

Shylock's Demon And The Ideology of Capitalism

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Shylock's Demon and the Ideology of Capitalism

Thesis directed by Professor Christopher Braider

Approaching Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as a critique of the logic of capitalism, my thesis argues that we shouldn't be trying to locate the play's merit in spite of the admittedly anti-Semitic portrait of Shylock. It is through this very portrait that the play succeeds in becoming a radical critique of the ideology of early modern capitalism. Shylock, on the one hand a mythic literary trope of "the Jew" (not unlike Barabas from Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*), is an "ideological fantasy" (Žižek), who conveniently serves as a scapegoat for exploitation perpetrated by the Venetian mercantile system. Yet Shylock is also an abyss of inwardness, invested with what Philip Roth calls "a Shakespearean reality." Essentially, Shylock excels in the character of a mirror. As the reality at the heart of the fantasy, Shylock not only shows the fantasy its reality, but overwhelms it, forcing the city into collision with the effective conditions of the social reality it is distorting. Moreover, as the first of Shakespeare's "problem plays" and bridge to tragedy, I consider how, through Shylock's "negative capability", *The Merchant of Venice* becomes an early precursor of the more petrified nihilism for which the latter problem plays (especially *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*) will become notorious, and how, in tragicomedy—a genre Shakespeare explores in the final phase of

his career—Shakespeare continues to work through the question of nihilism by situating it alongside the utopian ideal.

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Shylock's Demon and the Ideology of Capitalism

Among Shakespeare's plays *The Merchant of Venice* elicits a unique ambivalence from readers, critics, and playgoers. The Jewish moneylender Shylock, who sets the forfeiture of Antonio's loan at "an equal pound of your fair flesh" ("Merchant" I.3.147-8), is oddly compelling. But how should we, especially in the aftermath of recent historical trauma, feel comfortable being compelled by Shylock? Shylock may also be a scapegoat and a victim, or a "victim turned villain," but as Shylock really becomes the monstrosity he is imagined to be, immovable in his desire to "feed upon the prodigal Christian" (II.5.15), the excesses of anti-Semitic rhetoric that inundate the play verge on assuming "a ring of truth"—something that contemporary multicultural readings of the play, along with stage and film adaptations, take pains, where they haven't succeeded in deceiving themselves, to scale down, while straining the emphasis on Shylock's "humanity."¹ As Melanie Long writes, echoing a large critical consensus and a typical honest reading,

It is difficult to deny that the play indeed villainizes Shylock and casts him in the role of the stereotypical avaricious usurer. Shylock lives up to popular perceptions of both usurers and Jews in the early modern period: he treasures wealth as much as, if not more than his own daughter and hounds for a Christian's pound of flesh in an echo of the 'blood libel' that fueled early persecution of Jews. (Long)

¹ It may be telling that, as the actor Jacob Adler would report, the tradition of playing Shylock as a sympathetic character only began in the 19th century. See *The Invention of the Human*, pp.172-5.

Yet still more disturbing than the anti-Semitic portrait itself—and even if we were willing to allow that Shakespeare himself, who in any case may have never met a Jew, was not anti-Semitic²—is that Shylock, even through this very portrait, is so compelling, invested with Shakespearean dimensions of personality. Marlowe’s Barabas, by contrast, too much of a cartoon to be taken very seriously, has also never been so destabilizing a force of history. As Supposnik, a member of the Israeli secret police, tells the character Philip Roth in Roth’s novel, *Operation Shylock*,

When I was a young student ... I studied the Shakespeare play that is second only to *Hamlet* in the number of times it has been performed on the London stage in the first half of the twentieth century. And in the very first line, the opening line of the third scene of the very first act, I came with a shock upon the three words with which Shylock introduced himself onto the world stage nearly four hundred years ago. Yes, for four hundred years now, Jewish people have lived in the shadow of this Shylock. In the modern world, the Jew has been perpetually on trial ... and this modern trial of the Jew ... begins with the trial of Shylock. To the audiences of the world Shylock is the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies for them the spirit of the United States. Only, in Shylock’s case, there is an overwhelming Shakespearean reality, a terrifying Shakespearean aliveness that your pasteboard Uncle Sam cannot begin to possess. I studied those three words by which the savage, repellent, and villainous Jew, deformed by hatred and revenge, entered as our doppelgänger

² The Jews had been expelled since 1290 and weren’t permitted to return until 1656.

into the consciousness of the enlightened West. Three words encompassing all that is hateful in the Jew, three words that have stigmatized the Jew through two Christian millennia and that determine the Jewish fate until this very day, and that only the greatest English writer of them all could have had the prescience to isolate and dramatize as he did. You remember Shylock's opening line? You remember the three words? What Jew can forget them? What Christian can forgive them? '*Three thousand ducats.*' (Roth 274)

Yet if for four hundred years, Jewish people have lived in the shadow of these three words, a curious ellipsis lives in *their* shadow, with the opening line of the scene beginning *in medias res*: Shylock is only echoing the sum of the loan that Bassanio needs as seed money for the wedding and bedding of the heiress, Portia.

Approaching the play as a critique of capitalism (not “the Jew”), drawing largely on the theory and critique of ideology in the philosopher Žižek and situating dramatic representation and critique of ideology as two sides of the same enterprise, I would argue that it is just at the point where the crude anti-Semitic stereotype rises to the level of Roth's “Shakespearean aliveness” that the play succeeds in becoming a radical critique.

Shylock is indeed a stereotype and a scapegoat, an “ideological fantasy-construction” (Žižek) of 16th century Venetian capitalism—a locus of displaced anxieties of the city surrounding the early emergence of free markets and the contracts (bonds) that regulate them.³ As a scapegoat, Shylock ought to enable the dominant ideology to evade

³ Apropos the setting for *The Merchant of Venice*, Melanie Long suggests, “Although the free market's first green shoots were sprouting in England, *The Merchant of Venice* is set in Venice instead, and for an obvious reason. The Italian city-states, including Venice, featured the most developed of Europe's mercantile city centers ... Venice's mercantile activity was already so well developed by this point that a

its own internal, systemic points of contradiction and crisis.

Yet a stereotype, by definition, is not supposed to convey the interior life of personality, is not, in this sense of “fantasy”, supposed to be “real”. Hence the most threatening feature of capitalism, exploitation, can be made manageable, distantiated, and non-threatening by the very crudity and simplicity of the stereotype (“the predatory capitalist hounding for a pound of human flesh”, “the avaricious Jew”). But what would it mean for the “ideological fantasy” to be invested with a “Shakespearean reality”? Would this not be tantamount to the sounding out of the real ideological conditions at the heart of the fantasy itself—the points of collision internal to the ideology for which the stereotype is, otherwise, merely a fantasy?

Literature (subtler than the stereotypes) has always seized on the stereotyped other in the character of a “mirror” which, reflecting back on the dominant ideological group (its representative characters, the target audience) thus puts on ironical display their own hypocrisies and modes of duplicity. Still “the other” typically remains only a foil for the dominant ideology—which has merely gone astray from its own ideal and fallen into corruption. The other holds up a “yardstick” against which ideology can measure what it’s not *supposed* to be, “the other”, thus playing into the hand of the fantasy itself, disarming and pacifying what it paradoxically finds most terrifying and disturbing—its own ideology.

In his book, *Shylock Is Shakespeare*, Kenneth Gross observes that “*The Merchant of Venice* is Shylock’s play, he gives it its point, even as he is larger than the world which

renowned judicial system had developed to support it. If Shakespeare’s play is in fact an examination of the free market, then Venice is the perfect backdrop for that undertaking, as it extrapolates from Venice the future growth of the market system in England.” See “Merchantry, Usury, Villainy.”

tries to contain him” (Gross 3). And if Shylock, an ideological fantasy, is larger than Venice, Shylock not only holds up a mirror to Venice, reflecting in the fantasy its very reality, but, insisting on the fantasy against all efforts to pacify it, traverses the fantasy as such. Paralleling Lacan with respect to the analytic process, what it means for Žižek to critique ideology is to “traverse the ideological fantasy,” which means, “to fully identify oneself with the fantasy—with the fantasy which structures the excess that resists our immersion in daily reality” (“Less Than” 689)—that is, which structures our modes of evasion. In himself, and in his power to reflect on the other characters, Shylock constrains the fantasy to immerse itself in daily reality. As fantasy, deploying the formidable resources at its disposal, comes to support the social reality (capitalism) in its very inconsistency, ideology for Žižek designates “a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility” (“Sublime Object” 50). While Antonio and the citizens of Venice may do what they can to efface all of these traces, Shylock inverts the definition of ideology itself: as the subversive kernel—the reality at the heart of the fantasy—that would undermine it, he stands out in full theatrical relief in all of his “negative capability.”⁴

While for the citizens of Venice Shylock from the outset embodies the stereotype of the “predatory Jewish moneylender” (by Shakespeare’s time long the stuff of legend), what we see from the first of Shylock himself is not only the stereotype but—paradoxical

⁴ In Keats, to whom we owe the phrase, “negative capability” means that power of imagination thanks to which Shakespeare is able to annihilate himself in fusion with the object of his imaginings. I use Keats’ phrase somewhat differently: exercising what Keats singled out as Shakespeare’s “negative capability,” Shakespeare creates a Shylock who subverts the ideology he embodies in the very act of instantiating its fantasmatic “rightness.” Even as his own words and conduct confirm his standing as “the Jew,” the fact of standing out in full theatrical relief grants him the status of the “subversive kernel,” the nugget/pearl of reality around which the fantasy forms in order to conceal it only to be undermined by its ongoing presence—a presence as incontrovertible as Shylock’s vividness can make it.

though it may be—an interiority of the stereotype, which outwardly puts itself on display⁵ while, an abyss of inwardness, it defamiliarizes the stereotype, arousing anxiety through ironical theatricality.

When Shylock, discussing with Bassanio the terms of the loan to get him to Belmont, asserts that Antonio (who will stand surety) is a “good man” and Bassanio queries whether he has “heard any imputation to the contrary,” Shylock, more passive-aggressively, ironically theatrical than strictly utilitarian, responds, “Ho no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient, yet his means are in supposition” (I.3.12-17). Equating “good” with “sufficient” in the case of Antonio may be an expression of Shylock’s “unfeeling Jewish avarice”, whose profit motive leaves no room for qualms about exploitation. But it is also his ironical form of revenge on a merchant for whom Shylock’s occupation of usury, in contrast to his own buying and selling of merchandise, is incompatible with the meaning of “good”⁶, while now Antonio finds himself operating within the same economic framework as Shylock himself. As Shylock puts it when Antonio arrives,

... Oft

In the Rialto you have rated me

About my moneys and my usances.

... You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,

⁵ Marlowe’s Barabas demonstrates a similar behavior, but the effect couldn’t be more different. As “the Jew,” Barabas, exposing Christian hypocrisy, confides in us, speaks to the audience, as a result of which “we can’t help enjoying him, since his outrageousness is so cartoon-like” (“Invention” 174). Shylock, presenting us with his “self-caricature,” also withholds himself from us, as the stereotype takes on a different sort of life—becoming notable for its negative capability.

⁶ As below, Antonio’s response to Shylock’s where he recounts the story of Jacob.

And spit upon my Jewish gabardine, ...

Well then, now it appears you need my help (103-111).

Antonio holds fast to his principles. “Albeit I neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess, / Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend / I’ll break a custom” (I.3.58-61). Not satisfied with this, Shylock, trying hard to make a case for moneylending, recounts the biblical story of Jacob’s “domestication experiments”⁷ to proliferate the stronger members of the family’s livestock, if at the expense of his uncle Laban. Shylock has clearly hit a nerve. Antonio’s easy, ad hominem dismissal of the argument’s author isn’t exactly a cogent response to the *argument* Shylock makes:

Mark you this, Bassanio,

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

An evil soul producing holy witness

Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,

A goodly apple rotten at the heart.

O what a goodly outside falsehood hath! (I.3.95-99)

Does Shylock even *try* to give himself a “goodly outside?” It is Antonio who first introduces into Shylock's account the “goodly outside” of “holy witness.” According to Antonio, “This was a venture Jacob served for / ... swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven” (II.88-90). Shylock is under no illusions that it is through Jacob’s own Odyssean prowess—“the skillful shepherd peeled me certain wands”—that “this was a way to

⁷ Genesis 30.

thrive ... / And thrift is blessing if men steal it not” (ll. 86-87).

As Shylock understands, for Antonio to be able to lend money “gratis” in the first place, as he would otherwise be doing for Bassanio, a “surplus” must have come from somewhere. And Bassanio (who certainly isn’t prepared to “work” for it) needs to raise an immediate sum in order to finance his own gold-digging venture in Belmont, where he will woo the “lady richly left” (I.1.161). Why should the taking of profit, in Shylock’s case of usury, be so anathema to the rich merchant? Antonio, not incorrectly, perceives that Shylock has launched into the story of Jacob in order to “make interest good,” adding sarcastically, “or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?” To which Shylock, falling back into his “self-caricature”, responds, “I cannot tell. I make it breed as fast” (ll.91-3).

Shylock *is* trying to “make interest good.” But he also seems to impute the unique stigma attached to usury to a sort of fetishization of words. After all, “usury” is derived from “to use”, laying bare the commodity value relation⁸ of the market. For Marx—as a way of designating the transition from feudalism to capitalism—that means “the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁹ That is, they effectively “use” one another on the market for “labor value”, or value as commodities. “Interest” likewise takes no pains to mince words

⁸ As embodied in money, which, on the one hand, coordinates the relative value of diverse commodities, on the other hand (see “commodity fetishism” below) represses the human relations of domination and servitude. As Žižek writes, “The value of a certain commodity, which is effectively an insignia of a network of social relations between producers of diverse commodities, assumes the form of a quasi-‘natural’ property of another thing-commodity, money: we say that the value of a certain commodity is such-and-such amount of money. Consequently, the essential feature of commodity fetishism does not consist of the famous replacement of men with things ... rather, it consists of a certain misrecognition which concerns the relation between a structured network and one of its elements: what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements” (“Sublime Object” 19).

⁹ *Capital, Volume I*, p. 169. Marx’s definition of “commodity fetishism.”

with its suggestion of “self-interest” and the same egoistic relations that have assumed the “fantastic form of a relation between things.” Shylock dislikes the word as much as Antonio enjoys shaming him with it. “He rails / ... On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift, / Which *he* calls interest” (II.45-8, my italics).

Antonio may “have much ado to know myself,” but he isn’t a fool when it comes to business. As on top of his “merchandise” as Shylock is on his “moneys,” he reassures Bassanio, “Within these two months ... / ... I do expect return / Of thrice three times the value of this bond” (I.3.55-7). What is the difference between Antonio’s “returns” and Shylock’s “interest”? If Antonio neither lends nor borrows at interest, he has other (presumably Christian) creditors, who are also expecting a return on their investment.¹⁰ Later when Shylock insists on the penalty to which Antonio’s forfeiture entitles him, Antonio himself defends the legal premises of Shylock’s bond—the same that give teeth to his own financial contracts, enabling both him, as a merchant buying and selling in the mercantile economy of Venice, and the city itself to thrive.

The duke cannot deny the course of law;
 For the commodity that strangers have
 With us in Venice, if it be denied,
 Will much impeach the justice of the state,
 Since that the trade and profit of the city
 Consisteth of all nations. (III.3.26-31)

¹⁰ Cf. Tubal, “There came divers of Antonio’s creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break” (III.1.106). Or Antonio’s letter to Bassanio, “Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low.” (III.2.315-16).

Scholars often mark how Antonio and Shylock “mirror” each other through the play, e.g. in the mirroring of the professions “merchant” and “moneylender”, begging the question what exactly does “merchant” signify in a play named after the merchant Antonio, but whose initial focus is the question of usury? Both Shylock and Antonio are, in their respective professions, driven by profit motive. The same underlying logic of credit, of surplus risk and of surplus value, applies.

Is there perhaps something especially sinister in appearance about the moneylender? In the case of the moneylender, a surplus is appropriated from the borrower, as the borrower repays at interest the loan by some point in the future, while the borrower’s ability to obtain a ready sum—the immediate appearance of money—would seem to foster the impression that money can be obtained without the need for some form of toil or precious resources to back it up.¹¹ Yet what hides behind the proffering of the loan itself—the sudden appearance of money—is what it will take for the borrower to pay it back, which inexorably accumulates to the lender’s advantage.

Yet if the merchant, buying and selling goods in the mercantile economy of Venice, appears less sinister, might it be because the “exploited labor value” in the appropriation of surplus has grown so hidden as to simply go unregistered? In such an economy, surplus emerges as the disparity between the price at which goods are purchased at one location and the price at which they are sold at another.¹² The labor

¹¹ Auden astutely observes, “Bassanio seems to be one of those people whose attitude towards money is that of a child; it will somehow always appear by magic when really needed. Though Bassanio is aware of Shylock’s malevolence, he makes no serious effort to dissuade Antonio from signing the bond because, thanks to the ever-open purse of his friend, he cannot believe that bankruptcy is a real possibility in life.” “Brothers & Others,” p. 232.

¹² As Auden notes, “Venice does not produce anything, either raw materials or manufactured goods. Its existence depends upon the financial profits which can be made by international trade ... that is to say, on

value purchased to produce the products whose value over and above the value of the labor itself will be appropriated by the merchant as “surplus value” is literally distantiated from the merchant. Just as Antonio’s “fortunes are all at sea,” the grittier underside of capitalism is kept out of sight with the goods themselves, as they magically return to harbor.¹³ It’s as though we have to look for the “hidden signifier”—exploitation—indirectly, via the commodities themselves, as when Salarino describes Antonio’s merchandise-laden ships sailing the high seas as being very nearly, if not quite, “self-sufficient”.

Your argosies with portly sail—
 Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,
 Or as it were, the pageants of the sea—
 Do overpeer the petty traffickers
 That curtsy to them, do them reverence,
 As they fly by them with their woven wings. (I.1.9-14)

Antonio’s “argosies,” personified as “signors” and “rich burghers,” aren’t merely “self-sufficient” but “self-determining.” The goods come in as under their own volition, by

buying cheaply here and selling dearly there.” Further, motivating the homology between the usurer and the merchant, Auden suggests, “Had Shakespeare wished to show Shylock the usurer in the most unfavorable light possible, he could have placed him in a medieval agricultural society, where men become debtors through misfortunes, like a bad harvest or sickness for which they are not responsible, but he places him in a mercantile society, where the role played by money is a very different one. When Antonio says, “I neither lend nor borrow by taking or by giving of excess,” he does not mean that, if he goes into partnership with another merchant contributing, say, a thousand ducats to their venture, and their venture makes a profit, he only asks for a thousand ducats back. He is a merchant and the Aristotelian argument that money is barren and cannot breed money, which he advances to Shylock, is invalid in his own case.” See “Brothers & Others,” pp. 219-20.

¹³ Shylock himself, less deluded as to this grittier underside, at least points to “land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves—I mean pirates” (I.3.22-3).

themselves, and aristocratically, as spared the indignities of manual labor.

Shakespeare was no stranger to class consciousness, anticipating Marx as much as he anticipates the depth psychology of Freud. It's curious that, with the entourage of cobblers, peddlers, sailors, and so forth that fill many of his other plays, he chose, for his play with the most explicitly economic focus, to leave out "the worker" altogether. Indeed, the ellipsis is perfectly suited to the kind of "fantasy capitalism" that he's depicting. We need only recall one example of Shylock's shaming of the city during the trial scene to see that neither Shakespeare nor Shylock was under any illusions about the fantasy:

You have many among you a purchased slave,
Which like your asses and your dogs and mules
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them. (IV.1.90-3)

But all we see up until this point is an excess of surface effects distracting from and concealing the infrastructural reality beneath. The ellipsis is part of the insupportable fantasy, and it is by way of ellipsis—which will unravel, explosively, in the court scene—that Shakespeare disillusions us about it.

Shakespeare does give life to the servant Lancelot,¹⁴ who merely flees from "my old master the Jew" to "my new master the Christian" (II.4.18). Shylock, not unreliably contradicting Lancelot's earlier grievance and rationale for fleeing Shylock's service—

¹⁴ And should one dwell on the ironies of this name? The noble Launcelot of traditional Arthurian romance, transplanted to Venice, becomes the comic servant. Talk about the "transformation of nature"!

that “you may tell every finger I have with my ribs” (II.2.100)—opines, “Thou shalt not gormandize / As thou hast done with me” (II.5.3-4). It is Bassanio who has “disabled my estate / By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance” (I.1.123-5). Yet “Master Bassanio,” says Lancelot, “indeed gives rare new liveries” (II.2.102). Are we not reminded of Oscar Wilde’s “quip” about the, indeed, “very real problem” of London’s East End? “It is the problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves” (Wilde 29).

It will be easy enough to recognize Antonio, who may himself own slaves, as a terrific hypocrite, but we shouldn’t understand this in the sense of “saying one thing and doing something else”, or “knowing very well what he is doing and doing it all the same”¹⁵—as though it were his conspiratorial method for being able to have his cake and eat it too. Antonio really believes what he is saying, only he is deceiving himself.¹⁶ The best evidence for this is not Antonio’s hypocrisy but rather his hysteria. Žižek, evoking the psychoanalytic implications of Marxian commodity fetishism, relates

This symptom, the point of emergence of the truth about social relations, is precisely the ‘social relations between things’ Instead of appearing at all events as their own mutual relations, the social relations between individuals are disguised under the shape of social relations between things—here we have a precise definition of the hysterical symptom, of the hysteria of conversion proper to capitalism. (“Sublime Object” 22)

¹⁵ An attitude Žižek calls “ideological cynicism”—which may be highly applicable to Bassanio. See *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 24-27.

¹⁶ Cf. Bernard Williams: “Self-deception is a homage fantasy pays to the sense of reality.” *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 135.

Of course, this “hysteria of conversion” doesn’t simply mean an automaton-like subjection of one’s identity to the value relation of the market. As Freud taught, with repression comes a “return of the repressed”—but in a disguised, transmuted form. If in capitalism the human relations are repressed under the disguised shape of the social relations between things, what becomes of the repressed, of its return? In “fantasy,” Antonio effectively “re-fetishizes”¹⁷ the human relations, not because he initially “identifies” with them, but as a displacement of the social relations between things—as a defense mechanism.

Antonio would like to believe that, lending gratis and emphasizing the virtues of friendship, he, in his human relations, stands apart from the egoistic relations that characterize the market. Shylock, a usurious Jewish exploiter, epitomizes the market. Isn’t this why Antonio despises, loathes Shylock, as the basis of his anti-Semitism? Yet even if it were the case that Shylock is a greedy, utilitarian capitalist, and that Antonio is anything but, does this actually explain his anti-Semitic loathing of Shylock—such as we see it erupt when Shylock cites Jacob in support of his usury? Žižek makes the useful point:

Let us suppose ... that an objective look would confirm—why not?—that Jews really do financially exploit the rest of the population, that they do sometimes seduce our young daughters, that some of them do not wash regularly. Is it not clear that this has nothing to do with the real roots of our anti-Semitism? Here,

¹⁷ “Re-fetishizes” because, just as in the transition from feudalism to capitalism “a relation between men assumes the form of a relation between things,” feudalism “fetishizes the relations between men,” capitalism “defetishizes the relations between men.” See *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 18-22.

we have only to remember the Lacanian proposition concerning the pathologically jealous husband: even if all the facts he quotes in support of his jealousy are true, even if his wife really is sleeping around with other men, this does not change one bit the fact that his jealousy is a pathological, paranoid construction. . . . The proper answer to anti-Semitism is therefore not “Jews are really not like that” but “the anti-Semitic idea of Jew has nothing to do with Jews; the ideological figure of a Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system.” (49)

In order to see how Antonio’s pathological anti-Semitism also stitches up the inconsistency of his own ideological system, we must consider how it takes hold of him at the level of his own desire.¹⁸

Antonio’s eagerness to sign onto Shylock’s bond may help demonstrate his desire in this respect. If he is willing to “break a custom” (neither to lend nor borrow at interest) in order “to supply the ripe wants of my friend” (I.3.60) and if he doesn’t expect that he will have to forfeit the bond, it is only when Shylock formulates its extraordinary terms—“let the forfeit / Be nominated for an equal pound / Of your fair flesh” (II.146-8)—that he positively leaps at it. “Content, in faith. I’ll seal to such a bond / And say there is much kindness in the Jew” (II.150-1). Antonio will come to figure himself as a martyr—a “sacrifice” (or “offering” in the sense of “payment of a debt”) at the hand of the unfeeling, predatory Jewish moneylender: “You may as well do anything most hard as seek to soften that—than which what’s harder?—his Jewish heart” (IV.1.78-9). Shylock

¹⁸ Also cf. ‘Che Vuoi?’, pp. 45-51 ff.

may not relent, but Antonio wants the bond. Just as he initially leaps at it, he continues to await Shylock's knife with the inflated humble devotion of a saint, savoring the opportunity it affords him to be a sacrifice at the hand of his "bloody creditor" (III.3.34).

... I do oppose
 My patience to his fury, and am armed
 To suffer with a quietness of spirit
 The very tyranny and rage of his (IV.10-13)

Or as he tells Bassanio,

Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
 And he repents not that he pays your debt;
 For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
 I'll pay it instantly with all my heart. (IV.1.276-9)

Something of the actual, undistorted version of Antonio's doom-eagerness—that is, prior to its sacrificial fetishization—seems to escape him in what would have been his final speech had he not been delivered from the yoke of Shylock's bond by the legal maneuverings of Portia.

Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you,
 For herein Fortune shows herself more kind
 Than is her custom: it is still her use
 To let the wretched man outlive his wealth
 To view with hollow eye and wrinkled brow

An age of poverty; from which ling'ring penance
Of such misery doth she cut me off. (IV.1.264-70)

“Kind,” “custom,” and “use” were all significant terms that figured into Shylock’s and Antonio’s earlier heated exchanges about usury. There we saw that it was Antonio’s “custom” neither to lend nor borrow at interest, while here it is the “custom” of “Fortune” (in association with his own future wealth or “fortune”) that is figured suggestively in the function of “use.” Fixated as he is on the vicissitudes of his own merchandise, he figures himself in the position of an object of exploitation, with the commodity value relation so ingrained in his ideological consciousness as to be naturalized by the figure of “Fortune”. It was Shylock who, without any qualms about “using it”, was so keen to assert “this is kind I offer” (“natural” was a common use of the Elizabethan “kind”), while here (because preparing to cut him off entirely) “Fortune” is “more kind than is her custom.” Her everyday mode of “kindness” is more akin to Shylock’s. Does Antonio finally concede that Shylock’s own ideological model of the world is the mirror of his own?

Antonio’s desire *needs* a Shylock, anti-Semitism, because it allows him to separate himself from his own antagonism with the social relations between things, providing a recognizable, living carrier for his reaction-formations and the discharge of his pent-up cruelty. So divested, in fantasy, he can imagine that he embodies a higher value, which transcends the value relation of commodities.

If Antonio, in this mode of displacement, becomes a sadist where Shylock is concerned, he would have to be a masochist¹⁹ when it comes to Bassanio—as well as to

¹⁹ The focus of Drew Daniel’s “Melancholic Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy.” See below.

himself. Not quite a “repressed” homosexual, his obvious romantic infatuation with Bassanio is however unrequited. Nor does their friendship exist in a sphere apart from the effects of the market economy. In fact, we are introduced to Bassanio when he comes to Antonio in need of a loan, with the scene paralleling, segueing into the one in which they defer to Shylock.

As a pragmatist, Bassanio himself may be a match for Shylock, if only of necessity, too far behind in the chase for surplus to be anything else—a slick, but decent enough, playboy. The romantic love Antonio bears him couldn’t have escaped his notice (it doesn’t anybody else’s). Does he use this love strategically to his advantage? Bassanio concocts a rather outrageously elaborate metaphor borrowed from archery as an overture to his proposal for taking (another) loan from Antonio—as chockfull of sexual innuendo as it is suggestive of the anxiety of the debtor, if not the gambler.²⁰

In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft
 I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
 The selfsame way, with more advised watch
 To find the other forth; and by adventuring both
 I oft found both ...
 I owe you much, and like a willful youth
 That which I owe is lost; but if you please
 To shoot another arrow that self way

²⁰ Also, not without parallels to Shylock’s citing of the example of Jacob, where Jacob’s “wands”, before which “the ewes being rank / In the end of autumn turned to the rams” (I.3.77-8), mirror the “arrows” or “shaft” shot by Bassanio, with both figurations suggesting an analogy between sexual reproduction (in the sense of an animalistic, violent act) and the proliferation of money. Also cf. Auden below.

Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
 As I will watch the aim, or to find both
 Or bring your latter hazard back again
 And thankfully rest debtor for the first. (I.1.140-52)

Ironically, “To shoot another arrow that self way which you did shoot the first” could sound like a better formula for losing the arrow a second time around. Antonio will predictably tell him not “to wind about my love with circumstance” (I.1.153-4)—quite literally what Bassanio has done—though he may find the erotic imagery tantalizing enough. Unfortunately, Antonio’s fortunes are at sea and he has “neither money, nor commodity / To raise a present sum” (I.2.178-9). Either way, coming together not quite on the basis of “their own mutual relations”—with Bassanio under no illusions about his need for a loan, Antonio held by his quite hopeless (indeed fatal) attraction—makes for a rather hysterical love interest on the part of Antonio, a love interest that Shakespeare seems ready to exploit at every turn for melodramatic purposes.

In the *mise-en-scène* that passes between Bassanio and Antonio as Bassanio prepares to depart for Belmont to woo Portia and Antonio has only Shylock’s knife to look forward to, Salarino describes how Antonio, after telling Bassanio, “slubber not business for my sake,”

Even there, his eye being big with tears,
 Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
 And with affection wondrous sensible
 He wrung Bassanio’s hand; and so they parted. (II.8.46-9)

Antonio's depth of feeling, incommensurately channeled through a formal, if not quite business-like, handshake, perfectly exemplifies Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's account of melodrama as developed by Ben Singer in *Melodrama and Modernity*.²¹

Melodrama foments psychic energies and emotions which the narrative "represses," blocks from full expression, gratification, or resolution, because they are fundamentally incompatible with the demands of dominant ... ideology ... As a consequence of this repression on the narrative level, the undischarged emotions, "which cannot be accommodated within the action ... are diverted or siphoned off."²² (Singer 39)

That Antonio will literally "ring" Bassanio's finger in the final Act—that is, as Portia's deputy, place the ring she'd earlier given Bassanio back onto his finger—hardly helps Antonio's emotions in the way of finding, beyond their "melodramatic siphoning off", a commensurate avenue of expression. The bond itself, if oddly strange the more real it becomes, and which would now also seem to be Antonio's way of proving his love for Bassanio, only goes to show how mystifying may be human relationships in the grip of the hysteria of conversion. We're never quite sure whether we're supposed to laugh at Antonio or to weep for him—if not exactly for the reasons he might like us to weep for him.

The merchant Antonio, whose actual human relations point to the hysterical

²¹ Singer will develop Smith's account of classical melodrama in patriarchal ideology as it is given fresh impetus by the conditions of modern capitalism. See also Singer, pp. 131-149, "Melodrama and the Consequences of Capitalism."

²² Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," *Screen* 18.2 (Summer 1977): pp. 113-118.

symptom of conversion, very repressed, is not surprisingly characterized by a “sadness”—whose origins it is one function of the story to teach him. As he opens the play, he says,

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
 It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
 But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
 What stuff ’tis mode of, whereof it is born,
 I am to learn;
 And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
 That I have much ado to know myself. (I.1.17)

Antonio does presume to know something—those things which do not make him sad. While Solanio and Salarino argue that the proverbial care of the merchant is the culprit, Antonio insists, “My merchandise makes me not sad”—even as he justifies why not by enumerating all of his ships, which, if only because of how readily he can account for them, conjures a great deal of a sense of care (cf. I.1.41-5). Of course, as “all my fortunes are at sea” (I.1.177), Antonio is actually being quite reckless. Antonio, we’ve seen, has something of a “death wish”, which is very much connected to “his merchandise”—and which, in fantasy, assumes a life of its own, however paranoid and melodramatic it may be.

If melancholy deprives the body of its vitality, “mortifying the flesh”, we can discover another explanation for how Antonio’s body could become ripe for lending itself as surety for a loan. “When did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend”

(I.3.130-1)? he asks Shylock before Shylock proposes his bond of flesh. We might rather expect, “take a breed *of* barren metal *for* his friend.” With a further pun on “metal” and “mettle”, is “barren metal *of* his friend” Antonio’s money or his body?

Yet as Antonio fetishizes his very melancholy—which assumes the fantasmatic existence qua sacrifice of collateral for a loan—it perhaps isn’t quite as anemic, or saint-like in sadness, as he would like us to believe. Gratiano isn’t falling for it, essentially calling Antonio a phony:

Why should a man whose blood is warm within
 Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
 I tell thee what, Antonio,
 There are a sort of men whose visages
 Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
 And do a willful stillness entertain
 With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
 Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,
 As who should say, “I am Sir Oracle,
 And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!” (I.1.83-94)

Bassanio will reassure Antonio, “Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice” (II.1.114-5). And yet, “Let no dog bark” does sound a lot like Antonio spurning Shylock “like a stranger cur” (I.3.115).

For some scholars, Antonio’s sadness is the upshot of his repressed homosexuality—his unrequited love for Bassanio. That could say more about our own

sexual hang-ups than Shakespeare's or his time's. Would it not help us more in the case of Antonio, the melancholic merchant of Venice, to draw the connection between his homosexuality and his greater melancholic fantasy? Homoerotic fantasy provides a support for his fantasmatic conviction about the vanity of the reproduction of the species: he's as repulsed by its "breeding" as he is by the breeding of the barren metal of money and barren mettle of his own flesh.²³ Or, to add insult to injury, "masochism to melancholy", does his unrequited love assure him that satisfaction will consist only in its denial? Why should Antonio be in love with his foremost debtor if not that such "love" is guaranteed—that is, on condition of Bassanio's financial indebtedness to him (which strains love, but from which his fantasy can extract a hard kernel)? "To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and in love" (I.1.130-1). Bassanio's connection between "money" and "love", if not prioritization, is clear enough.

Drew Daniel's formula for Antonio's melancholy is succinctly instructive:

Antonio's melancholy functions as a discursive switch point that allows it to 'carry' any or all of the multiple, overdetermining explanations his behavior solicits: merchant capitalist anxiety, Christian heroism, unrequited homoerotic desire, moral masochism. (Daniel 216)

²³ Auden, following up on the homology between the usurer and merchant—Antonio too makes money "breed as fast"—points to the poetic trope in the Middle Ages (e.g. in Dante) associating usury and sodomy. "With the rise of a mercantile economy in which money breeds money, it became an amusing paradox for poets to use the ignoble activity of usury as a metaphor for love, the most noble of human activities ... It can therefore hardly be an accident that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist [and mirror] a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex" ("Brothers & Others" 231).

As the “moral” moment of his “masochistic fantasy,” Antonio’s mortified flesh, like his anti-Semitism and his love, is given over in fantasy to its fetishization as a sacrifice. The great irony is that, in this way imagining he transcends the commodity value relation, he himself literally, materially embodies it. And yet is it any wonder that he winds up a commodity? A living testament to the hysteria of conversion to capitalism, might his strange fantasy even be, at a certain level, his most poignant form of protest against an ideological system that has so diminished his human relations? But would Antonio, who admittedly does not know himself, and whose first instinct is always evasion, be capable of admitting as much? Just as Antonio tells Bassanio not to “wind about my love with circumstance,” outward appearance for Antonio (his ephemeral merchandise, the tenuous, if effective social relations between things) is disowned in the name of a fantasmatic inward reality that stands apart, whereas “reality” is already the repressed underside of “appearance” itself. Gratiano’s jibe gets more bite here, for what is more *transparent* than this “inward reality”?

The theme of the three caskets evokes on a close reading the same logic of evasion. The casket episode would *seem* to have a more or less obvious message. “All that glisters is not gold” (II.8.65), the message waiting inside the gold casket for Portia’s more credulous suitors. Material wealth and luxury, gold and silver, the seductiveness of appearances, are transient and illusory, not the real, true source of value. Against this stands the lead casket, humble and unpretentious. Its “paleness moves me more” (III.2.106) because the one who chooses lead must be expecting nothing in return, willing to “risk and hazard all”—even charitable like Antonio. Though its material worldly value is rather meager, that only goes to show how much richer in spiritual goods must be the

one who chooses it. And yet, expecting nothing in return, all the rewards come flowing back. Bassanio, choosing lead, wins Portia and her fortune.

Freud certainly wasn't satisfied with such an explanation, taking for his cue the fact that these are "caskets" and the worldly depreciation of gold, silver, and lead alike, in which he discerns, not the promise of life, but a "death drive."²⁴ Freud wonders at Bassanio's relative "muteness" when it comes to making a speech about the lead casket. "If in psycho-analysis we were confronted with such a speech, we should suspect that there were concealed motives behind the unsatisfying reasons produced" (Freud 109). Bassanio's mere "thy paleness moves me more" leaves something to be desired in the way of "analysis", particularly when, serving to justify his choice of lead, it becomes the key to unlocking the chest in which Portia's portrait is contained, betokening his superior faculty of judgment and making him the worthiest of all of her suitors.

Investigating what he considers to be analogous variations on the theme of the three caskets in wider European mythology,²⁵ Freud deduces that the lead casket, purportedly containing the secret of life's true value, is actually (like "muteness" in psychoanalysis) a "representation of death" (115) "Life" is merely a "displacement" (ibid), or form of deception in regard to the "concealed motives:" the displacement of the death drive. The depreciation of the gold and silver caskets—which in themselves, as associated with desire and desert respectively, are more suggestive of Eros—would already seem to point to the death drive. And just as Freud would increasingly in his later

²⁴ An idea first formulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which also gives us the "repetition compulsion" as a version of the "return of the repressed."

²⁵ Freud becomes especially interested in the special case of "the third". Cordelia, Lear's "third daughter," is also supposed to represent life but is actually a harbinger of death. In certain instances of classical myth, the third as a symbol of death is quite transparent. Cf. "The Theme of the Three Caskets" esp. pp. 115-21.

career come to see Eros and Thanatos as inextricably woven together, as though separate manifestations of a single drive²⁶, the division into three separate caskets of gold, silver, and lead is really three variations upon a single theme: the tension between the drive for life and the drive for death, which in the theme of the caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* is at each point a pointer to death. “Worthless lead” is, we might say, what awaits within, as in any case their inevitable conclusion, the gold and silver caskets themselves:

Thanatos as the (albeit fantasmatically displaced) repressed inverse of Eros.

By way of analogy to capitalism, we could view the sequence that runs from declaiming on the outward appearance of the caskets to the message that awaits on the inside as the unmasking of commodity fetishism—of the commodity value relation, as embodied in money. Money in Venice took the form of gold and silver ducats, and we could, if somewhat conveniently, understand “gold”—historically a symbol of wealth despite its little “use value”—to be a representation of “surplus value” and “silver” (the more common form of currency) to be a representation of “exchange value”. Hence, just as Lacan modeled his concept of “surplus enjoyment” on Marxian “surplus value”²⁷, gold is associated with the More’s “desire,” which, incommensurate with its object,²⁸ leaves behind (like exploitation in the appropriation of surplus value) only a hard residue: choosing gold, the More is greeted with, not the proverbial lesson concerning the “emptiness of wealth,” but rather, “A carrion death, within whose empty eye / There is a

²⁶ In Lacanese: Eros (desire), in antagonism with itself—like the Lacanian *petit objet a*, incommensurate with its aim, wants to be thrown off: hence Thanatos (death drive). Thanatos is the inassimilable moment of desire. Also see Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 17-21.

²⁷ Cf. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 50-55.

²⁸ The Lacanian *objet petit a*.

written scroll” (II.7.63-4)!

“Silver,” a symbol of exchange value, is associated with Aragon’s sense of “desert”. But “exchange value”, or the “ideal of equivalent exchange”, is merely a euphemism for exploitation as omitted from the market value relation of commodities into which the commodity of labor value has also been interpolated.²⁹ Whatever Aragon may think he “deserves from Portia,” in exchange for his “wit” he is greeted only with “the portrait of a blinking idiot” (II.9.55).

“Lead”, though figured as a separate casket, is the hard leftover residue of gold and silver, of surplus value and exchange value, themselves—the repressed human relations of domination and servitude. As Freud implies by noting Bassanio’s “muteness” when he comes before the lead casket, it is not that “unpretentious lead” is to authenticity what the outward show of gold and silver is to inauthenticity. Rather, just as Bassanio says in association with gold, “ornament is but the guiled shore to a most dangerous sea” (III.2.97-8), what is “lead” but this “most dangerous sea” itself? Lead “rather threaten’st than dost promise aught” (I.105). Is it not appropriate that Bassanio, a pragmatic match for Shylock, should be able to recognize this—thus making him “worthy” of Portia and all of her wealth?

Scholars frequently point out the resonances of the lead casket with the bond of human flesh—whether from the side of Antonio (“whose paleness moves me more”), or

²⁹ Žižek writes, “The crucial point not to be missed here is that this negation is strictly *internal* to equivalent exchange, not its simple violation: the labour force is not ‘exploited’ in the sense that its full value is not remunerated; in principle at least, the exchange between labour and capital is wholly equivalent and equitable. The catch is that the labour force is a peculiar commodity, the use of which—labour itself—produces a certain surplus-value, and it is this surplus over the value of the labour force itself which is appropriated by the capitalist.” See *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 17.

from the side of Shylock (who “threatens”).³⁰ Yet while Antonio may become the, however willing, signatory of Bassanio’s bond, Shylock’s genius, however terrible, is to quite knowingly, “threateningly”, reconfigure the medium and value of commodity exchange in the harder currency of human flesh—the “lead” that hides behind gold and silver.

We can’t be certain at precisely what point Shylock hatches his bond plot, but the idea may have occurred to him more or less spontaneously when Bassanio approaches him for a loan and Antonio continues to shame him for his practice of usury. Of course, he wants “revenge” for all of the kicking and spitting and being called dog; but all of the kicking, spitting, and expletives are Antonio’s way of “rating me about my usances,” which, we’ve seen, Shylock takes so much to heart. Is the, initially, “merry sport” (I.3.143) of the bond, which “is kind I offer” (I.139)—not only “natural” but also connoting “likeness”, “measure”—a sort of object lesson for Antonio, as though to say, in capitalism, profit and exploitation (whether yours or mine), are, like domination and servitude, two sides of the same coin and, in the final analysis, to be paid for in human-bodily terms? Is not usury merely one way of acquiring such a surplus? Antonio’s merchandise, the buying and selling of luxury goods for a profit, is indeed another.

In his own effective version of the unmasking of the commodity value relation, Shylock has written into the terms of his bond the “obscene underside” of surplus value itself—the leftover human residue (exploitation) in the appropriation of surplus. It is in this way that Shylock’s, through his bond, is what Wallace Stevens calls “the

³⁰ See *Shylock Is Shakespeare*, pp. 1-10 ff.

accomplishment of an extremist at an exercise.”³¹ And yet, fixating on his bond even at the point of its subversive potential, Shylock, still more than the self-deluded Antonio, *apotheosizes* the hysteria of conversion to capitalism: he has literally transfigured the “relations between men” into the “fantastic form of a relation between things.” Shylock, Jessica has heard say, “would rather have Antonio’s flesh than twenty times the value of the sum that he did owe him” (III.2.286-7). Wholly incommensurate with what we should expect of “human relations”, Shylock, like Antonio—whose loss of flesh “Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not” (III.3.35-6)!—can’t but take a turn for the melodramatic.

As Shylock pursues his own hysterical fantasy with the hysterical conviction of reality—an extremist all the way—even his famous lament for his “ducats” and “daughter”, conflating the two with equal emotional investment, sounds less pathos-ridden than simply melodramatic,³² *especially* because, by this point, Jessica, stealing his ducats, has abandoned his house, converted to Christianity, and married Lorenzo (one of Antonio’s gang). As Solanio recounts, mirroring Salarino’s tableaux for Antonio’s parting with Bassanio,

I never heard a passion so confused,
 So strange, outrageous, and so variable
 As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
 “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!

³¹ See *Shylock Is Shakespeare*, p.1. The line comes from Stevens’ poem “The Auroras of Autumn.”

³² Recent critics have argued that this is a precursor of Lear, which seems unlikely. On the other hand, the *afterlife* of his lament, like Shylock himself, has been transfigured with a life of its own—essentially the subject of Gross’s book.

Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
 Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!
 A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
 Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
 And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones,
 Stolen by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
 She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats! (II.8.12-23)

The crude, “melodramatic” juxtaposition of “ducats” and “daughter”, a clear gesture towards Marlowe’s Barabas, may convey an impression of the unfeeling Jewish utilitarian capitalist anti-Semitic stereotype in all of its crudity. Yet not only is the passage related through Solanio’s derisive, second-hand tableaux; we can also infer from the two tableaux that, whereas Antonio *transfers* his own “debt with capitalism” (paying Bassanio’s debt in fantasmatic love), Shylock constrains the fantasy—“the fantastic form of a relation between things”—to immerse itself in reality: unlike Barabas, Shylock doesn’t *equate* “ducats” and “daughter.” His daughter Jessica is she who has exploited or betrayed him by stealing his ducats. “Find the girl! She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats!”

In a similar way Shylock may, like Barabas, be as exemplary of the stereotype itself as of the logic of how “the other” could, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, become the stereotype—a logic made fierce with Shylock’s own sensational exclamation, “Since I am a dog, beware my fangs” (III.3.7)! Such a logic, in fact paying homage to the fantasy, the caricature (or, in Shylock’s case, *self*-caricature), only situates “the Jew”, as deformed

by hatred and revenge, within a space of its fantasmatic verisimilitude. Much more eloquent, evoking his “Shakespearean reality” (which is to say, the reality at the heart of the fantasy), Shylock, asked why he should hold to his bond of flesh, explains,

He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? – fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that ... The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better thy instruction. (III.1.54-66)

As powerfully eloquent as Shylock’s words are, Harold Bloom makes the interesting comment,

I myself ... am not moved by his “Hath not a Jew” litany, since what he is saying there is now of possible interest only to wavering skinheads and similar sociopaths. Perhaps it was a revelation for Shakespeare’s audience, but it had better not be such for any audience now. (“Invention” 180)

It may be too offensively obvious to have to spell out. And yet, what exactly is Shylock's "revelation" here? Whether or not it was a revelation for Shakespeare's audience that Jews are "fed with the same food," it clearly isn't a revelation for *Shylock's* Venetian audience: against his better judgment, he even dines with them (cf. II.5). Perhaps Bloom underestimates the subtler implications of his own insight. A sociopathic fantasy is already in excess of any "factual observations" it might be able to glean from daily reality. Of course the Venetians know that Shylock has eyes and hands. The real critical thrust of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" litany is not literally "what he is saying here"—or even as, say, a plea for "liberal multicultural tolerance". Rather, in spelling out the obvious—not only for us but even to those for whom his revelation is intended and yet, alarmingly, still called for—he offers a critique of the *ideology* of multicultural tolerance itself, one of capitalism's most cunning ideological procedures³³ and indeed what makes the cosmopolitan city center of Venice and financial capital of the world since the late Middle Ages go round.

According to Žižek, "Liberal multiculturalism masks an old barbarism with a human face" ("Guardian"). We may see plenty of this old barbarism in *The Merchant of Venice* (though not a drop of blood is shed, it is oddly one of Shakespeare's most violent plays—which is saying a lot for Shakespeare), and yet the play also explicitly thematizes the human face that masks it. Even Shylock and Antonio "tolerate" each other as men who do business together. "I would be friends with you" (I.3.135-6), says Shylock as they discuss the terms of Bassanio's loan. Antonio knows that Shylock has "eyes" and "hands". And yet, he spits and kicks at him as though he were a dog. Portia, who

³³ See Žižek, *Violence*, pp. 140-177.

entertains her diverse suitors with a great deal of “tolerance”—feasting, ceremony, civility, excellent manners applied equally to all—becomes quite cruel, indeed racist, behind closed doors (cf. I.2.38-102). According to James Shapiro,

Much of play’s vitality can be attributed to the ways in which it scrapes against a bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual, and religious difference of others. I can think of no other literary work that does so as unrelentingly and as honestly. To avert our gaze from what the play reveals about the relationship between cultural myths and peoples’ identities will not make irrational and exclusionary attitudes disappear. Indeed, these darker impulses remain so elusive, so hard to identify in the normal course of things, that only in instances like productions of this play do we get to glimpse these cultural faultlines.

(Shapiro 228)

I will have more to say about the “elusive darker impulses” of the “cultural faultline” that antagonizes relations between “the Jew” and “the Christian”, Shylock and Antonio. But we shouldn’t overlook the play’s suggestion that “tolerance of culture”, preached in the name of amicably conducting business across a hostile cultural divide (or bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual, and religious difference of others), is also a way for capitalism to avert our gaze from its own ideology—which actually structures such “beliefs” in support of its own fantasy.

On the one hand, cultural exoticism, fascination with the foreign (such as we see in attitudes surrounding the reception of Portia’s diverse suitors at Belmont) becomes—like “the opiate of the people”—an intoxicating soporific that distracts from socio-

economic antagonism. What actually has an ideological hold on Portia in her choice of suitor is not cultural idiosyncrasy. Subjugated to her father's—"patriarchal capitalism's"—will for choosing her a husband (which means somebody to assume control of her estate, thus negating her own economic agency³⁴), she has no choice.

On the other hand, the inflating of "culture" and its "differences" serves as an arbitrary, fetishized vehicle for displaced economic antagonism in mechanisms of scapegoating. Antonio's martyrdom and anti-Semitism, we've seen, have less to do with his "Christianity" or Shylock's "Judaism" than with his role as a (even *the*) merchant in Venice. Does the law care one way or the other whether Shylock is a Jew? Of course not.

³⁴ Oddly, the lottery method of the three caskets of gold, silver and lead, is intended as some form of insurance to protect her from goldiggers. Yet the question is in earnest, as it will again impress itself on us in court scene when, disguised as the lawyer Balthasar, she plays such a formative role in the outcome of Shylock's trial. We've seen how Antonio figures himself as a sacrifice. "Portia," appropriately, means "sacrifice" (cf. III.2.57): bound by her father's will, she becomes a "sacrifice" to his method of choosing her a husband, and her portrait—"she herself" (cf. I.40)—is already, like a sacrifice contained inside the (threatening death) lead casket, which also figures her as an economic sacrifice. Why is Portia at first so adamant in defending Shylock's right to his bond, waiting till the very last possible second to stay his knife? Witnessing the intimate exchanges between Bassanio and Antonio at the trial (and after all Antonio has dedicated his body to her husband), we can't dismiss the possibility that there's a piece of Portia that, at least in fantasy, would like to see Shylock cut into her rival's flesh. If that is a fantasy she doesn't want to make real, the question remains why, beyond staying Shylock's knife, Portia also denies Shylock the right to a cash surplus and even his right to the principal. We can't forget that the money Bassanio would be handing over to Shylock is Portia's money. And yet, has not all Belmont just been transferred over to Bassanio? "Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted" (I.165). However insignificant may be nine thousand or a hundred thousand ducats to Portia, Bassanio's readiness to ease into the role of executor of her estate—he's all too ready to pay Shylock the ducats, while Portia halts him—is a troubling reminder that, so long as the means of her life are under her husband's control, keeping her in dependency, so her life itself is not her own, but a "sacrifice." In this way, "apostrophizing" his wife, Bassanio tells Antonio, "I am married to a wife which is as dear to me as life itself; but life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life. I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all here to this devil, to deliver you" (II. 284-5). Having figured Portia as a sacrifice, the remark is followed by one by Shylock who, insinuating his conviction that the choice of husband for his daughter should be a question of his own will, may recall to mind Portia's own father. "These be the Christian husbands! I have a daughter; / Would any of the stock of Barabas / Had been her husband, rather than a Christian" (II. 293-6)! Might Portia at this moment, thoroughly disillusioned in a fate that ineluctably pursues her as a sacrifice—whether for father or husband—decide to turn the tables? Displacing the animus onto the old man Shylock, Portia, it would seem, decides to take a surplus—offer up a sacrifice—of her own. It is Antonio who will deliver the *coup de grâce* of the forced conversion, but Portia is all too ready to orchestrate it.

His legal bond must be upheld because to deny it “will much impeach the justice of the state, / Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations” (III.3.29-31). It is only as his bond is also recognized to effectively undermine the political and economic power of Venice, threatening the smooth functioning of commerce, that his status as a Jewish “alien” (IV.1.347) is invoked in order to undermine Shylock’s legal bond.

Though Shylock is “the Jew” for the citizens of Venice, what makes his “Hath not a Jew” litany subversive is that it actually has nothing to do with Jews—thus he exposes “the Jew” as an ideological fantasy-scenario of capitalism. Antonio has mocked his gains and scorned his losses because he is a Jew. But a Jew is the same as a Christian. “Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons.” If that has become a celebration of multiculturalism, it also suggests, like Antonio’s sociopathic fantasy, that the “faultline” here has nothing to do with Jews. “What’s his reason? I am a Jew.” What resonates here is the “period”. “Jew” is a stand-in for something else. In fact, if we can get away from the resonance with contemporary multiculturalism, Shylock (with his many “if-then” clauses) seems to be still more interested in the twin concepts of “measure” and the “body”—with what, in the measure of commodity exchange, is concealed (“organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions”) behind the force of paper contracts to regulate trade and commerce. “It shall go hard but I will better thy instruction.” And what exactly is this “instruction?”³⁵ His legal bond of flesh.

³⁵ “Instruction,” we might further note in anticipation of the following section, is alternately how an examining magistrate directs legal proceedings following an investigation, how a judge “directs” a jury as it meditates a verdict, and what a “principal,” the true “author” of his representative’s words and actions, conveys to that representative, authorizing him to act on his behalf in the way he does.

The question of “measure”, even in its excesses, continues to occupy center stage in the notorious kangaroo court of Act 4. It may seem odd that Shylock’s bond is wholly recognized (at least as a potential claim) by the city’s courts—perhaps a melodramatic trope for a legal system that was famed for its protection of commerce. In his *An Itinerary* the English traveler Fynes Moryson notes the Venetian judicial system’s “strict observing of justice” and writes that its courts have “singular justice in cases of debt and have particular judges over merchants’ bankrupting” (Moryson 109). It may then be no surprise that Shylock’s demand for the penalty of the economic bond fails only when he is beaten at his own game: the legal grounds on which he pursues his bond turn against him in accordance with the not uncommon theatrical convention described by A.R. Braummuller as “the Biter bit.” “Shylock, seemingly in command of his enemies, himself becomes a victim through the very means he employed to gain that victory, now empty and reversed upon him” (Braummuller xvi).

But if Shylock’s is the “bite of the law” in the first place, who is the “biter” and who the “bit” to begin with? Braummuller’s phrase is suggestive on more than one count. As “surplus enjoyment” comes to be inscribed within the system of commodity exchange (that is, law), a rhetoric of “passion versus reason” runs throughout the play, and metaphors of “animality” abound. “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cool decree” (I.2.17-18). Shylock desires Antonio’s flesh. And yet, re-appropriated by exchange through his very bond, his desire—though he will insist on there being no rational explanation for it—could also give a sense of the strange, excessive logic of measure—the trading on desire—operative within capitalism. Seeing that Shylock won’t relent, Gratiano lashes out at him:

O be thou damned, inexecrable dog,
 And for thy life let justice be accused!
 Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
 To hold opinion with Pythagoras
 That souls of animals infuse themselves
 Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
 Governed a wolf who, hanged for human slaughter,
 Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
 And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam
 Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
 Are wolvis, bloody, starved, and ravenous. (IV.1.128-38)

Shylock has also been “called dog” and “spurned like a stranger cur” by the hardly less “wolvis” Antonio. In fact, the image of the animal lurking behind the commodity and twisting out of measure the smooth functioning of commerce from the outset pervades all Venice. Here we learn of “strange fellows ... / Some that will evermore ... / ... laugh like parrots at a bagpiper” (I.1.51-3). If “silence is only commendable in a neat’s tongue dried and a maid not vendible” (I.1.111-12), is it any wonder that—more soberly?—“the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence, and discourse grow commendable in none but parrots” (III.5.40-2)? Before they travel to Belmont, Bassanio has urged Gratiano himself, who is “too wild, too rude, and bold of voice,” to “allay with some cold drops of modesty thy skipping spirit ... thy wild behavior” (II.2.169-74). As Jessica and Lorenzo (following Shylock’s scandalous conversion at the trial’s finale) try to “outnight each

other,” exchanging instances of the most scandalous episodes from classical mythology, Lorenzo associates her stricken conscience, stirred by the music, with what, under the subdued light of the moon and soothing musical accompaniment, is surely intended to “mask an old barbarism with a human face”:

The reason is, your spirits are attentive.
 For do but note a wild and wanton herd
 Or race of youthful and unhandled colts
 Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
 Which is the hot condition of their blood;
 If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,
 Or any air of music touch their ears,
 You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,
 Their savage eyes turned to a modest gaze. (V.1.70-8)

When Shylock learns that Jessica has traded his late wife Leah’s ring “for a monkey,” his response doesn’t simply suggest, like his bond itself, his greater interest in the human *behind* the commodity: “I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I wouldn’t have sold it for a wilderness of monkeys” (III.2.112-3). Does not “wilderness of monkeys” also aptly sum up the citizens of Venice? “I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What’s that good for?” Salarino timidly inquires. “To bait fish withal” (III.1.49).

If Shylock is figured by the Venetians, as here by Gratiano, as an “animal”, he is particularly keen to counter the charge with the, apparently incongruous, assertion, “I stand for law.” Inasmuch as Shylock “stands for law,” never swerving from his legal

bond, he stands for the law of Venice. And inasmuch as the city of Venice likewise stands for law—helpless but to honor Shylock’s bond, and hardly less “strange” for it—the suggestion is not only that they too are animals, but that a hard residue of animalistic desire is what the law represses under the disguised shape of its rational measure.

Shylock demonstrates no small sally of wit when he suggests that the fury with which Gratiano lashes out at him only recoils back upon Gratiano himself. Gratiano is now the irrational, blood-thirsty animal, while Shylock—having just a moment ago declaimed in justification of his bond, “affection, master of passion, sways it to the mood”—presents himself as the seat of cool, measured reason.

Till thou canst rail the sea from off my bond,
 Thou but offend’st thy lungs to speak so loud.
 Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall
 To cureless ruin. (IV.1.139-42)

Portia’s (“Balthasar’s”) initial plea for “mercy” may seem gentler than Gratiano’s “rude” approach—indeed it is figured as a point transcendent to law itself. When Shylock asks “on what compulsion” he must be merciful, Portia responds,

The quality of mercy is not strained;
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes ...
 And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
 When mercy seasons justice. (IV.1.182-95)

Portia, along with Antonio, will make a travesty of mercy not strained when, immediately falling back upon law, she cites the city's legal seizure of Shylock's goods as the measure of justice for his effective attempt on Antonio's life. While Portia appeals to the duke's and then Antonio's "mercy" on Shylock's behalf, Antonio "mercifully" supports the duke's remittance to a fine of the forfeiture of one half of Shylock's goods to the city "in exchange" for Shylock's agreement to "let me have / The other half in use, to render it / Upon his death unto the gentleman / That lately stole his daughter." Further, Shylock must "presently become a Christian" (II.380-5).

Portia's mercy speech doesn't merely devolve into "hypocrisy". "Mercy" from the outset already circulates within the sphere of justice—indeed mercy does "season justice" by lending it the transcendence of mercy, thus disguising its roots in predatory animality. Leaving it to Shylock's own discretion to be merciful is also a way of upholding the prior legitimacy of his bond. His mercy would be an example of "the exception that proves the rule." Portia insists on Shylock's *right* to the bond. "There is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree establishèd / ... it cannot be done" (II.216-20). Accordingly, "Then must the Jew be merciful" (I.181).

We see the same ironical figuration of mercy strained replayed by the duke. When Portia appeals to the duke's mercy on Shylock's behalf, the duke boasts, "That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it" (IV.1.366-7). Yet when Antonio sets his own conditions for the exchange of his mercy, the duke decrees, "He shall do this, or else I do recant the pardon that I late pronouncèd here." Mercy, as his own *prior right* either to grant or to withhold, already circulates within the discourse of measure—and indeed makes clear the points of imbalance in that discourse. Are not

Portia's lines "twice blest, it blesseth him who gives and him who takes" inscribed with the further, bitter irony that these are in fact the same person? It blesses the one who, vested ("blessed") with the *power* to grant or withhold it, like a wealthy CEO writing out bonus checks for the rank and file, is thus also entitled to take something back in exchange for it. Particularly in regard to the forced conversion, the quality of being "twice blest" could make for an extraordinary critique of "Christian mercy"—Antonio's presumption that the convert too is blessed by the act of "taking" this conversion.

And yet, it is just where many would see Portia as at her most sophisticated—her sly, subtle legal maneuver for first dissolving Shylock's bond—that she may have actually touched "mercy not strained." Indeed this is the very moment where the subversive potential of Shylock's own bond emerges. Yet the conditions Portia stipulates for Shylock's cutting of Antonio's flesh suggest that Shylock's bond *is* subversive because it unmask and overturns the logic of measure itself—which means Shylock can't have his bond. As Shylock has written into his very bond "flesh and blood" (by taking Antonio's flesh Antonio will bleed to death), he forces the "fantasy capitalism" we've seen throughout to confront the fantasy head on. Contracts (bonds), the gold and silver caskets, Antonio's distantiated, seafaring self-sufficient merchandise, actually carry with them a hard human residue that has been repressed by the commodity value relation. With Shylock's bond of human flesh, repression returns in a non-displaced mode, thus unleashing desire, as subversive potential, back upon capitalism itself. Yet inasmuch as it undermines the commodity value relation, Shylock's bond, while inscribing what is repressed in all bonds, thus threatening the system of commodity exchange, doesn't make sense *as* a bond.

Portia doesn't simply evade Shylock's subversive bond by rejecting it as way of perpetuating the fantasy. She dissolves it just where it does away with itself. Portia may not know that she know this, and yet, by noting that Shylock's bond doesn't entitle him to one "jot of blood" (1.304), or to "more or less than a just pound, be it but so much / As makes it light or heavy in the substance / Or division of the twentieth part / Of one poor scruple" (1.328), she has, in dissolving Shylock's bond, dissolved the commodity value relation itself at exactly the point at which it comes into existence: at the threshold of repression and its (non-displaced) return, at the point where the (repressed) "leaden flesh" becomes the blood of life, and the ideal of equivalent exchange (a "just pound," which is impossible) is exposed as a euphemism for exploitation. Mercy not strained really does "transcend law"—that is, it subverts law.

But how should the capitalist process of production, driven by surplus value, proceed without the taking of excess, without exploitation? Of course, with "mercy seasoning justice," where have we even heard about exploitation except where Shylock is concerned? What is so shocking about Shylock's sudden announcement that the city is trafficking in slavery is that it should come so unexpectedly. Shylock's bond of human flesh, for which he may merit the superlative of "the most impenetrable cur that ever kept with men," is supposed to be unique. What is so subversive is his direct analogy:

You have among you many a purchased slave,
 which like your asses and your dogs and mules
 You use in abject and in slavish parts,
 Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,

“Let them be free! ...” ... You will answer,
 “The slaves are ours.” So do I answer you.
 The pound of flesh which I demand of him
 Is dearly bought, ’tis mine, and I will have it.
 If you deny me, fie upon your law! (IV.1.90-101)

As it happens, Shylock, denied his surplus, is taken back over into measure, which produces quite excessive claims of “surplus” on him in turn.³⁶

The question of the forced conversion, as the most blatant of Shakespeare’s original contributions to the pound-of-flesh tradition,³⁷ tends to be a locus of critical interest and debate. Yet, as a dramatic choice, it is entirely appropriate as the finale of the agon with Shylock, of the agon between the Jew and the Christian. (As the stereotype of the Jew par excellence, Shylock *is* “the Jew”). We’ve considered how this agon is more notable for being interpolated into the ideology of capitalism, but, as a first approach to extending the issue further, we can note that not only Antonio’s kicking, spitting, and anti-Semitic tirades, but also a resonant, continuous subtext evoking an “ancient quarrel” pervades the play. If Judaism is the “parent religion” of Christianity, the theme of fathers who, even after they have outlived their time, continue to hold a claim on the living is

³⁶ With each new “tarry a little,” Portia’s increasing pitch of subtle cruelty is perhaps matched only by Antonio, begging the question why Portia, who at any rate is only “playing” the lawyer, should get so carried away. Cf. footnote 34.

³⁷ Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone* (1378) is one of the two major source texts Shakespeare made use of for his *The Merchant of Venice* (the other is the *Gesta Romanorum*, which features the three caskets as the method set forth in Portia’s father’s will for finding her a husband). In Fiorentino’s tale, a young gentleman marries a wealthy woman at Belmont. As he is in need of money, his friend, desperate to help, goes to a (unnamed) Jewish moneylender, who demands a pound of flesh if the money is not paid back. While, in regard to the major plot points of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare relies heavily on these two sources, the forced conversion, which is also missing from Marlowe’s play, appears to be Shakespeare’s own invention.

especially obvious in the case of Portia, whose late father's way of finding her a husband means, "So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (I.2.23-4). Shylock is a reminder that, though the Christian "New" Testament is supposed to have replaced the Jewish "Old" Testament (that is the whole point), it—if more troublingly Christ's own origins—won't go away. As Shylock's Christian servant Lancelot comes to question his legitimacy (cf. II.2.68 ff.), and the question becomes conflated with his "questionable" service to Shylock, the suggestion is that, by taking up in Shylock's house, he effectively becomes "illegitimate" as an "erstwhile Jew". "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer" (II.2.105). On the other hand, as a *Christian* in the service of the Jew Shylock, Lancelot recapitulates the illegitimacy of Christianity itself so long as Judaism, whose will continues to hold a claim on its Oedipal rival, persists in imposing itself. To convert Shylock then means, metonymically (and whether or not Shakespeare is being ironic), to lay the ghost of an ancient quarrel—"the Jewish question".³⁸

The difficulty of this explanation is its reliance on Judeo-Christian ideology ("theology"), which may already be a displacement. Religious ideology, we've seen, becomes less notable for what it says in itself than for its role in structuring the ideological fantasy in support of capitalism. As Shylock instructs Jessica, "Lock up my doors ... / Nor thrust your head into the public street / To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces" (II.5.29-33). What Shylock calls his own "sober house" (I.36) is the greatest asset of his thrift. Jessica, of course, does not convert to Christianity to "save her

³⁸ According to Braunmuller, "To understand how an Elizabethan audience might have understood Shylock's forced conversion, we must remember that such conversions were regarded as beneficent. Only converted could a Jew hope for (Christian) salvation, and Christian belief held that the 'conversion of the Jews' (Andrew Marvell's phrase) would precede the end of time and the world's final turn to eternal joy (see Romans 11.11-12, 15-16, 15-16)." See "Introduction," xlvii.

soul”. Rather Lorenzo can show her a good time. Meanwhile, Lorenzo has not only found a ready convert in this “most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew” (II.3.10-11), but one who is willing to steal Shylock’s money for them to squander on their honeymoon. It is Lancelot who best sums up the real “value” of this “conversion”: “This making of Christians will shortly raise the price of hogs; if we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money” (III.5.21-3). As Lancelot invokes the law of supply and demand, the religious question is trumped by its direct economic consequence.

But Lancelot admits he can’t explain Antonio’s *desire* to convert Shylock. And yet there must really be something to this ancient quarrel. If Shylock were merely an arbitrary scapegoat—that is, as the nominal other called “the Jew”, a convenient target for the displacement of (and sadistic balancing act against) his own masochistic fantasy in his agon with capitalism—Antonio would be wiser to let Shylock stay a Jew. While religious, and other, ideology, may be “stitched” to the “master signifier” of capital, that doesn’t negate the nether side of the stitching point.³⁹ How has the *historical* dialectic of Judaism and Christianity been interpolated into the ideology of capitalism?

Useful here is Žižek’s discussion of anti-Semitism by way of the Lacanian concept of ‘Che vuoi?’ The question “what does the other want”—or “the call of the other’s desire”—designates how, on the one hand, as social beings, we are interpellated into ideology by the thought, or desire, of the other.⁴⁰ Yet the other, its desire, like the

³⁹ Cf. “The ideological quilt,” *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 95-97.

⁴⁰ Lacan’s phrase, “desire is the desire of the other.”

objet petit a, is always other. Ideology provides an “answer” to the unfathomable, unbearable dimensions of this otherness and its calling desire. Like ideology itself,

Fantasy is an answer to this ‘Che vuoi?; it is an attempt to fill out the gap of the question with an answer. In the case of anti-Semitism, the answer to “What does the Jew want?” is a fantasy of ‘Jewish conspiracy’: a mysterious power of Jews to manipulate events, to pull the strings behind the scenes. The crucial point that must be made here on a theoretical level is that fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the desire of the Other: by giving us a definite answer to the question ‘What does the Other want?’, it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which the Other wants something from us, but we are at the same time incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify. (“Sublime Object” 128)

We could say that ideology, whether in capitalist or pre-capitalist societies, has something in common with the reality principle. It imposes an order, a symbolic meaning on what can't be symbolized—the opening of the desire of the Other. Yet while we may be “incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation,” ideology is incorrigible. In this way Žižek speaks of a “primordial repression” of the abyss, or “primordial traumatism” (“lack in the Other”) as the first and last moment of every ideology. But whereas in pre-capitalist society the abyss is repressed beneath or beyond the “positive human relations”—which strive, like love, to fill a void that persists—in capitalism might the human relations, which are already repressed,

themselves first emerge as the abyss? That is, the abyss of the Other, the unbearable gap of ‘Che vuoi?’, is the abyss of human relations.

The repressed abyss of human relations in capitalism could certainly make for a tense gathering of neighbors—“tolerance” notwithstanding. The question becomes one of how to distinguish between the “Jewish” and “Christian” modes of comportment towards the “abyss of the neighbor”. What is so terrifying about Shylock, much more than what he actually wants, namely, the pound of flesh, is that he insists on the unfathomability of his desire.

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have
 A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
 Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that,
 But say it is my humor. Is it answered?
 What if my house be troubled with a rat,
 And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
 To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
 Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
 Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
 And others, when the bagpipe sings i’ th’ nose,
 Cannot contain their urine ... Now for your answer:
 As there is no firm reason to be rendered
 Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
 Why he a harmless necessary cat ...

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
 More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
 I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
 A losing suit against him. Are you answered? (IV.1.40-62)

As the question “what does he want” proves “incapable of being translated into a positive interpellation,” Shylock effectively inverts the “fantasy of Jewish conspiracy” as an *answer* to ‘Che vuoi?’ by turning it back into a *question*. As he in this way breaks open the gap of the Other’s desire—a gap on whose repression capitalism depends—the citizens of Venice strive to fill out this gap with an “answer”. For Gratiano: the predatory, irrational, bloodthirsty animal—already an answer to ‘Che vuoi?’ Antonio, the real anti-Semite of the play, more profoundly than Gratiano intimates the real anxiety that takes hold of Venice in the presence of Shylock: the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss:

I pray you think you question with the Jew.
 You may as well go stand upon the beach
 And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
 ... You may as well forbid the mountain pines
 To wag their high tops and to make no noise
 When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
 You may as well do anything most hard⁴¹

⁴¹ The question of the “hard heart” raises a classic scriptural locus: where God “hardens” Pharaoh’s heart so that Moses may inflict the plagues upon his kingdom. This in turn relates to the theology of grace and the status of will—in Luther, notably.

As seek to soften that – than which what’s harder? –

His Jewish heart. (IV.1.70-80)

Antonio’s ominous foreboding of this “hard heart” is not without hints of the Jewish Yahweh, from whom Shylock may well have learned something:

Is not the Jewish God the purest embodiment of this ‘Che Vuoi’? , of the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss, with the formal prohibition on ‘making an image of God’—on filling out the gap of the Other’s desire with a positive fantasy-scenario? (“Sublime Object” 128)

Shylock himself may seem to fill out this “gap” with the “positive fantasy scenario” of his bond. But the question remains what does he actually want from it? Žižek continues,

Even when, as in the case of Abraham, this God pronounces a concrete demand (ordering Abraham to slaughter his own son), it remains quite open what he really wants from it: to say that with this horrible act Abraham must attest to his infinite trust and devotion to God is already an inadmissible simplification. The basic position of a Jewish believer is, then, that of Job: not so much lamentation as incomprehension, perplexity, even horror at what the Other (God) wants with the series of calamities that are being inflicted upon him. (128)

Might Shylock stand before the “law of Venice” in the “basic position of a Jewish believer” standing before the “law of God”? Indeed, the “law” (“Torah”) in Judaism is in its origins perhaps much closer to the law in Kafka than it is to the law of its later normative figurations (as in Leviticus). Shylock really does “stand for law!” But For

Shylock, the law itself is already contiguous with the opening of the desire of the Other, with the otherwise repressed abyss of human relations in capitalism, before which he stands in incomprehension, perplexity and horror at what the Other (the law) wants, even as he commits this incomprehension, perplexity, and horror back upon the law.

According to Žižek,

Jews persist in this enigma of the Other's desire, in this traumatic point of pure 'Che vuoi?' which provokes an unbearable anxiety insofar as it cannot be symbolized, 'gentrified', through sacrifice or loving devotion. It is precisely at this level that we should situate the break between Christianity and the Jewish religion—the fact that in contrast to the Jewish religion of anxiety, Christianity is a religion of love. The term 'love' is to be conceived here ... in its dimension of fundamental deception: we try to fill out the unbearable gap of Che vuoi?, the opening of the Other's desire, by offering ourselves to the Other as the object of its desire. (130)

Antonio may offer himself, his body, as "the object" of Bassanio's desire—even Bassanio's desire for money. But what is he to do with the unbearable anxiety he feels in the presence of Shylock, who opens within the answer "Jew" only the gap of the question? Žižek writes, "Christianity is to be conceived as an attempt to 'gentrify' the Jewish 'Che vuoi?' through the act of love and sacrifice" (ibid). If Antonio makes an act of love and sacrifice by offering his body as the object of Bassanio's desire for money, for Shylock, Antonio's bond, as the "object" of Shylock's desire, can't be translated into a positive interpellation. In this way, insisting on his "hard bond," he not only constrains

the fantasy—the commodity fetishism that fills out ‘Che vuoi?’ in capitalism—to immerse itself in reality, but, opening up the answer of his bond into an incomprehensible question, he also traverses the fantasy itself.

The forced conversion, hardly a “sacrifice”, is a variation on *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* (“accursed man” or “man set apart”⁴²) is an “exception.”⁴³ Defying any conceivable answer to ‘Che vuoi?’, *homo sacer* can’t be a sacrifice, though he or she can be killed by any citizen with impunity. Antonio may spare Shylock’s life, but why must Antonio have him convert in the first place but that he appears as an unbearable question in need of an answer?

Shylock may be “fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,” and so forth. But if, ironically, Shylock has just made a latent plea for “universal brotherhood”, he has done so not on grounds of “love and sacrifice”, but rather, like Job, “incomprehension, perplexity, horror at the calamities that are being inflicted upon him.” “What’s his reason? I am a Jew.”

Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “subversion and containment” in the Renaissance, which he finds to be especially applicable to Shakespeare’s history plays,⁴⁴ could perhaps also apply to *The Merchant of Venice*. Greenblatt’s basic thesis is that the dominant ideology, in skepticism towards and antagonism with itself, “provisionally adopts” the “subversive thought of the other” (with a particularly efficacious avenue in the theater, where others have a chance to speak for themselves as a matter of form as well as

⁴² With likely origins, picked up by Roman law, in the Hebrew concept of “quodesh.” Also an “outlaw” (in the Middle Ages literally referred to as a “wolf”).

⁴³ See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1998.

⁴⁴ See “Invisible Bullets,” 1988.

intention) as a way of hypothetically undermining the prevailing ideological order. However, in the process of entertaining this subversive fantasy, it becomes alarmed by the threat to its own ideology, and thus reasserts (“contains”) itself. Like Antonio’s “poignant protest”, perhaps the city too entertains the subversive thought of Shylock’s bond—that is, it doesn’t initially support Shylock’s bond simply to protect commerce but as its own subversive fantasy with which it on some level identifies but only up to a point. In this way Portia herself “contains Shylock” after testing subversion to the limit. Yet the subversion and containment hypothesis would hardly seem to hold at the level of the play itself—that is, us the audience. Indeed, containment itself is contained by Shakespeare’s ideological critique of it.

As many have observed, Shylock, though vanquished and contained by the law, won't go away. His “I am content” sounds less like his than theirs. Nor has the denouement of Act 5 that apparently resolves everything (even Antonio’s lost ships are accounted for) actually resolved much of anything.

The subplot of the rings may resonate with larger themes: the (fantasy) construction of a human value that stands above the commodity value. “There’s more depends on this than on the value,” Bassanio tells Portia (as Balthasar), who, as an ironical “test”, demands the wedding ring as a form of payment for a job well done. She eventually prevails, and Gratiano likewise gives his ring to “the doctor’s clerk” (Nerissa). They’ve been set up, and all will be forgiven. Still Gratiano—and by analogy Bassanio—may have good reason, in closing out the play, to “fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (V.1.306-7). Though perhaps the rule in Shakespeare, the fidelity of the lovers is highly questionable from the outset. If Bassanio and Portia apparently have

some prior attraction—she oddly recalls Bassanio as “a scholar and a soldier” (I.2.108), and *not* a businessman—he and Gratiano have, after all, journeyed to Belmont in the first place as part of a larger wooing campaign for Portia’s wealth, and her anxiety over the implications of her father’s arrangements for her never quite leave her. A little too eager “to choose” (Portia herself wants only to delay his choice of casket), Bassanio says, “I live upon the rack” (III.2.25). Portia responds, “Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess / What treason there is mingled with your love?” When he chooses correctly he figures his exhilaration as the winning of a prize, “hearing applause and universal shout” (I.143). The specter of a gold-digging Bassanio will continue to hover over Portia even throughout the trial.

The complications of plot surrounding the rings are the only purely “fictional” moment of the play: of course it can be resolved, Bassanio and Gratiano never actually handed the rings over to anybody but their truly wedded, and, as targets of a sting operation that only makes them look noble, they have passed the test; the rings are returned to them. As so often in Shakespeare, the ellipses speak louder. The ring that Jessica actually “traded for a monkey” and which won’t find its way back to Shylock so easily has still more profound resonance than these two rings. Likewise Jessica’s and Antonio’s silence speaks louder, the one bitten by conscience, the other having lost for good the love he never had. In fact, the one remark Antonio is allowed should give us pause, given his track record: “I dare be bound again, / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly” (V.1.251-3). When Portia announces to Jessica and Lorenzo the prize that awaits them of Shylock’s “deed of gift” “of all he dies possessed of” (I.293), her earlier figuration of mercy not strained—“which droppeth like

the gentle rain upon the place beneath”—now returns with an ironical vengeance as Lorenzo, after the price we’ve seen that Shylock has had to pay for it, remarks, “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starvèd people” (V.1.294-5). Is it not Shylock, in his negative capability, who, “starved” himself but not masking an old barbarism, has the last word?

Leaving behind a hard, subversive residue that won’t be neatly tidied up by the formal conventions of genre or strained to be accommodated by ideology, *The Merchant of Venice* has been called Shakespeare’s first “problem play.”⁴⁵ The increasingly feverish nihilism of the problem plays, typically seen as a bridge to tragedy,⁴⁶ will give way to an explosive, abyssal pathos, already starting with Hamlet. The familiar trope taken from Marx’s introduction to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce,”⁴⁷ could suggest how subversion of ideology, which holds out the prospect of freedom, may be but a step away from tragedy and, from tragedy, to the farce of a reconciliation, in cynical complacency, with the conditions that led to tragedy in the first place.⁴⁸ What Žižek calls an “event” is the moment of subversion, or effective dissolution, of an ideology. Yet still more crucial than an event is what he calls the “next

⁴⁵ Originally coined by F.S. Boas. As suggested by Boas, the problem plays, exploring complex issues that may leave the audience without a sense of closure, becoming a connecting link between the comedies and the tragedies and the tragedies and the tragicomedies.

⁴⁶ Notably *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*.

⁴⁷ If after the French Revolution—“that bloody farce,” said Nietzsche—Napoleon came along and, it would seem, salvaged the energies of the revolution, spelling plenty more bloodshed and tragedy in the process, what was the installation of Louis-Napoleon on the throne but the farce of re-implementing the social and political realities that prompted revolution in the first place?

⁴⁸ Even in *The Merchant of Venice*, after Shylock effectively leads the city to a point at which it might be able to recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality it is distorting, does not the city, “knowing very well what it is doing and doing it all the same”, make a kind of farce of itself? Is “farce” but a variation on “containment”?

step.”⁴⁹

The plays that seem to be Shakespeare’s way out of tragedy, *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*, though not exactly farce, are not without (albeit bitterly) farcical elements. Indeed hardly is this the farce of complacency—better yet, outrage. But these have also been called his “transition plays”. Shakespeare was searching for a new form, the upshot of which was tragicomedy or romance. What sort of a “next step” is tragicomedy?

In *The Winter’s Tale*, in which the tragicomic designation becomes literal with the play’s division into a “tragic” first half and “comic” second half, the subversive revelation by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi bluntly implicates Leontes’ own tyranny for the ensuing tragic chain of events. “Hermione is chaste; Polixenes blameless . . . Leontes a jealous tyrant” (III.2.131-2). As a result of his tyrannical, jealous outbursts, his wife and son are dead and, for all he knows, his daughter.

But as the Chorus of Time steps onto the stage, announcing the long passage of years, and we are convinced of Leontes’ long suffering repentance and the tempering of his jealousy, which makes him worthy of Hermione’s “resurrection” and of his title of king, have we not simply, via the detour of subversion, come full circle from tyranny to tyranny, however sympathetically won over by a more “just tyranny”?

Yet I would suggest that the division of the play into tragic and comic halves is Shakespeare’s way of exploring Žižek’s “next moment” in such a way as to preserve the freedom that subversion holds out even before taking the plunge into tragedy. “Time”, more than facilitating a reconciliation with a tragic past while effectively restoring the

⁴⁹ See Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*, pp. 86-125.

conditions of tyranny that spelled tragedy, figures itself as an “event”—“since it is in my power / To o’erthrow law and in one self-born hour / To plant and o’erwhelm custom” (IV.1.7-9). Metatheatrically playing on the fact that no such time has actually passed, we are simply in the “next moment”. The vital center of the second comic half of the play is the “coming to life” of Hermione’s statue, which is directly contiguous with Leontes’ earlier nihilism (and point of tragic collision). As he’d earlier watched Hermione “hanging about [Polixenes’] neck,” what he calls “this nothing,” is also, it should become clear, Hermione’s own freedom and agency—that is, from Leontes’ perspective as a tyrant, a threat to his fantasy that he is the measure of the world.

... Is this nothing?

Why, then the world and all that’s in’t is nothing,

The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia is nothing,

My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,

If this be nothing. (I.2.292-6)

Alerted to the possibility that she actually exceeds him, only Leontes the king is threatened with becoming “nothing.” Insofar as he is the measure of the world, Hermione’s otherness is already stamped out in the “dead likeness” of her later statue beneath his tyrannical gaze. An Othello who is his own Iago, seeing many things that, stirring him to pathological jealousy—and more profoundly to Lacan’s “madness of the king” that first qualifies every “king who believes himself to be a king”⁵⁰—has he ever actually seen her—in the otherness of her desire?

⁵⁰ See *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.21.

Intimating his greater readiness to “see Hermione”, to recognize that she exceeds his image of her, Paulina leads him to the statue. “As she lived peerless, so her dead likeness, I do believe, excels whatever yet you looked upon.” Hermione is not only “morally chaste”, but “peerless” because he, as a tyrant, cannot see her. In this way even her “dead likeness” also excels whatever he has yet looked upon. (After all, the statue is only Hermione herself “posing as the statue.”)

Are not tragedy and comedy, nihilism and the source of life’s excess (“joy”), instead of being opposed to each other, infinitesimally close? Portia dissolves Shylock’s positive bond just at the point where “nothing” crosses over into “something”—where the perfect equilibrium of the scales must turn, and where the deathly “leaden flesh” crosses over into the blood of life. But in the next step, they leap apart. Portia, as unequal to such finesse as capitalism itself, can’t help but to take a surplus something back from Shylock, thus reducing him to the nothing of its hard residue. Had Leontes taken the infinitesimal step even at the moment of abyssal nihilism—of his mad readiness to overthrow every and all ideology with—perhaps he would have stepped back into life as the statue steps down onto the stage, averting tragedy even at the point where ideology leaves off.

With the statue coming to life, art crossing over into reality, the Pygmalion-motif becomes indicative of general trend towards metatheatre that Shakespeare will continue to pursue in these tragicomedies or romances. For Antonio, that “all the world’s a stage, where every man must play a part,” means one thing: repressed in evasion of the effective conditions of the social reality he is distorting, is it any wonder that he should figure himself as following a pre-given script on a stage that determines, rather than reflects, the role he plays on it—or that his should be a sad one? Here, “the world is a stage” can only

be a metaphor for his existential alienation from the “part” he “plays”. As in *The Winter’s Tale*, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s last play,⁵¹ the world is a stage makes the metatheatrical leap of transcending the existential division between the part and the player.

As the author of the play (the ‘magician on the stage’) in which he is protagonist, Prospero orchestrates the events as they unfold on the stage of his island, casting spells no less on the weather than on his shipwrecked guests (the usurpers of his former kingdom of Naples). As though to compensate for their usurpation, he’s been equally lording it over the island’s natives (and his daughter Miranda), initially as much a tyrant in his own way as Leontes.

The suggestive savagery and wild otherworldly quality of the island, colonized by the foreign tyrant Prospero, has made the play particularly susceptible to neocolonialist readings, however ambiguous, alternately subversive and orthodox they may be. Is the savage Caliban (not unlike Shylock vis-à-vis his “Christian intercessors”) a victim of his “colonialist tormentor”, or does he deserve the cruel and unusual punishment Prospero inflicts on him for his attempted rape of Miranda?

Perhaps more suggestive is Oscar Wilde’s quip that “The 19th century hatred of Realism is Caliban’s enraged reaction to seeing his own face in the mirror. The 19th century rejection of Romanticism is Caliban’s fury at not seeing his face reflected in the mirror” (Wilde “Preface”). Where reality, and the reality concealed behind the fantasy, are shown to converge with equal monstrosity, is it any wonder that evasion should be so formidable, even as it preserves in fantasy the very reality it rejects?

⁵¹ He’d later write *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in collaboration with Fletcher.

Whatever we may think of Caliban, Prospero is not without his own demons, and no less sad than Antonio. But his sadness is his anticipation of renouncing his tyrannical magic—through which he would fill out, indeed control, the desire of the Other, though as the spells he casts on Miranda begin to falter, it may be impossible in any case. Is not this—the collision with Žižek’s “primordial traumatism”—the hardest of all things? The nihilistic impulse is strong as the critical moment approaches.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and
 Are melted into air, into thin air;
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capped tow’rs, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yeah, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed. (IV.1.148-58)

Vexed though Prospero is—and while it would be absurd to try to “claim Shakespeare for the revolution”—Shakespeare has also reserved for his last play one of the definitive formulations of the ‘utopian ideal’, even if it should be placed in the mouth of the jeered at, if wholly honorable, Gonzalo. In Gonzalo’s utopia (“no place”), “I would by contraries execute all things,” that is, negatively:

For no kind of traffic
 Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
 Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
 No occupation; all men idle, all;
 And women too, but innocent and pure;
 No sovereignty. (II.1.147-155)

Further situating his utopia at the infinitesimal gap between nihilism and excess, Gonzalo continues,

Treason, felony,
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
 Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
 Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
 To feed my innocent people. (II.1.160-4)

Gonzalo may sound naïve. Even if Prospero should effectively renounce his ‘tyranny’ over the players, how should “nature bring forth.” As we see in the opening scene of *The Tempest*, nature, more than creating “all men equal,” rather reduces all men to equal enslavement before it. “What cares these roarers for the name of king” (I.1.17)?

Of course, it is Prospero, through his magic, who incites the storm. Might the curious relationship between science and magic in the Renaissance be suggestive of a

dialectic—Benjaminian “dialectical image”?⁵² The explosive energy and capabilities of science released by the humanist turn towards nature is projected through the figure of magic to have fulfilled the “dream wish” of its latent possibilities: mastery over nature, or, as the Boatswain puts it, “to command these elements to silence and work the peace of the present” (1.23).

It was Bacon who most fully perceived and gave expression to this new spirit. As Adorno and Horkheimer quote in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

No doubt, the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge; wherein many things are reserved, which kings with their treasure cannot buy, nor with their force command; their spials and intelligencers can give no news of them, their seamen and discoverers cannot sail where they grow: now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity: but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action. (qtd. in Horkheimer 1)

Especially for Adorno, this scientific ideal—the “myth of Enlightenment”—was no less naïve for its own ideological assumptions than the ideological fantasy of magic itself. The new rational utilitarian ethos, fetishizing technology in the name of freedom from nature and fear, is indeed an outgrowth of commodity fetishism. Obliterating Bacon’s high hopes with a future he couldn’t fathom, the relations between men that would assume the fantastic form of a relation between things, even culminating in the infamous *musselmänner*, would make a tragedy of farce itself. As for Shylock, rather than “justifying the fantasy”, he ought rather to have sounded the alarm bells for all parties.

⁵² See *The Arcades Project*, pp. 1-14.

For how might Shylock, an ideological fantasy, have achieved a “Shakespearean reality” but through his “negative capability”—that is, through his traversal of the fantasy as the reality of ideology? It may in the end be the city of Venice that subverts Shylock rather than the other way around. Ending on a note of “ideological cynicism” at best, they’ve found a way to disarm the fantasy. Yet just as, we’ve seen, it is Shylock who has the last word, is it not he who contains them?

As for Prospero, even as he renounces his “tyranny”, in the full mastery of his magic, he also chooses to “break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And ... drown my book” (V.1.54-7). In the Epilogue Prospero bids farewell to the audience, suggestively resonant with Shakespeare himself as his farewell to the theatre. Having granted freedom to Ariel and the other players, he now implores the audience to do the same for him. The figure of “mercy” returns, perhaps not without a wry gesture towards the play in which it had earlier assumed such a domineering aspect. Prospero perhaps knows better than to appeal to our prima facie unqualified mercy. Rather,

And my ending is despair
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults,
 Mercy itself and frees all faults.

Mercy, as the most human and heavenly face for masking an old barbarism—which, like Antonio, would fill out the desire of the Other in the belief that his own is “merciful”—must also be pierced and assaulted so as to subvert containment’s last, most duplicitous, stranglehold on mercy not strained.

In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek calls upon philosophy to restore to every positive the *excess* of the negative. He notes the multiple points at which Hegel's system generates an excess which threatens to explode its framework" ("Less Than" 6). Is this not Shakespeare's *modus operandi*? According to Žižek, after Hegel, all we can do is to become "more Hegelian than Hegel." But what would that mean in the case of Shakespeare's Shylock? Shylock's legacy to Jessica, his "deed of gift of all he dies possessed of," is presumably not only his property, but also Shylock's demon, whose "shame to offend, being offended," is also the city's, and the audience's too. Shylock's negative capability may yet exceed us. Will we ever catch up to Prospero?

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