the latest advancements in mathematics and legal tactics, using the language of capitalism to defeat her opponent.⁴⁵ Her legal prowess, her gender-bending, and her manipulation of Bassanio may appear revolutionary but only insofar as she works to preserve the status quo and solidify her own power. She even personifies the Christian proverb in her interaction with Shylock: “For to those who have more will be given [...] but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matt 13:12, NRSV). If Shershow is correct, then this seems to be the fundamental passage of capitalist scripture, that capitalism does indeed support a spirit of generosity.

Yet the play confidently asserts that less—and far more—is at issue than money. Shylock wishes to kill under the pretext of preserving justice and the state; Portia, using the same pretext, seeks to save life. The highest moment in the play is undoubtedly Portia’s speech invoking mercy. It ranks as high as Macbeth’s and Hamlet’s soliloquies in aesthetic power and cuts to the heart of humanity. Mercy, she argues, can be exercised gratis by anyone, granting the benefits of justice (i.e., right living) beyond the limits of one’s economic, relational, or spiritual life. It can be exercised for anyone, especially those who least deserve it, blessing the giver and receiver (4.1.92-93), raising the peasant to the role of kings—even in imitation of God himself (4.1.199-203). That Portia’s appeal to mercy does not move Shylock is no fault of her poetry but a demonstration that only crafty legalism will overcome him. She implores Shylock’s free act of mercy, which the law allows him, but when he refuses the more humane

⁴⁵ Korda contrasts the medieval and early modern methods of accounting in order to demonstrate Portia’s progressiveness. According to her findings, Shylock more acutely lacks virtue in his inability to appropriately account wealth (using antiquated systems), and that Portia is more distinctly virtuous—and Christian—because she not only is free with her money but is also able to account for each cent and shilling (146-148). This trait would seem to be distinctively capitalist in a way that Shylock himself cannot even live up to.

choice, she sets the law upon him—the same law that he could not divine in his unmerciful pursuit of justice. His “incredulous question, ‘Is that the law’...when he finds the law invoked against him, shows a new and overwhelming consciousness of the defects of legalism.”⁴⁶ He ignores the benefits of mercy when offered and only finds himself “content” when shown the darker demands of the law (4.1.398). Consequently, Shakespeare discovers in this impossible dilemma a Christian answer to the conflict between property rights and safeguarding humanity.

Mercy is the better way. We in the audience rejoice at Antonio’s salvation and in Shylock’s comeuppance. The tables are turned, yet Shylock, surprisingly, is not treated as an attempted murderer but as someone who has merely skipped out on his alimony payments. Shylock’s wealth, for instance, is only partially confiscated. Antonio instructs the court to keep half of it in trust for Shylock’s legacy, regardless of what Jessica has done to him, perhaps in hopes that father and daughter may reconcile, and to “teach Shylock by right Christian example the value of mercy and giving.”⁴⁷ The other half he asks for in use—whether to help restore his own fortunes or to hold it over Shylock in allowance.

This aspect of the trial invites a more nuanced interpretation of the text. For if we reserve any respect for Shylock, we must acknowledge the troublesome nature of Portia’s legalism and the court’s infantilizing verdict. Portia’s request for mercy for Shylock is, according to at least one pessimistic reading, insincere, “a careful, rhetorical construction” fraught with self-interest.⁴⁸ She appeals to mercy not simply for Christian consistency but to save Antonio’s life for the sake of Bassanio. The verdict is dramatically complicated as we consider Gratiano, who is made a vindictive mouthpiece for the Christians during the trial. He speaks without understanding and speaks far too often—as Bassanio observes (1.1.121). His vitriol against Shylock is natural considering the usurer’s

⁴⁶ Lewalski, “Biblical Allusion and Allegory,” 341.

⁴⁷ Holmer, “The Education of the Merchant of Venice,” 318, 319.

⁴⁸ Overton, “The Problem of Shylock,” 307.

attempted consumption of his friend. He wishes death upon the Jew (“a halter gratis”) with as much generosity as the titular merchant’s lending (“money gratis”). His reactions are understandable, but they are not those of a Christ follower; and through its emphasis on mercy, the play carefully centers our cutthroat impulses on Gratiano. For he stands in contrast to the more enlightened, liberal attitudes expressed by the Duke, Portia, and Antonio. Antonio’s sufferings have schooled him in compassion, and he now chooses to exemplify the New Law instead of using it to divide from the Old. In short, while Gratiano speaks the minds of the outspoken Christian audience hoping for Shylock’s defeat and even destruction, Antonio speaks of a more humane expression of Christian living. Portia, too, “squeezes new life and salvation out of the dead and deadly law.”⁴⁹ She saves Venice from the murder of its own in the mindless and undiscerning execution of a private contract that should never have been enforced. But this defense is insufficient, says Overton, for “Shylock’s treatment only appears merciful in contrast to the dire penalties with which he is threatened and in accordance with a Christian perspective the Venetians may consider they are favouring a Jew by converting him.”⁵⁰

Some have seen Antonio’s demand that Shylock receive baptism as merciless—indeed, one might think it more merciless in his exaction of justice than Shylock’s pound of flesh. Countless critics, especially in the modern era, have nothing positive to say about Antonio’s addendum to Shylock’s sentence.⁵¹ A.D. Moody argues that the Christians are corrupting the judicial process, appealing to mercy to transform the legal issues into theological ones, concluding that

[i]n the end the trial turns out to have been a drama in which the Christians were engaged in resolving their inner contradiction, by casting out Shylock, the scapegoat fashioned in the likeness of their devotion to

⁴⁹ Tanner, Tony, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 132.

⁵⁰ Overton, “The Problem of Shylock,” 303.

⁵¹ Such critics include Tony Tanner, Richard A. Levin, Bill Overton, Harry Berger, Jr., A.D. Moody. Moody, in particular, considers Antonio’s act “malicious joy” (85).

the world, and a reproach to their indifference to the life of the spirit and the love which it demands. With him undone and compelled to put on their own goody outside, they are at liberty to enjoy the delights of Belmont, their idyll.⁵²

The critics who feel Shylock has been unjustly treated and see a religious conspiracy against the outsider conveniently overlook the fact that default on Shylock's bond equals death. The fact that Shylock is a religious minority and presumably unable to defend himself against the majority, for them, in some way justifies his attempted murder of Antonio. Contracts by nature exist to assign remedies against the party in default and to mitigate the long-understood *lex talionis* of natural law. Yet Shylock's intent is homicidal, while his opponents' are merely prejudicial.

Nevertheless, as the critics above assert, has Antonio undone his own salvation in the audience's eyes by forcing Shylock to convert? However often it may have been practiced, forcible conversion was long held to be anathema to the Christian doctrine of faith. St. Thomas Aquinas makes it clear that a baptism made under compulsion is no salvation at all and an affront to natural law.

Among unbelievers there are some who have never received the faith, such as the heathens and the Jews: and these are by no means to be compelled to the faith, in order that they may believe, because to believe depends on the will [. . .] even if they [the Christians] were to conquer them, and take them prisoners, they should still leave them free to believe, if they will.⁵³

With this reminder, we might rather conclude that Shylock has been not circumcised but emasculated, without agency over his own money, family, or religious beliefs. Kiernan Ryan, too, sees the verdict as an expression of racial and religious intolerance:

What is at stake is the deeper recognition that, through the revenge plot and the trial, through the ironies and contradictions they lay bare, an apparently civilized society is unmasked as premised on barbarity, on the

⁵² Ibid., 86.

⁵³ ST II-II.q10.a8.ans.

ruthless priority of money values over human values, of the rights of property over the elementary rights of men and women.⁵⁴

What Ryan fails to recognize in his hyperbole is that Venice is hardly a barbarous society by any comparison; rather, a whole list of characters—including Bassanio, Portia (in both her forms) and the Duke—comes to Antonio’s defense *and* offers monetary concessions to Shylock. They are in fact promoting the elementary rights of life, liberty, and property. To view the judgment skeptically, we risk “sentimentalizing Shylock and brutalizing Portia.”⁵⁵ Shylock is not impartially denied access to the scales of justice. Under the Jewish law of “an eye for an eye” Shylock has every right to demand the principal of Antonio’s loan, but he attempts to take a heart for an injured eye. The bond may be legal under Venetian law, but it is excessive under every other moral system. No less a critic than Marx himself disagrees, stating rather eloquently in *Das Kapital*, that

[w]e have seen how the absolute contradiction between the technical necessities of Modern Industry, and the social character inherent in its capitalist form, dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the laborer; how it constantly threatens, by taking away the instrument of labor, to snatch from his heart his means of substance.⁵⁶

This idea aligns with other ideas expressed in the *Manifesto*, which refer to the bourgeoisie ruthlessly breaking asunder “all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” and placing a strictly monetary value on individuals.⁵⁷ The reader remembers when Shylock infamously substitutes the term “daughter” for “ducats” (3.1.16), inadvertently co-opting the language of capitalism for filial relationships. According to Marx, then, Shylock is a

⁵⁴ Ryan, Kiernan, “Re-Reading *The Merchant of Venice*” in *The Merchant of Venice: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 39-40.

⁵⁵ Brockbank, Philip, “Shakespeare and the Fashion of These Times,” *Shakespeare Survey* 16 (1963), 38.

⁵⁶ Marx, Karl, *Das Kapital*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 487

⁵⁷ Marx, Karl, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Signet Classics, 1998), 53. This breaking asunder of filial relations is clearly represented in the patriarchal attitude he has toward Jessica, who revolts against her father’s rule.

man most to be pitied, for his admirable feudal attachment to his labor is ripped from him by the heartless bourgeoisie who are motivated by both religious intolerance and economic difference, leaving him with a distorted worldview from which he cannot escape.

On closer examination, however, I assert that the exact opposite is true. When Antonio insists Shylock convert to Christianity, he is—to the Elizabethan mind—saving his soul. We recall Shylock’s claims that to relinquish his bond might perjure him eternally (4.1.237-38); converting exempts him from his oath and assumes a greater interest toward mercy. It is true that St. Thomas’ injunction against forced conversions makes Antonio’s demand suspect, in keeping with the tragic-comic and morally complex nature of the text. Yet this may be the very act of mercy, not humiliation, Shylock refused his enemy. In requiring baptism, Antonio is also granting Shylock access to those municipal seats of power that adherence to Judaism formerly forbade him.⁵⁸ Shylock is no longer bound to a life of exacting usury but can participate fully in the Venetian capitalist system, with all the trade networks it had to offer. Even if such a conversion seems superficial, superfluous, or in direct contrast to the saving act of faith, it is, if nothing else, ushering Shylock into the free market. Further, Shylock has been allowed to keep half his money—though in trust with Antonio as executor—and can now use it however he should please. The merchant even instructs him to be reconciled to his Christian daughter and son-in-law, granting him restoration of those filial relationships. The alternative is penury and social ostracization, which may not sound pleasing, surely, though it is not equivalent to death. And, despite the critics’ objections, Shylock claims he is “content”; whether or not we interpret his words literally or ironically, he chooses a life of Christianity over a Jewish martyrdom. The death he demands of Antonio

⁵⁸ This is not a completely unique phenomenon. Shapiro cites the baptism of one Nathaniel Menda, a Jew turned Christian, who made a public confession renouncing his former beliefs and way of life. His confession was so popular as to be referenced in later documents for the next fifty years (74).

he does not elect for himself. However the law may have been turned against him through his own manipulation of it, he willingly—though perhaps not eagerly—receives mercy under the law and, we might hope, mercy under heaven.

Antonio goes above and beyond aristocratic conceptions of friendship by pledging his means for Bassanio's debt; his redemption of Bassanio moves from the financial to the spiritual. He has been regarded as exemplifying the Christological model of self-sacrifice wherein he embodies the ultimate form of charity in laying down his life for his friend.⁵⁹ But he becomes an archetype in showing mercy to Shylock, both in granting him salvation in the life to come and by redeeming his life and livelihood. With resemblance to the casket test, Antonio has learned from Portia how to rightly see the world. As the story closes, it now remains for Bassanio to learn how to live rightly in it.

V. THE RING TEST

Yet to learn how to live rightly in Venice, he must return to Belmont. Richard A. Levin holds that the play, though clearly centered around the conflict of Venice, of justice and Jewry, is incomplete without the lyrically comedic resolution of Act 5.⁶⁰ Surely, we might assume a sufficiently comic ending with the courtroom verdict. But the court test reveals that Bassanio's loyalties are not yet in their proper place; rather than in the comfort of home and hearth, Bassanio is still too generous with his words—a prodigal liberality that exposes both his misplaced loyalties and potentially unfrugal handling of wealth. He professes to Antonio that Shylock can execute Bassanio himself instead (4.1.114-15). On face value, we might think this statement merely the embellishment of a friend distressed, but it portents something far more irresponsible. For he later

⁵⁹ Ferber, "The Ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*," 432.

⁶⁰ Levin, Richard A., "Portia's Belmont," 55.

says—unknowingly, in front of his wife—he would sacrifice Portia for Antonio’s life (4.1.294-99).⁶¹ Finally, out of gratitude to Balthazar for successfully defending his friend, he offers anything that might repay the lawyer for his kindness. Portia, seeing an opportunity to once again test the mettle of her husband, insists upon the ring which signifies her love and wealth. This same ring, “Which, when you part with, lose, or give away, / Let it presage the ruin of your love, / And be my vantage to exclaim on you” (3.2.176-78), represents the value Bassanio imputes to his wife. Bassanio, at first loath to give the ring, is prevailed upon by Antonio and the niceties of social custom to part with the ring, which outwardly pleases Balthazar but inwardly angers Portia.

The court test should be the climax and resolution of a problem play, but Shakespeare goes farther than mere legal commentary to see if Venetian justice applies to personal relationships as well as civilization’s mores. For those who believe that Venetian justice is anything but, the ring test becomes merely an extension of deconstructing marriage as well. But we need not adopt so cynical a reading; if the court test concludes with an ultimate moral victory, then in assaying the commitments of marriage and friendship we might also expect a charitable interpretation. Does Bassanio “sacrifice” the ring for a good cause, perhaps? Has he learned to value people rightly more than things? Or does he only view some people rightly, preferring friendship to marriage? Or does this action reveal Portia’s anxieties, as she shrewdly capitalizes upon Bassanio’s capitulation to return sovereignty over Belmont to herself?

To answer these questions, we must first return to Jessica, whose surprising presence in the final act lays the foundation to these questions. She and Lorenzo sit under the Belmont moon and recite a litany of famous love stories, including Troilus and Creseyde, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, and Medea and Jason (5.1.1-17). Yet each of these lovers, the

⁶¹ Gratiano, not to be undone, makes a similar claim—also unknowingly in front of his own wife. Both of these protestations earn jealous asides from Portia and Nerissa (4.1.300-01 and 4.1.305-06).

audience likely observes with a cocked brow, ended in tragedy, a feeling of unease which is multiplied by the fact that Lorenzo and Jessica follow up these references with their own troubled tale. Jessica “steal[s] from the wealthy Jew,” says Lorenzo, and Jessica responds that Lorenzo “swear[s] he loved her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And ne’er a true one” (5.1.19-25). Theft and falsehood are the hallmarks of their story, and their elopement signals a break in filial relations and her Jewish identity. Such an abrupt fissure shows that “to a society politically committed to the organization of the family as a ‘commonwealth,’ as a replication of the order of the state, elopement was tantamount to a form of domestic treason in its capacity to undermine the established hierarchy.”⁶² True, Jessica has traded one community for another, but she does so without the love and blessing of her father, an act of deceit which may forever disrupt her integration into her new family and Christian community.

She precludes the final act with her sorrow; though music sets the tone of Belmont, as it did in the casket test, Jessica proclaims, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.77). This dissatisfaction may explain why she, like Antonio and Portia at the beginning of the play, is so sad: our characters have all been suffering from a moral malaise, an affliction that can only be resolved not by money but by achieving spiritual wholeness. She is warned by Lancelot that the sins of the father will be visited upon her (3.5.1-2), a prophecy she intends to avoid by marrying Lorenzo.⁶³ “I shall be saved by my husband,” she exclaims, “He hath made me a Christian” (3.5.18-19). Jessica’s theological misdirection results from her confused identity, finding no grace in her father’s household but no place among the Venetian Christians; she is “a stranger to herself, a complex

⁶² Drakakis, “Jessica,” 159.

⁶³ Marginalization is a common trope in Hebraic literature, particularly in the Torah. See Ex. 34:7, Num. 14:18, Deut. 5:9 as a few examples. The later promise against this pronouncement of generational guilt is found in Ezek. 18:19-20, which can be seen as a rejection of the Mosaic Law and the dispensation of grace expected in the New Covenant.

image of the very materiality that Venice seeks, almost desperately in the play, to marginalize.”⁶⁴ By marrying Lorenzo, she has achieved proper spiritual and social status so as to no longer be damned. We sympathize with and yet critique Jessica, both for wanting to leave her father’s house and the selfish and self-loathing manner in which she leaves. In this world, rings are a type of coinage in which one exchanges not in money but friendship.⁶⁵ Whereas Portia as a member of the Christian aristocracy is bound to her father’s will, Jessica has the power of choice in the Jewish lower class—but she does not choose her manner wisely. Jessica repudiates her father’s turquoise ring, while Portia treats hers as sacred. Bassanio, too, will forsake the ring, and her action foreshadows his. But while he eventually achieves redemption with his wife and reintegration into the marital state, she may not. Even if she does proclaim her freedom and escape a filial tyranny, her father, if we have read correctly, has now also been tacitly accepted into the community of Christians and the elite Venetian mercantilists—and deserves the respect due a father. A dramatic shift in perspective has occurred. Jessica’s actions, which may have been understandable in Act 3, appear poor payment for a father’s love in Act 5. Likewise, Bassanio’s actions, which may have seemed generous in Act 4, prove to wreck marital harmony in Act 5.

The ring test, therefore, is a way for Portia herself to exercise the mercy she has extolled. Jessica’s acquisition of her mother’s ring may be accounted as part of the wealth held in trust by Antonio’s stipulations. Just as Jessica foolishly steals the ring, Bassanio foolishly gives it away. Hers is a prodigal’s contempt, all too easily erased by her and Shylock both being granted access to the community of Christians. His failure is a human error, not a repudiation of marriage or justice but a reminder that love is easily misplaced. This misdirected love has been his flaw from the beginning, first by allowing friendship to become surety to gain a wealthy

⁶⁴ Drakakis, “Jessica,” 147.

⁶⁵ Ferber, “The Ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*,” 454.

wife and now by elevating that friendship above the more important marital bond.

Portia requests the ring from Bassanio because she is understandably threatened by Antonio's constant interposition between her and her husband.⁶⁶ This threat occurs first in Act 3 when Bassanio's affections for Antonio lead the former away from the marriage bed to rescue the latter, again in Act 4 when Antonio's sacrifice might be seen as an extreme and self-serving act of martyrdom, and finally in Act 5 when Antonio tries again to play middleman in the couple's marital spat. It is Antonio, after all, who prevails upon Bassanio to part with the ring when Portia embarrasses them both by insulting Bassanio's false liberality and hyperbolic gratitude. "Let [Balthazar's] deservings," Antonio pleads, dismissing Bassanio's reluctance, "and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.468-69). R.F. Hill sees the Renaissance virtue of male-male friendship at odds with male-female marriage.⁶⁷ This devaluing of the latter in favor of the former may have been a frequent problem in the early modern period. Wealthy women began appealing to the Courts of Chancery by the end of the sixteenth century to keep their property separate from their husbands, suggesting not only a rising economic agency in concert with the rise of capitalism but a concern that husbands might use their wife's wealth for extra-filial purposes.⁶⁸ Why Portia does not avail herself of this option suggests a renewed confidence in her husband's fidelity after failing the ring test and a need for the narrative to conclude in romantic unity.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Alscher, Peter J., and Richard H. Weisberg. "King James and an Obsession with *The Merchant of Venice*" in *Property Law in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Daniela Carpi (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 198.

⁶⁷ Hill, R.F., "'The Merchant of Venice' and the Pattern of Romantic Comedy," *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975), 75-88.

⁶⁸ Korda, "Dame Usury," 138.

⁶⁹ Another reason is because Venice didn't have an official Court of Chancery as did England and Wales. The Duke's court in the play certainly acts as a de facto Chancery Court, though Portia's legal exclusion as a female suggests a dearth of liberal attitudes on the matter.

As mentioned, Bassanio has valued Antonio over Portia several times already, and Antonio seems to have little compunction being the third wheel in this marriage. By pointing out the additional claims of the law upon Shylock in Act 4, Portia is circumventing Antonio's claims on Bassanio and reinstating his fortunes—not yet knowing about the miraculous recovery of his ships—to keep him financially stable and independent of Portia's and Bassanio's wealth.⁷⁰ Bassanio's forsaking of his wife's ring implies a careless attitude, fearful though he is of relinquishing the ring to Balthazar. He has no intention, that we can tell, of telling Portia about his error.

The precipitating stand-off for the ring test occurs off-stage, when Nerissa confronts Gratiano. Gratiano, who previously bets a thousand ducats for which couple could first conceive a son (3.2.218-19), laughably finds himself begging for his wife's favors. Right on cue, Portia subsequently makes claim for her own ring (5.1.204-05). When Bassanio protests his relinquishment of the ring was for a good cause, she tells him that he does not understand the value of the ring nor she who gave it to him (5.1.215-18). If he cannot place his wife first in his affections, then he will not get to enjoy her sexually. "I will become as liberal as you," she tells him (5.1.242), giving her body to the man who holds the ring. Bassanio's unfaithfulness, though it is not as serious as sexual infidelity, is nevertheless "an oath of credit" (5.1.246), for which he will now be perpetually in her debt. His words must be mirrored with action, and the ring acts as a reminder not merely of who both wears the pants and owns the checkbook in this marriage but also reminds Bassanio where his loyalties should truly lie. His failure to protect his own access to wife and wealth stymies his ambitions and places him in the same servile position as he was in the play's opening.

Liberality, he realizes, is not the same as mercy. Mercy may be favor unwarranted, but it is not favor haphazardly bestowed. Mercy, whether

⁷⁰ Engle, "Thrift is Blessing," 36.

dispensed in the form of justice, coin, or sex, must be received as well as given. A good aristocrat does not throw around his money, a good friend does not ask other friends to stand surety, and a good husband does not put other goods before his wife. To succeed in life, Bassanio needs—and must be reminded that he needs—Portia. Thus, the play reorders all the chaos which it created, so that the hierarchy of value—marriage over friendship, friendship over freedom, freedom over money—is reasserted and restored.

VI. CONCLUSION

The stealing of Shylock's ring—and its representation, the prop that sustains his house—is symbolically restored with Portia's ring—and its representation, mutual fidelity and respect. *The Merchant of Venice* appears to validate capitalism by appropriating the medieval virtue of largess and transferring that value to the new economic sphere. By the end of the play, all's well that ends well—even for Shylock. He does not “live according to the bonds of love and friendship”⁷¹ that the other characters live by, and yet he receives back everything—excepting his Judaism, which he may or may not have valued highly anyway. He is denied the *lex talionis* by the institutionalized law of Venice, yet while justice is enacted upon him so also is mercy. He profits from largess, and it is hoped that with his acceptance into the Christian community he will now exercise the largess that he has withheld from others. No scenes are devoted to Shylock's integration, sadly, but Jessica's integration—troublesome though it may be—serves as an aristocratic stand-in for her father's own social and ecclesial redemption.

Shershow claims the play promotes a capitalist ideology because the characters give without any expectation of reward and are in themselves

⁷¹ Ferber, “The Ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*,” 454.

rewarded for it.⁷² But this behavior runs entirely against the supposed capitalist ideal, which holds that there is no economic incentive for investment without return. For we see each of the main characters who give and “hazard” their wealth receives not only their wealth back in return but a greater depth and breadth of friendship as well. Shakespeare does not use Shylock as a vehicle for criticizing the emerging system of capitalism, nor does he use Portia as a paean to the merits of feudalism (and its counterpart, socialism). Such oppositions that do exist, while they are in practice economic concerns, rest upon the wider foundation of religious conflict.

If anything, in its conclusion *Merchant* promotes not so much an economic ideology as a Christian romance, echoed in the Gospel of St. Matthew: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you shall find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matt 7:7, NRSV). This admonition to pursue the Kingdom of Heaven first is supported by other scriptural injunctions to liberality and self-denial: use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves (Luke 16:9); the last shall be first and the first last (Matt 20:16); freely ye received, freely give (Matt 10:8). Mercy is the currency that ties all of these virtues together. It is generosity that purchases success in all areas of life: financially, legally, maritally, and spiritually. The more magnanimous we are, the more we will achieve. The more we share our spiritual gifts, the more will be shared with us. The free exchange of money and spirit produces a cycle—a ring, as it were—in which good will and goods flow from one person to the next as all are dependent upon each other and upon God.

⁷² Shershow, “Shakespeare Beyond Shakespeare,” 259.