The Merchant of Venice (Fall 2011)

"One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work." Thus proclaims Harold Bloom [171], characteristically quick to dismiss the many directors, actors, critics, and playgoers who have failed to recognize—indeed, argued passionately against—this axiom. In *The Shakespeare Wars*, Ron Rosenbaum offers an equally passionate, at times scathing critique of contemporary attempts "to exculpate Shakespeare and Shylock," to "somehow transcend the ineradicable anti-Semitism of the caricature"[1]—particularly Michael Radford's 2004 film, which I find extremely effective drama, however much of it seems calculated not to offend. Yet more distinguished artists than Radford have erected similar defenses. In *Playing Shakespeare*, John Barton, co-founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, emphasizes, "If we thought [the play were anti-Semitic] we would not have done it," and two of his Shylocks, Patrick Stewart and David Suchet, agree [169–71];[2] Barton further notes, "There are two other Jews in the play, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and Tubal; Shakespeare doesn't take an anti-Semitic view of them"—a tenuous position, as we shall see. More convincing is Harold Goddard, who unearths layers of subtext from even the simplest lines, though one still senses the great critic sweating to make his case:

> There is a repressed Shylock. Now repression inevitably produces a condition of high tension between the conscious and the unconscious, with sudden unpredictable incursions of the latter into the former attended by a rapid alternation of polar states of

[1] See Chapter 9: "Dueling Shylocks" (quotes from pp. 288 & 289)

[2] For my taste, Stewart's excerpted performances do not support his articulated interpretation of the role—he over-leans on his celebrated voice, and when not ranting he snivels—but Suchet is magnificent: neither dignified nor diabolical but unexpectedly, poignantly funny.

> mind. . . . As the imaginative Shylock pictured himself coming to the aid of a friend, so the primitive Shylock dreams of shedding the blood of an enemy. [95–7]

Reading the reams of papers analyzing *Merchant*, I find myself repeatedly echoing blind Gloucester: *And that's true too*. So what can be said with relative certainty of the only major representation of a Jew in Shakespeare? Whatever the playwright's ultimate intent, Elizabethan performances of the play were undoubtedly anti-Semitic (if we may apply a term three centuries before its coining)—during the climactic trial scene, one can easily imagine the whole theater joining with Gratiano to jeer "this currish Jew" [IV.i.290]. Even that soul-stirring appeal, "Hath not a Jew eyes . . . ," may originally have been played for laughs, bellowed by a hook-nosed, red-wigged clown whose every grotesque gesture further distanced character from audience.

Indeed, few interpretations of Shylock are too libelous for Shakespeare's text to accommodate—as Rosenbaum keenly remarks, "Hitler and Goebbels were not somehow *deluded* when the Nazis sponsored no less than fifty productions of the play during the Third Reich. They knew the effect if not the intent of the play" [291]. Yet for many, productions such as Radford's, which make every effort to uncover the "real" Shylock—if not quite tragic hero then at least a man as sinned against as sinning—are not only effective but capture the play's deeper meanings. Rosenbaum satirizes the typical stance—"it's not anti-Semitic, but *about* anti-Semitism" [314]—and certainly such conclusions oversimplify. But Rosenbaum oversimplifies too when he asserts that "Shylock's obsession with vengeful fulfillment of his bond no matter how cruel the consequences … is specifically cast as an imprint of Old Testament, Old Law, Jewish theology, the Old Law 'superseded' by the New Testament's new dispensation of mercy"

[297]. For Shakespeare finds ironies everywhere—as Bloom exclaims, "may God (and democracy) save me from Portia's mercy" [180]. I agree with Bloom that the play Shakespeare wrote is Portia's,[3] and with Goddard that Portia's primary legacy is failure (to follow her teachings; to transform lead into "spiritual gold"),[4] and with everyone over the years who has sensed these uncomfortable truths and wondered how this play can possibly be labeled a comedy. And in spite of all I just wrote, any fair attempt to answer this question must begin not with Portia but with the man who is at once her adversary and her dupe:

Shylock

How we understand Shylock turns on how we answer two related questions: Why does Shylock offer Antonio three-thousand ducats "for an equal pound / Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" [I.iii.141–9]; and when precisely does he determine to claim it? The straightforward—and probably Elizabethan—answer is that Shylock is a villain plotting from the start to eliminate, with the law's blessing, his greatest enemy. Shylock himself suggests this motive early in the play, upon meeting Antonio in the street:

> How like a fawning publican he looks.
> I hate him for he is a Christian;
> But more, for that in low simplicity
> He lends out money gratis and brings down
> The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
> If I can catch him once upon the hip,
> I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
> He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
> Even there where merchants most do congregate,
> On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,

---

[3] See p. 172 of Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. Of course, this declaration doesn't keep Bloom from devoting the bulk of his 20-page essay to Shylock.
[4] See pp. 105–16 of The Meaning of Shakespeare, Vol. 1. (The quote is from p. 112.)

Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him.

[I.iii.38–49]

This speech is an awkward fusing of the profound and petty. Much later, in the courtroom before the Duke, when asked "why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats," Shylock further wrestles with this tension:

What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others, when the bagpipe sings i' th' nose,
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
Master of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rendered
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a woolen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him.

[IV.i.40–62]

Certainly Shylock has valid reasons to loathe Antonio, beyond the merchant's rate-depressing habit of refusing interest. Few characters in Shakespeare have such a genius for speechmaking, especially when the theme is their own suffering; Shylock's recitation of the wrongs done him by Antonio (none of which the Christian denies) flips the script, at least for modern audiences—the villain becomes the hero, and the hero the villain:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft

> In the Rialto you have rated me
> About my moneys and my usances.
> Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
> For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe.
> You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
> And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
> And all for use of that which is mine own.
> Well then, it now appears you need my help.
> Go to then. You come to me and you say,
> "Shylock, we would have moneys"—you say so,
> You that did void your rheum upon my beard
> And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
> Over your threshold …
>
> [I.iii.103–16]

Grant, then, that Shylock hates Antonio, and further that Antonio deserves it. Whatever contempt Shylock may feel toward Christians in general, his dealings with other followers of "the Nazarite" [I.iii.32]—at least until they abscond with both daughter and ducats—have a different quality. "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you," he dryly informs Bassanio [I.iii.33–5], yet several scenes later he has accepted Bassanio's invitation to dinner. True, he says he goes "in hate to feed upon / The prodigal Christian" [II.v.14–5]—and his absence creates a convenient opportunity for Jessica to elope with her betrothed, Lorenzo[5]—but this seems a flimsy excuse, given Shylock's repeated insistence he would rather stay home. "I am not bid for love, they flatter me," he mutters [II.v.13], yet in going Shylock betrays a desire, however deeply buried, for the flattery he would scorn. Might this help explain his particular hatred of Antonio, who refuses to flatter whether his suit be money or mercy?

---

[5] We may infer that Bassanio, who is friends with Lorenzo, extends the invitation for this very purpose.

When first we meet Shylock, Bassanio has already laid out the terms of the loan; all that remains is for Shylock to set the rate:

> *Shylock:* Three thousand ducats—well.
> *Bassanio:* Ay, sir, for three months.
> *Shylock:* For three months—well.
> *Bassanio:* For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
> *Shylock:* Antonio shall become bound—well.
> *Bassanio:* May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?
> *Shylock:* Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
> [I.iii.1–10]

Shylock's tone—that idiosyncratic, repeated "well"—suggests surprise, even amusement. He reminds Bassanio that Antonio's "means are in supposition … there be land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves—I mean pirates"—chuckling, perhaps, at his cleverness—yet such misgivings are no sooner uttered than dismissed: "The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient … I think I may take his bond" [I.iii.17–26]. Of course, three-thousand ducats is a very large sum, and Shylock admits, "I cannot instantly raise up the gross." Again, no matter—he will himself borrow the money from another Jewish lender, Tubal [I.iii.50–5].[6]

The source of Shylock's amusement, then, is neither the size of the loan nor the risk, but the identity of the borrower, Antonio, who cannot even greet Shylock without anticipating an objection:

> *Shylock:* Rest you fair, good signor!
> Your worship was the last man in our mouths.
> *Antonio:* Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow
> By taking nor by giving of excess,
> Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend
> I'll break a custom.
> [I.iii.56–61]

[6] If we may safely assume that Tubal charges interest on this loan, Shylock's determination to collect his pound of flesh is even more clearly a "losing" suit.

Having thus underscored the line between Jewish usury and Christian charity, Antonio turns to Bassanio, eager to render Shylock a third-person bystander to their arrangement. Shylock will not be ignored, however; he tries briefly to conduct business, but the objection nags:

> *Antonio [to Bassanio]:* Is he yet possessed
> How much ye would?
> *Shylock:* Ay, ay, three thousand ducats.
> *Antonio:* And for three months.
> *Shylock:* I had forgot—three months, you told me so.
> Well then, your bond. And let me see—but hear you,
> Methoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow
> Upon advantage.
> *Antonio:* I do never use it.
>
> [I.iii.61–7]

Antonio's smug superiority must madden Shylock, but what can he do? To call Antonio *hypocrite* would surely end the conversation and perhaps the transaction permanently—if Tubal can raise three-thousand ducats, after all, what is stopping Antonio and Bassanio from dealing directly with him? If Shylock wants Antonio's bond, as he clearly does, he must force himself down a more conciliatory path; he thus replies in the most respectable manner he knows: citing scripture, specifically the example of Jacob, who according to *Genesis* obtained the better part of his uncle Laban's flock through cunning:

> Mark what Jacob did:
> When Laban and himself were compromised
> That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied
> Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank
> In end of autumn turned to the rams;
> And when the work of generation was
> Between these wooly breeders in the act,
> The skillful shepherd peeled me certain wands,
> And in the doing of the deed of kind
> He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,
> Who then conceiving, did in eaning time

> Fall parti-colored lambs, and those were Jacob's.
> This was a way to thrive, and he was blessed;
> And thrift is blessing if men steal it not.
>
> [I.iii.74–87]

This reasoning continues to baffle me; the fact that science has discredited the folkloric notion that progeny are influenced by the circumstances of their breeding does not help. Shylock's point seems to be that Jacob turned the fruits of another's labor to his own profit; in this respect, his actions resemble usury, and if God blessed Jacob's "thrift" (a word both Shylock and Bassanio have previously applied to themselves[7]), why should God condemn the usurer's? I am no Biblical scholar, and so my analysis of scripture (as interpreted by Shakespeare and delivered by the Jewish villain of a comedy written for a prejudiced audience) can only be superficial; quite possibly, Shakespeare gave Shylock a specious argument to further erode his credibility.

Whatever Shakespeare's purpose, Antonio can only scoff—"Was this inserted to make interest good? / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?"—inspiring Shylock to crack a rare, intentionally funny joke: "I cannot tell; I make it breed as fast" [I.iii.91–3]. Surely even an Elizabethan audience could laugh at this; alas, Antonio has no sense of humor, nor will he concede the slightest point in this parody of a debate:

> Mark you this, Bassanio,
> The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
> An evil soul producing holy witness
> Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
> A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
> O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!
>
> [I.iii.94–9]

How much of the play is contained in this final line!

---

[7] I.iii.47 (Shylock) & I.i.175 (Bassanio)

His civilities rejected, Shylock turns once more to business, and once more he is distracted:

> *Shylock:* Three thousand ducats—'tis a good round sum.
> Three months from twelve—then let me see, the rate—
> *Antonio:* Well, Shylock, shall we be beholding to you?
>
> [I.iii.100–2]

Whether Antonio interrupts sharply or with "a smiling cheek," Shylock's patience finally breaks, and the previously quoted list of grievances—the public humiliations, the insults—pours from his gut. Again, for me the impulse to assign Shylock the tragedian's role begins with this speech—its venomous conclusion in particular comes from a place antipodal to comedy:

> What should I say to you? Should I not say,
> "Hath a dog money? Is it possible
> A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Or
> Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
> With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
> Say this:
> "Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
> You spurned me such a day, another time
> You called me dog; and for these courtesies
> I'll lend you thus much moneys."
>
> [I.iii.117–26]

Who has not longed to speak with such fierce eloquence to an enemy! Yet if Antonio is chastened, his words do not reveal it—the cool logic of his reply mocks Shylock's passion:

> *Antonio:* I am as like to call thee so again,
> To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
> If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
> As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
> A breed for barren metal of his friend?
> But lend it rather to thine enemy,
> Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
> Exact the penalty.
> *Shylock:* Why look you, how you storm!

> I would be friends with you and have your love,
> Forget the shames that you have stained me with,
> Supply your present wants, and take no doit
> Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me.
> This is kind I offer.
>
> [I.iii.127–39]

Had Shylock's "kind" offer immediately followed Antonio's outburst ("O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!"), I would be tempted to believe it sincere; coming when it does, it seems late by thirty lines. I hear no "storm" now from Antonio, and Shylock's own tirade (however justified) suggests he is not ready to forget his shames. Contrary to his proffered generosity, he was a breath from fixing the interest rate when Antonio's interruption reset the course of the scene and play. Only now, having lost another round in a rigged contest, does Shylock appeal to something he calls kindness:

> Go with me to a notary; seal me there
> Your single bond, and—in a merry sport—
> If you repay me not on such a day,
> In such a place, such sum or sums as are
> Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
> Be nominated for an equal pound
> Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
> In what part of your body pleaseth me.
>
> [I.iii.142–9]

We may wonder where Shylock has acquired his notion of "merry sport," but Antonio has already made the connection for him: "Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" "[F]or when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?" Shylock's bond is thus a twisted attempt to beat Antonio at his own game: For my barren metal, your fair flesh.[8] Even so, it is unfair to accuse Shylock, this early in the play, of plotting murder. As Goddard notes, "[T]he idea that as intelligent a man as Shylock could

---

[8] We must note the irony (though of course Shylock cannot) that Antonio—alone and celibate throughout the play—proves as barren as any coin.

have deliberately counted on the bankruptcy of as rich a man as Antonio, with argosies on seven seas, is preposterous" [92]. Certainly Antonio does not think he will forfeit. "Within these two months," he reassures an alarmed Bassanio, "I do expect return / Of thrice three times the value of this bond" [I.iii.155–7].

More crucially, how could Shylock—how could *anyone* with a modicum of sense—have expected his enemy to agree to so perverse a bond? Why Antonio does agree is a question for later; if we imagine him rejecting the offer—as any other merchant would have done—we sense the balance of power shifting back toward Shylock. Indeed, Shakespeare has already written Shylock's triumphant retort:

> O father Abram, what these Christians are,
> Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
> The thoughts of others! Pray you tell me this:
> If he should break his day, what should I gain
> By the exaction of the forfeiture?
> A pound of man's flesh taken from a man
> Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
> As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats. I say
> To buy his favor I extend this friendship.
> If he will take it, so; if not, adieu.
> And for my love I pray you wrong me not.
>
> [I.iii.158–68]

The twist is that Shylock delivers these lines to Bassanio, who quite understandably opposes the bargain (though not so much as to call off the venture), rather than to Antonio, who is so amenable to Shylock's terms, he manages to pun: "Hie thee, gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" [I.iii.175–6].

Granted, from the moment he enters, Shylock expresses an instinctive thirst for Antonio's blood; locutions such as "feed fat the ancient grudge" and "the last man in our mouths" are shameless invitations for us to imagine the ogre beneath the Jewish gabardine. But an instinct for murder is not the deed itself—so unconcerned is Shylock

with actually claiming his pound of flesh, he consistently requires others to remind him of the prospect. The turning point, of course, is his daughter's betrayal. We learn from the Venetian gadflies Salarino and Solanio that Shylock's first thought upon missing Jessica was to search Bassanio's ship, departing for Belmont; he arrives too late, however, and his only satisfaction is to hear Antonio pronounce the fleeing lovers—carrying with them Shylock's gold—not on board [II.viii.6–11]. "I never heard a passion so confused, / So strange, outrageous, and so variable / As the dog Jew did utter in the streets," reports Solanio:

> "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
> Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
> Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!
> A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
> Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
> And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones,
> Stolen by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
> She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats!"
>
> [II.viii.12–22]

No doubt Solanio—a painfully biased witness—exaggerates for cheap laughs; when present to speak for himself, Shylock is never a caricature. Compare his own words on the same theme, two scenes later:

> Why there, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now. Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin. No news of them, why so? And I know not what's spent in the search. Why thou loss upon loss! The thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o' my shoulders, no sighs but o' my breathing, no tears but o' my shedding.
>
> [III.i.77–89]

Conspicuously absent from either speech is Antonio, though in vouching for Lorenzo and Jessica he cannot help but implicate himself in their elopement. As Shylock rages in the street, rumors of Antonio's losses spread through the Rialto—one ship wrecked off the English coast [III.i.2–7], another "cast away coming from Tripolis" [III.i.93]—yet Shylock scarcely hears them. Accosted by Salarino and Solanio—"How now, Shylock? What news among the merchants?"—he points an accusatory finger at the louts: "You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight" [III.i.21–3]. Clearly the news they had hoped to hear is of their friend; they ask again, more directly, though not before expending a dozen lines mocking the old man's losses:

> *Salarino:* I for my part knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.
> *Solanio:* And Shylock for his part knew the bird was fledge, and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.
> *Shylock:* She is damned for it.
> *Salarino:* That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.
> *Shylock:* My own flesh and blood to rebel!
> *Solanio:* Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?
> *Shylock:* I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.
> *Salarino:* There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?
> *Shylock:* There I have another bad match! A bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto, a beggar that was used to come so smug upon the mart! Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy. Let him look to his bond.
> [III.i.24–46]

These threats confirm the pair's worst fears—though if Shylock's true purpose were Antonio's life, one might expect his "bad match" to please him. "Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh," Salarino protests. "What's that good for?" "To bait fish withal," comes the reply, and I need hardly repeat what follows, though it is worth

remarking that today's conventional wisdom, apparently recoiling from years of excess sympathy for Shylock, is too often guilty of the opposite fallacy, which is to dismiss his riveting lines as *merely* (to quote Patrick Stewart) "a calculating, cold-blooded justification of revenge."[9] They certainly end there, but what cold-blooded critic would deny Shylock his moment of clarity:

> He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?—fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
> [III.i.47–67]

The meanness of the conclusion does not require so impassioned a prologue—we sense that Shylock has opened the floodgates, and he cannot shut them until Salarino and Solanio prove unmoved. Revenge, not empathy, must be his goal, yet not sooner do the Christians beat a hasty exit than Tubal enters with news of Jessica, and Shylock forgets all over again—the Jew who repeatedly steers the conversation back to Antonio is not the one we might expect:

> *Tubal:* Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—
> *Shylock:* What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?
> *Tubal:* Hath an argosy cast away coming from Tripolis.
> *Shylock:* I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?
> *Tubal:* I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wreck.
> *Shylock:* I thank thee, good Tubal. Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Heard in Genoa?
> *Tubal:* Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night fourscore ducats.

[9] Playing Shakespeare [177]

> *Shylock:* Thou stick'st a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting, fourscore ducats!
> *Tubal:* There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break.
> *Shylock:* I am very glad of it. I'll plague him; I'll torture him. I am glad of it.
>
> [III.i.90–108]

It does not seem an exaggeration to say Tubal plays his fellow masterfully, completing—if not forging outright—the link between Shylock's losses and Antonio's. Yet there remains one more twist of the dagger:

> *Tubal:* One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.
> *Shylock:* Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.
> *Tubal:* But Antonio is certainly undone.
>
> [III.i.109–115]

Of the play's many ironies, perhaps the most devastating is that, for all its eloquence and enchanting music, the most heartfelt declaration of love in this romantic comedy comes from a possessive, patriarchal villain who by rule of genre opposes everything young lovers represent. So strange is Shylock's tenderness, we risk missing the motives of his companion, though Tubal's instincts are no more sympathetic than a Christian's. "But Antonio is certainly undone"—that is the last we hear from Tubal—and Shylock finally understands:

> Nay, that's true, that's very true. Go, Tubal, fee me an officer; bespeak him a fortnight before. I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will. Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue, go, good Tubal, at our synagogue, Tubal.
>
> [III.i.115–21]

From this point, Shylock's course is fixed, his broken heart too hardened for mercy's touch. How much is due to natural villainy and how much to the wrongs inflicted

on him by a hostile culture is a question for each production to answer anew; yet this scene implies that at the moment Shylock makes his fatal choice, when his destiny teeters between prey and predator, another Jew gives the push. To those who ask why Tubal should do this—who protest, perhaps, that I am overplaying a minor role—does Tubal not stand to gain as much as Shylock from Antonio's death? Were Antonio—"the fool that lent out money gratis" [III.iii.2]—out of business, Tubal too could make what merchandise he would. Ah, but Shylock's main motive is revenge, not profit. Yet why should we think Antonio restricts his kicking, spitting, and cursing to one Jew only? Might not *every* Jew in Venice be secretly urging Shylock's quest for vengeance? Shakespeare gives us no context for knowing beyond Tubal, and I hear no disapproval in his lines.

This seems to me the true source of the play's anti-Semitism. Rosenbaum makes a similar point, though his target is different, when he writes of Shylock, "no matter how dignified and complex a Jew he's costumed as, ultimately he's forced by the text to remove the mask and reveal the bloodthirsty Jew of anti-Semitic imagery beneath the dignified garb" [289]. "Shylock [is] a bad Jew and a bad human being," John Barton argues in *Playing Shakespeare* [169] … but where in Venice are the good Jews? Whatever Shakespeare's view of Tubal, his influence on Shylock is undeniably sinister, and Jessica is a Christian by Act III. In such a shallow pool, Shylock looms even larger as the *representative* Jew, identified by religion four times more often than by name.[10]

He is also an extraordinary character—perhaps the most complex and fully human Shakespeare had created to that time. Still, the fact that we can recognize ourselves in

---

[10] By my count, the play's Gentiles call Shylock "Jew" nearly 60 times; they call him "Shylock" only 15.

Shylock does not by itself redeem him—we recognize Iago, too, and where are his defenders? Of course, Shylock is no Iago; his motives, though plentiful, are easy to comprehend. More significantly, the Venice of *Merchant* harbors no one resembling Othello. We therefore excuse Shylock by listing the sins of his Christian adversaries—a familiar exercise that I shall not belabor. But the time has come to visit the opposing camp, though before journeying to Belmont we must linger in the shadow of Venice, for to understand one in a pair of foes we must understand the other:

Antonio

Perhaps more than anyone else in Shakespeare, Antonio seems indelibly characterized by his opening lines:

> In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
> It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
> But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
> What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
> I am to learn;
> And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
> That I have much ado to know myself.

[I.i.1–7]

Why is Antonio sad? In typical Venetian fashion, his friends first guess the cause is pecuniary. So extravagantly do Salarino and Solanio describe the threats of rocks, wind, and water to loaded argosies, they leave no doubt of their priorities, at least. Yet Antonio disagrees:

> Believe me, no. I thank my fortune for it
> My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
> Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
> Upon the fortune of this present year.
> Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

[I.i.41–5]

This seems credible (however ill-founded it proves); Antonio's readiness two scenes later to stake his flesh on his fortune likewise suggests that finances rate low on his list of cares. Undeterred, his friends offer another hypothesis:

> *Solanio:* Why then you are in love.
> *Antonio:* Fie, fie!
> *Solanio:* Not in love neither? Then let us say you are sad
> Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy
> For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry
> Because you are not sad. Now by two-headed Janus,
> Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time:
> Some that will evermore peep through their eyes
> And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper,
> And others of such vinegar aspect
> That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile
> Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.
>
> [I.i.46–56]

This seems closer to the mark, at least with respect to Antonio's "vinegar aspect" as we observe it. Yet why should his friends bother to diagnose his malady unless it were a recent development? If Antonio were melancholic by nature, his mood would hardly warrant a second thought, much less a lengthy conversation to open the play. More likely, something has happened to plunge Antonio into his presently depressed state.

Consider again how Antonio replies to each theory concerning his sadness. In rejecting the first—that wealth is the cause—he is composed and articulate; in rejecting the second—that love is the cause—he is the opposite. Though Solanio is quick to interpret "Fie, fie!" as "Not in love neither," one senses a deeper emotion in Antonio, the object of whose love is no secret. Bassanio himself admits, "To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and in love" [I.i.130–1], and Antonio insists on this point several times. "If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" [III.ii.320–1], he writes

Bassanio from jail, and in court, making what he believes shall be his final declaration, he is even more explicit:

> Commend me to your honorable wife.
> Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
> Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
> And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
> Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
>
> [IV.i.271–5]

We cannot know whether Antonio's love for Bassanio is sexual (though such an interpretation is not inconsistent with the text) or platonic, one more instance of that chaste intimacy between friends that Shakespeare was constantly dramatizing: Valentine and Proteus; young Leontes and Polixenes; the Academe of Navarre. Though Bassanio is willing to exploit his friend's love to finance his "something too prodigal" lifestyle [I.i.129], he seems sincerely to love Antonio in return, much to Portia's apprehension:

> *Bassanio:* Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself;
> But life itself, my wife, and all the world
> Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
> I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you.
> *Portia [disguised]:* Your wife would give you little thanks for that
> If she were by to hear you make the offer.
>
> [IV.i.280–7]

This tension between man and friend and wife—though most prominent in the play's final sequence, the "episode of the ring," when Portia claims her exclusive right to Bassanio's love—precedes the opening scene, as we learn from Antonio's first private words to Bassanio: "Well, tell me now what lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage, / That you today promised to tell me of" [I.i.119–21]. Thus, some time before the play began, Bassanio revealed to his dear friend and lover (however we understand this term) that he intends to take "a secret pilgrimage" to see a mystery lady—

may we not infer that from these hints Antonio guessed the truth? Bassanio desires a wife, with whom must come a transfer of his love: from Antonio to Portia, from man to woman, from bosom companion to sex partner—however we define each relationship, Antonio shall never more be to Bassanio what he was. Is this not cause for sadness?[11]

Bassanio then puts Antonio in the awkward position of financing the quest to displace himself. Bid in the name of love, Antonio cannot refuse. "Then do but say to me what I should do / That in your knowledge may by me be done, / And I am prest unto it," he reassures his friend [I.i.158–60], concluding with a pledge that on the surface may seem a reflexive courtesy: "Go presently inquire, and so will I, / Where money is; and I no question make / To have it of my trust or for my sake" [I.i.183–5]. Yet when Shylock offers money for flesh, Antonio backs his words with deeds, no questions asked. True, he does not expect to forfeit … yet the prospect of risking life for love must intrigue him. Bassanio is horrified, of course: "You shall not seal to such a bond for me! / I'd rather dwell in my necessity" [I.iii.152–3]. Only Antonio does seal to such a bond; by taking the money, Bassanio comes to owe his friend a debt so great it threatens to ruin his marriage.

Make no mistake—Antonio does not want to die. Arrested and awaiting trial, he pursues Shylock through the streets, jailor in tow, begging for mercy. But when his enemy proves implacable, Antonio begins to accept his fate:

> *Antonio:* Let him alone;
> I'll follow him no more with bootless prayers.

---

[11] We need not strain to hear in Antonio echoes of Sonnet 20:

> A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted,
> Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion; . . .
> And for a woman wert thou first created,
> Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
> And by addition me of thee defeated,
> By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.

He seeks my life. His reason well I know:
I oft delivered from his forfeitures
Many that have at times made moan to me.
Therefore he hates me.
Solanio: I am sure the duke
Will never grant this forfeiture to hold.
Antonio: The duke cannot deny the course of law;
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. Therefore go.
These griefs and losses have so bated me
That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh
Tomorrow to my bloody creditor.
Well, jailor, on. Pray God Bassanio come
To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!

[III.iii.19–36]

Apparently unable to comprehend the role that kicking and spitting might play in earning another's animosity, Antonio distills Shylock's "reason" for wanting vengeance into a single, self-serving explanation. More surprisingly, by deferring to "the trade and profit of the city," Antonio hints at a pragmatic acceptance of Jewish moneylending, so crucial to the health of leveraged Venice. But the moment passes, and by speech's end, Antonio has thoughts only for Bassanio, who returns at last with his new bride's dowry to see his debt discharged—one sacrifice for another. By then, Antonio has realized the power of martyrdom to transform ordinary men into saints:

I have heard
Your grace hath ta'en great pains to qualify
[Shylock's] rigorous course; but since he stands obdurate,
And that no lawful means can carry me
Out of his envy's reach, I do oppose
My patience to his fury, and am armed
To suffer with a quietness of spirit
The very tyranny and rage of his.

[IV.i.6–13]

This would be heroic were it uttered by one of Shakespeare's noble Romans; subsequent lines are more ambivalent:

> I pray you think you question with the Jew.
> You may as well go stand upon the beach
> And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
> You may as well use question with the wolf
> Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
> You may as well forbid the mountain pines
> To wag their high tops and to make no noise
> When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
> You may as well do anything most hard
> As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—
> His Jewish heart. Therefore I do beseech you
> Make no more offers, use no farther means,
> But with all brief and plain conveniency
> Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will.
>
> [IV.i.70–83]

Are these words evidence of a quiet spirit or a despairing one? Shakespeare does not dramatize the reunion of Antonio and Bassanio, who according to the stage directions enter together at the beginning of the trial scene, yet do not speak to each other for a hundred lines. Probably they have already shared an emotional greeting offstage; onstage, however, their moods contrast sharply:

> *Bassanio:* Good cheer, Antonio! What, man, courage yet!
> The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,
> Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood.
> *Antonio:* I am a tainted wether of the flock,
> Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit
> Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.
> You cannot better be employed, Bassanio,
> Than to live still, and write mine epitaph.
>
> [IV.i.111–18]

Antonio never explains how he is "tainted," nor does Bassanio ask, though the chosen metaphor is surely significant: Like a wether, or castrated ram, Antonio has produced no offspring. Perhaps the taint is homosexuality; perhaps he simply was too

busy loading argosies to marry—either way, he feels his life force nearly spent, he sees the future in his youthful friend, and again we hear the echo of a sonnet: "And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence / Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence."[12] From this perspective, Bassanio's proper employment, now that he has taken a wife, is to father heirs. Yet Antonio urges a different, "better" purpose—"to live still, and write mine epitaph"—claiming in death his love's enduring devotion.

Can a man satisfy two loves equally and simultaneously? Already we have heard Bassanio struggling with this tension; unbeknownst to him, his wife has been similarly struggling. The final scenes dramatize her fight to exorcise her rival's spirit as much as save his body. Let us turn to her at last, the true protagonist of *Merchant*:

Portia

Like "In sooth I know not why I am so sad," if more self-consciously, Portia's entrance lines establish the arc of her character. "By my troth, Nerissa," she tells her handmaiden, "my little body is aweary of this great world" [I.ii.1–2]. Distracted by her youth and beauty, we risk dismissing Portia's world-weariness as an ironic pose, though it shapes nearly all her actions—in the glittering heiress of Belmont, we see the corrupting effects of boredom and forced passivity, particularly where love is concerned:

> O me, the word "choose"! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?
>
> [I.ii.21–5]

She is referring, of course, to the eccentric—some would say tyrannical—conditions imposed by her deceased father on would-be husbands. Nerissa summarizes:

---

[12] Sonnet 12, lines 13–14

> Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations. Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead—whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you—will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love.
>
> [I.ii.26–31]

Lost in this favorable spin is the implication that Portia is not herself capable of choosing "rightly." Equally unsettling is a condition Nerissa neglects to mention, though Portia is quick to remind her admirers: "You must take your chance, / And either not attempt to choose at all / Or swear before you choose, if you choose wrong / Never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage" [II.i.38–42]. One senses in Portia's father another Antonio—another voice from the grave demanding fidelity. Bassanio seems prepared to make his sacrifice, but Portia resists hers, using the only weapon available: wit. Her mocking appraisals of the hordes of bachelors who throng Belmont are rather too bitter to be funny, though if her words are just she deserves pity, at least:

> *Nerissa:* First, there is the Neapolitan prince.
> *Portia:* Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse, and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts that he can shoe him himself. I am much afeard my lady his mother played false with a smith.
> *Nerissa:* Then is there the County Palatine.
> *Portia:* He doth nothing but frown—as who should say, "An you will not have me, choose!" He hears merry tales and smiles not; I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher when he grows old, being so full of unmannerly sadness in his youth. I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth than to either of these.
>
> [I.ii.37–50]

In the County Palatine too we find Antonio's spirit; joyless wealth seems endemic to the world of *Merchant*, for all its feigned gaiety. Portia's other suitors are equally familiar types: the Englishman aping foreign fashions; the Scotsman abused by the

Englishman; the drunk German. Only one man seems to have made a positive impression, some time before the play began:

> *Nerissa:* Do you not remember, lady, in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither in the company of the Marquis of Montferrat?
> *Portia:* Yes, yes, it was Bassanio—as I think, so was he called.
> *Nerissa:* True, madam. He, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady.
> *Portia:* I remember him well, and I remember him worthy of thy praise.
> [I.ii.107–16]

When Bassanio returns in (borrowed) splendor to Belmont, sophisticated Portia becomes, in his presence, a giddy girl:

> I pray you tarry; pause a day or two
> Before you hazard, for in choosing wrong
> I lose your company. Therefore forbear awhile.
> There's something tells me, but it is not love,
> I would not lose you; and you know yourself
> Hate counsels not in such a quality.
> But lest you should not understand me well—
> And yet a maiden hath no tongue but thought—
> I would detain you here some month or two
> Before you venture for me. I could teach you
> How to choose right, but then I am forsworn.
> So will I never be. So may you miss me.
> But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin—
> That I had been forsworn. Beshrew your eyes!
> They have o'erlooked me and divided me;
> One half of me is yours, the other half yours—
> Mine own I would say; but if mine then yours,
> And so all yours!
> [III.ii.1–18]

I have quoted so much of this speech because it is one of the very few moments when Portia allows herself to lose control. After an insufferable procession of charmless fortune-hunters, the sight of the handsome Bassanio could hardly fail to spark her

desire,[13] yet she is far from confident her preferred lover will pass her father's test. Though she publicly renounces the temptation to break her oath and teach Bassanio "[h]ow to choose right," Shakespeare drops enough hints to justify a subversive reading of what follows.

First, however, comes a brief but necessary repartee; to be truly master of Belmont, Bassanio must prove himself more than a handsome face—he must be able to keep pace, at least, with Portia's wit:

> *Bassanio:* Let me choose,
> For as I am, I live upon the rack.
> *Portia:* Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess
> What treason there is mingled with your love.
> *Bassanio:* None but that ugly treason of mistrust
> Which makes me fear th' enjoying of my love.
> There may as well be amity and life
> 'Tween snow and fire, as treason and my love.
> *Portia:* Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack,
> Where men enforced do speak anything.
> *Bassanio:* Promise me life and I'll confess the truth.
> *Portia:* Well then, confess and live.
> *Bassanio:* Confess and love
> Had been the very sum of my confession!
> O happy torment, when my torturer
> Doth teach me answers for deliverance.
> But let me to my fortune and the caskets.
> *Portia:* Away then! I am locked in one of them;
> If you do love me, you will find me out.
>
> [III.ii.24–41]

This echoes *Romeo and Juliet*, but only faintly—unlike the heroine of that tragedy, Portia does not really fear Bassanio might be disingenuous. His sugared speech and pleasing appearance are sufficient proof of their compatibility; as she studies him studying the caskets, she again indulges her passion:

---

[13] We should not discount the appeal of Bassanio's familiar Italian "complexion," to echo Portia's contemptuous dismissal of the dark-skinned Prince of Morocco [II.vii.79].

Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then if he lose he makes a swanlike end,
Fading in music. That the comparison
May stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream
And watery deathbed for him. He may win;
And what is music then? Then music is
Even as the flourish when true subjects bow
To a new-crowned monarch. Such it is
As are those dulcet sounds in break of day
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear
And summon him to marriage. Now he goes,
With no less presence but with much more love
Than young Alcides when he did redeem
The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy
To the sea monster. I stand for sacrifice.
The rest aloof are the Dardanian wives,
With bleared visages come forth to view
The issue of th' exploit. Go, Hercules!
Live thou, I live. With much, much more dismay
I view the fight than thou that mak'st the fray.

[III.ii.43–62]

We may wonder why Portia identifies with Hesione, the Trojan princess rescued by Hercules (Alcides) for promised wages rather than love, especially when Greek mythology supplies a more romantic metaphor in Andromeda, a maiden rescued from another sea monster by her future husband, Perseus. Perhaps she cannot ignore the possibility that Bassanio most desires her wealth. Perhaps she remembers that Hesione was chained to the rocks by an unkind father. Regardless, though she stands "for sacrifice," Portia does not take an entirely passive stance toward her fate. She calls for music, a balm she did not offer her other suitors, and one of her attendants, or possibly herself—a director has great freedom to stage this moment—sings lyrics that reward close attention:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
    Reply, reply.

It is engendered in the eye,
With gazing fed, and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
    Let us all ring fancy's knell.
    I'll begin it—Ding, dong, bell.
    Ding, dong, bell.

[III.ii.63–72]

Is it merely coincidence that the song's first three lines end in rhymes for "lead," the correct casket, or that its theme essentially restates the morals buried in the golden and silver decoys? ("All that glisters is not gold … / Gilded tombs do worms infold …" [II.vii.65–73]; "Some there be that shadows kiss; / Such have but a shadow's bliss …" [II.ix.62–71].) Except Morocco, Aragon, and their ilk gain this wisdom only *after* making their losing choice; Bassanio has the luxury of contemplating deceiving appearances as he chooses, and he absorbs the lesson:

So may the outward shows be least themselves …
Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest. Therefore then, thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge
'Tween man and man. But thou, thou meager lead
Which rather threaten'st than dost promise aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;
And here choose I.

[III.ii.73–107]

This from one who, to fund his quest for a rich wife to clear his "great debts" [I.i.128], allows his dearest friend to pawn his flesh! Bassanio is a perfectly nice young man, and he will no doubt make a perfectly nice husband, but you will search the text in vain for even one line prior to Portia's song that suggests he is capable of such judicious distinctions.

Howsoever he manages it, he chooses rightly; as he opens the leaden casket containing his prize, Portia experiences, for perhaps the only moment in the play, unalloyed bliss:

> How all the other passions fleet to air:
> As doubtful thoughts, and rash-embraced despair,
> And shudd'ring fear, and green-eyed jealousy.
> O love, be moderate, allay thy ecstasy,
> In measure rain thy joy, scant this excess!
> I feel too much thy blessing. Make it less
> For fear I surfeit.
>
> [III.ii.108–14]

Inside the casket is a portrait—"Fair Portia's counterfeit!" [III.ii.115]—and already Bassanio has forgotten his professed contempt for ornament:

> What demigod
> Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?
> Or whether, riding on the balls of mine,
> Seem they in motion? Here are severed lips
> Parted with sugar breath; so sweet a bar
> Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs
> The painter plays the spider, and hath woven
> A golden mesh t' entrap the hearts of men
> Faster than gnats in cobwebs. But her eyes—
> How could he see to do them? Having made one,
> Methinks it should have power to steal both his
> And leave itself unfurnished.
>
> [III.ii.115–26]

Directors eager to get on with the scene may be tempted to cut these lines as superfluous, yet how sublime the irony of hearing Bassanio lavish on a trinket such nonsense (hair like gnatty cobwebs!), while behind him the living Portia waits to be kissed. To Bassanio's credit, he eventually realizes this:

> Yet look, how far
> The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow
> In underprizing it, so far this shadow
> Doth limp behind the substance.
>
> [III.ii.126–9]

At last he reads his fortune, at last he turns to Portia … only now she has regained control; her tone, no longer giddy or ecstatic, sounds rehearsed, as though she has been preparing this speech her whole life:

> You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
> Such as I am. Though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish
> To wish myself much better, yet for you
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
> More rich, that only to stand high in your account,
> I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
> Exceed account. But the full sum of me
> Is sum of something—which to term in gross
> Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed;
> Happy in this, she is not yet so old
> But she may learn; happier than this,
> She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
> Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.
>
> [III.ii.149–65]

In what universe are these the words of an "unlessoned girl"! Regardless, they exemplify a common trait of Portia's: Few characters in Shakespeare are so adept at praising themselves through false modesty. Though she wishes she were richer—indeed, ten times more rich than fair—she is rich enough not to be fazed by the sudden appearance of a messenger from Venice, Salerio, who—together with Lorenzo and Jessica, now married—brings news of Antonio's catastrophic losses:

> *Portia:* Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?
> *Bassanio:* The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
> The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
> In doing courtesies, and one in whom
> The ancient Roman honor more appears
> Than any that draws breath in Italy.
> *Portia:* What sum owes he the Jew?
> *Bassanio:* For me, three thousand ducats.
> *Portia:* What, no more?

Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.
Double six thousand and then treble that,
Before a friend of this description
Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.
First go with me to church and call me wife,
And then away to Venice to your friend!
For never shall you lie by Portia's side
With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold
To pay the petty debt twenty times over;
When it is paid, bring your true friend along.
My maid Nerissa and myself meantime
Will live as maids and widows.

[III.ii.291–310]

Given the circumstances, "What, no more?" ranks among the funniest lines in the play. Such generosity, however casual, must be commended, yet Portia does not remain at Belmont with Nerissa, to "live as maids and widows" until the men return. What motives impel her to Venice in lieu of her cousin Bellario, "a learned doctor" whom (by a fortunate coincidence) the Duke has summoned to court to decide Antonio's fate [IV.i.104–7]? Certainly Portia wants to see her husband's friend for herself; she also has reason to doubt that gold alone shall save Antonio:

Salerio: Besides, it should appear that if he had
The present money to discharge the Jew,
He would not take it. Never did I know
A creature that did bear the shape of man
So keen and greedy to confound a man.
He plies the duke at morning and at night,
And doth impeach the freedom of the state
If they deny him justice. Twenty merchants,
The duke himself, and the magnificoes
Of greatest port have all persuaded with him,
But none can drive him from the envious plea
Of forfeiture, of justice, and his bond.
Jessica: When I was with him, I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him; and I know, my lord,
If law, authority, and power deny not,

It will go hard with poor Antonio.

[III.ii.272–90]

Thus, as Bassanio races back to Venice, Portia sends a servant with a letter to Bellario, requesting "notes and garments" [III.iv.51]—lawyer's robes and, presumably, advice pertaining to Antonio's case. We may wonder how much of Portia's legal acumen is cribbed from her cousin, yet such questions are beside the point—whether speaking her own lines or someone else's, she has managed to trade her gilded cage for something more exhilarating:

Portia: Come on, Nerissa; I have work in hand
That you yet know not of. We'll see our husbands
Before they think of us.
Nerissa: Shall they see us?
Portia: They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit
That they shall think we are accomplished
With that we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered like young men,
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man and boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a manly stride, and speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,
How honorable ladies sought my love,
Which I denying, they fell sick and died—
I could not do withal. Then I'll repent,
And wish, for all that, that I had not killed them.
And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,
That men shall swear I have discontinued school
Above a twelvemonth. I have within my wind
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging jacks,
Which I will practice.

[III.iv.57–78]

From this speech, one would never guess Portia's purpose is to save a life; her Venetian vacation seems an opportunity to practice not forensics but the "thousand raw tricks" she has learned from all the "bragging jacks" who competed for her hand. Yet

when she finally enters the courtroom, disguised as Balthasar, “a young doctor of Rome” [IV.i.152–3], she has different tricks in mind. The trial scene is a master class in the art of building suspense, yet suspense is more the province of stage directors than lawyers, and Portia’s instinct for theatrics verges on sadism. Consider the argument that saves Antonio:

> This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
> The words expressly are “a pound of flesh.”
> Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh;
> But in the cutting it if thou dost shed
> One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
> Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
> Unto the state of Venice.
>
> [IV.i.304–10]

Portia speaks these lines to Shylock at the last possible moment—in some productions, his knife is literally inches from Antonio’s bare breast. Why does she wait so long to play her trump? There is an obvious answer, though Portia’s admirers may object: She waits because eleventh-hour rescues are more dramatic.

Portia’s delays also give Shylock plenty of time to procure more rope with which to hang himself. True, she offers him every opportunity to be merciful—it is the theme of her most famous speech. Yet her first order of business is not to plead for Antonio but to declare the court powerless to help him:

> *Portia:* Is your name Shylock?
> *Shylock:* Shylock is my name.
> *Portia:* Of a strange nature is the suit you follow,
> Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
> Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.
>
> [IV.i.174–77]

If Portia’s goal is to save Antonio, this seems a curious beginning—from all that she has heard reported, she must realize that granting Shylock his right to vengeance will make

him less likely to relinquish it. On the other hand, if Portia's goal is to save Antonio *against all apparent odds*, her tactics become clearer. So dazzling is her eloquence, we wonder how near Shylock comes to yielding:

> *Portia:* Do you confess the bond?
> *Antonio:* I do.
> *Portia:* Then must the Jew be merciful.
> *Shylock:* On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.
> *Portia:* The quality of mercy is not strained;
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;
> It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
> 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
> The throned monarch better than his crown.
> His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
> The attribute to awe and majesty,
> Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
> But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
> It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
> It is an attribute to God himself,
> And earthly power doth then show likest God's
> When mercy seasons justice.
>
> [IV.i.179–95]

Harold Goddard takes Portia at her word, at least for this brief moment: "They are no prepared words of the Young Doctor she is impersonating, but her own . . . the spiritual gold hidden not beneath lead but beneath the 'gold' of her superficial life . . ." [106]. Perhaps. Or perhaps they are in fact rehearsed; she has had plenty of time to practice, and—as we objected to Bassanio's uncharacteristic choice of casket—what precedent is there for believing such poetry comes naturally to Portia? (Possibly her blissful awakening to love, which I have already quoted [III.ii.108–14], and which, like her more famous speech on mercy, plays on the image of gently falling rain.) Perhaps Shylock, like the rest of us, listens spellbound. Or perhaps he eyes his prey, whets his knife, or stares dully at the ground, unmoved. Practically any reading of this moment

seems legitimate, because—like all great theatre—it is so rich with possibility. And like all theatre, great or no, it is ephemeral; as unexpectedly as it began, the magic dissipates, and Portia's tone shifts:

> Therefore, Jew,
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
> That in the course of justice none of us
> Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
> And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
> The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
> To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
> Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
> Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.
> [IV.i.195–203]

After mercy seasoning justice, the sound of "Therefore, Jew" is like a slap to the face. The next few lines, so logical, appeal to Shylock's intellect, not heart. Most jarring is the conclusion. Goddard again:

> "You should show mercy," the Young Doctor says in effect, "but if you don't, this court will be compelled to decide in your favor." … It is like a postscript that undoes the letter. Thus Portia the lover of mercy is deposed by Portia the actress that the latter may have the rest of her play. [107]

This last theme is critical, for though Shylock refuses to bend—"My deeds upon my head! / I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond" [IV.i.204–5]—Portia is not yet ready to conclude the scene; to reveal her ingenious loophole so soon would be an anticlimax. She must re-raise the stakes, and therefore she demands to see the bond, though she knows its terms already, and bids Shylock take three times the money owed him, though he has already refused it, until even Antonio, truly upon the rack, begs for judgment. "Why then, thus it is," she announces:

> You must prepare your bosom for the knife—
> *Shylock:* O noble judge! O excellent young man!
> *Portia:* For the intent and purpose of the law

Hath full relation to the penalty,
Which here appeareth due upon the bond.
Shylock: 'Tis very true. O wise and upright judge,
How much more elder art thou than thy looks!
Portia: Therefore lay bare your bosom.
Shylock: Ay, his breast,
So says the bond, doth it not, noble judge?
"Nearest his heart": those are the very words.
Portia: It is so.

[IV.i.242–53]

Only it is *not* so, as Portia well knows, though this revelation remains another fifty lines away. Again, one might object that she delays to save Shylock as well as Antonio—to lead him, like a lost lamb, to the haven of Christian forgiveness. But she is no longer interested in the question of justice versus mercy; instead, she urges Shylock to show "charity" by providing a surgeon "on your charge, / To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death" [IV.i.255–9]. (When Shylock predictably refuses, she does not bother to remind Bassanio that *he* might use a portion of the six-thousand ducats he brought to court to pay for a surgeon himself.) She then invites Antonio to speak his last words, listens as he bids a tender farewell to Bassanio, *a second time* awards Shylock his pound of flesh, and finally—some hundred-and-fifty lines after she entered—effects the reversal that crushes the evil Jew and restores order to an ostensibly comic world: "Tarry a little, there is something else . . ." [IV.i.303–10].

Unless Portia has literally just realized that Shylock's bond grants him flesh but no blood—and such an interpretation renders inexplicable her supreme confidence as she leads everyone through the scene—we must conclude one of two things: She delays to prolong her star turn in this courtroom drama, or to punish her husband and Antonio for loving each other too dearly. Either way (or both), Portia is unconscionably willing to

torture others with false despair … and hope. For where does her playacting leave Shylock?

At least for modern audiences, the experience of watching the trial scene is incredibly disorienting—how do we make sense of the continual reversing of our sympathies? Is Antonio's prejudice more repulsive than his suffering is pitiable? Even the most ardent defender of Shylock must cringe to hear his murderous insistence on his bond. Then in an instant Portia breaks him; whereas previously she prolonged Antonio's agony, now it is Shylock's turn to suffer:

> *Portia:* Why doth the Jew pause? Take thy forfeiture.
> *Shylock:* Give me my principal, and let me go.
> *Bassanio:* I have it ready for thee; here it is.
> *Portia:* He hath refused it in the open court.
> He shall have merely justice and his bond.
> *Gratiano:* A Daniel still say I, a second Daniel!
> I think thee, Jew, for teaching me that word.
> *Shylock:* Shall I not have barely my principal?
> *Portia:* Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture,
> To be so taken at thy peril, Jew.
> *Shylock:* Why, then the devil give him good of it!
> I'll stay no longer question.
> *Portia:* Tarry, Jew!
> The law hath yet another hold on you.
> It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
> If it be proved against an alien
> That by direct or indirect attempts
> He seek the life of any citizen,
> The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
> Shall seize one half his goods; the other half
> Comes to the privy coffer of the state;
> And the offender's life lies in the mercy
> Of the duke only, 'gainst all other voice …
> Down therefore, and beg mercy of the duke.
>
> [IV.i.333–61]

In defeat, Shylock becomes a touchstone by which to gauge others: Bassanio is soft-hearted and impulsive; Gratiano is a witless boor; the duke—who promptly pardons

Shylock—is as virtuous a ruler as the time and place allows. As for Portia and Antonio, the former proves a living golden casket, her outward beauty concealing a death's-head, her now-forgotten ode to mercy but a showpiece. The latter, granted life and half Shylock's wealth, emerges from his brush with death unchanged, as generous to his friends as he is cruel to foes:

> So please my lord the duke and all the court
> To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
> I am content; so he will let me have
> The other half in use, to render it
> Upon his death unto the gentleman
> That lately stole his daughter.
> Two things provided more: that for this favor
> He presently become a Christian;
> The other, that he do record a gift
> Here in the court of all he dies possessed
> Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.
>
> [IV.i.378–88]

Shakespeare's contemporaries may well have found this speech *too* merciful; even if we view the forced conversion by this light, it is difficult to believe Antonio cares a whit for saving a Jewish soul. Shylock makes plain his own wishes: "Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!" he begs the duke. "You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" [IV.i.372–5]; instead, Antonio divorces Shylock from his true community and effectively bars him from his profession—medieval Christians were not supposed to lend money at interest. At the same time, Antonio claims half of Shylock's wealth to keep "in use," which may simply mean "in trust," though it is impossible not to hear in *use* the sound of *usury*. Regardless, Antonio's intent to gift the money to Lorenzo and Jessica is a double slap to Shylock, who has already lost more than he can bear to his Christian son-in-law.

Thus Shylock fades from view, though not before enduring one last, terrible play-on-words:

> *Portia:* Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?
> *Shylock:* I am content.
>
> [IV.i.391–2]

We neither see nor hear of him again, though the play is far from over, for a problem remains involving a very different kind of bond: that of marriage.

Act V

I have less to say about *Merchant*'s lyrical final act, for in many respects it is a sideshow, manufactured entirely by Portia, who again claims the starring role. For me, the most interesting moments happen early—before Portia's entrance, in fact—as Lorenzo and Jessica, temporary caretakers at Belmont, repose beneath a glowing moon. Strikingly for a play that features three marriages, this brief scene is the only private conversation we hear between lovers:

> *Lorenzo:* The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls,
> And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents
> Where Cressid lay that night.
> *Jessica:* In such a night
> Did Thisby fearfully o'ertrip the dew,
> And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
> And ran dismayed away.
> *Lorenzo:* In such a night
> Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
> Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
> To come again to Carthage.
> *Jessica:* In such a night
> Medea gathered the enchanted herbs
> That did renew old Aeson.
>
> [V.i.1–14]

We may wonder why newlyweds know only tragic romances: In one the woman is faithless, in another the man; in a third, the lovers are faithful but fate is unkind. Media's is a different kind of tragedy; the shadow of the archetypal witch who betrays her homeland for love seems to rouse Lorenzo from his reverie—suddenly, the allusions turn personal:

> *Lorenzo:* In such a night
> Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew
> And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
> As far as Belmont.
> *Jessica:* In such a night
> Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
> Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
> And ne'er a true one.
> *Lorenzo:* In such a night
> Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
> Slander her love, and he forgave it her.
> *Jessica:* I would outnight you, did nobody come:
> But hark, I hear the footing of a man.[14]
>
> [V.i.14–24]

Soon Portia will re-enter and shift the focus to her own love story; meantime, in Lorenzo and Jessica I sense a growing awareness of the truth Shakespeare explored nearly every time he wrote about love: The moment of bliss is necessarily short-lived, and what follows can shatter expectations derived solely from that bliss. The severity of the shattering depends on genre, and *Merchant* is a comedy; we therefore take for granted that all three couples will live happily (or at least carelessly). Lorenzo and Jessica can only glance at their futures through the gauze of more famous loves, and what they see disturbs more than consoles … yet in their brief time onstage they seem willing to look together, and they seem to enjoy each other's company. Perhaps I am reading too much

[14] The meter of line 12 suggests that Jessica interrupts Lorenzo, while at line 14 Lorenzo seems to interrupt Jessica. In contrast, lines 17 and 20 contain slight beats between speakers, as though each is pausing to absorb what the other has said.

into their teasing, but I leave *Merchant* feeling most optimistic about their chances for happiness.

As for the other couples—Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano—Antonio's crisis postpones their wedding night; before the men return to Venice, they exchange with their wives conventional symbols of marriage, though Portia demands more from the exchange than mere convention:

> This house, these servants, and this same myself
> Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,
> Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
>
> [III.ii.170–4]

Even at this early juncture, she appears to be laying the groundwork for testing Bassanio, though the test, when it happens, seems more improvised than planned. Fresh from her legal victory and still disguised, Portia meets her grateful husband and Antonio outside the courtroom, where they insist on giving "some remembrance of us as a tribute" [IV.i.420]; she casually requests the ring and Bassanio demurs, though not as emphatically as we might expect:

> *Bassanio:* This ring, good sir, alas, it is a trifle!
> I will not shame myself to give you this.
> *Portia:* I will have nothing else but only this,
> And now methinks I have a mind to it.
> *Bassanio:* There's more depends on this than on the value.
> The dearest ring in Venice will I give you,
> And find it out by proclamation.
> Only for this, I pray you pardon me.
> *Portia:* I see, sir, you are liberal in offers.
> You taught me first to beg, and now methinks
> You teach me how a beggar should be answered.
> *Bassanio:* Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,
> And when she put it on she made me vow
> That I should neither sell nor give nor lose it.
>
> [IV.i.428–41]

What prevented Bassanio from *beginning* with the truth? (After all, he never promised “Balthasar” anything he wanted—merely “some remembrance.”) Instead, Bassanio first dismisses the ring as “a trifle,” then vows to acquire in its place the most expensive ring in Venice. (One hopes he would think twice before borrowing more money to acquire it!) When he finally acknowledges the ring’s true value, his tone remains apologetic, as though his obligation to his wife were a source of embarrassment—not *I* vowed but *she made me* vow. In this context, Portia’s lack of sympathy seems less unreasonable:

> That scuse serves many men to save their gifts.
> And if your wife be not a mad woman,
> And know how well I have deserved this ring,
> She would not hold out enemy for ever
> For giving it to me.
>
> [IV.i.442–6]

Portia is not a mad woman—merely an anxious bride. When “upon more advice” Bassanio gives up the ring [IV.ii.6–7], her anxieties are confirmed; she must realize the “advice” came from Antonio, and she and Nerissa—who correctly assumes she can pry her own ring from her new husband—hurry home to teach the men their rightful place. Unsurprisingly, Gratiano refuses to learn—his argument with Nerissa interrupts Belmont’s tranquility, prompting mock surprise from Portia:

> *Portia:* A quarrel ho, already! What’s the matter?
> *Gratiano:* About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring
> That she did give me, whose posy was
> For all the world like cutler’s poetry
> Upon a knife—“Love me, and leave me not.”
>
> [V.i.146–50]

Gratiano’s obliviousness demonstrates how completely extravagance and ostentation have perverted his taste. I hear no “cutler’s poetry” in *Love me, and leave me not*—only

the heartfelt expression of a young woman's hopes for marriage. For a moment, Nerissa steps out of Portia's game—she is genuinely, justifiably angry:

> What talk you of the posy or the value?
> You swore to me when I did give it you
> That you would wear it till your hour of death,
> And that it should lie with you in your grave.
> Though not for me, yet for your vehement oaths,
> You should have been respective and have kept it.
>
> [V.i.151–6]

Still Gratiano will not apologize; instead he rats out Bassanio, proving himself a lousy friend as well as husband:

> *Gratiano:* My Lord Bassanio gave his ring away
> Unto the judge that begged it, and indeed
> Deserved it too; and then the boy his clerk
> That took some pains in writing, he begged mine;[15]
> And neither man nor master would take aught
> But the two rings.
> *Portia:* What ring gave you, my lord?
> Not that, I hope, which you received of me.
> *Bassanio:* If I could add a lie unto a fault,
> I would deny it; but you see my finger
> Hath not the ring upon it—it is gone.
>
> [V.i.179–88]

In contrast to his fair-weather friend, Bassanio is at heart a decent guy. Even so, his reflex is to deny his fault. His excuses—as rhetorically overstuffed as Nerissa's posy was simple—fail to charm Portia:

> *Bassanio:* Sweet Portia,
> If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
> If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
> And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
> And how unwillingly I left the ring
> When nought would be accepted but the ring,

[15] Though Nerissa is denied a response, I cannot pass this line without comment: The clerk "took some pains in writing"—for *this* Gratiano breaks his marriage vow! Such generosity is either hilarious or heartbreaking; either way, it says all we need know about the prospects of conjugal happiness for poor Nerissa.

You would abate the strength of your displeasure.
Portia: If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honor to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring.
What man is there so much unreasonable,
If you had pleased to have defended it
With any terms of zeal, wanted the modesty
To urge the thing held as a ceremony?
Nerissa teaches me what to believe:
I'll die for't but some woman had the ring!

[V.i.192–208]

We might protest that Bassanio *did* do what Portia now demands; only the zeal was lacking, and for Portia—again, not unreasonably—zeal in this case is everything. Yet Bassanio is learning—his reply is considerably less florid; he even offers an apology … of sorts:

No, by my honor, madam! By my soul
No woman had it, but a civil doctor,
Which did refuse three thousand ducats of me
And begged the ring, the which I did deny him,
And suffered him to go displeased away—
Even he that had held up the very life
Of my dear friend. What should I say, sweet lady?
I was enforced to send it after him.
I was beset with shame and courtesy.
My honor would not let ingratitude
So much besmear it. Pardon me, good lady!
For by these blessed candles of the night,
Had you been there I think you would have begged
The ring of me to give the worthy doctor.

[V.i.209–22]

Though Bassanio still misses the point—he continues to prioritize his debt to a friend (however dear) over a vow to his wife—at least he misses with honorable intent. An opportunity is here for Portia to meet her husband where he is vulnerable—to lead him to a private room, perhaps, and help him understand her need to feel secure in his fidelity. Yet as we saw in the courtroom, Portia derives greater satisfaction from public

performance; she therefore pursues the false trail of adultery, priming her audience for another last-minute reversal:

> Let not that doctor e'er come near my house.
> Since he hath got the jewel that I loved
> And that which you did swear to keep for me,
> I will become as liberal as you;
> I'll not deny him anything I have,
> No, not my body nor my husband's bed.
> Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.
> Lie not a night from home; watch me like Argus.
> If you do not, if I be left alone,
> Now by mine honor which is yet mine own,
> I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow.
>
> [V.i.223–33]

These are among the least inspired lines Portia speaks. The scene she is directing contains no real urgency or truth—only puns and calculated dramatic irony. As Bassanio grows nervous, he falls back on familiar, extravagant speech patterns, which Portia rejects; the concession that convinces her to end the game comes not from her husband but Antonio:

> *Bassanio:* Portia, forgive me this enforced wrong,
> And in the hearing of these many friends
> I swear to thee, even by thine own fair eyes,
> Wherein I see myself—
> *Portia:* Mark you but that!
> In both my eyes he doubly sees himself,
> In each eye one. Swear by your double self,
> And there's an oath of credit.
> *Bassanio:* Nay, but hear me.
> Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
> I never more will break an oath with thee.
> *Antonio:* I once did lend my body for his wealth,
> Which but for him that had your husband's ring
> Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
> My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
> Will never more break faith advisedly.
> *Portia:* Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,
> And bid him keep it better than the other.
>
> [V.i.240–55]

By concealing the truth till now, Portia wins two pledges for the price of a ring. We want to believe Bassanio shall keep his word, and we are confident Antonio shall keep his; however vilely he may treat his enemies, he is an incredibly faithful friend. "And I have better news in store for you / Than you expect," Portia continues, in case his life weren't debt enough:

> Unseal this letter soon;
> There you shall find three of your argosies
> Are richly come to harbor suddenly.
> You shall not know by what strange accident
> I chanced on this letter.
>
> [V.i.274–9]

A ridiculous twist, as Shakespeare tacitly acknowledges by refusing to explain it. Antonio can only utter, "I am dumb"; later he manages, "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living" [V.i.279 & 286]. Thus her rival is neutered, and Portia can enjoy her marriage bed at last. . . .

Or not. "It is almost morning," she notes,

> And yet I am sure you are not satisfied
> Of these events at full. Let us go in,
> And charge us there upon inter'gatories,
> And we will answer all things faithfully.
>
> [V.i.295–9]

Even now, Portia is reluctant to dismiss her audience. Fortunately Gratiano has a better idea, and with it he concludes the play:

> Let it be so. The first inter'gatory
> That my Nerissa shall be sworn on is,
> Whether till the next night she had rather stay,
> Or go to bed now, being two hours to day.
> But were the day come, I should wish it dark
> Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.
> Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing
> So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.
>
> [V.i.300–7]

As always in Shakespeare, wordplay leads to sex and sex to fears of cuckoldry (and venereal disease, if I am reading "sore" correctly). Even in daylight, Belmont seems impossibly removed from external threats—no Jewish ogres lurk, and Portia's fortune may well be inexhaustible, even for prodigal Venetians. Boredom and restlessness, cynicism and jealousy, are less easily vanquished.

*   *   *   *   *

In most of his comedies to this point, including *Merchant*, Shakespeare focuses mainly on external threats to happiness;[16] even Portia, for all her complexities, ends with a very shallow understanding of love. Shakespeare's next effort also features an elaborate set of obstacles for its lovers to overcome. Except in this play, these obstacles form the basis of the *secondary*—and far less interesting—plot. The lovers who continue to resonate are themselves their worst enemies—not unkind fathers or bungling fairies but their own insecurities and suspicions nearly thwart their hearts' desires. Of course I mean Beatrice and Benedick; if they have proved more enduring than Portia and Bassanio, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, or any other comic couple in early Shakespeare (with the possible exception of Kate and Petruchio), it must be because Shakespeare—and the characters he created—turned increasingly inward. In this respect, *The Merchant of Venice*—with its relatively forgettable lovers overshadowed by a brooding villain—is itself a turning point in his dramatic career.

Works Cited

- Barton, John. *Playing Shakespeare*. London: Methuen Drama, 1993. Print.

[16] The exception, I would argue, is *Love's Labor's Lost*.

- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. Print.
- Goddard, Harold C. *The Meaning of Shakespeare, Volume 1*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. Print.
- Rosenbaum, Ron. *The Shakespeare Wars*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*. Ed. John Kerrigan. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.