

# Through a Looking Glass, Darkly: Judging Hazards in *The Merchant of Venice*

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**T**HE *Merchant of Venice* bases its dramatic logic on the New Testament premise that you get what you give, and the play's consistent enactment of this looking-glass logic creates a world in which mirroring is a major internal principle of order. This makes for a rather peculiar play-world: a providential world where reversal (the last made first) and reflexiveness (the judge self-judged) rule; a world which offers at any moment to confound subject with object and appearance with reality; a world, that is to say, oddly akin to Alice's Looking-glass Garden, where you approach your goal by advancing in the opposite direction. The three main lines of action — the casket-, bond-, and ring-plots — form portions of this reflexive unity, each an analogue of the others, helping to clarify them and the meaning of the whole.

The play as moral mirror of a human nature external to it; the necessity of moral risk-taking: these two ideas are familiar enough to students of *The Merchant of Venice*. In this essay however I want to propose a more intimate and somewhat different connection between them and to show with what persistence both are implicated in the internal mirroring just mentioned. I will suggest also that Shakespeare in this play confronts not only his dramatis personae but perhaps his audience as well with the moral risk of self-judgment through judging the other and, further, that this dramatic (or supradramatic) situation could be achieved only by a playwright self-consciously willing to put his own craft at hazard. Portia's arts too, mirroring her creator's, will

be seen to exploit the shifts of self-reflexiveness for moral ends. And the end of my argument should be to rediscover under a new light the familiar truth that in such a world of fearful Christian symmetries — a world which I think meant to embrace playwright and audience as well as the play's internal characters — the choice between real and apparent goods is always consequential and inescapably hazardous.

## I

Shylock's tale of Jacob and Laban and Antonio's response to it turn on thoughts of hazard and consequence. The standard argument against usury had it that legitimate wealth could be generated only by risk of wealth or by physical labor. Since the usurer avoided both (his loans were guaranteed), his profits were plainly illegitimate. Yet according to Shylock Jacob's profit is just such a riskless consequence not of labor but of magical know-how, and he nevertheless "was blest". So Shylock the usurer — to put this in a way that should seem more relevant as the present essay unfolds — sees in this patriarchal exemplar only his own reflection. Antonio on the other hand reads there only the pattern of a Christian merchant. His Jacob is no more a laborer than Shylock's but he is no sorcerer either and deserves no personal credit for his good fortune, which is rather the result of a risk, a "venture" much like Antonio's own: Jacob's luck is to Antonio's mind a thing "swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven" (I. iii. 88-90).<sup>1</sup> For Antonio, following Christian tradition, recognizes in Fortune, who seems to shuffle the world's goods blindly and randomly, a mere *persona* of omniscient providence, an agent of the divine will. I think the play supports only Antonio's interpretation.

The casket choice willed by Portia's father also is spoken of as an affair of "fortune," a "venture," but often in a sense opposed to Antonio's. Morocco, for example, frets about being led by "blind fortune" and complains that even Hercules might be beaten at a game of chance. Yet the happy outcome of the contest makes it dramatically clear that old Belmont's quaint device was very providently designed. "Who chooses

his meaning chooses" Portia, and she is in fact won by the only suitor whose love transcends narcissism. For Belmont's law, like the Christian God's, is fulfilled only by such love. Risk is indeed part of what must be chosen. But risk in this context is not reliance on accident, on pagan and arbitrary Chance (*Sors*), but again the gamble of faith understood by Antonio. The leaden demand to "give and hazard all" expresses a kind of wisdom, the reversal of worldly values, which is folly to pagans (and to Roman Catholics in the Reformers' view) and a stone of stumbling to the Jews.

Belmont's caskets are the mirrors which first expose the reflexive hazards of judging. Each chooser chooses his own self-image; what he gets (win or lose) is a glimpse of a truer self, of character as personal destiny. Aragon wishes to see himself unironically as a worldly wiseman but, like his name and nation, his zeal to get what he deserves reflects only obtuse arrogance. "There be fools alive iwis, / Silvered o'er, and so was this" jibes his scroll (II. ix. 67-8) and the point is sharpened if Aragon himself displays the silver thatch of age without its wisdom. Morocco is described in the original stage direction as a "tawny" — golden rather than black — Moor, and he proclaims part of his self-image in rejecting base lead: "A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross" (II. vii. 20). Launcelot's later punning on the noun "Moor" and the comparative adjective "more" (III. v. 41-3) may further help interpret this emulous chooser of desire: because "enough/ May not extend so far as to the lady," the Moor wants more (II. vii. 27-8). He is sensual, ambitious, aggressive; but from Belmont's Christian perspective physical potency wins only physical death.

Whereas the choosers of externals mirror both physically and spiritually the images they approve, the richly-attired Bassanio, who chooses "not by the view," is physically no "lead casket."<sup>2</sup> Yet he unmistakably does choose a reflection of his own values when he chooses to "give and hazard all." This is his motto from the first to the last scene of the play. To Antonio he is frank about the element of hazard in his plan to win Portia, and he gives to the Gobbos and right after to

Gratiano as readily as Antonio and later Portia give to him (II. iii. 142, 173). If he never needs squarely to face the ultimate generosity, forgiving an enemy (as Shylock and Antonio must), he nevertheless lives by the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount that enjoins Christians to "Give to him that asketh."<sup>3</sup> But this strength, unconscious of its limits, turns to weakness, as Portia in Act Five leads him to understand. Bassanio's glimpse of his essential self, his soul's destiny, is the lead casket's picture of Portia.<sup>4</sup>

The casket contest is at least as consequential and hazardous for Portia as for any of her suitors. Her predicament at first glance may seem just the converse of theirs. They must choose, she must not; bad luck for them means they must not marry no matter how much they want to, for her that she must no matter how much she wants not to. But Shakespeare uses most of her introductory scene to establish that Portia too makes a choice. From her witty scourging of the first parcel of wooers and her embarrassed delight when Nerissa trips her into blurting Bassanio's name we gather that Portia is far from indifferent to the contest's outcome. She is no fairy-tale automaton: submission to her father's will means curbing a strong will of her own (I. ii. 23-4). She is after all herself "lord" of Belmont now (III. ii. 167-9) and could, as Nerissa incidentally reminds her, refuse to perform [her] father's will" (I. ii. 90-92). And Jessica's example reminds us of the same possibility. When instead Portia chooses obedience she too chooses a version of the lead casket. She accepts self-renunciation and the risk of faith: faith in her father's love and wisdom and, as inevitable consequence of this, faith that if the man she loves loves her, he too will make the right choice (III. ii. 41).

The hazardous necessity of consequential choice is the play's recurring moral predicament. It reflects an irony of the human condition mediated for Shakespeare's culture by the myth of Adam's choice and its consequences. The inevitability of *hamartia* was one of these consequences, from which it followed that all human decisions, no matter how resolute or thoroughly calculated, ought to preserve some margin of faith

in a providential grace.<sup>5</sup> Or otherwise put: all our choices are risks.

## II

When the Prince of Aragon chooses desert he discovers himself a fool; for in the words of a wiser prince, "treat every man after his desert and who shall scape whipping?"<sup>6</sup> Desert is mere justice, as Portia warns Shylock at the trial.

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,  
That in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation.

(IV. i. 196-9)

The issue raised by the silver casket, in other words, is assimilated here as elsewhere in Shakespeare to the Reformation antithesis of justification by human merit and justification by divine grace.<sup>7</sup>

Shylock, we have seen, judges Jacob's profit in lambs riskless and deserved, rejecting Antonio's interpretation of it as a gift of providence. Likewise in court, sensing no risk and feeling no need of grace, Shylock stands secure on his own righteousness under law: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" St. Paul identifies this attitude as an aspect of what he sees as a kind of fundamental "Jewish heresy," the confidence that one has no need of Christ's purchase of grace if one is already performing to the letter the law of Moses. But Shylock's bond condemns Shylock himself to death, and if he had been merciful the life saved would also have been his own. Obviously, like Belmont's caskets, the law too is something of a mirror in this play.

If we disregard motivation, Shylock's behavior appears not very different from Antonio's. Among other things both are law-abiding money-lenders and rather sober and solitary wifeless men. Antonio seems really close only to Bassanio, who leaves him (financed by Antonio's money) to go off and win himself a bride; Shylock is close only to Jessica, who leaves him (financed by his money) also to marry. If Antonio lends Bassanio money without interest, Shylock first lends it (the identical ducats in fact) to Antonio also without interest

and in the end even forgoes the principal. When Antonio is awarded half Shylock's estate he arranges to pass it at Shylock's death to Lorenzo and Jessica; and our last intelligence of Shylock is that he is about to turn Christian, having already willed his remaining worldly goods to his Christian son-in-law and convert daughter. Obviously the contrast between Shylock and Antonio leans less on deeds than on motives: the play distinguishes them for us rather by what they would like to do than by what they end up being responsible for. Antonio voluntarily finances Bassanio's marriage venture; Jessica must steal her dowry. Antonio lends without interest out of love, Shylock out of hate. Shylock forgives Antonio's principal, turns Christian, and bequeaths his goods to his only child solely because the law compels him to act in these ways; Antonio's mercy at the trial is free and uncompelled.

What we see in action here is the New Testament dialectic of love and the law, which are presented there not only as antagonistic opposites but as also in a certain sense two forms of one reality. If law is external motivation to do good, love as *caritas* is internal motivation toward the same end. Thus in a sense the law is simply Christian love objectified. If you act out of love you are no longer "under the law" because your acts though lawful are autonomous: the law is merely "what you will." But if your actions express motives contrary to love you find yourself facing a law which appears as a menacing external enemy. Thus conceived, the law has power only over criminals who, though they break it, are not therefore free of it: instead violation wakes forces of coercion otherwise dormant. Jesus and Paul usually distinguish God's law from Caesar's, but Paul in his homily on the duty of obedience to civil authorities extends the dialectic of law and love to the secular order (Rom. 13), and the Reformers took this more general interpretation as also the fundamental one.<sup>8</sup> In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare too assimilates his civil and criminal law to this theological model.

At the opening of the trial scene Shylock equates the law with his own lust for revenge, and the more responsible

Venetians reluctantly agree with him. To disarm and unmask this perversion of law, Portia must at last turn the Mosaic tables on Shylock and produce her anti-Judaic "quibble". The bitter point of this serious joke is that Antonio is not kosher: his flesh is bloody and blood is forbidden Shylock by the letter of his own "law", his bond, metonymic here for the law of Moses.<sup>9</sup> And despite his clamor that everything not expressly spelled out in it is invalid, Shylock evidently has not read his bond with sufficient care. But the letter of the law turns out to be even harder to fulfill than to interpret; in fact in Shylock's case fulfillment is impossible. As soon as this lesson sinks home Portia follows it with a more important one. Even if Shylock could live up to it in other respects, the law is anyway incapable of sanctioning private revenge, which contradicts its nature as objectified love. It can only reflect the offense back onto the would-be perpetrator's head: for having sought another man's life Shylock must forfeit his own. Thus the law Shylock had thought one with his own murderous will is revealed as instead an antagonist, which meets him in the magnified image of his own violence.

But although *The Merchant of Venice* intends to be anti-Judaic, it does not mean to be anti-Semitic.<sup>10</sup> In fact in so far as the rationale for its attitudes is Pauline it is also fundamentally anti-racist: Jessica's "race" is no bar to her salvation. For to Paul the old covenant of the flesh (both in its racial sense of descent from common ancestors and in its insistence on material signs of holiness: physical circumcision, dietary laws, etc.) is superseded by the new covenant of the spirit, with its belief in inheritance through faith and its "circumcision of the heart." Paul, writing to the Romans, worries that recent converts from Judaism will slide back into their old habit of confusing physical symbols, external appearances, with spiritual realities. Literalism in its whole range of meanings is thus another aspect of Paul's "Jewish heresy."

Literalism is the presiding mechanism of Shylock's style of mind. Even his speech patterns are shackled by a trick of literal repetition very like the broken-record rhythms of old

Justice Shallow, the sterile inversion of Renaissance rhetorical ideals of "copia" or generous variation. His style compulsively explains away its own figures of speech: a perfect verbal tic for a miser who, Midas-like, has a hard time distinguishing money as symbol from the real wealth it only represents. When other characters in the play speak of people as "dear" and "worthy" or even as "dear bought," they understand these terms figuratively, after the "spiritual sense"; only Shylock tries to take such expressions according to the "letter". And if "the Spirit giveth life" Shylock's despiritualized "letter" threatens to snatch it away. Thus in III. i. Shylock bewails to Solanio-Salerio the rebellion of his "flesh and blood" (meaning, as he immediately explains, his daughter) and complains that Tubal's gossip of Jessica's honeymoon junket "sticks a dagger" in him. Here passion constrains him to seize the figurative word; but in the subsequent trial scene that word is almost made flesh in a demonic triple parody of circumcision, crucifixion, and communion as Shylock does his utmost to stick a literal dagger into Antonio's gentle side and scatter abroad some of his literal flesh and blood. The *lex talionis* itself seems the fitting condemnation of this literalist caricature of reciprocity.

Shylock's sharply reductive cast of mind shows itself too in his treating people as things to be owned and used, as well as in his crafty confounding of mineral with animal breeding. It is partly to forestall the perennial objection to *usura* as *contra naturam*, which bases itself on this last confusion, that Shylock produces the witness of Jacob's practice on Laban. But here as everywhere Shylock's defense serves only to convict him out of his own mouth. He doesn't answer the objection at all; instead he reminds his audience of it. The moral of the whole Jacob-Laban story, as Shylock reads it, is that the letter, not the spirit, is all that need concern a man: "Thrift is blessing if men steal it not." Anything goes, that is to say, short of literal theft. It is against this notion of theft, a notion that lets Shylock prosecute a bond whose burden approximates the outlaw challenge: "Your money or your life!" — it is against this interpretation of what the law allows



and disallows that Jessica's theft of love is to be measured and judged.

Jessica's choice appears to be between love and the commandment of filial obedience. But we have already observed that from the Christian viewpoint her father's conception of law is perverse. He sees it as an objectification of the wrong kind of love, of *cupiditas* not *caritas*. For Jessica to continue obeying his commandments would be to acquiesce in his warped and heretical values. *Eros* is not *caritas* either, but as romantic love leads to the sacred institution of marriage it accords with law and is essential to society.<sup>11</sup> In Shakespeare, as we know, to be anti-marriage is to be anti-social, and heavy fathers in both tragedies and comedies are typically petty tyrants and their eloping daughters sympathetic heroines. But Shylock's sense of Jessica is anti-human as well as anti-social. He is aware of her as of an item of inventory, to be locked away with his precious stones, an item of great sentimental value, like Leah's ring, as precious to him as his own flesh and blood but with no more right to independent life than a ducat or one of his own limbs.

That Shylock has finally to be forced by law to leave his goods to his daughter and son-in-law should remind us of the foreseeable consequences Jessica faces as she makes her choice. When she elects to throw down the casket of jewels to Lorenzo she also elects to throw down her right to inherit old Shylock's ample fortune. So that when she "steals from the wealthy Jew" she is not just a thief but equally an heiress renouncing a secure claim to wealth to risk an uncertain life with an impecunious lover. This must I think be reckoned a version of choosing the lead casket. Nevertheless Jessica does disobey her father and she is at least literally a thief. We are not to perceive her as a paragon of daughterly conduct: that is Portia's role. But she ought to draw more sympathy than censure as a well-meaning character caught up in a moral dilemma, who chooses to do a wrong to do a right, a choice which, as we shall see, is made also by Bassanio.

## III

Portia, like other heroines of the early comedies, shows a strong histrionic bent. She loves to hold the mirror up to human nature just as her father did in the casket contest. She seems unable, in fact, to resist gilding even his lily. The casket scenes designed by him are surely theatrical enough, with their parting curtain and glittering symbolic props, their built-in reversals and recognitions. Yet when Bassanio comes to choose, Portia's excited imagination cannot refrain from casting the scene and its characters against a musical backdrop, into the allegorical postures of a court masque of Hercules and Hesione (III. i. 53-62). The dressing-up is only verbal here but at the trial Portia puts on the actual appearance of law and, as we have seen, aims its mirror at the violence of Shylock's will; in the ring scene she again shows a character the image of his vice so that in passing judgment on another he may judge and so amend himself.

We recall that in the casket and trial scenes, all more or less stage-managed by Portia, we have observed characters first self-deceived by distorted self-images, then abruptly confronted by reflections of truer selves. But to understand how an analogous double-take informs the ring scene we must first review the trial from a slightly different angle.

When Portia tells Shylock he may have his pound of flesh but no jot of "Christian blood," he asks: "Is that the law?" "Thyself shalt see the act" is her reply — which seems to indicate that she has already "seen the act" herself, since she knows its content and location. And if we grant that Portia enters the scene knowing at least this way to block Shylock's attempt at legalized murder, there is really no reason to resist the companion assumption that Bellario has "furnished her with [his] opinion" on the other two laws as well. Why then doesn't she just tell Shylock at once the truth of his legal position? If we could ask Portia, who quotes Shylock the Lord's Prayer, she might respond by quoting us Christ's explanation that he employs parables because in this way "is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which prophecy saith, By hearing, ye shall hear, and shall not perceive."<sup>12</sup> But the

dramatic reason seems to be like father like daughter: she wants to give Shylock the chance to make his free choice and to set him up a mirror to show him the inmost parts of whatever self he chooses. If she were to explain to him at once how his bond could become his own death warrant, he would tear it up and both he and Antonio would be physically safe. But his chance to choose the lead casket, *caritas* rather than *cupiditas*, would be utterly lost. The only choice left him that would not further his self-interest would be the insane decision to execute his bond, carve out Antonio's heart, and knowingly thereby sentence himself to death. He is finally offered this choice, but not until he has been given every chance to give and thus to receive absolute forgiveness: the giving and the receiving being complementary interpretations of the same judgment.

But this free moral choice Portia insists on offering everyone is always depicted by Shakespeare as consequential and as based on partial ignorance, hence as risky. Shylock, ignorant of his own ignorance, thinks he can judge others without risk to himself: he is made to see how hazardous judgment is and that it is always reflexive: "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged." "To offend and judge are distinct offices" as Portia says; but Shakespeare habitually contrives to have them performed by the same agent so that the judge may unknowingly judge and sentence himself. Othello and Angelo and Lear are conspicuous victims of this moral boomerang; but the process is ingrained in Shakespeare's imagination and some example of it gets into almost every play. The principle is the complement of the golden rule: do not unto others as you would not have them do unto you.<sup>13</sup> Shylock does not want to give up his own life (he finally prefers humiliation), yet he demands Antonio's. On the other side, Antonio does not sentence Shylock to anything he would not want for himself, including the conversion. To a twentieth-century audience Antonio may seem to be demanding that Shylock merely shed — or worse, betray — one religion for another, where both are equally valid. These are surely things Antonio would refuse to do himself. But

Shakespeare would have expected his contemporaries to perceive a different situation. He would have expected them to see Antonio as requiring Shylock to adopt the unique sure means to his soul's salvation — which is something Antonio indeed would do — has done — himself.

If Shylock had chosen mercy when Portia begged him to he could have walked out of the courtroom with his life, his goods, and his religion all apparently intact. But this choice, if genuine, would actually have amounted to a *de facto* conversion to the play's vision of primary Christianity. Shylock of course remains true to himself in his self-destructive fashion. And forced conversion thus becomes inevitable, the reflexive *reductio ad absurdum* of the major pattern in the play which shows Shylock never doing anyone a good turn unless he is made to. For though Shylock's conversion is part of the consequences of his originally free choice and therefore cannot itself be free in the same sense, it does hold its own kind of freedom. As Marsilio Ficino explains the principle, the evil man "converts blessings into evil for himself" whereas the good man "converts evils into good for himself."<sup>14</sup> Thus Antonio profits spiritually from facing up to imminent death; and Shylock has the option of truly embracing his new religion and its gift of eternal salvation. But we feel sure he will characteristically convert what could have been his greatest blessing, his baptism, into a means of self-damnation. Attempts to interpret this as the planned result of some kind of hypocritical Christian entrapment would seem to be misguided: a faked conversion would be seen by Shakespeare's neighbors as endangering Shylock's soul no more than his simply remaining a Jew (Acts 4:11-12). Antonio's stipulation seems rather to offer Shylock an opportunity he probably will not accept and at the same time to demand an outward conformity that will make it at least less easy for him to go on openly taking advantage of what was thought of as his Jewish license to commit usury (Deut. 23).

It was Mrs. Jameson, followed in this century by E.M.W. Tillyard and others, who first noted that Portia in her

"quality of mercy" speech is actually pleading for Shylock not Antonio. Antonio is already safe when Portia starts her pleading: only Shylock can profit from the destruction of his bond. It is not Antonio's flesh that needs saving but Shylock's soul. Both Mrs. Jameson and Tillyard however assume that Shakespeare requires his audience to be aware of this actual situation.<sup>15</sup> I want to suggest instead that the scene may well be arranged to provoke a more complex response than this. For Shakespeare has apparently rigged the trial so that it can be construed in two mutually exclusive ways. It seems, in fact, to have been made easy to misunderstand, hard to see truly. A word from Portia could have prevented all possibility of audience misunderstanding. But Shakespeare withholds the word. On the first acquaintance then, when we do not know what Portia knows, we are invited to accept as our own the Venetian view, seeing the danger as Antonio's, fearing Shylock's fury and the privilege of his knife, cheering the sudden rescue of Antonio by Portia and her equally sudden defeat of Shylock. We are thus drawn into a vicarious participation in the Venetians' anxiety for their neighbor's life and encouraged to share with them the melodramatic thrill of Portia's long-delayed "Tarry, Jew," which overturns the situation, hands Antonio Shylock's opportunity for vengeance or mercy, and makes Shylock taste Antonio's bankruptcy and sentence of death. But with hindsight and after considering the total pattern of the play's evidence, we find ourselves instead looking through this surface melodrama and realizing that the danger is always actually to and from Shylock, who defeats, judges, and sentences himself. And once we penetrate to this inner meaning, our former view can remain appropriate only to Shylock and the Venetians: we cannot ourselves return to it. Thus, on this interpretation, the trial may be thought of as like one of Belmont's caskets, with a deceptive outside whose apparent significance is reversed by what is concealed within. So conceived, it offers a hazardous mirror to audiences: for whoever with Gratiano judges this complex structure a melodrama simultaneously judges the depth of his own

understanding of it. It is the author of the play who now seems to be saying of the Gratianos in his audience: "in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias. . . ." I am suggesting then that in the trial scene Shakespeare constructed a dramatic event that would offer his audience a first-hand experience of the kind of double-take they had thought they were merely observing. And like the "good" characters in his play Shakespeare as artist would also be committing himself to the same gamble of faith. The hazard of *his* enterprise (to use the mercantile metaphor) would be that his audience, even the most perceptive, might fail to catch on, in which case his ingenious dramatic structure along with its moral point would be lost. But this is the ordinary risk of the parabolist, and Renaissance poets, with Portia, were disposed to accept it as proper to serious mimesis.<sup>16</sup>

But what is concealed in the trial scene (however we interpret it) is revealed in the ring scene. Here we share with Portia and Nerissa the information — that they were the lawyer and clerk — necessary to see all points of view and spot the limits of each. The trial scene repeats the lesson of the caskets that judgment is a mirror and shows too that the only escape from the destructive circuit of retributive justice is through forgiveness: not a forgiveness that negates the law's necessary consequences but a forgiveness that fulfills the law's spirit, which is essentially educational: the law being, according to Paul, our school-master to Christ. This is the kind of mercy Antonio extends to Shylock in act four and it is the kind Portia extends to Bassanio in act five.

The ring test catches Bassanio in a double-bind. He ought to *give* and hazard everything he has for love (give the ring — his claim to Belmont and Portia — for love of Antonio) yet he ought also to *keep* faith with his bride whom he also loves. Bassanio meets here for the first time the sort of ordeal that Portia and Jessica have already undergone: the psychic tug-of-war between equal and apparently mutually exclusive loves, with their divergent obligations. His conflict is closer to Portia's than to Jessica's in its balanced intensity: there is no Shylock on either hand to obscure the delicacy of his

predicament. But his solution is more like Jessica's. Portia alone is able to resolve the dilemma through obedience to a father whose will is in perfect unison with her own. Jessica and Bassanio do wrong to do right. Jessica breaks faith with her father and steals a ring given him by his wife which she prodigally spends for a love trifle. Bassanio spends his wife's ring for a far worthier purpose, to repay his debt of love to Antonio; but he nevertheless thus gives away his claim to his new fortunes at Belmont and takes a very great risk on his bride's reaction when she learns he has been false to his word.

Bassanio has failed to realize that even giving has a limit, that holding on — constancy — is also among love's values. And he has also failed to understand the dialectic of justice and mercy, as we learn during the trial when he asks Portia-Balthasar to "wrest the law" and do wrong to do a right. The answer he receives then is that this "must not be." Yet this is the principle that governs his decision after the trial to forswear himself and surrender his wedding ring. In act five he must learn by personal experience what Shylock's example might more comfortably have taught him: a wrong, even a small one, is always a wrong and calls forth its own punishment automatically. For, as we have seen, the law sleeps only until offended, when it reacts by reflecting the offense in kind. The law has no power to make anyone choose to do right; it can only punish those who do wrong. As with Adam and Everyman: the original choice or judgment is free, its consequences are not. The consequences are what the law-breaker deserves, mere justice (*dike*). And though one's freely-chosen attitude toward unavoidable consequences can transform them, making virtue of necessity, the only transcendence of the mechanical rigor of desert itself is by way of giving, forgiving, mercy.

Portia responds to Bassanio's decision in what we may recognize as typical Belmont family style: she offers him a little dramatic lesson, using highly-polished equivocation as her mirror. First she uses her art to tell him the plain truth: "I'll die for't, but some woman had the ring" (V. i. 208), that hearing he may hear and not understand. Next she produces

the ring, flashing him an image of his own indiscretion in her verbal portrait of herself as adultress, thus apparently trading places with him, hoisting him suddenly to the seat of judgment and casting herself into the role of guilty suppliant: "Pardon me Bassanio,/ For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (ll. 258-9). Bassanio's understandable "amazement" achieves no verbal expression, but Portia's expectation in showing him a magnified double of his fault is quite conventional: his conscience, fundamentally sound, will be soundly wrung and will return his judgment onto himself so that he may amend his own smaller infidelity.<sup>17</sup>

But just at this brink of moral gravity Portia redeems the comic mood and rends her veil of illusion. Her adequate response to the violation of *her* bond avoids Shylock's empty literalism, distinguishing nicely between the symbol (the ring) and what it represents (herself and her wealth). Bassanio's offense in yielding the ring remained symbolic, so must its chastisement. Moreover the very offense was simultaneously a gesture of generosity and renunciation of self in recognition of which his punishment is now revealed to be also his reward. With the sudden flourish of the stage magician Portia flips the leaden casket of adultery inside out and shows that it has all along concealed a forgiving and faithful wife, this time the thing itself and not a painter's iconic symbol. The case of Shylock's bond is played back in reverse. The *same words* that a moment ago had guaranteed Portia's infidelity now, echoed by Bassanio, guarantee her constancy:

Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow.  
When I am absent, then lie with my wife.

(V. i. 284-85)

This whole elaborate joke is possible only because the law, the "doctor" who "saved" Antonio, was in reality only an outward disguise of love. And like her other feats of Christian magic Portia's last illusion is created and dispelled by the mainly verbal looking-glass of her entertaining and instructive art.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Citations of Shakespeare's plays are from Sylvan Barnet (ed.), *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Bassanio's name seems not to be the same kind of vernacular pun as the names of the other suitors. Nevertheless, as Northrop Frye pointed out in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 166, it is fitting that the name of the only suitor to judge truly among the symbolic metals should resemble a Greek word for touchstones (*basanoi*). And it may even be intentional that the first syllable of Bassanio's name should in Shakespeare's pronunciation have the sound of English *base* — as in the key phrase "base lead" — with its appropriately conflicting meanings of "worthless," "foundation," and "humble."

<sup>3</sup>Matt. 5:42. Bible citations are from the Geneva version, spelling modernized. For an account of Antonio's progress from a self-righteous piety that cannot love its enemy to a closer approximation of true Christian charity, see Barbara K. Lewalski's "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ*, 13 (1962), 330-1.

<sup>4</sup>Portia explains to Lorenzo the Neoplatonic principle of the like souls of true lovers at III. iv. 11-21.

<sup>5</sup>I mean *hamartia* here to include both Aristotelian "error" and Pauline "sin."

<sup>6</sup>*Ham.* II. ii. 536-7. Hamlet of course was educated at Wittenberg; Aragon is a Spanish Catholic.

<sup>7</sup>See also Isabella to Angelo in *MM* II. ii. 74-8.

<sup>8</sup>See Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review*, 56 (1963), 205-6.

<sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), I, 448, n. 1. On the imagery of cannibalism that accompanies Shylock through the play see Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pp. 110-11.

<sup>10</sup>Perhaps it always ought to be mentioned that the "Judaism" portrayed in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses an inaccurate idea of historical Judaism, especially as contrasted with historical Christianity. Shakespeare's conception of "Judaism" is derived mainly from Paul's propagandist distortions. There is no room here to rehearse the inaccuracies of that view, but its limits may perhaps be sufficiently indicated by recalling that the New Testament's "'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord" is a quotation from the Torah and that the golden rule was taught in its complementary form (see p. 16 below) by Rabbi Hillel Hanasi, elder contemporary of Philo, before the birth of Christ (see *The Talmud of Jerusalem* [New York: Wisdom Library, 1956 ], pp. 26-7).

<sup>11</sup>"For charity itself fulfils the law, / And who can sever love from charity?" (*LLL* IV. iii. 361-2): in its Renaissance context Berowne's *coup de grace* to the court's oath of abstinence is not altogether fool.

- <sup>12</sup>Matt. 13:14. A somewhat different application of this text to *The Merchant of Venice* was made by Neville Coghill, "The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy," in *Essays and Studies of the English Association* (1950), p. 23. The idea of course is a commonplace of Renaissance defenses of poetry. Cf., e.g., Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), I, 166 and Sir John Harington, *A Preface, or rather a Briefe Apologie of Poetrie*, prefixed to the edition of *Orlando Furioso* 1591, also in Smith, II, 205-6.
- <sup>13</sup>Sir Walter Raleigh calls this "the law of Nature incorrupt" in *The History of The World*, ed. C.A. Patrides (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), p. 193.
- <sup>14</sup>Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1964), p. 365.
- <sup>15</sup>Mrs. Jameson, *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), p. 64; E.M.W. Tillyard, "The Trial Scene in *The Merchant of Venice*," *REL*, 2 (1961), 54-56; Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 63-64.
- <sup>16</sup>Sidney's *Apologie* in Smith, I, 206. For the doctrine of poem as parable with several layers of intelligibility suited to the various capacities of its audience see Harington's Preface in Smith, II, 203-6.
- <sup>17</sup>The Renaissance mirror of art normally has a moral as well as mimetic function. Hamlet is explicit on both points: *Ham.* II. ii. 596-9, III. i. 20-24. See also Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), pp. 25-38.