

SHAKESPEARE AND THE JEWISH QUESTION:
BELONGING, ALIENATION AND INJUSTICE IN
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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On the 29th of March 1516, Venice issued a decree which allowed Jews to settle in the Ghetto. It was the first decree of its kind in Europe. Ghettos arose in European countries that did not expel Jews. In England, Jews had been banned since 1290. In France, they were expelled in two waves: in 1306 and in 1394. In Spain, they were expelled in 1492. Venice made them permanent residents, although not full citizens.

*In such a world, where belonging is the ability to form meaningful human bonds, it was hard to belong. That is what I take to be the Jewish question in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is also true of the human condition afflicting all economic migrants: they are treated as necessary to the economy, but they do not enjoy all the privileges of the citizens, and their status can be modified unilaterally. *The Merchant of Venice* suggests however that there is something that unites migrants and citizens: it is the godhead of money. In trade-based economies, human relationships are mediated by money, and money transforms all relationships into interested bonds; the tale of King Midas becomes reality: men desire money above all, and that means that every human relation becomes infected by monetary calculations. Jews and Venetians have a bond since Jews can lend money and fund the trade of the city. Trading interests define the identity of the city and of all its citizens, and non-monetary relations are transformed into monetary ones. This paper aims to show that in a world dominated by economic bonds it is impossible to form strong human connections. As a result, it is hard for everyone, not only for Shylock, to fully and genuinely belong to any place. *The Jewish**

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question is a particular name for a universal problem that affects us all: the impossibility of fully belonging to any society that prioritizes interested bonds over genuine bonds of love and friendship.

Venice allowed Jews to settle in the city in order to satisfy the growing demand for money. But this was not a story of lost love. The city split between religious traditionalists, who were opposed to living side by side with Jews, and business men who needed a cash injection to subsidize their trading ventures. Monetary reasons of prevailed over traditional reasons, and Jews started move into the Ghetto. The Merchant of Venice is an allegory of that half-hearted openness. The city is open to fresh money, but closed to new religious and cultural practices. One needs not look far for a modern comparison. London is open to Russian oligarchs, petrodollars, and Chinese billionaires, but England is more and more reluctant to acknowledge the rights of migrants. It also is an allegory of injustice: injustice lies in the fact that the state is prepared to use people as a means to an end, as instruments to a goal. Jews were instruments to further Venetian trade. The modernity of Shakespeare, and that of The Merchant of Venice, can never be downplayed: the fundamental questions remain the same even though the circumstances change. The Jewish Question is central to the understanding of Europe because it is the mirror of what Europe is, the values and the ideals Europe stands for. Shylock, the Jew of Venice, is the mirror of Christian Europeans, and in the text is the mirror image of Antonio. His hatred, his cruelty, his lack of mercy are not exclusive properties: they are in fact the mirror of a Christian society. The Merchant of Venice is a play about the uncertainty of belonging, and the injustice that comes from alienation.

1. VENICE, THE WORLD TRADE CAPITAL

In 1598, when Shakespeare was writing the play, Venice was at the peak of its splendour. One of the four Maritime Republics, it dominated sea trade and had already explored trade routes to Asia. Marco Polo was the symbol of entrepreneurial activity and business exchange with the Far East. Venice was the best setting for a corrosive play that explores social injustice in a business-driven society. If Shakespeare were to set *The Merchant of Venice* today, he would probably call it 'The Capitalist of Singapore' or 'The Businessman of Dubai' or 'The Trader of Hong Kong'. The idea is to portray a closely-knit society that is open for business, but fairly closed

socio-culturally. Openness is an economic necessity, but it is not matched by any great degree of cultural toleration.

Business transactions are constitutive of the political identity of Venice, and the instrument to protect these transactions is contract law. This law is blind to any racial and religious difference, because the point is to facilitate the flux of money. Contract law is very rigidly respected in Venice, and its interpretation is necessarily strict. The city's political and trading image depends on the respect of business contracts, and Antonio—the Merchant—acknowledges this fact even when his life depends upon the interpretation of the law.

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 his 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
 To-morrow to my bloody creditor. (3.3.1737-1745)

Antonio is adamant that the justice of the city-state of Venice would be hampered if contracts were not strictly policed. At best, Antonio is confused: justice would be served by a fair interpretation of contracts; however, it is true that Venice's business reputation would be harmed if contracts were not respected. And that much is clear in this line: "the trade and profit of the city consisteth of all nations." (3.3.1741-1742).

In 1598, London was not quite as rich and thriving as Venice, but was working hard to become a trading power. Shakespeare's London was very much a city in search of its own identity: northern Europe's economy was land based, and the society was aristocratic and heavily class dependent. London's transformation into a global trade hub must have been tremendously unsettling. To move from a feudal aristocratic society to a bourgeois, business oriented society must have happened through conflict and social strife.

The tension between a trade based polity and an aristocratic society are captured by the dichotomy between Venice and Belmont. The latter is a fictional place that stands for an ideal, virtuous society. The very name, Belmont, means beautiful mountain and contrasts with Venice, which is built at sea level and is not capable of

elevating itself. The inhabitants of Belmont are apparently more virtuous than Venetians.

BASSANIO

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
 And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
 Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
 I did receive fair speechless messages.
 Her name is Portia – nothing undervalu'd
 To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.
 Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth;
 For the four winds blow in from every coast
 Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
 Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
 Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
 And many Jasons come in quest of her.
 O my Antonio, had I but the means
 To hold a rival place with one of them,
 I have a mind presages me such **thrift**,
 That I should questionless be **fortunate**. (1.1.168-184)

Portia is a lady of wondrous virtues and she is comparable to Brutus' Portia, one of the finest patricians of old Rome. More importantly, she is 'a lady richly left.' Bassanio brings from Venice the capitalist spirit, obsessed with wealth, and incapable of seeing a person's worth in non-monetary terms. Indeed, Bassanio's mission and mind are fixated on thrift and hopes to be blessed by (monetary) fortune.

Both Venice and Belmont are open to foreigners, but it would be more accurate to say that they are open to their money, much like today's London. The ports and gates of the cities are welcoming to rich foreigners, but these foreigners are ridiculed behind their back and satirised. When Portia talks about her French suitor, she exclaims: "God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man." The Englishman's sartorial deficiencies are also stressed: "How oddly he is suited." And the German, "when he is best, he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast." But in our contemporary ears, the most vilified is the prince of Morocco: "if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me (1.2.109-114)." Playing with the stereotype that devils are supposed to be black, Portia dismisses him as a potential suitor.

The contrast between openness to money and intolerance to sociocultural diversity

is striking. The law follows suit: contract law in Venice (England) is biased in favour of traders, bankers and businessmen. However, in criminal matters, and especially when outsiders threaten the life of Venetians, the punishment for aliens is much harsher. Jews were full members of the business community, but not full citizens.

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.
 In which predicament, I say, thou stand'st; (4.1.2295-2306)

The life of Jews in the community matters as an instrument to the functioning of business, it matters as a means to an end. No Christian would be allowed to lend money with interest, therefore Jews provide a vital role in bringing in fresh capital for the business ventures of the Venetians. Jews are fundamental to Venice, yet they are not recognised as citizens.

2. HATRED AND LOVE

There are three main characters in the play: a businessman, a banker and a lawyer. It sounds like the beginning of a lousy joke; indeed, *The Merchant of Venice* is formally a comedy. But Shakespeare's comedies often reveal dark corners of humanity.

The businessman is Antonio, the depressive Merchant, and 'good Christian.' He is depressed from the first line of the play, but we do not know why; most importantly, Antonio does not know why he is so sad.

ANTONIO

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. (1.1.1-8)

Antonio knows only that he does not know himself and that he has a lot of work to do on this front, for the man who doesn't know himself is destined to suffer and depression. This is a central theme in Shakespeare. Consider King Lear and the tragedy that flows from the fact that he is uncertain about the love of his daughters.

Antonio is isolated and lonely. He has company and visitors but those people are there because they are interested in his wealth. His acquaintances speculate that he is depressed because of all the worries related to his trading interests, his boats scattered around the world and at risk of being sunk or attacked. But Antonio rebukes those suggestions as well as the thought that he might be depressed because he is in love and does not know it. I am inclined to think that Antonio is depressed because he cannot form meaningful bonds with anyone, since human bonds in Venice are driven by interest and the quest for money. Indeed, Antonio receives the visit of his dearest friend Bassanio. Dearest because he is very close to Antonio, but also because he is the most expensive acquaintance. Bassanio has come to ask for money to sponsor his journey to Belmont to conquer a lady who is very rich; if Bassanio were to seduce her, then his debts would be fully repaid.

Antonio is a Christian who discriminates Jews. This is a compelling reason for the banker—Shylock, the Jewish moneylender— to seek revenge, but it is not the only reason.

SHYLOCK

[Aside] 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,
 Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe,
 If I forgive him! (1.3.362-373)

Shylock hates Antonio because he is a Christian, but he also hates him because he is an unfair competitor who lends money free of interest, thereby lowering the interest rate. In capitalist Venice, that matters more than religious hatred. Money is the ultimate source of strife and resentment, but at the same time it is what brings people together despite their religious and cultural differences.

The key to the understanding of this play is the idea of mirroring: Shylock and Antonio hate each other, first and foremost, because they resemble each other. Both are lonely, depressed and isolated. They see in each other the detested region of their soul. Rather than engaging in self-understanding, Antonio and Shylock express their sadness through the hatred of the other. We know it is much easier to blame someone or something else for our own failures. It is particularly easy to blame an alien for the shortcomings of one's own society. Antonio does exactly that, blaming Shylock the alien. But Antonio does not understand that he is himself an alien in his own city. As a matter of fact, in a society whose supreme goal is to make money rather than to form human bonds, everyone is alienated.

Neither Shylock nor Antonio can form meaningful bonds with anyone: as rich men their position attracts only those people who are interested in their money, while they perceive relationships as a matter of interest. By the end of the play Shylock is abandoned by everyone, including his daughter Jessica. When she elopes to marry Lorenzo, Shylock does not ask for her to return alive. He wants her back coffined and bejewelled. Shylock does not have a loving relationship with his daughter, it is rather one of possession and control, causing him to worry about her as an object that is more safely preserved in a coffin, just like any other jewel.

The third main character is Portia, the quick-witted lawyer. She famously helps to solve the conflict between the merchant and the banker, ultimately by holding Shylock liable for attempted murder against a Christian. She is noble and rich, but as a lawyer she is cutthroat and a bit of a trickster: her appearance in court is in disguise. She has no problem usurping the title of lawyer, by asking her cousin Bellario—a prominent legal expert from Padua—to let her stand in his stead. During the trial, she asks Shylock to be merciful thrice, but not once does she offer him mercy when the legal tide turns against him.

As a woman, she is in competition with all the men, not only with Shylock. She is in competition with Antonio for the love of Bassanio. And she is also in competition with Bassanio, whose true commitment to her is tested through the trial of the ring: first she gives him her ring as a sign of her love, then—when disguised as a lawyer—she asks him to give her back the ring as a payment for her legal services. Finally, she publicly humiliates Bassanio for having broken his oath by giving the ring away.

Bassanio is beaten into submission, and vows eternal fidelity, but at this point one is left wondering whether their relationship has anything to do with love.

3. LAW AND CONFLICTS

The play cannot be reduced to one simple theme or one area of conflict. Sixteenth century London is a complex place where social, religious and legal conflicts are deeply intertwined.¹ Some like to read the play as being essentially about the clash between a Christian commonwealth and its religious minorities, and in particular about anti-Semitism.² But this is hardly Shakespeare's concern: he is a member of a Christian minority (his family is Catholic) in a Protestant world. Of course, he can hardly mention the pain and suffering that comes from that position: the obliteration of one's faith in public. It is not impossible to imagine that Shakespeare would have sympathised with the fate of the Jews in England, and in the rest of Europe. After all, the issue of Marrano Jews who were forced to convert, while practicing their faith in private, was an open secret and resembled the forced conversion of Catholics in England.

For Shakespeare, addressing the Jewish question was a way to also address the Catholic question in England. To be sure, there is much one can say about Shakespeare and the Jews.³ Jews lived in the ghetto and wore yellow hats when walking the streets of Venice; they were considered aliens in the eyes of the criminal law and received harsher punishment than citizens. Shylock, however, is not afraid of planning his murderous revenge in the open: the trial of Antonio is a public event, and Shylock brings to court Venetian customs, habits and strongly commercial identity. Shylock wants to expose the fiction behind the legalistic conception of contracts, negotiating the forfeiture of Antonio's bond not in monetary terms, rather asking instead for a pound of Antonio's flesh.

SHYLOCK

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. (1.3.476-479)

1 It is well known that Venice is a thinly veiled way to address the socio-political problems in London.

2 HAROLD BLOOM, *SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN* 91–171 (1998).

3 JAMES SHAPIRO, *SHAKESPEARE AND THE JEWS* (Columbia University Press 1996) (1992).

Shylock does not mention which part of the body he's aiming at. He simply says where it "pleaseth me." In London's audience, this might have been met with laughter: the Jew is after the male's member; he wants to circumcise him and turn him into a Jew.⁴ This might seem ridiculous to us, but it was not back then. After all, the final and most cruel punishment for Shylock is to be converted into a Christian, the ultimate forfeit when two religious communities live side by side.

Later, we discover that Shylock is aiming at Antonio's heart. Paul's idea of the circumcision of the heart must have come to Shakespeare while attending mass at Southwark Cathedral: "A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter [Romans 2:29]." In this passage, Paul compares Jews and Christians and suggesting that Christians owe the secret to circumcision: it is not to be understood literally as an instance of bodily purification; instead, it should be understood metaphorically, as a means to purify the heart of men. In an ironic twist of the text, Shakespeare gives Shylock the role of potential circumciser of the heart; when Shylock asks for a pound of flesh, he is aiming at Antonio's heart. Of course, the irony comes from the fact that he's not aiming at the metaphorical heart, but at the literal body organ.

Another obvious site of conflict between Jews and Christians concerns the prohibition to intermarry, unless one converts. The prohibition is brought to stage by the amorous relation between Lorenzo and Jessica (Shylock's daughter). Jessica repudiates her father not because he is Jewish but because he is nasty and brutish, and very possessive.

JESSICA

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
 To be ashamed to be my father's child!
 But though I am a daughter to his blood,
 I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
 If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
 Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (2.3.791-797)

Conversion here is not perceived as a penalty or a punishment, but as an individual choice to live in a loving relationship, as opposed to a possessive one. However, there is little doubt that to prohibit intermarriage is the mark of a racist society. Think of US race laws, where slaves were instrumental to the economy but were not equal members of the political community, nor could they intermarry.

4 *Ibid.*

Bleaker yet is the memory of Nazi race laws, whose central kernel was to treat Jews as aliens and prohibit any contamination of the pure German blood.⁵ Today, most countries in the Middle East still prohibit, or make it very hard, to intermarry.

The cocktail between economic necessity of cheap labour and denial of civil and political status for aliens dramatically marks our contemporary world too. To accept the premises of such a situation inevitably leads any society to making questionable choices in matters of immigration. The bottom line, even in Shakespeare's text, is that conversion—and full integration as a consequence—has economic costs that the community is not always prepared to bear. In *The Merchant*, the economic cost of conversion is rendered with tragicomic effect, but still bears the marks of racism: conversion of Jews into Christian will ultimately raise the price of pork!

JESSICA

I shall be sav'd by my husband; he hath made me a Christian.

LAUNCELOT

Truly, the more to blame he; we were Christians enow before; e'en as many as could well live, one by another. This making Christians will raise the price of hogs; if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money. (3.5.1858-1864)

Economy and religion, as well as law, are intertwined in the play. Shakespeare writes at a time in which jurisdictional conflicts were part and parcel of London's legal scene. There were at least three different sets of courts: common law courts, equity courts—otherwise called Chancery courts, or the courts of conscience—and ecclesiastical courts. Equity courts would work in tandem with common law courts, the former would qualify very strict decisions of the latter so as to mitigate the harsh consequences of strict legalism: a practices Shakespeare was well aware of.

BASSANIO

And, I beseech you,
Wrest once the law to your authority;

5 James Q. Whitman argues that Nazi race laws were inspired by US race laws. JAMES Q. WHITMAN, *HITLER'S AMERICAN MODEL: THE UNITED STATES AND THE MAKING OF NAZI RACE LAW* (2017).

To do a great right, do a little wrong,
And curb this cruel devil of his will.

PORTIA

It must not be; there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established;
'Twill be recorded for a **precedent**,
And many an error by the same example,
Will rush into the state: it cannot be. (4.1.2150-2164)

Portia knows the common law cannot tolerate a shoddy decision, because it will constitute a precedent that will penetrate, and wreck, the whole system of state law. Shakespeare translates the legal clash into the language of Justice and Mercy; some would like to see here another religious quarrel between the Old Testament—inspired by a notion of strict divine justice—and the New Testament—inspired by Christian charity, love and mercy. But this dichotomy is overly simplistic and does not represent how Shakespeare thinks. The opposition in Shakespeare's text is not between justice and mercy, but between justice with mercy and justice without mercy. Mercy is something added upon the law, Shakespeare calls it a gentle rain, and a seasoning of justice.

PORTIA

The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre 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 sceptred 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. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation; we do pray for mercy,

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
 To **mitigate** the justice of thy plea,
 Which if thou follow, this **strict** court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (4.1.2125-2146)

The court of Venice, like common law courts in Shakespeare's London, is strict and legalistic; it must stick to the words of the bond as recorded by a public notary. Portia pleads with the Jew to show mercy, but cannot constrain him to do so. If he refuses to be merciful, then the court has no choice but to follow suit. The job of an ordinary court is to interpret the law strictly, and that is why most claimants would hope for mitigation from equity courts. It is impossible to reduce the reading of this passage to a formulaic distinction between Old Testament and New Testament. Law and religion are intertwined, the language of law borrows from religion, and religion expects strict secular courts to administer blind justice.

There is another interesting twist in the very idea of Mercy. Its root lies in the Latin word *merx*, which means commodity or goods. It shares this root with merchant and mercenary. The original idea is that in a well-functioning ethical community individuals would treat each other with reciprocity and would offer each other gifts in recognition of their common status as citizen. To present a good (*merx*) to another citizen would be tantamount to expressing gratitude (that is the origin of the French word *merci*, too).

In the *Merchant of Venice*, the relation between Antonio and Shylock is not one of reciprocity. In a society dominated by economic interests and trade ventures, Shylock is requested by the court to give Antonio a free pass, a gift, in the name of Mercy. Shylock was never once the recipient of free gestures on the part of Antonio; on the contrary, he was on the receiving end of brutal and dehumanising treatment. Shylock was frequently treated as a dog. In a society obsessed with trade, and very low in reciprocity, it should not come as a surprise that Shylock does not feel moved by the idea of mercy. The only reciprocity in Venice is that of revenge.

SHYLOCK

To bait fish withal. if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my **revenge**. He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated 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? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? **Revenge**. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, **revenge**. The villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.1287-1307)

The economic structure of mercy provides a better understanding of Venice. In a world dominated by economic bonds, and where the god of religion has been replaced by the god of money, there is no place for gratuitous acts of forgiveness or mercy. Every human bond is mediated by economic considerations and mercy is the negation of economic considerations elevated to ideology; it is the negation of god-like financial interest. It cannot flourish in this city-state.

4. THE JEWISH QUESTION

Money is what brings people together, and the play is about giving and receiving. This becomes very clear in the famous scene of the three caskets. Portia's father set this up in his legal will, wanting to have the final word with regards to the man who would marry his daughter and inherit his wealth. Portia's inheritance is locked by her father's will in one of three caskets—one made of gold, one made of silver and one made of lead— and her suitors must choose from amongst the three. The fortunate casket that contains her counterfeit corresponds to the green light to marry her. The Prince of Morocco is the first to test his fortune:

MOROCCO

The first, of gold, who this inscription bears:

'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.'

The second, silver, which this promise carries:

'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.'

This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt,

'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.'

How shall I know if I do choose the right? (2.7.990-996)

Morocco chooses the golden casket, which is the emblem of desire fixated on appearance and economic gain. The right choice is not gold, "what many men desire." Nor is it silver, which promises men will get their just deserts. The right choice is lead, which asks man to give and hazard all he hath. The multitude is fixated on interested desire, they want beauty and riches and they go after the shiniest metal. I doubt Shakespeare has anything against desire *per se*. Rather, he is deeply sceptical of desire directed towards riches, which seems to be the defining trait of a newly emergent capitalist society where money is the new deity and all action and desire is geared towards that goal. The capitalist society shapes the object of desire, and in so doing it enslaves human beings.

In Belmont, like in Venice, human relations are measured in money. To have meaningful and genuine human relations, men would have to go through a process of emancipation that liberates them from interested desire. But note an important point here: to move from gold to silver—that is from desire to deserts—does not qualify as an instance of full emancipation. By focusing on your just deserts, you are still enslaved to the capitalist society; you have not been freed from interested desire, or from overarching financial considerations. But you do not liberate yourself from the society that shapes your being and your desires simply by having a rightful place in the commonwealth, a place that comes with certain prerogatives and certain rights. In a society that measures everything by money, your worth is anyhow determined by how much money you have, and not by who you are as a moral member of the society.

Shylock could, and indeed does, become a rightful member of the Christian commonwealth by converting. Putting aside for a moment the fact that that conversion is imposed, rather than chosen, being part of the commonwealth, becoming a fully-fledged citizen and not an alien should be an improvement of Shylock's status. But it is not. Shylock is horrified by the conversion and does not care about becoming an equal political member. He does not care because the great equaliser in that society is not political status, but money. To be a good man means to be financially solid.

SHYLOCK

Antonio is a good man.

BASSANIO

Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

SHYLOCK

Oh, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a

good man is to have you understand me that he is **sufficient**. Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand, moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath, squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves – I mean pirates; and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks. The man is, notwithstanding, **sufficient**. Three thousand ducats – I think I may take his bond. (1.3.335-352)

Antonio's worth is evaluated in relation to his financial solidity. A good man is sufficient, that is to say, he can be trusted on the market to raise credit. If by now you sense a proximity between Shakespeare and Marx, you are right. Many have argued that Shakespeare is a Marxist;⁶ but the truth is that Marx is a Shakespearean. This is evident in the section entitled "On Money" in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*:

"If money is the bond that binds me to human life, that binds society to me and me to nature and men, is not money the bond of all bonds? Can it not tie and untie all bonds? Is it not, therefore, also the universal means of separation? It is the true agent both of separation and of union, the galvano-chemical power of society."⁷

Followed by what might be the most interesting passage in Marx's *Manuscripts*:

"Shakespeare brings out two particular properties of money:

1. it is the visible god-head, the transformation of all human and natural qualities into their opposites, the general confusion and inversion of things; it makes impossibilities fraternize.
2. It is the universal whore, the universal pander between men and peoples. The inversion and confusion of all human and natural qualities, the fraternization of impossibilities, this divine power of money lies in its being

⁶ A. D. NUTTALL, SHAKESPEARE THE THINKER (2008).

⁷ DAVID MCLELLAN & KARL MARX: SELECTED WRITINGS 118 (2nd ed. 2000).

the externalized and self-externalizing species-being of man. It is the externalized capacities of humanity."⁸

Marx directly refers to Shakespeare when thinking about Money. Shakespeare is Marx's teacher and shapes the thought of many political economists. Classical theories of values shift from value determined in relation to gold and silver, to value determined in relation of money. Shakespeare is the first and most eloquent observer of that social shift and of its implications for what it means to be part of a society whose godhead is money.

For Shakespeare and Marx, the old society of gold and silver and the new society of money is the world turned upside down. Marx has no doubt: "Since money is the existing and self-affirming concept of value and confounds and exchanges all things, it is the universal confusion and exchange of all things, the inverted world, the confusion and exchange of all natural and human qualities."⁹ To live by the standards of those societies means to acquiesce to alienation, and to refrain from having genuine relations that do not require the intermediary of money.

The only way out is to turn the world upside down again and choose the lead casket, rather than the golden one. If you are lucky, you'll have love in exchange of love, for it is not always required. But the only means to achieve true love is by giving true love. This helps us understand the inscription on the third casket, the lead casket: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." In order to love one has to give all he hath; that is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. One also has to risk all he hath, for there is no guarantee that your love will be reciprocated.

Interestingly, Marx concludes his essay on money with the topic of love: "If you suppose man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one, then you can only exchange love for love, trust for trust, etc."¹⁰ The condition of freely giving is present in Marx, but he has more to say: "If you love without arousing a reciprocal love, that is, if your love does not as such produce love in return, if through the manifestation of yourself as a loving person you do not succeed in making yourself a beloved person, then your love is impotent and a misfortune..."¹¹

The final parallel between Shakespeare and Marx relates to the stages of emancipation, which Marx explains in "On the Jewish Question":¹² As we know,

8 *Ibid*, p 118.

9 *Id.* at 119.

10 *Ibid* 119.

11 *Id.* at 120.

12 *Id.* at 46.

there are three stages of emancipation. The first is one of complete alienation. The second stage is one of political liberation, where the alienated individual receives civil and political rights with which he can protect his individual interests. But the fact of having protected interests does not allow you to form genuine, meaningful human bonds. The only way to do so is to reach the final stage of emancipation from the desires produced by society, and start living a liberated life in touch with oneself.

Shakespeare is clear about the fact that neither gold, nor silver, are sufficient to live a genuine life. We have already discussed gold as being associated with a distorted desire for money; but I haven't said enough about silver, which symbolizes just desert. In Shakespeare's play, the notion of just desert is also scrutinised. It focuses on your egoistic moral agency, and makes you ask: what do I deserve from society? Shylock is a completely alienated being who still believes that the civil society owes him something because he deserves it, because he has worked hard for it, and because he can pay for everything. He is not a citizen because he does not want to forgo his Jewish identity. And he does not care, because being a member of the civil society is enough, since Venice has already emancipated itself from the shackles of feudalism, and has given everyone the freedom to trade upon which the 'justice of the city' rests. Obviously, for Shakespeare that does not amount to full emancipation, even if it might be a step toward it. And he would add that the state has given citizens freedom of religion and other freedoms.

Marx reads like a prosaic paraphrase of Shakespeare: "Feudal society was dissolved into its basis, into man. But into the man that was its true basis, egoistic man. This man, the member of civil society, is the basis, the presupposition of the political state. He is recognized by it as such in the rights of man. [...] Man was therefore not freed from religion; he received freedom of religion. He was not freed from property; he received freedom of property. He was not freed from the egoism of trade; he received freedom to trade."¹³

There stand the lone egoistic men, Shylock and his Christian counterpart, Antonio. They are both better off in a trading society than under a feudal system, but they are far from being liberated and brought back to their humanity. The strict laws of Venice protect their cruelty and thirst for revenge. Shylock desires revenge, and believes he deserves justice and the forfeit that he has stipulated for the non-performance of the contract. Shylock's; legal claim to have the contract respected is not contested by anyone, not even by Antonio who is prepared to pay.

Venice has reached political emancipation. Echoing Shakespeare, Marx states that "the formation of the political state and the dissolution of civil society into

13 *Id.* at 63.

independent individuals, who are related by law just as the estate and corporation men were related by privilege, is completed in one and the same act."¹⁴ In Venice, the legal bond is more important than the social bond. But the problem is that political emancipation leaves untouched the egoistic nature of man; if anything, it places the independent egoistic man on a pedestal. The Jew of Venice has already emancipated himself because the world of money and strict law is his world, but that is in itself problematic: "The contradiction between the practical political power of the Jew and his political rights is the general contradiction between politics and the power of money. Whereas the first ideally is superior to the second, in fact it is its bondsman."¹⁵ We understand better why acquiring full political rights amounts to nothing for the Jew, it is in fact a loss of identity. The Jew does not need political rights to be powerful. Shylock does not need to be a citizen to have his way.

It is interesting to note that Shylock will lose his battle on the very territory of strict law. Portia outsmarts Shylock on his home ground. First, she alerts him by asking whether he has brought a doctor to take care of Antonio's wounds, after his pound of flesh is removed. Shylock thinks that his reply that the doctor is not mentioned in the bond protects him. But that is exactly what Portia wants him to say; she now faces him with his own weapons and asks him:

PORTIA

Tarry a little; there is something else.
 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. (4.1.2251-2257)

Portia points out that the contract does not mention the shedding of blood. Now, Shylock can no longer rely on a strict interpretation of the contract. A trickster's legalism has been forced unto him, and he does not have a counter argument; he is not quick enough to point out that the shedding of blood must be an implied element of the bond. Strict legalism is not so quick on implied conditions. So this is how it ends:

¹⁴ *Id.* at 68.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 67.

the Jew is outsmarted by a Christian who turns into a Jew just for the sake of winning the argument. And now the Jew, Shylock, has to become a Christian.

Becoming a Christian (becoming a citizen) is a punishment. Marx summarises the argument of his opponent, Bruno Bauer, in the following way: Bauer suggests that the Christian has only one stage to accomplish to emancipate himself: he has to shed his Christianity. The Jew however, has to go through two stages: "he has not only to break with his Jewish nature but also with the development and completion of his religion, a development that has remained alien to him."¹⁶ In other words, the Jew has to become Christian and then shed his religion. Marx disagreed: it is not a religious question; the two should help each other to move beyond mere political emancipation.

Marx and Shakespeare are on the same wavelength: the stage of political emancipation is duplicitous. They also agree on the point that Christianity has not overcome Judaism: "The Christian was from the beginning the theorizing Jew; the Jew is therefore the practical Christian, and the practical Christian has become the Jew again. Christianity has overcome real Judaism in appearance only. It was too gentlemanly, too spiritual, to remove the crudeness of practical need other than by raising it into the blue heavens."¹⁷

Shakespeare does not admire Antonio, Bassanio or Portia. Antonio is a hateful Christian man who spits on the Jews. Bassanio worships the god of money. Portia is a trickster lawyer who uses her wit to protect her old money. Her speech on Mercy is pure hypocrisy, given that the facts tell us that she uses Shylock's strict legalism to punish him. And what a cruel punishment awaits Shylock.

Marx comments, as if he was speaking directly to Shakespeare's text:

"The baseless and irrational law of the Jew is only the religious caricature of morality and law in general, the purely formal rights with which the world of selfishness surrounds itself. Here, too, the highest relationship of man is the legal relationship, the relationship to laws that are not valid for him because they are the laws of his own will and essence, but because they are the masters and deviations from them are avenged."¹⁸

16 *Id.* at 49.

17 *Id.* at 69.

18 *Id.* at 68.

5. INJUSTICE AND DEHUMANISATION

Justice is not possible in a proto-capitalist society such as Venice. To begin with, it is too easily confused with and substituted by other virtues. Justice would coincide with strict laws that preserve property (Portia's old money) and protect trade. In the name of religion, Justice would also maintain the patriarchal structure of the society where daughters are disciplined and led by their fathers (Jessica and Portia). But the reality is that justice, law and religion are just the eminent expression of the hypocrisy of the merchant society, whose real foundation we have already uncovered: money. Everything is subordinated and confused with it. After Jessica's elopement, Shylock is reported crying in the streets:

SHYLOCK

Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
 A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
 Of double ducats, stol'n 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.' (2.8.1088-1093)

Shylock confuses justice, law, money and family. It is unclear which is more important at first. Is Shylock sad because his daughter left or is he sad because she stole the money? Only a very charitable reading could suggest a doubt at this point; for Shylock is ultimately concerned about his ducats. Law and religion, both in Marx and in Shakespeare, are vain ornaments of the bourgeois society in which we live. A society that lives by the rules of money, gold and silver needs to use instruments such as law and religion to hide its corruption, vice and error.

BASSANIO

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
 The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
 But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
 Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
 What damned error but some sober brow
 Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
 Hiding the grossness with fair ornament? (3.2. 1440-1447)

Law's hypocrisy is to make 'tainted' claims sound plausible, if not reasonable, provided that they are presented in the right rhetorical style. Religion's hypocrisy consists of grounding wrong-headed beliefs in ancient scriptures to confer on those mistakes a glittery impression of truth. Marx's criticism of law and religion is already present in the words of Bassanio.

The injustice in Venice does not come from the workings of the law. The law is but an instrument for achieving political goals. The injustice is connected instead with the dehumanising treatment of Shylock, who is not shy to point out the sheer immorality of Venice towards other humans that are enslaved for the pleasure of the citizens.

SHYLOCK

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong? You have among you many a purchas'd slave, Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules, You use in abject and in slavish parts, Because you bought them; shall I say to you, 'Let them be free, marry them to your heirs – Why sweat they under burthens? let their beds Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates Be season'd with such viands? You will answer 'The slaves are ours:' so do I answer you: The pound of flesh, which I demand of him Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it. If you deny me, fie upon your law! There is no force in the decrees of Venice. I stand for judgment; answer; shall I have it? (4.1.2021-2035)

The law treats slaves like legal property, and Shylock wants the law to treat his property over Antonio's pound of flesh with equal respect. No more, no less. Just the same respect that the law accords slavery as a means of control of other humans. If that is allowed, why not Shylock's bond?

Shylock comes across as a cruel monster, but he also shows how monstrous is the allegedly civilised society of Venice. There is no reasonable justification for slavery, and indeed Venice cannot provide such. Likewise, Shylock is unwilling to provide a reason for wanting to extol the pound of flesh, aside from the fact that he has a legal entitlement to his own property.

Injustice comes from the way in which we treat each other. Venice is treating other human beings as slaves or as mere instruments. All these are paradigmatic cases of dehumanisation. Instead of treating human beings as human beings, the city treats them as property, objects or instruments to other goals.

SHYLOCK

I have possess'd your grace of what I purpose, And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn To have the due and forfeit of my bond. If you deny it, let the danger light Upon your charter and your city's freedom. You'll ask me why I rather choose to have A weight of carrion flesh than to receive Three thousand ducats. **I'll not answer that**, But, say, it is my humour – **is it answer'd?** What if my house be troubled with a rat, And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats To have it ban'd? What, **are you answer'd 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, Mistress 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 render'd, Why he cannot abide a gaping pig; Why he, a harmless necessary cat; Why he, a woollen 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 lodg'd hate and a certain loathing I bear Antonio, that I follow thus A losing suit against him. **Are you answer'd? (4.1.1967-1994)**

6. SAVING GRACE?

For both Shakespeare and Marx, the next stage of emancipation requires man to go back to "his own will and essence."¹⁹ Venice is a city of crass and base nature because it embodies the virtues of the money man. Marx points out that "What lies abstract in the Jewish religion, a contempt for theory, art, history, man as an end in himself, is the actual, conscious standpoint, the virtue of the money man."²⁰ It follows then that women in the play are not regarded as the subject of love: "The species-relationship itself, the relationship of man to woman, etc., becomes an object of commerce! Woman is bartered."²¹ Rather, women are objects of certain monetary value, and daughters are worth a certain amount of ducats.

There is, however, an exception: Lorenzo loves Jessica for who she is; he is able to see past her religion and love her for her inner qualities. Talkative Gratiano, full of blather, questions Lorenzo's choice of partner.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 68.

²⁰ *Id.* at 68.

²¹ *Id.* at 68.

GRATIANO

Now, by my hood, a gentile and no Jew.

LORENZO

Beshrew me, but I love her heartily,
 For she is wise, if I can judge of her,
 And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
 And true she is, as she hath proved herself;
 And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,
 Shall she be placed in my constant soul. (2.6.964-972)

Lorenzo is unflinching. He does not care if she is a Jew. What matters is that he loves her heartily. She is a subject of his love, and he focuses on her observable virtues: fairness, truth, and wisdom.

Shakespeare's choice of names is never casual. Lorenzo de Medici was patron of the arts in the Renaissance. The name Lorenzo comes from *laurus*, which means bay leaf and is used to make leafy crowns with which great poets are crowned. Virgil and Dante are laureate poets. Lorenzo de Medici is a man open to art, theory, history and to being a man as an end in himself. In the play, Lorenzo praises the beauty of nature and the pleasure of music.

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
 Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
 Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
 Become the touches of sweet harmony.
 Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
 Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold;
 There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
 But in his motion like an angel sings,
 Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
 Such harmony is in immortal souls,
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (5.1.2507-2519)

In these few lines Shakespeare captures the spirit of the Renaissance.²² It is near impossible not to see Botticelli's spring in this description. The beauty of nature itself produces harmonious music. The sky is painted metaphorical gold. The music they

22 STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *THE SWERVE: HOW THE RENAISSANCE BEGAN* (2012).

are hearing is the music of celestial spheres. These lines are deeply resonant of Renaissance poetry, and find their roots in Lucretius, the poet who inspired the Renaissance with his rediscovered *De Rerum Natura*.²³ Lucretius describes the origin of music with the following words:

"These are the tunes that soothed and cheered their hearts after a full meal: for at such times everything is enjoyable. So they would often recline in company on the soft grass by a running stream under the branches of a tall tree and refresh their bodies pleurably at small expense. Better still if the weather smiled upon them and the season of the year emblazoned the green herbage with flowers. Then was the time for joking and talking and merry laughter. Then was the heyday of the rustic muse. Then light-hearted jollity prompted them to breathe head and shoulders with garlands twisted of flowers and leaves and dance out of step, moving their limbs clumsily and with clumsy foot stamping on mother earth. This was matter enough for mirth and boisterous laughter. For these arts were still in their youth, with all the charm of novelty."²⁴

Lorenzo and Jessica are sitting on the soft grass by a running stream, listening to celestial music. They tease each other and enjoy their time while joking, talking and laughing. Jessica suggests that music does not make her happy. Lorenzo explains then the power of music and the way in which music softens human beings and changes their nature. He adds that those who have contempt of music should be distrusted.

LORENZO

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull: as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.(5.1.2539-2544)

You would not be surprised to learn that the other person who is not moved by music is Shylock. His house should remain sober and quiet. Shylock hates the carnival, and its music.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ LUCRETIUS, ON THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE (Ronald Melville trans., Classics, 2010).

SHYLOCK

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica:
 Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum,
 And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife,
 Clamber not you up to the casements then,
 Nor thrust your head into the public street
 To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces;
 But stop my house's ears – I mean my casements;
 Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
 My sober house. By Jacob's staff, I swear
 I have no mind of feasting forth to-night;
 But I will go. Go you before me, sirrah;
 Say I will come. (2.5.876-887)

This might explain, though not justify, Marx's point about the Jewish contempt for art: "What lies abstract in the Jewish religion, a contempt for theory, art, history, man as an end in himself, is the actual, conscious standpoint, the virtue of the money man."²⁵ Venice is already Jewish, and has embraced the virtue of the money man. It is the world upside down, where man loses his will and essence. Belmont is fictional, a utopia, since it represents a place where relations can potentially transcend money, and humans follow the natural laws as opposed to the artificial laws.

CODA: BEING AN ALIEN

The modernity of Shakespeare is striking: the virtues of the money man have reached the four corners of the world. Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong and the rest of the world are modern Venices, where money transforms all human relations into interested bonds and stresses the disparity between citizens and economic migrants, whose status is always open for renegotiation on the basis of the needs of the hosting society. Shakespeare sheds lights on belonging and alienation: the predominance of interested bonds precludes the possibility of genuine human bonds. A genuine sense of belonging can no longer be developed amongst people. All we are left with is spurious belonging that depends on the arbitrary boundaries imposed by legal definitions of citizenship. Legal bonds have replaced genuine human bonds.

²⁵ *Id.* at 68.

Moreover, legal bonds legitimize the instrumental treatment of non-citizens: they are welcome as long as they are useful; unwelcome as soon as they demand to be treated equally to other citizens. The possibility of belonging for non-citizens is altogether precluded, and their alienation is inevitable. The play shows that citizens display the same alienation and lack of genuine belonging since meaningful human relations are impossible in a world that prioritises interested bonds.

Shakespeare saw this happening and portrayed this reality before, and more compellingly than anyone else. A community is open to aliens as long as they increase its wealth; but as soon as the economy deteriorates, the status of the alien is questioned, and the blame for the downturn is placed on him. This perverse mechanism never fails to reproduce itself: an alien is used as an instrument to economic welfare. Once the goal fails to materialize, the instrument no longer has purpose. Injustice is built into this system, and there is no escaping it.

Shylock, in a moment of human generosity, turns himself into the ultimate scapegoat. He does not play the victim, he plays the executioner for a Christian audience that eventually blames him for the ills of Venice. All's well that ends well? Not quite. The story takes the form of a comedy, but it preserves all the marks of the greatest human tragedy that repeats itself, and will continue to do so unless we learn the lesson.

What is the lesson to be learned from the play? Perhaps the most important insight is anthropological: we are all members of the world upside down; a world in which money is the godhead, and all human relationships are mediated through it. In a society that praises money so highly, all human relations are economically interested. The play asks us to free ourselves from this predicament: we must strive to return to our essence, to live full and genuine relations of love and friendship and shed interested bonds. Shylock is in each and every one of us, as is Antonio. And in the conflict between them everybody loses. But the play does not end with the trial. Instead, it offers us the image of Lorenzo and Jessica's love that crosses cultural boundaries. If we hope to belong anywhere, we should strive to be like them.