

Love and Money in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Fy on Love without Money!

—John Wodroephe, *The Spared
Hours of a Soldier*, 1623

A perennial question for some persons of every generation is: shall I marry for love or for money? It is typical of the open-minded Shakespeare that he finds nothing wrong with marrying for both. There is in him no niggardly stinginess, no ghostly idealism that finds something amiss with combining the noblest spiritual ideal—love—with the most fundamental material reality—money. Without of course wishing to challenge the general wisdom of the Beatles' classic formulation "I don't care too much for money, 'cause money can't buy me love," there is more compatibility between the two than is sometimes acknowledged. The richest king in the Old Testament, for example, Solomon, was also the one who indulged the most his romantic desires (albeit beyond all reasonable boundaries) and to whom was traditionally ascribed one of the world's greatest love poems, the Song of Songs. The Old Testa-

ment patriarch Jacob, praised by the comic villain Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* for his clever industriousness in multiplying his financial gains when breeding his father-in-law Laban's sheep, was also the most romantic of the patriarchs, working for seven years to marry his heart's desire, Rachel, only to be tricked by Laban into having to work still another seven years to gain her hand—and doing this without complaint. And even Shylock, who dreams at night of moneybags, has a sentimental side; when his friend Tubal tells him of the rumor that his daughter Jessica had sold a family ring "for a monkey," the old moneylender laments, "It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.90–92).

One stereotyped romantic plot familiar to everyone has parents warning their daughters against fortune hunters and consequently insisting on arranging marriages with young men of equal fortune so that their social status and wealth will be safeguarded. But great stories have been written that also work against this theme. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is the famous account of a rich aristocrat, Mr.

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Darcy, rejecting (after much soul searching and self-inflicted distress) his peers' expectations about whom he should marry and choosing finally a spouse of modest income. But the novel still makes clear the compatibility of love and money; its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, without question loves Darcy, but she also has no hesitation in responding to her sister Jane's question about when she first started to love the romantically-challenged gentleman by saying, "I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley,"¹ Darcy's grand country estate.

Love and money are both transforming agents, able to change, like the magic of the sea in *The Tempest*, otherwise pedestrian realities into something "rich and strange." Ovid told such stories again and again in his *Metamorphoses* (one of Shakespeare's favorite sources for his plays) when the love of gods for mortals or of mortals for each other causes one or the other to change from a human being into a tree or a bush or, somewhat more magnificently, a constellation. Trees and bushes and stars are not more precious, of course, than human beings, but what gives them their worth in Ovid's eyes is their greater permanence than transient human lives, which they may eternally memorialize and celebrate. Apollo's love for the nymph Daphne, for example, who was turned into a laurel tree so that she would not have to succumb to the great Roman god, was commemorated whenever one of the god's devotees, such as victors at the ancient Pythian games, wore a wreath made of leaves from that tree. Or to take another example from the same book, the mulberry bush was a timeless reminder of the tragic unrequited love of Pyramus and Thisbe, a story retold by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* and also alluded to extensively in his contemporaneous *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All these stories are allegories of human love,

emphasizing the profound transformational quality of desire. Perversions of love deny change and metamorphosis; in lust the dynamism of the person is paralyzed and rendered immobile, as is seen in pornography or in a false romantic idealism where a woman is placed on a pedestal she can never leave.

It is much the same with money. According to the Biblical parable of the talents, money is properly used when it is invested and brings forth a good return, not when it is hoarded or buried and kept back from supporting good enterprises. In the parable Jesus tells of the master who rewards his two servants who double the money he gives them but takes away the single talent hoarded by a third servant who feared his master's wrath if he lost it in business. The master gives that servant's talent to one of those who had made a profit. The moral given by Jesus is, "For everyone who has will be given more, till he has enough and to spare; and everyone who has nothing will forfeit even what he has" (Matthew 25:30). In these texts, so familiar to all persons in Shakespeare's time, money has power to build up and transform society for the common good, as love has power to change the supple human form to something more enduring. The perversion of commerce and the pursuit of wealth in *The Merchant of Venice* is usury, the exorbitant charging of interest on transactions where no new wealth is created. "For, if the merchant may be allowed to make gain of his money," wrote Thomas Wilson in *A Discourse upon Usury* in 1572, he will most certainly do that rather than engage in more risky but socially necessary commerce. As a result, says Wilson,

The plough man will no more turn up the ground for uncertain gain, when he may make an assured profit of his money that lies by him. The

artificer will leave his working. The clothier will cease his making of clothes, because these trades are painful and chargeable [burdensome]. Yea, all men will give themselves wholly to live an idle life by their money [i.e., by lending their capital], if they have any.²

In *The Merchant of Venice* love and desire are everywhere in evidence, as are the boundaries which seem to, but ultimately do not, hold them in check. Antonio, the play's title character, is "sad" in its first scene and literary critics have ever since tried to discover why—because of concern over some of his wealth being tied up in cargo at risk on the high seas? Because his good friend Bassanio wants to marry the rich and witty Portia and so will not hereafter be his close companion? Both are quite possible but in fact Antonio, the one who should know, says (in the play's very first line), "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1) and denies specifically that affairs of business or the world have made him melancholy: "I hold the world but as the world / A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one" (1.1.77–79). This is common Shakespearean wisdom: "all the world's a stage" says another temperamentally melancholy character, Jacques, in *As You Like It*, "and all the men and women merely players;/ they have their entrances and their exits" (2.7.139–41). In addition, to be "sad" or "melancholy" did not necessarily mean in the late sixteenth century to be self-indulgently gloomy and introspective; it could also mean simply to be serious, a person of *gravitas*, to use the Roman term, of weightiness or intelligence.³ Antonio, then, may be constitutionally melancholy, that is, serious or sober; that he is not merely self-absorbed is evident when Bassanio enters the stage in this same first scene and Anto-

nio inquires in a lively manner for news about the object of Bassanio's love, Portia, and assures his friend that, if he needs financial help in his romantic quest, the merchant's "extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.137–38).

Act 1.3 elaborates upon this theme of love and money and their compatibility. Shakespeare is considered by some critics to be notable for his subtle thematic ambiguities, but the vast majority of the time he leaves us in little doubt about what to think. Shylock's first appearance in the play, for example, is in this scene, and it starkly reveals his character. When Antonio enters the stage at 1.30, Shylock is so disturbed that he must speak in an aside, revealing his clear hatred of Antonio: "How like a fawning publican he looks! / I hate him for he is a Christian" and because he "lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (1.1.31–32, 34–35). He could hardly be much clearer: the whole speech is an indication of his desire to harm Antonio and the fact that they are very nearly the first lines Shylock speaks gives them additional weight. Such lines of Shakespeare's villains often ironically reveal their characters. Iago's first words in *Othello*, for example, are a curse (1.1.4), and those of Macbeth are, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.38), an ironic echo of what the witches have said in that play's first scene, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11).

It would be an inventive critic indeed, then, who could find ambiguity in this initial speech of Shylock. Shylock does speak with unconscious irony, though, when he compares Antonio to a "fawning publican," which to Shakespeare's Christian audience would be a clearly favorable reference to the suppliant publican in St. Luke's Gospel (18:9–14) who humbly begs for God's forgiveness at the temple because

of the dishonesty he has practiced in his profession; the self-righteous Pharisee, praying beside him, piously claims that he had no need of such forgiveness.

Shylock also misinterprets Jewish as well as Christian Scripture. In this same scene he distorts the story in Genesis of Jacob's breeding Laban's rams and ewes as a justification of usury, leading Antonio to comment that "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," a reference to Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. But along with sacred texts Shylock is also twisting basic human relationships. He pretends to lend Antonio money as to a friend; Shylock suggests that the pound of flesh that he asks from the merchant as security for the loan of 3,000 ducats to Bassanio is useless to him and would not be collected; he is, he avers, making a "kind" offer (1.133), making a business deal a "merry sport" (1.137), for "what should I gain / By the exaction of the forfeiture?" (1.155–56).

The intentional ironies here are many. Shylock is pretending to be "kind" in at least two senses of that much played-upon word in medieval and later literature. He claims to be kind, that is, "generous," in making the bargain, but also at issue is the idea that he is responding in a "natural" way (as the Middle English word "kinde" meant "nature") to a fellow human being in need, the same way that Antonio had responded to Bassanio's request for further loans to support his expedition to Belmont. As well as in etymology, important background for this exchange between Antonio and Shylock is found in the Old Testament's discussion of usury in Deuteronomy 23:19–20. There Moses instructs the Israelites that they must not "lend upon usury to thy brother" but that "unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury." There were Jewish writers in Shakespeare's age who argued that Jews and Christians were in fact "brothers" who should not

practice usury toward one another.⁴ And on the Christian side of the discussion St. Thomas Aquinas, whose writings were still greatly influential in the sixteenth century, said that as Christians were brothers of all men, the text in Deuteronomy therefore prohibited practicing usury at all.⁵ So that is perhaps what Antonio has in mind when he says that he would have Shylock lend him money as "to thine enemy" (1.130)—he wants interest charged, as he does not wish, *contra* St. Thomas, to be Shylock's "brother"—and why Shylock says—hypocritically—that "I would be friends with you" (1.134) and is willing therefore to substitute the "merry bond" of the pound of flesh rather than charging conventional interest.⁶

Bassanio, not so caught up in his romantic desires that he cannot see the danger inherent in this sort of deal, exclaims to Antonio, "You shall not seal to such a bond for me! I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (146–47). But Antonio shrugs off this objection, expressing his confidence that he will easily be able to repay the debt before it is due. It is possible, I suppose, to see in Antonio's abandoning all business sense here, as well as concern for personal security, his despair in losing Bassanio's affectionate companionship because of his possible marriage to Portia. His later plaintive confession, when it looks as though Shylock will be able to collect his bond, "I am a tainted wether of the flock,/ Meetest for death" (4.1.114–15), might support such a notion. But as Shylock uses human virtues such as friendship and generosity to disguise his hatred, so Antonio subordinates here his business acumen to the demands of friendship. As one of the most perceptive commentators on Shakespeare, W. H. Auden, has said, Shylock's "unlimited hatred is the negative image of the infinite love of Venetian and Belmont society, which proposes that one

should behave with a love that is infinitely imprudent.”⁷ Also resonant here is the famous biblical text from St. John’s Gospel, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (15:13).

Even though Antonio’s role in the play diminishes after this first act, his unre-served and risk-filled act of friendship is the model for similar kinds of other passionately virtuous acts, such as those of Bassanio and Portia and Jessica, all of whom, to different degrees (but none to the extent of Antonio), are moved by love to accept great risk in return for great reward. Bassanio’s venture in love involves a kind of gambling; in order to visit Portia at her home in Belmont, he must first receive a loan from Antonio for which he has no collateral, being already in debt to his friend for a previous loan. He must then choose the casket that has the picture of Portia in order to win her hand; if he does not, he must 1) leave Portia’s home at Belmont immediately, 2) tell no one which casket he guessed, and 3) promise never to marry. Bassanio seldom gets any credit for his role as a suitor but in fact love requires him to risk his livelihood and his freedom ever to marry—everything, that is, short of his life—in order to gain the beautiful, intelligent and wealthy Portia in marriage.

Portia, in her turn, gives up a cherished possession—her freedom to choose a husband—in return for following the terms of her father’s will that dictates that she can marry only the person who chooses the casket with her picture. For all the talk of arranged marriages in this period, it was nonetheless commonly acknowledged that a woman did in fact have the right to choose her spouse,⁸ and Portia is emphatic that acceptance of her father’s will is also her own choice. Although she initially complains about its hard terms to her maid Nerissa, she also says, “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana,

unless I be obtained by the manner of my father’s will” (1.2.103–05). Nerissa’s support for this resolve is telling: “Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations,” and therefore, Portia will undoubtedly “never be chosen by any rightly, but one who you shall rightly love” (1.2.27–28, 31–32). This, too, is Portia’s own conviction, as she tells Bassanio as he prepares to make his choice: “If you do love me, you will find me out” (3.2.41). That this is indeed what happens results from Bassanio’s wisely interpreting the riddle of the caskets. He chooses the despised leaden one because of its inscription, “Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.16). Where others had despised the leaden box—the suitor from Morocco, for example, had complained that “A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross, / I’ll then nor give nor hazard aught for lead” (2.7.20–21)—Bassanio says that lead’s “paleness moves me more than eloquence, / And here choose I” (3.2.106–7). The appropriateness of choosing lead was that love, be it *philia* or *eros*, friendship or romantic love, ought indeed to require the hazarding of all one has, as both Antonio and Bassanio demonstrate. The connection between love and money here is not in the material worth that each has but in the necessity of “hazarding all one has” to gain their fruits. Antonio’s wealth is important because he can sacrifice it in friendship to Bassanio, as Bassanio’s courtship is made virtuous by his having to risk his freedom to marry when he seeks Portia’s hand.

But success in love and business also requires intelligence and wit—Portia calls her previous suitors “deliberate fools! When they do choose, / They have the wisdom by their wit to lose” (2.9.80–81) and it is to intelligence, reason, personified in Portia, that the last half of the play turns. As love and money are no necessary

enemies, neither is reason and desire. The golden mean, the famous term Aristotle used to describe virtue, implies compromise but it is a very different kind of compromise than is usually practiced in contemporary politics or society. In *The Merchant of Venice* compromise ("How many things by season seasoned are / To their right praise and true perfection!" says Portia [5.1.107–08]) is achieved, not by political calculation or backroom deals but rather by various persons' passions having their sway until reason discovers virtue's golden mean. Perhaps Portia could be seen as a "deal maker" when she comes to Venice disguised as Balthazar to rescue Antonio from his bond, but her aim is not to take a little bit from each competing side for the presumed good of the whole—the typical political procedure—but rather to find a way to give everyone what they want: to Antonio his life, to her husband Bassanio the friend who exposed that life to finance the expedition to Belmont to win her hand, to the Duke of Venice the integrity of the city's commercial reputation. Even to Shylock she would have given a return on investment that exceeded his wildest dreams if he had let her. But Shylock was not as interested in money as in revenge: his abandonment of financial good sense in favor of passion led to his ruin.

Portia's name suggests her role in the trial scene in Act 4: it is her duty to "apportion," to judge fairly what various characters deserve. This role suits her both because of her wisdom and status and also because she was required to be passive in the first half of the play because of her father's will. Now her role is changed as she takes charge of the action, and her self-control is evident. In her excitement over Bassanio's choosing the right casket, she tells "love," in an aside, to be "moderate, allay thy extasy, / In measure rain thy joy, scant this excess! I feel too much thy

blessing, make it less / For fear I surfeit" (3.2.111–114). She also tells Bassanio that they will say their wedding vows but postpone the physical consummation of their marriage until Antonio's situation over the bond with Shylock is resolved. Portia shows here the spiritual basis of both friendship and marriage: friendship is not in the first place giving another his material resources, as romantic love is not in the first place the union of bodies.

Portia's reason is most in evidence, of course, in her famous speech about "the quality of mercy." As Antonio's extreme passion of love was shown in his friendship for Bassanio, so is Shylock's hatred in his insistence on execution of his bond against Antonio. He is offered double and even ten times the 3,000 ducats that he is owed and when he refuses these, Portia asks him if he will not at least offer his victim a handkerchief to stop the flow of blood (a clever, ironic suggestion, as this of course is what will ultimately invalidate Shylock's bond: in his cutting a pound of Antonio's flesh he cannot shed a drop of the merchant's blood); this, too, is refused. Shylock is now making clear in public what had been obvious from his first soliloquy: he hates Antonio and wants his life. Portia's speech, and her subsequent insistence that Shylock must observe the literal terms of his bond, is the triumph of a reason eloquent in articulating that in "the course of justice none of us/ Should see salvation" (4.1.195–96).

Shylock of course has had his defenders and the Venetian Christians their critics. Many readers for at least two centuries have seen something noble in Shylock because of the contempt with which he has been treated by those now seeking his assistance. I cannot think for a moment this was Shakespeare's intention. There are so many and such obvious ways that the dramatist portrays Shylock as a villain; to those already cited, we might add how

he is deserted by his daughter Jessica, a sympathetic character, to marry Lorenzo, Shylock's comic juxtaposition of his frantic concern for the wealth that his daughter took from him and his indifference, to put it mildly, to the loss of the daughter herself ("I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin" [3.1.80–82]), the hypocrisy of the bond he makes with Antonio, his contempt for merriment and festivity—really, almost everything Shylock does or says is obviously and completely out of step with the Shakespearean canons of comedy. The prime example of those who see Shylock as something more than a villain is the speech in which Shylock defends his humanity by saying "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions. . . ." and in which he concludes:

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example?—why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.52–65)

This is a powerful speech, but the way it insists on all men's common humanity is only partial and ultimately reveals what's wrong with Shylock's own view of humanity. For everything that he cites as an example of human nature—"if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?"—has to do with the senses and the passions; none of it concerns reason. Desire and passion cut off from reason have become, in the modern Western intellectual world, the hallmark of human authenticity, so it is not surprising that Shylock's speech has won

admiration and cheers in the theatre and in scholarly journals. Typical of the severing of desire from reason in some intellectual circles is this comment, found in an article discussing *The Merchant of Venice*:

Desire is perilous because it annihilates the speaking, knowing, mastering subject, the choosing, commanding self so precious to the Free West. Lovers are conventionally speechless (what can they say that would do justice to desire?).⁹

Well, lots of things. Lovers are "conventionally speechless"? In Shakespeare? The plays, including *The Merchant of Venice* (for example, Portia's speech to Bassanio at 3.2.149 ff. after he chooses the correct casket), are full of lovers finding innumerable verbal outlets for their passion. Romeo and Juliet are not exactly tongue-tied. Desire finds its way to reason in the plays if it is not perverted by a malicious will.

But it is also true, of course, that Shylock has achieved a larger-than-life image for some very good reasons. While stating that it is his "stubborn villainy that generates the uneasy tension that runs through the drama," R. V. Young also notes "there can be no question that the Jew suffers ill use at the hands of the Christians."¹⁰ Shylock does, for example, in his hard-headed fury and outrage, point up the manifest inadequacies of Venetian society—its use of slavery, its Christian citizens who have no interest in loving their enemy, its adherence to a business code that would require the execution of a manifestly inhuman agreement in order to have its commercial reputation upheld. And some of Shylock's anger can be justified as a response to the contempt with which he is treated.

In listening to claims for Shylock's virtue, though, says A. D. Nuttall, we must not forget "the real generosity, however

produced, of the Christians, the real ferocity, however explained, of Shylock. They did forgive Shylock. Shylock would have torn open the breast of Antonio. These are things which no theatrical experience of the play will ever let you forget.”¹¹ And when Lorenzo tells Jessica, in one of the play’s many beautiful speeches, that “The man that hath no music in himself, / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, / Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils . . . / Let no such man be trusted (5.1.81–83, 86),” the application to Shylock, who hates all music and revelry, is obvious.

But in general, desire, when motivated by what Hawthorne called the “sanctity of the human heart,” is given free rein in the play to indulge, variously, a businessman’s generosity to his friend, a father’s control of his daughter’s marriage, a suitor’s desire to have one woman and no other, and even a wife’s pleasure in watching her husband’s struggling between the (apparently) conflicting demands, in the fifth act’s comedy over the rings, of spouse and friend. And reason, surprisingly but typically, vindicates these extreme demands of the heart in public and coherent ways in the play’s double conclusions in Acts 4 and 5. As Pascal said in his most famous *pensée*, “The heart has reasons the reason knows not of.”

The title of this play has often been thought odd. Antonio has little to do after the first act except offer himself with dignified charge to Shylock’s knife; why should the play be named for him? But the play is about taking risks, essential both to business and to love. As Antonio is willing to entrust his whole financial empire on various enterprises at one time, so is he willing to offer his life as collateral to further Bassanio’s romantic desires. In both love, friendship, and business, Antonio offers all he has—as did the two prudent servants in the parable of the talents—and even puts himself under obligation to his enemy as a condition for serving his friend. For this no reward is promised him except gratitude. Portia, too, willingly foregoes her freedom in exchange for obeying her father’s will, and Bassanio risks his ability ever to marry by accepting the lottery of the caskets. Unlike Antonio, though, both Portia and Bassanio stand to gain great reward for their bargains—each marrying whom they love and, in the case of Bassanio, receiving great wealth as well. But it is Antonio, the merchant of Venice, who sets the standard for risk-taking in both business and love and who therefore deserves to be the eponymous hero of the play.

1 3.17.290. London: T. Egerton, 1813. 2 *The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts*, ed. M. Lindsay Kaplan (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 199–200. 3 See C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 75–85. 4 See the interesting texts discussing this in Kaplan’s edition of the play, 217–20. 5 *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 78, reply obj. 2. 6 At the time of the play’s performance, English law permitted charging 10 percent interest on moneylending. 7 *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 81. 8 See,

for example, the remarks by Thomas Becon, *The Catechism*, p. 322 in Kaplan’s text: “. . . though the authority of the parents be great over their children, yet in the matter of marriage the consent of the children may not be neglected.” 9 Catherine Belsey, “Love in Venice,” in *The Cambridge Shakespeare Library* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105. 10 See his article in the March, 2004 issue of *First Things*. 11 *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1985] 2007), 131.