“Which is the Merchant here? And which the Jew?”

I
Anyone invoking the “historical aspects” of The Merchant of Venice is likely to have in mind the intricate set of social, legal, financial and theological views and conditions that Shakespeare would have been familiar with - that he would, indeed, have had to think with - in the closing years of the sixteenth century. There is, of course, another history, the one of which Benjamin reminds us in remarking that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Benjamin, 1950). In one variant of this minor history, The Merchant of Venice loses its privilege of cultural artifact, enshrining a public world, and becomes, inter alia, a representation of the feelings and fantasies in Shakespeare’s inner world. According to this view, scenes from that inner world necessarily flowed into the play he was writing, whether he chose to give expression to them or not. Even Shakespeare - “sublime”, “magnanimous”, as “negatively capable” as you will - did not walk without footprints. This means that, in common with many - if not all - works of art, the Merchant is significantly marked by ideas and feelings which in all likelihood formed no part of its creator’s conscious plan and which yet entered into muted dialogue with the situations of the play’s surface, with History, so to speak. This unconscious element in the play is what lies behind some of its most curious ironies - the irony, for example, that Shylock and Antonio, the surface antagonists, have arguably more in common that any other characters in the play. Psychically, their differences do not run very deep. Scratch the surface of either and it is the same wound that stares out at us.
The merchant’s wound is the more consistently displayed, right from the play’s opening scene. On the face of it, what happens in this ordinary-seeming sequence is that the melancholy Antonio is visited by his special friend, Bassanio, who asks for another loan. This is one way of describing the initiating events, but an incomplete way, for it takes no account of a number of intriguing details. Bassanio’s request (and its outcome) is to be no secret in Venice, and yet it is made only after other callers deliberately disperse and the two friends are finally left alone together. But, even then, the “costly” Bassanio so far gives the lie to any implied intimacy between himself and Antonio that he hides his pretty evident uneasiness in delay, small talk, obliquity, and only comes (reluctantly) to the point when Antonio presses him towards disclosure of his request:

I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it,
And if it stand as you yourself still do,
Within the eye of honour, be assured
My purse, my person, my extremest means
Lie all unlocked to your occasions...
And out of doubt you do me now more wrong
In making question of my uttermost
Than if you had made waste of all I have. (I,i,135-39; 155-57)

This complex and sinister piece of auto-petitioning makes clear enough Antonio’s pressing wish or need to give of his substance to Bassanio. In an important sense, the petitioner is actually Antonio: for the quality of his desire - his craving to lend - finds a rather more vivid and unsettling expression than Bassanio’s, in his fairly conventional wish to borrow. More than once in the play we will hear Antonio use the favoured hyperbole (“my uttermost”) that here rises to his lips. The intimated intensity of his feeling for Bassanio is not lost on us. But what he offers Bassanio is not offered promiscuously: from his “other friends” Solerio and Solanio, the same Antonio has, just a few minutes before, hard-headedly concealed his overstretched trading position. To Bassanio only is he prepared (and eager) to
confess his vulnerability, both in a factual, book-keeping sense, and (more importantly) in another sense to which it is not easy to give a ready name. When Antonio says that his coffers lie all “unlocked” to his friend’s “occasions”, there is an unmistakable - and faintly eroticised - impression of a man inviting plunder, exploitation, invasion, misuse. That Bassanio is on the whole a shallow adventurer, a friend of (gold-coloured) straw, is a trick of characterisation that serves above all to accentuate this troubling fact of Antonio’s openness. It is rather difficult to escape the impression that Antonio is inviting a kind of rape.

The echoes of this state of affairs - the merchant’s pleasure in passivity - redound to the end of the play and will, for example, provide the trial scene with some wonderfully ironic convolutions, begotten of his (allied) wish to suffer. In that scene, as we watch Antonio build his own funeral pyre, made up it seems of countless elegiac farewells to Bassanio, and see him visibly impatient for Shylock to strike a match, there comes a point at which it is no longer possible to escape the thought that the merchant, squarely Portia’s rival for Bassanio, wishes above all to die for love. There is no escaping either the amusing and opposed fact that Portia, intent on her rival’s suffering and on a kind of revenge, hopelessly bungles in exercising herself sadistically - and with such skill - on one who craves that very use. The ultra-capable mistress of so many other occasions, reticent to a fault with Morocco and Arragon, unwittingly serves Antonio up rather more than a pound of the very (Bassanio-derived) pleasure she wants to deny him. True citizen of the land of plenty, inexpert of privation, she is never to discover that she gives Antonio his only truly irredeemable pain in announcing at the play’s end that his ships are safe. He was happiest with all his fortunes at sea, his life hanging by a thread. In having any grounds for suffering removed and his life and living restored, Antonio loses as comprehensively as Shylock the whole basis of his existence and might just as appropriately utter his lines:

    Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!...
    ...You take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.
(IV,i,371-74)

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We do not know much of Antonio’s life before the events around which the play assembles itself. But we do know something, and that something squares with this emerging view of the man in the play. Part of his commercial life - and part of Shylock’s resentment - has been Antonio’s readiness to rescue those in Shylock’s financial grasp:

He seeks my life. His reason well I know.
I oft delivered from his forfeitures
Many that have at times made moan to me.
(III,iii,21-3)

If we set this alongside Portia’s similar remark in the next scene, an important distinction becomes clear:

How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty. (III,iv,19-21)

Each speaker makes a (rather grandiose) comparison between himself/herself and Christ as Redeemer. It is an identification readily facilitated in the play by the ghost of the word “redemption” itself, with its heavy etymological sense of the “buying back” of souls in pawn to Sin and Death. But it is important to notice that, financial imagery aside, each speaker is clearly identifying with a quite different aspect of the Redeemer. Portia’s emphasis falls - with just a trace of contempt - on the idea of an effortless heroism (“Redemption is easy; just a petty debt,” she seems to say,) and is characteristically active. Antonio’s identification is clearly with the suffering Christ, as he takes upon himself (“a tainted wether of the flock”) the suffering of others and is, in consequence, sacrificed for them. His theology - like hers - suits his disposition.
Up to this point we have looked almost exclusively at a passive, benign and giving Antonio. But these qualities seem to sit rather uncomfortably beside another, totally opposed trend in his personality. This side of the man is most clearly visible in his dealings with Shylock, to whom he speaks, in memorable moments, with a quite extraordinary ferocity. But, as we have already noted in passing, another Antonio is also visible when he is with members of his own set other than Bassanio. With these he can be guarded, evasive, secret and excluding. The point is not merely that he is different with these other friends, but that he is as different as it is possible to be. It seems to me that this secretive and aggressive side of Antonio is best understood as a defence against the exaggeratedly passive side of his make-up. This is a trend that can only find full and free expression in his relation to Bassanio, though (as we have seen) it can also find a more muted expression in certain attracting images of suffering. But what is tolerable in an erotised or quasi-erotised variant, or rather, what has ceased to be intolerable by being eroticised and serving the ends of pleasure, still remains simply intolerable in its unredeemed and undefended state. What is happening in Antonio’s (early) gratuitous rage at Shylock is a particularly vivid expression of the same defensive psychical need displayed only covertly in his dealings with Solerio and Solanio. Antonio’s awful passive need to be invaded and used, to be entered, counters itself in an expulsive frenzy before Shylock. In this context, his most characteristic and significant bodily action is spitting. Shylock is alien: he may not come in: nothing of his may enter. So his money, however much sought and needed, is (ludicrously) disowned and execrated at the same time, disowned, indeed, with all the expulsive force of a psychical repudiation of part of the self.

For the money contradiction is ample evidence that Shylock is indeed caught up in Antonio’s internal conflicts. And, in fact, Antonio’s relation to Shylock is not simple but overdetermined. Shylock is peculiarly fitted to the role that Antonio assigns to him because the merchant unconsiously sees in Shylock the living representation of a hated part of
himself. For what is the Jew of Venice if he is not the emblem of one endlessly imposed upon and one committed to a kind of irreversible cultural passivity?

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,

For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. (I.iii.106-7)

He is *mutatis mutandis* the shame in which Antonio both sees and refuses to see himself. For *he also* lies open to the “occasions” of the irresponsible:

> Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife, Clamber you not up to the casements then, Nor thrust your head into the public street To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces; But stop my house’s ears, I mean my casements; Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter My sober house. (II.v.28-35)

That is why this attempt to stop up “[his] casements” (as he calls them), the ways (bodily) into him, is unavailing and his home - which he clearly associates with his bodily integrity - is violated. It is also why betrayal comes from inside, from his own daughter (“my own flesh and blood to rebel”). Shylock is even - so thorough-going and deeply seated is the mirroring with Antonio - imposed on by his so-called friend - Tubal, with his sadistically exact inventory of Jessica’s profligacy, running Portia a close second when it comes to verbal torturing skills.

It goes without saying that Shylock also shares with his gentile mirror image (“The villainy you teach me I will execute”) a capacity for rage. After all, the main plot of the *Merchant* depends on a worm that turns - with a (significantly) active and penetrating vengeance. But it is worth noting that such emotions are already there *sotto voce* from Shylock’s very first words to Antonio in the play:
Rest you fair, good signor!
Your worship was the last man in our mouths. (I,ii,56-7)

As a form of words, this is as impressive a compromise-formation as one could imagine. The (active) oral sadistic urge is exquisitely defended against in a fawning lavishness of compliment that cannot quite subdue its animus. But until he (wrongly) supposes the law on his side, Shylock lacks the cultural licence to give his anger its head, rebounding as he must for the moment into the conciliatory, his habitual “sufferance”:

Shy. Why look you, how you storm!
I would be friends with you and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stained me with,
Supply your present wants, and take no doit
Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me.

This is kind I offer.
Bass. This were kindness.
Shy. This kindness will I show. (I,iii,135-41)

It is important to notice that, until the deal sours, Shylock is, in the name of friendship, as giving as Antonio, and with him too in being without real hope of advantage, which is to say, without real hope of love returned. This almost unformulated aspiration is poignantly rendered, here as elsewhere, by an echolalic trend in his speech - an elusive harmony sketched in a world of sound only. And this same echolalia also embodies, as if emblematically, his irremediable cultural passivity - and his fate at the end of the trial scene: he may only fit by turning Christian, all individuality subdued.

II
Thus far our attention seems to have been so much taken up with the play’s emotional underclass that we are, perhaps, in danger of forgetting that The Merchant of Venice is also a play that concerns itself with those who soar above
these “petty traffickers”, their petty debts and bonds, with those who inhabit, indeed, a different state altogether. This thought brings us to Portia.

In Belmont, however, from the outset, Portia also presents herself as a victim, as weary of the world and of her place in it as the Antonio who, unknown to her, has just voiced a similar lament on the same stage. We are not slow to distinguish between her luxurious ennui, child of surfeit, and the feelings of loss that are assailing the distant, still unknown merchant whose fate is bound up with hers.

Nevertheless, Portia would have us believe (“By my troth” are her opening words) that the trio of caskets by which her father has devised the “lottery of [her] destiny” are an emblem of her subjected and vulnerable state, of her penetrability, so to speak. She has barely locked up her gates when another invader arrives. In fact, this echoes Antonio’s situation only to parody it.

Like her father, who is dead, but who refuses to accept the condition of his deadness, but must orchestrate an elaborate conjuring trick from the grave, Portia - to this extent faithfully his daughter - simply cannot accept the deadness of passive acquiescence. This state she does not merely elude but reverses, by identifying with and usurping the controlling (male) side of the relation. It is certainly most interesting that, whatever Portia’s objection to the trial by casket, she is more than happy to ventriloquise her father’s nasty little verses that reward the unsuccessful efforts of Morrocco and Arragon. This is, of course, a tendency that reaches its climax in her (essentially tautologous) male disguise in the Venetian courtroom. But even before this, in the Belmont scenes as they are (rather than as she would have us take them), the “unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised”, Circean in all but name, makes victims of the men who venture inside her golden lair. Her suitors cannot elude suffering: either it is a question of immersion in a bath of caustic irony for those who do not venture to choose or, for those who do, the seeming impossibility of finding a way into her (casket). Such
failure, of course, contracts them to lifelong celibacy - which reiterates the sexual point, should we happen to have missed it.

To all of this the successful suitor, Bassanio, is only an apparent exception. For one thing, his success is not even his own: he has only found his way into her casket because she has shown him the way - by hints that have all the subtlety of neon signs. Portia immediately greets his “triumph” with a relinquishment of power that is (there’s the rub) both disarming and calculated to be so. This hollow surrender is no sooner voiced than Bassanio finds himself staring at a KEEP OUT sign:

First go with me to church and call me wife,
And then away to Venice to your friend!
For never shall you lie by Portia’s side
With an unquiet soul. (III,ii,303-6)

The marriage is not to be consummated until the “petty” debts of Venice and friendship are discharged. But even when this is done to the lady’s satisfaction - and of course by the lady’s agency, for Bassanio is a cipher in the rescue - the path to her bed is still blocked - this time, by a ring. The ring has, of course, since she gave it, held out emblematically the possibility of entry of her body, entry to her casket foreshadowing this in a kind of dumb-show. But the ring also comes to imply the restrictions on entry, if not indeed the constrictedness of the entry. Not for nothing did the announcing of her “little body” herald Portia’s arrival in the play. If we contrast her with Rosalind, the heroine of As You Like It, for whom courtship, physical desire and child-bearing are cognate fantasies, it is immediately clear that Portia displays little sexual or bodily interest in Bassanio, certainly no body-aliveness to him. In no sense, literal or figurative, and in no realm, of fantasy or actuality, is Portia penetrated in the play. The moment in which this may come to pass lies outside of the fictional space that she utterly dominates.
The play ends, indeed - not insignificantly - with the question of yet another deferral of the wedding night:

PORT. It is almost morning. And yet I am sure you are not satisfied Of these events at full. Let us go in, And charge us there upon inter’gatories, And we will answer all things faithfully.

GRAT. Let it be so. The first inter’gatory That my Nerissa shall be sworn on is Whether till the next night she had rather stay, Or go to bed now, being two hours to day.

(V,i,295-303)

This is, in my view, rather more than the occasion for a little bawdy innuendo - which Gratiano makes it, a few moments later. For there is something humourlessly cerebral (“I am sure you are not satisfied”) in Portia’s proposal about how the newly-weds may best beguile what is left of the night. The persisting (inexpugnable?) legalism of her thoughts is nicely pointed up in Gratiano’s playfully ironic echo of her talk of interrogatories. It serves as final fuel to the suspicion that Portia cannot relinquish (active) control to the degree that successful sexual commerce requires.

At this point we can make an important connection to Freud’s remarks on Shakespeare in “The Theme of The Three Caskets” (1913). One puzzling aspect of this otherwise wonderfully suggestive piece is that Freud does not draw attention to some pieces of textual evidence that provide striking support for his argument. The general argument is, of course, based on substitutions and reversals: the choice of three caskets (in The Merchant) resolves itself into that of three women (as in Lear) and this in turn into the ineluctable necessity of being chosen by the third, silent woman (the leaden casket) who is neither Mother nor Wife but Mother Earth - that is, death itself. Curiously, Freud does mention that the word “Nothing” is a kind of leitmotiv in Lear and that, with sinister appropriateness, it enters the play in the mouth of Cordelia,
the daughter who stands for death. As she says with chilling frankness, “Nothing” is what she has to give her father. On Freud’s reading, it is the beautiful and giving Portia who occupies the place of Cordelia in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is precisely at this point that the symbolism of the ring comes back into its own. For as a circular band without beginning or end it is both the lavish everything that Portia pretends to give and yet also *on the contrary* not this infinite but the cold zero, the nothing that hides inside it. It is not for nothing, or rather, *it is to hide this nothing* that her formal acceptance of Bassanio insists on the (positive) numbers of her wealth:

...but the full sum of me  
Is sum of something which to term in gross  
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised,  
Happy in this, she is not yet so old  
But she may learn...  
But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o’er myself; and even now, but now,  
This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours, my lord’s. I give them with this ring,  
Which, when you part from, lose, or give away,  
Let it presage the ruin of your love  
And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (III,ii,158-62;167-74)

In Portia, Bassanio has not found what he thinks he has found, nor chosen what he thinks he has chosen. This play without a mother is also of necessity a play without a wife - a fact which strikingly accords the central contention of Freud’s essay - that the psychical core of the love-choice has nothing to do with love: it is a question of surrendering to the third woman in the consummation of death.

**III**

We return now to the question raised in opening - that of William Shakespeare’s personal investment in *The Merchant of Venice*, the question of the play’s “private history”. On the whole, we do not like to dwell on the idea that a great work of art *has* a private history. In a well-established sense it
does not - this sense being almost the precondition of artistic culture itself. For that culture rests on an institutionalized *forgetting* of the personal roots of art, on an appropriation of the art-work into a public realm that sets the private history aside. (As Freud remarks in the Clark lectures, the modern commuter does not weep for a dead Plantagenet queen at Charing Cross.) In the public realm, the work of art *means* what it is *taken to mean* at a given point in the history of the encircling culture. A fetishised pluralism, an overvalued permissiveness to interpretation dissolves the singularity of the originating private life, whose “sublimated” residue alone may enter the culture. The greater the art, the greater the culture’s determination to hold it as well-nigh levitating above the ordinary conditions of human life - the life of the body, the life of the instincts; to concentrate on its extraversion and neglect its living core. Above all, the greater the unwillingness to see it as *someone’s*.

Shakespeare, the cultural institution, was, of course, also *someone*, - someone of whom, in an objective sense, we know very little. We know most of him because we possess the things he imagined - things like *The Merchant of Venice*. You can, of course, content yourself (and it is not a minor contentment) with admiring the psychological insight of the author of this play, his canny (conscious and pre-conscious) grasp of human types. There is no denying that he had such a grasp, based on observation and experience. But the play also betrays colours of feeling and shades of disposition that reached him from inside. Of these things - things about himself - he was, almost certainly, not fully conscious.

It is important to see that you do not have to look very far in Shakespeare's work to find men who have a good deal in common with Antonio - important because these elements that persist from play to play and that find expression in characters otherwise widely diverse and in differing characters within the same play, make for some of the best evidence we have of the author’s own disposition and characteristic fantasies. As every clinician knows, it is a
precious thing - precious even beyond facts and records - to know what someone imagines. Antonio has assuredly some unlikely bedfellows - Macbeth for example, the blood-boltered Thane of Cawdor, a character very far removed from the merchant’s worlds of trade, fashion, usury and Romance. But Macbeth, for all his gory and muscular setting, is nevertheless one deeply concerned with the question of manliness, of what behaviour becomes a man and what unmans him (“A soldier and afeard?”) And Macbeth’s irrepressible imagination is as little serviceable to him in battle or murder as Antonio’s aptness for exploitation suits him as a trader in a place just as savage in its way as Macbeth’s Scotland. Hamlet’s psychological disposition (however we describe it) is equally inconvenient - to put it mildly. What these imagined men have in common is that the same man imagined them and that they are all casualties of sensitivity, men in whom the passive-feminine side is perhaps the main source of emotional conflict, however variously presented.

It would be foolish to pretend that, three hundred and eighty odd years after Shakespeare’s death, his private history could be written with unimpeachable psychological authority: the correlative attesting facts are lacking, however the imaginative ones abound. But it does seem to me possible, from the evidence of the plays, to suggest the basic colouring of Shakespeare’s psychical reality: that it involved a struggle against passivity and the “repudiation of femininity” (Freud, 1937) in his own nature. This is not, of course, to reduce Shakespeare to his passive femininity, rendering him indistinguishable from the many other artists - Henry James, Leonardo da Vinci, Marcel Proust - who display such a trait. No clinician would consider a bare reference to “Oedipal pathology” an adequate account of a patient. As Dostoyevsky remarks in Crime and Punishment, “Every case is an exception from the moment it occurs in nature”. A classificatory phrase or diagnostic category serves only as a convenient shorthand to orient thought at the beginning - not to act as a premature foreclosure - of the patient’s story. In just the same way, to say of Shakespeare that he had a passive feminine side to his nature is in the
end only of interest because a play like the *Merchant* offers such a fascinating dramatisation of that constellation of personality. It is the profuse and wonderfully realized detail of the play that redeems the categorisation ("passive femininity") from blandness and feeds one’s sense of what it is - concretely, livingly- to have such a nature; and also (a point to which we will return) one’s sense of how such a nature may often foster creativeness.

It may, of course, also be objected that recourse from the work to the life is invalid, and especially so when there is, as with Shakespeare, a poverty of the kind of biographical facts that might serve to contain and discipline the speculative impulse. (That a such recourse is often crudely managed - may, indeed, be the extra-clinical equivalent of “So you wanted to sleep with your mother, eh?” - is, of course, no necessary argument against that method when applied with modesty and delicacy.) But a careful argument needs to be mustered against this position, which has a long and interesting history (Holland, 1989). The present writer believes that character analysis of fictional persons is far from being a kind of absurdity. It is both possible and logically sound.

First of all, the reality of imagined characters is derived from that of their creator. This is not to say that *all* factual question can be asked and answered of them: this would be the *reductio ad absurdam* of my position. The crucial question is whether the fictional may, like the living, have a psychical core around which their behaviour and feelings are organized. It is my conviction that they may indeed have such a core, in the same sense in which a dream has; and no one would suggest that dream-analysis is invalid on the grounds that a reported or transcribed dream has no psychical core. Fictional characters may have such a organizing centre because the work of art is - like a dream - *someone’s*, and is a product of someone’s psychical life. It is conceived inside a human being. This is not to say - crudely and simply - that the inner life of the writer will be represented within the contours of a particular fictional character. An individual character *may* embody significant
elements of his creator’s psychical reality. But that reality is much more likely to find a condensed and displaced representation, to be spread across a number of characters and their circumstances. Or it may be found in the margins of a text, in details that do not seem to solicit attention at all. But, above all, it is only recoverable by a reader who believes the text carries the psychically-organized traces of a human life and in consequence feels licensed to employ the same “free-floating attention” that provides the standard for clinical work.

If, then, my basic conclusion about Shakespeare is sound, one might speculate that his lack of surviving male issue may have fed the attendant group of fantasies, as may marriage to a very capable wife eight years his senior. But we must assume that these fantasies were already in place much earlier in life. One might also ponder the bearing of the “passive feminine” hypothesis on Shakespeare’s prodigious creativeness and on the precise character of that creativeness. Keats’ famous remark about Shakespeare’s “negative cabability” (his trick of being “everything and nothing” in his imagined worlds) turns on the paradoxical claim that he imagined with such vividness because he was empty, this imparting a capacity or need to be taken over by what came to mind. It is a remarkable thing if we can think of the great poet’s creative faculty as itself bearing the mark of the unconscious and instinctual life to which it lent the gift of representation. Can it be that, between the most primitive founding facts of Shakespeare’s imagination and the melancholy opening tableau of his Venetian play, in which a “royal merchant” waits to be used, there is more than just a fanciful analogy?

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