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Work in progress

Chapter 2 of Shakespeare's *Morals: Shylock Is Us*

Our approach to *The Merchant of Venice* has been so conditioned by our attitude toward victims of all sorts that we cannot see that there are two sides to the question of Shylock's humiliation. Because he is a Jew, and subject to ethnic slurs as well, we cannot abide the notion that he might deserve his fate. Our view of the play is ethnocentric in the extreme, as extreme as the view of the Presbyterian missionaries who clothed the honest nakedness of Polynesian women in Mother Hubbards. Something similar has happened to the honest Christians in *The Merchant of Venice*.

For a start, let's set aside the custom of calling Shylock's opponents "Christians." That term is loaded with irony these days, and may even be accompanied by a sneer. Let's label them "Belmontese," after Belmont, the heroine's country estate, which is their true home. Of many sneerers, W. H. Auden, in *The Dyer's Hand* (1962), has most eloquently stated the missionary critics' disapproval of these Belmontese: he says that Bassanio, who seeks the hand of the heiress Portia in marriage, is "a spendthrift"; he and his friends Gratiano and Lorenzo, are "frivolous members of a leisure class, whose carefree life is parasitic," and Shylock's daughter Jessica, the one who runs away with Lorenzo and spends fourscore ducats in an evening, exhibits "the sin of conspicuous waste." The merchant Antonio who lends Bassanio the money to court Portia, he concludes, differs from Shylock only because he deals in "luxury goods," and at the final curtain he should be left "standing alone on the darkened stage." That is, sentenced metaphorically to solitary confinement.

Is this the way to recompense a man who was introduced to Portia as "one in whom/The ancient Roman honor more appears/Than [in] any that draws breath in Italy," "the kindest man, / The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies," and who was just now about to lay down his life for his friend? It is typical of missionaries in their rush to judgment to overlook contradictory facts, no matter how prominent. On the Berkeley campus of the University of California, where the missionary spirit runs high, the watchword among graduate students is "read until you find the oppressor and then stop." Auden apparently stopped as soon as he caught the first whiff of old money.

In fact "Roman honor" motivates not just Antonio, but the whole Belmontese contingent. All practice impeccable Stoic morality. Indeed, the very purpose of the play--plot, settings, characters, climax, reversal, denouement, beginning, middle, and end,--seems to be to show off Stoicism. But the missionary spirit sweeps all before it, and, after centuries of intense *Merchant of Venice* criticism, Roman honor still lies neglected

in the ditch.

The *Merchant of Venice* has four interwoven plots. In the first one, the merchant Antonio, wishing to provide the wherewithal for his friend Bassanio to court the heiress Portia, borrows money from Shylock on the security of a pound of his flesh. When the loan comes due, Antonio is out of funds, and Shylock calls him into court to deliver the security. At this point Portia, disguised as a young lawyer, "Balthasar," cleverly saves the day. In the second plot Shylock's daughter Jessica, whom he does not trust and keeps under tight control, rebels and runs off with Lorenzo, a friend of the Belmontese. His servant Launcelot Gobbo likewise deserts him, to join Bassanio's staff. In the third plot Bassanio wins Portia by choosing the lead casket in a lottery designed by Portia's dead father. In the fourth plot, Portia, still disguised as "Balthasar," wheedles her husband's wedding ring away from him as her reward for rescuing Antonio. Her maid, disguised as the lawyer's clerk, likewise wins the ring of her husband Bassanio's sidekick, Gratiano. Back at Belmont, with Launcelot, Lorenzo, Jessica, and Antonio, the women, no longer disguised, want their husbands to explain what happened to the rings, and after much merry scolding, to everyone's utter amazement they produce the rings themselves, and they all live merrily ever after.

The plot has a fearful symmetry. The play begins with Shylock's "merry bond" which turns out to be solemn, and it ends with Portia's solemn bond which turns out to be merry. At every point Shakespeare invites us to compare Shylock with the Belmontese. One finds that they are polar opposites, perfect moral antitheses of each other, perfect projections of the motive of the cash nexus and the motive of trust. Consider the parallel borrowing scenes in the first act:

First we see Bassanio borrowing money from Antonio: After listening with some impatience to Bassanio's elaborate grant proposal, Antonio cuts him short:

You know me well and herein spend but time
To wind about my love with circumstance;
And out of doubt you do me now more wrong
In making question of my uttermost
Than if you had made waste of all I have.
Then do but say to me what I should do
That in your knowledge may by me be done
And I am prest unto it. Therefore speak.

Some hostile critics think this passage shows Antonio's ill temper, but he is only following Seneca's guidelines in *De Beneficiis* (translated 1578):

It is unpleasant and burdensome to have to say, "I ask," and as a man utters the words he is forced to lower his eyes. A friend and every one whom you hope to make a friend by doing him a service must be excused from saying them; though a man gives promptly, his benefit has been given too late if it has been given upon request. Therefore we ought to divine each man's desire, and, when we have discovered it, he ought to be freed from the grievous necessity of making a request; the benefit that takes the initiative, you may be sure, will

be one that is agreeable and destined to live in the heart. If we are not so fortunate as to anticipate the asker, let us cut him off from using many words; in order that we may appear to have been, not asked, but merely informed, let us promise at once and prove by our very haste that we were about to act even before we were solicited.

Antonio had to know the amount before he could act, so he took the alternate course at the start, offering a blanket authorization:

I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know [how much you need],
And if it stand, as you yourself still do,
Within the eye of honor, be assur'd
My purse, my person, my extremest means,
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.

The stipulation about the request's honorability echoes Cicero's *De Officiis*, Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, and Elyot's *Governour*. Since his friendship automatically entails the grant, Antonio only wants to know "How much." "Why" is irrelevant. For the Stoic moralists, a "hesitant friend" is a contradiction in terms. In his *De Amicitia*, Cicero says, "Do for friends [whatever] is honorable . . . without even waiting to be asked; let zeal be ever present, but hesitation absent." "We do not put our favors out at interest." "There is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers," says Seneca. "Give . . . quickly, cheerfully, and without hesitation." This is exactly what Antonio is doing.

Now watch Shylock lend money a few scenes later. Bassanio is still the borrower, but this time he represents Antonio, who is temporarily out of pocket, but has good credit on the Rialto:

Shylock. Three thousand ducats--well.
Bassanio. Ay, sir, for three months.
Shylock. For three months--well.
Bassanio. For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
Shylock. Antonio shall be bound--well.
Bassanio. May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?
Shylock. Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
Bassanio. Your answer to that.
Shylock. Antonio is a good man.
Bassanio. Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

Now Shylock lists all of Antonio's investments and finds them "squand'ered abroad."

Shylock. The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats--I think I may take his bond.
Bassanio. Be assured you may.
Shylock. I will be assured I may; and that I may be assured, I will bethink me.

Not until he's waffled for 140 more lines is Shylock ready to lend the money--as soon as Antonio produces a properly drawn-up bond with his signature on it.

Alacrity

Though it appears on no official lists, "alacrity," it is apparent, is a virtue. Because Lancelot, having lost his horse and traveling afoot, hesitated for two steps before jumping into a disgraceful cart, in his harrowing quest to rescue Guinevere, she rejected him outright on arrival. So relates the medieval poet Chretien de Troyes, in *The Knight of the Cart*. In *The Merchant of Venice* alacrity is evident whenever anyone grants a favor. Not counting Antonio's unhesitating loan to Bassanio with which the play begins, we witness seven other instantaneous grants. In act 2 Bassanio gives Launcelot a job without hesitation, without an interview, without calculating whether he can afford another servant, which he can't.

Bassanio. What would you?
Launcelot. Serve you, sir.
Old Gobbo. That is the very defect of the matter, sir.
Bassanio. I know you well; thou hast obtained thy
suit.

A moment later request and grant occupy one blank verse line:

Gratiano. I have a suit to you.
Bassanio. You have obtained it.

A mere hint is enough for Lorenzo:

Gratiano. Was not that letter from fair Jessica?
Lorenzo. I must needs tell thee all.

And he proceeds to do so. Gratiano asks for Nerissa's hand in marriage:

Bassanio. And do you, Gratiano, mean good faith? [Are
you serious, for once?]
Gratiano. Yes, faith, my Lord.
Bassanio. Our feast shall be much honored in your
marriage .

On receiving the news that Bassanio's friend must forfeit a pound of flesh:

Portia. What sum owes he the Jew?
Bassanio. For me, three thousand ducats.
Portia. Pay him six thousand and deface the bond.
Double six thousand and treble that.

But by far the fastest response occurs at the trial, when the Duke pardons Shylock his life "before [he asks] it."

When Portia, disguised as "Balthasar," leaves the scene disappointed because Bassanio won't give her his wedding ring as a reward for her saving his friend's life:

Antonio. My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
Let his deservings and my love withal,
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

Bassanio. Go, Gratiano, run and overtake him.

. . . Away, make haste!
Exit Gratiano

Shakespeare doesn't let up on Shylock: the lack of trust inherent in the practice of moneylending entails other faults: he can't make up his mind. As Tully says in *_Offices_*, "Righteousness shines with a brilliance of its own, but doubt is a sign we are thinking of a possible wrong." Exactly.

Trust

All Shylock's anxiety stems from lack of trust. In place of contracts the Belmontese simply have the confidence that every man will do his duty. Tully's *_Offices_* maintains that no human institution can long endure unless its members can trust each other. "The foundation of justice," he says, "is good faith." For Aristotle, justice derives from a "common bond" among men, similar in agency to trust. It is that "cement," without which society would collapse. In *_De Amicitia_* good faith is the main guarantee of enduring friendship. Montaigne says, "Trusting obligeth trustinesse." He goes so far as to say that he would rather trust his friend "in any matter of mine than myself." Bassanio links "mistrust" with "treason." Theophrastus said, "It goes without saying that Distrustfulness is a presumption of dishonesty against all mankind." In this connection it is interesting to note that in 1993 37 percent of Americans thought they could trust each other. 58 percent of them thought so in 1960. (*_Time_*, 28 August 1995, p56)

In such an atmosphere it is no wonder that the Belmontese take such a cavalier attitude toward money. After all, as long as one has friends one will never starve. Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca quote the proverb, "Amongst friends all things in common." *_De Officiis_* lays down that "There is . . . no such thing as private ownership established by nature."

All these fortuitous things . . . that glitter about us - children, honours, wealth, spacious halls and vestibules packed with a throng of unadmitted clients, a famous name, a highborn or beautiful wife, and all else that depends upon uncertain and fickle chance - these are not our own but borrowed trappings; not one of them is given to us outright.

In this context the Renaissance word for "state," must be understood literally: that is, "common wealth."

When the hunting party bring in their kill, they share it with the whole tribe. "The use of wealth," says Aristotle flatly, "consist[s] in spending and in giving." Hence using one's wealth to entertain and assist one's friends becomes a major occupation, generosity and liberality become primary virtues, and "those little nameless acts of kindness and of love" that visiting Tintern Abbey motivated in Wordsworth will do more for one's self-esteem than success in one's affairs.

The *_Merchant of Venice_* consists essentially of five trials; Shylock's suit against Antonio, and four others, more like initiations, in which the principal Belmontese prove that they are qualified to belong to the tribe. Bassanio must choose the least likely casket, Antonio must prove he can forgive his enemy, and Portia and Jessica must prove that they can trust

their husbands without the assurance of loyalty oaths.

Why Bassanio Deserves to Win the Casket Test

The ambiguous scene in which Bassanio first discusses his courtship of Portia with Antonio leaves us in doubt: does he love her for herself or for the opportunity she offers him to renew his wasted estate? The other main characters are tried by events; Bassanio only passes a multiple-choice test. Unless it is a foolproof test, we can never be sure about Bassanio. Let us note that the play takes some pains to certify the test in advance. In the second scene, Nerissa, making the best of Portia's predicament, observes that the right casket "will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one you shall rightly love." And as Bassanio hastens to his choice, Portia remarks, "If you do love me, you will find me out." We may assume the test's validity as given.

But for hostile critics some extratextual evidence of Bassanio's worthiness may be necessary. First let us admit that in the fairy-tale world to which Belmont is often said to belong, the fair lady's fortune is always a given, having no other signification than a reward for virtue. Let us further acknowledge that in the real world of Elizabeth, an impecunious young lord had no choice but to choose his partner from the available heiresses. We will entirely miss the point if we approach this marriage with our post-Romantic notions of individual free choice and true love; these are not the ways of this world. Among available heiresses, Portia is obviously a precious treasure: high mettled like "Brutus's Portia," virtuous, beautiful, and rich. Bassanio is no mean catch either: he is a peer of the realm (some thirty times he is "Lord Bassanio," "my lord," "your lordship," "your worship," and "your honor"). But he requires wealth to do justice to his title.

Magnificence

At a time when relationships were everything and money nothing, Bassanio's reckless expenditures, so painful to modern sensibilities, would have been seen as a virtue. He is what Aristotle calls a "Great Soul," one who has no attachment to worldly goods, who is fond of conferring benefits on others, for whom spending money is an art ("Magnificence"), and who spends "gladly and lavishly, since nice calculation is shabby." *De Officiis* declares that "There is nothing more honorable and noble than to be indifferent to money." For him, money is a non-thing, a drudge for moving goods from one person to another, but never an end in itself. It has no more value than the water that carries the merchant's cargo, and we should "deny no one the water that flows by."

Bassanio is introduced as one who has "disabled [his] estate/By something showing a more swelling port/Than [his] faint means would grant continuance." In dire financial straits, he expensively feasts his friends and plans to entertain them with a masque. He undertakes to "hold a rival" place with Portia's other suitors, both princes, and he therefore brings "gifts of rich value" to Belmont. He does not apologize for the "noble rate" of his expenditures; he trusts his luck. In Granville's Restoration adaptation, called *The Jew of Venice*, the much-advertized masque does take place as a full-fledged court masque of heroic proportions. Amazed and delighted Antonio (don't

forget he is Bassanio's chief creditor) cries out

With such an air of true magnificence
My noble minded brother treats his friends:
As hardly has been known to Italy
Since Pompey and Lucullus entertained:
To frame thy fortune ample as thy mind,
New worlds should be created.

Granville has Bassanio dead to rights; he has a *_magna anima_*. Later on, in another part of *_The Merchant_*, Jessica echoes Bassanio's prodigality, when she wastes away her little casket of gold and jewels at a rate of fourscore ducats a night and trades her father's wedding ring for a monkey, just to celebrate her marriage.

Montaigne's early finances sound very much like Bassanio's at the beginning of *_The Merchant_*. For twenty years, he says, he had

no other means but casual, and depending from the direction and help of others, without any certain maintenance or regular prescription. My expenses were so much the more carelessly laid out and lavishly employed, by how much more they wholly depended on fortune's rashness I never lived so well at ease: my fortune was never to find my friends purse shut.

The prodigal young nobleman was a fixture of Shakespeare's England. In "Of Expenditure," Francis Bacon recommended spending no more than half of one's estate, no more than one-third if one wished the estate to increase. This was good advice, but so strong was the obligation to spend that great numbers of Elizabethan landowners, according to Lawrence Stone in his seminal *_Crisis of the Aristocracy_*, almost deliberately spent themselves into total ruin. In his introduction to Thomas Wilson's *_Discourse Upon Usury_* (1572, one of several attempts to stop it from being legalized), under the heading "The Needy Gentleman," R. H. Tawney paints this picture:

With large establishments in the country and expensive lodgings in London, compelled by social conventions to take part in the life of a court where everyone, except its mistress, was extravagant, restoring their fortunes by the lucrative channels of trade only in exceptional cases, through an occasional speculation, a lucky marriage, or the success of a landless cadet, with an income from their estates of which the greater part was fixed by custom and which could be increased only after a prolonged wrangle with obstinate copyholders, the [magnificence] of the landed aristocracy," might be categorized as "an example of what "conspicuous waste." With all their thousands of acres, their financial position was often deplorable. . . .

The surprising thing is that some of them survived at all. For their debts were not seldom overwhelming. Consider for example, the picture drawn in . . . personal correspondence . . . during the last twenty years of the 16th century. The Duke of Norfolk owes *6,000 to *7,000; the Earl of Huntingdon *20,000, the Earl of Essex between

*22,000 and *23,000, Viscount Bindon *4,000, the Earl of Leicester (it is reported) about *59,000, Sir Francis Willoughby (who had spent *80,000 in building Wollaton House) *21,000, Sir Percival Willoughby *8,000, Sir Philip Sidney over *6,000, Lord Sandys *3,100, Sir H. Parke *4,600. And, of course, these figures must be multiplied by something like six to reduce them to the currency of to-day [1925: today these sums are in six figures]. The Earl of Sussex is heavily in debt, though for an uncertain sum ; so is Lord Thomas Howard; so is the Earl of Rutland. The Earl of Shrewsbury moves heaven and earth to borrow *3,000. Lord Vaux of Harrowden has been forced to pawn his parliament robes "to a citizen where I have offered large interest," and subscribes himself "the unfortunatest Peer of Parliament for poverty that ever was." The Earl of Southampton [Shakespeare's patron] has surrendered his estates to his creditors and "scarce knows what course to take to live." Lord Scrope cannot raise even *300, and is obliged to beg the loan of it from Cecil.

In the sixth year of his reign, James I, in dire straits, came begging to Parliament with the following words:

It is true I have spent much but yet if I had spared any of those things, which caused a great part of my expense, I should have dishonoured the kingdom, my self, and the late Queen. Should I have pared the funeral of the late Queen? or the solemnity of mine and my selves entry into this Kingdom, in some honourable sort? or should I have spared our entry into London, or our Coronation? And when most of the Monarchs, and great Princes in Christendom sent their Ambassadors to congratulate my coming hither, and some of them came in person, was I not bound, both for my own honour, and the honour of the Kingdom, to give them good entertainment?

Even the king showed "a more swelling port/Than [his] faint means would grant continuance."

It is easy enough to make moral judgments about conspicuous waste when people are starving, etc.; but we are here to interpret *The Merchant of Venice*, not to give our opinions. The contemporary defense of course was that magnificence created jobs. And these magnificos are following the most illustrious models. Montaigne lamented how far contemporary France had fallen away from the grandeurs of Greece and Rome. He measured the distance by the fact that Julius Caesar once gave away two countries after a battle. Those days were gone forever.

And Portia knows precisely what kind of a man she is getting. Bassanio "freely" told her, on his first visit to Belmont, that all the wealth he had "ran in [his] veins," that his "state was nothing," but that didn't stop her from issuing a second invitation. She knows that he is "a scholar and a soldier." He has had a good education. His military service is an even better recommendation, for, according to the leading authority on the subject, "the principal and true profession of a Courtier ought to be in feats of arms." And he is well-connected, too, for he first came to Belmont "in the company of the Marquis of Montferrat." The Marquisate of Montferrat

belonged to the illustrious princely house of Gonzaga. Three Gonzagas participated in the dialogue of which *The Courtier* consisted, The Lady Elizabeth Gonzaga in the chair. Thus Nerissa can say without reservation, "He, of all men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady." On this topic Cicero quotes Themistocles' wishes for his daughter: "For my part, I prefer a man without money to money without a man." When wealth is subject to fortune, a good man is a better bet. Portia has plenty of money; what she lacks is a man. In truth, if Bassanio passes her father's test, he is as big a catch for her as she is for him.

Fortune

To understand the casket test one must imagine some of the consequences of a living in a highly entropic world. In the first line of the play, Antonio says, "I know not why I am so sad." The second scene shifts us to Belmont, and Portia says, "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a-weary of this great world." In the beginning, we find the characters on whom the two main actions hinge, one in Venice and one in Belmont, in a state of limbo. Antonio knows only that he is about to play a part, and that a sad one. Portia knows only that she is about to be sacrificed to the first man who picks up the right casket. Much more than it does today, fortune ruled Shakespeare's world. In these two scenes Shakespeare gives us existential experience of what it's like to be helpless in the hands of forces beyond one's control.

Recognizing the part played by fortune was once a moral imperative. A basic premise of Stoicism is that Fortune controls everything but one's body and one's will (Epictetus); by giving up any hope of controlling the future and putting will in charge of body, one can make the best of the options still open. Our premise at the end of the 20th century is the reverse. By taking charge of Fortune--by engaging in scientific and medical research, passing laws, making studies, forecasting natural disasters, averting diseases, installing air bags, taking courses, and preventing war--we can manage to control the direction of our lives, keep what we earn, and look forward to a full and rewarding career. This is not reality according to *De Officiis*, which cries out,

Who fails to comprehend the enormous, two-fold power of Fortune for weal and for woe? When we enjoy her favouring breeze, we are wafted over to the wished-for haven; when she blows against us, we are dashed to destruction.

Nor according to Seneca, who declares, "Chance drives and tosses human affairs without method."

Desert

When, in deciding whether to lend money to Antonio in Act 1, Shylock put forward the Jacob/Laban story to justify charging interest, he gave Antonio a chance to state emphatically the moral consequences of fortune that the play would continually invoke. Jacob made an pact with Laban that he could have all of Laban's particolored sheep. Then, by holding peeled wands in front of mating ewes, he made sure that there would be lots of particolored sheep. Jacob's deception doesn't bother Shylock (moments later, aping Jacob, he tricks Antonio into accepting his

murderous "merry bond.") What counts for him is that Jacob had a contract for the spotted sheep and couldn't be accused of theft. Furthermore, God Almighty himself apparently blessed the trick:

This was a way to thrive, and Jacob was blest;
And thrift is a blessing if men steal it not.

Antonio explodes:

This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven.

If we thrive, the credit goes to God (or fortune), not to us. Perhaps the reason that Antonio lost his temper here was that Shylock had voiced the noxious Puritan line that success is a sign of grace, already current in Shakespeare's time. There are two problems here from the Stoic point of view: first, Shylock "assumes desert," as the play later puts it; and second he co-opts God's grace. But if all good things are randomly distributed, both premises are morally outrageous. The first thing King Henry did after winning the battle of Agincourt was to ask his troops to sing "Non nobis:" "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory" (Psalm 115.1) The last line of the Lord's Prayer makes the same disavowal: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever." So Montaigne declares that "glory and honour appertaineth to God only. And there is nothing so repugnant unto reason as for us to go about to purchase any for our selves." When you observe how many winners nowadays wave their hands in the air and prance in self-admiration, and how few fall on their knees in thanksgiving, you have some idea of how far we have come from the country of The Merchant of Venice. "Vain is his enterprise that presumeth to embrace both causes and consequences and lead the progress of his fate by the hand," says Montaigne.

Nowadays rewards are generally understood to be, and, because accidents play a smaller part, really are to some extent, the reward of hard work and individual merit, not so much the result of good luck or the hand of heaven. If you earn a benefit, you have no one to thank but yourself. As Seneca so well puts it, "Every man is a generous judge of himself. The result is that he thinks he has deserved all that he gets, and receives it as given in payment." But Seneca is against this kind of self-esteem. Montaigne, too: "The vanity of our presumption maketh us rather to be beholding and as it were indebted unto our own strength, for our sufficiency, than unto [nature's] liberality." There is no such concept as "earn" in Antonio's world, and that's why, on hearing Shylock use the tale of Jacob and Laban to justify interest, he flares up with the hatred of a man whose deepest belief has been insulted.

Now, with Antonio's lecture to Shylock firmly in mind we are able to decipher the riddle of the caskets. The first two suitors lose because they are afraid to lose; like Shylock they take too many pains to assure success. When one begins to rely on outcomes subject to Fortune, according to Seneca, "there follows a life of anxiety, suspicion, and alarm, a dread of mishap and worry over the changes time brings." "This is the

depth of servitude." The overly cautious approach comes through best in Arragon's deliberations. "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves," says the silver casket. True, Arragon bethinks himself, there are those who manage somehow to cheat or "cozen fortune" and get honor without meriting it. Not my case, he thinks. "I shall assume desert," he says, and picks the silver casket, containing, not Portia's picture but that of a blinking idiot. It was a foolish mistake, because by assuming desert he does try "to cozen fortune," to force her hand, doing exactly what he has just finished saying shouldn't be done. If she can be cozened, she isn't fortune.

However much honor may be deserved, one cannot earn it, one cannot honor oneself. Arragon asks for "as much as he deserves" and gets exactly that much. "To offend and judge are distinct offices," observes Portia, tartly. One can't be a judge in his own cause. The scroll inside the casket confirms her opinion: "Seven times tried that judgment is/That never did choose amiss." Justice is arbitrary and unreliable. That's why, as Portia reminds us later in the courtroom, "In the course of justice/None of us should see salvation." Don't ever depend on justice. Morocco, too, assumes desert, but fixing on the negative side of Arragon's argument, that desert is too often unrewarded, chooses what looks like a sure thing, the gold casket. Nothing is as gold as gold.

The first two suitors try to "cozen fortune" by deciphering the clues (the metals and the mottos) on the surface of the caskets. Portia calls them "deliberate fools" because they work so hard at destroying themselves. Neither considers the lead casket; why hazard all for lead? But they worry themselves over the gold and silver caskets almost as much as Shylock does over the loan to Antonio. In truth their "native hue of resolution/Is [like Hamlet's] sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought."

Risk

Bassanio doesn't agonize over the mottos or the metals. If Portia hadn't held him back, he would have gone directly to the lead casket. "Let me choose," he protests, and later "Let me to my fortune and the caskets." Relishing risk rather than seeking to escape from it, admitting his mortality, realizing that he cannot control fortune, he automatically rejects the security of the silver and gold exteriors that seduced his rivals and chooses lead because it "threaten[s]." Fortune "draws back from all cowards," says the wise Seneca, and Montaigne proudly echoes "I am a man that willingly commits my self unto fortune, and carelessly cast my self unto her arms." Because he is brave, because he does not count his deserts, because he trusts fortune, and because he loves Portia, Bassanio is bound to choose the casket marked, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." To love is to be ready to do just that.

Shylock's Day in Court

We now test Shylock's money-lending "thrift" against Antonio's "ventures" "squand' red abroad," and, in the event, I think, we also test Antonio's self-righteous advocacy of his principles. Shylock's crime, like that of Bassanio's rivals, is that he "assumes desert." He does not wait upon "the hand of

heaven" but attempts to "cozen fortune" by binding his debtors in legal instruments. The Belmontese, on the other hand, trust to fortune, or in Christian terms, "take no thought for the morrow," and subsist like "the lilies of the field" (Matt.6.28).

Critical and theatrical sympathy for Shylock and denigration of his upper-class antagonists in *The Merchant* did not begin with the reaction to the Holocaust, although the Holocaust solidified it, but with the Romantic period and its republican sentiments. The reason we find Shylock so problematic is that we cannot see that the Belmontese provide a clear-cut alternative moral standard against which to measure him, and without that, being market-oriented and legalistic ourselves, we have difficulty in condemning him. But he would constitute no problem for the natives of the upper Amazon: obviously not one of us.

In fact Shylock's "hath not a Jew eyes" speech on which much of the argument for Shakespeare's sympathy rests is not, as we now read it, a plea for religious tolerance. He doesn't claim to be as good as his Christian adversaries but as bad as they are, equally prone to getting revenge. Like some of Shylock's laments, its sympathy-seeking beginning is characteristically canceled by its off-putting ending.

Law

But he differs from his adversaries in seeking revenge via the law, in the manner of some divorcing couples and lawsuit-bringers in our time. An aggrieved Christian would challenge his injurer to a duel. By throwing in his lot with those who settle their grievances by law, he takes the cowardly route, and that is one more grievance against him. For, according to Montaigne, "he that shall address himself to the laws to have reason [satisfaction] for some offence done unto his honour, dishonoureth himself." The historical moment of which, for which, and at which Shakespeare wrote Shylock's trial is evidently the same one Montaigne bemoans in his *Essays*:

What is more barbarous than to see a nation, where by lawful custome the charge of judging is sold, and judgments are paid for with readie monie; and where justice is lawfully denied him that hath not wherewithall to pay for it; and that this merchandize hath so great credit, that in a politicall government there should be set up a fourth estate of Lawyers, breath-sellers, and pettifoggers, and joyned to the three ancient states, to wit, the Clergy, the Nobility, and the Commualtie; which fourth state having the charge of lawes, and sometimes auctoritie of goods and lives, should make a body, apart and severall from that of Nobilitie, whence double lawes must follow, those of honour and those of justice; in many things very contrarie. . . . by the law and light of armes he that putteth up an injurie shall be degraded of honour and nobilitie; and he that revengeth himselfe of it, shall by the civill Law incurre a capitall punishment. . . ; [the lawyers] having peace, [the nobles] war committed to their charge; those having the gaine, these the honour; these knowledge, these vertue; those reason, these strength; those the word, these action; those justice, these valour; those reason, these force; those a long gowne, and these a short coat

Shakespeare's colleagues also record great hostility between wielders of laws and the wielders of swords. Middleton's *Michaelmas Term* (1605) is a detailed account of the methods by which sharpers swindle a gentleman out of his land. His *Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605) contains a virulent gratuitous lampoon of "trampers" of land (i.e., lawyers), in the character of one Dampit. Jonson's 107-line "contract" with the audience in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) is a hilarious travesty of a scrivener's legal document. The war continues well into the 18th

century, if the number of ridiculed scribes in Restoration comedy is a reliable witness. A good example is the scrivener Vulture in Christopher Bullock's *Woman is a Riddle* (1717), who boasts of his skill in legal weapons: "Your writ of delay, that is your longsword; *scandalum magnatum* is backsword; *capeas et quonimus*, case of rapiers; a writ of execution, sword and dagger. . . . [With these weapons] I took Sterling Castle once." In this milieu, it is not surprising that Antonio's favorite courtesy was thwarting such vultures: Shylock's chief grievance against him was that "[he] oft delivered from my forfeitures/Many that have made moan to me" (3.3.22-3)

The prejudice against litigation is an ancient one: "More law, less justice," says *De Officiis*. The trouble is, according to Seneca, that

there are many things that do not come under the law or into court, [such as] the conventions of human life, that are more binding than any law. No law forbids us to divulge the secrets of friends; no law bids us keep faith even with an enemy. What law binds us to keep a promise that we have made to anyone? There is none.

Montaigne has the same preference for unforced compliance: "The bond that holds me by the law of honesty seemeth to me much more urgent and forcible than that of legal compulsion." Elyot lamented the very existence of legal instruments: "[Even] now at this present time we may make the exclamation that Seneca doth, saying, O the foul and dishonest confession of the fraud and mischief of mankind; now a days seals be more set by than souls."

The end result is universal mistrust: "O what public weal should we hope to have . . . where lacketh fidelity, which as Tullius sayeth is the foundation of justice?" Surveying the Roman scene Seneca had concluded similarly, "Would it not have been more desirable to allow some men to break their word than to cause all men to fear treachery?"

Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt that litigiousness is Shylock's ruling passion. Twenty-seven times the word "bond" issues from his mouth. Railing at the free-spending Antonio, he jeers,

Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer,
let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a
Christian courtesy, let him look to his bond.

When he has him in jail for debt, he shrieks, "I will have my bond. Speak not against my bond . . . I will have my bond. . . . I'll have my bond . . . I'll have my bond. . . . I will have no speaking. I will have my bond." Likewise in court: "I am not

bound to please thee with my answers. . . I would have my bond.
. . . I stay here on my bond. . . So says the bond. . . Is
it so nominated in the bond? . . . I cannot find it; 'tis not in
the bond." Obviously he is obsessed with his sheet of paper. He
calls for "justice," the "law," and "judgment" fifteen times. "I
stand for judgment . . . I stand here for law," he tells the
court.

Because we are unaware of the ideological dimension of the
contest between Shylock and his adversaries, we amplify the human
dimension. To the degree that we treat Shakespeare's characters
as real people, we lose their metaphorical sense. Just as
Michelangelo's David is not just a beautiful young man in the
classical style but Florence gaining pre-eminence over all the
cities of Italy, Shylock is not just a beleaguered old man, but a
representative of incipient capitalism. It seems to me
that the primary reason Shakespeare made Shylock a Jew was not to
denigrate an ethnic minority but to establish a link to Old
Testament legalism and thus to the Puritan capitalists who were
the real Shylocks of Elizabethan England, the ones who loudly
advertized their holiness while raking in their ill-gotten gains.
But he couldn't make him a Puritan, because his fable bound him
to Venice, a city not renowned for Puritans. But despite some
gratuitous racial slurs, Shakespeare's argument is essentially
ethic, not ethnic. His real target is the legalistic bourgeois
individualism so rabidly advanced by the entrepreneurial Puritan
sects in the late 16th century. We should think of Shylock not
as a real person but as a conceit. Verily, Shylock is us.

In my view, since the racial slurs unavoidably spoil the
play for us, and steer it off course. we should cut out the
offending lines in performance. Then I think we will be able to
relax and enjoy the comic villain that Shakespeare presents us.
Because the racial slurs, in the view of the play I propose here,
have nothing to do with Shakespeare's point.

According to the hostile view of the trial, Portia plays a
cruel cat-and-mouse game with Shylock. She leads him on to
wilder and wilder claims of righteousness and withholds her legal
trick until it will have the most devastating effect. All the
while Gratiano's sneering anti-Semitic jibes accompany him, step
by step, down to utter and abysmal defeat. This behavior, it is
said, belies Portia's famous speech on mercy at the beginning of
the trial and shows the Belmontese to be monstrous hypocrites.
But in the moral environment established by Antonio's generosity
and the casket riddles, Shylock's trial is a powerfully dramatic
demonstration of the motto on the silver casket: "Who chooseth
me shall get as much as he deserves." By pulling laws out of a
hat to suit her purpose, Portia burlesques the chicanery that so
often makes a farce of legal justice. By leading Shylock on to
the point where she can "catch him on the hip" for threatening
the life of a Venetian, she shows him the fallacy of "assuming
desert." Though Portia warned him against seeking salvation
through justice and predicted that he would have "justice more
than thou desirest," Shylock ardently cooks his goose so as to
become indeed that identical "blinking idiot" whose picture
Arragon found in the silver casket. Gratiano's jibes function
simply as reinforcement of this point. Since the audience
(having been prompted not only by Portia's explicit warning but
also by the whole casket rigmarole) knows exactly where Shylock's

shrill insistence on justice and the law is leading, the scene is full of dramatic irony and could be rendered effectively as a double take.

Antonio's Day in Court

The trial of Shylock is also the trial of Antonio, who is guilty of the crime of anger. Indeed his open hatred of Shylock has a certain honesty about it, and in mid-18th century the role was given to James Quin, who specialized in plain dealers and misanthropes, including Manly, the title role in Wycherley's *Plain Dealer*; another Manly, in Cibber's *Provoked Husband*; Pierre and Jaffier in Otway's bitter *Venice Preserved*; Addison's upright *Cato*; and in Shakespeare: Brutus, Jaques, Thersites, Timon, and Lear. Antonio's spitting on Shylock, and his refusal to apologize even though it may cost him what he seeks, fit the type well.

We may sympathize with his open contempt for his opposite, because a man of honor may not hide his feelings. "Of all forms of injustice, none is more flagrant than that of the hypocrite who, at the very moment when he is most false, makes it his business to appear virtuous," says *De Officiis*. And also Aristotle: "Falsehood is in itself base and reprehensible, and truth noble and praiseworthy; and similarly the sincere man . . . is praised." And the *Amicitia* concurs: "Let there be no feigning or hypocrisy; for it is more befitting a candid man to hate openly than to mask his real thoughts." Shylock, of course, can in the midst of swearing vengeance (aside) greet Antonio as if he were a long lost friend and a minute later get his signature to a murderous bond while professing friendship.

Trade

But Antonio comes on the scene identified as a merchant, and this fact predisposes the hostile observers to doubt his credibility as an exemplary character. Since he gets a livelihood by investing money, how can he possibly take the moral high ground? Actually, there is an absolute moral contradiction between his and Shylock's occupations. According to *De Officiis*, usurers are the most despicable sort of tradesmen, but retailers are not much better, for "they would get no profits without a great deal of downright lying." (Why must a car unfaithfully sell for \$11,999?) Importers and exporters hold an equivocal position. If they are rich and bountiful, they may be accepted in genteel society; they may even retire to country estates and disappear into the gentry. Cicero might be describing the way in which an appreciable number of Elizabethan merchants did actually gentrify (Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy*). In his *Complete Gentleman* (1622), Peacham, perhaps in recognition of this fact, strives mightily to find grounds for admitting merchants to gentility. "The honest merchant," he decides, deserves honor because "he exposeth as well his life as goods to the hazard of infinite dangers" for the health and well-being of his country. The key word is "hazard." In "Of Usury," Bacon singles out "uncertainty" as the crucial difference between a moneylender and a merchant. As we might expect, people who make a living by trusting fortune and/or the hand of heaven instead of legal instruments, may, if they behave graciously, consort with the landed gentry, many of whom in Shakespeare's time dabbled in mercantile matters themselves.

As if to prevent us from missing the difference between the two entrepreneurs, *The Merchant* opens with thirty-five lines devoted to the amount of risk in Antonio's business: the ocean, on which Antonio's mind is said to "toss," is an image of chaotic flux through which his enterprises ply. High winds, "shallows," "flats," "dangerous rocks," and "roaring waters," beset his "pageants of the sea," his "argosies," on every side. These passages seem designed to detach from Antonio the negative connotations of his mercantile pursuit, to distinguish him from mean shopkeepers, and confer on him some of the glamour of noble conquistadors like Raleigh and Drake.

Honor is theoretically open to anyone who behaves honorably. As the Wyf of Bath's old crone reminds us, true gentility is conditional on "gentle dedis:" "He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,/For vileyns synful dedis make a cherl." And according to *The Merchant's* own self-appointed expert, Arragon, if honor (in the sense of recognition) were distributed according to merit,

How many men then should cover that stand bare,
How many be commanded that command;
How much low peasantry would then be gleaned
From the true seed of honor. (2.9.44-7)

At the beginning of *De Officiis*, Cicero defines "moral goodness [honestum] [as] something . . . worthy of all honour [recognition]; and by its own nature . . . it merits praise even though it be praised by none." "We all spring from the same source," says Seneca, "no man is more noble than another except in so far as the nature of one man is more upright and more capable of good actions." In other words, anyone may *merit* honor if he takes the course and practices its precepts. Birth has nothing to do with it. Antonio, as far as we know, is not "honorable" by birth. He has made his fortune, and now he must make his name. (The parallel to the case of "William Shakespeare, gent." is interesting: born to a tradesman, he dies with a coat of arms.) Perhaps that's why Antonio insists so stridently on his difference from Shylock.

Anger

Perhaps Antonio may be explained as an early version of a persistent character type in Shakespeare, to place beside Lear, Prospero, Coriolanus, Othello and Hotspur, whose anger drives him to excesses which he lives to regret. This character type undoubtedly derives from Stoic opinions about anger. For Seneca, anger is one of the two most destructive passions that plague mankind. (The other is Lust.) To be angry is to be driving yourself totally out of control down a perilous path to hell. The worst thing about the angry man is that he presumes to judge in his own cause. But, according to Seneca,

no man of sense will hate the erring; otherwise he will hate himself. Let him reflect how many times he offends against morality, how many of his acts stand in need of pardon; then he will be angry with himself also.

One might expect Antonio, after Shylock's attempt to murder him, to behave like late 20th century victims of crimes, and, like Ron Goldman's permanently enraged father to seek the most severe

punishment of the presumed malefactor that the law permits. But that isn't the Stoic way; the stance of a truly great soul is forbearance. Montaigne decries the "furiously blind desire of revenge." Thomas Elyot had expressed very much the same sentiment in his *Governour* under the heading, "Of Patience in sustaining wrongs and rebukes":

Unto him that is valiant of courage, it is a great pain and difficulty to sustain Injury, and not to be forthwith revenged. And yet often times is accounted more valiantness in the sufferance than in hasty revenging.

King James I, in his letter of advice to his son (1603), citing Cicero's advice to *his* son, Seneca's essay on clemency, the *Aeneid*, and Aristotle's *Ethics*, counsels the Prince of Wales to

Embrace true magnanimity, not in being vindictive, which the corrupted Judgements of the world think to be true Magnanimity, but by the contrary, in thinking your offender not worthy of your wrath, emptying over your own passion, and triumphing in the commanding your self to forgive.

In these equations of greatness with forbearance do we not suddenly recognize the terms of Portia's exhortation to Shylock on mercy?

'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.

This is the thesis of Seneca's *De Clementia*, addressed to his pupil Nero, but it seems equally applicable to the menacing Antonio, furious with rage at Shylock for lending money on interest.

In his *Characters of the Virtues and Vices* (1608) Joseph Hall, later Bishop, counsels much as Portia does:

The Patient Man finds that victory consists in yielding. He is above nature, while he seems below himself. The vilest creature knows how to turn again, but to command himself not to resist, being urged, is more than heroical.

These echoes suggest a common origin, and, of course, they have one: in the writings of the Roman moralists:

[Do not] listen to those who think that one should indulge in violent anger against one's political enemies and imagine that such is the attitude of a great-spirited, brave man. For nothing is more commendable, nothing more becoming in a preeminently great man than courtesy and forbearance. (*De*

Officiis_)

There is no surer proof of greatness than to be in a state where nothing can possibly happen to disturb you. . . . The lofty mind is always calm, at rest in a quiet haven; crushing down all that engenders anger, it is restrained, commands respect, and is properly ordered. (Seneca, *_Essays_*)

Revenge is the confession of a hurt; no mind is truly great that bends before injury. (Seneca *Essays_??*)

Mercy (Latin *_clementia_*) is a major topic of the conduct books. Plutarch's *_Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans_* contain many examples of it, for instance those of Fabius, Lycurgus, and Pericles. Elyot's *_Governour_* devotes considerable space to it, using as an exemplum the story of the Emperor Augustus's handling of Cinna, which Seneca had used for the same purpose.

Mercy

Antonio comes to the trial resigned but sad. The Duke makes a long speech in which he urges on Shylock the virtues of mercy. Portia adds theological dimensions. Eventually the defeated Shylock kneels to ask the Duke's mercy. According to Venetian law, half of his estate now belongs to Antonio, the other half to the state, and he continues life at the mercy of the Duke. The Duke pardons him his life "before he asks it" (following Seneca's recommendation) and decrees that the state's claim on his estate may be reduced to a fine if Shylock shows "humbleness." He then turns the culprit over to Antonio for further judgment, causing Portia to say, "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" All eyes turn to Antonio. And here is what he says:

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

Then the Duke says:

He shall do this, or else I do recant
The pardon that I late pronounced here.

And Portia says,

Art thou contented, Jew? what dost thou say?

And Shylock replies,

I am content.

And leaves the stage. Here ends the Antonio/Shylock plot.

This is the end of the Shylock story. How does it end, really? What actually happened here? Did the Duke remove the state's penalty entirely or just reduce it to a fine? Did Antonio borrow his own share of Shylock's estate on interest, thus effectively giving it back to him? Or did he lend it back to him? Is it cruel to force Shylock to make Lorenzo his heir? Is it a kindness or a cruelty to expect him to become a Christian? One supposes that it would be difficult even for an Elizabethan to take in the many nuances of this terse set of sentences. Hostile critics hold that here the great metamoral Shakespeare calls in question the whole Belmontese pretense, making Antonio's dispensation a cynical and hypocritical contradiction of Portia's "Quality of mercy" speech.

Let us consider some often overlooked details of this denouement before going on to see what light its moral environment will cast upon it. Antonio does not decree that Shylock become a Christian; he asks it as a favor in return for whatever relief from the full penalty Antonio's intercession has obtained for him. That Shylock now owes Antonio a favor cannot be doubted. Antonio simply suggests that Shylock's becoming a Christian would please him most. It is the Duke who makes the conversion compulsory, almost as a favor to Antonio. Portia's famous speech is not about forgiveness, it's about the need to "season" justice with mercy. In asking Shylock to give Antonio mercy, the court did not expect him to forgive Antonio's debt, only to mitigate the penalty for nonpayment or perhaps extend the date of payment. As Antonio would certainly agree, justice ultimately requires the payment of debts. Common sense dictates that courts should strike a balance between justice and mercy, as the wise Cicero counsels in *_De Officiis_*:

Gentleness of spirit and forbearance are to be commended only with the understanding that strictness may be exercised for the good of the state; for without that, the government cannot be well administered. On the other hand, if punishment or correction must be administered, it need not be insulting; it ought to have regard to the welfare of the state, not to the personal satisfaction of the man who administers the punishment or reproof. We should take care also that the punishment shall not be out of proportion to the offence, and that some shall not be chastised for the same fault for which others are not even called to account. In administering punishment it is above all necessary to allow no trace of anger. For if one proceeds in a passion to inflict punishment, he will never observe that happy mean which lies between excess and defect.

Supposing that in the judgment of Shylock Shakespeare is showing us the administration of justice according to the balanced formula of Cicero and Portia, let us now return to the lines in question. When the Duke gives Antonio the honor of completing the judgement of Shylock, Antonio asks a second favor, that the Duke "quit" Shylock's fine. He thus gives back to Shylock the state's share of his fortune. As for his own share, he keeps it in trust for Lorenzo and Jessica, but will pay interest on it, thus reversing his position on interest, and making Shylock the virtual owner of the money while he is alive and taking nothing for himself. In return for restoring

Shylock's estate to him, he asks as a favor that Shylock become a Christian. This is an option, not a decree, but the Duke makes it a decree. Finally Antonio requires that Jessica and Lorenzo inherit all that Shylock dies "possest."

On the mercy side of the ledger, Shylock gets full use of "the means whereby which he lives," and, as he claims, without which he would die, except the part in trust with Antonio on which he receives interest as if it were still his. On the justice side of the ledger, when he dies all this money goes to his disinherited daughter via her husband, certainly not his wish but in a way just, as compensation for her inexcusably deprived upbringing. It is also just, considering his abuses of the privilege of moneylending, that he become a Christian and reform. This stipulation fulfills Cicero's proviso that a judgment should have regard to the general welfare. As a whole the judgment restores Shylock's wealth but compels him to manage it as he ought to. Perhaps he does not, like Cinna, become a fast friend of the man he sought to destroy, but he has been invited to join the club; and when this all began, we remember, Antonio accepted Shylock's own offer of friendship with delight. As for Antonio, he was sad at the beginning of the play and sad when he came to trial, but how does he feel now? Has he not, with the help of Portia's teaching on mercy, his own ordeal, and the example of the Duke's clemency, relieved himself of a heavy burden of anger, and learned to hate the vice instead of the man. Has he not achieved

The lofty mind, . . . always calm, at rest in a quiet haven;
crushing down all that engenders anger, [a mind which] is
restrained, commands respect, and is properly ordered.

The moral context warrants this conclusion, if not the insufficient text.

Portia Makes Merry with Oaths

In the final act, the play recapitulates its demonstration of trust by introducing a new plot, in which she tricks his wedding ring away from her husband, producing another trial. Recent critics have suggested that the ring business is the trial of Bassanio, which he flunks, but, in terms of trust, it looks more like the trial of Portia. Differing from earlier trials as Belmont differs from Venice, Portia's trial, stemming from her own practical joke, is a comic burlesque of Shylock's trial, showing how differently from Shylock friends respond to a breach of contract. Portia's contract involves a pound of flesh, too: the accused Bassanio would like to cut off his ring-bearing hand and swear he lost it defending the ring.

The real business of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice* has become so hard to see since the triumph of the cash nexus that most critics pass it off as light entertainment, having little more bearing on the main body of the work than to show the Belmontese at play. Only Sigurd Burckhardt, in one of the darkest interpretations of *The Merchant* now extant, has to my knowledge managed to integrate it with the Shylock plot, but unfortunately, in my opinion, as an affirmation of the cash nexus. Nevertheless, he is on the right track: the ring business, in its moral context, *is* a recapitulation of the

Shylock plot.

More recently feminist criticism has managed to integrate the last act as a final episode of the Antonio/Bassanio plot, in which Portia disposes of Antonio as a rival for Bassanio's love. In so doing they demonize friendship and disintegrate the main body of the play.

The reason why the last act is invisible to us is the replacement in our society of the agency of trust by the agency of law. We do not, cannot, rely on mutual trust to assure fairness in our dealings with each other; we rely on law and law enforcement or the fear of same. The last act of *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates a society that runs on mutual trust, as opposed to a society that runs on law. Belmont as opposed to Venice. But we can't see trust in action.

Indeed, the last act is not Portia's own one-act, but an apotheosis of friendship, and the true climax of the play is not, after all, the defeat of Shylock but the scene just after it, when Bassanio in his turn passes a supreme test of friendship. When "Balthasar" chooses Bassanio's wedding ring as a reward for saving Antonio from Shylock, Bassanio remonstrates--it is his pledge of fidelity to his wife--but Antonio, having a huge debt of gratitude to "Balthasar," commands

My lord Bassanio, let him have the ring;
Let his deservings, and my love withal,
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

This moment of truth rolls the main issue of the drama into a ball and tosses it in the air to see if it will be caught. When you consider how much Bassanio owes Antonio, he is actually fortunate that the ring costs him a broken promise to his precious new wife. In fact, the high cost of the favor is an essential point of the episode. By putting his request in the form of a command, Antonio actually does Bassanio two favors: first, he gives his friend a way to pay him back, and second, he effectively lets him "off the hook" for betraying his wife. For, commanded thus, Bassanio has no more choice in the matter than he would about whether to obey the force of gravity after stepping out of a window. "A singular and principal friendship dissolveth all other duties, and freeth all other obligations," says Montaigne.

Antonio would have given his life for Bassanio. Bassanio's debt of gratitude is maximum. When, instantly, with no trace of reluctance, he gives up the ring at his friend's request, we gasp. But the very speed with which he betrays his oath to Portia is the main point of the play. *The Merchant* has actually been building for this moment ever since Antonio waved aside Bassanio's grant proposal in Act 1.

Waiting for the consequence of this deed causes the play to slide back into limbo again, this time in the uncertain light of the moon, just before dawn at Belmont. Jessica, in this totally foreign country, still wonders if her "fortunes be not crost." Launcelot's anti-Semitic jibes have not been re-assuring. Prompted by Lorenzo's friend

s' conjectures upon his slowness to appear for the elopement, the audience, too, seeks assurance of his good intentions. Antonio has still to discover his place in Bassanio's new arrangement. Especially the audience and the perpetrator await the outcome of Bassanio's apparent "breach of faith," planted so neatly at the end of the previous act.

In the uncertain light of the inconstant moon, Jessica almost commits "the treason of mistrust" which Bassanio fended off, upon entering the casket test, but she draws back just in time. She and Lorenzo, in a strikingly musical discussion of star-crossed lovers, conclude with Jessica hoping she and Lorenzo aren't another example:

In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
And ne'er a true one.

In her own small way, Jessica here hopes to "cozen fortune" by getting some kind of concrete assurance from her beloved.

We

would like Lorenzo to deny her allegation and protest his undying devotion, but if he is to deal plainly with her, he will not bandy words. Since he does love her, he can only say that she slanders him, and since he does love her, he sympathizes and forgives. Love is a matter of faith, not oaths and declarations. In the next century, heroines of Restoration comedy continually forbid men they like from making any oaths or vows to them. There can be no absolute assurance of anything, and the vows that Jessica rightly deprecates have already been made: her fortune is complete, and she must obey the commandment of the scroll in the lead casket:

Since this fortune falls to you
Be content and seek no new.
[You should] be well pleased with this
And hold your fortune for your bliss.

It is as much a mistake to question fortune's dispensation as to try to control it. These words of Seneca may apply:

[The] man who has attained virtue never cursed his luck, and never received the results of chance with dejection; he believed that he was citizen and soldier of the universe, accepting his tasks as if they were his orders.

As for Lorenzo, he doesn't behave like a fortune hunter. Except for his being late for his elopement we have no reason to look for ulterior motives. As far as he knew, he had no chance of becoming Shylock's heir. Did he marry Jessica for a plaything? If so, he hazarded a great deal for a trivial affair, because he defied the laws of Venice in carrying her off. He was also an accomplice to theft.

Further, Lorenzo insists on calling Jessica his

"torchbearer," an unlikely term for a plaything, especially if one considers the other references to light in *The Merchant*. Hearing Solanio's complaint about lack of preparation for the masque, Salerio observes, "We have not spoke us yet of torchbearers." On receiving Jessica's letter, Lorenzo answers that deficiency: "I am provided of a torchbearer." Having taken Gratiano into his confidence, he reiterates, "Fair Jessica shall be my torchbearer." When Jessica appears "above," he says, "descend, for you must be my torchbearer." Punning on the double meaning of "light," Jessica modestly objects that her torch will reveal too much of her figure, dressed as she is in boy's clothes. But modesty is appropriate in the lady who is to lead her lover out of the dark night of Venice. Portia as well is adorned in light, and Act 5 abounds in references to the coming dawn. Portia is the greater light and Jessica is the lesser.

But Jessica continues in the dumps: Lorenzo orders music for her, but her response to that is negative also: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music." That's normal, argues Lorenzo: "The reason is, your spirits are attentive." He then proceeds to give a lecture on the way in which music tames the passions and fosters harmony among men. Sadness is certainly a legitimate response to good music. Unlike her father, Jessica is well-tuned to music's civilizing power, and will soon adjust to the brave new world of Belmont.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is moved by the concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are as dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted.

Such a man is Shylock. He hates, "the drum/And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife," and commands Jessica to "stop my house's ears - I mean my casements - /Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter /My sober house" when the masquers parade down the street.

Music

Belmont, in contrast to Shylock's Venice, is full of music. Starting the music to accompany Bassanio's choice, Portia tells us that "music is/Even as the flourish when true subjects bow/To a new-crowned monarch." Her image suggests the same harmonizing power that Lorenzo explains to Jessica. Morocco's entrance, his introduction to the caskets, and his exit are announced by "A Flourish of Cornets." Arragon is introduced to the caskets by another flourish. Bassanio's choice is accompanied by a song. In act 5, Bassanio's "tucket" heralds his victorious return to Belmont. "Your husband is at hand. I hear his trumpet," says Lorenzo, suggesting that the House of Bassanio has its own special signature tune.

These trumpetings, I suggest, are signs that the people of Belmont observe rituals or "ceremony". Ceremony is a kind of dance which formalizes the social "concord" of which Lorenzo speaks. It is the flourish, tucket, or song which accompanies entrances, exits, and casket choices. It is calling Bassanio "my lord," and Portia "my lady". It is the pains one takes to entertain one's guests with pomp and circumstance: as Portia

approaches Belmont, Lorenzo enjoins Jessica, "Go we in, I pray thee . . . /And ceremoniously let us prepare/Some welcome for the mistress of the house." In Venice, ceremony runs into difficulties. Gratiano regrets that "we have not made good preparation" for the masque at Bassanio's house. Solanio agrees: "'Tis vile unless it may be quaintly ordered/And better in my mind not undertook." The ill-fated masque is eventually cancelled when the inconstant wind unceremoniously changes for Belmont. Finally, in Belmont, Portia chastises Bassanio for giving up the ring he "held as a ceremony," and he pleads for mercy on the grounds of another kind of windshift. The Belmontese were, as we shall see, capable of distinguishing "mere" ceremony from real life.

According to Portia, when Belmontese "companions" get together, they "waste the time." If to kill time is to murder eternity, then this habit of wasting time is for us perhaps the most antipathetic Belmontese trait, for here their behavior runs afoul even of Thoreau, who is certainly no lover of the cash nexus. But once upon a time human beings who had to work saw no reason to work any harder than they had to get a living, and contrary to the common belief, most hunters and gatherers lived a life of leisure, as Marshall Sahlins (*Stone Age Economics* 1972) can attest. In the beginning, wasting time was man's true vocation and work was a punishment for sin.

"Merriment" is *The Merchant's* word for the means by which the Belmontese waste time. Aping the spirit of his Christian "friends," Shylock undertakes to entertain them with a "merry sport" which turns out to be the "merry bond" by which he attempts to murder Antonio. Host Bassanio entertains Gratiano to "to put on/Your boldest suit of mirth, for we have friends/That do purpose merriment." Launcelot is a "merry devil," and carrying out that appellation seems to be his main function in the play. Antonio urges Bassanio, as he departs for Belmont, to "be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts/To courtship and the fair ostents of love/As shall conveniently become you there."

At the beginning of the play, his friends regard Antonio's sadness as a sin against good company, and, treating it almost as a sickness, they attempt to cheer him out of it. Increasing the general merriment appears to be one of the kindnesses expected of a friend. Hosts and hostesses thus "cheer" guests in *The Merchant*. When Jessica arrives in Belmont, Gratiano asks his wife to "cheer yond stranger; bid her welcome." Similarly, Portia enjoins Bassanio to "Bid your friends [Salerio and Lorenzo] welcome, show a merry cheer." Greeting Antonio, Portia says, "Sir, you are very welcome to our house./ It must appear in other ways than words;/Therefore I scant this breathing courtesy." (I.e, talk is cheap. Wait until you see what entertainment we have in store for you.)

The Belmontese are often accused of being frivolous. But making merry was a serious matter in the conduct books. Conversation, says Cicero in his *Offices*, "should be easy and not in the least dogmatic; it should have the spice of wit." His advice echoes through the ages: Castiglione, of course, wrote the book on good manners. "Sprezzatura," or artless grace, which his English translator Hoby renders as "recklessness," is the virtue of polite conversation, while "affectazione," which he

translates as "curiosity," comprising pretentiousness, stiffness, overprecision, formality, pedantry, and gravity, is the corresponding vice; in short it is Polonius. As Sir Toby Belch said to Malvolio, "because thou art virtuous shall there be no more cakes and ale?" Montaigne (who never cites *The Courtier*) apparently knew the book:

I have sometimes [he writes] pleased myself in imitating that licentiousness or wanton humor of our youths, in wearing of their garments; as carelessly to let their cloaks hang down over one shoulder; to wear their cloakes scarf or bawdriewise???, and their stockings loose hanging about their legs. It represents a kind of disdainful fierceness of these foreign embellishings, and neglect carelessness of art: But I commend it more being employed in the course and forme of speech. All manner of affectation, namely in the liveliness and liberty of France, is unseemly in a Courtier. And in a Monarchy every Gentleman ought to address himself unto a Courtiers carriage. Therefore do we well somewhat to incline to a native and careless behavior.

Besides knowing how to sit a horse, knowing how not to be a crashing bore was a *sine qua non* for a gentle man or woman. Call it a facade, if you wish, but it was just something one did for the benefit of one's friends.

To improve the time friends wasted together, Castiglione supplied an exhaustive fully-illustrated catalogue of all kinds of witty "jests," which include "merrie Pranckes" or practical jokes, like Portia's ring trick. In the 16th century, witty booklength conversations like that of *The Courtier* itself must have provided another excellent waste of time.

In Belmont, busy-ness is the enemy of merriment, to be avoided at all costs. In this spirit, Lorenzo puts aside the business of "ceremoniously" preparing to welcome Portia, and chooses instead to enjoy music on the moonlit bank with Jessica. *De Officiis* declares that men who devote themselves to business are "traitors to social life." "They lose [the world] that do buy it with much care," says Gratiano correctly. In Restoration comedy the dialectic of business and pleasure becomes a fixture. For example, Sir Jasper Fidget, a personification of dullness in Wycherley's *Country Wife*, expresses the dichotomy perfectly, enjoining his merry wife to "go to your business, I say, pleasure, whilst I go to my pleasure, business." And his witty adversary closes the act with an appropriate moral: "Who from his wife to business doth run / Is sure to get his business done." As *The Merchant* proceeds, business, of which Shylock's business is the chiefest, continually interferes with merriment until Portia of Belmont finally overcomes his business altogether.

In fact the interruption of pleasure by business is an important structural principle of the play. Lorenzo's failure to make his appointment, because his "affairs" have kept him, is only one of many such delays. It is actually the second, if we count the tedious negotiation with Shylock of the loan that enables the suit to Portia as the first. The third is the cancellation of Bassanio's masque so as not to miss a favoring tide. The fourth, fifth, and sixth are the casket episodes

standing in the way of Portia's marriage, the seventh is the interruption of the consummation of the marriages by the trial, the eighth is Shylock's delay of the deed of gift that stands in the way of Lorenzo and Jessica's happiness, and the ninth is the business of the rings, delaying the consummation a second time.

When the sun replaces the moon in Belmont, the protocols of Belmont are associated with light. As we have noted, Lorenzo has insisted on calling Jessica his torchbearer. Portia, too, is a torchbearer. When Bassanio first tells of her, she has "sunny locks," likened to "the golden fleece." In Act 5 she arrives at Belmont with the approach of day. In the darkness before dawn, the candle that burns in her house "shines [like] a good deed in a naughty world." Carrying on the conceit, Nerissa observes, "When the [inconstant?] moon shone, we did not see the candle." Portia reflects, "This night is but the daylight sick." Upon his arrival Bassanio adds Portia to the conceit: "We should hold day with the Antipodes/If you would walk in absence of the sun." All the attributes of Belmont come together in Portia's luminosity: music, human concord, the courtesy that fosters concord, and the dance of ceremony that gladdens it.

The "crime" for which Portia is tried in Act 5 imitates that of Jessica, the unsuited suitors, and Shylock: she has attempted to "cozen fortune," by binding Bassanio in an oath never to give up her ring. It gave her a "vantage," she said, "to exclaim on [him]." By taking this "vantage" she commits the "treason of mistrust" before the marriage has even been consummated. If she's serious, it's not off to a very auspicious start.

But her motives for rescuing Antonio from the toils of Shylock belie her mistrust:

This Antonio,
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so
How little cost have I bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty.

According to both Cicero and Aristotle, friends are two persons with one soul. Laurens J. Mills, in his book *One Soul in Bodies* (Twain: Friendship in Tudor Literature and Stuart Drama, (1937) jumps on this speech of Portia's as evidence that Portia (and Shakespeare) understand the bond between Antonio and Bassanio to be an example of ideal friendship in the Platonic/ Aristotelian/ Ciceronian mold. Further, Mills lists copious instances of conflicts between love and friendship in Renaissance literature, including that in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The ring business was a standard plot complicator.

Feminist scholars, in an ambitious hurry to colonize *The Merchant of Venice* while making an ally out of Portia in the war against male solidarity, cannot abide the truth clearly and emphatically stated in her own declaration of her motive for rescuing Antonio, and stated in the language of classical friendship, that any friend of her husband's is a friend of hers and merits her utmost efforts in his behalf. The glorification of friendship in *The Merchant of Venice* cannot be swept under the rug, for it is the core of the play--the reason for Antonio's

loan to Bassanio, the reason for Antonio's engaging himself to Shylock for the pound of flesh, the reason for Portia's rescue mission, and the reason for Bassanio's "betrayal" of his wife. Friendship was a very serious matter in the Renaissance, and it is clear from this passage that Portia hoped to join the friendship rather than dissolve it.

Friendship

The ancient cult of friendship dates back at least to Achilles and Patroclus; it is enshrined in Plato, and celebrated in the works of Aristotle and Cicero. With these authorities behind it, the idea of friendship achieved high status in Renaissance society, as Mills's book testifies. *De Officiis* claims, "Of all the bonds of fellowship, there is none more noble, none more powerful than when good men of congenial character are joined in intimate friendship." In *De Amicitia* Cicero goes farther, saying that "with the exception of wisdom no better thing [than friendship] has been given to man by the immortal gods". Sir Thomas Elyot closely follows Cicero. Seneca declares that

Nothing . . . gives the mind so much pleasure as fond and faithful friendship. What a blessing it is to have those to whose waiting hearts every secret may be committed with safety, whose knowledge of you you fear less than your knowledge of yourself, whose conversation soothes your anxiety, whose opinion assists your decision, whose cheerfulness scatters your sorrow, the very sight of whom gives you joy!

In fact, he concludes, no loss to which human beings are exposed can exceed the loss of a friend. Castiglione carries on the panegyric, saying: "Friendship ministreth unto us al the goodness contained in our life." Montaigne praises his friendship with Etienne de la Boetie as "unspotted . . . , so entire and inviolably maintained between us . . . that it may be counted a wonder if fortune once in three ages contract the like." Surely, given the high regard in which friendship was held in the Renaissance and the degree to which it is woven into *The Merchant of Venice*, the fact that it is universally ignored in academic interpretations of the play can only be understood in terms of the Berkeley byword, "Read until you find the oppressor and then stop."

Promises

Bassanio's, "betrayal" is simply the only possible response to an impossible situation. He must betray either his wife or his friend; it's the old love/honor dilemma so common in Renaissance fiction. Cicero, the great virtue of whose *De Officiis* is the brilliant way in which he adjusts his rules to the complexities of the real world, points the way out. Although he believes that keeping promises is the foundation of civil harmony, he wisely foresees that promises may conflict. When unforeseen circumstances arise, he maintains, a promise must be weighed against what's best for all concerned. If, for instance, I have promised to defend a man in court, but my son falls dangerously ill, I should break my promise to my client and stay with my son, and the client should forgive me. In such cases, "good faith"--that is, trust--guarantees that the defaulter will have a good reason and that the person promised will accept it.

Aristotle concurs: "Friendship exacts what is possible, not what is due."

When Bassanio gave up the ring at Antonio's request, trust overruled formal agreement. As we have already seen, friends do not stand on ceremony when unforeseen circumstances arise. His "affairs" prevented Lorenzo from arriving on time for his elopement. The wind rescinded the masque. Antonio's danger called off the wedding celebrations, and now "Balthasar's" insistence on having Portia's ring has interrupted that celebration again. In the light of these perfectly reasonable cancellations of ceremony, Gratiano simply states a fact when he remonstrates that Nerissa's ring is nothing but "a hoop of gold" with "cutler's poetry" engraved on it.

Compared to a relationship based on trust, a formal bond is a "mere formality." Notice that Portia's is not the only ring treated with less than due respect in *The Merchant of Venice*. We remember that on her honeymoon in Genoa, Jessica bought a monkey with her father's wedding ring. Shylock, always the antithesis of Belmont, shrieked in anguish over her cavalier treatment of this token, which he appeared to value, along with his ducats, more than the daughter whom he had alienated by his heartless stinginess.

Gratitude

Honor would without question give precedence to "Balthasar's" and Antonio's claim on Bassanio over Portia's. "No duty is more imperative than proving one's gratitude," says *De Officiis*. Seneca quotes a proverb: "It is a shame to be outdone in courtesy." "Endeavour all you can to requite [a friend's] courtesy," echoes Peacham. *The Merchant* affirms this doctrine when Bassanio tells Portia why he gave up the ring:

I was enforced to send it after him.
I was beset with shame and courtesy.
My *honor* would not let ingratitude
So much besmear it.

Obviously Portia knows in advance that the ring is mere ceremony, compared to the necessity of expressing gratitude. When "Balthasar" asks Bassanio for the ring, she says,

If your wife be not a madwoman
And know how well I have deserved this ring
She would not hold out enemy for ever
For giving it to me.

When she confronts him with his "treason," Bassanio likewise assumes her sanity: "Had you been there I think you would have begged / The ring of me to give the worthy doctor." Of course she would have (and, funnily enough, she was there and she did).

Being by nature trusting and trustworthy, the principals have no difficulty in rising above a problem that for lesser mortals might have been a severe threat to congeniality. They do so by an elegant display of courtesy. Sometimes in *The Merchant*, a favor is called "a courtesy." Shylock hates Antonio because he is "wont to lend money for a Christian cursy." Calling Antonio "the kindest man, / The best-conditioned and

unwearied spirit/In doing courtesies," Bassanio links "courtesy" with "Ancient Roman honor." The Duke, recommending mercy to Shylock, notes that even Turks, "untrained" in "courtesy," would pity Antonio. Bassanio gave up Portia's ring because he was "beset by shame and courtesy."

For a person of honor, even power is a form of wealth, and to hoard it is a sin. Therefore it is a "high courtesy" to give away one's power to do a favor. Thus, after the battle of Shrewsbury in *Henry IV, Part 1*, Prince Hal asks the king for the prisoner Douglas as his own prize. Request instantly granted. Just as instantly Hal sets Douglas "ransomless and free." But wait, he gives the *honor* of setting Douglas free to his younger brother John. The favor passes from king to Hal to John, conferring honor as it goes. John thanks Hal for "this high courtesy." *De Officiis* teaches that our enemies (Latin, *hostes*) should be treated as our guests (also Latin, *hostes*). It behooves us to be generous toward those we have vanquished.

In the judgement of Shylock, we have a similar flurry of high courtesies. Shylock is the defeated enemy. The Duke, in whose "danger" he lies, pardons him his life, and then gives the captive to Antonio, the injured party, to do with as he pleases. Thus empowered, Antonio sets Shylock "ransomless and free," while imposing some conditions "for this favor." Similarly Bassanio gives the honor of rewarding "Balthasar" to Gratiano, and Portia gives Nerissa the honor of bestowing Shylock's deed of gift on Jessica and Lorenzo. She also delegates her power as mistress of Belmont to Lorenzo. The great Fabius Maximus, needing to punish a good soldier for spending too many nights outside of camp, delegated the task of seeing to it that he behaved himself on these nights to the young woman who was the cause of his absence.

Portia has the power to forgive the vanquished Bassanio, by the gesture of giving him "another" ring. But she chooses the higher courtesy of giving the privilege to Antonio. Antonio, the real culprit as he candidly admits, is now able to restore what he had previously demanded, and in return for Portia's favor, he asks Bassanio to swear never to give up this ring. The missionary critics make much of this episode, decreeing that Portia here makes Antonio relinquish his hold on Bassanio, giving her full control over her husband and achieving a major victory for women over the patriarchy. But that's not what it is. In feminist terms, it's really a victory of friend over wife instead of the reverse, while in its own terms it's a declaration of mutual regard. When Portia returns the ring to Bassanio via Antonio, and Antonio makes him promise never to give it up again, Portia honors the friendship and Antonio honors the marriage, in an exchange of benefits that establishes an enduring bond between the two. Is this transaction invisible to us because we are bred up to compete rather than consort?

When Bassanio takes the ring, lo and behold, it is the same he gave to Balthasar, who was Portia all along and no one knew it! And the whole tempest in a teapot dissolves in merriment. Now Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio are indeed three persons with one soul. And Portia, who appeared to have committed "the sin of mistrust," has passed her self-imposed test.

To confirm Antonio's worth and his acceptance at Belmont,

"the hand of heaven," via Portia and an undisclosed "accident," drops "manna" on him, with the news that three of his argosies are safe. But by delegating him to return the ring she has already given him something he needed much more: a great honor from a great lady. Now Antonio rests in the bosom of Belmont, not sentenced by W. H. Auden to solitary confinement on a "darkened stage." He no longer has any reason to be sad. Similarly, when Portia produces the deed of gift by which Shylock, like it or not, blesses Jessica's marriage, we may suppose that she no longer has any reason to question her fortune.

The high point of Portia's "merrie Pranke" comes when Bassanio gives his reason for giving up the ring, and Portia pretends to reject it.

Bassanio. Sweet Portia,
If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring
When naught would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

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

In this passage, "ring" occurs at such regular intervals that each "ring" suggests the pealing of a bright bell. In contrast, Shylock's incessant "bond . . . bond . . . bond" sounded like the insistent tolling of a death knell.

Seneca's Ring

In the process of answering some rhetorical questions about the Three Graces (i.e., so to speak, the Three Thank yous), Seneca becomes enraptured by the beauty of reciprocating benefits. First, why are there three of them?

There is one for bestowing a benefit, another for receiving it, and a third for returning it Why do the sisters hand in hand dance in a ring which returns upon itself? For the reason that a benefit passing in its course from hand to hand returns nevertheless to the giver; . . . Their faces are cheerful, as are ordinarily the faces of those who bestow or receive benefits. They are young because the memory of benefits ought not to grow old. They are maidens because benefits are pure and undefiled and holy in the eyes of all; and it is fitting that there should be nothing to bind or restrict them, and so the maidens wear flowing robes.

This passage actually conveys the main points of Seneca's theory

of reciprocating benefits. Benefits create rings because the goodwill travels from person to person until it returns eventually to the giver. Giving and receiving favors makes us cheerful. If we forget a favor, the ring is broken and the harmony of society is damaged. Therefore we must have a good memory of favors received. The benefit must be given for pure unselfish motives, because if it is given in expectation of a return it is not given but sold. And if one is bound by circumstances to give a benefit, it is not freely given and thus not a benefit but a payment or a bribe. A benefit by definition implies no quid pro quo. "To help, to be of service, is the part of a noble and chivalrous soul; he who gives benefits imitates the gods, he who seeks a return, money-lenders." The end result is a society like "a stone arch, which would collapse if the stones did not mutually support each other." The illustrious Shakespearean, L. C. Knights calls this concept "mutuality" and believes it to be a distinguishing feature of Shakespeare's "humanity."

The value of property is not as great as the value of the human ties created by giving it away. As the Stone Age Nuer put it, "Friends make gifts [and] gifts make friends." Before society came to be bound up in contracts, constitutions, and laws, it was thought to be held in harmonious equilibrium by the exchange of benefits. De Officiis teaches that

[A] strong bond of fellowship is effected by mutual interchange of kind services; and as long as these kindnesses are mutual and acceptable, those between whom they are interchanged are united by the ties of an enduring intimacy.

Hence

we ought to follow Nature as our guide, to contribute to the general good by an interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving, and thus by our skill, our industry, and our talents to cement human society more closely together, man to man.

Ask not what you can do for your country, but ask what you can do for your associates (family, friends, neighbors, and helpers), and the country will take care of itself.

At the end of The Merchant of Venice, something very like Seneca's ring of graces knits the main characters together. Antonio stakes his life to fund Bassanio's courtship. Bassanio owes Antonio not just three thousand ducats but his own life in return for Antonio's risking his, not to mention the fortune that Antonio enabled him to win. By the same token, Portia owes her husband to Antonio. She pays him back by saving his life at the trial. Now Antonio owes his life to the "lawyer," whom he repays by commanding Bassanio to give up the ring. Now Antonio owes Bassanio for jeopardizing his domestic tranquility. Back at Belmont, Portia pays her debt to Antonio by giving him the honor of returning the ring to Bassanio. He returns this favor by promising to cherish the union forever after. And when he puts the ring back on Bassanio's finger Antonio pays his debt to Bassanio for sacrificing Portia so that he could repay the lawyer who saved his life which he risked when he borrowed money to give

Bassanio so that he could woo Portia. Is all of this accidental, or has Shakespeare been reading *De Beneficiis*?

We have been watching a society built on obligations, not rights. Since these obligations are obvious, there can be no room for hesitation, calculation, or policy when they are invoked. Since voluntary good will motivates all members, the social cement is trust, and legal instruments are redundant and abhorrent. The *Merchant of Venice* plays variations on these social conventions in a thousand ways. It will be said that my interpretation of the play is reductive and that I have damped off the titillating ambiguities and contradictions that so delight postmodern critics. But I ask, which rendering is the richer, the one that reduces the whole play to a simple contest between racist, sexist upperclass twits and their victims--in the process papering over vast tracts of unusable text--or this one, in which every line reverberates in sympathetic vibration with the truly major concerns of the play?