

### 3 / *The Wether and the Ewe*

#### VERBAL USURY IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

SOON AFTER the vernacular grail tales first appeared in Europe, new financial institutions began to challenge the theories of production and representation by which the tales were informed. Fiduciary means disturbingly similar to the Christian cornucopia that is the grail affected more and more the livelihood and thinking of impoverished aristocrats and merchants. The topos of the *roi-pecheur* (sinner/fisher king) was displaced by the Venetian "merchant prince." This "royal merchant,"<sup>1</sup> both landed aristocrat and moneyed trader, sought the golden fleece with marine fleets supported by interest loans and insurance.<sup>2</sup> The divine store generated gratis from the Holy Grail was replaced conceptually by the natural store of alien shores, whose wealth had to be husbanded or exploited by expensive means. The problems of divine economy and of the difference between producer and product came to be considered in terms of nature and the tension between natural and unnatural representation and exchange.

1. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Brents Stirling (Baltimore, 1973), 3. 2. 239. References are to act, scene, and line. The English "royal merchant" made his appearance in economic history much later than the merchant prince of Venice. Samuel Johnson (Johnson, ed., *Plays of Shakespeare* [London, 1765]) notes that "this epithet ["merchant prince"] was, in our poet's time, more striking and more readily understood, because [Sir Thomas] Gresham was then commonly dignified with the title of the *royal merchant*."

2. E. D. Pettet, "The Merchant of Venice and the Problem of Usury," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 31 (1945): 19, notes that "by the time Shakespeare was writing his plays the feudal aristocracy had come to feel the full pinch of the century's momentous economic developments" and that "there was only one way out—the usurer." In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604), America is the "golden fleece" (*Doctor Faustus*, ed. Sylvan Barnet, [New York, 1969], 1. 1. 124–25).

Generation, or production, is the principal topic of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In this play the quest for material and spiritual riches—for money and love—involves two related conceptual difficulties: the similarity between natural sexual generation and monetary generation, and the apparent commensurability (even identity) of men and money. The revelation of these difficulties depends for its dramatic expression on a series of bonds in which individuals and properties are exchanged for each other. The play generates a grand political and economic critique of human production that, in a few hours, runs through the whole gamut of familial and political associations.

### *Use, Ewes, and Iewes*

Antonio is an unfortunate “royal merchant” whose purse is exhausted and whose personal part in this comedy is sad. This *roi-pecheur* claims that neither money nor love saddens him. Yet the only person he loves, Bassanio, owes him “in money and in love” (1. 1. 131) and is “plot[ting] to get clear of all the debts [he] owes.” Bassanio would free himself from Antonio, whose present lack of funds diminishes Bassanio’s once “noble rate” of living. He would attach himself to one more “worthy” than Antonio.<sup>3</sup> Antonio offers to aid Bassanio with “[his] purse, [his] person” (138), but, as Bassanio already knows, these are insufficient. All that Antonio can do is borrow a purse for his friend by hazarding a vital part of his person.

Need to supplement oneself or one’s own thus leads to borrowing and to tension between two ideas about moneylending. The first idea (that of the Greeks) focuses on breeding and the relationship of monetary generation to animal generation. The second idea (that of the Hebrews) focuses on the classification of groups of human beings and the laws concerning bonds that divide and join them together. These ideas are elucidated in the interview between Antonio, who says that his custom is neither to give nor to take unfair “advantage” or “excess,” and Shylock, whose means of livelihood is usury.

“Few [persons],” writes Francis Bacon, “have spoken of usury use-

3. Throughout the play, *worth* refers both to monetary, or commercial, and to human value. See, for example, 1. 1. 35, 36, 61, and 118. Compare the similar ambiguity of *sure*, *good*, and *credit*.

fully.”<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare’s Shylock is one of them. Shylock is not a miser of words (which is what Mark Van Doren calls him), but rather (as Sigurd Burckhardt suggests) a user of words.<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, no one since the medieval era has devoted attention to the category of verbal usury in jurisprudence, rhetoric, and philosophy. (The phrase “verbal usury” has been consistently overlooked even by compilers of dictionaries.) Yet “verbal usury” is an important technical term in the Jewish Talmud, in the Christian church fathers, and in the Islamic Traditions. There it refers to the generation of an illegal—the church fathers say unnatural—supplement to verbal meaning by use of such methods as punning and flattering.<sup>6</sup>

Shylock uses Antonio’s words “I do never use it” (1. 3. 66) to generate by a pun an argument that would enlarge any debate about “use” to include consideration of the human genealogy of “Iewes” (as Shakespeare spelled *Jews*)<sup>7</sup> and also the animal generation of “ewes.” Thus he supplements the principal meaning of “use.” The genealogy, as we shall see, defines divisions between the Jewish and other peoples, and the generation of ewes serves to locate monetary generation in relation

4. Francis Bacon, “Of Usury,” essay no. 41 in *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, 15 vols. (Boston, 1860–64), 12: 218. Hereafter this edition of Bacon will be referred to as *Works*.

5. Mark Van Doren (“*The Merchant of Venice: An Interpretation*,” *Shakespeare* [New York, 1939]) argues that Shylock “is always repeating phrases, half to himself, as misers do—hoarding them if they are good.” Cf. Sigurd Burckhardt (*Shakespearean Meanings* [Princeton, 1968], pp. 214–15).

6. For the Talmud, see *Baba Mezi’a* 75a–75b: “R. Simeon said: There is a form of verbal interest” (*Baba Mezi’a*, trans. Salis Daiches and H. Freedman [1935], Mishnah on p. 434 and Gemara on p. 435; in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein [London, 1935–48]). Thomas Patrick Hughes (*A Dictionary of Islam* [London, 1896], s.v. “Usury”) notes that “in the Traditions, Muhammad is related to have said:—‘Cursed be the taker of usury, the giver of usury, the writer of usury, and the witness of usury, for they are all equal’ (*Sahīhu Muslim, Bābu ‘r-Riba’*).” For the Christian church fathers, see note 50.

7. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice: A New Variorum Edition*, ed. H. H. Furness, 12th ed. (Philadelphia, 1916). *Jew* is derived from the Hebrew *Yehuda* and *Yudah*, the son of *Yakov* (Jacob), to whom Shylock refers in his speech about “ewes” and “use.” Cf. the similarity between the sounds *ieu* in *adieu* and *Ju* in *Jude* in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. Richard David (London, 1968), 5. 2. 620. For the position that the Christian Portia, if not the Jew Shylock, pronounces *Jew* with the modern sound of *j*, see Kökeritz’s phonetic transcription of Portia’s “quality of mercy” speech (Helge Kökeritz, *Shakespeare’s Pronunciation* [New Haven, Conn., 1953], pp. 354–55).

to animal generation. As the Jew uses moneys (which Bacon calls “[the tokens current and accepted] for values”) to supplement principals, so he uses puns to exceed the principal meanings of words (which Bacon calls “the tokens current and accepted for conceits”).<sup>8</sup>

Shylock argues from Genesis that, as Jacob’s management of the sexual generation of lambs by Laban’s “ewes” is natural, so too is the generation of “use” by money.<sup>9</sup> He compares “[sexual] generation” with monetary generation or usury. “Ewes” and “rams,” he implies, are like monetary principals, and “lambs” are like monetary “interest” or “use” (1. 3. 74–86). Antonio tries to argue against Shylock’s position by suggesting that “gold and silver” differ from “ewes and rams” (91). Yet Shylock did not argue that metals are generative (as did many alchemists),<sup>10</sup> but rather that, as Saint Bernardino of Siena says, “money as capital has a creative power [*quandam seminalem rationem*].”<sup>11</sup> Antonio thus misses the point of the Jew’s analogy. Antonio does not use even the traditional Aristotelian and Thomist argument against the analogy between reproduction and monetary use;<sup>12</sup> he does not argue

8. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 6. 1 (*Works*, 9:110); cf. *De augmentis scientiarum*, 6. 1 (*Works*, 2:409–27).

9. Cf. Gen. 30:32–42.

10. As reported by Ibn Khaldūn (*The Maqaddimah, An Introduction to History* [1377], 3 vols., trans. Franz Rosenthal [Princeton, 1967]), At-Tughra’i compares “the alchemical process [“the generation and creation of gold and silver”] with the individual similar instances noticed in nature, such as the (spontaneous) generation of scorpions, bees and snakes” (3:277). Ibn Khaldūn, who aimed to refute all alchemy, notes that “the alchemical treatment is . . . [properly] called a ‘sterile treatment’” (3:279), as Antonio suggests that money is sterile and cannot breed; but Ibn Khaldūn, unlike Antonio, is careful to distinguish gold and silver from money, even when considering the scarcity of the precious metals and the role of these metals as “the standard of value by which the profits and capital accumulation of human beings are measured” (3:277).

11. Bernardino (1380–1444), quoted in Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance*, introd. Wallace K. Ferguson (New York, 1963), p. 49.

12. Aristotle objects to the identification of monetary offspring with natural offspring. He argues, for example, that “currency came into existence merely as a means of exchange; usury tries to make it increase [as though it were an end in itself]. This is the reason why usury is called by the word we commonly use [*tokos*]; for as the offspring resembles its parent, so the interest bred by money is like the principal which breeds it, and [as a son is styled by his father’s name, so] it may be called ‘currency the son of currency.’ Hence we can understand why, of all modes of acquisition, usury is the most unnatural” (Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham [Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1967], 1258). For the identification of monetary offspring with natural offspring in Shakespeare, see Pompey’s remark in *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London, 1967), 3.2.5–7: “Twas never merry world since, of two usuries, the merriest [sexual] was put down, and the worsor [monetary] allowed by order of law.”

that, as Francis Bacon ironically puts it, "it is against nature for money to beget money,"<sup>13</sup> or, as Luther says, that "money is the sterile thing."<sup>14</sup> Shylock wants to discuss usury in these Greek and Christian terms, but he is thwarted because Antonio cannot or will not recognize any difference between a gold or silver coin and any other piece of gold or silver.

Antonio says that he wants Shylock to lend him money, not according to "nature," but according to Jewish law:

. . . lend it not  
 As to thy friends—for when did friendship take  
 A breed of barren metal of his friend?—  
 (1. 3. 128–30)

Antonio refers to the Jewish legal distinction between lending to a "brother" or fellow Jew and lending to an "other."<sup>15</sup> If Antonio were a Jew, suggests Antonio, Shylock would lend money to him gratis. (Tubal will lend money gratis to Shylock, who, like Antonio, does not himself have sufficient funds for Bassanio.) Antonio does not seem to understand that this Jewish distinction between brother and other is essentially connected with the problem of natural generation about which he insists that Shylock be silent. He does not see that the only way to determine who is a brother and who is an other is to determine the generation of every one. Such a determination was the aim of Shylock's interrupted genealogy of the Jews, which prefaced his tale about the generation of ewes. It was meant to distinguish between Jews and non-Jews.

13. Francis Bacon ("Of Usury," *Works*, 12:218) writes that "many have made witty invectives against usury. They say . . . that it is against nature for money to beget money and the like. . . ." Nicholas Oresme, "De monete" (in *The "De Moneta" of Nicholas Oresme and English Mint Documents*, ed. Charles Johnson [London, 1956], p. 25) writes that "it is monstrous and unnatural that an unfruitful thing should bear, that a thing specifically sterile, such as money, should bear fruit and multiply of itself."

14. "Pecunia est res sterilis" (Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, 6 vols. [Weimar, 1912–21], vol. 5, no. 5429).

15. "Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother. . . . Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury." (Deut. 23:19–20). Cf. Deut. 28:12 and Lev. 25:35–37. In the late sixteenth century Henry Smith wrote: "Of a stranger, saith God thou mayest take usury; but thou takest usury of thy brother; therefore this condemneth thee, BECAUSE THOU USETH THY BROTHER LIKE A STRANGER" ("The Examination of Usury: The First Sermon," in *The Works of Henry Smith*, 2 vols. [Edinburgh, 1866–67], 1:97–98). See Benjamin Nelson, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1969).

When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep—  
 This Jacob from our holy Abram was,  
 As his wise mother wrought in his behalf,  
 The third possessor; ay, he was the third—  
 (1. 3. 67–70)

Abraham fathered Isaac who fathered Jacob. Jews suppose that they are the descendants of Jacob. (Shylock often confuses himself with his forefather Jacob. The folio reads, "I, he was the third—"; and Jacob's first wife, Leah, was the namesake of Shylock's late wife. Leah was the sister of Rachel, for whose hand in marriage Jacob husbanded Laban's ewes.) The argument is complicated by the fact that the two successions—through Isaac and Jacob—to which Shylock refers were challenged. Ishmael, Isaac's older half-brother by Abraham and Hagar, was, according to some, robbed of his birthright. Muslims—the Prince of Morocco, the Turks, the Moorish woman pregnant by Launcelot, and Launcelot, who is called "Hagar's offspring" (2. 5. 42)—suppose that they are the descendants of Ishmael. Esau, by a similar argument, was robbed of his birthright by Jacob, his younger twin brother, who tricked him with a bit of clever merchantry. He exchanged food, which sustains an individual's life, for the possession of the lifeline of the Jewish tribe.<sup>16</sup>

Thus Shylock's discussion in terms of monetary use of the clever Jew's management of the sexual generation of ewes (his forefathers were shepherds as his brothers are moneylenders) is essentially connected with his discussion of the sexual generation of Jews themselves. By speaking of the generation of Jews, Shylock is distinguishing precisely between others and brothers. Antonio fails to see the relationship between breeding and both the division of animals into species and the division of the human species into linguistic, racial, religious, and other groups.

For a Christian, such as we suppose Antonio to be, a brother is supposed to be any descendant of Adam and not, as for a Jew, a descendant of Jacob. For a Christian there is no need to know a man's individual genealogy to determine whether he is a brother. Yet the customs and

16. Compare this with the scene between Launcelot and old Gobbo (2. 2), which parodies the biblical scene in which Jacob dispossesses Esau by "stealing" his father's blessing. Also compare the byplay with Gobbo/Isaac's blindness and Launcelot/Esau-Jacob's hairiness (2. 2. 68–91).

the laws of the white, Christian Venetians and the practice of Belmont discriminate against others in more extreme ways than does Shylock's distinction between human brothers and others who are human. Shylock does treat Antonio as if he were from a group of human beings other than his own Jewish one, but Antonio treats Shylock as if he were from a species of animal other than the human one (a dog). Not to be a Jewish brother is to be less alien to a Jew than not to be a brother is to a Christian. Does Antonio treat Shylock as an animal because he believes that Shylock has some characteristics of the canine or of the "ewe-ish" species or that he lacks some characteristics of the human species?<sup>17</sup> Or is it because Antonio conflates special with tribal characteristics, and so believes that the difference between a human being and another animal is identical to the difference between a member of one's own tribe (a racial, religious, or familial group) and a member of another tribe? If the latter, then Antonio has transformed the Jewish distinction between human brothers (members of the Jewish tribe), from whom one cannot take interest, and human strangers (members of any other tribe), from whom one can take interest. He has changed it to a distinction between those beings whose religion is Christianity (a tribe that proselytizes and is theoretically "universal" or at least "humanist") and those whose religions are other than Christianity (in our play Judaism and Islam) and who are, on that account, nonhuman, though convertible to Christianity and to human being. Antonio may be one of those people who, if he should say "All men are my brothers," might well mean "Only my brothers are men, all others are animals," or even "Citizens of Italian states (Venice and Belmont) are human, but citizens of other states (Morocco, Turkey, and, if there were such a place, Jewdom) are animals."

If Shylock should wish to lend money to Antonio as if Antonio were a brother to all Jews (descended from Jacob) or as if Shylock were a

17. That Shylock has some characteristics of the canine species is suggested in terms of his sexual generation; Gratiano says that Shylock was produced by the "infusion" of the soul of a wolf "hanged for human slaughter" into the body of the "unhallowed dam" who was pregnant with the foetus Shylock (4. 1. 133-38). The infusion of the damned wolf into Shylock's dam is meant to explain Shylock's "wolfish" desires and perhaps also his failure to accept the Christian distinction between the naturalness of generation by dams (ewes) and the unnaturalness of generation by metal or money (use). That Shylock lacks some qualities of the human species is suggested by the Duke when he argues that one characteristic of human being is that any human—including even Tartars and Turks—would pity Antonio (4. 1. 17-33).

Christian brother to all men (descended from Adam), he would lend Antonio money without interest, but he might well exact, as Bacon reminds us that good Christians did, a monetary or corporeal penalty if the loan were not paid on time.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a monetary penalty would be condemned as an unnatural offspring by a zealot like Antonio, who seems to condemn even marine insurance.<sup>19</sup> Only by taking no interest and substituting a corporeal penalty, then, could Shylock be or appear to be brotherly (gentile) to Antonio. This is what he does. To buy Antonio's friendship Shylock extends this kindness: he will lend him money and "take no doit / of usance" (1. 3. 136–37). He who spoke of the sexual "deed of kind" between animals (81) says that he will lend Antonio money as though he were a kind kinsman to him (138–39). Adapting the Christian method of securing loans, Shylock announces that he will take as a conditional surety an obligation to pay a corporeal penalty, a pound of flesh. The merchant Antonio, who assured his friend of funds, is very sure of the safe return of his uninsured commercial ventures, and Shylock allays the Christians' fears of danger by insisting that to a Jew "a pound of man's flesh taken from a man is not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttoms, beefs or goats"

18. John Comyns, *A Digest of the Laws of England*, 8 vols. (New York, 1824–26), 8:846. A pecuniary penalty was usually not considered interest because it was due only if the debt was not paid on time. Antonio would have done better to pay interest (in the Jewish manner) rather than to forfeit a pound of flesh (in an extreme version of the Christian manner). Of the Christian practice of disallowing interest but allowing securities, Francis Bacon writes: "As for mortgaging, or pawning, it will little mend the matter; for either men will not take the pawns without use, or if they do, they will look precisely for the forfeiture. I remember a cruel monied man in the country that would say, The devil take this usury, it keeps us from forfeitures of mortgages and Bonds" ("Of Usury," *Works*, 12:220).

19. It is odd that Antonio does not insure his ships. Marine insurance was common in Venice by the fifteenth century and in England by the sixteenth. Sir Nicholas Bacon suggests, in his address to Queen Elizabeth's first parliament (1559), that "the wise merchant in every adventure of danger give[s] part [of his purse] to have the rest assured." Perhaps Antonio leaves his ships uninsured because he is an unwise merchant who is too sure of their return or because the insurers he may have consulted are too unsure of their return (see 1. 3. 12–28). Perhaps his stated policy against lending or borrowing for profit extends to the institution of insurance, which some thinkers connect conceptually and historically with monetary interest. Demosthenes thus describes the historical origin of insurance: "Money was advanced on a ship or cargo, to be repaid with large interest if the voyage prosper, but not repaid at all if the ship be lost, the rate of interest being made high enough to pay not only for the use of the capital, but for the risk of losing it" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Insurance").



(161–63). The flesh of ewes is worth more (to one who is not a human cannibal or a man-eating dog) than flesh of man. By the terms of the contract, then, Shylock substitutes, for the use he would usually take, a conditional security on something supposedly worth less than even ewe's flesh.

Antonio would not speak of use—ewes and lewes. But the discussion of usury and sexual generation that Antonio would not pursue is soon enacted in the related terms of a series of exchanges of a purse (three thousand ducats) for a part of a person (a pound of flesh) or for a whole person (since the part may be vital). The apparent commensurability between persons and purses that this enactment reveals turns out to be more typical of Christian law, which allows human beings to be purchased for money, than Jewish “justice” and practice, which disallow it.

### *From Courtship to Court*

The suitors to the person and purse of Portia believe that the trial by caskets is a hazardous gamble like most commercial ventures and loans. The inscriptions on the caskets would seem to support their opinion. Portia's father, however, established the trial to discover a real man for Portia, or at least a suitable one. The inner mettle of the suitors is supposed to be tested by how well each suitor surmises from the outsides of the three metallicly different caskets what the insides contain. Metals—including the silver and gold ones that Antonio said were useless—are supposed to have the useful role of distinguishing the right man for Portia to marry.

Most of Portia's suitors are said to be unmanly, and all are threatened with being unmanned. They are unmanly in that they are, in Portia's language, mere “beasts.” Portia disqualifies them from Mankind on the basis of outward characteristics, such as type of clothing and complexion. She does not consider inward characteristics as measures of Man or of the men who court her: “If [the Prince of Morocco] have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil [black], I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” (1. 2. 120–22). Her tendency to banish persons from the human species or from the male sex is checked only in jest: “God made [Monsieur Le Bon, who is ‘every man in no man’], and therefore let him pass for a man” (1. 2. 52–53). Yet we know that being divinely created does not mean that an animal is a

man. God made females as well as males and animals as well as humans. Only knowledge of an animal's ontogeny and of its species' phylogeny can determine whether it is a man, a horse, a monkey, a dog, a ewe, or something else. Shylock claims to have access to such knowledge: for him, men are the animals descended from Adam (*Adam* means "man") and Jews are the men descended from Jacob.

Among the characteristics Portia heeds is language. Language is both a bond and a barrier between men. The ability to speak is a characteristic that binds men together into a species, but men speak different languages. Men who speak only one language are bound together by their language, but they are barred from speaking with men who speak any other. Because Portia has hardly "a poor pennyworth in the English" and her English suitor "hath neither Latin, French nor Italian" for example, the Englishman is to her only a counterfeit of a man: "He is a proper man's picture, but alas! who can converse with a dumb-show?" (64-68). The ability to speak language may distinguish men from the (other) animals, but inability to speak a particular language may make one man as dumb to another man as to any other animal.

The suitors that are, to Portia, not even men are threatened with being legitimately unmanned. Should a suitor choose the wrong casket, he must promise never to generate within the bonds of wedlock his own flesh and blood. (2. 1. 41-42). He will be made as barren as Antonio believes metal to be. His legitimate genealogical bloodline (if not the flesh and blood of his own body) will be cut. He will become, in this legal sense, a castrate.

A black man, outside of whom flows a white robe, is the first to choose. The Prince of Morocco seeks the picture of Portia inside one of the caskets. He must tell the substance from the superficialities.

The outside of each casket is like that of a coin and also like that of an inscribed ring: all these items are composed of metal and of an inscription impressed into it. We have seen that failure to distinguish between coins (ducats) and the metals of which they are only partially composed (gold and silver) was associated with Antonio's dangerously hasty dismissal of Shylock's words about monetary generation. Here the "golden mind" (2. 7. 20) of Morocco considers each inscribed metal object before him in terms both of its inscription and of its metal. He chooses "the saying graved in gold" (36) and, on the basis of a numismatic analogy that confuses the impressed type on a coin (an

angel) with what he hopes to find inside the casket (an "angel"), he chooses gold (55–59). The skull that he finds in the engraved gold casket comes from the grave. Morocco thus learns, from the written scroll that accompanies this "carrion Death," that he must now be as barren, legally speaking, as Antonio argued that gold was.

In this context, what is striking about the next suitor's method of choosing is that he considers each casket only in terms of its inscription. Arragon "assume[s] desert" (2. 9. 50) by coining himself with "the stamp of merit" (38) but without considering the metal of which the coinlike silver is made. Arragon is "sped," yet he is allowed to "take what wife [he] will to bed" (69). Unlike the black Muslim, the white Christian is allowed to try to generate kin in wedlock.

The third trial is that of Bassanio, he in whom outside appearance and inside reality are most unlike. He uses words, clothing, and gifts to dress up his suit.<sup>20</sup> Portia, who judges men by their glister or lackluster, has chosen for herself this being with a white complexion and with a desire for glistering gold, but she fears that the seeker of gold and silver may choose a casket made of one of the metals he seeks. Though bound to her father's will (which curbs her will) and to the properties that it promises, she planned nevertheless to mislead the young German (1. 2. 87–91) and now educates Bassanio to choose the lead casket.

To help Bassanio, Portia orders music to be played. This will have the effect of seasoning Bassanio, making him more royal and less merchantlike, more like

. . . young Alcides, when he did redeem  
The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy  
To the sea monster.

(3. 2. 55–57; compare 2. 1. 32–35)

Then follows a suggestive song about the generation ("breeding," "begetting," "engendering") of fancy, whose first lines end with words that rhyme with "lead" and whose last line "ring[s] fancy's knell" (3. 2.

20. Bassanio is even careful to instruct others in the use of words. For example, he fears that Gratiano is so "bold of voice" that he may cause Bassanio to be unsuccessful in Belmont (2. 2. 171–75; cf. 1. 1. 114–18). Although he allows Gratiano to "put on [his] boldest suit of mirth" in Venice, he tells Gratiano that in Belmont he should "put on sober habit," "talk with respect" and be "like one well studied in a sad ostent" (2. 2. 175–83). Cf. Antonio's impatience with Bassanio's angling use of words (1. 1. 153–60).

63–72). Bassanio, who still uses fanciful speech and dress, now learns to say that, or act as though, he dismisses them.

So may the outward shows be least themselves;  
The world is still deceived with ornament.  
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt  
But being seasoned with a gracious voice,  
Obscures the show of evil?

(3. 2. 73–77)

Bassanio thus criticizes deceivers who use ornament to their evil purpose, perhaps as Antonio believed that Shylock used scriptures. Bassanio does not seem to consider how he himself uses and has used words and gold to purchase “valor’s excrement” (87). Nor does he consider that a seasoned voice may generate good as well as bad shows. Portia’s song, for example, “seasoned” him to choose the lead casket in the courtship trial (cf. 5. 1. 107–8), and Balthasar-Portia’s voice will obscure Shylock’s case in the courtroom trial.

Bassanio, like the losing suitors, considers the problems of exchange about which the inscriptions on the caskets are written. Unlike them, however, he does not consider the inscriptions themselves. He pays heed, significantly, only to the metals (which is what Antonio did when he failed to distinguish between coin and precious metal). Bassanio calls gold a “hard food for Midas” (3. 2. 102)—who turned his daughter into gold—and silver a “pale and common drudge / ‘Tween man and man” (103–4). As Karl Marx reminds us, silver is money, the intermediating “drudge” that pays Launcelot and that Bassanio has borrowed to finance his courtship,<sup>21</sup> and it is an ostentatious ornament like the silvery and beguiling tongue of “eloquence” (3. 2. 106).<sup>22</sup>

21. Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1956–68), *Ergänzungsband*, pt. 1, pp. 562–67; translated as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. T. B. Bottomore (London, 1963), pp. 189–94.

Launcelot is the major go-between for religion and sex. He has left the Jew (Shylock) and gone over to the Christian (Bassanio), and has discussed with Jessica the possibility of her going over from Judaism to Christianity. He carries messages between Jews and Christians: a letter from Bassanio to Shylock that bids Shylock to supper; a letter from Jessica to Lorenzo that contains her instructions for elopement, theft, and disguise; and a message from Lorenzo to Jessica notifying her that Lorenzo will not fail her. For his going between Jessica and Lorenzo, he takes money each time. On Launcelot and the mixture of races, see note 55.

22. Cf. Burckhardt (*Shakespearean Meanings*, p. 209) and Sigmund Freud (“The

Inside the lead casket he chooses, Bassanio finds the portrait of Portia. But as he has learned to claim cunningly to set aside the “seeming truth which cunning puts on / To entrap the wisest” (3. 2. 100–101), so he knows not to be trapped into confusing this mere “counterfeit” of Portia with the genuinely valuable thing itself.<sup>23</sup> He would win the wealthy “lady of substance,” and so presents Portia with his “title” to her: “I come by note”—he means the portrait—“to give and to receive” (140). The “note” is a kind of ticket to the person and purse of Portia that Bassanio, as master of etiquette, would “confirm, sign and ratify” with a kiss.

Portia promises Bassanio the “full sum of me” (157). She is a “fulesome ewe” (compare 1. 3. 82). Despite all the talk about lead, Portia is not bred so “dull” as lead (3. 2. 162). Like gold and silver ducats as the lewe Shylock interprets them, she can generate riches.

But a fertile ewe, unlike a monetary principal, needs a potent ram to generate offspring. Herein lies an essential connection between the two major plots of the play. The marriage formula must be reciprocal. Bassanio cannot reciprocate, cannot give, because he is not his own man. Bassanio is about to win the ewe’s “golden fleece” (3. 2. 241, compare 1. 1. 170), but Antonio’s marine “fleets,” his means of livelihood, which were to return gold for the Jew, are lost, and so too may be his life. The danger to Antonio—and the “paper” in which Antonio, who would not use money, encourages Bassanio to “use [his] pleasure” (3. 2. 320)<sup>24</sup>—compels Bassanio to admit that his courtship strategy depended not only on the gentleman’s blood that circulates in his veins but also on Antonio’s bond and the Jewish money that circulated to him. He is compelled to reveal to Portia that he is already engaged:

. . . When I told you  
My state was nothing, I should then have told you  
That I was worse than nothing; for indeed

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Theme of the Three Caskets,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. J. Riviere and J. Strachey, 5 vols. (London, 1949–50), 4:244–56.

23. Bassanio’s earlier description of Portia’s hairs as the “golden fleece” (1. 1. 170) was meant to persuade Antonio to support his venture. Now Bassanio tries to ensure that he will not be misled by a similar artifice: “Here in her hairs / The painter plays the spider, and hath woven / A golden mesh t’entrap the hearts of men” (3. 2. 120–22).

24. For the sexual meanings of *use* see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Use,” sb., 3b, and v., 7c. *Use* is a standard term for sexual enjoyment in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*.

I have engaged myself to a dear friend,  
 Engaged my friend to his mere enemy  
 To feed my means  
 (3. 2. 258–63)

Thus Portia learns that Bassanio did not give and hazard all he has (as the inscription on the lead casket, so far ignored by the couple, demanded). He hazarded only the purse of Shylock and the person of Antonio.<sup>25</sup> Antonio, rather than Portia, is his “dearest friend” (292). Portia wanted to marry Bassanio right away (303), as her father required (2. 9. 5–6), but now she may fear that her interference in the trial by caskets resulted in her getting a suitor who is (as yet) unsuitable. She encourages him to leave before they marry.<sup>26</sup>

The commercial fate and love of Antonio have thus “interposed” between Portia and Bassanio. The problem of monetary “excess” (1. 3. 58) that Shylock and Antonio discussed in the bond scene has become the problem of “excess” or “surfeit” in the love between Bassanio and Portia (3. 2. 111–14, 157).<sup>27</sup> The courtship cannot be completed until the bond between Shylock and Antonio, which made the courtship possible, is nullified in court, until Bassanio’s engagement to Antonio is somehow voided. The marriage bond cannot be concluded until the commercial bond is canceled. In the process of its cancellation the nature of the marriage bond and of human bondage in general will be relentlessly explored.

### *My Purse, My Person*

Exchanges involving persons include (a) those in which a human life is traded for a human life, and (b) those in which a human life is bought

25. The associations of *purse* with *person* and of both terms with *use* occur in other works of Shakespeare. In *2 Henry IV*, for example, the Chief Justice accuses Falstaff: “You have . . . made her serve your uses both in purse and person” (*2 Henry IV*, ed. A. R. Humphreys [London, 1967], 2. 1. 112–15).

26. Bassanio “dispatch[es] all business and [is] gone” (3. 2. 322) without actually marrying Portia. English law recognized two kinds of spousals: *sponsalia per verba praesenti*, which was legally binding, and *sponsalia per verba de futuro*, which was not binding (Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals* [London, 1686]). It is doubtful that an English court would rule that the events of 3. 2. constitute *sponsalia per verba praesenti*.

27. On “excess of love,” see John Russell Brown, “Love’s Wealth and the Judgement of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare and His Comedies* (London, 1962).

or sold for money. Definition of these exchanges and of their interrelations in *The Merchant of Venice* sheds light on the essential dilemma of this play about people and property.

#### LIFE FOR LIFE (BARTER)

*The lex talionis for taking a life.* No one in *The Merchant of Venice* takes anyone's life in the literal sense of killing him. Yet the Judaeo-Christian laws of taliation for murder—that one who takes the life of another must give his own life, and that nothing more should be taken from him or his—play a major role. Retaliation, which these laws both allow and limit, is a crucial problem in the attempt to define man and to comprehend interpersonal exchanges.

In his most famous defense of vengeance, Shylock suggests that desire for revenge is one characteristic of the human species (3. 1. 51–64). His remark, made to Christians, is out of character for a Jew, whose principal bond is not the natural one to the human species (descendants of Adam) but rather the tribal one to the laws of his Jewish forefathers (descendants of Jacob). In another defense of his revenge—or rather of his limited retaliation—Shylock depends on an interpretation of the Jewish law of retaliation. For the loss of his daughter—his own flesh and blood—he will take the flesh and blood of Antonio.

That Shylock's daughter is now as if dead to Shylock is a crucial "legal fiction" in the play. Once Shylock adopts it he cannot, according to the Hebraic *lex talionis*, accept anything other than a death for the loss of her. Nothing but a life can pay for a life. He cannot sell his revenge for money. His heavenly oath is to take life for life.

The fiction that Jessica is dead to Shylock is reinforced by the Jewish faith, which conflates conversion to another faith with death, and it arises from Jessica's divorce of and theft from her father. The divorce is important to the problems of law and sexual generation in the play. According to an interpretation of the Old Testament rule that one must honor one's parents, Jessica, if she is Shylock's "own flesh and blood" by Leah, must be "damned" for leaving the "dam" (3. 1. 26–30). To avoid damnation, therefore, Jessica must hope either that Leah and Shylock are not her natural progenitors or that the law commands one to honor those who are one's parents not in "blood" but in "manners" (2. 3. 11–19). The two possible hopes sum up an important difference between Judaism, which emphasizes the importance of bloodlines, and Christianity, which deemphasizes it. According to another Old

















































